

A man in medieval armor, including a chainmail collar and a gauntlet, stands in a battlefield. His tunic is stained with blood, and his gauntlet is also bloody. He holds a dagger with a gold hilt. The background is a hazy, yellowish battlefield scene.

THEIR GOD IS WAR.  
AND EVERY GOD  
NEEDS HIS DEVIL.

# THE RELIGION

TIM WILLOCKS

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## About the Book

The Mediterranean, 1565. The greatest war the world has ever seen is unleashed on Malta as the Turks do battle with the Knights. The Knights call themselves **The Religion**. The Turks call them the **Hounds of Hell**.

Back in Sicily, the beautiful, rich Carla pines for her bastard son, lost in the bloody inferno across the water.

Enter Mattias Tannhauser - warrior, hero and double agent. Under Carla's command, he embarks on a death-defying mission to save her son and lead the Turks to victory. But is he too late? As battle rages on the doomed island time is running out.

## About the Author

Tim Willocks was born in Stalybridge, Cheshire, in 1957 and studied medicine at University College Hospital Medical School. He is the author of three previous novels, *Bad City Blues*, *Green River Rising* and *Bloodstained Kings*.

ALSO BY TIM WILLOCKS

*Bad City Blues*  
*Green River Rising*  
*Bloodstained Kings*

*To CHAIM ZVI LIPSKAR and the many other friends who  
helped to make this book*

TIM WILLOCKS

# The Religion

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



PROLOGUE

**THE *DEVSHIRME***

# THE FÂGÂRAȘ MOUNTAINS, EAST HUNGARIAN MARCHES

*Spring, AD 1540*

ON THE NIGHT the scarlet horsemen took him away - from all he knew and all he might have known - the moon waxed full in Scorpio, sign of his birth, and as if by the hand of God its incandescence split the alpine valley sheer into that which was dark and that which was light, and the light lit the path of devils to his door. If the dogs of war hadn't lost their way, the boy would never have been found, and peace and love and labour might have blessed him all his days. But such is the nature of Fate in a time of Chaos. And when is Time not Chaos? And when is War not a spawnhole of fiends? And who dries the tears of the nameless when even Saints and Martyrs lie sleeping in their crypts? A King had died and his throne was disputed and Emperors fought like jackals to seize the spoil. And if Emperors care little for the graveyards they scatter in their wake, why should their servants care more? *As Above, So Below* say the wise men, and so it was that night.

His name was Mattias and he was twelve years old and of matters of Policy and State he knew nothing at all. His family were Saxon metalsmiths, transplanted by his migrant grandfather to a steep Carpathian valley and a village of no importance except to those who called it home. He slept by the kitchen hearthstone and dreamed of fire and steel. He awoke in the dark before dawn with his heart a wild bird in his chest. He pulled on boots and a scorch-marked coat and silently - for two sisters and his

mother slept next door – he took wood and summoned flames from the pale pink embers in the hearth so that warmth would greet the girls on their rising.

Like all first-born men of his line, Mattias was a blacksmith. His purpose today was to complete the making of a dagger and this filled him with joy, for what boy would not make real weapons if he could? From the hearth he took a burning brand and stole into the yard and the sharp air filled his chest and he stopped. The world about was painted black and silver by the moon. Above the mountain's rimrock, constellations wheeled in their sphere and he sought out their shapes and marked them under his breath. Virgo, Boötes, Cassiopeia. Lower down the slopes headlong streaks of brightness marked the valley's forked stream, and pastures floated misty beneath the woodlands. In the yard, his father's forge stood like a temple to some prophet unknown and the firelight on its pale stone walls promised magic and marvels, and the doing of Things that no one had done before.

As his father, Kristofer, had taught him, Mattias crossed himself on the threshold and whispered a prayer to Saint James. Kristofer was out on the road, shoeing and sharpening tools for the farms and manors thereabouts. Would he be angry, when he returned, that Mattias had wasted three days' forging? When he might have made fishhooks or a wood saw or a scythe – goods that always found a ready buyer? No, not if the blade were true. If the blade were true, his father would be proud. Mattias crossed himself and stepped inside.

