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Ashes Over Ragusa

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Introduction

On the stone lip of the Adriatic, where gulls carve their names into the wind and the city walls drink salt from the morning air, a thin republic holds its breath.

Ragusa—merchant, mediator, and survivor—keeps its ledgers with one hand while steadying a trembling lamp with the other. East and west argue above it like twin storms, Ottoman and Venetian banners flashing in lightning that never seems to spend itself. Between those weather systems a young scribe copies lives into margins, binding them with twine, with wax, with hope.

This is a story of ink and ash. Ink for the promises men make when their voices won't carry across the water; ash for what remains after cannon, rumor, and hunger have done their work. It begins with a manuscript folded into a bolt of wool and carried through a checkpoint at dusk. Smuggled pages, Byzantine script slanting like a flight of starlings, offer meanings that may be faith, or law, or leverage. In Ragusa, meaning can be traded like pepper or pearls. When meanings tilt, so do allegiances.

Our scribe, who has learned to weigh every word like coin, finds himself torn between alphabet and oath, between a city's need for neutrality and the private pull of love and grief. He is asked to be a witness and a weapon. Along the Stradun, in the cool nave of Saint Blaise, under the lintels of Jewish and Greek shops, he becomes a courier of confidences. He is present when the quarantine bells toll and refugees crowd the lazaretto, when ships heave into the roads with patched sails and whispering holds. He learns that mercy, too, has tariffs and that a favor recorded in the city archive can be as binding as a chain around a galley bench.

Beyond the walls, the Dalmatian coast bristles with fortresses and coves where oars bite the water at night. Envoys exchange compliments that taste of iron, corsairs eye plunder through rosaries and prayer beads, and news travels faster than reason. Each embassy speaks a language that is only partly words. Our scribe learns to translate gestures: the way a ring is turned, a sleeve arranged, a gaze allowed to drift toward the sea. He learns that documents can be forged but hunger cannot, and that every pact costs someone a harbor, a cottage, a child.

This book keeps company with those who survive by listening. It attends to the archivist who threads silk through a broken binding, the midwife who recognizes a fever from the sound of a cough in the alley, the porter who knows which casks breathe perfume and which breathe danger. It travels by mule track and lantern boat, between chancery and battlefield, between the measured quiet of a reading room and the ragged thunder of a breach in a wall. It believes that small choices—when to speak, whom to shelter, what to omit when copying—rearrange the fates of cities.

While cannon smoke marks the obvious hours, the secret durations live in notebooks, margins, and the pauses between formal greetings. The manuscript at the heart of this chronicle does not merely contain a theology or a history; it is an argument about belonging, a palimpsest of treaties and prayers, a set of names that, if spoken together, might alter the balance of tribute and trade. To hold it is to feel the city's pulse. To read it aloud is to ask who has the right to claim safety, and at what price.

Ashes Over Ragusa does not pretend that borders are lines. They are tides—advancing, retreating, leaving behind driftwood and relics, graves and gardens. In following a scribe through siege and parley, through betrayals that masquerade as service and fidelities that look like treason, this novel invites you to stand where he stands: on a quay wet with spray, amid voices in Turkish, Italian, Croatian, Greek, Latin, and the most persuasive tongue of all—necessity. If there is heroism here, it lives in the ordinary courage of those who choose the fragile, exhausting work of keeping a city alive.

Enter, then, by the Ploče Gate at dawn. Smell the cedar shavings in the boatyards, the vinegar at the lazaretto, the ink crusting on a pen left too long in thought. The pages ahead are a ledger of debts and mercies, of ships outward bound and names crossed through. May what you find in these leaves—like the sea itself—be both mirror and question.

CHAPTER ONE: Salt on the Wind

The morning light in Ragusa did not so much rise as it bruised the sky, a deep violet fading into the pale gold of old limestone. Marin stood upon the high ramparts of the Revelin Fortress, his lungs burning with the sharp, saline draft that swept off the Adriatic. It was a wind that carried the scent of distant cedar forests, the rot of seaweed, and the faint, metallic tang of the cannons that guarded the harbor. Below him, the city stirred like a waking beast, its terracotta roofs gleaming as if they had been dipped in blood and honey. To the north lay the Ottoman shadow, a vast interior of mountains and janissaries; to the west, the Venetian lion prowled the sea, its galleys cutting the water with predatory grace. Ragusa sat between them, a silver coin balanced on its edge.

Marin rubbed his ink-stained fingers against the rough stone of the parapet. At twenty-two, his life was measured in fluid ounces of gall-ink and the steady scratch of a quill. As a junior scribe to the Rectory, his world was one of ledgers, tariffs, and the frantic, whispered diplomacies of a republic that bought its peace with gold and polite lies. He was supposed to be at his desk in the Palazzo by now, recording the night's intake of grain from the Pelješac peninsula, but the air this morning felt heavy with a different kind of commerce. There was a tension in the harbor that no ledger could yet quantify.

