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The Fools' Crusade

Written by Pip Vaughan-Hughes

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the FOOLS' CRUSADE

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Prologue

The Nile Delta, April 1250

The outline of the door was a dazzling line of white light on a slab of darkness, and the dark itself was thick and dusty and full of the reek of sheep and chickens. I sat with legs drawn up tight against my chest, eyes streaming from the fetor that rose from the damp straw beneath me. My guts were clenching and unclenching as if a giant's hand were milking them, but I had nothing left to give. My breeches were iron-stiff with my own filth. I had drunk nothing for a day and a night, and no food had passed my lips for more than two days, and now thirst had become my whole world. The hut was crawling with insects. They had got inside my clothes and my groin, and the backs of my knees were already welted and smarting as they gorged on my thin, sickly blood. 'May it poison you,' I muttered.

'What did you say?' The quavering voice of Matthieu d'Allaines came from somewhere on my left. Another man groaned softly in the blackness. There had been five of us yesterday. I had heard two lives gurgle to their ends in the night. Soon they would add their stink to the terrible air.

'I was praying for the lice that are eating me alive,' I said. 'Their god must hate them, to have sent them a meal like me.'

'You blaspheme,' croaked Matthieu. 'This is . . .'

'Not the time? Are you sure?'

There was a rustling and suddenly Matthieu's fingers were clawing at my neck.

'Give it me . . .' he whispered suddenly. *'Give it to me . . . I will destroy it. And then I will shrive your soul.'* I shoved him away and he rolled into the man lying further off in the black stink.

'Hell-mouth is yawning for you! I can see it . . .'

'You are mad, priest,' I muttered.

'Use your breath for repentance. Death is very near,' he croaked.

I could have told him that we had both been as good as dead since Shrove Tuesday, two months ago. We had been part of an army of walking corpses, our flesh rotting even as it clung to our bones, the stink of the living no different from that of the heaps of dead. I wondered if Jean had escaped, or the king, but I thought mostly of my wife, and of a little stream that ran beside the house in which I had been born, its cold, clear water dancing over golden rocks, nimble barred trout swimming and drinking, drinking, drinking . . .

There was a sudden clashing of sound and the door burst open, drowning us in unbearable daylight. Loud, angry voices hacked at the vile air, and the chink and slither of drawn weapons. Great black shadows appeared in the doorway. The straw beside me churned as the sick man, whoever he was, tried to burrow out of sight. A leg, clad in mail and blue leather boots, stamped down next to me. He bent and shouted into my face.

'Are you ill?' It was a strange question, given that I was a living skeleton sprawled in my own shit, but I knew that he was not expecting an answer, for he had used his own tongue. The spear tip was already pointing at my sternum when I replied in Arabic.

'I am as strong as you, my lord!' The soldier squatted down before me, his nose wrinkling in surprise, or disgust. He was my age, with grey beginning to pattern his trimmed beard. The white of his turban was almost blinding me.

‘No, Frankish jackal, you are not.’ He had dropped the spear, and somehow a long, curved knife had appeared in his hand. The men behind him were all talking at once. I guessed they were demanding to know what I had said, what it was that had taken their captain by surprise. They were pushing into the hut, shoving against the man so that his knife wavered and jabbed at the air just in front of my breastbone.

‘I can stand, lord,’ I was telling him. And indeed, like a dying crane-fly at the end of summer, I was struggling upright, the jagged stones of the wall scoring my back. The Saracen watched me, whether in amusement or revulsion I could not tell. As soon as I was roughly standing he grabbed my ankle and pulled me down and the stones flayed my back once more.

‘Keep still, you revolting cur! You are a priest! Say it! You are an infidel priest!’ The other voices were snarling now, egging the man on. The whites of his eyes were showing. And the knife, cool and silver as a fish in a Devon stream, was at my throat. He could slice me now, and let the coolness in. Then I would drink for ever.

‘Lord, I am not,’ I told him. The soldiers were gripping their captain’s shoulders now, and I could see the rage growing in him. I had seen it many times, and I had felt it myself. I understood, somehow, that this Saracen was not a bad man, just a tired, overworked soldier with men who needed to have some fun. Matthieu was praying. I heard the fear in his voice, and the anger, the self-righteous anger. To bring his god into this place . . . What kind of man would invoke the god of love in a charnel house, with rage in his voice? My head was swimming. This *was* Hell-mouth, then.

