

Markus Heitz

The Dark Lands

Novel



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Aenlin Salomé Kane: an adventurer, daughter of Solomon Kane
Tahmina: a mystic, friend of Aenlin
Caspar von und zu dem Dorffe: duelist and adventurer
Nicolas: a lansquenet captain
Jakob aka Jäcklein: a lansquenet
Status alias Stats: a lansquenet
Moritz Mühler: a lansquenet and »Frozen One«
Joss von Cramm: a free mercenary crimper
Osanna: a taverner
Barthel Hofmeister: a lansquenet captain
Valentin: captain
The Venetian: a plague doctor
Henry Rich: First Earl of Holland and Baron of Kensington
Melchior Pieck, aka Bracke: a bounty hunter, mercenary, spy, and assassin
Claas de Hertoghe and Hans de Hertoghe II: merchants of the Dutch West India Company
Kettler: a banker from the Bank of Hamburg
Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich Fjodorov: a diplomat of the Czar
Agatha Mühlbach aka Gatchen: an inhabitant of Bamberg
Veronica Stadler, aka Nica: an inhabitant of Bamberg
Ursula Garnhuber, aka Ula: an inhabitant of Bamberg
Martin Huber: an innkeeper
Franz: a tavern lad
Father Hubertus: a Jesuit
Sebastian: a guard
Sophia: a witch
Anna: a witch
Master Schneider: a council member from Mühlhausen
Katharina and Peter: a couple who run a mill
David: the millers' son
Maria: a villager
Christian Schwarz: an inhabitant of Magdeburg
Karl Schulzenmüller: an inhabitant of Magdeburg
Tännel: a giant
Valna: a mermaid

GLOSSARY

Ahura Mazda: Zoroastrian creator God

Deva: Fiend

Dutch West India Company, Geoctroyeerde Westindische Compagnie: chartered company of Dutch merchants

Fougasse: Improvised mortar hidden in a hollow in the ground, can be fired via a cloth line from afar

Genie: supernatural being; may be good or evil

Hagzussa: Ancient word for witch

Passau Art: The art of making somebody magically immune against bullets and blades, also called »turn frozen«

Tercio: Battlefield formation

Xolotl: Deity or monster

Yatu: Ancient Persian word for magic, spell craft, sorcery, and witchcraft

ADDITIONAL READING: THE REAL STATE OF AFFAIRS IN 1629

Do not worry, this is a fantasy novel, and I have no intention of turning it into anything else. However, to make my readers understand the context better, I have decided to supply a little overview of the historical backdrop of the 17th century.

The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was not a nation at all, but an alliance of three hundred Imperial cities, counties, and principalities — from giant electorates to tiny territories consisting only of a few farmsteads ruled by Free Imperial Knights of the Holy Roman Empire. The Emperor was no autocrat but instead was chosen by seven electors: three clerical and four mundane ones of different confessions. Moreover, the ruling Emperor, the staunch Catholic Ferdinand II, had to cooperate with the Imperial Diet consisting of nobles, clerics, and citizens. They also belonged to different confessions, and tension grew.

Thus, some of these coreligionist lords, states, and cities formed the »Catholic League« to oppose the Protestant »Union,« while others declared themselves independent neutral. The Catholic League as well as the Protestant Union mustered troops to defend themselves against attacks by their counterparts.

Foreign powers such as the Dutch, the Danes, the Swedes, the English, and the French intervened in the conflicts on German soil or even had a say in them due to feudal rights.

What started with the well-known Defenestration of Prague in 1618 and ended with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 has gone down in history as the Thirty Years' War. In fact, it was not a long war at all, but a series of related battles with ever-changing allies and enemies.

When the novel starts, the Battle of White Mountain (1620) is already over, and the Low Saxon War (1625 – 1629) is about to end.

The Holy Roman Empire was in a state of permanent unrest, triggered by confessional disputes and fueled by the thirst for more power of those already powerful and the belligerence of the mercenary leaders whom the war made rich.

To find out more, start reading up on this tumultuous era — and be warned: you will need patience to follow all those tangled conflicts.

Now, however, let me present to you adventure, intrigues, and ... magic

Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n.
— John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)

EXORDIUM

Kingdom of England, London, March 1629

»I am sorry for the hubbub and the dirt. However, if you want comfort, you have to suffer through some uncomfortableness first.« At the sound of the voice echoing through the high, paneled room, Melchior Pieck turned towards the entrance he had come through half an hour ago. His host had made him wait. Punctuality was the politeness of kings, not of lords.

»I did not notice them at all, your lordship.« For someone from Hanover, Melchior was not too fluent in English. »Your servants know how to find the dust even in the most remote corners and get rid of it.«

»Like you do with your prey, right? No matter if it's humans or animals.« Henry Rich, First Earl of Holland and Duke of Kensington, entered the giant room.

The various scenes adorning the stucco ceiling clashed with the paintings on the walls. Several oil lamps and candles fought against the dark colors; the dying light of the evening falling through the gate-like windows was not enough.

»That is the reason why you are here, dear Pieck.« The long, tailored brocade jacket fell past his hips, and puffy sleeves and trouser legs made the slender man seem more sturdily built. He had curly hair and wore a stylish mustache and a goatee. »Did no one offer you a drink?«

Melchior, who was just past fifty and wore his gray-silver beard and his hair cropped short, bowed slightly, the movement fluid despite his stoutness. »I declined, your lordship. My throat is not used to your kind of fine wine.« In his deliberately simple wardrobe and worn leather boots, he looked the exact opposite of the Earl.

»Do not be too modest. I know that you are a man of wealth and taste. Someone who belonged to the favorites of the Count of Mansfeld must have earned a fortune.« Rich gestured at the two armchairs next to the crackling fireplace. »Have a seat. I can see that my messenger has brought you here unharmed.«

»Thank you, your lordship. A charming lady indeed. The coach was extremely comfortable, too.« Melchior took a seat and arranged his baldric with its broad saber. He carried his flintlock pistol in a sheath on his chest.

»You knew the Count?«

»No. It was enough for me to hear about him and his fights. Excellent mercenary leader. His last battle was for the English Crown near Breda. However, things went downhill for him after Dessau and against Wallenstein.«

»Appearances were deceitful,« Melchior replied coolly. He did not have to put up with imputations and derogation. Mentally, he added fifty guilders to his fee. »The Count came up with a new plan.«

»Did he, then? A pity that the Ottomans poisoned him. Wasn't he about to travel to Venice with you to raise more money for a fresh army?«

»I saw no Turks close to him when he dictated his last will to us, coughing blood and little pieces of his lungs. It was a hematorrhea, your lordship.«

»What a pity. Less heroic.«

»If your lordship prefers you may imagine an Ottoman behind it. I for one stick with the affliction.« Melchior took in his surroundings. He did not like to speak about the past. Those memories hurt him like the scars on his body and his face. He had liked his leader a great deal and learned a lot from him. »Your lordship has plans for the Holland House?«

»Oh, yes, indeed! That brick building is far too unpretentious for my taste,« Rich confessed. »The stucco and stone ornaments are not nearly enough for a man of my standing. After my wife had inherited the building, I ordered the addition of wings and arcades at once. Doric columns will also be a good addition. At the entrance. What do you think, Pieck?«

»They will, your lordship.«

The Earl gestured for the waiting servants to put victuals and various beverages on the table between them, then he dismissed the lot.