A single merchant carrack, its sails patched and gray like a beggar's coat, was limping toward the mouth of the harbor. It flew the Ragusan flag—the red and white bars of Saint Blaise—but it moved with a sluggishness that suggested its hold contained more than just wool or spice. Marin watched as the harbor master's skiff pulled alongside. In Ragusa, the law was as salt-crusted as the docks: no man or cargo entered without the blessing of the lazaretto, the great quarantine station that stood as a sentry against the plague. But this ship was not veering toward the quarantine docks. It was signaling for an immediate audience with the customs house at the Ploče Gate.

"You're squinting again, Marin. It makes you look like a conspirator or a man who needs spectacles," a voice called out behind him. Marin turned to see Petar, a veteran of the city guard whose breastplate was perpetually dented and whose humor was as dry as sun-baked hardtack. Petar leaned against a stone merlon, picking his teeth with a splinter of wood. He didn't look at the ship; he looked at the horizon, where the shimmer of the sea met the sky.

"That vessel is riding low," Marin remarked, ignoring the jab about his eyesight. "If that's salt, the captain is a fool for loading so much in a swell. If it's lead, the Rector will want to know who is arming the hinterlands this week."

Petar spat over the edge. "It's neither. Word from the lookout at Cavtat says that ship was chased halfway across the Ionian by three Venetian brigantines. They weren't after salt, and they certainly weren't after Ragusan grain. They wanted what's in the captain's cabin. There's a smell in the air today, lad. It isn't just the fish markets. It's the smell of a secret being brought home to roost."

Marin felt a prickle of unease. Secrets were the primary export of his city, but they were usually wrapped in silk and sent abroad. When they arrived by sea, battered and pursued, they tended to bring fire in their wake. He adjusted his woollen doublet, which was already becoming uncomfortably warm in the mounting sun. He had a task to perform at the Ploče Gate—overseeing the manifests of the overland caravans from the East—but his gaze remained fixed on the limping carrack. It was named the *Aethelgard*, an old name for an old world, and as it dropped anchor, the sound of the chain rattling through the hawsepipe echoed like a funeral bell.

Descending from the fortress, Marin made his way through the narrow, winding guts of the city. The streets were a cacophony of tongues: the melodic lilt of Italian, the harsh gutturals of the mountain Slavs, and the fluid, serpentine vowels of Turkish merchants. Ragusa was a city of the ear. One survived by knowing which language to speak to which man. To the Venetians, you spoke of art and antiquity; to the Ottomans, you spoke of tribute and stability; to your neighbor, you spoke of nothing at all, lest the Rector's spies find a reason to invite you for a long, uncomfortable talk in the dungeons of the Sponza Palace.

By the time he reached the Ploče Gate, the heat was shimmering off the pavement. The gate was the city's eastern throat, a massive stone maw through which passed the lifeblood of the Republic. Caravans from Istanbul, Belgrade, and Sofia arrived here, their mules laden with silk, wax, and hides. Today, however, the gate was choked with people of a different sort. Refugees from the burning villages of the southern coast stood in huddled groups, their belongings tied in ragged bundles. They looked at the city walls with a mixture of awe and resentment. To them, Ragusa was a fortress of safety; to the Ragusans, these people were a liability, a threat to the delicate peace maintained with the Sultan's governors.

Marin pushed through the crowd, his scribe's satchel bumping against his hip. He found the chief customs officer, a man named Drago who possessed the temperament of a badger and a nose that had been broken in at least three different decades. Drago was shouting at a muleteer whose animal had decided to collapse in the middle of the thoroughfare.

"Check the seals, Marin! Don't just stand there gawking at the sea," Drago barked, wiping sweat from his forehead with a stained sleeve. "The Council wants the manifest for the Greek's wool. They think he's hiding silver in the bales again. And watch the

crowd—half these wretches are trying to slip through without a health pass. If the fever gets into the Stradun, it's our heads on the block, not the Rector's."

Marin nodded and set to work, but his mind was elsewhere. He kept looking toward the harbor, where the *Aethelgard* sat silently at anchor. He watched as a small boat was lowered from its side. It carried only two men and a heavy wooden chest bound in iron. They weren't heading for the main docks; they were rowing toward a private quay owned by one of the city's most influential merchant families, the Gozze. This was a breach of protocol that would normally have Drago screaming for the guard, yet the customs officer seemed purposefully occupied with the muleteer's dying animal.

