The Last Walls

Eight Voices from Constantinople

Constantinople and surroundings

1452–1455

The city is fallen and I am still alive.

— George Sphrantzes, chronicler and servant of the last Emperor

God forbid that I should live as an Emperor without an Empire. As my city falls, I will fall with it.

— Attributed to Constantine XI Palaiologos, last Emperor of Byzantium

Nothing in the world will ever equal those walls, which are impregnable to any who would attack them.

— Pero Tafur, Castilian traveller, after visiting Constantinople in 1437

Author's Note

The eight voices in this book are fictional. The events they describe are not. Dates, fortifications, weapons, fleet movements, and battles in these pages are drawn from the historical record — primarily from the accounts of Nicolò Barbaro, George Sphrantzes, Doukas, and Kritovoulos, cross-referenced with modern scholarship. Where sources conflict (the severity of Giustiniani's wound, the opening of the Kerkoporta gate, the exact manner of Constantine XI's death), the diarists reflect the uncertainty honestly, each from their own vantage point.

Constantinople in 1453 was a city of perhaps fifty thousand souls defending twelve miles of wall against an army that outnumbered them ten to one. The siege lasted fifty-seven days. The Theodosian Walls, which had stood for a thousand years, fell to a weapon the world had never seen deployed at such scale: massed heavy artillery. The twenty-one-year-old sultan who ordered the bombardment would rename the city and make it the centre of an empire that endured for nearly five centuries.

These diaries attempt to recover what the chronicles necessarily leave out: the smell of the stockfish rations, the sound of the great bombard at three in the morning, the particular dread of a merchant who picked the wrong season to visit. The characters speak in English, but several of them would not have — and so they occasionally lapse into the languages they actually thought in. These fragments are left untranslated, as they would have been heard.

Publisher's Note

Pocket Memoirs grew out of a personal project to learn about the Battle of Chosin Reservoir — and the realisation that this is a good and easy way to learn about historical events. The content is both human-and AI-made; we strive to give you the best of both worlds. All characters are fictional, the events are not. We cross-check everything for accuracy, but if you spot any issues, do not hesitate to reach out via contact (at) pocketmemoirs (dot) com.

Please note: the historical realities depicted in these books are not always appropriate for minors. All content on this site should be considered unsuitable for younger readers. Parents and guardians are advised to read or listen to the material themselves before sharing it with children.

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Alexios Kalothetos, Guardsman of the Walls

Militia defender, assigned to the Mesoteichion sector of the Theodosian Walls

I was a tanner before they gave me a spear. The walls did not care what I was before.

30 January 1453

A Genoese ship came in yesterday. Seven hundred soldiers aboard, armed better than any of us, under a man called Giustiniani. The Emperor himself went to the harbour to greet him. I watched from the wall above the Golden Gate and saw them embrace. Seven hundred men. The city cheered as if the whole of Christendom had arrived.

I told Petros afterward: seven hundred is not enough. He said I should be grateful. I am grateful. But I have walked the walls from Blachernae to the Sea of Marmara, and I know what twelve miles looks like when you must fill every stretch of it with men who can hold a spear. We have perhaps seven thousand, if you count the monks and the Venetian sailors and the men who were bakers last month.

Το τείχος δεν πολεμάει μόνο του. The wall does not fight by itself. Someone has to stand on it.

15 March 1453

Word has come from the scouts: the Sultan's great gun is on the road from Edirne. Sixty oxen pulling it. They say it takes three hours to load and fires a stone ball the weight of ten men. I have never seen such a weapon. None of us have. The oldest soldiers on the wall say the same — nothing like this has come against these walls before.

The Emperor has set the Genoese to repair the outer wall near the Gate of St. Romanus, where the ground dips into the valley of the Lycus. That is the weak place. Everyone knows it. The Turks will know it too. I have been assigned to this sector. My captain says it is an honour. Petros laughed when I told him. Η τιμή σκοτώνει, he said. Honour kills.

2 April 1453

They are here.

The Ottoman army appeared this morning in the fields beyond the moat. I have never seen so many men in one place. The columns kept coming for hours — cavalry, infantry, carts, camels, more infantry, then more behind them. They spread along the whole length of the land walls like water filling a ditch.

From the top of the inner wall I could see their camp taking shape. Tents by the thousand. Cook-fires already burning. The Sultan's pavilion — red and gold — went up near our sector, directly across from the Mesoteichion. He has chosen to face the weakest point. He knows.

