

PART I

The Predators



1

The Winds of Distress

COURTYARD
CASTELLO DI PORTA GIOVIA
Milano, Italy
June 20, 1480

The sun hung in the blue sky, a golden disk that warmed the skin as William Castle watched the mounted crossbowmen of the *Lanza Spezzate* (ducal guard) circle the courtyard. His back to one of the porticos of the vast Sforza castle, he observed them aim their crossbows at targets in the middle of the yard as they galloped around the oval courtyard. Most arrows found the mark. William turned toward their commander, thick-set, jut-jawed Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, who watched from a position close to the target. While Trivulzio's dour expression revealed nothing of his satisfaction or dissatisfaction, no one had ever questioned the effectiveness of Trivulzio or his troops in battle.

In the years Gian Giacomo had headed the guard, he had never lost a battle. In fact, he had lost very few of his men in battle. They were tough, battle-tested, well-housed, well-paid, and well-trained. Trivulzio's conquest of the fortress of Vercelli in Savoy, five years before, remained fresh in William's mind, as it did in the minds of all who had viewed the captain's single-handed assault, in the days when Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy, yearned to absorb Savoy into his duchy.

Predators

In a far corner of the courtyard a tall, solitary figure, Capitano-Generale Roberto Sanseverino, sat on his horse, assessing Trivulzio and his men. One of the legendary condottiere of the era, Sanseverino had his own army which the general paid for and maintained near his estate at Castlenuovo, on the Po River, a day's ride from Milano.

William observed the two men with wonder. As a musician, he knew little about warfare and warriors, but as a friend of Ludovico *Il Moro* Sforza, ruler of Milano, he knew both men well. Each had been close to Il Moro's father, the legendary *Il Gran* Francesco Sforza, condottiere (warrior for hire) and later duke of Milano.

Trivulzio and Sanseverino hated one another with a passion bordering on the demented. Trivulzio and Cicco Simonetta, the long serving First Secretary to Francesco Sforza, had shared the regency of young duke Gian Galeazzo Maria Sforza after Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza had been assassinated. When Ludovico *Il Moro* had overthrown Simonetta and Trivulzio's regency, Sanseverino had been a major player in Il Moro's success. Trivulzio came away unscathed. Having been away on a military mission when the coup took place, his life had been spared and his rank and position preserved.

Simonetta had been less fortunate. Sanseverino had insisted that his enemy, Simonetta, be put to death and so it happened. This fact alone ensured that Trivulzio's distaste for Sanseverino would emerge as undying hatred. Surely he would do everything possible to unhorse Sanseverino. But nothing had happened so far. Il Moro had chosen to live with their mutual distrust as both were valuable soldiers and long-time friends of the Sforza family.

Sanseverino watched as Trivulzio's men performed. Finally he turned his horse toward the entrance to the castello, nodding to

William, as he galloped away from the fortress.

William roused himself and walked toward the library of the castello inside the corte ducale, the home of the duke and his immediate family, located at the northwest corner of the fortress. On his way across the courtyard, he caught the eye of Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, who appeared to give him a slight smile. After all, William had witnessed Trivulzio's immense bravery and daring at Vercelli and, during the Trivulzio/Simonetta regency, he had accomplished numerous missions for the two men. In fact, William held the warrior in high esteem, even awe.

Nevertheless, he had helped Il Moro overthrow the regency of Simonetta and Trivulzio, for he believed Il Moro possessed a worthy vision of the Milano's destiny and he wished to be a part of it.

Within the dark, mahogany-covered walls of the library of the *rocca* (fortress) of Milan, many secrets had been shared, strategies outlined, and fears expressed. Here the dukes of Milan, or the regents for a duke too young to rule, shared their visions of what lay ahead for the prosperous duchy of Milano.

Bishop Branda Castiglione, emissary and counselor to the dukes, sat in a chair close to the window, where the southern light warmed his body. His high cheekbones and serious features stood out in the afternoon sunlight. The bishop had served the dukes of Milan longer than anyone else, having been appointed to the secret counsel at age twenty-five, in 1440, some forty years before. No matter the changes in administration, Castiglione had served well and faithfully.

Next to him, Emilio Botta, ambassador to Venice, only a few years younger than Bishop Branda waited patiently. Curly white hair swept back over his head and heavy eye lids gave him an appearance of

Predators

being half asleep. Yet he was an astute judge of character, like his good friend, Bishop Branda.

Sitting behind the two men, William eyed both his uncle and Botta, wondering why they had been called to the library this morning.

On the other side of the library's large table sat Bartolomeo Calco, First Secretary to Governatore Ludovico *Il Moro* Sforza, Milano's *de facto* ruler. A small, thin man, with an ascetic look to him, Calco had the appearance of a man who carried out orders extremely well. Having been a clerk in the chancery office under the long-serving Cicco Simonetta, he had become First Secretary when *Il Moro* had overthrown the regency of Simonetta and Gian Giacomo Trivulzio the year before.

The four men waited for Ludovico *Il Moro* to appear.

In a moment, *Il Moro* entered the room and sat down. A handsome young man of twenty-eight with a slightly thickening, athletic build, fine features and wary, searching eyes, *Il Moro* had guided the duchy of Milan with a sure hand for the past year.

"Good afternoon, my friends," *Moro* greeted the four men with a serious, half-smile. "I have called you here because it is time we take stock of our neighbors and the state of our relationship to them." He nodded to Calco who unfolded a map of the Italian peninsula and began speaking.

He pointed to Venice on the Adriatic. "Venice has lost more of its ports of call on the Adriatic to the Turks." He shook his head. "Within the past three years, it has lost most of its empire to the ambitions of Mehmed II of Turkey." He looked up. "Now, the question is: what will Venice do to replace the income it has lost from trade with the east?"

Il Moro glanced from one man to the next as Calco finished speaking.

William also looked from his uncle, Bishop Branda, to Botta to Calco, wondering what they were thinking.

Il Moro's finger moved from Venice down to the Papal states in the middle of the peninsula. "Our biggest concern is the ambition, the covetousness of Pope Sixtus IV, Francesco della Rovere. He continues to appoint his relatives to positions as cardinals, surrounding himself with those who favor his policies while lining their own pocketbooks at the expense wealthy states like our own."

Botta and Bishop Branda both nodded as if they knew, only too well, the truth of Il Moro's words.

"The Pope intends to create a new crusade to blunt the expansion of the Turks," Calco continued.

"...which will, no doubt, cost us a considerable slice of our annual income..." Bishop Branda commented.

The other men nodded in agreement.