The forge smelled of ox hooves and sea salt, of clinker, horses and coal. The firepot was readied as he'd left it the evening before and the kindling caught with the firebrand's first touch. He worked the bellows and fed yesterday's coke to the flames, coaxing the fire, building it, until burning charcoal lay two inches deep on the tuyère. He lit the lamp,

then unearthed his blade from the ashes in which he'd buried it overnight.

He'd taken two days to straighten and harden the steel, six inches in the blade and four in the tang. Knives he'd made before but this was his first dagger, and the requisite skill was multiplied in the weapon's double-edged symmetry and the forging of strength in the spine. He hadn't perfected the symmetry but the edges didn't roll beneath a file. He blew away the ash and sighted down the bevels and found no warp or screw. With a damp rag he wiped the blade clean and worked its either surface smooth with pumice. Then he polished the blade until it gleamed dark blue, with powder of Emril and butter. Now would his Art be tested in the temper.

On the charcoal bed he laid a quarter inch of ash, and on the ash the blade, and watched the colour creep through the steel, turning it face over face so the heat remained even. When the cutting edges glowed as pale as fresh straw, he pulled the blade clear with the tongs and plunged it into a bucket of damp soil. Burning vapours spiralled with a smell that made him heady. In this first quench, by his grandfather's lore, the blade laid claim at its birth to the power of all four elements: earth, fire, water and air. Such a blade would endure. He rebuilt the coal bed and layered the ashes on top, and took the lid from his second quench, a bucket of horse piss. He'd collected it the day before, from the fleetest horse in the village.

'Can I watch, Mattie?'

For a moment his sister's voice vexed him. This was his work, his place, a man's place; not a place for a five-year-old girl. But Britta adored him. He always saw her eyes glow when she looked at him. She was the baby of the family. The death of two younger brothers before they could walk remained always at the back of Mattias's mind; or rather, not their deaths but the memory of his mother's grief and his father's silent anguish. By the time he turned,

his anger was gone, and he smiled to see Britta in the doorway, her silhouette doll-like in the first grey rumour of dawn. She wore a nightshirt and clogs and she clenched her hands about reedy arms as she shivered. Mattias took off his coat as he walked over and slipped it round her shoulders. He picked her up and sat her on the sacks of salt inside the door.

'You can watch from here, as long as you stay back from the fire.' The bargain wasn't ideal, he could see, but she didn't demur. 'Are Mamma and Gerta still sleeping?' he asked.

Britta nodded. 'Yes. But the village dogs are barking. I was scared.'

Mattias cocked an ear. It was true. From down the hill came a chorus of yaps and snarls. Absorbed by the crackle of the forge he hadn't noticed.

'They must have found a fox,' he said.

'Or a wolf.'

He smiled. 'The wolves don't come here any more.'

He returned to his blade and found it cool enough to touch. He wiped it clean and laid it once more on the fire. He was tempted to pump the bellows, for he loved the surge of life within the coals, but if the colour rose too fast the core of the steel might weaken and he resisted.

'Why don't the wolves come here any more?'

Mattias flipped the blade. 'Because they're afraid of us.'

'Why are the wolves afraid of us?'

The edges flushed dark fawn, like a deer's coat in autumn, and he grabbed the blade with the tongs and flipped it again, and yes, the colour was even and rising still, with magentas in the spine and tang, and the second quench was upon him. He pulled the blade from the forge and plunged it into the urine. The hiss was explosive and he turned his face from the acrid, ammoniac steam. He began at once to say an Ave. Halfway through, Britta joined in, stumbling over the Latin, and he continued without

waiting, timing the quench by the pace of the prayer until he'd finished, then he pulled the smoking steel from the caustic brew and buried it down in the ash box and wiped his brow.

The second temper was done; he hoped well enough. The pungent bite of the piss quench would impart itself to the metal and keep its sharpness keen. Perhaps too, he hoped, the fleetness of the horse would quicken the dagger to its mark. For the third quench, most magical of all, he would take the glowing blade out to the dense green grass by the vegetable patch, and temper it with the newly fallen dew. No waters were more pure, for no one had ever seen them fall, even if they stayed wakeful through the night, and they flowed from Heaven. Some believed them the tears God shed for His children while they slept. Through such cooling dew the spirit of the mountain would bind to the dagger's heart and its purpose would always be true. He pushed a pair of tempering tongs into the coals and pumped the fire until the thickened ends glowed orange.

