

Prologue

The majestic ship creaked and groaned; its sails rippled, fat with wind. Days from land, it split the ocean towards the great city in the west, carrying precious cargo: a man – a man the crew knew only as the Master.

He was among them now, alone on the forecastle deck, where he had lowered the cowl of his robes to let himself be lashed by seaspray, sipping at it with his face in the wind. Once a day he did this. He appeared from his cabin to pace the deck, chose a spot to gaze out at sea, then returned below. Sometimes he stood on the forecastle, sometimes on the quarter-deck. Always he stared out at the white-crested sea.

Every day the crew watched him. They worked, calling to one another on deck and in the rigging, each with a job to do, while all the time stealing glances at the solitary, pensive figure. And they wondered, What kind of man was he? What kind of man was in their midst?

Furtively they studied him now as he stepped away from the deck railings and pulled up his hood. He stood there a moment with his head bowed, his arms hanging loosely at his sides, and the crew watched him.

Perhaps a few of them even paled as he strode along the deck past them and back to his cabin. And when the door shut behind him, each man found that he had been holding his breath.

Inside, the Assassin returned to his desk and sat, pouring a beaker of wine before reaching for a book and pulling it towards him. Then opening it. Beginning to read.

Part One

I

19 June 1257

Maffeo and I remain at Masyaf and will stay here for the time being. At least until one or two – how shall I put this? – *uncertainties* are resolved. In the meantime we remain at the behest of the Master, Altaïr Ibn-La’Ahad. Frustrating as it is to surrender dominion of our own paths in this way, especially to the leader of the Order, who in his old age wields ambiguity with the same ruthless precision he once wielded sword and blade, I at least benefit from being privy to his stories. Maffeo, however, has no such advantage and has grown restless. Understandably so. He tires of Masyaf. He dislikes traversing the steep slopes between the Assassin’s fortress and the village below, and the mountainous terrain holds little appeal for him. He is a Polo, he says, and after six months here the wanderlust is like the call of a voluptuous woman to him, persuasive and tempting and not to be ignored. He longs to fill the sails with wind and set off for new lands, show Masyaf his back.

His impatience is a vexation I could live without,

quite frankly. Altaïr is on the cusp of an announcement; I can feel it.

So, today I declared, ‘Maffeo, I’m going to tell you a story.’

The manners of the man. Are we really kin? I begin to doubt it. For instead of greeting this news with the enthusiasm it so clearly warranted, I could have sworn I heard him sigh (or perhaps I should give him the benefit of the doubt: perhaps he was simply out of breath in the hot sun), before demanding of me, ‘Before you do, Niccolò, would you mind telling me, what it is about?’ in rather exasperated tones. I ask you.

Nevertheless: ‘That is a very good question, brother,’ I said, and gave the matter some thought as we made our way up the dreaded slope. Above us the citadel loomed darkly on the promontory, as if it had been hewn from the very limestone itself. I’d decided I wanted the perfect setting to tell my tale, and there was nowhere more apposite than the Masyaf fortress. An imposing castle of many turrets, surrounded by shimmering rivers, it presided over the bustling village below, the settlement a high point within the Orontes Valley. An oasis of peace. A paradise.

‘I would say that it’s about *knowledge*,’ I decided at last. ‘*Assaseen*, as you know, represents “guardian” in Arabic – the Assassins are the guardians of the secrets, and the secrets they guard are of knowledge, so, yes . . .’

no doubt I sounded very pleased with myself ‘... it’s about knowledge.’

‘Then I’m afraid I have an appointment.’

‘Oh?’

‘Certainly I would welcome a diversion from my studies, Niccolò. However, an extension of them I don’t desire.’

I grinned. ‘Surely you want to hear the tales I’ve been told by the Master.’

‘That all depends. Your pitch makes them sound less than invigorating. You know you say my tastes run to the bloodthirsty when it comes to your stories?’

‘Yes.’

Maffeo gave a half-smile. ‘Well, you’re right, they do.’

‘Then you shall have that, too. These are, after all, the tales of the great Altaïr Ibn-La’Ahad. This is his *life story*, brother. Believe me, there is no shortage of event, and much of it, you’ll be happy to note, featuring bloodshed.’

By now we had made our way up the barbican to the outer part of the fortress. We passed beneath the arch and through the guard station, climbing again as we headed towards the inner castle. Ahead of us was the tower in which Altaïr had his quarters. For weeks I had been visiting him there, spending countless hours by him, rapt, as he sat with his hands clasped and his elbows on the rests of his tall chair, telling his stories,

his old eyes barely visible beneath his cowl. And increasingly I had come to realize that I was being told these stories for a purpose. That for some reason yet unfathomable to me, I had been *chosen* to hear them.

When not telling his stories, Altaïr brooded among his books and memories, sometimes gazing for long hours from the window of his tower. He would be there now, I thought, and hooked a thumb under the band of my cap and shifted it back, shading my eyes to look up at the tower, seeing nothing but sun-bleached stone.

‘We’ve an audience with him?’ Maffeo interrupted my thoughts.

‘No, not today,’ I replied, instead pointing at a tower to our right. ‘We’re going up there . . .’

Maffeo frowned. The defensive tower was one of the highest in the citadel, and was reached by a series of vertiginous ladders, most of which looked in need of repair. But I was insistent, and I tucked my tunic into my belt then led Maffeo up to the first level, then to the next and finally to the top. From there we looked across the countryside. Miles and miles of craggy terrain. Rivers like veins. Clusters of settlements. We looked over Masyaf: from the fortress to the buildings and markets of the sprawling village below, the wooden stockade of the outer curtain and stabling.

‘How high are we?’ asked Maffeo, looking a little green, no doubt conscious of being buffeted by the

wind and that the ground now looked a long, long way away.

‘Over two hundred and fifty feet,’ I told him. ‘High enough to put the Assassins out of range of enemy archers – but able to rain arrows and more down upon them.’

I showed him the openings surrounding us on all sides. ‘From the machicolations here they could launch rocks or oil over their foe, using these . . .’ Wooden platforms jutted out into space and we moved over to one now, holding on to upright supports either side and leaning out into the air to look down. Directly below us, the tower fell away to the cliff edge. Below that the shimmering river.

The blood draining from his face, Maffeo stepped back on to the safety of the tower floor. I laughed, doing the same (and secretly glad to, feeling a little giddy and sick myself, truth be told).

‘And why is it you’ve brought us up here?’ asked Maffeo.

‘This is where my story begins,’ I said. ‘In more ways than one. For it was from here that the lookout first saw the invading force.’

‘The invading force?’

‘Yes. Salah Al’din’s army. He came to lay siege to Masyaf, to defeat the Assassins. Eighty years ago, a bright day in August. A day very much like today . . .’