It was then that Marin noticed the man standing in the shadow of the gatehouse arch. He was dressed in the somber, expensive black of a Venetian scholar, but his posture was that of a soldier. He was watching the rowboat with an intensity that made Marin's skin crawl. The man didn't move, didn't speak, but his hand rested habitually on the hilt of a thin, elegant rapier. In Ragusa, carrying a weapon of that length was technically a violation of the peace, but the guards seemed not to notice him. Or perhaps they had been told not to.

The salt on the wind shifted, bringing with it the damp smell of the incoming tide. Marin opened his ledger, but his hand trembled slightly as he dipped his pen. He began to record the contents of a crate of Levant spices, but his eyes kept darting back to the iron-bound chest being hauled onto the Gozze quay. He saw a flash of movement—a figure in a hooded cloak stepped out from the warehouse to meet the rowers. There was a brief exchange, a purse of coin changed hands, and the chest disappeared into the darkness of the stone building.

"Focus, boy," Drago growled, leaning over Marin's shoulder. "You've written 'Byzantine' instead of 'Benzoin' for this shipment of resins. What's the matter with you? Have you forgotten your Latin, or has the sun boiled your brains?"

Marin looked down at the page. He had indeed written the word *Byzantine* in a sharp, frantic hand. It was a slip of the mind, a ghost of a thought that had no place in a merchant's ledger. He quickly scratched it out, the black ink pooling like a bruise on the parchment. "My apologies, Master Drago. The wind is playing tricks on my ears."

"The wind doesn't play tricks," Drago muttered, turning back to the crowd. "It just tells you what's coming. And by the look of those clouds over the Adriatic, what's coming isn't going to be settled with a simple customs fee."

As the afternoon wore on, the sky began to lose its gold, turning the color of hammered lead. The refugees at the gate were being herded toward the lazaretto, their cries for water and mercy echoing against the high stone walls. Marin finished his work, his fingers cramped and his neck stiff. He packed his pens and his inkwell,

feeling the weight of the day pressing down on him. He had seen something he wasn't meant to see, a small ripple in the steady pool of Ragusan life.

He walked back toward the center of the city, passing the Great Onofrio Fountain where the water hissed with a constant, soothing rhythm. Men were gathered in small groups, their voices low as they discussed the latest news from the front. The Venetians had taken a fort near Kotor; the Ottomans had retaliated by burning a granary; the Pope was sending letters that arrived three weeks too late to matter. It was the usual theater of war, a play that had been running for centuries with different actors in the same bloody costumes.

But Marin couldn't shake the image of the iron-bound chest. He knew the history of the Gozze family; they were collectors of things that had no place in a world of gunpowder and steel. They dealt in old maps, forgotten genealogies, and the crumbling remnants of an empire that had died when the Turks climbed the walls of Constantinople a century ago. If they were smuggling something into the city under the very noses of the Venetian spies and the Ottoman informers, it wasn't gold. Gold was too common.

He reached the doors of the Scriptorium, the quiet heart of the Republic's memory. Inside, the smell of vellum and beeswax replaced the salt and sweat of the street. It was a place of silence, where the only sound was the turning of pages and the occasional muffled cough of a scholar. Marin found his desk in the corner, near a window that looked out over the rooftops toward the sea. He sat down and stared at the empty space where his next report was supposed to begin.

The wind rattled the shutters, a sudden, violent gust that smelled of impending rain. It was a restless wind, a traveler that had crossed the Mediterranean and the mountains of Anatolia to find its way to this narrow strip of stone. Marin picked up a scrap of parchment and began to doodle, his hand moving of its own accord. He drew a ship with tattered sails, a chest with heavy locks, and a single, stylized eagle with two heads—the crest of a fallen empire.

He realized then that the peace he had known, the quiet life of a scribe who recorded the world without touching it, was ending. The salt on the wind wasn't just a herald of a storm; it was the taste of a sea that was rising to drown the old certainties. He closed his eyes and listened to the city. Somewhere in the distance, a bell began to ring, not for prayer, but for the closing of the gates. It was a heavy, lonely sound that spoke of walls and the people who huddled behind them, praying that the world would pass them by. But the world was already inside the gates, hidden in a wooden chest, waiting for someone to find the key.

Marin opened his eyes and looked at the ink on his fingers. It was the only weapon he had, and as the first drops of rain began to pelt the stone outside, he knew it wouldn't be enough. The chronicle of Ragusa was being rewritten, and he was no longer just

the scribe; he was part of the text. He stood up, pushed his chair back, and headed toward the door. If the Gozze warehouse held a secret that could bring the Venetians and the Ottomans to their knees, he needed to know what it was before the city burned to hide it.