'Mattie, why are the wolves afraid of us?'

'Because they fear we will hunt them and kill them.'

'Why would we hunt and kill them?'

'Because they kill our sheep. And because their skins are warm against the winter. That's why Dadda wears a wolfskin.'

'Did Dadda kill the wolf?'

Kristofer had indeed, but the story was not for a little girl's ears. Mattias wiped ash from the blade and laid it by the fire. Britta was not to be ignored, he knew, but the blade was where his attention was needed most. He said, 'Why don't you sing me a song? Then the song will be part of the steel, and so will you, and it will be your blade as well as mine.'

'Which song? Quickly, Mattie, which song?'

He glanced at her face and saw her flushed with delight and for a moment he wondered if he had not doomed the

blade to be hers forever, at least in her mind.

*'The Raven,'* he said.

It was a song their mother sang for them and Britta had caused much amazement when, at the age of only three, she had piped her way through every verse. It told of a prince bewitched into a raven by a jealous stepmother, and of the princess who risked the life of her only child to bring him back again. Despite dark deeds it was a happy tale in the end, though Mattias no longer believed it as he once had. Britta still believed every word. She started to sing in her high, trembling voice and its sound filled the gloom of the forge with her stainless soul. And he was glad he'd asked her for the song, for as his father, Kristofer, had told him, no man could comprehend the mystery of steel entire, and if a blade forged during a snowstorm was other than a blade forged in the sun - and who could ever doubt that that was so? - then why would a sound as sweet as Britta now made not leave its imprint too?

As Britta sang he put his all into the final tempering. He quenched the handles of the tongs and clamped their glowing jaws along the dagger's spine. Thus he drew the hardness, for hardness is not itself strength. When the spine was a solid dark blue he worked the tang and the ricasso darker still. And to the very tip of the blade he gave a pale blue temper, like the early morning sky on New Year's Day. And all the while he worked, Britta sang her song, and the Raven won the Princess's heart, and in his chest grew the knowledge that this would indeed be a blade to make his father proud. He dropped the heated tongs into the water and took the cool pair. He relaid the bed and spread the ash and placed the blade on the coals with its tip on a lump of raw charcoal. When the cutting edges bloomed the colour of his mother's hair - a fierce, coppery bronze - he'd take the blade to the dew and its moment of truth. He watched the steel as if his place in eternity hinged on it and he didn't hear the sound Britta



made when she fell to the floor. He heard only the sudden silence in her song.

He called out over his shoulder, 'Britta, don't stop now. We're almost done.'

And there: the hues were changing, rising like alchemical gold, yet the silence remained unbroken and his gut cried out for the song for he knew, in his bone by now, that her voice would indeed forge one blade and not another, and that truly it was hers as well as his, and that they both had fixed some portion of their souls into the metal, and that in that fixing would inhere the blade's nobility. He turned from the fire, his hand still on the tongs, to find her eyes.

'We're almost done!' he said.

He found her sprawled on the ground.

Her skull was smashed apart like a broken jar of wine. His coat had fallen from her shoulders. Her nightshirt was drenched with something black that gleamed like streaks of treacle through her pale yellow hair.

Standing over her, with the incurious expression of a farmer who'd spaded a mole, was a stocky youth, wispily bearded and half a head shorter than he. He was swathed in a motley of wrappings and rags and on his head was a filthy green cap. By his side he held a short curved sword, clotted with the treacle and strands of Britta's hair. When the youth looked up from the murdered child, his eyes were as dead as stones. His roving gaze held Mattias for no more time than he spent on the anvil and the tools. He grunted a question in an alien tongue.

