

DAVID
GILMAN

MASTER OF WAR IX

RAGE
OF
SWORDS



An Aries Book

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For Suzy

CHARACTER LIST

*SIR THOMAS BLACKSTONE

THOMAS BLACKSTONE'S MEN

- *Henry Blackstone
- *Hugh Gifford: man-at-arms
- *Sir Gilbert Killbere
- *Meulon: Norman captain
- *John Jacob: Blackstone's squire
- *Renfred: German man-at-arms and captain
- *Will Longdon: veteran archer and centenar
- *Jack Halfpenny: archer and ventenar
- *Aicart: Gascon captain
- *William Ashford: man-at-arms and captain
- *Bullard: man-at-arms
- *Walter Mallin: man-at-arms and horsemaster
- *John Terrel: man-at-arms
- *Arnald Bezián: Gascon man-at-arms
- *Girald: Gascon man-at-arms
- *Eckehart Brun: German man-at-arms
- *Becker: Renfred's scout

ENGLISH MERCENARIES:

- *Richard Bell

ENGLISH ROYALTY AND NOBILITY:

Prince Lionel of Antwerp, Duke of Clarence
Lord Edward Despenser, Knight of the Garter

FRENCH ROYALTY:

Charles V: King of France

FRENCH OFFICIALS, NOBILITY AND OTHERS

Simon Bucy: counsellor to the French King
Duke of Berry
Duke of Burgundy
Amadeus VI, Count of Savoy
Countess Bonne of Bourbon: Amadeus's wife
*Onfroi: Norman mercenary
*Guichard: goatherder
*Melisende: Guichard's wife
*Abbot Jean
*Brother Baptiste
*Brother Gabriel

ITALIAN NOBILITY, OFFICIALS AND OTHERS

Galeazzo Visconti: ruler of Milan
Bianca of Savoy: Galeazzo's wife
Violante Visconti: Galeazzo's daughter
Isabelle de Valois: Galeazzo's daughter-in-law
Bernabò Visconti: ruler of Milan
Beatrice Regina della Scala: Bernabò's wife
Cansignorio della Scala: Lord of Verona
John II, Marquis de Montferrat
Secondotto: Montferrat's son
*Messer Salvarini
*Donna Elena Salvarini
*Cardinal Guido Alberti da Viterbo: papal legate
*Maestro Bernini: Veronese lawyer
*Signor Corrado: podestà of Piacenza