‘Why are you not praying, priest?’ the Saracen was barking at me like a dog.

‘Because I am not a priest, lord.’

‘Do Franks not pray when death comes for them? Why is your friend praying, then?’

‘Him? Not my friend, lord. He thinks this is hell, and that you are *Shaitan* come for my soul.’ I giggled, and tasted blood in my throat.

‘Does he? Does he, the dog? The worm?’ The Saracen leaped to his feet and grabbed Matthieu by the tunic. The rag tied round Matthieu’s head fell off and revealed his stubbly tonsured scalp, scabbed with ringworm. The soldiers in the doorway all cried out at once: *Priest! Priest!* There was a confusion, a rush, and many hands clawed at Matthieu and dragged him out. I glimpsed his heels jouncing over the dried dung, and then I was seized as well.

The sunlight was white-hot needles thrusting into my eyeballs. I cringed, and the men laughed and shook me until my teeth rattled. Through bloody tears a world took shape: a dusty courtyard – no, a threshing floor between low, whitewashed buildings thatched with reeds. Spears were stacked against walls and a green standard had been thrust into the thatch of one hut. A lop-eared goat chewed on something as it watched us with its lizard eyes. Men – soldiers in dusty chain mail and white robes, with helmets or white turbans on their heads – leaned against walls or squatted in the narrow strips of shade. They were hooting and cursing at Matthieu, who was being hauled into the middle of the threshing floor. The Saracens pulled him up until he was kneeling, face towards the sun. His eyes were squeezed shut but his lips were still moving in prayer. He fumbled inside his ragged clothes and brought out a silver cross, which he clasped tightly. The Saracens were all jeering now, and their captain was strutting to and fro, stiff with rage. He bent and said something to Matthieu, and in answer, the friar raised his clasped hands as high as the chain of his cross would allow. He called out in a cracked, trembling voice:

‘*Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum . . .*’ And the Saracen drew his long, curved sword, raised it backhanded across his body and with a hissing slash brought it down upon

the friar's neck. A lovely stroke it was, the wrist loose, one finger curved over the hilt, the left hand extended delicately to one side. The flesh of Matthieu's neck cleaved and I saw the neat white ring of bone flash before the blood, one thick gout of it, sprayed out. There was a hollow crack as his head struck the packed clay of the threshing floor. The soldiers hooted as their captain bent and wiped his blade on Matthieu's back. Then he swung, loose as a dancer, pivoting on his heel, to face me. His face was set, indifferent. He gestured with the point of his blade and my guards jerked me forward. The goat was running to the end of its rope again and again, panicked by the yells and the smell of blood. But the circle of the threshing floor was empty save for the Saracen and the corpse of Matthieu. The soldiers shoved me onto the hard clay and stepped back. I stood, swaying. The sky was deep blue, the threshing floor pale as butter, the huts blazing white. The Saracen captain was ordering me to do something, but I could not make out the words, just the sounds of his language, and into my mind drifted the face of a man I had known when we had sailed together, and the songs he had sung. There was a good one, about dying. 'The One You Kill, Lord . . .' And then the hand of memory, fickle servant that he is, had found me the very song. I shuffled forward, smiled reassuringly at the Saracen, and began to sing.

*The one You kill,
Lord,
Does not smell of blood,
And the one You burn
Does not reek of smoke.
He You burn laughs as he burns
And the one You kill,
As You kill him,
Cries out in ecstasy.*

I had learned it in Arabic, so I sung it in that tongue as my feet faltered towards the black stain spreading around the friar. A hand caught me under the arm and I knelt obediently. The man's sharp face appeared before mine, very close. I smiled: I knew he would do a good job. I felt nothing now, and that was wonderful. The Saracen was speaking urgently to me, and so I stopped singing and cocked my head drunkenly to catch his words.

'What are you doing? How do you know those words? Frankish man, why do you sing the words of Sheikh al-Ansari?'

'I'm sorry . . . I will stop. Please do your work, lord.' My head was growing intolerably heavy, so I let my chin drop to my chest. The sun was flooding me, even as I closed my eyes it seeped in until my skull was filled with it, breaking into fragments like stars, like bees, buzzing, buzzing . . . Then the buzzing became, for a moment, the voices of men, and hands reached for me as I pitched forward into the tumult.