Mattias stood stranded in the forge's heat yet inside he felt icy and empty. Empty of breath. Empty of will. Empty of each and every feeling he'd formerly known. Some portion of his mind asked if this was how the blade felt in the quench. And if so, which quench? And he took refuge in the fire, where something he did know yet awaited him. He turned and looked at his blade and saw the cutting edges bloom into the colour of his mother's hair - a fiery bronze

that crept across the bevels to the dark blued spine. He felt the final temper slipping from his grasp and with it all the magic they'd spun that dawn and with it, too, his father's pride when he saw what they'd created. These things he could not let stand. He clamped the tongs fast on the ricasso and pulled the blade clear of the coals. Then he turned.

The murderer had started towards him and his face betrayed no alarm until he saw what Mattias carried. The bolt of fear that pierced him betrayed his youth, but earned him no mercy. As if of its own volition the dagger lunged forward, the air a shimmer in its wake. Mattias lurched through the first pace with feet as heavy as lead, and through the second propelled by a rage that choked his gorge. By the third pace raw hatred drove boy and dagger both. The youth cried out in his alien tongue and Mattias ran the blade into his gut. Flesh sizzled on steel as he crammed him back against the wall and the stench of burning wool and fat filled his throat and the stones in the twisted face bulged forth in horror. The murderer screamed and dropped his sword and grabbed and screamed and screamed again as the red hot tang stripped his palms down to their sinews. Mattias clamped his left hand across the gaping lips. He leaned into the tongs until their jaws met the heaving belly and the tip of the dagger grated on what felt like bone. And then he prayed.

*'Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus.'*

The youth's gullet convulsed and vomited blood spilled through Mattias's fingers. He squeezed tighter. Blood snivelled from the flaring nostrils and the skinless hands clawed at the tongs and the stocky chest convulsed in futile spasms. The light in the protuberant eyes began to fade and the spasms waned and Mattias completed his prayer.

*'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.'*

Mattias felt something pass from the body, something that vanished with a stealth that chilled his marrow. Something that had been and now was gone. The youth sagged, heavier than anything Mattias had ever known. The face clamped in his hand was as pale as putty. Its half-closed eyes were lightless and dull, like those in the head of a pig on a butcher's stall. So this was death and this was killing.

Mattias said, '*Amen.*'

And he thought: *The quench.*

He pulled the dagger free. The blade down to the ricasso smoked black as sin. He let the body fold and didn't look at it again. Amidst the distant barking of the dogs he heard coarse foreign shouts and screams of terror. Britta lay in the doorway, bloodied and still. Something had passed from her too that was no more. In his hand the tongs began to shake and so did his knees. His bowels felt loose and his vision was blurred. He turned to the safety of what he knew. The forge, the tools, the fire. He scrubbed the steaming blade with a damp cloth but its blackened hue remained, and somehow he knew that the blade would stay black forever. The steel was too hot to hold, yet he was loath to plunge it again, for in a world turned upside down his mind clung tight to his Art. He dipped the cloth in cold water and wrapped it around the tang. And then he paused.

From the chaos beyond the forge house door he heard a voice - closer than the rest - shouting out to God, but not for His mercy. Calling, rather, on His vengeance and His wrath. It was the first voice Mattias had ever heard. It was his mother's.

Mattias squeezed the sodden hilt in his hand. The tang's heat was tolerable. The dagger's final quench had not been purest dew but a murderer's blood, and if its destiny and purpose were now other than he'd planned, so too, now, were his own. And he wondered then, as he would wonder always, if it were not his forging of this Devil's blade that

had brought this fatal doom upon his loved ones. He searched for the soul with which he'd woken and found it not. He searched for a prayer, but his tongue didn't move. Something had been torn from within which he hadn't known was there until the hole it left behind howled in sorrow. Yet gone that something was; and not even God could restore it. His mother's fury pierced him. In fury - not in sorrow - had his mother chosen to die. Her fury called him to her side. He walked to the door and stooped to cover Britta with his coat. Britta at least had died whole, with a song on her lips and the joy of creation in her heart. There was an angel in the blade along with a devil. He'd take her with him. He'd take angel and devil both.

