

A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
ADMIRAL ANDREA DORIA

THE
PIRATE PRINCE
— OF —
GENOA

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PROJECT

Introduction

The nightmares came in droves, always with the same consistency and unsettling cruelty. After nearly twenty years as a soldier, and another forty at the helm of the Republic of Genoa's naval fleet, Admiral Andrea Doria endured each horrid dream as if it were just another military adventure, seeing it to its ungodly end, never stirring, never bolting up from a dead sleep to shake off the myriad sea monsters, tempests, and evil spirits invading his subconscious. Serving as a *condottiero*, or mercenary captain, to emperors, kings, and popes for most of his eighty-one years of life had inured him to the images of brutality that attacked him in his sleep. They rarely frightened him, incessant as they were, and the torrents of blood inhabiting nearly every frame of these nightly episodes of terror had long ago lost their shock value. He'd seen so much blood seeping into the floorboards of ships, or spurting from the severed limbs of his men in battle, that shadowy visions of barbarity, horrific as they were, failed to have any effect on him. The demons that haunted him in the dead of night couldn't hold a candle to the brutality he witnessed and personally suffered during combat in the name of independence for his beloved homeland.

One particular dream, however, never failed to send shivers down Andrea's spine: the faded image of an endless blue sky looming over a tranquil sea of blood. No movement stirred within it. No sound permeated its murky boundaries. Nothing of consequence ever happened. What stood out, and terrified the admiral to his core, was its boundless expanse of emptiness. Time stood still. Nothing but emotions existed in this world: sorrow, fear, and regret. Nothing within the contents of this vision could distract him from experiencing those emotions completely and facing the truths they would ultimately reveal. They were his true enemies and eternal nemeses. He'd spent a lifetime trying to keep them in check in order to maintain appearances in society, or to affect a stoic demeanor for the soldiers and sailors under his command. *Such emotions should be stifled at all costs, he always told himself, for reasons of decorum, or simple peace of mind.* They required introspection, or rather they imposed it, which bothered him. He certainly wasn't averse to long periods of contemplation or self-reflection; they were essential tools for leaders wishing to hatch new political schemes or deliberate battle strategies. But in sixteenth-century Italy, the age of *homo faber*, where men were meant to craft their own destinies, such indulgences were reserved for the intelligentsia and holy men of the Catholic Church.

The mere sight of placid skies and blood-drenched waters was somehow able to do what nightmarish visions of brutal warfare never could: They roused a seasoned warrior from the gaping depths of unconsciousness. No level of fatigue, exhaustion, or inebriation could quell the pain triggered by these simple

but utterly relentless images. Try as he might, Andrea couldn't possibly sleep through such dreams.

He woke up the moment those very images reared their mighty heads, and as the world racked into focus, all emotional discomfort gave way to the physical pain he felt in his eighty-one-year-old body. Andrea had always maintained an exceptionally strong, athletic constitution; he was lean and muscular in aspect, unusually agile for a man six feet two inches tall, and rarely given to fatigue. But the long days, weeks, and even months he'd survived at sea steeped in the heavy salt air of the Mediterranean had eaten away at his bones and rusted his joints to the point of no return. The pangs of arthritis and his debilitating gout blocked nearly all forward movement. He tried shuffling a bit, propping his head on the goose-feather pillows stacked against his bed's massive headboard, but it gave him precious little comfort. It wasn't until an electrical charge of misery shot down his spinal cord to the tips of his toes that a wry smile finally managed to crease his lips.

"I'm still alive," he mumbled.

Chapter One

THE AFTERNOON OF JANUARY 2, 1547

Only when Andrea wiped the sleep from his eyes did he notice a woman standing at the foot of his elaborately draped canopy. She seemed a million miles away at first, hidden by some distant impenetrable fog, but her sharp topaz eyes called to him like a beacon in the night. That same pair of eyes had melted his young heart nearly sixty years ago after he'd caught a glimpse of her in the family chapel of San Matteo during Sunday mass. The woman rounded the bed and pulled in closer. Andrea said nothing. She, too, remained silent as she leaned in to feel his forehead with the back of her hand.

“Are you in any mood to entertain guests?” Peretta asked.

Andrea grunted. He always woke up a bit groggy after his afternoon nap. She waited a few seconds longer, knowing he'd respond to her question sooner or later.

He sighed. “My God, Peretta, must I really? I can barely bend a finger without wanting to scream bloody hell.”