Chapter One

Florence, two years earlier

Enough. I had had enough of this. I pushed back the vast ledger, heavy as a grave marker, and stood up carefully. Three years as a banker had put a bend in my spine, and I felt I must be creaking like an unoiled hinge as I stretched wearily towards the painted beams of the ceiling. Wincing, for one of my legs had gone to sleep into the bargain, I limped out of the reading room and called for my cloak. A young clerk, new to us – I had forgotten his name already, if anyone had even bothered to tell me what it was – brought it, holding it out to me gingerly, as if I were some large and unpredictable dog: might bite, might not. I did not bite, not often, but I was rarely in a good temper these days, especially here. I made an effort to smile and thank him, but he just stood there. He would have had the same look on his face if a stone statue in his church had wished him good day. Once I would have paused and taken a little time to draw him out. I could still recognise that look in his eyes, a young man's terrified fascination with the world that is engulfing him. I could have told him how I had once been young, a monk from the country, and that the world has many rows of sharp teeth and may take you in its jaws, but if you are clever and lucky it may not chew you up and gulp you down.

But I did not. And I didn't stop to bid goodnight to my old friend Isaac of Toledo, head of the Florence branch of

the Banco di Corvo Marino. I would see him tomorrow, and though I loved him, he would want to discuss the Uberti loan and some papers that had arrived from Lyon, and I only wished for some food, a drink of wine and bed.

It was not as late as I had thought, however, for I stepped out into dazzling sunlight. The reading room was like a tomb, windowless and airless, the atmosphere a thick, nose-worrying mist of dust, mouldering vellum, tangy ink and candle-grease. I leaned on one of the pillars that stood on either side of the door, letting my eyes get used to the glare. Jesus, I was becoming a bat, a leathery old bat with ink blots on its wings. Should I go back to my toil? No, I hadn't simply left, I had escaped. The ledgers would have me again tomorrow. I took a deep breath and stepped out into the Via dei Tavolini. With nowhere to be, no one needing me, I felt almost dizzy with the freedom of it all. What to do?

Perhaps some shoes. I had heard of a bootmaker near Santa Maria who, his customers said, would surely go straight to heaven when he died, to make shoes for the angels. Try as I might I could not imagine why angels would need them, but Iselda, waiting patiently for me at home in Venice, would like a pair of Florentine shoes, and perhaps he could measure me as well.

I was so deep in these soothing thoughts that I did not notice the man who had fallen in step with me until he skipped ahead, turned and bowed, very politely forcing me to stop. Polite or not, my hand went to the green stone of my knife hilt, for this was a city where people had fallen into the habit of slicing each other up over the most trivial slights. But this fellow was smiling and bowing again, and I decided he was probably not an assassin.

'What do you want?' I demanded crossly. An escape is an escape, and I was not going to let myself be troubled by duty, at least not for the rest of the day.

‘Sir Petrus Zennorius?’ I nodded, curtly. ‘My master would be vastly gratified if you would indulge him with a scant . . .’ He waved his arms gently, like seaweed in a rock pool. ‘A mere nibble, a morsel of your time.’ I sighed in exasperation and looked him up and down. Tall, dressed in sober colours – although the cloth was expensive – he held himself loosely, as if every sinew of his body were waiting for the command that would make him most appealing to whoever stood before him. But I was not in the mood for foppish interruptions.

‘And who is your master?’ I growled.

‘Cardinal John of San Lorenzo in Lucina,’ announced the man, with a sort of breathless triumph. He might have been announcing the end of the world, and my imminent acceptance into the bosom of the Lord – shoeless, at this rate. At least the angels would not be jealous. But wait. Cardinal John – John of Toledo, as I thought of him – what was he doing in Florence? A very powerful man indeed, far too powerful to have a fop like this wretch run errands for him. But perhaps he was not such a fop after all. He had a pale, indoor face, nondescript save for a slight wall-eye, and his hair was covered by a black coif tied tight. There was something steely beneath his apparent limpness. Perhaps that was why I still had a finger on the hilt of my knife.

‘Why would your exalted master require even a morsel of my day?’ I wondered aloud. But of course I knew the answer: a loan, a deposit – even, perhaps, a relic, though I was asked for those less and less these days. I would have to follow this nitwit, then. I had escaped the bank’s masonry, but not its responsibility. God’s liver! Iselda’s shoes would have to wait for an hour. ‘Very well, lead me,’ I said. ‘But I cannot stay long.’