He stepped out into the cold and steam rose from the black dagger in his fist, as if the forge contained a shaft bored up from Hell and he were a demon assassin newly ascended. The yard was empty. The heavens at the rimrock's edge were reefed in vermilion cloud. From the village pillars of smoke quavered skyward and with them cries of anguish and crackles of flame. He walked across the cobbles, sick with fear. Fear of whatever vileness afflicted his mother. Fear of shame. Of cowardice. Of the knowledge that he couldn't save her. Of the darkness that had housed itself inside his spirit. Yet the darkness spoke with a feral power that brooked neither refusal nor hesitation.

*Plunge in, the darkness said.*

Mattias turned and looked back at the forge. For the first time in his life he saw a drab stone hut. A drab stone hut with the corpse of his sister, and the corpse of a man he had killed, inside.

*Like the blade in the quench.*

*Plunge in.*

In the kitchen little Gerta lay tangled on the hearthstone. Her features were twisted in bewilderment and her puddled blood smoked foul among the coals. He

straightened her fragile limbs and knelt and kissed her mouth. He covered her corpse with the blanket he'd slept in. He plunged on. Across the ransacked room the door hung creaking from one hinge. In the dirt outside was a melee. He stepped closer. He glimpsed the village priest, Father Giorgi, for whom he served at altar on a Sunday morning. Father Giorgi was shouting at assailants unseen, with a crucifix upraised in his fists. A squat figure hacked him in the neck and Father Giorgi fell. Mattias stepped closer. What kind of man would kill a priest? Then he stopped and wheeled away, his mind erased in an instant of all he'd seen.

He blinked and heaved for breath and the forbidden picture returned. His mother's nude body, her pale breasts and thick dark teats. Her pale belly, the hair between her legs. Shame writhed in his gut with the urge to run. Across the yard, beyond the forge, to the woods where they'd never find him. The darkness that was now his only guide and counsellor made him turn back to the door and he looked again.

A horse, pierced with arrows, lay dying on its side, its great head flapping and its eyes rolling wide above the pink froth bubbling from its muzzle. Nearby sprawled a villager, also pierced, as if in flight, and by him Father Giorgi in a widening pool. Across the horse's carcass, as if upon a mattress obscene, lay his mother. Her copper hair tossed as she fought against the four men cursing and struggling to hold her down. Her stark naked skin was marble white and slashed with scratches and blotched with the indigo welts of brutish fingers. Her face was drawn. Her teeth were bloody. Her shocking blue eyes were wild. She didn't see Mattias, and while part of him yearned for those wild blue eyes to meet his own, he knew that the knowledge of his witness would drain her defiance, and her defiance was the last gift she would give him.

Someone punched her in the head and screamed in her ear and she turned and spat in his face and the sputum was crimson. A fifth man knelt between her legs, his breeches pulled down. And all of them shouting – at each other, at her, one with a twisting finger up his nose – in their yammering alien tongue. They were raping a woman dragged half-sleeping from her bed, yet their manner was like herdsmen freeing a stranded calf from a bog: gesticulating, blaming, bellowing encouragement and advice; their faces innocent of malice and vacant of pity. The brute between her legs lost patience, for she wedged her knee against his chest and wouldn't let him take her. He pulled a knife from his boot and pushed up her breast and took aim and ran her through her heart. No one tried to stop him. No one complained. His mother stopped moving and her head flopped back. Mattias wanted to sob – but his breath was frozen in his lungs. The brute dropped his knife and reached for his crotch and he slotted something stiff inside her and started pumping. And someone must have said something funny, for they all of them laughed.

Mattias held back the tears he hadn't earned. He'd failed his sisters. He'd failed his father. His mother's corpse lay violated by beasts. He alone was left standing, dispossessed and powerless and lost. He came to as he realised that he'd pushed the tip of the dagger into his palm. His blood was bright against the crusting filth on his fingers. His pain was clean and true and it cleared his mind. His mother had denied them what they'd wanted even more than her flesh: her surrender and humiliation. The laying of her pride. The desire to be close to her soul overwhelmed him. The desire for death and in death that companionship he treasured more dearly than life. He clasped the blade against his arm where it wouldn't be seen. Without haste – for if the blade was yet warm, his blood was now cold – he waded into atrocity to claim his share.