Il Moro then slid his finger down to Naples. "King Ferrante is a bitter enemy of the Pope and remains on friendly terms with ourselves." He then slid his finger north and west of the Papal states. "Florence under Lorenzo Il Magnifico de Medici remains our friend...and a bitter enemy of the Pope Sixtus IV."

"Presently, we are at peace..." observed Botta. "The Treaty of Lodi continues to be effective. No one has made war in thirty years."

Bishop Branda unfolded his arms and looked at the map, then looked up at Il Moro, searching his face. "You suspect that either Venice or the Papacy intends to break the treaty?"

Il Moro nodded his head, his expression remaining inscrutable. He pointed at the map of the territory between the papal states and

Predators

Naples and then again between Venice and Ferrara. "I suspect something will happen in these areas...something ruinous to the well-being of all Italy."

All eyes followed Il Moro as he got to his feet. "We have merchants and ambassadors all over the peninsula sending us reports of troop movements in these areas." He shook his head. "Our ambitions to create libraries and hospitals, and universities and works of art will be impossible if warfare drains our income, or if our friends become our enemies." He sat down once more and pointed to Parma, half way between Venice and Milan, in the valley of the Po River. "If Venice wants to create trouble for us, look for it to begin in Parma...and around Ferrara."

Calco, Botta and Bishop Branda all nodded in agreement.

Il Moro turned to Botta. "I want you to be especially alert, my friend. Pay attention to everything the Doge of Venice does. Record whom he meets...everything...and get word back to us."

"I have seen the shipping that comes into Venice diminish," Botta replied. "I suspect the doge intends to expand to the west and south. Ferrara? Perhaps..."

"Very well," Moro put out a hand. Botta got to his feet, clasped Moro's outstretched hand in his own then left the room.

Moro turned to Bishop Branda. "I am appointing you special emissary to Rome. We need our best eyes and ears as close to the pope as possible." Branda nodded in agreement. At last, Ludovico turned to William. "You will be valuable in Rome. The pope loves music and art and you have proved your worth in many ways. Assist your uncle."

William smiled. "I will do my best."

"As one of our most valued assets, we don't want anything to

happen to you,” Il Moro gave the two men a small, half-smile and nodded toward an attendant at the door of the library. The young man knocked on the door which opened.

A short, stocky, middle-aged man with a slight paunch, matted hair, bowed legs and wine stains on his clothing stepped into the room.

Moro put a hand on the man’s shoulders as he spoke to William. “This is Vittorio d’Arrezzo. Your bodyguard. “

William suppressed a gasp. *How could a man who looks like a beggar be a bodyguard?* But as was his habit, William smiled and put out a hand to the peasant. “My pleasure.”

The man gave him a limp handshake in return, looked at the floor, only occasionally glancing up. Clearly he was ill-at-ease.

Moments later, William and his uncle walked down the hallway outside the library.

“What do you think of your protector?” The bishop asked, a sly grin on his face.

“I don’t know what to think, Uncle. He...he hardly looks like a bodyguard, to be honest.” William fell silent, not knowing what else to say.

“Indeed,” the Bishop continued to smile.

At that moment, the stocky, thickly-muscled, jut-jawed figure of Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, Captain of the Ducal Guard, appeared from down the hall. He bowed slightly to Bishop Branda. “Good afternoon, Bishop. You are looking well.”

The bishop gave him a half-smile. “Thank you, Capitano.”

Trivulzio glanced over at William. “And our musician friend from the British Isles, who survives the ebb and flow of ‘Buona Fortuna’ here at court.” The soldier chuckled for a moment. “All is well with

Predators

you, Messere William?”

William gave Gian Giacomo a glassy-eyed smile. Trivulzio. Aaaaa! The name sent shivers up and down his spine. The few times he had seen the soldier in the last year, he had felt as if he were looking into the eyes of a hooded, demonic thing...like a python. That thought had sent shock waves coursing through his body. The idea of being squeezed to death by a dark and deadly force made him want to vomit.

His mind coursed over the past year—a turbulent year in which Il Moro had come to power, supplanting Simonetta and Trivulzio as regents for young Duke Gian Galeazzo. Both men had befriended William, giving him opportunity and influence, believing they could trust him completely. What had he given them in return? Simonetta had lost his head and Trivulzio had narrowly avoided the same fate. *William, you fool! You are being too hard on yourself. You were a minor player in their fates, nothing more.*

Trivulzio’s chesty physique and protruding jaw give the man something of the look of a python, as if he could swallow whole anyone or anything that crossed his path, without even bothering to inflict a paralyzing wound. *Whatever the truth might be, Trivulzio must have suspected that I played a part in Il Moro’s rise to power.*

William lifted his eyes to meet those of Gian Giacomo. “I am happy to see that you have survived and flourished during this difficult time.”

Trivulzio stared at him, finally nodding his head in agreement. Nevertheless, a little glint remained in his eye. A suspicion. A recognition. An acceptance of some kind. An acknowledgment that William and the house of Castiglione had proven themselves worthy men, whether allies or opponents. It did not much matter one way or the other which it was. He gave William a tap on the arm and continued on his way.

THE RIVER PO
North of Parma
July 10, 1480

The sun's rays glistened off the rippling waves of the Po River, and off the burnished surfaces of the ornate carriage tied to the first of two barges. Emblems, crests and flags of *La Familia Castiglioni* attached to the coach signified the importance of its occupant. The second barge contained the coach's four horses as well as three men armed with pikes.

Leaning against the wooden railing of the lead barge, William ran a hand through his long, dark-blond hair. At age thirty, he stood poised between the impatience of youth and the sense of purpose that comes with age. One of the truly fine musicians of his age, he had become a gifted emissary for the Sforza court of Milano. His air of graciousness, objectivity and good-natured humility solidified the trust... and the envy of those around him.

Branda Castiglione, William's uncle, saw behind that air another quality which few saw— an air of almost permanent despair. Bishop Branda simply didn't know what to make of it. Thin, almost ascetic, a man in the sixth decade of his life, Branda eyed his nephew from the window of his coach. That despair made the older man sad, for he loved William as if the young man were his own son, not just the off-spring of his beloved brother. Despair turned to what? Branda wondered. *A tiger on a short leash*, he concluded.

William flicked his gaze upstream to the south shore silhouetted in the early morning sunlight. A movement caught his ever-watchful eye. A shallow-draft boat had pushed off and set a course toward the barges.

Predators

Vittorio d'Arezzo approached William. His dirty clothes hung from his limbs as if he were a paunchy scarecrow, his long, dark hair a mess, the stubble of his beard, rough and unkempt. In fact, he seemed something of a dullard.