Rich, who at forty was ten years younger than Melchior, smiled deviously. Obviously, it was time to talk business. »Since the Count of Mansfeld's death three years ago, you've made yourself quite a name as ...«

»I prefer the word 'trader.'«

»Well, and I prefer to call a spade a spade.« Rich leaned closer to him. »Bounty hunter. Mercenary. Spy. Assassin. Schemer.« He took his cup of port and slurped noisily. »Did I forget anything, my dear Pieck?«

»The things I offer as a trader are manifold. Would your lordship like to make use of them?« Melchior grabbed his port and emptied it at a gulp. »Your lordship was right.« He put the less intricately adorned cup back down on the serving tray. »Your port is not too fine for me.«

»Touché.« Rich laughed softly. »A man right after my fancy.« He reached under the table, pulled forth a portfolio and handed it to Pieck. »Your mission.«

Full of curiosity, Melchior opened it. It held several pencil drawings of a young woman in her mid-twenties, sometimes in profile, sometimes in front view. She had long dark hair with a midnight black skein the breadth of a finger that absorbed the light, as the artist had noted; a white velvet ribbon held them together. Her left eyebrow had a striking light streak. A scar? In the profile drawing, the lady wore a white hat with a black ribbon and a wide brim tilted up on the right side.

»Pretty. Her face is a little ... reedy,« Melchior commented, avoiding the word *lank*. Her features were vaguely familiar, but he could not place them. Beneath the drawing were the woman's personal crest and her name. Next to two crossed, burning torches with a rapier and pistols, he saw the words *Aenlin Salomé Kane*.

»She resembles her father.« Rich pointed at the crest. »She knows how to fight with a rapier and a main gauche. Additionally, she carries two hidden stilettos on her body. Moreover, she is an exceptionally good shot. They say.«

»Kane?« Melchior squinted his eyes shut. The name finally enabled him to place the resemblance. He had seen drawings of this face in many a book. »Is she ... is she in fact Solomon Kane's daughter, your lordship? The daughter of *the* Solomon Kane?«

»Does that matter, Pieck?«

It does when it comes to my fee, he thought, and he regarded her features. »I did not know that this legendary man had children.«

»Let's say his mistress Bess waited in vain for him to return, to show him the wonder that he left her,« Rich answered sardonically. »After her death he saw no necessity to investigate.« He poured himself some more port. »Young Aenlin can already look back on a remarkable career as a swashbuckler, I heard through the grapevine. That is why I mentioned her weapons. Do not let her youth fool you. She is said to use her blades with extreme precision.«

Melchior knew all the stories about Solomon Kane, the Puritan adventurer who had fought evil in Europe and Africa and gone on the wildest of journeys there.

Most people considered them stories to scare children.

Melchior however had fought on battlefields in devastated regions and forlorn villages and knew what darkness could spawn if unopposed. Or if someone summoned it. »What would your lordship like me to do?«

»You, my dear Pieck, will follow Aenlin Kane to Hamburg and tail her there. Keep her safe. You have to protect her, no matter how you manage to do so and no matter what it takes — and she cannot learn about you.« Rich took a sip.

»So, your lordship is her benefactor?«

»Up to a certain point, yes.«

»And which point would that be, your lordship?«

»My protection ends as soon as Aenlin Kane leaves the city again.« Rich pensively looked at the painting to his right, which showed him on a hunt. »Then you will kill the woman.«

Melchior raised his grizzled brows and poured himself some more port, too. Again he drank it at one gulp. »Care to explain?«

»You will put any belongings she carries with her at the time of her death and everything that Aenlin Kane has acquired in Hamburg into a crate and send it to London. To an address down by the docks that I will give you as soon as we have signed a contract.«

Melchior nodded slowly. »Your lordship wants something she's going to pick up in Hamburg. But she will only do so if she feels unobserved.«

»Exactly, Pieck.«

»Is that reason enough to kill her, your lordship?«

»Qualms don't fit a man like you, Pieck. She will never surrender the item voluntarily. Moreover, I do not want us to get in trouble because of this. It's a delicate matter.«

»Like your lordship's affair with the paramour of the Count of Chalais?« Melchior whispered with an innocent look. »He was executed for conspiracy against Richelieu, but the duchess —«

»— is back in Paris,« Rich said gruffly, his face reddening. »Her ban has been lifted. The Duchess of Chevreuse has been forgiven.« He belonged to a string of lovers that the beautiful French woman had had, and as a husband he had more than one reason for anger when hearing her name.

»Is your lordship still on friendly terms with the duchess?« Melchior inconspicuously put one hand on the hilt of the dagger resting next to his saber in the double sheath.

»That is not important for your mission, Pieck. Do not presume too much.«

»I am only asking this for business reasons. I do not care for gossip and tittle-tattle. For all I care, your lordship can have as many liaisons as you choose and can manage.« Melchior liked the port. »Tell me, did Lord Buckingham's life not end in a truly tragic fashion last summer? Stabbed by his own man!«

»May his soul rot in Hell! Buckingham cost us more than four thousand good men at La Rochelle. I should have ...« Rich made a fist. »Turn over the drawing.«

Melchior grinned. He had paid back the Lord for his taunts against the mercenary life. The Crown of England had made too many enemies in its wargames and now was paying the price for it.

He turned the drawing over. »Another woman? Or a disguise?«

She was obviously younger and more delicate; the artist had darkened her complexion with tiny dots and had written brown skin next to the drawing. Her eyes were dark, too. Her wardrobe was oriental, the style that Melchior knew from the Ottoman women serving in mercenary armies. She held a carved hiking pole in her hand.

»A Persian mystic called Tahmina. She has been at Aenlin Kane's side for a while now. Presumably, Kane saved her life, and she has been following her around ever since.«

»So, she is a witch?«

»Let's say this child has connections to some exquisite powers that no one wants to investigate any further.« Rich pointed to the sealed envelope within the portfolio. »That is why you will slip Tahmina this letter discreetly. After Kane's death.«

»What shall I do if she claims to be Kane's heiress?«

»Knock her out. Do not kill her, Pieck.«

»As your lordship pleases.« Melchior's eyes darted back and forth between the two drawings. He did not want to fight a witch. She might have cast a protective spell on herself and the murder victim-to-be. This might not be an easy mission after all. »An unusual team.«

»Soon, only one horse will remain. See to it.« Rich had obviously gotten over his anger about the defeat at La Rochelle and about Lord Buckingham. »Do you think that is feasible?«

»Of course, your lordship.« Melchior had calculated his pay. »That is two hundred guilders per month. Or two hundred English thalers. Whatever is easier for your lordship. First month in advance.«

Rich inhaled slowly and audibly, and the carefully set mustache under his nose quivered.