The first creature shuddered and whooped in a bestial spasm and the others cheered, and he rose to his feet and staggered back with his breeches round his knees. A second beast knelt to penetrate his mother and the other three groped her thighs and breasts to arouse themselves for their turn. All but the second looked at Mattias. They saw nothing but a wretched boy. From the direction of the village came the sound of hooves at the canter and this concerned them more, but the hooves concerned Mattias not at all. The darkness rose within him and he felt free.

He plunged in.

After hammer and tongs the blade seemed delicate as paper, yet he punched it twice through the first devil's back as if his ribs were woven from straw. The creature sighed and his breeches snared his ankles and he dropped to his hands and knees with his arse in the air and stared at the ground between his elbows and panted like a heat-exhausted dog. Mattias kicked him over in the dirt and plunged on.

The second creature grunted between his mother's splayed legs. He knew nothing was amiss until Mattias scraped the cap from his skull and grabbed him by the hair and bent him backwards. Mattias saw a bewildered sense of injustice in his eyes, as of a child dragged unawares from a pot of jam, then he punched the blade through his upturned cheek and pulled it free and punched again and an eye popped forth and dangled from its socket by the string. Working his arm with the rhythm of the forge he ploughed the childlike face with bleeding slits, splashing the heel of his fist in the screaming mask as he stabbed the dagger through teeth and tongue and bones, and through and through the fluttering hands that the man flung up for protection.

Mattias paused and heaved for he'd forgotten to breathe. He looked at the other three devils, and found them watching him agape. A wordless cry escaped Mattias's



throat, for he was now more beast than they, and he cast the yowling blind man to the mud. The three backed away on the far side of the horse and one came to his senses and unslung a bow from his back. He fumbled an arrow from his sash and it dropped to the ground. Mattias turned away and looked at his mother and his madness was expunged. He knelt and took her hand and pressed her workworn fingers to his cheek. The fingers were yet warm with life and Hope knifed his heart. He looked up: but her wild blue eyes stared sightless, and the knife twisted, and he choked into the hand held to his face. The thud of hooves pounded in his ears but he was beyond all the things of this world. From this world, the touch of his mother's hand was all he needed.

His head jerked up to a crash as loud as thunder. The brute nocking the arrow to his bow spun into the ground, his skull dashed apart and grey slop spilling down his shoulders as he fell. The two remaining rapists dropped to their knees amid a drift of blue smoke and they babbled like the crazed as they crammed their foreheads to the dirt.

Mattias turned and saw a sight such as never he'd seen.

A man, though he seemed a god, sat astride a grey Arab stallion, the twin plumed breath from the bores of its nose giving both the look of phantoms in a tale. The rider was young and proud and dark of complexion, with high, fine cheekbones and a beard like the blade of a spear. He wore a scarlet kaftan lined and trimmed in sable and baggy scarlet breeches and yellow boots, and his snow-white turban was garnished with a spray of diamonds that flashed when he moved. At his waist was a curved sword whose hilt and scabbard were alive with precious stones. In his hand smoked a long-barrelled pistol, its fittings chased with silver. His eyes were brown and fixed on Mattias's own, and in them was something that looked like admiration, and something more - though it could not be so - that felt to Mattias like love.

The brown gaze did not waver and Mattias did not blink. And in this moment the soul of the man and the soul of the boy reached out and were entwined, for no good reason that either might explain and with a power that neither dared question, for it came from God.

In time Mattias would learn that this warrior was a captain of the Sari Bayrak, most ancient and valorous guardians of the Sultan's arms, and that his name was Abbas bin Murad. For now he was simply a man. A man whose heart contained no trace of malice.

Behind the captain sat two more scarlet riders. In the street beyond, villagers fought fires and rushed back and forth in dismay, dragging furniture from hovels and ferrying children and old folk from the flames. Riding through this tumult like paladins among sheep, a dozen more scarlet horsemen wielded lances and whips as they harried the chastened foot soldiers from their pillage. Abbas sheathed his pistol in a saddle-mounted sleeve. He looked at the woman draped violate and nude across the horse. He looked again at Mattias and he spoke. His tongue was not the same as that of the devils and though Mattias didn't know the words, he knew what he asked.

*'This is your mother?'*

Mattias swallowed and nodded.