‘No, no, of course not,’ simpered the messenger, and bowing again, he set off up the street.

I followed, admitting to myself as I did so that it was curiosity more than anything else that was steering me off

course. For in those years the city of Florence was very much in the hands of families like the Amidei and Donati, who were loyal to the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick von Hohenstaufen. And Cardinal John – an Englishman, in fact, a Cistercian abbot who had ended up in Spain before receiving the call of His Holiness – was the pope's man through and through. It would be hard to imagine a more staunch supporter of Pope Innocent, and such a fellow would not expect to be made welcome in Florence. No indeed: he would have to feel quite certain of his safety. And it was partly for that reason that I had begun to doubt that this simpering personage clicking along in front of me was as ineffectual as he seemed.

I had been heading towards Santa Trinità, and I was being led in that direction, but we passed the church and dived into the alleys between it and the river. The buildings ended and there was the Arno, sluggish and disreputable, its waters low, streaked with grease and dye from the tanneries and butchers upstream on the Ponte Vecchio. My guide turned to make sure I was following, and beckoned me onto the old wood of the Ponte alla Carraia. Why in the name of Saint Lawrence's sizzling hide were we going to Oltrarno? He turned right into the Borgo San Frediano and after a minute halted beside the nondescript brick front of a church. San Frediano – I knew it only because, years ago, some workers repairing the floor had dug up a jumble of old bones and the ambitious deacon had tried to sell them to Captain de Montalhas as priceless relics of an ancient martyr. But now I caught on. San Frediano was also a Cistercian cloister, and where else would John of Toledo feel safe in this dangerous city?

The church was empty except for a man wrapped in a dark cloak, sitting in a pew in front of the altar. The messenger signalled for me to wait halfway down the aisle. He tapped across the tiles, bent and whispered something in the shrouded figure's ear. Cardinal John of San Lorenzo in Lucina stood up

and his messenger nodded to me. I squared my shoulders and marched towards them. I was in no mood to be intimidated. If they wanted something from me, they could ask. And there was nothing I wanted from them. I had seen the cardinal once before from a distance in the Lateran, but I recognised the triangular face, the hollow cheeks and the large eyes that seemed out of place in their owner's austere visage. He held out his hand and, like the professional courtier I had come to be, I kissed his ring of office.

'Thank you for coming to see me, my son,' he said. He spoke in English, though his speech had been warmed by the southern lands in which he had spent his life. In this he sounded, I supposed, somewhat like myself.

'Any opportunity to serve Mother Church,' I replied, icily polite.

'Of course. I knew you could be relied upon. Now, if you can bear another short walk, shall we allow Remigius to lead us?' Without waiting for my reply, he inclined his head meaningfully towards the messenger, who all of a sudden seemed to have found a new tightness in his joints. He strode out of the church with us close behind.

'You are not married, are you, my son?'

'No, Your Eminence.'

'Iselda de Rozers – is that her name? Charming, by all accounts. You are such a fortunate man, Sir Petrus. But the godly, my son, the godly seek the sanctity of the vow of marriage.'

'Might I enquire where we are going, Your Eminence?' I asked.

'Certainly. We are going to visit an alchemist.'

I blinked. I had obviously not heard properly. 'An alchemist? That is . . . unexpected.'

'So much is, my son, especially in these times. Don't you agree?'

Did this require a diplomatic answer or a casual one? I had been trying, quite successfully, to remove unexpectedness from my life these past three years. As a banker I dealt in stability and safety. As a banker . . . A thought struck me and I stole a glance at the cardinal. He did not look like a charlatan, nor did he seem particularly gullible. But alchemists and bankers both concerned themselves with gold. I sighed. I did not have the time for fool's errands, and if my suspicions were correct I was, at this moment, being taken for a mooncalf. Surely the Church had not come to believe in the transmutation of base metals? How ridiculous. But then I caught something in John of Toledo's expression. There was a jest here. Was I being made the butt of some juvenile sort of ecclesiastical jape? A cardinal and that ridiculous Remigius, trying to set up one of the richest bankers in Christendom for . . . for what, exactly? And then an even less palatable thought struck me. What if I were not being set up for a joke, but for something entirely different? Iselda and I had been more than scrupulous about appearing to the world as perfect Christians – obsessively so, given our business and our clients. But this short walk . . . By 'alchemist', did the cardinal, by any chance, mean Inquisitor, someone who brought truth from the vile matter of heresy, as an alchemist brought forth gold from dross? Very carefully I laid my forefinger back onto the hilt of my knife.

