

MICHAEL JECKS

THE BOY'S REVENGE

Ed would never forget that morning. Before that day he had been a child, only seven years old; afterwards he was a man. He would have a new purpose. That day set the seal on his future and gave him a target: a red, raw determination of death and pain for the man who killed his people.

‘Get a move on, boy!’

Ed grabbed a handful of the netting and threw it over his shoulder as old Gil the Ropeman lazily flicked a rope’s end towards his backside. From bitter experience, Ed knew how much that could sting when it connected, and the boy arched his back protectively, then scooped up more of the netting to his chest, and scampered off, laughing.

‘And hurry back this time!’ Gil bellowed as the boy darted through the doorway and out into the sunshine.

It was a day to remember. The sun was beating down on the stones here at the rough beach near the castle, and Ed paused as he let the netting slide from his shoulders, a small boy with tousled, mousy hair cut short over his ears.

There was a sharp pain at the back of his head, and he turned to see a group of older boys laughing at him. One picked up another stone and threw it at him.

‘Stop it!’ he shouted.

‘Make me!’ the boy jeered, and flung another pebble.

Ed ducked and continued on his way. Hal always attacked him. He was a tall boy for his age, and he liked to beat up smaller boys, especially when they were defenceless. Around him his

little tribe of supporters joined in, heckling and jeering, all of them glad that they weren't the focus of Hal's bile today. But they never were when Ed was around. Hal always picked on him. It wasn't fair.

He made his way down the beach, trailing some of the netting, and passed it to the fisherman there.

'They bully you?' It was Simon, a younger sailor. He was bare-chested in the sunshine, his face and torso brown as a walnut, and when Ed nodded he scowled. 'Bastard lurdens! I'll thrash Hal's arse for him later.'

Ed didn't speak as Simon hooked the net over the wooden stand, eyeing the repairs with a knowing frown. The ropes at either end had frayed and worn, and Gil had replaced a length, splicing it expertly so that the repair was scarcely visible.

'You ought to fight back, Ed.'

Ed glanced back towards the older boys. Hal was a good six inches taller than him, and his shoulders were broad and powerful. He was four years older than Ed, and the thought of attacking him was shocking. Worse still was the thought that Simon could avenge him in an act of misplaced kindness. Simon was Hal's brother, and if Simon was to beat Hal, Ed knew Hal would want to take it out on him again. He'd prefer Hal was left alone. Even as he peered at them, he saw Hal bite his thumb at him.

Rather than respond, Ed looked away. He found himself staring out to sea, and the sight was soothing. He loved the water. It was in his blood. The son of a fisherman always looked first to the water, his father had once told him. Peter, his father, was a short, wiry man with skin the colour of old oak. His hands were horny and callused from long years pulling at ropes and oars, one arm twisted from where an accident had broken the bone. Although it had set, it was crooked from then on. Not that it mattered. To Ed the only thing he saw was his eyes. They weren't kind like Ed's mother's, but they were calm and understanding. He seemed to respect Ed rather than love him, much in the same way that he admired the family's old hound. So long as both behaved and obeyed when they were told, Peter was content.

'Looking for your father? He's over there,' Simon said, pointing.

On the water the little fishing craft were bobbing on the swell out in the river. The sun glinted on the river all about them, making the wave-caps sparkle like tiny diamonds on a gently rippling blue silk. The morning's mist had all but disappeared, and now it lay down at the mouth of the river like a pale grey cushion, its top and base curiously well-defined. He didn't recall seeing a mist like that before.

He thought he could see his father. He was out on a long, low boat with his brother and

their friends. Five men, all working hard, and yet his father found time to stop. Ed thought he might be about to wave to him, but then realised he was staring out towards the mist as though perturbed by something. A sound, or a premonition. The men returned to their labours. There was no time for wool-gathering on a boat.

Nor on land.

On hearing Gil's hoarse bellow, Ed was startled from his reverie. He turned to hurry back to the rope shed. There was no sign of Hal and his companions, and Ed found himself hoping that he might return without capture. The thought of Gil's homely old face was the most appealing sight he could conjure up just now, and he hurried up the sandy track, past the fish salting sheds, and along the narrow path. There was a wall on one side, bare rocks on the other, with a gap between the stone where a mason had carved a hollow for shelter, and it was here, as he turned behind the next shed, that he heard the hated voice again.

'Hello, little Ed,' Hal said.

He didn't stop to look, but made to flee, too late. Already a hand had grabbed his shoulder, another his leg, and he tumbled to earth. Unable to break his fall, his chin struck the ground with a crunch and he felt a tooth snap, while a stone caught his temple and left him stunned and blinking.

'Asking my brother to help you, were you?' Hal sneered, and Ed turned his head to stare up at him with bleary eyes. 'Maybe you'll need to ask him to help with *this*, too, eh? And *this*!'

With each question he kicked Ed's belly and, as Ed curled into a ball, his friends joined in like scavengers following after the leader of the pack. They closed in so close the sun's light was blocked. He felt as though he was enfolded in the gloom of twilight. Blows thudding, their irregular pounding creating a cacophony in his head that stopped hurting, and instead became a dull aching that spread over his entire body. It spread, a dreary awareness of bruising and pain to come. A high, keening sound came to his ears, and he realised it was his own voice.

And then he heard a crack and a sharp scream.

The kicking stopped. All around him he heard a whirling noise, slapping, and shrieks of pain and protest. Suddenly there was more light about him: the darkness was clearer, and he dimly recognised a fresh voice and sounds of pain.

When he opened his eyes, he found Gil standing over him, wielding his rope's end with vigour. Most of his enemies had already fled, but Hal and one other were trapped in the niche in the wall, and were receiving the brunt of Gil's rage.

'You'd hound a boy like him? A fellow half your size? You cowardly sons of the devil, God rot your cods!'

Ed was weeping as he pushed himself up on his hands and knees, and then pressed himself backwards so that he was leaning on his elbows, slumped against a shed's wall.

Hal pulled out his knife, shouting, 'Leave us, you old bastard!', but Gil swept across and down with his rope, and the knife was hurled away as Hal yelped, the heavy rope striking his wrist.

'Pull a knife on me, would ye?' Gil bawled, spittle flying from his face, and he moved forward with his rope held high.

Before he could reach them, the two sprang forward and past him. The rope's end fell, hard, and smacked someone on the back, making him shriek, and then they were gone, and Gil turned, his face purple with rage, panting.

And then he stopped, and his mouth fell wide. 'Sweet Jesus!'