»These are two missions, your lordship,« Melchior explained, »and I will be running a significant risk. This mystic can cause mortal peril for me. Moreover, I must turn down other ladies and gentlemen who ...«

Rich raised his hand to cut him short. »All right, Pieck. Half of your fee now, the other half later. For my own safety.«

»Forgive me, your lordship, but I know that the English Crown has financial problems. Due to your king's belligerence,« Melchior insisted. »Is it not true that royal demesnes and jewels have been sold, and valuable cutlery has been melted down? Also, let us not forget the exaction of forced loans. Didn't the Parliament grant additional funds?«

»Consider me impressed. For a German mercenary, you are very well informed.«

»I keep an eye on my business acquaintances' solvency. If His Majesty ever considered infringing on his lords' assets ...«

»Do not worry. I know that Charles is having initial exploratory talks with the French and the Spaniards to end these expensive wars. I heard that Rubens might travel to London to negotiate on behalf of Madrid.«

»Still, Charles remains a king with an iron crown, not a golden one.« Melchior put the drawing of the two women back into the portfolio and closed it. »Your lordship could hire someone cheaper than me ...«

»No, Pieck. You shall get your money.« Rich took the bell and rang for the servants, whom he sent to get the pay. »Sign the contract. The coins will soon be here.«

In the portfolio Melchior found the agreement for a mission to be discussed nuncupatively, entered the fee they had agreed upon into a space left deliberately blank, and signed it.

»One more thing,« Rich said as Melchior did so. »If you should not be able to complete your task, if you should warn those women, or if you should fail to send me all that Kane acquires in Hamburg, Pieck, I will put an assassin on you.«

»Heavens!« Melchior perused the agreement once more, deliberately exaggerating. »Where do I find that clause here, your lordship?«

»These are the details agreed upon by word of mouth.« Rich signed and sealed his copy and handed it to Melchior. »Now you know the clauses. If it should take you more than two weeks, let me know. Is that clear, Pieck?«

»Very much so, your lordship.«

»Do you know Hamburg?«

»I have been there once or twice. Invulnerable and full of merchants, diplomats, and agents of all nations.« As Melchior recited his list, he considered whether he should have demanded a higher pay. »I will find them quickly, your lordship, and do as we have discussed.«

Rich scribbled something on a scrap of paper and, waved it to dry the ink. As he folded the paper to seal it shut with wax, his servants returned. »This is the address you will deliver Aenlin Kane's belongings to. Do not open it before her death.«

»Very well.« Rich scribbled something on a scrap of paper and, waved it to dry the ink. As he folded the paper to seal it shut with wax, his servants returned. Melchior pocketed the scrap of paper, shoved his copy of the agreement under his doublet and took the heavy sack full of thalers from Rich. Under the eyes of the Earl, he opened it and counted. »Two hundred.«

»Don't you trust me?«

»Your lordship would be surprised how many coins grow legs even on short distances.« He looked at the servants standing by the doors, gazing straight ahead towards the paneling. They looked unfazed. »Not this time, though. Your servants are honest.«

»Well, good hunting then, Pieck. Now be off.« Rich didn't get up from his armchair and waved him off with his hand. »See you soon. I hope.«

Melchior got up and bowed. »Your lordship.«

Without another word he went to the door, straightening his baldric and taking his floppy hat with its two kinked gray feathers from a servant. The retainers also handed him his large bag, which bore a lock protected against unauthorized opening.

Melchior left Holland House, which could have housed dozens of families — to say nothing of its giant, parklike estate, which was big enough for hosting hunts.

They made him walk to the gate. The coach awaited him at the estate's entrance. Another small insult.

Melchior started walking and soon got inside.

As he had hoped, the woman who had picked him up near the docks was waiting inside: Angelique, almost thirty years old. He had noticed the French accessories she wore with her English dress.

»Good evening. Will you take care for my safety, milady?« He put the bag with the silver in his satchel. She slightly inclined her head, her blonde curls moving and bobbing in the light of the small lamp.

»I will.« She knocked against the roof of the coach, and the one-horse carriage started moving. »The Earl wants to make sure that you board the Ivy right away. She leaves London with the flood and will get you to Calais.«

Melchior was happy. This way, nothing could stop him from leaving. »My luggage is already on board?« »Of course.« She smiled. »You have —«

Melchior drew his hardened dagger from its sheath next to the saber and drove it into the woman's chest. On the battlefield, the armor-piercing weapon served as a tool against harnesses and cuirasses, and it easily pierced the thin skin and the bones. The blow found her heart, and the woman opened her eyes wide.

»Cardinal Richelieu sends his regards, Countess Henriette,« he said. »You couldn't fool me.«

Smoke billowed up from the margins of the wound, and her skin burnt with a hiss, wherever the silver touched it.

The noblewoman wanted to reply, but the pain allowed her only to gasp. The paralyzing effect of the Argentum stopped her from using her self-healing powers. Softly snarling, she stared at the handle of the dagger protruding from her chest. Her fingers turned into claws, her fingernails became long and sharp.

»Before visiting Holland House, I informed myself about whom the Earl hosted and whom he offers protection to,« Melchior explained and drew his pistol. »You are the pardoned Duchess Chevreuse's Huguenot friend and felt safe in London.« He leaned into her. »So the rumors are true, Countess. You are a shifter.«

Henriette growled and tried to bite Melchior. Her teeth had become long fangs. »You fiend!« She grabbed the hilt of the dagger with her claws, but she wasn't strong enough. »I have done nothing wrong!«

»As opposed to the Duchess with her many powerful friends at court, your low title doesn't save you from Richelieu's revenge,« Melchior said. »London can thank me later. The less beasts like you are prowling around the better.«

»You will ...« Henriette began, and her eyes flared red. Half a breath later she died and turned back into a normal woman. Nothing hinted at what she had been in life.

»*Excusez-moi.*« Melchior pulled his dagger from the dead body and wiped it clean on her dress. Then he put the body on the bench in a position that enabled him to behead Henriette with his saber, which took him three tries thanks to the shaking of the coach. »A deal is a deal.«

Quickly, he opened his capacious satchel and took out the large glass vessel holding the liquid honey.

He cut off the longest curls, then he put her head into the honey to preserve it. In Calais, he would hand over the head to a messenger and soon be happy about his reward. Richelieu paid well.

The coach rumbled through the deserted area around Holland House while Melchior took his prey's jewelry.

On his list of prey, there was also Benjamin de Rohan, Duc de Frontenay and Baron de Soubise, the Huguenots' military leader who had fled to London after the fall of La Rochelle. And who pondered his return.