“Signore... look there.” The peasant aimed his finger toward the boat.

William peered out at the approaching craft. “Who in the world would inter...?”

The peasant spat on the ground next to the carriage. “Tax collectors, I would say, from the looks of the fat one in the bow, the one with the book.”

“Annoying? Or worse?” William mused, under his breath.

The peasant heard the remark but said nothing. William glanced in his direction and saw the man's eyes glittered with an unstated focus, as though he relished the upcoming confrontation, man-to-man.

In a few moments, the scow, which flew the flag of Pier Maria Rossi, Lord of Parma and contained six pike-bearing men, pulled alongside the bishop's barge. In its bows stood the pudgy man whose feet-apart posture suggested importance. Crewmen tossed ropes around the cleats on the bishop's barge, lashed the vessels together, and the self-important man climbed aboard, clasping his book to his chest. Porcine, with enormous jowls, he sauntered toward the carriage and looked it over. “Very nice. Very nice. An important personage, eh? Haven't had anyone of such stature pass this way in quite some time.”

Bishop Branda Castiglione stepped out of the carriage.

The pudgy man gave the bishop an unctuous smile. “Allow me to

introduce myself. I am the tax collector for the Lord of Parma, Pier Maria di Rossi." He paused for effect.

The bishop said nothing.

"Headed to Rome are we?" The tax collector smiled, knowing that the Po River remained the most widely traveled route from Milan eastward and the southward to Roma. He man glanced down at the official-looking book he carried, and paged through it. "Ah, ha. Here it is," he grinned. He showed the page to a rail-thin man standing next to him.

"To get this coach ashore ..." the skinny figure whistled, "...will cost a king's ransom."

William watched, eyes squinting in the sun, sensing a dangerous situation unfolding.

The unkempt peasant disappeared behind the coach which the tax collector had been eying..

"*Certo.*" The tax collector slapped his wispy companion on the shoulder. "Our Lord and provider, Pier Maria di Rossi, will surely be impressed about this happy meeting with..."? He opened his arms to the bishop.

"Castiglione, Count of Castiglione Olona, Bishop of Como," muttered Bishop Branda. "Milanese ambassador to Rome."

William cocked his head, listening carefully, not liking what he sensed was about to happen.

"Most certainly the Duke of Milan can afford 12 ducati for the carriage, 100 soldi for each occupant and 60 for each guard," the skinny man continued. "And perhaps a little something for those of us who are not so advantaged." He took out his dagger and flipped it toward the carriage, burying it in the door of the carriage.

William slipped away from the railing and disappeared around

Predators

the back of the coach.

“This is outrageous,” hissed Branda. “The lord of Parma has no quarrel with us.”

The tax collector stepped forward, a menacing look spread across his thick features. “To the contrary, Your Eminence. At every turn, the Sforza princes support that garbage heap of thieving bastards, the Pallavicini.”

The bishop softened. “I understand your grievances.”

The tax collector laughed. “...and you, a long way from home—and poorly defended.” He looked at the three pike bearers on the second barge.

The skinny man pulled his dagger out of the wooden door. “So you will pay an extra tax—” He pricked his hand with the blade until a drop of blood was visible.

At the back of the coach, unseen by the tax collector, the peasant leaned over a trunk lashed to its rear. He flipped it open, withdrew several bottles and then handed them to William. “Make yourself useful.”

Carrying the bottles under each arm, William and Vittorio went around the side of the coach.

Preoccupied with the bishop, the tax collector did not see the two men offer his guards gifts of wine bottles. Despite the hot sun, they refused the gift...at first. But when they saw the heated discussion continuing on and on, they put their pikes down, each grasping a bottle. Before long, the lord of Parma’s ferocious-looking guards had become meek-as-a-pussy-cat drinking companions. All but one, who remained suspicious.

“Give me the book,” Bishop Branda demanded at last.

The tax collector refused.

“I said give me the book,” The bishop snatched the volume from his hands.

The tax collector and his assistant yelled for help. Their guards ignored them.

“You little scum of a liar,” muttered the bishop, scanning the page. “The lord of Parma required 25 soldi and no more for passage.” The bishop flicked little finger slaps at the fat man’s face and then tossed the book into the boat.

“Help. Help. I was told...to...to raise...help me.”

Branda continued the slaps, backing the man toward his boat.

The skinny man hurried to retrieve the tax book.

Suddenly, the guard who had not been drinking stepped forward and thrust his pike’s blunt end into the bishop’s mid-section.

Bishop Branda bent over in pain.

“Well, well...” the tax collector continued, with an ugly smile. “We’re not so high and mighty now, are we, *Bishop of Como, Count of whatever...?*”

With a practiced watchfulness, William caught the sudden change in circumstance. Raising the bottle in his hands to his lips, he detached himself from the crowd and staggered up to the guard. “Cou’d I offer you ‘ust one sip, ‘mico?”

The pike-bearing man gave him a furious look.

Vittorio slipped behind the carriage, out of sight.

As the guard turned his attention from the bishop to William, Vittorio reappeared, slipped a leg behind the guard’s knee and gave him a little nudge with his shoulder. William gave him another nudge. The guard teetered on the edge of the barge, and then fell overboard, the surprised look on his face soon covered by ripples of water.

The bishop squinted at the tax collector, now shivering with

Predators

fright. “Get out of my sight,” he raged. “Out, or I will have the Bishop of Parma give you a good whipping.”

The skinny tax collector jumped into his boat, his men staggering at his heels, jarred the ropes binding the two craft loose and the boat floated away. The drunken pike bearers worked hard to haul the fat tax collector into the boat, but could do no more than keep him afloat.

Leaning against the coach, William chuckled to himself.

Vittorio ambled over to him. “You are quick in the head,” he mused in a soft voice.

William wagged a finger at him. “And you are no half-drunken peasant...”

The man laughed. “Perhaps. Perhaps not.” He put out his hand.

The two men shook hands.

Vittorio shrugged, as if it were not important.

The Englishman rubbed his chin for a moment. “*Il Moro* sent you, didn’t he? You were part of the rag tag army of his that invaded Tortona and defeated the Duke of Ferrara, yes?”

A hint of merriment appeared in Vittorio’s eyes. “I am merely a peasant, Signore. Nothing more. But you. You are very clever. And I do remember you.”

“From...?” The comment piqued the Englishman’s curiosity.

The soldier ambled away. “We will talk, one of these days.”

William approached the coach and leaned his elbows on the sill of the open window. “Well, Uncle?” He wondered. “I have been holding my breath since Milano. What is our mission?”