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The mist was like a thick fustian blanket in which only the sound of the waves slapping against the side of the galley could be heard, and Arnaud leaned forward, his fist clenched about a stay as he peered into the gloom, legs rocking naturally with the movement of the ship, feeling her rear and plunge gently. He could feel her movements in his belly, an almost-tingling below his ribs, the precursor to a fight. He recognised his own excitement in that sensation as though he was picking up the ship's own mood. She was to him like a knight's charger to the knight. All ships had their own tempers, and he, a master shipman, could feel hers.

He knew this craft better than anyone. It was like a patient, reliable rounsey: sleek and fast, and deadly in battle. But today, in this damned fog, he felt that he was commanding it to commit suicide, because sailing blind was a route to an early grave.

A frown of lingering intensity fixed to his face, Arnaud concentrated on the sounds ahead. No slap and hiss of water on rocks yet, he noted, but that didn't mean that there was nothing under the waves to rip out her keel. It was all deeply alarming.

Arnaud, the son of a shipwright, was slim and short. A mop of dark hair gave him the appearance of youth and, because he wasn't tall and possessed a slender, wiry frame, he looked younger than his twenty-three years. It had been a cause of amusement to his friends when he was younger and less able to defend himself, and he had often been the butt for others' entertainment. Now, as a commander of a galley, few were foolish enough to try their luck.

Catching Arnaud's eye upon him, the sailor at the wale nodded and pointed to port. The shore was still just in view. Arnaud glanced past him. Yes, he could see the rocks over there. The mist was thinner there, at the isle that protected the entrance to Southampton. Up at the forecastle, the seaman swinging the lead felt his stare upon him, and turned to catch his eye, but

then shook his head and returned to hurling his weight into the water. Silence had been demanded for today. Any who disobeyed would suffer the lash.

Over the sound of straining sheets and the slap of water he suddenly heard the noise of the sea breaking on the shore, all too close, and it drove Arnaud into a state of mild panic. The prickling excitement in his belly grew to an alarmed shudder that shook his entire body. Although the idea of sailing like this without a clear view of all the rocks was against all sense, and felt like lunacy to a seaman, he knew this port. He had been here before. He had studied the river and the town several times, and he knew how broad was the entrance to the harbour. This was his idea: forcing the ships slowly into this estuary to take the town, and the fog aided their silent approach.

He saw the leadsman turn again, his face pale and slightly green in the unnatural light. The crew were all the same: terrified of that horrible moment when they would all hear the graunching of the timbers rasping over rocks, the hideous crunch and moan as the stakes splintered apart. It was a nightmare vision. But he knew that this port, the safe haven for so many of the cursed English pirates, was well defended. If they had sailed up here in broad daylight, they could have damaged some ships, killed a few men – but for the vengeance he craved, this silent, assassin’s approach was better. They should catch the town unawares.

He gazed over the sailors waiting at their oars, over the mail-clad warriors waiting. A man had been shoved to the side, where he was drooling a thin vomit over the ship’s side, his body convulsing. Those nearest him registered nothing: neither disgust nor sympathy, only a weary disinterest. All the men were aware of the danger.

A shaft of sunlight struck the sea near him, and he stared over at it with surprise. It was so unexpected, it was like seeing a fireball materialise in a tavern, and the flash was so bright that it seemed almost to burn his eyes. There was a second, a third – and then the mist was gone. Instead, all about them, he saw the other ships of Harfleur, and before them the coast of England. And the river mouth.

He bawled down to the drummer, ‘Beat the attack!’

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Ed followed the direction of Gil’s stare, and saw what looked like a wall of vessels burst from the mist. A booming drum beat came over the calm sea, and Ed felt it like the kicks of Hal and his friends.

‘Master Gil? Master? What’s happening?’ he said.

‘Boy, *run!* Run to your home and lock the doors!’ Gil roared, giving him a shove that almost sent him sprawling.

Ed turned to flee, but before he reached the path to the gates he looked back, and the sight that met his eyes made him give a shocked sob.

The first of the ships were racing onwards, and already he could see the faces of the men at the prow. Bowmen, he saw, with their great crossbows, waving and shouting, urging the oarsmen to greater efforts. He saw a ship turn with a kind of negligent laziness, to ram into the flank of a fishing boat. It crumpled like a basket smashed by a hammer, the timbers parting and splinters flying up into the air, and Ed saw little dark figures leaping into the waters. Then he saw the crossbowmen taking aim, and a man rolled over, face down, a short smearing of red on the waves before the ship's hull thrust the body beneath the waves.

'Pa,' he breathed.

He couldn't move. His father's boat was some distance from the approaching galleys, and he saw it edge about until the prow was pointing at the shore. He wanted to believe his father would survive, that the boat could win the shore before it was assaulted, but he could see already that the ships were gaining. A dull lassitude spread over him. There was a hollowness in his belly, and he felt tears assailing his eyes. He wiped them away with an angry hand, and stared until his eyes were as sore as the rest of his body.

The oars in the galleys were sweeping forward and back, the steady beating of the drums sounding clearly over the water, and then he heard the bells ringing their warning in the castle's tower. Already he could hear shouts and screams from up in the castle and beyond. All the noise drowned out the oars.

Gil, he saw, was running down to the shoreline and bellowing to the men to get to the town's walls, but many didn't seem to understand. They stood, fishing nets in their hands, pails, or barrels of salted fish, staring with incomprehension as death hurried to them. And then it arrived.

A grating sound like a file on stone as a keel ran up the sand, and then a ferocious, animal roar as the first men leapt into the water, weapons already drawn. Three fishermen had knives in their hands and rushed to meet them, but two were slammed to the ground as crossbow bolts hit them from close range. The last was hacked to pieces at the water's edge.

All too late, the other fishermen realised their error and tried to escape, but they were too late. Bolts caught three more, and a sudden flurry of men from the leading ships were bolting up the sands to cut off the men before they could reach the gates. Two more were cut down as they chased up the narrow paths, a third in the corner where Hal had beaten Ed, another who had panicked and ran in the wrong direction, and hurtled into the storming enemy only to be stabbed and beaten with a war hammer.

And then Ed saw Gil. The old ropemaker had a knife in one hand, his rope's end in the other, and he laid about him with the fury of a berserker. He knocked two men aside with his rope, stabbed another man, but soon he was swallowed up by the mass of men-at-arms like a stone engulfed by the tide. His rope's end was no use against mail.