As far as Melchior knew, de Rohan was also a shifter. According to rumors the Duc had a pet jaguar from the New World. However, de Rohan and the jaguar had never appeared in public together. Melchior had no doubts that the noble himself was the beast.

However, the two hundred thalers gave the Earl priority. He could take care of de Rohan when he brought Aenlin Kane's belongings to London.

As they rolled across a small bridge, Melchior called out, »Coachman, stop!« and produced his primed pistol. »Her ladyship feels sick. She would like to vomit.«

As soon the man stopped the coach and bowed to the side worriedly to look for his mistress, Melchior fired.

With a bang, the propelling charge ignited, and whitish gun smoke shot out like angry mist, riddled with sparks. The bullet hit the man right between the eyes. It tore away half of his skull and his hat, and he slumped on the box seat, his back resting on the roof. Blood trickled down.

Quickly, Melchior got out and threw the beheaded corpse of the countess into the stream below, which ran to the Thames and on, into the open sea.

To make it look even more like an assault, he hit the coach a few times with his saber. He slathered the coachman's rapier in the fellow's own blood before putting the weapon into his hand. Then he threw one of the countess's rings back into the coach to make it look like as if the robbers had dropped it. Another one he dropped next to the coach. The rest he kept.

On the unhitched horse he rode toward the harbor.

On the way there, Melchior pondered what he might expect when he encountered Aenlin Kane and Tahmina. A fighter and a mystic.

It surely would not be as simple a task as was killing the Huguenot.

The first thing he would do in Hamburg would be finding the executioner or someone who was skilled at the Passau Art to buy a magical writ of protection that would save him from various hardships. Just in case.

The earth, whose custom it is to cover the dead, was there itself covered with them, and those variously distinguished: some had their bowels hanging out in most ghastly and pitiful fashion, and others had their heads cleft and their brains scattered.

— from *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1668) by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, about the Battle of Wittstock on 4 October 1636

CAPITULUM I

Free Imperial city of Hamburg, April 1629

Aenlin stood out amongst the bustle and flurry of the lower harbor. For various reasons.

One was that she stood still amidst all the ado, involving a stack of crates holding cannonballs. Another was that she wore bright, expensively tailored clothes, including a light-gray, wide-brimmed hat with her black ribbon partly covering her long, dark hair. But mostly she stood out because, as a woman, she wore men's clothing. Moreover, she wore her coat open, letting everyone see the weapons she carried.

She did not mind the looks the bustling servants, house cleaners, hucksters, merchants, and peons gave her. Absentmindedly she read her father's letter, which had reached her mother a long, long time ago.

Beloved Bess,

there may come a day when I do not return. When I lose my life fighting evil. Do not worry. I do care that you will be set for life, should that happen.

In these hours that I write this letter I have no idea how the both of us spent those last years. You should know, though, that every time my task dragged me away from you, I stayed with you in my mind. Together with my faith, you gave me the strength to oppose the beasts of darkness, Bess.

Well, I was able to gather a small fortune and some artifacts that I bequeath to thee. As they are of considerable value, I have taken precautions to protect them against unauthorized access.

To get your due you and what you deserve, go to Hamburg. Find a man called Jacobus Maus in the lower harbor and show him your signet ring. He owns a rope shop. Maus will tell you how to go ahead from there.

Should Jacobus Maus be dead by the time you arrive in Hamburg, he will have taken steps to grant you access to your treasure.

I do not want to go into any more details in this letter. Should somebody read what kind of riches await you, kings and queens might become jealous.

I am looking forward to seeing you again, be it in this life or in paradise, where God will reunite us. May the Righteous One bless you.

*Deeply in love and forever yours,
Solomon*

Aenlin lowered the letter and took a deep breath, watching the manifold loading and unloading of the huge ships moored in the harbor. Their masts jutted skywards, the reefed sails tied to the halyards. Here and there, sailors were climbing in the shrouds, checking the ropes for damage before the ships set sail again.

Aenlin's thoughts and emotions slowly adjusted to the fact that she was awfully close to her destination: Jacobus Maus's shop was only a stone's throw away.

However, Aenlin did not want to take this last step alone. She wanted her friend Tahmina by her side. She waited anxiously for her.

The shouting and the clamor, the rattling of the derricks and the runners keeping the machines going, the hoof beat of teams and the grinding of the wheels resounded across the quay and echoed from the counting houses and warehouses. Trade across the Elbe never slept; even the sporadic embargoes and controls by the Danes, the English, and the Dutch could not stop the keels.

Every day, various ships set sail from Hamburg to every nook and cranny of the known world, several thousand per year. In times of peace or in times of no matter which war, the city catered to all conflicting parties alike. Hamburg could afford this approach, having declared its own neutrality while at the same time erecting fortifications that stopped everyone from attacking the city.

Aenlin liked the bustle of the harbor, and her light eyes scanned the façades of the brick and half-timbered buildings. She had found the letter in her mother's estate, folded between the pages of a Bible. Elisabeth Kane had died from typhus in poverty at the age of forty-five. The fever befell the inhabitants of London in turn with the Black Plague.

Other cities suffered from those afflictions, too. On her way to Hamburg, Aenlin had heard about the plague ravaging nearby Altona, and Hamburg itself had had to cope with typhus recently. On one hand, the citizens were happy about its prosperity even as large parts of the surrounding countryside fell victim to wandering armies. On the other hand, they were ranting against the fugitives who washed up behind their walls thanks to the war and, according to rumor, brought those afflictions with them.

Aenlin had been to Hamburg before, but this was the first time she saw the massive walls, the bastions with the defense works and the cannons that were able to fire in all directions, completed. No matter how long this war between Catholics and Protestants, nations and interests, would rage, this city would survive — unless an affliction or a conflagration should overtake it. Her father's treasure for her mother was safe here.

»Hey! Where do you think you're going with my purse?« shouted a merchant in expensive clothing and a foppish hat after a ragged boy who ran across the quay. The merchant unleashed his gray mastiff, and the dog barked darkly. »Brutus, attack! Attack! Tear the little thief to pieces!«

Aenlin saw the boy, who was about eleven years old, sidestep obstacles and jump over sacks and crates. He might have lost an adult this way, but the mastiff refused to give up its prey. Whenever it lost sight of the thief, the animal followed his scent.

Aenlin's heart quickened in her chest. Intervening would be tricky, but she could not simply watch this hunt come to a bad end. She picked up an empty sack from the ground and walked towards the boy. *Lucifer help me.*

»That's the spirit! Cut him off, woman,« the merchant shouted, thrilled with anticipation. »But be careful, don't let Brutus attack you.«

The crowd laughed. Some onlookers showed their sympathy for the child by whistling loudly to distract the dog.

The little thief tried to evade Aenlin, but she had foreseen his steps correctly. Even before the mastiff could bite down on the boy's neck, she tripped him, so he hit the ground on the dead run and went head over heels on the cobblestones several times.