At William’s urging, and with the blessings of Ludovico *Il Moro*, Branda had been grooming his nephew to carry out the duties that Branda himself had been performing for the past thirty-five years—

heading embassies to the important states of Italy.

Now that the bishop had been appointed Ambassador to Rome—Milano's most prestigious and important legation—William had become his aide and confidant.

Ambassadors and emissaries under Il Moro had one purpose: to find out what the heads of state in Italy intended. To that end, Branda and his nephew had been provided with plenty of funds to encourage 'loyal' citizens to divulge the kind of information that would help Moro counter the self-serving activities for which the Italian heads of state were famous.

"*Il Moro* is highly suspicious of Pope Sixtus and all of his Riario and della Rovere relatives," Bishop Branda commented, "...especially his nephews. The 'hue and cry', as you English would say, over their attempt on the life of Lorenzo *Il Magnifico* has died down. Moro has urged me to look for signs that they are up to something else, something even more worrisome than their last adventure."

"Figure out his plans...and contain them?"

Bishop Branda leaned back in his seat and smiled to himself. Hardly more than a year ago, Ludovico *Il Moro* had slipped into the fortress of Milan (Castello di Porta Giovia) and had wrestled control from the grasp of Cicco Simonetta and Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, the hero of Vercelli, and a superb soldier. Branda and William had both been in the middle of that intrigue...and both had landed on their feet. The smile broadened.

"Something amuses you, Uncle?" William's eyes crinkled up at the corners.

"I was reflecting on our successes, especially yours?"

William laughed. "Was it not you, yourself, who counseled me to sleep with my eyes open, listen to every whisper, be a friend to every

Predators

jackal and smooth turbulent waters with coins in the hands of those with even a drop of wit about them.”

Branda chuckled. “I may have said such a thing.”

Glancing toward the approaching shore, William felt that knife of despair tear at his innards. He ought not to have revealed so much at dinner the previous night—hinting at his overpowering yearning for Cecilia Gallerani, Ludovico *Il Moro*’s mistress. But the fine wines of Cremona served up by Lady Giovanna Stanga-Bentivoglio and the obvious affection of his uncle for the kind and gracious woman had at last loosened his tongue.

Oh, how he ached for Cecilia. *The smell of her hair, the taste of her mouth, those delicious, enveloping lips.* Every woman he had known in the past year reminded him of her in some way. *Il Moro*’s beautiful mistress. *Mistress. Another man’s mistress. Another man feeling the softness of her breasts, caressing her.*

Bah, he reminded himself. *How can a man of the world belong to one woman. An absurd idea trumpeted by all those French dwarfs, cuckolds and eunuchs who call themselves poets.*

Reflecting on the impotence of the bards and on his own frustrated passion, William’s mind drifted back to an even darker recess: a future that looked less than rosy. The heads of the other states throughout the peninsula had signaled their readiness to test the mettle of Ludovico Sforza, as well as his cadre of spies and ambassadors and his military strength under the unpredictable Captain-General Roberto Sanseverino.

The tests would come soon. He knew it. His uncle knew it. *Il Moro* knew it. Traps lay everywhere. No doubt the Pope in Rome would be among the chief culprits. Sixtus IV had almost succeeded in murdering Lorenzo *Il Magnifico*. Surely he had something in mind

for a young prince like *Il Moro*. William felt the blood rising in his veins.

Toward the end of the afternoon, the barges put ashore south of Ferrara. The Duke of Ferrara was a good friend to the Sforza family and had arranged for a fresh team of horses to be available for the bishop's long journey to Roma.

As the barge pulled onto shore, a rider waited for them. The courier handed the Bishop Branda a sealed envelope, which the cleric opened.

His face fell as he read.

"Trouble, Uncle?" William inquired.

The bishop looked up, his face white as that of a sheep. "A change of plans." With that he ordered two of the horses from the team of four cut out and saddled. "Otranto!" he murmured to William and Vittorio, the peasant guard.

Branda signaled to Vittorio to accompany his nephew.

The peasant soldier nodded to Bishop Banda and pressed his fist to his heart.

William then went to his trombone case tied, with the other luggage to the rear of the coach. "I won't need this for the time being," he grinned, patting it with affection as if it were a faithful dog. "Take good care of it."

"Of course," murmured the bishop.

William and Vittorio mounted up, waved and rode off in a cloud of dust.

"God speed, William," Bishop Branda muttered. "And God help the people of Otranto."

Predators



2

The Shadow of the Crescent

OTRANTO, ITALY
On the Adriatic Ocean
Kingdom of Naples
July 28 – 1480

From his hillside perch overlooking the deep blue of the Adriatic Ocean, a young boy puzzled over the tiny black specks appearing, one after another, on the horizon. Throughout the warm, summer morning, he had been tending his sheep on this hill above Otranto, a city of twenty thousand people, sitting at the eastern tip of the upper arm of the Kingdom of Naples. The boy shaded his eyes, as the specks took the form of ships—hundreds of them.

He ran to his cousin who slept under a tree.

“Tonio! Tonio!” He grabbed the sleepy youth by the shoulder and shook him.

“Go away.” Antonio Grummelo, a handsome youth with thick black hair, pushed the boy away. Dark fuzz grew above his upper lips. Even in sleep, he tugged at it to see if it had grown a little more.

“Get up! Do you hear me?” the boy shouted, dragging, pushing and kicking Tonio toward the cliff.

The boy pointed out to sea. Tonio rubbed his eyes—a surprising shade of deep blue, the shade of the sea, as if he had had Irish forbearers. Squinting, he was able to make out the shapes: ships,

Predators

hundreds of them. He whistled under his breath. “Coming at us like a plague of locusts.” Tonio grabbed his jacket. “Watch the sheep.”

On a hill not far away, William Castle sat atop his horse, gazing out toward the approaching ships. Next to him, also sitting on his horse, Vittorio d’Arezzo, William’s friend and bodyguard for the past month, squinted his eyes.

“Warships,” William muttered.

“Biremes,” observed Vittorio, wiping a hand across his face which dripped perspiration. “Lateen rigged. Not friendly,”

A moment later, Tonio appeared, out of breath. “Signore. Signore.”

From his horse, William looked down at the youth. “What is it?”

Antonio pointed toward the ships spread across the horizon. “I must warn the Archbishop.”

William nodded to Vittorio who grabbed the boy’s arm and pulled him up onto his horse.

Half an hour later, the first of Otranto’s worried citizens had just made their way toward mother church when William and Vittorio arrived at the cathedral. William heard some mumbling about “—the governor of the town...fast asleep.” All around them, townspeople had climbed up to the cathedral to watch the approaching ships.