The rain started in earnest as he stepped back into the street, washing the dust and the salt from the stones. It was cold, biting, and smelled of woodsmoke. Marin pulled his cloak tight around his shoulders and vanished into the shadows of an alleyway, following the path toward the harbor. The wind howled through the narrow passages, a mournful sound that seemed to carry the voices of a thousand years of ghosts. Ragusa was a city of stone, but tonight, even the stone felt fragile.

He reached the edge of the Stradun, the great main street that ran like a spine through the city. It was empty now, the white stones slick and shimmering under the lamplight. He saw a figure standing near the fountain, the same man in black he had seen at the gate. The man was looking directly at him, his face pale and unreadable in the rain. He didn't move to stop Marin; he simply nodded, a slow, deliberate gesture that felt like a death sentence or an invitation.

Marin didn't stop. He turned his head and kept walking, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. He reached the warehouse district near the Ploče Gate, where the buildings were thick-walled and windowless, designed to protect the wealth of the Republic from fire and thieves. The door to the Gozze warehouse was locked, but a thin sliver of light escaped from beneath the heavy oak.

He pressed his ear to the wood. At first, he heard nothing but the rain and the distant wash of the sea. Then, a voice—thin, cracked with age, and speaking a language that wasn't Italian, Turkish, or Slavonic. It was Greek, the high, formal Greek of the liturgy and the law.

"It is complete," the voice whispered, the words trembling with a terrifying reverence. "The geography of the soul, and the map of the true inheritance. If the Doge knew this was within a league of his fleet, he would sink the city to claim it."

"The Doge is a merchant," another voice replied, younger and harder. "He understands price, but not value. We must hide it until the envoy arrives. If the Sultan's men catch wind of the lineage described here, the tribute Ragusa pays will be the least of our worries. They will demand the blood of the keepers."

Marin backed away, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps. He stumbled over a loose stone, the sound echoing in the narrow space. The light beneath the door vanished instantly. The silence that followed was more frightening than any threat. He turned and ran, not toward the Rectory or the Scriptorium, but toward the harbor, toward the open air and the safety of the wind.

He stopped at the water's edge, leaning over the stone quay to catch his breath. The *Aethelgard* was a dark shape in the harbor, its masts swaying like skeletal fingers against the stormy sky. He looked down at the water, which was black and churning with the storm. Something was floating there, bobbing against the stone. He reached down, his fingers brushing against something cold and wet. He pulled it up.

It was a page of vellum, heavy and sodden with seawater. The ink had run, but the script was still visible—slanting, elegant Greek characters that seemed to glow with a faint, ghostly light. He recognized a single word at the top of the page: *Basileus*. Emperor.

He tucked the damp page into his doublet, the cold of it seeping through to his skin. The wind picked up, a sudden gale that nearly knocked him off his feet. It carried the scent of woodsmoke and old dust, the smell of a world that was being consumed by the very flames it had tried to outrun. Marin stood there, a young scribe with a stolen page of history in his pocket, and realized that the salt on the wind was no longer just a seasoning for the air. It was the taste of tears, and the taste of the sea that was coming to claim the debt of the living.

The bells of Saint Blaise began to toll for the midnight watch, their iron tongues striking the air with a relentless, rhythmic force. Marin looked back at the city, the beautiful, stubborn, impossible stone republic, and felt a sudden, fierce pang of love and terror. He didn't know what was in the chest, or who the envoy was, or why a scrap of a Byzantine manuscript was floating in the harbor. But he knew that by morning, the ledgers of Ragusa would have to be opened for a new kind of entry, one written not in gold, but in the ash of the old world.

He walked back toward the gate, his head bowed against the rain. The man in black was gone, but the feeling of being watched remained. As he passed through the inner arch, he saw a single feather lying on the wet pavement—a dark, glossy feather from a bird of prey. He picked it up and held it for a moment before letting the wind take it. It whirled away toward the mountains, toward the East, where the fires were already burning.

The first chapter of his life as a scribe had ended with the setting of the sun. The next chapter, he realized, would be written in the dark, and the ink would never truly dry. He reached his small room above a bakery, the smell of rising dough a cruel mockery of the hunger he suddenly felt—a hunger for truth, for safety, for a way to stop the tide. He sat on his bed and pulled out the wet vellum, laying it flat on his small table. He watched as the water slowly evaporated, the letters becoming sharper, darker, like teeth.

"Salt on the wind," he whispered to the empty room. "And blood on the page."

The storm broke then in full fury, the thunder shaking the foundations of the city. Marin sat in the dark, watching the manuscript page, waiting for the light of a morning that he feared would never look the same again. The Republic of Ragusa was a city of stone, but tonight, stone was nothing more than a temporary arrangement of dust. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but all he could hear was the scratching of a thousand invisible quills, recording the end of an age.

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