He and Peretta were coevals, both distinguished members of Genoa's noble class. Despite having been struck by love's

thunderbolt all those many years ago, Andrea didn't get around to asking for her hand in marriage until an entire generation later; he was sixty-one at the time. She was slightly younger, but still spry and a force to be reckoned with. Marriage had never quite appealed to Andrea. His thirst for independence and adventure was legendary, and his early maritime career kept him busy and far from Genoese shores for months at a time. It would be no exaggeration to say that the deck of his private galley, the *Capitana*, felt more like home than anywhere else. And, of course, his natural aversion to domestication continually kept him from the altar as well. Yet the underlying reason behind the protracted delay of their marriage was quite simple: Peretta was already married. In fact, she was betrothed by the age of ten to a respected nobleman. She tied the knot several years later, and subsequently gave birth to four children before her husband died suddenly in 1516. She remained a widow for eleven years after that, finally joining Andrea in holy matrimony in 1527.

"Your fever has passed," she said as she gathered the thick linens of Dutch cotton neatly around him to stave off the chill in the room.

"Whom have you invited this time?" he asked flatly.

Peretta's frown was quite familiar to Andrea. He may have been the most revered military man on the European continent, not to mention an astute political strategist of some repute, but Peretta had set the record straight long ago that she was neither a member of his ship's crew nor a low-level government official under his authority, and was to be treated with the deference her family name demanded.

“I’ve invited no one,” she retorted. “If you can think back to as far as yesterday, you will recall that it was you who issued invitations to half of Genoa to visit us this afternoon. Heaven forbid anyone should think our mighty *pater patriae* was losing his legendary vigor,” she added.

Andrea could not argue with that last statement, despite her sarcasm. He always did all he could to live up to the title of “father of the homeland,” an honor bestowed on him twenty years earlier after leading Genoese forces against the French to give rise to the independent Republic of Genoa.

“We’ve brought in the new year with friends and family as far back as I can remember,” Andrea shot back.

“Ambassadors, cardinals, diplomats, and spies are not friends,” she calmly stated. “Now please answer me—do you feel you are in any condition to face the world?”

“Have you ever known me to drop my guard?” he countered without missing a beat.

Peretta burst out laughing. This couldn’t be more true. Over the years, Andrea had become quite the master of dissimulation. Just yesterday, at the Doria family’s annual New Year’s Day banquet, he masterfully put all his charm, exuberance, and conviviality on full display despite the debilitating pangs of gout continually gnawing at him, and the inflammation of his joints rendering movement nearly impossible. Under no circumstances would he dare exhibit signs of weakness and thus jeopardize his position of respect and authority in the community or on the political stage. He knew all too well the consequences of exposing frailty of any kind. Genoa was no different than any

other city-state inhabiting the Italian peninsula during those tumultuous years. Political intrigue, revolt, conspiracy, usurpation of power, and assassination awaited the unprepared and inattentive.

“You’ve made self-control your life’s work,” she quipped. “That is common knowledge.”

“You say that as if it were a defect,” he snapped back. “How can a leader possibly claim dominion over his men, and I daresay over world events, if he exacts no control over his own mind and body?”

“You hold your cards close to your chest, this is true, but I remember quite well that in your youth—oh so many, many years ago, before all this self-restraint and sanity—you were terribly insolent and even reckless,” she uttered with a smile.

“I believe you meant to say ‘insistent and fearless,’” he countered, hardly bothering to conceal a grin. “And, may I add, that was to ensure absolute obedience from my men as well as deference from my enemies.”

Peretta matched Andrea’s grin with one of her own. “It was precisely your fearlessness that drew me to you back then,” she whispered, “and your levelheadedness that draws me to you now.” She pulled in closer to give him a tender kiss on the forehead.

Andrea found it impossible to do anything but smile in such situations. Peretta’s talent for disarming him with a few choice words both frustrated and completely beguiled him. His unruffled composure while in the heat of battle or during tense negotiations with pirates, popes, and kings had become

almost mythical over the years, but with Peretta, and quite frankly with all women, he simply lacked the wherewithal to compete. Truth be told, Peretta's character differed little from her husband's, which more than likely threw him for a loop. He surrendered to her every time. She was a classic Ligurian noblewoman, austere with just enough elegance to lend an air of congeniality and warmth to her overall bearing. The Prince's Palace, as their sumptuous residence was called, fell into good hands each time Andrea sailed off to police the high seas in defense of Spain, Genoa's protector, and his wife's parsimonious distribution of finances proved exemplary. Peretta hailed, after all, from one of the oldest and most esteemed families in Genoa, the Usodimare. She was granddaughter to Pope Innocent VIII of the Cybo dynasty, also from Genoa, who occupied the Vatican during Andrea's early military career. It was there, in fact, that Andrea and Peretta formally met.