Tonio crept inside the open doors of the cathedral, genuflected, and then hurried up the nave to the altar where Archbishop Stefano Pandinelli knelt. The cleric crossed himself, got to his feet and turned. Glimpsing Antonio—for years one of his acolytes—Pandinelli hastened to meet the youth.

“*Bon giorno*, Antonio,” welcomed Pandinelli, a youngish man

with thinning hair and a warm smile. He put an arm around a shoulder of the youth.

“Come!” Tonio urged, grasping the Archbishop by the sleeve. “Come with me” He pulled Pendenelli toward the cathedral’s entrance.

Outside, in the warm summer air, they met William and Vittorio.

“Father Pendenelli,” the youth pointed toward the ocean. “Ships. Hundreds of them.”

Pendenelli looked out toward the ocean. He mused.

An old woman, hearing the boy, waddled toward them. “My son says it is the Turks come to kill us all. Last month, my husband, a fisherman, went to sea. He never come back. Everyone say it were the Turks.” She began to weep.

The Cleric patted her shoulder gently. “Do not worry yourself, Mother Torelli. God watches over us all. Perhaps it is simply the Venetian fleet.”

In a moment, she stopped her crying, taking his hand in her own. “I am so alone,” she murmured as if to herself, “without my Bonifacio.”

“But, father, so many ships?” the youth interrupted.

Pendenelli gave him a quick frown, putting a finger to his lips. The youth nodded.

William observed the tender scene unfold. “Father, lead your parishioners out of the city. Now, before it’s too late.” Though soft, his voice betrayed a tone of unmistakable urgency.

“If it is not already too late,” Vittorio chimed in.

Archbishop Stephano ignored the disheveled peasant, squeezed the hand of the old lady and gazed out to sea. For months, rumors had floated around the city of the murderous Turks lurking in the

Predators

waters offshore. Several boats had come back from a day's fishing with empty nets, their crews terrified of the ships they said were out in the ocean. "God will provide," muttered the young priest, gazing toward heaven.

Within the hour, some five dozen galleys had formed a semi-circle around the city. The people hovering inside the walls gazed out in fear. Sudden puffs of smoke wafted from the bows of each brightly painted galley. Flaming balls of iron dropped into the city and exploded. People everywhere screamed and shouted. More ships appeared on the horizon.

Unseen to the north and south, other galleys unloaded soldiers who began to spread out around the city, intending to pinch off all avenues of escape.

Pendinelli turned to young Tonio. "You must get to Rome as fast as you can. Find the Pope. Tell him what is happening."

"The Pontiff will not see you," William interrupted. "...ride toward Naples. Find the king's son, Alfonso, the Duke of Calabria. Tell him William Castle sent you—the musician from Milano, the nephew of Bishop Branda Castiglione. He will know what to do. Stop for nothing, do you understand?" William's eyes drilled into the boy's.

Antonio nodded, his eyes filled with fear.

Pendinelli led the two men and the boy to a stable at the rear of the church where several well-kept horses grazed. Vittorio flung a saddle across the back of the nearest one and cinched it in place. "You know how to ride, yes?"

"Si. Si." Tonio thrust the note in his pocket. Vittorio helped the youth onto the saddle. The boy gazed toward the city gate to the west, and then turned toward the sea, and the approaching ships. He

hated the thought of leaving his family and riding to far-off Naples, but the people of Otranto were desperate. He waved and galloped off.

An hour later, William and Vittorio observed the bombardment from a hill above the city, whose small fort had not yet answered the cannon fire from the Turkish fleet.

“The *citta* has little means of defending itself.” Vittorio squinted into the afternoon sun, noticing that few people were moving out of the city to the west. “They must move more quickly,” he groused.

Day after day, Ahmed Pasha’s vast array of galleys—one hundred and forty of them—arced their fiery missiles into the city, setting afire many of the houses within the walls of Otranto. The wind began to pick up and the flames raced through the city. Its inhabitants all huddled in and around the cathedral, believing that God, and God alone, would protect them from the fury of the heathen.

The cannon within the sturdy walls of the city fired back six-pound shot for several days, but aboard the Turkish galleys, Pasha’s nine-pounders had greater range and his gunners were more accurate.

On the sixth day of the siege, William and Vittorio paused. For days, they had been racing from house to house along the edges of the city, urging people to pack up and head for the mountains. With each passing day, escape became less and less possible.

Earlier in the day, they had found a troop of soldiers and had urged the commander to dispatch a messenger who would ride to Napoli and inform the king of the events taking place. The commander had promised to do so. Now William and Vittorio could do

Predators

little but wait for the Turks to come ashore.

The Ottomans continued to pour cannon shot into the city. The reply had become sporadic.

“The Turk will come ashore within the hour,” murmured Vittorio in broken English.

William turned to his companion. Vittorio’s hair was thinning; his grin was full of dark holes where teeth ought to have been, and several fingers were missing from his right hand. *Not a pretty sight, this fellow.* But behind the lackadaisical manner lay an astute observer, William decided, a military man of no mean ability.

“You have been a soldier a long time?” wondered the musician

“Ummm...under Trivulzio,” the soldier stuffed an orange into his mouth, and then held up his hand with fingers missing. “Lost these against the Neapolitans, when Trivulzio went to the aid of the Florentines. They don’t fight too well, the Florentines, or I’d still have a couple of these.”

A great explosion sounded and the two men looked up to see a billowing fire erupt from the bottom of one of the towers guarding the city.

Vittorio shook his head. “Powder magazine’s been hit. The city’s in real trouble now.”

True to the soldier’s prediction, the guns of Otranto fell silent. Great gaping holes in the walls soon appeared.

The Turkish ships swept closer to the shore. Fierce-looking, dark-skinned men, naked to the waist, with black beards and large curved-bladed swords, hurled themselves into the shallow water, and onto the beaches.

William and Vittorio watched from the hill as a first group of men swarmed ashore, past idled fishing boats and headed into the city.

Huge holes in the walls of the city stared at them and the dark-skinned men leaped through the holes.

At the wall, a few defenders wearing chest plates with the insignia of the Aragonese monarchy raised their swords toward the hordes coming at them. "Get back, you bastards from hell," shouted one defender, slashing at the first man to come at him.

Three invaders were on him in a moment. "In the name of Allah..." shouted the first man, bringing down his sword which sliced through the flesh, bone and arteries of the defender's wrist.

"Ahhh!" shrieked the soldier.

"In the name of Mehmed II..." yelled the second, whipping his sword across the bleeding man's shoulder.