The moat is twenty metres wide and seven deep. Behind it, the outer wall. Behind that, the killing ground. Behind that, the inner wall where I stand — twelve metres high, five metres thick, a thousand years old. I have to believe that is enough.

6 April 1453

The siege has officially begun. Ottoman troops have taken their positions along the full length of the walls. I can see the organisation from

up here — Karadja Pasha's Europeans to the north, the Anatolians under Ishak Pasha to the south toward the Marmara. And in the centre, directly before us, the Sultan himself with the Janissaries and the guns.

Κύριε ελέησον. The guns. There are more than seventy of them lined up facing us. The great bombard is there too — I can see it, a dark shape like a fallen column, mounted on a wooden frame the size of a house. They have been building earthworks and positions for the artillery all day.

Giustiniani inspected our section this afternoon. He is enormous — taller than any man on the wall. He checked the stockpile of stones and timber we have ready for repairs, nodded, said nothing about whether it would be enough. His silence told us everything.

12 April 1453

The bombardment has begun and I understand now why the old soldiers looked afraid.

The great gun fires once every two or three hours. You hear it before you feel it — a sound like the sky splitting open, then a pause, then the stone comes. It struck the outer wall near the Gate of St. Romanus this morning and took out a section six metres wide. Stone and dust flew higher than the towers. The ground shook under my feet on the inner wall, two hundred paces behind the impact.

The smaller guns fire more often. All day, all night. The noise does not stop. Some men have stuffed cloth in their ears. I tried, but then you cannot hear the orders.

We repair the breaches at night. Timber, earth, barrels, whatever we can carry. By morning the wall looks like a thing made by children — patchwork and prayer. Then the guns begin again and we watch our work disappear.

Petros said: we are building sandcastles against the tide. He is not wrong.

22 April 1453

Something terrible has happened. The Turks have moved eighty ships overland — over the hills behind Galata, on greased logs — and put them into the Golden Horn. The harbour that the chain was supposed to protect is no longer safe.

I saw the sails from the wall this morning, where there should have been no sails. Ottoman galleys sitting in our harbour as if they had always been there. The chain still hangs across the entrance, useless now.

This means we must send men to defend the harbour walls too. We barely have enough for the land walls. Every man pulled away from here is a gap that someone else must fill, or that no one fills at all.

The Genoese in Galata claim they are neutral. They let the Turks drag eighty warships across their hills. Πρόδοση. I will remember their neutrality.

5 May 1453

The miners came last night. I was on watch above the outer wall when I felt the ground vibrate — not the guns, something different. A tremor from below, rhythmic, like a heartbeat.

The Scottish engineer — Grant, they call him — had set out bowls of water on drums with peas floating on the surface. He showed us how to read the ripples. When the peas dance, the Turks are digging beneath you. He found the tunnel quickly and sent his own men down with Greek fire and grenades.

I could hear the fighting underground. Muffled screams and the sound of collapsing earth. I do not envy the men who go down into those tunnels. At least on the wall, you can see the sky.

Grant has destroyed five tunnels now, maybe more. He is quiet and grim and speaks a Greek so broken it sounds like a different language entirely, but he is keeping us alive from below while we try to hold what is above.

14 May 1453

The great gun has cracked. We heard it happen — a sound different from the usual firing, a deeper, wronger sound, followed by shouting in the Ottoman camp. For a few hours this morning, the bombardment from the centre slowed.

Some men cheered. I did not. There are seventy other guns, and the walls are already broken in nine places along the outer line. We patch them every night, but the patches are weaker each time. The inner wall still holds, but the outer wall at the Mesoteichion is more rubble than stone now.

Food is short. We eat stockfish and bread made from whatever grain is left. The cisterns still have water, but no one talks about how long that will last.

Δεν μπορώ να θυμηθώ πώς ήταν η σιωπή. I cannot remember what silence sounded like.

25 May 1453

An icon of the Theotokos was carried through the streets today in procession. The Emperor ordered it. The people came out — women, children, old men, monks — and walked behind the icon praying. I watched from the wall.

Halfway through the procession, the icon slipped from its frame and fell to the ground. The bearers scrambled to pick it up, but the crowd went quiet. Then a thunderstorm broke — sudden, violent, hail in May — and the procession scattered.

The men on the wall are talking about it. They say it is a sign. They say the Theotokos has turned her face from us. I am not a man who reads signs, but I saw their faces, and that frightened me more than any omen.

We are so tired. Five weeks of bombardment. Five weeks of repairing walls by torchlight and sleeping in two-hour fragments. The Turks rotate their men. We cannot.