Ed recognised his own danger almost too late. He span and pelted up the slope to the castle gate at the quay, but it was already locked and barred. The sound of running men, the squeak of their belts, the clinking rattle of their mail, was all too close, and he hurtled away from them, along the side of the wall to the castle, past the great latrine ditch that reeked of the night's sewage.

Here, at low tide, there was a narrow pass that led up to the beach outside All Saints parish. He ran on, past the beach to the Bar Gate. It was closed, and although he shouted at the guards on the towers, they ignored him. Later, when he was a man, he would realise that they couldn't open the gates to one boy and risk the lives of all inside, but then, at that moment, he knew only despair that he was deserted, and he hated the guards up there, standing so smug and aloof, while he waited to be slain. He was too young to curse them with any depth of feeling, but in his heart, he damned them forever. All of them, the men in the towers, those on the walls, the people inside the town. He damned them with a vicious loathing, his jealousy of their safety tearing at him. His mother was in the town, and he wanted to go to her.

Another scream, rattles of metal against metal, the distinct, fine clinking of mail, and he hurried away, along to the Strand, where there lay another broad ditch. Here he covered himself with the ordure and mud that lay at the bottom, trying to conceal himself. There was no sound of pursuit, and after a while he peeped over the edge.

Men were milling around at the shore line, where four of the immense galleys were already beached. Larger cogs were close to them, disgorging more of the pirates, and Ed felt his heart tighten when he looked out into the river for his father. There were no boats, but for three that were tacking up the river away from the carnage, and none was his father's.

A cry went up from the shore, and another galley aimed at the Strand not far from him. He whimpered at the sight, trying to push himself into the soft soil of the ditch's edge, but then he heard a sudden blast from a horn, and he saw the gate of the drum tower open. A posse of men emerged, many armed with long staffs and bills, some with axes. There were three watchmen with heavy falchions, and men-at-arms with their swords. Screaming their defiance, they pelted down the beach to the galley.

That was when he saw the fresh horror.

From the ship there came a great belch of fire, yellow, red and orange. It was a flame like

that of a dragon, and with it there was a roar like a demon's bellow of hatred, and Ed watched in fascinated horror as a thick, roiling smoke sprang from the ship. Three of the castle's men were scythed down in an instant, one man was cut in two, another was blown over, staring with dumbfounded horror at his leg, which lay some distance from him. Two others were knocked from their feet, while a fine, red mist rose, and there were screams and wails of agony as the rest of the men turned and fled this new weapon of horror.

And Ed tore at the wall of his ditch, petrified with terror, convinced that these pirates were aided by the devil himself.

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Arnaud bellowed at the men reloading the little gun with their little Pot de Feu. Men were stamping and moving about the ship, bringing up fresh little barrels of Serpentine and the iron arrows with which they loaded the strange bottle-shaped device to fire at the English on the beach.

'Loose it at them over there,' he bellowed, pointing at a group of archers who stood and began letting their arrows fly at them. A flurry of arrows plunged down and struck four men at the foredeck, and Arnaud shouted again, before he understood that the men at the cannon were so deafened by its blast that they could hear nothing he said.

He was nothing loath. Running the length of his ship, he flung himself over the side and landed on the shingles. There was a jarring shock in his ankle, but he ignored it as he threw himself forward at the archers.

A crossbow gave its characteristic snap, and he saw an archer spin around, a bolt in his shoulder, but then a fresh flight of arrows clattered into the shingle all about him, and he ran through their shattered pieces, little flakes and splinters flying all about him.

All the way, he saw again that day fifteen years or more ago, when the English had appeared.

They had come late in the forenoon, six ships of varying sizes, manned by men like these: strong, dark-haired madmen, armed with steel and leather. They ran through the town, slashing and burning everything they could. Women and girls were grabbed and raped in the roads, while other English stood aside and watched, waiting their turn. Men were held and stabbed repeatedly or had their throats cut. The boys were beaten to death. He had seen his own brother killed, a man with a maul bringing it down on the boy's skull. It stove in his head like an egg, and Arnaud saw his eyes roll up into his head as his legs crumpled. Then it was his go, and he turned to look at his brother as the hammer fell. It glanced from his skull and slammed into his shoulder, knocking him senseless, but not killing him. It saved his life.

Later, when he came to, sick and feeble as a kitten, he looked about him at the smoking remains of his town and swore vengeance on these sea-predators. The English were evil. He knew that. If he could, he would wipe them from the face of the earth.

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Ed crawled away as the French thundered up the beach. One group ran past him and on to the main gates, while a second stopped and began to load and fire crossbows urgently. Looking up, Ed saw a mob of men running towards them, fishermen, peasants, a man-at-arms, all wielding axes and bills, with here and there a sword. Although some were felled with bolts, the rest came on and slammed into the French bowmen, and a vicious little battle took place there, with blades rising and falling. It would have gone ill for the French, but then a fresh force of Frenchmen hurtled into the rear of the English, and they were cut down to a man.

Panting quickly with the shock and fear, Ed tried to move further through the ditch to escape, but as he went, the ditch grew suddenly deep. Ed plunged down into a foul, reeking liquid formed of rank sea water and sewage, and it filled his eyes and mouth and nostrils with its hideous stench.

Rising, he could not stop himself from spitting and choking. He crawled from the slime and wiped at his face with hands like claws, trying to clean the filth from him.

A shriek, a cough, and a man fell into the ditch beside him. It was a man Ed knew. A friend of his father's called Rod the Pot because of his skill at catching lobsters with his own little traps. Ed knew him as a mild-tempered man who would give him a sup of his ale at any festival, or pass him a sweetmeat when his mother wasn't looking. A kind man, a generous-hearted man, with a gentle manner and great spirit. And now, the blood was gushing from a great wound in his throat, and Rod was trying to staunch the flow with his hands, his legs thrashing.

Ed could do nothing to help. As he watched, Rod's eyes took on a distant look as though peering into the distance, and the urgency of his flailing slowed. He glanced at Ed and as his soul fled, Ed would have sworn that he nodded to Ed, as though anticipating a quick reunion.

That was when Ed looked up and saw him.

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Arnaud had already hefted his sword. He had killed the man and saw his body tumble into the sewer, and only followed to make sure the man couldn't rise again. It was unlikely with his neck opened like that, but he was filled with the need to kill as many English as possible. This was their legacy, after their assault on his town, when they killed his mother and father, and his brother. He would eradicate the English from the world if he could. Wipe them out like the vermin deserved.

But then he saw the boy.

A little thing, small, scrawny, pathetic. But yet he could grow into an Englishman. Another to harry French ships, another to turn pirate and rob and rape and pillage all along the Norman coast. An English child could grow into a man.