Andrea's eyes shifted to the immense fireplace that covered a good portion of the far wall. Its black limestone facade, mined from the Promontorio quarry—an area just above Genoa's Lanterna, the world's tallest and most imposing lighthouse at the time—cast a solemn aura over what would have otherwise been a rather accommodating and hospitable chamber. The embers from the previous evening's fire still sparkled within its massive belly, but did little to fend off the draft that whisked through the room and stiffened Andrea's aching joints. Intuiting her husband's thoughts, Peretta tucked the lambswool blanket under his perpetually long, ruffled beard, and secured it firmly around the contours of his neck and shoulders.

Andrea's eyes eased shut as he savored the tenderness of the moment, so distant from the rigors he weathered at sea. He'd been so superhumanly resilient his whole life that everyone began to think he'd live forever. But the last few years had taken their toll. Bedridden days like these came more often and with greater ferocity. Although Andrea never put it into words, Peretta could glean from the gentle smile that creased his lips that he treasured the succor she so liberally offered in times like these.

Andrea finally opened his eyes, then breathed deeply as if trying to summon the willpower to face the onslaught of scheduled guests. Before he could even raise his head from the pillow, Peretta pressed him back down with the full force of her outstretched hands.

"You're not going anywhere," she said. "I've taken the liberty to cut the number of visitors to an intimate few. They'll come directly into your chamber here."

"Include Governor Gonzaga and Ambassador Figueroa in that list," Andrea was quick to add. "With the election of the new doge planned for the day after tomorrow, I'm dying to hear what rumors are being bandied about."

Keeping a finger on the pulse of Spain's agents and delegates on the peninsula helped Andrea stay continually ahead of the game, especially when it came to choosing future government officials. Ferrante Gonzaga's allegiance to Spain dated back to his youth in Mantua, first as a page in the service of Charles V, future Holy Roman Emperor, then as an officer participating in the devastating Sack of Rome, and finally as Viceroy of Sicily before assuming his current position as the governor of the

Duchy of Milan, Genoa's immediate neighbor to the north. As was the case for the duchy under previous rulers, Gonzaga had a friendship with the Republic of Genoa that ran hot and cold. Immediately upon meeting Gonzaga for the first time, Andrea assessed him as being sly and ambitious enough to keep as a confidant, but not enough to trust completely.

Don Gómez Suárez de Figueroa y Córdoba, on the other hand, enjoyed Andrea's absolute confidence. As Charles V's ambassador, Figueroa resided in Genoa on a permanent basis. His penchant for social interaction, whether it was cavorting with spies or the city's numerous noble families, provided him with an inside track on any and all happenings of political import.

Both men visited Andrea regularly and shared their intelligence without reserve. Although Andrea chose not to occupy any formal position within the government other than city magistrate, he held uncontested sway over the city's affairs. Heads of state and diplomats from all over Europe, as well as Ottoman emperors and Barbary pirates, channeled their negotiations with the Republic through one single individual, Admiral Andrea Doria, and officials of the Genoese government would have it no other way.

"Both men have promised a short visit," said Peretta as she hurried over to attend to a knock at the chamber door.

The admiral sat up in his bed. "Let us pray that is not them already!" he cried out as he propped the pillows higher against the headboard to support his aching back.

It took every ounce of strength he could muster to withstand

the pain shooting through each one of the twenty-eight swollen joints in his aging hands. It didn't take long, however, for the pangs to subside when he saw who came running in.

"*Buongiorno, Mesiavo!*" cried little Giovannandrea in his nasal Genoese dialect.

For a boy of eight, Giovannandrea already commanded the respect of someone three times his age. His charm was contagious, his intelligence peerless, and his wit razor-sharp. Andrea simply adored him. Rather than use the more accurate and appropriate term *barba*, the Genoese word for "uncle," the boy always referred to Andrea as his *mesiavo*, "grandfather," which endeared him to Andrea even more.