"God help me," moaned the Aragonese soldier.

"Unbeliever!" shrieked the third. With a slicing motion he severed the head from the man's body. For a moment, the headless figure stood upright, and then it crumpled to the ground. The terrified look on the face remained as the head rolled toward the beach.

"Jihad!!" yelled the third Turk. "Jihad!"

All along the wall, the dark-skinned invaders screamed the same words, "Jihad! Jihad! Jihad!" as they cut and sliced their way into the bowels of the city, 18,000 invaders pitted against a city of 20,000 men, women and children.

William and Vittorio watched from the hill above the city, sickened by the sight of such slaughter. As the Turks caught sight of them, they galloped away.

Admiral Ahmed Pasha stood on the deck of the lead galley, his hands behind his back, watching the carnage. Short, powerful-looking, with a roll of flesh beneath his chin, he gazed up at the cathedral on

Predators

the hill overlooking the city. He ordered the helmsman of the galley to bring her around so the two guns at the bow of the ship could be trained on the church.

“A lifetime of ease, guaranteed by my hand, for the gunner who brings down the bell tower,” he grinned. The guns were quickly elevated and began firing.

Pasha looked down at the slaves shackled to the oars of the galley, many of them Christians captured in battles such as this along the coast.

“The Christian does not know how to fight,” he smiled at the nearest slave. The man gazed at him through yellow, watery eyes but said nothing.

The captain of the ship took the whip out of the hands of the flogger. “The Admiral was talking to you!!” He snapped the whip across the man’s shoulders.

The watery-eyed man winced. “It is true.” He cast his eyes down, his shoulders slumping forward.

“It *is* true.” Pasha smiled.

Pasha knew himself to be no ordinary seaman. Sultan Mehmed’s most trusted ally and a mariner of great skill, Pasha embraced learning as few of his generation had. In fact, he knew history better than most westerners: the epochal struggles of the Greek, Alexander the Great; the travels of Marco Polo; the ruling dynasties of India and China. All this history fascinated Pasha. He understood full well the aims of his sultan and the man’s wonderful accomplishments—all were familiar to the inquiring mind of Ahmed Pasha.

In a twenty year span of time, Mehmed II had extended the Ottoman Empire from India to the southern Mediterranean Sea. Mehmed’s father had come within one battle of conquering Spain, and possibly controlling the Atlantic Ocean. Now it appeared that

both Italy and Spain were ripe for conquest.

More important than conquest, Pasha and Mehmed would establish garrisons around the Mediterranean Sea, ensuring that all trade between the west and India and China would pass through Ottoman hands, taxed appropriately, of course.

Venice had recognized that she could not compete with the Sultan's navy and had signed a treaty of co-operation with Sultan Mehmed II. Now the Pope in Rome, Sixtus IV, appeared ready to sign such a treaty, provided the kingdom of Naples were defeated. The Pope had his reasons for wanting such a treaty; Sultan Mehmed II had his reasons, as well. Moreover, the young regent of Milano, Ludovico Sforza, had entertained one of the Sultan's ambassadors and appeared quite friendly. True, Milano controlled the fortunes of Genoa, which had the Italian peninsula's best navy, after Venice...but Pasha had defeated the Genoese several times within the past five years.

Pasha had enjoyed every moment of his long relationship with the sultan—a kind man in victory, a harsh man in defeat, a man who grew in wisdom with every step of his expanding empire. Were Alexander the Great alive, he would no doubt shake his head in admiration. Soon the King of Naples would shake his head, as well—in fear and humiliation. Pasha smiled to himself. Allah had been good to him.

“Admiral. Admiral!” A crewman shouted. The Admiral turned. “El Torre! El Torre!” The man pointed up the hill. “I hit bell in El Torre!” The other crewmen gathered around the gunner, congratulating him.

Pasha smiled. He felt the hand of Alexander, the Great on his shoulder. “It is time to go ashore.” He motioned the crew to unleash and float the galley's dingy.

Predators

With the Turks headed for the church, William and Vittorio resolved to act. William felt that familiar cold chill down his spine when danger lurked. However, this time he felt an excitement as well—his heart raced, his eyes seemed to see more of what occurred around him. In fact, his entire being seemed uplifted by this test of survival. *Am I enjoying the prospect of battle?* he wondered. *I hope not.* He whipped his horse forward.

The two men snuck into the city by means of a little used gate on the western edge of the city, a gate just big enough for a single horse and rider to make it through. They galloped as fast as possible, toward the church, arriving just before the Turks. Racing inside, they searched for the archbishop. No Pandinelli.

Moments later, the Turks reached the church, smashing in the door and carving their way toward the altar. William and Vittorio slashed at the first few intruders to step inside. Slowly, they were driven backwards toward the altar, and then toward a set of stairs leading to the floor above. At the top of the stairs they found a door ajar, backed through it and managed to close it. The room was small and the door flimsy. The two men heard the Turks pounding and kicking against the door. Vittorio looked upward. The room had no ceiling to the room. He motioned for William to climb up and then he followed.

Hidden against the huge dark beams and wooden arches of the cathedral roof, the two men had a clear view of the altar where Archbishop Stephano faced a dozen Turkish soldiers. Arms outstretched, he pleaded for mercy.

In an instant, the Turks seized him, bound him to the altar and began to hack away at his body. William stared in disbelief, then wretched at the sight of Pandinelli's arms falling to the floor, blood

gushing from his body.

“Quiet,” hissed Vittorio.

The townspeople gathered behind the altar screamed and begged for mercy as the Turks slashed away at the unarmed mothers and children, as if they were trees in a jungle. William turned away from the sight of the blood flowing as if in rivers past the altar on which the dead Stefano Pendinelli lay, his limbs lying beside him.

“*Dios mio*,” wounded and bleeding women and children shrieked as they were hacked to death. “*Dios mio*.”

William heard the thud of heavy boots on the floor of the room they had just left. He heard voices, laughing voices. Then he smelled smoke. The place had been set afire.

As night fell, the two men stirred. For the past twelve hours they had remained hidden, despite the smoke and the horrific stench that arouse from the dead and decaying bodies of the Turks’ victims. Hour after hour, William had stifled the vomit in his throat, sickened by the sight and smell of death,

With most invaders now wandering the city, Vittorio pointed toward a stained glass window not far from where they hovered high above the nave of the church. They crept along the beams leading up to it. Vittorio gave the window a soft kick with his boot, smashing a hole in it large enough for them to crawl through, unseen.