He lifted his sword, just as the boy looked up at him.

And in that face, Arnaud saw himself. He saw a boy who had lost his parents, a boy who was no longer scared, because the worse nightmare had already assailed him. There was no more fear in his face, only a kind of acceptance, just as Arnaud had known when he saw his brother fall, as he had known when the hammer, foul and besmeared with his brother's blood, had raised again to club him.

To kill that boy would be like killing himself, he thought. But he also realised that if he didn't, it was this boy and others like him who would continue the feud.

Better to kill him.

He lifted the sword again, but as he did so, a ripping sensation tore at his breast. Looking down, he saw the huge barb of an iron bolt. It grew from his belly like a flower of death, red and thick with his clotting blood.

The sword fell from his hands and he fell to his knees. Those fools on the ship had carried on firing. One bolt from the Pot au Feu had reached all the way up here, and at the last had killed him, the man who had thought to bring it with him.

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Ed watched as he tumbled to the ground, the man taking no notice of Ed as his breathing grew harsh and ragged. Blood trickled from his mouth, but Arnaud did not try to speak. He had nothing to say. His death was a relief.

Not that Ed knew anything of that. All he knew was that his old life was over.

After the French had slipped away again, their long, low galleys backing away from the shore, he climbed from his ditch and stared about him. Smoke rose from the town and from the beach, where the boats had been set ablaze. Men were all about the sands and shingle, some moving with slow desperation, while some few women, their clothing rent, went from man to man, searching for their own loved ones. Some women sat in the remains of their clothing near the town's walls where they had been raped, staring at the sea with empty, dulled expressions, clutching their rags to themselves as if they could cover their humiliation and anguish. Many lay still, their blood spattering the ground about them.

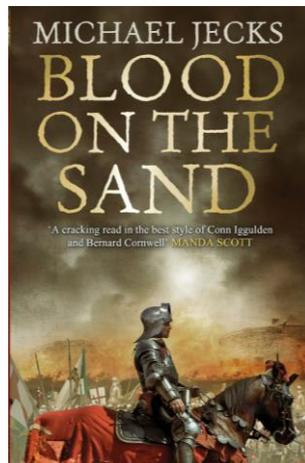
Ed stood, and as he looked at the devastation, he became filled with a firm desire.

He would never rest, never. Not until he had somehow managed to visit vengeance on the

foul people who had done this to him and to his town.

As soon as he could, he would go to France. He would kill all the French in his path, if he could. He would slaughter them all.

If you enjoyed *The Boy's Revenge*, read on for an exclusive advance excerpt of Michael Jecks' new novel, *Blood on the Sand*, which follows Ed's adventures.



Calais, 1346. Berenger Fripper and his men are stationed in the ancient port city, a city under English control and surrounded by enemies. They are here to defend their newly won territory from the French and their allies the Genoese.

Enemies are all about them, but there is also trouble within. Someone in the vintaine is leaking vital information to the French, jeopardizing not only the safety of the men but also the future of the war, and Berenger must find out who before it's too late.

And when the vintaine is attacked at sea and captured by the Genoese it looks as though their luck has run out. Can Berenger defeat the enemies that surround him and keep the English victorious?

Praise for Michael Jecks:

'Vivid imagination and gripping prose' **Anthony Riches**

'Compellingly brought to life - both bloody reality and glorious courage' **Julian Stockwin**

'Michael Jecks at his very best ... Utterly enthralling' **Karen Maitland**

'Classic Jecks - and that's as good as it gets!' **Susannah Gregory**

***Blood on the Sand* is out on 4 June 2015. Pre-order your copy now.**

PROLOGUE

Villeneuve-la-Hardie, outside Calais

There was a chill breeze coming off the sea as Berenger Fripper squatted on his haunches near the fire. It was dusk, and although the weather was dry enough now, it had been spitting all day from clouds the colour of old steel. The sort of weather to make a man want to be home again, in a tavern with a roaring fire and a quart of good ale in his fist.

Yet the weather suited his grim mood.

His vintaine had changed much since they had set off from England. The long march to Crécy had taken its toll. Many of his original sixteen men had died. Jon, Gil, Luke, Will, even Geoff, who had always seemed impervious to weapons. By the time they reached Crécy itself, most of his and another vintaine had been so badly mauled that there was scarcely enough to make one understrength vintaine from the remnants of the two. Jack was still with him, and the boy Ed, nicknamed 'the Donkey'.

Sadly, Clip had succeeded in whining his way here, although the day Clip died, Berenger would forswear ale and women and instead take up Holy Orders. The scrawny runt's constant complaining seemed to give him strength and vigour. When he stopped, the world would end.

Now he had new recruits, though Berenger eyed them without enthusiasm as they stood or knelt around the fire. He caught Jack's eye and the two men grimaced. They were both professional soldiers, and they knew how much work they had ahead of them to turn these into a fighting vintaine. At six-and-thirty, Berenger was feeling too old to start again. His thinning hair was already showing more grey than brown. This lot would turn it all white.

They were a mixed bunch, it was certain.

Over to the left there was the bulk of Aletaster. He was almost as fat as Grandarse, their centener, with a belt that could have encompassed Berenger, Jack and the Donkey simultaneously with ease. Red hair and small, dangerous blue eyes that never quite seemed to relax. Beside him sprawled the whey-faced, skinny little fellow the men had finally called Dogbreath, for the plainest of reasons. He had a whining voice and the appearance of a cur that's been kicked into abject submission; rather like Clip, but with more viciousness. There was the man they had named the Earl, for his fair hair and affable demeanour, listening politely with an expression of amused bafflement as Jack Fletcher tried to explain a fighting manoeuvre.

And finally, there were the others. The scum that always floated below the top of Berenger's pot of humanity when there was a little heat turned onto them: the fellows who wouldn't fit in, no matter what. Turf, so named for the colour of his face during the Channel

crossing; Horn, the man who was almost as wide as he was tall, rather like a drinking horn; Pardoner, named not for his untrustworthiness, but for his habit of apologising every few moments; Wren, who was so small and dainty, he could have been a maid; Saint Lawrence, who seemed too good and kind to be here. Men wanted to stay near him. He carried himself like a priest, tall and elegant as an abbot, but with a certain anxiety, as though he constantly feared being exposed as an imposter. What of it? Berenger thought to himself. They were all impostors here. That was why they were all content to be given a new nickname when they joined the vintaine. Whether they had arrived to win money and renown, or to escape a demanding wife, debts, or a length of rope, they were all welcomed. Their King had need of them all.