*Stefano: servant

*Morena: servant woman

*Salvatore: Milan gate commander

*Mattia Marchesi: man-at-arms and captain

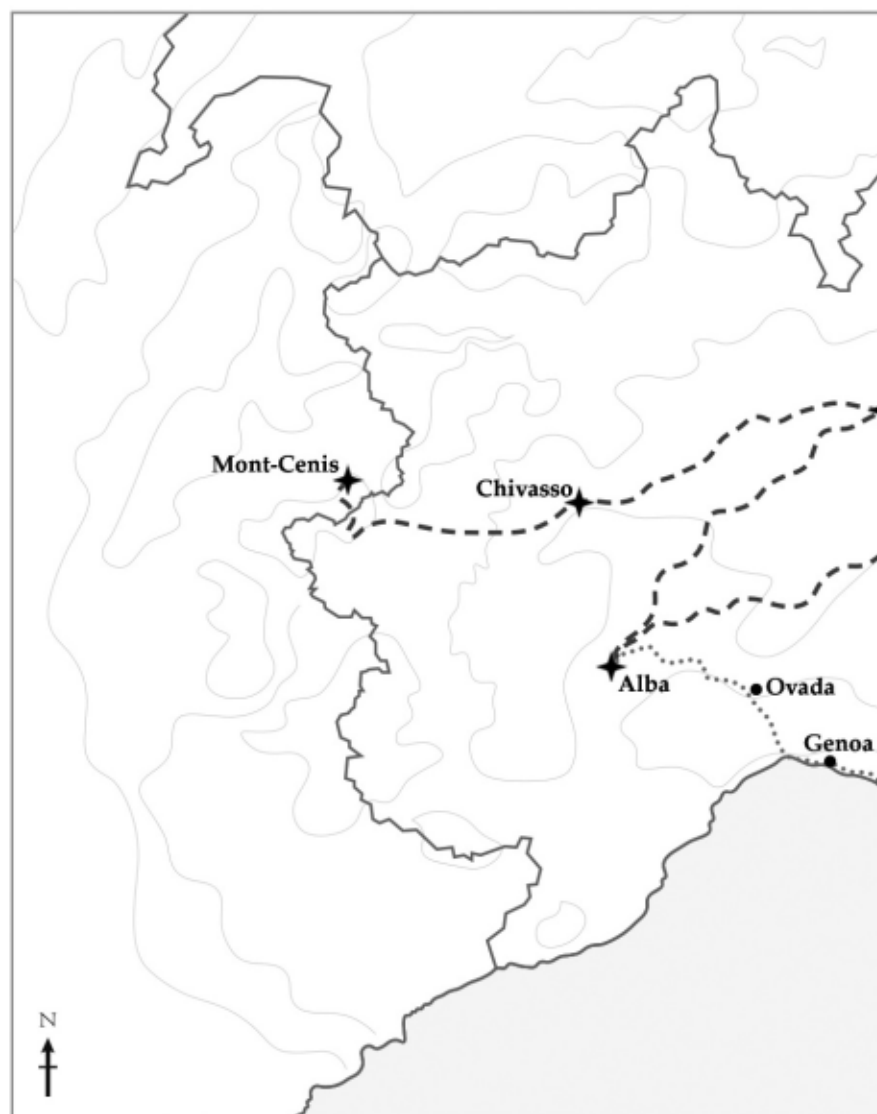
*Mastino Gambetti: man-at-arms

*Abbess Lucia

*Indicates fictional characters

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NORTHERN ITALY





BLACKSTONE AND HENRY'S ROUTE - - -
WILLIAM ASHFORD'S ROUTE TO LUCCA

What is this rage of swords? What is this lust for blood?

Petrarch, *Epistolae familiares* (*Letters to Friends*)

PROLOGUE

Paris
April 1368

Prince Lionel, Duke of Clarence, the English King's second son, rode into Paris via the Porte Saint-Denis. The twenty-nine-year-old English Prince was on his way to Milan at the head of several hundred men. The lavish hospitality offered in Paris by the French King Charles V would give him a place to rest before continuing onward into Italy, where his father had arranged a marriage between Lionel and Violante, the daughter of Milan's ruler, Galeazzo Visconti.

The French King's valued adviser, Simon Bucy, gazed from his vantage point in the old Palais de la Cité towards the right bank of the River Seine and his monarch's private residence at the Hôtel Saint-Pol. The sound of distant cheering occasionally usurped the babble of voices from the narrow streets below him. The raucous welcome grew ever closer. The commoners did not know why they were cheering for an English prince, but raise their voices they did because it was a pageant and the men and women of Paris liked nothing more than a spectacle.

Bucy admired the political caniness of the Visconti lord. Several years earlier Galeazzo's son had married Isabelle de Valois, the French King's sister. The more-than-generous dowry

that the Milanese ruler had paid had helped discharge the extortionate ransom demanded by the English for Jean le Bon, the King's father, after his capture at Poitiers. And now, with this imminent marriage, the Visconti would have a foothold in both kingdoms – and the English would gain a powerful alliance. Bucy tugged his cloak tighter against the cold air sweeping up from the River Seine below the window. The river twisted through the city, reminding him of the Visconti's blazon of a serpent entwining a man and devouring him. Prince Lionel's arrival signalled a fragile peace between the English and the French. Bucy knew it to be a momentary one. The winds of good fortune were finally blowing more than the pungent stench of human waste, fish and meat stalls across the city. They heralded a victory over the English – if his plans came to fruition.