When Giovannandrea's father, Giannettino Doria, pranced in right behind him, Andrea's face lit up even brighter. Since Andrea had gone a lifetime without producing heirs of his own, he came to view Giannettino as a son. Seeing two generations of Dorias poised to carry on his legacy filled him with unspeakable joy. Neither a blindly religious man nor an overtly secular one, Andrea was a product of his times. He put limited stock in the idea of an afterlife and held firmly to the notion that immortality could best be savored in this world. Therefore, finding a proper and sustainable line of succession had become a near fixation. *What is the sense of working your entire life in the pursuit of fortune*, he told himself, *struggling endlessly for a modicum of influence and status, or risking your life for the sake of freedom and the privilege of living another day, if everything dies with you?*

"Come here, little one!" Andrea shouted, his arms

outstretched, ready to catch young Giovannandrea as he leaped onto the bed. Andrea then smothered the boy with kisses.

Giannettino approached Peretta first. “He couldn’t wait to see his favorite uncle and aunt,” he whispered as he pecked her on the cheek.

Despite his sweet words, Peretta struggled to offer a smile. The tension between them had been brewing ever since Giannettino had risen to the level of lieutenant and captain of his own squadron of galleys in Genoa’s fleet, placing him first in line as Andrea’s heir apparent and, by extension, the most powerful man in the Genoese Republic. These were honors Peretta felt should have gone to her own son, Marc’Antonio del Carretto. Both men were offshoots of the same generation, and at their mental and physical prime: Giannettino, born in 1510, would soon turn thirty-seven, while Marc’Antonio was just a few years younger. It was long established that Marc’Antonio would inherit the title of Prince of Melfi, an honor bestowed on Andrea after his marriage to Peretta, but he had since fallen into disfavor with the Doria family, and with Andrea in particular. Giannettino’s bold leadership qualities and stunning military victories, on the other hand, spoke directly to the type of future Andrea had envisioned for himself and the city of Genoa.

“Welcome, Giannettino, my dear,” Peretta replied in a voice free of emotion. “Have a seat, won’t you?”

“Not before greeting our dear Prince,” he said as he crossed the room.

On a personal level, Giannettino lacked Andrea’s

graciousness. He was simultaneously admired and reviled by the general populace. His arrogance, penchant for cruelty, and aggressiveness might have had their advantages on the battlefield, but in the back rooms of government where the muted violence of intrigue replaced the sheer honesty of cold steel, he had much to learn. The tufts of auburn curls that framed the soft, boyish features of his face gave him an almost angelic mien, which, combined with his bad-boy persona, rendered him hopelessly alluring to the opposite sex, and only added to his notorious reputation as a womanizer.

Andrea, of course, knew all this about him and more; he'd undoubtedly assessed all of Giannettino's pros and cons a thousand times before dubbing him Genoa's next Prince. Sure, he was presumptuous, authoritarian, and opinionated, all traits that tended to draw more detractors than admirers, but his instincts as a naval officer were uncanny. As far as Andrea was concerned, Giannettino had every right to project pride and self-confidence, as overbearing as it may have been at times, because as a leader of men and a military strategist, he'd earned it tenfold. In a mercantile society like Genoa where pragmatism, productivity, and meritocracy often transcended the loftier Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love, Andrea had little doubt that Giannettino would gain the acceptance of the Genoese people for the simple reason that he was the best man for the job.

By now Andrea had thrown the blankets aside and was sitting up in bed.

"Have you eaten a *merenda*?" he asked little Giovannandrea, referring to Genoa's traditional midafternoon snack. Before the

child could respond, Andrea signaled to Peretta. “Have Tonino bring the *canestrelli!*” he cried out. “Can’t you see he’s a growing boy?”

“Which boy are you speaking of?” Peretta quipped, knowing full well her husband couldn’t resist a dessert or two himself.

Andrea concealed a smile and pretended not to hear her, turning his attention instead to Giovannandrea, who had already hopped onto his knee. As a rule, Andrea’s dietary needs were simple. He’d always shied away from elaborate foods, fatty cuisines of any sort, and desserts in particular. But it seemed that the older he got, the more he enjoyed a treat now and then, especially *canestrelli*, the sweet shortbread cookies that graced the dinner table of every tried-and-true Genoese family during the Christmas season. Peretta liked to joke that he preferred *canestrelli* over other holiday sweets because their classic six-cornered shape was featured prominently on the *genovino d’oro*, a local currency of the Middle Ages, and Andrea found it hard to disagree.

“Come, Giovannandrea, shall we?” Peretta said, taking the boy by the hand. “Let us fetch the *canestrelli* ourselves and leave the men to their business.”

She didn’t need to say another word. Giovannandrea leaped off Andrea’s knee and hurried out the door, dragging Peretta behind him.