At that moment, thrumming through the air and the walls of the houses, came a low, muffled but powerful *BOOM*.

'What the devil . . .' Cardinal John glanced at Remigius, and for a moment the two men looked quite stricken. Then Remigius gathered himself.

'If Your Eminence will forgive me?' he muttered, and all his floppy exquisiteness transformed itself suddenly into hard, purposeful angles. He sprinted off and vanished round a nearby corner.

‘Follow me,’ snapped the cardinal, and set off briskly after him.

My tumbling thoughts had not yet ordered themselves in my skull by the time we had negotiated a brief tangle of mean, smelly passageways and climbed the gentle slope of the Monte San Giorgio. In a few minutes we had found Remigius had stopped in front of a nondescript doorway in a low building of wood and brick that was slowly leaning across the alley as if it meant, one day, to kiss the house opposite. He was hammering on the door, listening, and then hammering again. As we trotted up, the handle shook and the door creaked open. I had expected to see some wild-eyed creature in the robes of a magus, but instead a very young Cistercian novice appeared, his face as white as his robes, where those were not spattered with drying blood and streaked with soot.

‘Ah. Ivo. What in Christ’s name is going on?’ said the cardinal. The young man looked at us with red-rimmed eyes and slumped against the door, dragging it wider. Now I saw thin lines of blood running from his ears. Remigius draped himself against the jamb and bowed elegantly as John of Toledo stepped past him.

No Inquisitors, just a large, cluttered room, walls dark, stained with smoke, lined with shelves groaning under the weight of jars, boxes, stacks of parchment, the skulls of men and beasts, skins, lumps of stone. The one window was filthy and let in a thin beam of whey-coloured light that struggled through thick ropes of smoke that coiled slowly midway between floor and ceiling. I stood, blinking, breathing in the heavy air. Flies were humming, a single deep note.

‘Up there,’ said Cardinal John.

The alchemist’s head was staring down at us from the ceiling. At least, I assumed that was who I was looking at. Like a small, shaggy ape it squatted, wedged between a rafter and a beam, leering. The rest of him sat in a high-backed chair

before a workbench cluttered with papers, vials, alembics and bits of stone and metal, in the midst of which spread a dark flower of charred wood and blackened shards. The body was leaning forward slightly, propped on its arms, which were burned and blistered. There was a strong smell of roast meat in the air which masked something else, something . . .

‘Brimstone?’ I asked Ivo. The young novice was at my side, looking as if he was about to puke down the front of his robes.

‘WHAT?’

‘Brimstone . . . damn. BRIMSTONE?’

‘IF YOU SAY SO,’ he bellowed, his voice rich with rising bile.

‘What happened here?’ the cardinal leaned over and shouted in the poor boy’s wounded ear.

‘There was nothing I could do!’ The lad was trembling, his voice raised over a sound only he could hear. ‘I . . . I came at first light, as instructed, with the letter and the gold—’

‘All here,’ said Remigius, holding up a charred purse.

Ivo threw him a terrified glance. ‘And he was very excited, as you said he would be, Eminence. He said he was going to put on a demonstration for you, and he ran around like a madman – he *was* a madman – sticking foul powders under my nose and grinding, mixing, cooking up devilment . . . I didn’t know what was going on, did I? He was bending over his pestle and mortar, trying to light an oil lamp with a taper, there was a flash . . .’ Ivo dragged his hands down his face, his red eyes staring. ‘I didn’t hear anything then, but now I do! Now I do!’

‘God’s breechclout! Get outside, you idiot!’ The cardinal grabbed the novice’s shoulder and shoved him towards the door. The lad took a last wild look around the room and vanished into the light outside. Meanwhile, Cardinal John was squinting up through the swirling dust motes at the head. ‘Get

that broom,' he said to me, more politely. I saw it, leaning against the wall. As soon as I handed it to him he passed it to Remigius with a nod. The messenger made a face, raised the broom handle first, and began to jab at the head.