Deftly, she threw the open sack over the raging dog's head, and the beast's aggressive barking stop at once. Blind and taken off guard, Brutus crashed against the crates and shook himself with a yowl, trying to shed the coarse fabric with his paws.

Aenlin went over to the little thief, who was just getting up, and grabbed him by the shoulder. »Give me that,« she demanded and held out her gloved left hand.

»But it is my due,« he protested. »It belongs to me and my people.«

The merchant approached. »Miserable lugworm!«

A crowd formed around Aenlin and the boy, who kicked at her and at the man in turn as if he had any chance to escape.

»You won't steal from me ever again!« The fop told his dog to sit and freed it from the sack. The mastiff sat down next to him with a snarl, closely watching the humans in front of it. »Give me back your loot.«

»You betrayed us, Master Fischer!« The boy grabbed his waistband. »You owe us money. For a month.«

»Shut your cheeky mouth, you thief,« the merchant snarled.

Undaunted, the boy continued. »We loaded the carts and pushed them from the lower harbor up to the weigh station. All March long. You gave us nothing!«

Aenlin admired his courage. Neither the crowd nor the merchant — nor even the giant dog, which was eye to eye with the boy as it sat upright — intimidated him. »Is that true, Master Fischer?«

»How is this your business?« The merchant grabbed for the boy, but Aenlin pushed him aside by his shoulder, and the man's fingers grasped nothing.

»Is what the boy says true?«

A soft babble echoed throughout the crowd.

»Brutus!« The mastiff rose with a growl as the merchant shouted at Aenlin. »Unhand that thief so I can get my money back, you strange, foolish woman. Why do you go out like this at all, wearing man's clothes?«

»What's the wage he owes you, boy?« Aenlin looked at him in a friendly, yet stern manner.

»A ducat. For both of us.«

»Then take one from the purse and give the rest back.«

»Are you mad,« Fischer said, obviously pondering an assault.

Meanwhile, the boy took the proper coin from the purse and then handed the purse to Aenlin. Quickly, he pocketed his wage, but his conqueror still did not let go of him.

»Here. Your purse, Master Fischer.« Aenlin gave it to the theft victim, and the crowd laughed softly.

»And here is a guilder. From me.« She took a coin from her coat pocket. »Now the world is not out of kilter anymore.«

»Not out of kilter anymore?« Fischer grabbed the purse and the coin. Both disappeared beneath his cape.

»My world is out of kilter until this mangy thief has been punished.« From his belt he pulled a bludgeon that looked worn from frequent use. »I will smash his hand to keep him from stealing other people's belongings.« He raised his bludgeon. »Give me his arm!«

Aenlin let go of the boy, who ran away at once.

»Brutus, attack!« Fischer called.

Aenlin stepped onto the dog's leash as the mastiff dashed off, yanked the animal around so it crashed to the ground yelping. She was sorry she had had to hurt the beast. »Brutus, stop.«

Now the onlookers laughed.

»You dare protect a thief?« Fischer raised his bludgeon against her. »I will beat the living daylight out of you, woman. You will never forget this beating! You will have to pick up your teeth from the gutter.«

Aenlin took a deep breath and put her hands on her hips. In the same movement, she pushed back her coat, showing her two flintlock pistols and the rapier. »Pay your people so they don't have to rob you to get their wage.« She slowly took her foot from the leash. »Then you and your Brutus wouldn't have to run so excited around the docks.«

Fischer scrutinized the intrepid young woman, his wavering gaze giving away his indecision. »I will not forget this!«

He turned around and walked through the cordon of onlookers to the stack of crates and the old cog he had loaded. When he whistled loudly, the mastiff slinked after its angry master.

Aenlin smiled, her gaze following the thief. Ideally, this would teach him a lesson.

The crowd dispersed, as there were ships to load and unload. The entertaining diversion was over.

Aenlin's heartbeat slowly returned to normal. She sat down on a crate. A long sip of ale would have been very welcome.

By showing off her impressive collection of weapons, itself unusual for a woman, she had sought to intimidate her opponent so she would not have to use her arsenal. Of course, she knew how to fight with the rapier. She also was a surprisingly good shot and knew how to use her stilettos. During training sessions. Yet she had never used her blades or bullets against another human being.

Her mother had set immense value upon her education. Gaining knowledge and skill with weapons had been equally important. Aenlin leaned heavily towards knowledge, but the times favored those who held proficiency with instruments of death.

Moreover, as Solomon Kane's daughter, a certain reputation preceded her in England. Not in Hamburg, though. She was sure that nobody in the Free Imperial city had known her father. And Aenlin surely would not go about flaunting her heritage.

She also kept her beliefs to herself. In a pub in England, Aenlin had shared some interesting conversations on religion, Heaven and Earth, and demons with a young student called John Milton. He had been deeply impressed by her opinions, but she knew better than to voice them openly these days while Catholics, Protestants, Calvinists, Quakers, and other Christian beliefs fought for pre-eminence.

»There you are!« Tahmina came running towards her.

People might have mistaken her for some exotic monk from the Caribbean or the East thanks to her darker skin. The loose, midnight blue garment she wore gave no hint at the shape of her body; the belt around her hips was loose. In her right hand, she carried a long, carved hiking staff that came up to her chest and looked ordinary unless examined closely.

»Have you been the reason for this uproar,« Tahmina asked.

»No. A thief. I might've saved his life.«

»Found a friend doing so?« Tahmina nodded towards the merchant standing in front of his old cog and gazing angrily at them. The mastiff lay on the ground beside him and watched people at work. »Now that was quick. We have just arrived in Hamburg, and already you make life awkward for yourself. Which means for both of us.« The Persian was five years younger than Aenlin, and a cap hid her long brown hair. Her eyes shone blue like the open sea on a bright, sunny day, even if there was disapproval in them. »Didn't I say we want to keep a low profile on our little journey?«

Aenlin laughed softly. »We both stand out, even in Hamburg, which is crawling with people from other countries.« She pointed to the quay wall of the lower harbor, where the large sailing ships were moored and new ones arrived constantly. When winter ended and the ice on the Elbe melted, trade gained momentum. »Look: Frenchmen, Englishmen, Spaniards, Portuguese, Dutchmen, even people from the Caribbean and Asia. I think all skin colors and languages of the world are gathered here.«

»It was your idea to claim your father's heritage,« Tahmina said. »And to dress conspicuously.«

»I thought being armed would discourage villains.« Aenlin nodded towards the merchant. »It worked with him. But you may be right. I should dress more discreetly. A burlap sack would do, yes?«

»Don't use your sharp tongue against your servant,« Tahmina replied. They had agreed that the Persian would pose as Aenlin's subordinate, even though that was not true. Tahmina's introducing herself as a mystic would have been the straw to break the camel's back when it came to tolerance, even in neutral Hamburg, where people tended to ignore questions of faith. Witchcraft and similar arts were no laughing matters, even here. Brushwood and logs were easy to find, and burning witches at the stake promised great entertainment for locals and visitors alike.