And Berenger felt a surge of affection for them. He would live in their company, teaching them, helping them, and in the end, no doubt, burying many of them, if God didn't call him first. These were *his* men. His archers.

CHAPTER ONE

English Channel, Seinte Gryfys, Late September 1346

On the day of their capture, Berenger Fripper wiped the salt spray from a face burned brown and leathery, and kicked the writhing figure at his feet.

‘Get up, Clip, you whining excuse for a man! I’ve seen better-looking turds in the midden. Get back on your damned feet.’

‘We’ll all be killed, ye mad bastard, Frip! Let me die in peace. Ach, you don’t understand. My head is a’ full of pain, man.’

‘You shouldn’t have gone thieving, then,’ Jack Fletcher said unsympathetically, aiming a kick of his own at the man’s scrawny backside.

‘I was trying to get hold of some food for you!’

‘You were seeing what you could thieve for your own benefit, more like,’ Berenger said.

‘You never complained when I brought you a squab or a barrel of ale, did you?’

‘We never had to go and search for you before,’ Jack said.

‘If you were real comrades, you’d have helped find the man and avenge this,’ Clip said bitterly.

Berenger was about to kick Clip again for the fun of it, when a sudden roll made him lose his balance. As he grabbed a rope, his belly clenched with the sudden need to puke. *Cog*, he thought with disgust. A rotten, stinking, leaking bucket, rather. The air about the deck was fetid with the stench from the bilges, and the only reason it was safe from fire was that the whole vessel was so old that the timbers were themselves sodden. As the waves caught at her, she wallowed like a sow in mud. This wasn’t a fighting ship: she was about as much use as a pastry bascinet. If the galley behind them caught up and accidentally rammed her, the hull would crumble like a dropped egg. They were here on this godforsaken tub to help bring supplies. The last few ships heading for Villeneuve-la-Hardie, the vast English encampment outside Calais, had been attacked by the French or their Genoese mercenaries, and someone had decided that it would be sensible to install archers on the fleets coming to supply the English.

Today Berenger’s men were on duty. Again. It made him wonder whether someone in his *vintaine* had offended a lord or some vindictive petty official. It was unreasonable that they kept being given the shit duties.

He felt a man slam into him, hard, and almost let go of the rope.

‘Watch it!’ he snarled.

‘I’m sorry,’ Pardoner gulped, his own face blanched and greasy with incipient sea sickness. ‘I didn’t mean to . . .’

‘Shut up. Just keep hold of something. Hit me like that again, and I’ll be pushed over the rails.’

He shoved the raw recruit back towards the rails, where Pardoner soon joined two others, Turf and the Saint, in emptying his belly. Berenger knew that if he were to go too close to them, he would soon be throwing up alongside them. The odour of vomit could do that to you.

A shipman hurried past, and three others were hauling on a rope as the shipmaster bellowed, his voice carrying clearly even over the howling and hissing of the wind. A fresh bout of nausea burned deep in Berenger’s guts as another man barged into him.

‘Look where you’re going, Tyler,’ Berenger grunted. He clung to the wale as the cog bucked, rearing over a high wall of water.

She hesitated at the summit, and then plunged sickeningly, lurching to one side as she fell. Berenger was convinced the ship would continue to plummet, down and down, until she landed on the sea bed, but somehow she stopped at the trough and flung him to the other side of the deck, as though, like a small dog, the cog wanted to shake herself dry.

There were twenty-five ships all told in this fleet. The first convoy were bearing fresh soldiers, food, clothing and boots for the men besieging Calais. Standing here, Berenger could see them streaming away to the north and the south, a line of old cogs and fishing boats, all rolling and pitching in the grey seas. He wondered how many men were chucking their guts up on each of them. Probably as many as on this ship, he thought.

The stench of vomit came to him and he had to turn and stare at the horizon to distract himself, cursing his luck once more. Sitting out here on this lump of floating crap, waiting for the wave that would overwhelm them all, or for the first of the attacks that must surely come, he felt way out of his depth. God’s truth, it was enough to make you throw up.

He looked ahead. John of Essex was up there at the prow, holding on to a rope and moving with the ship like a shipmaster born at the base of a mast. Gritting his teeth, Berenger made his way in stages to his side.

‘Hello, Fripp. Isn’t this great?’ the man said enthusiastically.

Berenger disagreed. He saw ships yawing and pitching and felt his own stomach lurch in response. ‘Yes,’ he lied.

‘You know, I’ve always wanted excitement. Where I was born, my father never travelled further than five leagues from home. Did I tell you about him? He was a tanner, and a good one.

I could have followed him in that trade, but . . . well, have you ever smelled the tanneries?’ He made a face.

‘Once smelled, never forgotten,’ Berenger said.

‘That’s right. When you’ve got piss and dogshit all mixed up, and worked with it a while, spreading it over the skins . . . well, some men don’t mind it, but for me, soon as I could, I ran away. I wanted *adventure*. I would never have got that back at home. I knew it would be different here.’

Berenger’s mind was fixed on the image of dogs turds and urine. He swallowed down his latest bout of nausea and said hollowly, ‘Adventure?’

His latest recruit gave a smile that made him look like a fox: cunning, but wary. ‘I want to be able to make some decent money, not to end up a mere cobbler or tranter about my old home, without two farthings to rub together. One day, I’ll be important. You watch me. I could be a centener, a man-at-arms . . . even a knight.’

‘A knight?’ Berenger scoffed. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Why not? I’ve as much brain as most of them.’

‘You’re the son of a tanner, and you think you can get your hands on a knighthood?’

‘Others have. All I need do is show myself bold enough. I’ll do it.’

Berenger wondered about that. The man had ambition, but ambition was never enough. This fellow had a lot to live down already. Berenger knew that until recently, he too had been the vintener of a small party – before his sudden fall from grace. If others could have had their way, this adventure-seeking tanner’s son would even now be gracing the King’s three-legged hangman’s tree outside Villeneuve-la-Hardie.

‘I reckon you should keep yourself quiet and unnoticed,’ he said. ‘Why?’ The fellow bridled.

Berenger looked at him. ‘You were found guilty of riding out for personal profit when the orders were to remain with the army. You’ve already lost your rank and position – you’d be well advised to keep yourself inconspicuous.’

‘I wasn’t riding for my own purse,’ John of Essex said, and his face took on the obstinate expression Berenger was coming to recognise. ‘I thought I saw men in the farmstead, and I was right. They waylaid us.’