'Stuck fast,' he hissed. 'Ah. There it goes.' He gave a last prod, and in a sudden flurry of wet hair and pallid skin it fell off its perch and landed with a hollow thud at our feet. Remigius stooped and, grabbing it by a forelock, picked it up and held it dangling before him. The head swung like a lazy pendulum, spinning slowly, and a blue eye, dull and dead, seemed to regard us one by one. The other eye was lost in a churned welter of charred flesh.

'Give me that,' said the cardinal. He took a handful of hair and held the thing up in front of him.

'You bloody fool,' he muttered malevolently into the ruined face.

'Who was he?' I asked the cardinal.

'Called himself Meister Nibelungus. German – of course, with a name like that – from Franconia. An odd sort of fellow, but then again: alchemists . . .' To my relief he stopped twirling the head and set it down on the workbench, so that it gazed up with its one good eye at the stump of the neck where it had so recently made its home. I leaned over and closed the eyelid: that gleam of dulling blue was beginning to play on my nerves.

'Your Eminence, why exactly did you bring me here? This is not, I take it, what you intended me to see,' I said. Cardinal John turned from examining a row of misshapen skulls and shook his head.

'Alchemists. Heretics and devil-worshippers, in my opinion. Judging by this mess, our friend Nibelungus did not stumble upon the Philosopher's Stone . . . or there again, perhaps he did, eh?' He chuckled.

'A little extreme, as epiphanies go,' I agreed, to be polite.

‘I had intended you to meet him,’ he said, ruefully. ‘Meanwhile, it seems that his labours are at an end. What a shame.’ He winced as he examined the bloody stump of the man’s neck. ‘Careless. Now then, you are as courtly as they say, my son. You have not demanded to know why you are here.’

‘I was about to, never fear,’ I said. I should have been angry – angry, at the very least – but the carnage in this room seemed to have drained all the outrage from me.

‘The answer is before you,’ he said, tapping gently at the centre of the charred circle on the workbench. Remigius, whose long fingers were tinkling through the litter of broken glass at its far edge, looked up and narrowed his eyes.

‘Alchemy? My dear cardinal, you surely . . . I mean, I have gold enough, and this is far from the business of Mother Church, is it not?’

‘Ha ha.’ Cardinal John laughed perfunctorily. ‘Nibelungus was not searching for gold or the Philosopher’s Stone when this happened.’

‘What, then?’

‘The *Drug*.’

He said it under his breath, though it was an ordinary enough word.

‘Medicine? *Medicine* did this to him? What, in the name of . . . of . . .’ My voice was rising, and John of Toledo was eyeing me sharply. ‘Your Eminence, I certainly know nothing, not one thing, about medicine.’ Then light, such as it was, dawned. ‘Ah. Some ingredient was required? Some esoteric tincture? Dried mummy powder? Really, Your Eminence: you of all people should reject this superstition.’ I fell into a whisper. ‘I suppose Your Eminence has some malady, and . . .’

‘Not I,’ said Cardinal John.

‘The Holy Father, then.’ I looked at him, frowning.

‘No, not Innocent. His opposite.’ John of Toledo was

studying me so intently that he might have been counting the pores on my nose.

‘Wait – we are speaking of the emperor? Frederick is ill?’ I said, surprised out of my anger. ‘And what affliction was this drug supposed to cure?’

‘Ah, well. Not *cure*.’

‘Oh.’ Suddenly I hardly dared draw breath. ‘So this was poison.’

The cardinal chuckled, but his teeth were clenched. ‘Oh, indeed. A poison for the whole world.’

‘What are you conjuring here, Your Eminence?’ I asked him quietly but urgently. ‘I will have no part of it: you may be sure of that.’

‘This was not a plot, Sir Petrus – your conscience may rest easy.’ The cardinal seemed to be making a jest, but his voice was smooth and cold. ‘I wanted to show you a glimpse of what is to come – it seems I was too ambitious, however.’

‘To come? Poison is as old as the mountains,’ I said. ‘If you mean to poison Frederick, I would rather not know about it.’

‘As a businessman?’

‘You need only ask me where my loyalties lie, Your Eminence,’ I told him, icily. ‘Indeed yes, I am a businessman, and so my loyalty stands with my clients. Amongst whom I count the most pious King of France, various of your own esteemed colleagues, and indeed the Holy Father himself. I’m guessing that you already know I have also dealt with several of the emperor’s more important allies – Ezzelino da Romano for one. But, again as a businessman, I have found that Frederick’s warring in Lombardy has disturbed the flow of trade, and that does not help my bank.’