Outside, the branches of a tree stretched toward the window. Vittorio extended his arm but the branch remained out of reach. To leap out the window and miss the branch would mean instant death. Without a second thought, he leaped toward the tree and caught the branch. He swung himself up onto the limb and hid in the foliage as several Turkish soldiers passed beneath him.

Predators

A few moments later, William followed.

At midnight, they slid down the tree and crept into the woods nearby.

That evening, William and Vittorio passed through one of the thinly-guarded western gates of the nearly deserted city and hid in the barn of an abandoned farmhouse until daybreak. When they awoke, they watched as Turkish soldiers herded a long column of men and women up a nearby hill. From the gestures of the Islamic troops, William guessed they are being made to convert to Islam. At the sign of the least resistance, the Turks took up their swords. When the Turks left, William and Vittorio came out of hiding and climbed the hill to bury the dead.

At the top, William counted over 800 dead, most of them men. No one helping to bury the dead could speak. The stench of death suffocated him. Even more terrifying, men, women and children lay on the ground, limbs hacked off, in grotesque positions, mouths open, bodies unmoving, massive wounds to their chests revealing hearts that still beat, ever more slowly.

Using only primitive digging tools—clay pottery bowls and earthenware—they carved graves in the hard ground. The digging grew hot and tiring.

William wandered away in a daze. What to do? His mind became fuzzy. He had lost the power to think clearly.

“Perhaps the Pope will act quickly,” muttered Vittorio.

“Not much chance of that. My uncle says he is not to be trusted. If I remember correctly, his exact words were: ‘It wouldn’t surprise me a bit if the Pope and the leader of the Turks were in this together’”.

Vittorio turned and looked at William, an ugly smile carved across

his hard-bitten features. "Even I cannot imagine that to be true."

"We must get to Naples, find the king and hope he will send troops. Otherwise, nothing stands in the way of the Turks taking all of southern Italy."

For the next hour they walked along a road that led west toward Naples. Looking back over his shoulder, William saw a cloud of dust rising from the direction of Otranto. Instinct told him that danger lay behind them. He grabbed Vittorio and flung himself and his protector to the side of the road. A troop of Turkish cavalry galloped past them and disappeared in the distance.

I have escaped death once again, William reminded himself. Goddess Fortuna gazes with favor upon me. Then he paused. Or blind luck...or fate?

Wandering without aim or direction through meadows and across streams, hour after hour, the two men found a horse ambling along a shallow creek. William crept toward it, caught its reins, and brought it to a halt. "That-a-boy," William whispered in the ear of the horse he had caught. Looking it over, he noticed that the saddle was of a finely-crafted, military design and bore several bloody cut marks. Using some weeds pulled from the banks of the nearby stream, he cleaned off the saddle and put one foot in the stirrup, imaging the fate of its rider. The pride of survival took hold of him and he shivered with excitement as he mounted the horse.

On a hillside above the creek, several horses grazed. Vittorio crept up the slope in pursuit of one for himself.

Preoccupied with the horse, William failed to hear the approach of several Turkish soldiers who had dismounted and now stalked him from three sides, unnoticed. In the light breeze, the stench of their

Predators

unwashed bodies preceded them—the blood of Otranto’s citizens still covered their bodies. William caught the smell of death, whirled around, dropped the reins and backed away. As the horse darted off, William started to run. A third soldier caught him from behind and pinned him to a tree. The other two moved toward him, scimitars drawn. One stretched his sword far above his head, poised to bring it down on William’s neck.

Terrified, William stopped breathing. Vomit rushed up from his stomach and bubbled out the sides of his mouth. One Turkish soldier leered, making a motion for the soldier with the raised scimitar to cut off the fingers first. The filthy soldier grinned, relaxed, then raised his sword a second time. At that moment, a dagger flew through the air and plunged itself deep into the swordsman’s back. He fell to the ground, writhing in painful throes of death. The second soldier turned to find Vittorio’s pike flying toward him. The sharp point caught him in the shoulder and pinned him to a tree. Vittorio then rushed the man, burying his dagger in the man’s stomach.

A third rushed at William who drew his dagger, hands shaking. Despite all the intrigue surrounding him, he had only used a weapon against another human being once in his life. The Turk sensed William’s indecision, and laughed. He whipped his scimitar back and forth like a scythe, waiting for William to make a move.

The musician took several steps backward holding out his dagger outward, a meager defense against the lethal scythe, cutting a path toward him. At length, the musician tripped over the exposed roots of a tree and hit the ground with a thud. The Turk raised his scimitar, but William rolled away from the blow and sliced at the Turk’s heel. The man dropped his weapon and hopped away as fast as he could.

Vittorio pursued the Turk up the road, flinging his pike at the Turbaned warrior. It found its mark.

In the distance, more Turkish riders approached. Vittorio mounted his horse as William raced after his horse, caught it and mounted. They rode west toward the mountains.

In a few minutes, more Turkish cavalry came to the spot where the bodies of the three Turkish soldiers lay. The leader of the troop ordered his men to pursue the fleeing riders.

As darkness approached, the troop of Turkish soldiers halted the pursuit. The men stopped and gazed up into the hills.

William and Vittorio stood unseen in the shade of a huge hickory tree. The exhilaration of survival, the pride and self-congratulation within William had all but disappeared. *My God, how I want to kill at this moment! How good it would feel to exact from them the price they so richly deserve.* The voice of reason reminded him that it would be futile. After all, he was young, inexperienced. To attack them would be to display the colors of impetuous youth. It would get him killed.

No, this is not a vendetta, he concluded. *The people of Otranto and the Kingdom of Naples are at war with the Turks.* The only sane course of action would be to find Duke Alfonso and urge him to come to the aid of the people of Otranto.

The Turkish soldiers in their bright-colored Turbans, white tunics and baggy pantaloons turned their horses back toward Otranto. The roar of cannon had stopped. The thick smell of gunpowder that hung over the city had begun to disappear. The city had been subjugated. Blood ran through its streets as the Turks commenced to slaughter and violate every person who hesitated to face to the east, kneel, kiss the earth and utter the words, 'Praise be to Allah.'"

William thought about all he had seen as the two men rode

Predators

slowly through the hills of the province of Basilicata.

“You have the makings of a warrior,” Vittorio interrupted.

The musician’s mouth turned down in a self-deprecating sneer. “Back there? That was all bravado. The knife I whipped out—I had no idea how to use it.”

“You could have run. You didn’t. You went forward,” counseled the soldier.

The two men rode along in silence for some time.

William looked at his hands holding the reins of his horse. He turned them over. “I hope these hands never again hold in them the means for ending a human life.”