But Bucy knew he had another enemy that could not be defeated. His age. While his mind and instincts were as sharply honed as any assassin's dagger, he knew that the grim reaper's distant horseman was fast approaching, and he would be lucky to have another year left. Two, if the horse went lame. Now was the time to set in place the final act to defeat the old enemy. Nothing mattered more than delivering France from the English.

Fighting them on the ground had proved disastrous for the King's father, but with Bucy's skilful advice the thirty-year-old Charles's slow, determined policy of ridding France of its transgressors was finally bearing fruit. He and Bucy had devised a plan the previous year to send the plague of foreign mercenaries who blighted France into Spain to fight alongside Henry of Trastámara, the bastard half-brother who had seized the crown from Castile's King, Pedro I. Don Pedro had escaped to Aquitaine with the help of that other suppurating wound in France's side, Thomas Blackstone.

The English Prince of Wales and Aquitaine needed Don Pedro as an ally on the southern side of the Pyrenees. Had Blackstone

not led an army against Trastámara, who made the cardinal mistake of facing the Master of War on the field of battle, the bastard usurper would still be in power. All had seemed lost once Don Pedro was back on the throne, until he reneged on his agreement to pay the cost of the war. After several months of waiting in Spain, the Prince of Wales had limped home to Bordeaux. Sick and with his coffers empty, he had had to raise taxes, which had driven Gascon lords over to the French King's side. That was the first sign of change in France's favour.

Bucy beckoned a servant to refill his wine glass as he gazed across the city roofs, dabbing a tear from the cold April wind and mentally unfolding the plan he and the King had been secretly working on. A month after the Prince of Wales had left Castile, French arms and money had secretly funded Trastámara's return. Within a year, Trastámara would seize back the Castilian crown, after which he would cross the Pyrenees and forge into Aquitaine while the Castilian fleet attacked Bordeaux. Then Charles would unleash the French army. Another year. No more. And France would crush the sickly Prince of Wales who would have no money in his treasury to fight a war.

But before then, Bucy needed to take one final risk. An act his pious King would not countenance. Stop Prince Lionel's marriage; destroy the strategic accord between England and Milan; deny the Prince of Wales the dowry being paid by the Visconti to his younger brother – two hundred thousand gold florins that could sustain the English in Aquitaine long enough to thwart French plans. Bucy had already sent word to the only man in Italy who could commit such a deed and whose murderous actions in killing the Prince would deflect any blame for French involvement. Bucy was a past master of forward planning. Only when those he marked for death thought themselves safe would the final blow be delivered.

He stepped back into the room from the balcony and closed the window. As he gripped the locking handle, his knuckles

whitened. He had set in motion the beginnings of the next war with England and the means to defeat them. What could stop it? Where was the weakness in his plan?

Bucy sighed.

Where was Thomas Blackstone?

PART ONE

BROTHER TO THE WOLF

CHAPTER ONE

Mont Cenis Pass

Savoy

May 1368

The mountain wolf pack ran silently through the night. Moonlight silvered their fur. The alpha male's unerring instinct was guiding him to where the pack would feast. The scent of blood was on the wind.

Thomas Blackstone's eyes flared in the light from the burning huts, a devil incarnate to those he attacked. His gore-streaked face and bared teeth turned his enemies' blood cold, such was the ferocity of the violence he inflicted on them.

Killbere snorted and spat. Lungs heaving, he and the others had run at Blackstone's heels through the darkness to a goatherders' hamlet which had been attacked by an unknown enemy. The settlement was burning. Cracking timbers hurled sparks high into the heavens, guiding the souls of the dead who lay slaughtered along the high plateau. Some of the mercenaries responsible for the killing had escaped Blackstone's onslaught out of the darkness, but a pocket of survivors remained, backed against boulders at the edge of the settlement. As Blackstone stepped closer to the beleaguered routiers, a group of his men went among the dead checking for survivors. The hamlet's inhabitants – man, woman, child and dog – had been brutally assaulted and butchered, some bodies left among rock clefts, others, charred, twisted corpses, in

their burnt-out huts. The mercenaries' bestial attack on the hamlet had showed no compassion.