‘And so you were put in my charge and then we were all pushed up the gangplank to this old tub.’

‘That’s hardly my fault.’

Berenger looked at him. 'Is it not? Perhaps someone in a position of power took a dislike to you and your actions.'

'We rode into a small hamlet, got attacked and rode back. What is there in that to make someone want to punish me?'

Berenger frowned as he considered the boat now on their starboard side. It was a swift-moving galley, and it overhauled the rest of the convoy. At the prow was a man with long, mousy hair blowing in the breeze. 'Who is that?'

'Sir Peter of Bromley. Haven't you heard of him? He used to be named Sir Pierre d'Agen, but he fell out with the French King. Something to do with the King's latest favourite wanting some lands, and Sir Peter's being the best available. So, to satisfy his friend, King Philip gave away Sir Peter's lands and lost a loyal subject. Stupid prick!'

A shorter man clad in a cleric's gown with a fringe of almostblack hair went to Sir Peter's side and whispered in his ear.

Berenger watched as Sir Peter's vessel overtook them at speed. The galley was soon far beyond them, racing on towards France as though flying over the waves.

It was after midday, and Berenger was breaking his fast with a chicken leg and quart of ale, when he heard Dogbreath calling to him.

'Fripper, are they with us?'

Grumbling to himself about his poor eyesight, Berenger strained his eyes, peering in the direction Dogbreath was pointing. There were some hulls there, he felt sure, but a long way off. 'What do you see?' he said to Saint Lawrence, but the tall, fair recruit shook his head. His eyes were no better than Berenger's.

'Can't you see?'

'Yes, you fool' Berenger snapped, 'but I want to know what you—'

His words were suddenly drowned by the shipman at the masthead, who bawled down at the deck, 'GENOESE! Galleys to port!'

All at once, the ship came alive. Shipmen ran up the ratlines to the yard and began to let out more sail, while the ship's company rushed to their stations. Berenger and John of Essex made their way to the rail as the ship began to wallow, then with a creaking and cracking of ropes and timbers, she lurched to the larboard and began to hurtle through the waves. Their passage became more urgent, with a thrumming of ropes as the wind howled through them. Men temporarily forgot the slow agonies of their sickness as the ship strained like a greyhound at the leash. But she was an old, arthritic greyhound.

‘Oh, God’s ballocks!’ Clip groaned.

Berenger followed the direction of his gaze and saw a galley ram the side of a great cog. Arrows were flying, and there was a loud crash and burst of flame as the galley fired a small gonne.

Amidst the thick, roiling smoke, Berenger saw a number of shipmen thrown aside. One man was flung over the wale into the sea. Then the galley reversed, and the cog immediately began to sink down in the water.

Another galley crushed the whole of a fishing boat. The vessel collapsed like a felt hat struck by a hammer. It was there one moment, and then the prow rose up to the sky, while the rear was smashed aside, and in an instant both parts were sunk. The galley did not falter, but continued on towards their own ship.

‘They’ll take us next,’ John of Essex said grimly.

CHAPTER TWO

At Villeneuve-la-Hardie, Archibald the gynour was up early that morning. He had been unable to sleep. Mares had troubled him as he tossed and turned under his blanket. In the end, he had got up and spent the remainder of the night sorting through his stores of powder and shot, testing the barrels for damage or leaks, and sifting powder to ensure all was still dry.

‘You look tired,’ Béatrice said when he returned to the camp late in the morning. There was, he thought, a slight edge of concern to her voice – almost as though she cared for him. He smiled at that thought. She had suffered so much in recent weeks, it would be a miracle if she ever felt able to trust a man again.

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ he admitted. ‘It was Fripper’s fault, though. He spoke to me about the ships that keep making their way to the harbour to supply the town, and it gave me pause to wonder: will you be safe here, if I go away for a few hours?’

‘I will see to my safety.’

‘See to the boy as well, eh? I wouldn’t wish for the Donkey to be harmed while I am away.’

‘I will guard him too.’

‘Good.’

He left soon after, walking up the north-bearing roadway, turning right, and continuing on to the city walls.

The town of Calais was itself held within a long rectangle of walls. To the north the city looked to the sea but on three other sides, the walls gave onto scrubby land with a miserable grey soil that looked insufficient to support any plants, and yet it brought forth a variety of trees and shrubs, while the fields further east looked productive. However here, near the walls, the land was wretchedly boggy. There was hardly any need to dig a moat. Even the trenches dug by the English were soon filling with water. Yet there was a wide, double moat, too, that curved from the east side along the south, and part-way up the western side.

Along the northern stretch of wall, and then curving slightly before continuing west, was the river that fed the estuary where the harbour lay. There was another moat here, as well as a long dyke. More defences protected the castle at the north-western corner of the town.

Archibald sighed as he took in the sight of the castle. It was tempting to think that he could pound it into dust, but alas, even the most massive gonne he possessed would do no more than scratch that rock. It was impregnable – as were most of the town’s walls. For him to reach

the town with his powder and shot was possible, but it would be at the last gasp. In truth, old technology would serve better. Large wooden catapults and stone-throwers would do more damage.

However, there was still work for his machines. This was what his dreams had told him.

To the north, for example, was the Rysbank. There, if he could position his gonnies safely, he would be able to command the entrance to the harbour. True, right now the Rysbank was protected by French defenders, but they could be driven off or into the sea.

It was a thought. Aye, it was a good thought.

‘They’re going to take us. We’ll all be killed,’ Clip whined.

‘Shut up, Clip,’ Jack said.

Dogbreath was eyeing the ship with a glower. ‘There’s no way I’ll be captured by a poxed Genoese son of a whore!’

‘They won’t take us,’ Berenger said. ‘Not while we remain here fighting.’

‘Frip? They’re getting closer,’ Mark Tyler said.

Berenger cast a look over his shoulder. The sea obscured the other vessel for a moment, but then it reappeared, the prow pointing to the heavens as it breasted the wave, and then started the long, gut-churning, swooping dive. It was definitely pursuing them.

‘It’s a fucking galley, Tyler. What do you expect?’ he rasped.

Tyler flicked his lank, straw-coloured hair back from his brow. He was a tall fellow, with dark eyes that looked out of place in his pale face. Berenger had known him only a matter of weeks, but didn’t trust the man at all. He had been involved in plundering a religious house, and Berenger preferred to keep to secular enemies. He saw little need to provoke God Himself.