Abbas saw the dagger in his hand, and his shirt plastered to his body with spilled blood. Abbas pursed his lips and shook his head. He glanced beyond Mattias and Mattias turned: the first man he'd stabbed lay unmoving. The second crawled half-naked in the dirt, blind and faceless and mewling in self-pity though rended lips. Abbas made a motion with his hand. One of his lieutenants rode forward and drew his sword and Mattias stared in wonder at the flawless damascene blade. The lieutenant stopped by the mewling wretch and leaned forward. The etched sword rose and fell with hardly a sound and a head rolled into the gutter in a spate of gore.

Abbas rode over to Mattias and held out his hand.

Mattias let go of his mother and wiped the blade on his sleeve and stripped the tang of its rags and wiped that too. He held the blade by the tip and gave it to Abbas. He felt no fear. The moment Abbas touched the dagger his brow rose in surprise. He held the flat against the back of his hand and surprise was confirmed. Mattias realised the steel was still warm. Abbas gestured with the dagger.

*'You made this?'*

Again Mattias understood the question if not the words. He nodded. And again Abbas pursed his lips. He nudged his horse towards the house and leaned across and slid three inches of the dagger into a crack between doorframe and wall. He threw his weight against the tang and Mattias flinched as the blade canted over, folding far further than he would dare bend it, the tang almost flat to the wall, and panic lanced through his gut as the steel snapped – but the steel did not snap. And when Abbas let go, the blade sprang back to the true. Abbas withdrew the dagger and examined it again and looked at Mattias. And both knew he'd forged a piece of appalling beauty. Then the dagger vanished into the captain's *dolama* and Mattias knew he'd never see it again.

Abbas gave orders and Mattias watched as the second lieutenant wheeled and rode away. The first, who hadn't sheathed his damask blade, trotted to the two kneeling rapists, they whose lust would never be slaked. They blubbered and pleaded and befouled themselves, and he prodded them into a stumbling run and chivvied them back down the street.

Abbas turned and reached behind the cantle and unhitched a milk-white blanket there rolled. He tossed it to Mattias and Mattias caught it. It was woven of the finest lamb's wool. Mattias had never handled an object of such high quality before and so gentle was its touch to his roughened hands that he feared that he'd damage it. He

stared at Abbas blankly, baffled by this gift. Abbas gestured to his mother, spreadeagled and outraged in the shambles.

Mattias felt his throat go tight and tears stung his eyes, for the gift was not of a blanket, but of a woman's dignity, and this kindness pierced him to the core. But a warning flashed on the captain's face and on instinct Mattias understood. He pulled the tears back inside. He didn't let them fall. And Abbas saw this and again his estimation rose and he nodded. Mattias turned and unfurled the blanket and it fell like a caress across his mother. His tears rose again as she vanished forever beneath it and again he quelled them. She was dead, and yet not dead, for she filled his heart with a love that burst its buckles and he wondered if she was even now in Heaven and if God would ever let him see her again. Then he heard Abbas's voice and turned. Abbas repeated the phrase. And though he didn't understand, Mattias felt the comfort of their intention. He remembered their sound. In the months to come he would hear them again many times and would learn their meaning.

*'All flesh is dust,'* said Abbas.

From his saddlebag Abbas produced a book. Its green leather binding was worked in a golden script of fabulous design and as if letting God direct his hand he opened it at random. His eyes scanned the chosen page and stopped, as if arrested by something noble and sacred and apt, and he looked up from the book and pointed at the boy.

He said, *'Ibrahim.'*

Mattias stared back without comprehension.

Abbas pointed again with an insistent gesture: *'Ibrahim.'*

Mattias realised that this was the name by which the captain intended to call him. The name, in fact, that Allah had decreed he be called, for the book randomly opened was the Holy Koran. Mattias blinked. His mother was gone. Britta and Gerta were gone. His home was gone. And his father would return to a howling pit where he'd left

prosperity and kin. The scarlet captain waited on his tall Arabian grey. Mattias stabbed a finger at his own chest.

He said, '*Ibrahim.*'

With this gone too was the name that his father had given him.