Aenlin put a hand on her friend's shoulder. »What have you been up to while I saved a boy from the teeth of the beast?«

»I got us lodging. Our luggage is already there.« Tahmina pointed at the smallest inn: The Thirsty Roper.
»We can rest our weary heads there once we have found this man. What was he called? Some rodent name. Hamster? Rat?«

»Maus.« Aenlin pointed to the shop. »Jacobus Maus. That is his store.«

»You haven't been in there yet?«

»I wanted you by my side when I'm hearing more about my heritage.«

Tahmina batted her eyelashes put her left hand to her chest. »O my gracious mistress. You are so kindly to let me —«

»Stop it.« Aenlin got up and ignored her rumbling stomach. All day long she had been too excited to eat.

»All right. Let's solve the riddle.«

Together, they approached the shop of the rope trader, which was wedged between buildings, small and tall, that were well-frequented. The two women were surrounded by various languages; people struck deals while walking, and there was a lot of negotiating going on, as Aenlin could tell from the hand gestures. According to the faces, not all of the negotiations were going well.

Aenlin knew that Hamburg was bustling with agents and diplomats, and that the various nations even had embassies here, where it was possible to talk to emissaries of their kings — to get subsidies, to suggest a deal, or to discuss other things.

threshold with very mixed feelings.

* * *

Altona, near the Free Imperial city of Hamburg, April 1629

»Damn, get me that beer,« Statius hollered across the tavern. It carried the beautiful name *Rogue Wave* and stood on the bank of the Elbe, right next to the ferry he and his two companions had used to cross the river. »Wifey, how long will we keep on waiting? Don't you know that it's dangerous to let warriors suffer want?«

»Coming up, coming up,« replied the barmaid, who couldn't be much older than fourteen. From a large pitcher she poured his drink into a tankard.

As the other patrons hid behind their own tankards and talked quietly, four card players tried to discard their hands softly to avoid the attention and displeasure of the mercenaries.

»What about the food?« said Statius, whose garb was as colorful as that of the two friends with whom he shared his table. They wore colorfully striped shirts with puffy sleeves; puffed, slashed pants; and berets or hats with long, colored feathers. Proudly they displayed that they were not average people. Their beards were meticulously trimmed. The tips of Statius's mustache were dashingly turned horizontal.

»Yes, mother is at it,« the girl reassured him, and she dragged further tankards to the table. »There you are.« Right after setting the tankards upon the tabletop, she hurried away to avoid being dragged onto one of the men's laps. »I hope you like it.«

»I hope so, too. Otherwise, I'll see how much I like you tonight.« Statius distributed the mugs. »A cheer to this life that has got us back, my friends!«

Jacob, the smallest and skinniest of them, whom the others always called Jäcklein, raised his mug and touched it to Statius's. »Yes! May our enemies' blades always be blunt.« His blond hair and beard always managed to stick out in all directions. He always seemed a little scruffy.

Nicolas, the oldest of them, a towering fellow of almost thirty years, looked at the tendrils of smoke drifting lazily out the window from the room's numerous glowing pipes. He kept an eye on the cart holding their tent, their armor, and their pole weapons — and on the horse tethered next to it. He would rather have put the cart and the animal into a livery stable, but when Jacob and Statius had seen the inn, they would not budge. They assumed that no one would dare to touch what was theirs anyway. No one wanted to confront lansquenets, especially not drunk ones.

In the end, Altona stayed a pitiful collection of farmsteads, fishermen's huts and inns, unloved by its thriving sister Hamburg. The Counts of Schauenburg had allowed prosecuted Protestants from the Spanish Netherlands — as well as Mennonites and German and Portuguese Jews — to settle here. After the

Danes had conquered Altona, the Imperial troops had ravaged the village. Then, the Black Death had come. Several houses stood empty; some were still marked as haunted by the Plague.

Nicolas knew this from other areas he had been in. He grabbed his mug without looking at it. »May their blades be blunt.« He emptied his mug in one gulp. The beer tasted bitter and watered down, but it quenched his thirst. He turned to his friends again. »Can we resume our conversation now?«

»You can always have a conversation with me,« Jäcklein said and wiped the foam from his upper lip.

»Not before I have eaten.« Stadius banged his fist on the table rhythmically, making his neck-length brown hair bounce, and shouted: »Hunger, hunger, hunger!«

»Stop that,« Nicolas barked at him. »The little one is scared to death by you.«

»Well, then she'll be more pliable later when I —« He stopped as he saw his leader's angry look. »All right. I will let her be. But I will bet you for your meal that she's had more than a dozen cocks inside her.« He gestured about the taproom. »That's a good additional income for a sweet little thing like her. Who knows how much longer she will stay pretty?«

Nicolas did not react. Stadius was a rough guy, often too loud and too coarse, exactly the generally accepted lansquenet cliché. However, he was extremely dependable on the battlefield. That was essential for survival when Nicolas stood in a tercio, fighting for his life. When the cavalry approached, firing into the ranks, when the enemy came marching on, the bullets flew and the pikes jabbed like oversized thorns, when gun smoke obscured Nicolas' view — that was when Stadius stood by his side. So, the mercenary leader tolerated some of the things Stadius allowed himself off the battlefield.

Jäcklein took another sip and looked at Nicolas. »What do you think? Will we be able to enter Hamburg?«

»Depends on his behavior.« Nicolas pointed at Stadius. »The Council doesn't particularly like errant lansquenets. They say.«

»Oh, I can be as meek as a lamb.«

Jäcklein laughed. »You'd be the first lamb with claws and fangs.«

»Yet still pious.« Stadius got up and threw his tankard behind the counter where it clattered to the floor noisily. »Fill it up, girl. Or I'll fill you up.«

The gamblers pocketed their cards and left the small inn, protesting, grumbling, and smoking.

Nicolas looked out of the window to keep them from tampering with their cart. One of them pissed against the wheel, but Nicolas did not mind. He would have intervened only if the piss had hit their cargo.

»Are people behaving nicely?« he heard Jäcklein ask. »We should have installed a fougasse outside to protect our stuff. Click, bang, and over.«

»A mortar would have been pretty extreme.« Nicolas's gaze returned to the taproom and the much-notched bidenhänder resting against the wall next to him. It was his. In combat, he wore it on his back while wielding a halberd against cuirassiers and musketeers. Only when the enemy formation was close enough would he break from the tercio to plow through the ranks of pikemen and musketeers with his bidenhänder. The heavy blade cracked wooden poles, bones, and skulls alike.

In his head, he relived the cruel memories of their last battle. »Brandy, girl,« he quickly called. He had to fight those images or he would mope all day. Slowly he took the colorful beret from his ash blonde hair.

Every mercenary dealt with his memories in a unique way. Jäcklein resorted to jokes and mischief, Stadius to obscenity and constant brawls. To Nicolas, intoxication was soothing.