Berenger glanced about him at the ship, his eyes narrowed against the stinging spray. He was weary after the last hours of rocking to and fro with the planks shifting under his feet, and felt like a man ten years his senior. Every muscle and joint ached, and his bowels felt weak, as though he was suffering from a fever, as well as the vomit that constantly threatened to gush like the spume from the wave-tops.

‘I’ve had enough of this shit,’ he swore, and began to make his way over the treacherous deck to the shipmaster.

A loose coil of rope, slippery planks, the sudden thunder of a fresh wave striking the hull . . . and Berenger was thrown from his feet. On his backside, he slid over the tilting deck and almost slammed into the wall of timbers on the farther side, but before he could do so, a hand grasped his jerkin, and he was drawn to a halt. He shivered as he looked at the sea in front of

him. He had been *that* close to drowning, he knew. Wanting to thank his rescuer, he stared around at his saviour.

‘Glad I’m here now, are you?’ Tyler enquired.

Berenger jerked himself free of Tyler’s hand and clasped a rope, hauling himself upright. ‘Keep off me!’

‘No gratitude?’ Tyler said sarcastically and returned to watching their pursuer.

No, Berenger said to himself, *no gratitude, no friendship*. Only suspicion and disgust.

Back at Calais, Ed the Donkey stood huddled in a cloak near Archibald’s wagon, grumpily surveying the grey seas.

Ed felt lonely. Twelve years old, he had been orphaned years before. He had come here to France to take his revenge, but the life of a soldier had proved more dangerous than he could have anticipated, and now he stood here staring out towards England and home.

Not that he had a home any more. The only home he knew was the one here, with Béatrice and Archibald the gynour.

At first he had thought the big man was terrifying: he reeked of the Devil. That was the smell Ed associated with Archibald – *brimstone*, the odour of Hell.

All the other soldiers tried to avoid Archibald: none of them liked the smell that followed him. Men made signs against the Evil One when he had passed, and even after a battle, Archibald found it difficult to acquire food. At Crécy, Ed had seen how Archibald’s great gonnes had ripped into the ranks of French men-at-arms – and had also seen how a mis-prepared gonne could detonate and slaughter all the gynours about it. Archibald had fought with all the zeal of a Christian that day. And recently Ed had grown fond of the old man.

It was not Archibald himself who made him feel more comfortable with his place at the gynour’s side, though. It was the constant presence of Béatrice.

Ed had no sister. His parents died when French pirates appeared and destroyed his town. The young lad saw his father die, and his mother was raped and murdered. Béatrice felt like a mix of the older sister he’d never had and his mother. She was beautiful, and kind, and very understanding. He simply adored her.

He suddenly heard a little sound and his head snapped around. It came from over by a wagon. He stared hard. In the semi-darkness, it was hard to see much, but he was sure he could see a sack moving. It was the bag in which they kept their stores of oats. Not many people liked oats, but Archibald and Berenger had it in their heads that oats were a useful food for the men.

Ed reckoned a dog must have got into their stores. The movement was too large for a rat, surely? A rat that size would be bigger than a cat. He had no wish to confront a giant rat, he told himself. At first he shouted and threw a stick, then a small rock. A yelp came, but it sounded human rather than canine.

Ed hurried to the stores, and found a small boy rubbing his head. He turned wide, terrified eyes to Ed, but then saw how small Ed was. Standing, he was almost Ed's height.

'Keep away from our food!' Ed spat.

'I'll take what I need,' the boy responded truculently.

'You'll have to fight me first!'

'Reckon you can stop me?'

Ed had no desire to fight anyone, but he would rather fight than see Archibald's food pinched, and some thieving scrote of a vintener's boy was not going to walk away scot free. 'Yes!'

The boy was painfully thin. He looked as though he hadn't eaten in days.

'You're French?' Ed demanded. Ed had lost his family to the French, but in the last two weeks of fighting, he had come to appreciate that not all French were evil, in the same way that not all English soldiers were saints. And this was only a young lad. With the condescension of an older boy for one at least a full year younger, Ed dismissed him as a threat.

'Yes! This is my land!' the boy declared.

Ed shrugged. 'But it's my food, and you won't take it without permission. Still, if you're hungry I have bread. Do you want some?'

The boy eyed the hunk of bread Ed produced with all the ravenous desperation of a cur, then stared up at Ed's face as though suspecting there to be a trick in this act of generosity.

'I've been hungry, too,' Ed said gruffly by way of explanation.

'Come. Eat! What is your name?'

'Georges,' his visitor said, edging nearer to the bread.

'Where are you from?'

'My family lived in a town. You have destroyed it. We have nothing left, and I have lost my family.'

'I lost my family years ago,' Ed said. He held the loaf lower, ducking his head. 'Come, eat.'

The boy darted forward, snatched the bread and darted away a few yards, stuffing the food into his mouth as quickly as he could. He looked like a squirrel desperately filling its mouth before a predator could arrive.

‘You want some drink?’ Ed asked.

Georges nodded, and Ed fetched him a mazer of wine. The boy drained it in one, coughing at the strength of it. Ed refilled the mazer and the boy took it back, sipping more carefully now.

‘You’ll be safe here,’ Ed said. ‘The men here are kind. They looked after me, too.’

Georges watched him doubtfully, but then nodded. As if by that one action he had passed responsibility for his well-being to Ed, he immediately wrapped himself up in Ed’s blanket, lay down and was soon fast asleep.

Tyler. Bleeding Tyler, Berenger thought to himself.

There were always men like Tyler in any army. The stranger who stood at the outer edge of the men; the man who held the secrets of his past close to his chest; the odd one who wouldn’t join in wholeheartedly. The one whom none of the others trusted entirely. John of Essex was bad enough, but he was predictable and, while dangerous, could be understood. Tyler was another sort of man entirely.

All the men in Berenger’s *vintaine* had their own secrets. Any group of twenty men would have one or two whose secrets were close-guarded for good reason. In King Edward III’s army, more than a few had been career outlaws and thieves. There were drawlatches, robbers and murderers in every *centaine* mingling freely with the honest fighters who had been brought by their lords or tempted by the promise of booty.

Many of them were pardoned felons. The King had need of more men to swell the ranks of his archers and infantry, which had been depleted in the short, vicious campaign that had taken the army down to the walls of Paris and back to Calais; therefore any man who could wield a sword or bow was welcome. For every man who could be counted on, who was reliable, there was another who was viewed askance by those who knew him, suspecting that his shifty manner meant he had something to hide.

And Berenger was convinced that Tyler was such a man.