Andrea gestured toward a finely upholstered X-shaped chair that stood to one side of the canopy. Giannettino picked it up and slid it in his direction. He was careful not to crease his stylish brocade doublet or ruffle his pleated breeches as he sat down.

“You are looking more and more like your father,” said Andrea, clearly happy to be alone with him.

Andrea and Giannettino’s father were first cousins, and bound by an unusually strong family connection. While at sea, or in the company of officers, politicians, and clergymen, Giannettino would refer to Andrea as his Admiral or Prince, but in the sanctuary of the Doria palace, outside the western walls of the city, Andrea was simply his *caro barba*, dear uncle.

“You look better today,” said Giannettino.

“If you mean well rested, you speak the truth,” said Andrea, shaking his head in dismay. “I’ve done nothing but sleep.”

He stood up slowly, stretching his legs and straightening his back oh-so gingerly to avoid the shooting pains that would inevitably follow. As he reached for his blue velvet house coat hanging on a nearby rack, Giannettino jumped to his feet to lend a hand. Eager to prove he still possessed a spark of his old athletic self, Andrea sprang forward to grab it first.

“So, tell me, what has Genoa dared to do in my absence?” Andrea growled as he handed the coat to Giannettino to help him put it on. “And before you answer, don’t think I don’t know you held back and let me get this silly coat before you did. I appreciate the gesture, but I would prefer you didn’t patronize your old, decrepit uncle. It makes me soft, and besides, I’d like to think I’ve got a few years left in me.”

“I suggest you let Ambassador Figueroa and that snake Gonzaga know just how healthy you are,” Giannettino was quick to add. “They’re in the garden below waiting to see you.”

“No doubt wondering if I’m still breathing,” Andrea snarled.

“*Hoping* you’re still breathing is more like it,” Giannettino said, doing little to hide a smirk. “Nothing would trouble them more than having to defer to me on future matters of importance.”

“Figueroa is your grappling hook to Emperor Charles,” Andrea shot back. “Keep him close. And as for Gonzaga, he is no different from any other ruler on this godforsaken peninsula. His eyes are bigger than his stomach, but he is a friend of the family and, for now, a cherished ally of the Republic.”

Exchanges of this tone and direction took place between these two men on a continual basis. No aspect of Giannettino’s personality or maritime skills would go unaddressed. As far as Andrea was concerned, molding a successful heir and future leader capable of juggling all the duties, powers, and responsibilities needed to keep Genoa free and independent required constant vigilance. The trick, he thought, lay in finding a diamond in the rough early in the process, and polishing it day in and day out until it sparkled for all to see. He usually limited his candidates to young members of the Doria family, venturing outside the clan every so often as he did with his stepson, Marc’Antonio, who unfortunately failed to meet his standards. Even close cousins who led their own squadrons of galleys and rose to prominence under Andrea’s tutelage were denied, for one reason or another, the distinction of rising to the level of Andrea’s direct successor. Therefore, since no one else matched Giannettino’s natural flair for the role, and time was of the essence, Andrea pounded him

hard like a swordsmith honing a high carbon blade for battle. But as Andrea soon found out, Giannettino was too much like him to take it lying down; the two men sparred incessantly.

“The minute he sees his chance, Gonzaga will make his move on us,” warned Giannettino. “He would like nothing more than to return to the days when Genoa answered to Milan’s whims.”

The abrupt entrance of Tonino, Andrea’s personal waiter, stifled Andrea’s response.

“Please welcome Ambassador Gómez Suárez de Figueroa y Córdoba of Spain and Ferrante Gonzaga, governor of the Duchy of Milan,” Tonino announced with some gravity.

Before either of the two visitors could set foot in the room, little Giovannandrea came running in, hauling a salver of canestrelli covered with finely granulated sugar and setting it on a short marble-top table by the bed. Andrea wasted no time reaching for one and sneaking a bite. He was careful to wipe the powdery white sugar from his lips as he and Giannettino stood up to greet their guests.

“Do come in,” Andrea said, waving them over to the bed.

Gonzaga and Figueroa took a moment to stop at the threshold and nod respectfully before entering. In that instant, Tonino grabbed two straight-backed chairs by the fireplace and slid them over to the bed. Then, with a mild flourish of the hand and a reverential bow, he invited them to take a seat, which they promptly did. Little Giovannandrea assumed his usual spot on Andrea’s knee.