Vittorio gave him a quizzical look. “That is the hope of every warrior.” Then a cynical laugh escaped his throat. “Unfortunately, throughout the peninsula there are those who would do anything for their own gain, whose actions happily inflict pain on a great many people.” He glanced at William, almost embarrassed by his burst of philosophical observation, then continued. “Appealing to their good hearts will have no effect—such hearts do not exist.”

The musician reflected on Vittorio’s thoughts but said nothing. After what the two of them had just been through, he had no doubt that Vittorio’s words gave shape to the truth about the nature of man—at least a certain portion of mankind had at its core an evil heart— sad comment, but unfortunately...accurate.

TARANTO, ITALY **Kingdom of Napoli**

Alfonso, Duke of Calabria, galloped across the sun-drenched fields of grain undulating in waves across the rolling hills that dotted the countryside between Potenze and Taranto, inland from Napoli. A

dour man with a strong physique and a mouth that turned down beneath a thin moustache, surrounded by a trim beard in the Spanish style, the duke sported a scar along his right cheek that glistened bright red beneath his skin, tanned by the hot sun of his native Calabria. Dressed in light traveling armor, he led his troops as they marched southeast toward Otranto.

Someday—after the death of his father, Ferrante—he would inherit the kingdom of Naples. But, like the rest of the kingdom, Napoli was poor, its lands burnished by the sun, not unlike his father’s native Aragon to which King Ferrante ached to return. Each day, the old king talked of his youth, the beautiful women of Valencia, his adventures. *Bah! He is overcome by “decrepito” (senile decay).* Alfonso had thought to himself. *I ought to be King and he knows it. But I will wait.*

Month after month, year after year, he had waited.

With money in short supply, father and son had worked hard to extract as much tribute as possible from the nobility of Napoli. Often enough, Ferrante had employed force to keep the nobility under tight control. His favorite tactic had been to invite his enemies to patch up differences at a state dinner, then—when they were seated, happy and relaxed—he would round them up and toss them into the dungeon. Within a week, they were hanged or beheaded. Duke Alfonso smiled at the thought of ruling Naples with an even mightier fist than that of his father.

The self-serving lords of Napoli feared Ferrante to the depths of their souls. *They will fear his son all the more. The soul of man is black as night and must be whipped into right behavior by those with a stronger intention. I have never feared using the lash to get what I want. I will never hesitate to use it—even on bigger fish than the*

Predators

Coppola and the Sanseverini. He grinned with satisfaction.

As his army marched toward Otranto, Duke Alfonso turned to young Antonio Grumello. "You know the city of Otranto, well?" Alfonso asked.

"Si, Signore. Like the back of my hand," answered the boy.

The Duke of Calabria held out his hand. "Very well. You will be my personal aide!"

"Signore?" the boy turned red.

Alfonso clapped the boy on his back as the long procession of soldiers marched south. He motioned to a wagon lumbering along. "Get some food. When we met you, you have not eaten in several days, true?" Antonio nodded. "You are still hungry. Go eat. Then I want to know what you saw. How many troops do the Turks have? How do they fight? Everything you can remember. We must make them pay for bringing their filth to the soil of Naples." The youth bowed and rode to the wagon.

As the hours went by, several of the men muttered that it would be another six months before they would see home and hearth again. Some even shuddered at the thought of facing the Turks whose reputation for blood-thirsty conquest had preceded them.

Alfonso knew his men well and heard the grumbling. A vicious smile crossed his lips as he turned to his chief lieutenant. "Tell the men to stop talking unless they wish to lose fingers and toes." The young officer saluted. "And tell them victory will be ours!" He gave the officer a hard-edged nod of the head and the young man rode off.

Young Antonio watched awestruck. Not since the return of Trivulzio to Milano five years before, when he was a boy of nine, had he seen a warrior so intent, so focused on meeting a foe on the field of battle. Somehow, in the company of this man, Duke Alfonso, he

felt as if he had found a home.

The Duke glanced over at his young charge. “You have displayed great bravery, young man.” As he turned his gaze to the south, his eyes had the look of two cannon trained on a distant adversary. “And for letting you live, the infidel shall pay.” He ran his thumbnail across his throat.

Two men rode toward Duke Alfonso and his army. As they approached, Antonio Grumello observed them, then leaned over and spoke to the Duke. “That is William Castle, Excellency. The one I told you about...Bishop Branda’s nephew.”

The Duke of Calabria raised his hand for his troop to stop. The two riders came to a halt in front of the duke and his army.

William doffed his cap in greetings. “*Bon Giorno, Eccellenza,*” smiled the musician.

“*Buon giorno*, Englishman...” The duke nodded toward Grumello at his side. “I have heard all about you. My father believes you are the finest musician he ever heard.”

“*Grazie...*” William smiled.

“What are you doing so far from Milano, all the way down here in our kingdom?” asked the duke, with a slight sneer. “And where is your musical instrument? I have heard that musicians are lost without something to strum, or pick, or blow.”

William ignored the subtle jab. “My uncle, Bishop Castiglione, and I were on our way to Rome. A message from Il Moro routed me to Otranto. He heard of trouble there and sent me to observe.”

The Duke stared to the east “We are on our way to deal with the Turks.” He nodded toward young Grumello. His eyes narrowed into mean slits. “Father Pendinelli...” the Duke scowled. “...was a very

Predators

fine man. I knew him from boyhood. It was I who asked the Pope to elevate him to Archbishop.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Hacked to death—?”

“On the altar—.” William added. The Duke frowned in disbelief. “Then they brought all those who refused to convert to Islam to a hill—hundreds of men, women and children—and put them to death. The screams of the dying...it was...God help them.” He continued on, relating what he had seen since Antonio had departed.

Through clenched teeth, the duke added, “The Pope was informed of what had happened in Otranto. He appeared less than interested.”

A knowing look crossed William’s face, a look he did his best to hide.

Pondering that thought, the duke finally spoke. “I suspect the pontiff covets Aquila, perhaps all of Abruzzi, knowing that we will be occupied with the Turkish invaders. He will take every opportunity to carve out chunks of Neapolitan territory for himself. Wait and see.”

William winced at the thought.

The Duke spat on the ground and then waved to William and Vittorio. “You will join us?”

William shook his head. “My uncle would want us to give you every possible assistance, but I must get back to Rome where my uncle waits.”

Duke Alfonso gave the young man a nod. “When you see the Pope, tell him that Alfonso of Calabria, offers him his condolences. Tell him the duke is not made of the stuff of Lorenzo de Medici and will not wait for a dagger in his back. Tell him to expect a frontal attack.” With that the duke signaled his men to begin marching toward Otranto.