»Coming right up, sir.« The serving wench first brought fresh beer, setting it down carefully in front of Jäcklein to avoid getting too close to Stadius, then she added a bottle of bouse and brought plates of steaming stew consisting of greasy meat in porridge. »Enjoy your meal.«

With a lightning-quick movement of his hand, Stadius grabbed her left wrist. »Tell me, little one, what's your name? Wouldn't you like to see the world? I need somebody to stitch me up, cook for me, and look after my affairs while we are in the battlefield.«

»No, no. I like the world in Altona,« she stammered. Her gaze implored the other two mercenaries to help her. She had tucked her light brown hair under a greasy kerchief; an old scar marred her cheek. The girl was nervous. »My name is Osanna.«

»Eat now, Stats,« Nicolas ordered. »We will find some willing souls.«

»A pity, child. I would have liked you all right.« Staius let her go and started eating. »Have had worse,« he mumbled between the bites he wolfed down. This way of eating was a habit acquired in the field. No one could take from you what you had in your belly.

Jäcklein resumed the conversation. »So, we are going to Hamburg? Ask around for the next battle and hasten to find a crimper to recruit us. Maybe Joss von Cramm, the cutthroat, is in town. He always knows who needs capable warriors.« He ate slowly and chewed every mouthful more than twenty times. Food was more filling that way.

Nicolas nodded. »Let us make the money bags take us up to speed. The seaport knows where our pikes and blades are needed. The Danes can piss off, but the Swedes, they are trustworthy people. They don't betray their Protestants and the Union.« Ladling food into his mouth, he looked around. »How about your savings? Does one of you have enough for a musket? A pistol?«

»I'd be glad if I could afford having my harness repaired,« Staius replied, then he belched noisily.

»A musket would be nice! But not one of those with the dumb fuses. Their flying sparks keep burning my beard. I heard there's new ones again. With a matchlock like the wheellock, just less inconvenient.« Jäcklein's face lit up with delight. »I'd gladly exchange my pike for one of those.«

»Who would accept an old piece of iron on a wooden pole and give you a rifle for it?« Staius laughed at him. »We have it good, don't we?«

Nicolas heard the message loud and clear: They lacked money. His purse held ten lousy ducats, a few hellers, and various principalities' batzes and kreutzers that felt less heavy to him than they should have. He had heard that some nobles ordered their mints to secretly reduce the coins' amount of metal. Treachery was everywhere.

»Beggars cannot be choosers,« he said to the others. »As soon as we are in Hamburg, we will look for a proper battle. Even in Bohemia, for all I care. I don't mind walking.«

»Against the Catholics or against the Protestants?« Staius threw his wooden spoon at the girl. It clattered against the bar next to her. »Hey! Bring that back to me, together with another bowl full of stew and some beer.«

Osanna got to the task.

»My steel doesn't care whom it pierces.« Jäcklein had not even finished half of his stew. »I'd love to fight for Wallenstein. A pity that Mansfeld is dead. He was skilled at fighting and trickery. He got a hundred thousand thalers for not joining the battle at the White Mountain! What a fox!«

»Still, he is dead,« Nicolas mused. »Wallenstein. Why not? Yes, let us see if he is hiring. Otherwise, Tilly. Guard duty would also be a possibility. Or Bohemia. We could also set sail for the South Sea, where other countries fight their battles.« He scraped up the remains of food in his bowl while Staius was served a fresh one and some beer.

»Across the sea? No, not for a hundred thousand guilders! A witch told me I would die at sea. No, I'd rather not.« Jäcklein watched their leader and shook his spoon at him. »Tell me, what was that? A while ago?«

»I don't know what you are talking about.« Actually, Nicolas knew exactly.

»When we went to battle.« The small, wiry man scratched a line into the roughly hewn tabletop with the round side of his spoon. »You cut a swath through the enemy's entire tercio as if the Devil himself was on your heels.«

»But you were not wounded at all.« Staius banged his chest. »Admit it. You're carrying a writ of protection. I have one, too. Always helpful.«

Nicolas only dimly remembered it. He had frenzied in the heat of the battle, like one of those berserkers the Romans used to talk about. Like a demon unleashed, he had attacked his enemies. He did not fully remember any of it. In his head, he relived the cruel memories of their last battle. »Brandy, girl,« he quickly called. He had to fight those images, or he would mope all day.

»The reaper himself, Nicolas. I'd never seen you that way before, not in all these years.« Jäcklein did not sound worried. »You should ask for a larger pay for yourself.«

»For all of us,« Staius interjected at once. »Because, never forget, we follow him.« His mien turned conspiratorial. »Did you ever notice that some of the men we beheaded stank awfully? Like ... the dead?«

»They were dead.« Nicolas remembered this detail vividly.

»They tore the dead from their graves and imbued them with unholy life,« Jäcklein confirmed. »Upon my soul! This must be the resurrection everyone is talking about. I envisioned it differently. We are not in paradise, gentlemen!«

The three mercenaries laughed.

»How does that work?« Status pushed back his second empty bowl and twirled the tips of his mustache into shape. »How do you resurrect corpses? That can't be a Christian spell.«

»I have heard that it's possible to command victims of the plague if you cut out their tongues.« Jäcklein shrugged. »Or the men just didn't know that they were dead and fulfilled their duty.«

»Plague.« Nicolas thought of the many marked houses in Altona where the Black Death had wreaked — or was still wreaking — havoc.

»The villages of the dead,« said a soft female voice next to them. The mercenaries turned in astonishment, and Osanna showed them a leaflet. »Some people talk about them. Areas full of malice where darkness and demons reign — and that's only the beginning.«

Jäcklein looked at the stained piece of paper, which had passed through many hands. »Ah. Penned by a priest,« he said. »Who else would write such a thing?«

»Demons,« Status repeated. He shuddered and crossed himself. He could not read the leaflet, but the invitations were enough to understand what it was about. He looked at Osanna. »Villages full of dead people?«

»Yes, sir. They ... the corpses roam around, some of them attack the living, others sign up for the army, they say.«

»For money?« Jäcklein laughed. »Zounds! What do these walking dead eat and drink?«

»The living. That is their greatest motivation. The freshly fallen belong to them, too.« Osanna carried the empty bowls back to the bar.

»Someone fart me in the face,« Status said after a brief silence. »Now the little woman has me scared. God, she is a sly dog!« He laughed out loud.

Loud but hollow. The sound did not chase away his discomfort.

Nicolas looked at Jäcklein and saw that he was worried, too.

It was not the first time they met weirdness on their way through the realms, principalities, and cities. Nicolas clearly remembered the crazed itinerant preacher in motley garb who was followed by a flock of children with skin painted green. He had called out to them that the Dark Lands, where the thralldom of humankind originated, were spreading. Where demons, witches, wizards, and the beasts of darkness ruled. Then he had wandered on. In one of the next cities they reached they had heard that the madman had been incarcerated for heresy. He had abducted the children.