One of the goatherds, Guichard, had run from these routiers when they had first attacked and, by good fortune, had stumbled into Blackstone's camp hours away. Fear-riven, dried blood from a head wound matted into his beard, he had fallen to his knees, thinking Blackstone's men were brigands, and begged not to be slain. John Jacob took him to Blackstone.

Guichard had run ahead of the mounted scar-faced Englishman and his men back to where his hamlet nestled in the high pass. After three hours Blackstone and his troop pulled up, hobbled their horses and ran the last mile with the goatherd, guided by the distant huts' burning thatch. The routiers were readying to leave the destroyed hamlet before first light when Blackstone swooped out of the night.

And now the goatherd had come across the bodies of his children. He bellowed, an animal howl of pain soaring into the wind. Snatching a rock he plunged through Blackstone's men, desiring nothing more than to kill the routiers with his bare hands. Had the biggest man in the ranks not sidestepped and grabbed him, he would have died on the point of a routier's blade. Meulon was strong enough to restrain the man's impulse. Spent, Guichard sank sobbing to his knees.

Blackstone addressed the routier he took to be the leader, whose face snarled in the moonlight. The man uttered a curse in French. He was ready to die. The others with him looked more fearful.

'There are a dozen of you left standing. Some of you are wounded. Surrender and we'll offer you a swift death,' said Blackstone, speaking to the man in his own language.

'English?' he said.

'What difference does it make who kills you?' said Blackstone. 'Were you sent to ambush us? Sixty of you against my hundred was no bargain, if that's what you were paid to do.'

The mercenary shook his head. 'Why would Englishmen come across the mountains into Italy if not to fight for one of

the Italian lords? If that's your plan, then join us. I don't care who you are. Thirty of my men escaped. We need others to make up our numbers. Your men will be worth good money.'

The man's answer made it clear that they had not been sent to ambush Blackstone. They were one of the bands of brigands that plagued town, village and hamlet. These were French routiers.

'You sell your sword to the Visconti?' said Killbere.

'If he paid enough.'

'There's someone who pays more?' said Blackstone.

'Stand with us and you'll be welcomed. These Italian lords fight like rats in a sack.' The man grinned. The men he faced were obviously killers. They could be bought. If tempted, they and the survivors could join those who had escaped and have an even stronger company of men whose skills would fetch a better price.

He licked his lips. Give too much information and the man wearing the open bascinet, whose scarred face was etched by the bleak moonlight, might still kill them, take that information and replace him. He had a contract waiting. How far to go with this unsmiling fighter who stared so hard that his gaze sapped courage? 'Della Scala, Lord of Verona. He offers a contract. He means to claim back lost towns that the Visconti seized and the taxes they bring.'

Killbere grunted. 'The Scaligeri are contracting men?' He blew snot from his nose, his sword dangling from its blood knot. 'More murderous bastards on the loose. God's tears, Thomas, we're going back into a hornet's nest.'

The mercenary's confidence ebbed. There were legends about an Englishman who fought in France and Italy. Thomas Blackstone. He swallowed hard. For the first time he stared at Blackstone's shield. The blazon of a gauntleted fist clutching a sword's narrowing blade beneath its crossguard and pommel was faded but still visible. Beneath the gauntlet were words he couldn't make out, so scarred was the shield.

Killbere saw the man trying to read it.

'*Défiant à la Mort*,' said Killbere. 'That's Sir Thomas Blackstone's blazon. Given by the Prince of Wales at the behest of the English King. There'll be no mercy this night. Scum like you have no right to life.' Killbere gripped his sword again.

The routier's courage wavered between helpless resignation and his own belligerent defiance. 'We are all scum, Sir Thomas. Even so, we would wish to be shriven before we die. There's a monastery not five leagues hence.'

'No,' said Blackstone. 'I hang rapists and killers of women and children, but there are no trees here. Yield and we give you a choice of death. A blade or'—he gestured beyond the plateau—'the cliff.'

'Who knows, you might even survive going over the edge,' said Killbere.