‘You all right, *Vintener*?’ John of Essex called.

Berenger grunted, his attention returning to the galley behind them. It was gaining far too quickly. ‘Shipman! How long till we reach the port?’ he bellowed.

The ship’s master, a dour old fisherman with a round face framed by grey whiskers and the expression of a man who had bitten by accident into a sloe, curled his lip as he peered over Berenger’s shoulder at their pursuer. ‘If he keeps on like that, us’ll never reach the port, boy.’

CHAPTER THREE

‘They’re preparing!’

The shipman’s cries from the crow’s nest came down to the decks during a brief lull in the storm, and for a moment, Fripper was startled to hear the voice coming from so high up. Then the deck pitched once more and he was forced to clutch at a rope. Staring back at their pursuers, he saw the enemy gathering at the forecastle. They were only a matter of yards away now.

‘*Vintaine!*’ he yelled. ‘String your bows!’

Usually, before he went into battle, Fripper would find a strange peace washing over him, his breath coming more calmly. As a young man, he had known only terror, his heart beating faster, his armpits and hands growing clammy with sweat at the realisation that he was about to risk his life once more, but with age, that had deadened. Now there was only the sense of a task to be undertaken. Nothing more. It was just a job.

Not this time, however. Today, his fear was smothering him. Fighting on ships felt unnatural at the best of times. He had done so before, but on ships bound together, so that it was like fighting on land. To the vintener, the risk of drowning was more alarming than the thought of a stab to the heart or being hit by a crossbow bolt.

He was terrified, and the realisation sucked at his will. Clinging to his rope as the galley crawled ever closer, he could not muster the energy to draw his sword.

Berenger had come here to France with the intention of making money. Many years ago, his parents had died, and afterwards he had been taken in by the old King, Edward II, the present King’s father. Growing up in the court, shown how to behave as a chivalric man should, he had loved the King like a father. But then the nation rose against Edward II, and suddenly his life was turned topsy-turvy. His King, his lord, was captured and held in prison; he himself was taken and gaoled. Only later, when the disastrous reign of terror of the arch-traitor, Roger Mortimer, had ended was Berenger fully free at last. He travelled widely, and when he returned to England, he was held as a traitor himself. Only the intervention of King Edward III had saved him. The King’s son had shown him every courtesy, and perhaps then Berenger could have made something of his life. Maybe he could have settled and raised a family. But instead the lure of loot and pillage took hold of him. With no roots, no family, no land to hold him, he became a freebooter, fighting wherever there was a battle.

Having learned about chivalry when he lived in the King's court, he could have worked harder to become a knight himself, perhaps. But nothing had come of that. His life had progressed from one war to another – fighting those against whom he had no quarrel, purely to win the largesse of his master. At least in recent months he had been fighting with Sir John de Sully, but now Sir John was far away. Only Berenger and his men were here, and that felt awfully lonely. And he, Berenger, had absolutely no idea why he stood on this rolling deck facing a force of Genoese and French and about to join the slaughter once again.

If he survived this, if he came out after the Siege of Calais whole, he vowed that he would find a different life. He would forswear war and battle, and with God's help he would find a woman and settle down. He had said this many times before, but this time he would keep his word. That he swore.

'Should we loose, Fripp?' Clip's whining voice cut through his thoughts. 'They'll kill us all if we don't fight.'

Berenger felt a shudder pass through his frame – a surge of anger at these Genoese, at France and, yes, at his King, for sending him here, to this poxy boat, to die. The spell of terror was broken.

'Archers, *draw!* Archers, *loose!*' he bawled, and set his hand to his sword-hilt. 'I don't give a fuck who these arrogant bastards are, but they won't take me without a fight!'

He could see them clearly enough. Burly fighting men, all of them burned by the sea's wind and sun, with dark hair set about swarthy features, wearing a mixture of plain clothing and mail, some with helmets or bascinets. Several were equipped with axes and polearms, while more stood at the rail brandishing swords or long knives.

Aloft, he saw the bowmen, their crossbows spanned and ready. Before the English could loose their first arrows, three bolts slammed into his men. The sound, like gravel flung against wet cabbage, made Berenger's belly roil. He hated that sound above all others. 'GET THOSE CUNTS ON THE CROW'S NEST,' he bellowed as he gripped his sword more firmly in his fist. It was a poor way to fight, this, with your hands cold and clammy, and damp from spray. No man could hold a weapon firmly in that kind of state.

A sudden lurch and he heard a splintering noise from beneath his feet. The ship gave a great shuddering roll, and then her rolling was stopped, but the deck remained at an impossible angle. Berenger stayed attached to his rope, the loose end wrapped about his wrist, while his men began to slide along the deck. Clip grabbed at a stanchion as he passed, and gave his hand to John of Essex; Jack Fletcher was halted by the mast, and he managed to hang on to a sailor who

passed by him on his back. All about the deck, sailors and warriors were clinging to each other and any spare ropes or stays, rather than fighting the enemy.

Arrows flew over Berenger's head; he saw one pass through a sailor's body, to pierce the decking behind him while he shivered and cursed in pain. Another nicked Jack Fletcher's skull and stabbed into the mast itself, and he looked up at the fletchings over his brow with an expression of shock mixed with fury. Dogbreath swung on a rope, cursing volubly when a bolt flew by and almost struck his hip. Turf was curled into a ball at the wale, his hands pressed together as he prayed.

A man with a grapnel stood at the front of the galley, and Berenger lifted his sword to try to rally his men, but before he could do so, a calm, accented voice cut through the din.

'English, do you think to die today, or would you prefer to live?'

The speaker was a dark-skinned man with a well-trimmed beard and white teeth that stood out in stark contrast to his oily black hair. His voice was serious, but his eyes were alive with humour.

'Come, English, there is no need for us to kill you all.

Surrender and you will be saved. Your ship is sinking already. Her hull is cracked like a dropped bowl. We could leave you to drown, but I don't think you would like that.'

Berenger gazed back at the tilted deck. There were three men dead – two men from his vintaine and a sailor – but as matters stood, the Genoese could pick them off one by one without effort if they wanted, and there was nothing he or the archers could do.

Only four men looked as though they still had their bows: their arrows were lost. With the deck angled the way it was, there was no choice. They could not fight up the slippery slope of the deck and hope to achieve anything. They would be slaughtered before they had reached the wale.

'Frip, if we live we can fight another day!' Jack roared up at him. 'In Christ's name, we can't fight!'

'You have us,' Berenger said to the smiling face. At that moment, he hated his captor.

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