“Bring the Madeira Malvasia for our visitors, Tonino,” said

Andrea. "I can think of no finer wine to complement the lovely biscuits our dear Giovannandrea has brought us."

"Immediately, my Prince," replied Tonino.

"And do prepare a fire upon your return," Andrea added, indicating the meager embers smoldering in the fireplace.

Tonino nodded in the affirmative as he backed out of the room.

"So wonderful to see you," said Figueroa, turning to address Giannettino as well.

Ferrante Gonzaga's greeting was equally gracious. Andrea's eyes never left their gaze, which served to help them feel welcome at first, but also produced the unfortunate result of having the four men sit, just staring at each other, for entirely too long. The awkwardness of the moment didn't seem to affect little Giovannandrea, however, who continued to munch on the canestrelli unimpeded.

"What can you tell me about our next doge?" Andrea finally asked, cutting right to the heart of the matter. "If there are any obstacles to install the man I want, I must know now."

"The name Benedetto Gentile Pevere is not sitting well with everyone," Gonzaga replied after a moment's hesitation.

"And why is that?" Andrea inquired, a bit surprised.

"For one, he has held no prior position with the Republic," Figueroa chimed in.

"And his name appears quite late on the *Libro d'oro della nobiltà italiana*," added Gonzaga, referring to the city's register of noble families, and clearly meant to cast aspersions on the newer class of nobles, mostly merchants and artisans, known as *popolari*,

of which Pevere was a member. The popolari had gained access to the registry through reforms Andrea had put in place twenty years earlier, elevating them to the same rank and status as the older feudal families such as the Grimaldi, Spinola, Fieschi, and, of course, the Doria themselves.

“I can only share your predilection for Genoà’s well-established nobility up to a certain point, gentlemen,” Andrea said sharply. “Is he a man with whom I can reason on matters of import? This is what I ask myself, and my answer is a resounding *yes*.”

“His perceived partiality for the French should give you pause,” said Gonzaga, knowing full well that Andrea’s loyalty to the Spanish was unwavering.

Giannettino shifted impatiently in his seat. “He has proven to be a good servant of His Majesty in Spain, has he not?” he said in a tone sufficiently masking his mounting anger.

“This is true,” said Figueroa, “but his affinity for the Fieschi raises some concerns.”

“This notion that certain members of the Fieschi family side with France is an exaggeration,” Andrea added, his eyes boring right through his two guests. “The Fieschi are loyal friends and patriots.”

Figueroa and Gonzaga exchanged looks, each reluctant to utter the next word. Andrea decided to simply wait for a reply rather than pound his message home. He was a tolerant man, though being lectured by two outsiders, one a Spanish nobleman of twenty-seven and the other a haughty Mantuan, tested his patience. But as always, he maintained his composure, which,

of course, yielded the intended effect of increasing the pressure on his visitors. The two men continued to steal sideward glances and squirm in their chairs just enough to telegraph their growing anxiety. *What the devil is going on?* thought Andrea. Even little Giovannandrea picked up on the mood and stopped chomping on his cookies. Giannettino leaned forward as if to say something, but Andrea halted him with a glare. Andrea had lured many an enemy into his traps utilizing the same maneuver. The waiting game had officially begun.

Ambassador Figueroa spoke first. "I am always grateful for your warmth and hospitality, dear Prince, and it pleases me greatly to speak with you on issues of political import, but I am afraid this is not the matter that compels us here today."

The ambassador stopped there, deferring to the governor of Milan to elaborate. Gonzaga cleared his throat and adjusted the starched lace ruff around his neck to buy some time.

Now it was Andrea's turn to trade glances with his dear nephew. Once again, he gestured to Giannettino to hold his tongue. Andrea's attention then shifted to Gonzaga, while keeping Figueroa neatly within his sights. Andrea's ability to orchestrate events with a slight tilt of the head, or a routine hand motion, was on full display. Gonzaga's time in the spotlight had come whether he liked it or not.

"Galleys bringing armed soldiers have been entering the harbor of late," Gonzaga began, "many of whom have been spotted in the palace at Via Lata."

Andrea remained unfazed. Giannettino, however, was quick to jump in.

“And why do you suppose Gian Luigi Fieschi would welcome these men into his residence at Via Lata?” he asked.

All eyes focused back on Gonzaga, who by now was eager to lay it all on the line. He took a deep breath, and then, careful not draw little Giovannandrea’s attention, leaned in to whisper in Andrea’s ear: “We believe your life is in peril, dear Prince, as well as the very future of the Genoese Republic.”