Cardinal John leaned over and picked up the head once more. He began to swing it lazily between us like a censer. ‘Let me put it bluntly, my son. Are you Guelph or Ghibbeline? We

are in Florence, after all, and you have certainly had to answer that question before.'

'Your Eminence, I am, like you, an Englishman, and my liege lord is Richard, Earl of Cornwall. By that token alone I am Guelph: England is for the Holy Father.' It was not hard to inject just the right note of self-righteousness into my voice, and I could tell from the cardinal's face that he was convinced. Of course he was: I claimed as many allegiances as I had customers, and could make my honour bristle for each of them. But in truth my only loyalty was to the few people I loved, and the rest, to me, was nothing but gaudy show, cheap and flashy as the stuff hung out on Venetian holidays. Still, cheap as I held it, my skill had kept me alive thus far: alive and rich.

'Nicely put, Sir Petroc,' said the cardinal. 'I did not bring you here to question your loyalty, but to strengthen it.'

'I still have no idea what you mean,' I insisted. The cardinal seemed to have relaxed: he was smiling again.

'Unlike you, the wretched Nibelungus was neither scrupulous nor a good businessman – and apparently not the great alchemist his reputation promised.' He set the head down again and wiped his hands on his robe.

'Apparently.' We stood there listening to the alchemist's blood drip, drip, drip onto the scorched wood.

'We heard he was brewing something the emperor intended to use against the Holy See,' the cardinal said at last.

'Oh. And you were going to turn it against him, I suppose? I cannot imagine how this concerns me, but . . . what is it, this *Drug*?' I should not have asked, but by the flash of amusement that darted across his face it was plain that he had known I would.

'I confess that I understand too little of such things,' said the cardinal. He laid his hand thoughtfully upon the matted locks of Herr Nibelungus, turned the alchemist's head and

thumbed the eyelid open, so that the eye, dull now and quite filmed with dust and dried tears, stared wearily at the centre of my chest. 'Frederick von Hohenstaufen, though – the creature makes every sort of devilry and maleficence his affair. It is not to be wondered that he set his heart on this . . . this trumpery.'

'Is it poison?' I tried again, grudgingly. The cardinal did not answer, but tapped again at the circle of devastation on the workbench.

'Well, it isn't subtle,' I muttered. 'The emperor . . . you put some in his wine, he drinks it and his head springs off? Messy, but spectacular. On the other hand, arsenic does the same job with less fuss, and I do know where to find that.'

'No. This is, I believe, what it does when it is not disciplined.'

'Discipline? This is alchemists' talk, Your Eminence.' I wiped my forehead. It was close in here, and I was beginning to sweat.

'But no, Sir Petrus. This was not alchemy, and he was not concocting some fabulous poison. The Drug is apparently a weapon, nothing more nor less.'

'Apparently. You've said that before, Cardinal John. Apparent to whom, exactly?'

The cardinal spread his hands, as if disclaiming any responsibility, but there was a lupine gleam in his eyes that gave him away.

I regarded the earthly remains of Herr Nibelungus. 'And if this is a weapon,' I countered, not bothering to keep the scepticism from my voice, 'how do you know? It is either imaginary, like most things alchemical, or useless. Why not simply train men to cut off their own heads with the swords they already own? 'Twould be simpler.'

'We have been assured that it is neither imaginary nor useless. Hohenstaufen has spent a great deal of money on concocting it. The substance is known in the East, but its

secret has reached us here through the Mussulmen, and only in tiny drops: an ingredient here, a ratio there . . .’

‘But *what does it do?*’ I insisted.

‘It blows heads off. Isn’t that enough? And the Mussulmen say it hurls lances and stones, sprays fire, knocks down walls.’

‘I haven’t heard of any such weapon. Besides, that sounds like witchcraft, Your Eminence.’

‘Do you believe in witchcraft, Sir Petrus? If so, you surprise me.’

I did not believe in witchcraft, any more than I believed in the Church’s magic that turned wine into blood and back again, but that was none of the cardinal’s business.

‘If it isn’t conjuring, what is it?’ I demanded.

‘*Chemistry* it is, my son, chemistry. And while we in Christendom have been lucky enough to remain in ignorance of the Drug, it has been a scourge in the lands of Cathay for a thousand years.’