»The Dark Lands,« Nicolas quietly said. The term was stuck in his head.

They had seen demons fight, specters on fiery horses or bat-winged creatures that appeared under cover of gun smoke and turmoil. Nicolas, Status, and Jäcklein, however, had perceived them. Just like the red eyes of a colonel who had bared his fangs before attacking his enemies with a snarl.

»We urgently need money,« Nicolas told his friends. »For larger weapons.«

»Yes, and for writs of protection.« Again, Status banged his chest, making the tips of his mustache quiver. »I will also buy a painted amulet of St. Christopher and of St. Jude. To wear around my neck.«

»St. Jude?« Jäcklein laughed. »Oh dear, do I have to watch my back in battle from now on, man?«

»He was an assassin. Fought with a sickle. He will protect me just right.« Status pointed at the leaflet about the villages of the dead. »I'd better have his name carved into my skin and across my heart, so I won't lose his succor.«

The Rogue Wave's door opened, and a giant silhouette filled the doorframe before bowing down to step inside. Only after the newcomer had crossed the threshold was he able to stand at his full height. He was more than two steps tall.

»Good day,« he said in a friendly manner, looking around. He wore shirt and pants, his shoes were mended, and on his back he carried a sack that hung over the threadbare shepherd's coat that protected him from the cold.

All conversations died down. Everyone stared at the new guest.

»Shit me in the boots,« Status exclaimed. »That guy is not even fifteen, but tall and broad like a little giant.«

»He has eaten his siblings and then his parents,« Jäcklein said with conviction, stuffing his pipe. »For the first time I see a man who could easily take you on, Nicolas.«

»He is not even a man.«

»Ah, you must be the owners of the cart with pikes and the tents.« With two steps of his long legs, the juvenile guest reached the mercenaries' table. »I am Moritz Mühler, from the beautiful city of Bremen. I want to become proficient at war craft. Will you take me in and teach me? I will give you half of my pay for it.«

»Heaven must have sent you,« Status muttered in fascination.

»Or Hell,« Jäcklein added as he stuffed some more tobacco into his pipe.

Nicolas gestured to the other two men in turn and briefly introduced his friends and himself. »How old are you, Moritz Mühler?«

»Fifteen, sir.«

»Forget the sir,« he said in a friendly way. »Why would you like to be a lansquenet?«

»I want to make money. Experience things. Be a war hero.« The towering lad wore a smile that seemed the width of his chest. He quickly took off his cap, and black locks tumbled to his shoulders. »I couldn't stand it at home anymore. Too placid for my taste.«

»Placid!« Jäcklein blurted. »Hell's bells! He wants to exchange placidity for hewing and stabbing.«

Moritz simply laughed along. It was the most friendly laugh that Nicolas had ever heard his life. On the battlefield, the boy would soon lose it. It was still unclear whether he was dim or simply a reckless fellow who didn't think about death.

»What have you done before, Moritz Mühler?«

»I was a logger. But the trees did not try to avoid my blows. That is too boring for me.«

Status snorted his beer across the table. »Holy Moses, we need this fellow! He will make a joke even on the most awful of days.«

»I wasn't joking. I was serious.« Moritz looked imploringly at the men in turn. »Take me with you. I want to be a lansquenet!«

»Have you ever fought before,« Nicolas asked, although he already knew the answer.

»Only against spruces and firs. A few oaks will probably have been amongst my victims, too,« Moritz told him with a grin. »Oh, yes, I have! I threw flour bags until they didn't know what hit them.«

»He's too good for the carnage.« Jäcklein raised his pipe, and the serving wench brought him a small splint. »Stay away from the war. You are too nice, child. Find yourself another craft, take a pretty wife like this flower of the bar, and have some children.« He lighted the tobacco and puffed quickly.

»I still can do that. As a lansquenet.« Moritz remained adamant.

»Take the bidenhänder, boy.« Nicolas handed him the heavy blade. »Now show us your strength.«

»Will you take me if I smash through the table?« The boy's brown eyes glittered.

»Agreed,« Status said without hesitation. »I will take him if none of you wants to teach him.«

»You heard the man. If you manage this blow, you will be one of us.« Nicolas put on his beret. Jäcklein abstained and kept puffing full of discontent. To be on the safe side, the three mercenaries took their mugs from the table.

Moritz didn't even take a big swing but wielded the bidenhänder with one hand as if it were no heavier than a cane.

The blade hit the wood and smashed the thick wooden slab of the table in half. But Moritz did not stop at that. Cockily, he grabbed one half and held it upright with his powerful left hand to easily split it in half again.

The three mercenaries had jumped to their feet, the guests of the inn shouted in surprise and excitement. They had seen nothing like this before in Altona.

»Looks like I'm in,« Moritz said. He tried to give the bidenhänder back to Nicolas.

»Keep it as a gift,« the mercenary leader said, and he shook Moritz's hand. »Welcome, Moritz Mühler.« He winked at the terrified Osanna. »I will pay for the damage.«

»By my immortal soul! You can slice up a cuirassier, complete with his horse! Soon they will be calling you the man splitter,« Jäcklein said. »Unless a musket bullet strikes you down before.« He shook the giant's hand, too, and Statius followed suit.

»That won't happen,« Moritz replied offhandedly.

A boy entered the taproom and approached the conspicuous group at once. His shirt and pants were threadbare, and he wore woven willow twigs instead of shoes to protect his feet against stones. »Here, an invitation,« he crowed. He held out a folded and sealed letter to them.

»For us?« Jäcklein looked around. »Are you sure, boy?«

»How could I mistake your cart and garb?« the boy replied.

»Do not ask,« Statius hissed. »That smells of money. Why should we care if it was originally addressed to another bunch?«

»Thanks, little one.« Nicolas took the letter. There were no names on the letter. Its exterior said only *To the lansquenets in Altona*.

He shared Statius's opinion: They needed money. They were lansquenets. In Altona. If any other lansquenets were around and they stole a job from them, that was providence.

»You owe me a kreutzer,« the boy stated and sniffled. »That's what I was promised.«

»Statius, pay him,« Nicolas ordered.

»Why me?«

»Because you will receive half of Moritz's pay soon. You will be the richest among us.« He cracked the seal. As he perused the lines, he grinned broadly. »That sounds like fat pay, gentlemen.«

Statius threw the messenger a kreutzer and lightly hit the back of his head to chase him away. With a curse, the boy ran out.

»So who needs our blades? A lovely damsel in distress?« Jäcklein stood on his tiptoes and glanced at the paper. Unlike Statius, he could read. »Or a king?«

»Even better. Someone who owns tons of coins.«

Nicolas held up the missive so his friends could see the seal that half-covered the signature. »The West India Company.«

»I will devastate Bavaria and burn it to the ground so that the marauding Imperial soldiery will drain itself there.«

— Gustav Adolf, King of Sweden, spring of 1632