Abbas nodded and closed the holy book and stowed it. The lieutenant returned with a saddled horse and he handed the reins to Mattias and Mattias realised he was to leave with these scarlet riders, and the wide world gaped before him like a chasm. Abbas was not offering him a choice. Rather, Mattias had been chosen. He did not falter. He mounted the horse and felt its living strength between his thighs and from this high prospect the world was already changed and more than he knew. He bent to the horse's ear and, as his father had taught him to say before the shoeing, he whispered, 'Don't be afraid, my friend.'

Abbas wheeled away and the lieutenant followed. Mattias looked down at the blanket-shrouded body and thought of his father. He'd never know the magic his father would have taught him, nor the love that was the greatest of his spells. Had the black blade snapped - had Mattias let those tears fall down his cheeks - perhaps the riders would have left him to bury the slain. But this he could not know, for he was a boy. Mattias stifled his anguish and urged his new mount onward. He did not once look back. Though he could not know this either, War was now his master and his trade, and War was jealous, and demanded love only of itself.

As they trotted up the street, past burning hovels and villagers with gazes cast down, Mattias saw the remains of the last two devils. Their decapitated bodies soaked in enormous puddles of blood and the whited eyes of their heads stared into the mud. Their chastened comrades stood in sullen ranks under the guns of their Turkish betters. These men, Mattias would learn, were the irregulars who flocked to the Sultan's banner in search of plunder - landless failures and criminals, Wallachians and Bulgars,

the floating scum without discipline or skill who crave the wages of war. The execution was to demonstrate that this was now the fiefdom of the Sultan and that all that lay upon it belonged to him. Every grain of wheat, every cup of wine, every sheep, every mule, every village. Every man, woman and child. Every drop of rain that fell. All this belonged to his August Majesty, as, now, did belong young Ibrahim.

Thus, in the year of 1540, Mattias the blacksmith's son became a *devshirme*: a Christian boy gathered in the Gathering and drafted for the Slaves of the Gate. Across many strange lands he would travel, and many strange Things he would see, before the fabled minarets of Old Stambouli rose gleaming in the sun by the Golden Horn. Because he was a killer before he was a man, he would train in the Enderun of Topkapi Saray. He would join the violent brotherhood of the janissaries. He would learn strange tongues and customs and the many arts of war. He would learn that God is but One and that Mohammed is his Prophet and would yearn to fight and die in Allah's name. For the unknown fate towards which he rode was to dedicate his life to God's Shadow On This Earth. To the Padishah of the White Sea and the Black. To the Refuge of All the People in the World. To the Sultan of Sultans and King of Kings. To the Lawgiver, the Magnificent. To the Emperor of the Ottomans, Suleiman Shah.

PART I

# **A WORLD OF DREAMS**



## SUNDAY 13 MAY 1565

### *Castel Sant' Angelo, the Borgo, Malta*

THE SITUATION, as Starkey saw it, was thus.

The largest armada since antiquity, bearing the finest army in the modern world, had been dispatched by Suleiman Shah to conquer Malta. Turkish success would expose southern Europe to a wave of Islamic terror. Sicily would be ripe for the picking. A Moslem reconquest of Granada would not be unthinkable. Rome itself would tremble. Yet these strategic rewards be as they might, Suleiman's most passionate ambition was to exterminate the Knights of Saint John - that singular band of healers and warrior monks known to some as the Sea Knights and to others as the Hospitallers, and who in an age of Inquisition yet dared call themselves '*The Religion*'.

The Grande Turke's army was commanded by Mustafa Pasha, who had broken the knights once before - and in a citadel immeasurably stronger than this one - at the celebrated siege of Rhodes, in 1522. Since then, Suleiman - who, despite his many achievements, placed his sacred duty to conquer the world for Islam at the forefront of his Policy - had overthrown Belgrade, Buda, Baghdad and Tabriz. He'd crushed Hungary, Syria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Transylvania and the Balkans. Twenty-five Venetian islands and every port in North Africa had fallen to his corsairs. His warships had smashed the Holy League at Preveza. Only winter had turned him back from the gates of Vienna. No one doubted the outcome of Suleiman's latest *jihad* on Malta.