‘And now you have decided that the time is right to bring the scourge here? It is not for me to question the Holy See, but . . .’ A huge black fly whirred out of the sun glare, brushed my ear with its tiny bristles and landed with a faint plop in the tarry pool of drying blood on the alchemist’s neck. ‘Do we really require this? Are we not killing each other fast enough?’

‘The question is, my son, who judges? Come. You have seen enough of this.’

We stepped out into the street. The sunshine was so bright that it pierced my eyeballs and set my blood throbbing deep in the bony warren of my temples. I pressed my fingers hard against my closed lids and watched purple light bloom inside my head and burst into a hundred tiny golden bees, buzzing bees. I opened my eyes. The buzzing was coming from beneath my feet, where a legion of flies were lapping at the dark river of gore that had run out of the door towards the gutter. Ivo the novice was watching it with pallid fascination. He started

guiltily when he heard us. Remigius slipped from the shadows and stood, alert, hand on a hidden weapon at his waist.

‘We are leaving!’ John said to the novice. ‘Get some men from the cloister. Have this cleared up, my son, and send every scrap, every crumb in this room over to my lodgings.’

‘What about him?’ stammered Ivo, plainly terrified.

‘Have him burned. Do not leave one speck of ash. And don’t forget his head.’

‘So the emperor wants the Drug simply to use against the Holy Father?’ I asked the cardinal. We were walking back through the alleys towards the river, Remigius padding a few discreet paces behind.

‘He wants it, we understand, because – listening to fools like Nibelungus, no doubt – he has come to believe that sooner or later it will be known all across these lands, and no one will be able to stand before the ruler who has the most of it, and who knows how best to make and use it. A notion he has picked up from his Mussulman friends.’

‘And the Curia thought that, if such a thing existed, the ruler who controlled that power must be the Church.’

‘Of course.’

‘God be praised,’ I said, dutifully – convincingly, I hoped.

‘But I think Herr Nibelungus has satisfactorily proved that the emperor has been wasting time and money on a . . . Perhaps you are right, Sir Petrus. On witchcraft.’

‘Well, it has been an interesting diversion, if nothing else,’ I said, suddenly keen to get as far from Cardinal John as might be possible within the walls of Florence. ‘But I’m still curious. What was to have been my part in this?’

‘You are, my son, one of the richest men in Christendom.’

‘You are too kind. The bank, in which I am a partner, has been blessed with some success.’

‘And that has made you, as I said, one of the richest fellows

in this or any other land – well, will you allow, this side of India?’ It was a casual jest, but I was meant to be flattered.

‘If you insist, Your Eminence,’ I said with exaggerated good grace.

‘You saw, back there, what the world is coming to,’ said the cardinal. ‘No longer a battle between believer and infidel, or true believer and heretic. No. This is a war between the godly and the godless.’ He stopped, to make sure I understood what he had just told me. ‘The Holy Father’s crusade shall succeed, with or without the so-called Drug – and I would suppose without, judging by what we saw today. Make no mistake: the godly, and the godless. My concern today is merely to ensure that you have chosen the right side. For the godless, my son, the godless shall not stand.’

‘Are you telling me, Your Eminence, not to make loans to Ghibbelines?’

‘I am telling you, as a friend, a fellow Englishman, that the Holy See would wish for such a rich and powerful banker to take the side of God.’

‘Or? There is an “or” implied in your words, Cardinal.’

‘Of course there is, my son.’ John of Toledo smiled and held out his hand. The gold ring of office gleamed.

I had had enough of this strange dance. My clothes still reeked of the Drug and of Herr Nibelungus’s roasted flesh. I had no doubt missed the bootmaker. And now this cardinal . . . I blinked. The ledgers I had been toiling through were full of the proof that I could buy and sell a man like John of Toledo eight times over, and yet here he was, stealing my time and threatening me into the bargain. If Pope Innocent wanted a loan, let him knock on my door himself and show me his collateral. So far I had seen nothing but a room full of smoke and a dead man.

‘I have business to attend to,’ I said, ‘and my time is considered an expensive commodity by those who wish to buy

it.' I stepped back, away from the ring and the frozen smile of its owner. 'Good day, Your Eminence. I wish you a safe return to Rome.' The incurious folk of the city were flowing around us like water in a flooded ditch. Cardinal John opened his mouth to speak, but I had already given him a stiff bow and walked off into the crowd.