'We fight,' said one man, taking a crouched step forward, his eyes wide at the thought of plunging thousands of feet.

Anticipation rippled through Blackstone's ranks.

Somewhere beyond them, wolves howled.

'No!' said their leader, primal fear getting the better of him. He threw down his sword. 'I'll not bleed to death and be torn apart by wolves.'

The others wavered. The eerie cry of the night hunters swept down on the wind. Even Blackstone's men looked uneasily over their shoulder. Wolves were demonic creatures living on the edge between this world and the next whose fangs ripped flesh to devour a man's heart and with it his soul. Every child was warned about them. Pray to God that a wolf never seized them. Pray to God that you die shriven. Or pray to the man holding the blade at your throat to kill you fast and bury you beneath stone.

The leader stared at Blackstone. 'You're no better than those ravening wolves.' He glanced again to where the pack waited. 'No wolf will take my soul,' he said. 'I'll take the plunge.'

The pack howled, each lending its voice, each announcing its

intent. The routiers followed their leader's example and threw down their swords.

Blackstone's men seized the mercenaries' weapons. Knife, axe, sword and mace. They kicked their shields aside and dragged them clear of the boulders.

'Your name?' said Blackstone to their leader as he forced him to his knees as Will Longdon and his archers quickly tied the men's wrists behind them.

'Onfroi.'

'You're Norman,' said Blackstone, recognizing the name's origin.

'I am. And a better man than the scum who ride with me.'

'Ah, a better class of scum,' said Killbere. 'We shall give you the respect you need, noble scum.'

The archers hauled the men towards the cliff edge. Some dug their heels in, but the archers' strength in back and arm drove them forward. Some stumbled; others whimpered for mercy. Blackstone pushed Onfroi behind his men and then kicked his legs from under him.

'Let's watch your scum die.'

Blackstone's men needed no signal to push the routiers from the ridge into the darkness below. The clouds briefly smothered the moon but not their screams. The sound of bone hitting rocky outcrops echoed. Blackstone's men peered down as the moonlight reappeared. Broken bodies littered the void.

'Vulture bait,' said Will Longdon with a grin. 'Though they'll probably choke on them.'

Blackstone grabbed a handful of Onfroi's hair, twisting him around, his back to the death ridge and marched him back into the ruined hamlet.

'We will bury the dead villagers and cover them with rock and stones. You commanded men and gave them free rein to butcher and rape. A man must pay dearly for such actions.'

Onfroi struggled but Blackstone's grip easily held him.

'Guichard!' he called.

Meulon helped the distraught goatherd to his feet, who took a few faltering steps forward. Blackstone nodded to Meulon, who slid his throat-cutting knife from his belt and pressed it into the man's hand.

The routier struggled violently but Killbere cuffed him. Onfroi raised his head. 'You offered me a good death,' he accused Blackstone. 'You are no better than any other whoreson of an Englishman.' He snarled, spat and squirmed but to no avail. John Jacob pressed his foot down on the man's bent leg, and Blackstone's grip was that of the stonemason and archer he once was.

'This man will pay for the death of your children. Don't kill him quickly.'

The goatherd had recovered his composure. Killing the man who knelt in front of him was all he could do to avenge his wife and children. He smeared a tear across his cheek.

'How... how should I kill him?' he said falteringly, his hesitation caused by an impediment in his speech.

'Hamstring him and feed him to the wolves,' said Killbere.

Onfroi screamed and begged for mercy. It did him no good. He bellowed as the goatherd severed his tendons. They dragged him to the edge of the hamlet, weeping in pain and terror.

A hundred yards away, the silver-backed wolves sat behind their pack leader. Each wolf knew his place in the order of things. Knew who would be the first to kill and eat.

Onfroi sobbed, pleaded with an unhearing Christ and then tried to squirm in the dirt.

Blackstone and his men turned back to bury the villagers.

Onfroi's screams ended abruptly, leaving only the sound of snuffling and ravenous wolves as they tore into him.

A soul seized by demons.

Killbere spat. 'Our road is paved with the dead.'

'It always will be,' said Blackstone.