28 May 1453 — evening

The Sultan sent a final demand for surrender today. The Emperor refused. There was nothing else he could do — the man will not leave his city, and I think he knows what tomorrow will bring.

Tonight the Turks are filling the moat. I can hear them working in the darkness — thousands of labourers throwing earth and timber and anything they can find into the ditch. The sound of their shovels carries up to us on the wall. By morning the moat will be crossable.

A service was held in Hagia Sophia tonight. Greeks, Venetians, Genoese — everyone together for the first time, Orthodox and Catholic side by side. Men who argued about the union of the churches for months stood next to each other and took communion. It was the most beautiful and the most terrible thing I have ever seen.

I have written a letter to my sister in Trebizond and given it to a Venetian sailor. If the harbour ships break out, it may reach her.

Εάν δεν γράψω ξανά, να ξέρεις ότι στάθηκα.

29 May 1453 — before dawn

They came after midnight. The auxiliaries first — irregulars, poorly armed, sent to tire us before the real assault. We cut them down at the stockade where the outer wall used to be. Bodies piled in the ditch. For an hour I thought: we can hold.

Then the second wave — better troops, Anatolian regulars — and the fighting became savage. We held the line at the inner wall. Giustiniani was there, shouting orders, enormous in the torchlight. I could hear the Emperor's voice somewhere to our left.

Then, at dawn, the Janissaries.

Perhaps three thousand of them, fresh, advancing in formation while their drums pounded. And at that moment — Giustiniani fell. Hit by a shot that opened his side or his arm, I could not see clearly. His men carried him back toward the harbour. The Genoese saw their commander leaving and the line began to come apart.

I heard someone shout that a gate was open — the Kerkoporta, a small postern in the Blachernae wall. Ottoman flags appeared on a tower. The Emperor drew his sword and went forward. I did not see him again.

Έτρεξα. God forgive me, I ran.

29 May 1453 — afternoon

The harbour. A Venetian galley. I do not know how I reached it. Through streets full of Ottoman soldiers and screaming and smoke. I threw away my armour and ran in my shirt like a civilian and somehow was not cut down.

The ship cast off with perhaps forty of us aboard who had no right to be there. The captain did not turn us away. Behind us, the city burned.

I looked back once. The Ottoman flag was on the towers of Blachernae. Smoke was rising from a dozen places. I could hear sounds carrying over the water that I will not describe.

Τα τείχη έπεσαν. Τα τελευταία τείχη.

17 June 1453 — Candia, Crete

We reached Crete eight days ago. The Venetians gave us bread and a place on the harbour floor. There are other refugees here — Greeks from the city, some I recognise, most I do not. We sleep and eat and sit in the sun and do not talk very much.

News comes slowly. The Sultan entered the city on the day it fell. Three days of looting were allowed. Hagia Sophia has been made a mosque. Loukas Notaras — the megas doux — was executed on the third of

June, five days after the fall. They say he refused to give his son to the Sultan.

The Emperor's body was never found. Some say he died fighting at the gate. Some say he fell among the common soldiers and was buried in an unmarked grave. I believe the first. I was there. He went forward with his sword drawn and did not come back.

I am a tanner again. The walls are gone and I am a tanner on a Venetian island and I do not know what else to be.

March 1454 — Candia, Crete

A ship from Venice brought letters. The Senate has negotiated trading rights with the Sultan — business continues, as it always does. Constantinople is being remade. Muslims are being settled in the city. Churches are becoming mosques. The great walls are being repaired — by the Turks now, for their own purposes.

Greek scholars have scattered — to Venice, to Rome, to Ragusa, wherever they can find a patron or a library. The Empire is truly finished. Not diminished, not reduced, not weakened. Finished.

I met a man last week who was in the city when it fell. He was enslaved for three months before a Venetian merchant bought his freedom. He told me the Turks are calling the city Istanbul now, or Konstantiniyye. It has many names. It will always have many names.

Δεν θα γυρίσω ποτέ. But the walls I stood on — the stones remember, even if no one else does.

Alexios Kalothetos escaped Constantinople by sea on the night of May 29, reaching Venetian-held Crete in June 1453. He settled in Candia, where he found work in the leather trade. He never returned to Constantinople. In 1461, he dictated a brief account of the siege to a Cretan notary, fragments of which survive in the Venetian state archives. He died around

1487, a subject of the Republic of Venice, and was buried in the Greek cemetery outside the walls of Candia.

Irene Notaras

Noblewoman of Constantinople, wife of a naval officer serving under Megas Doux Loukas Notaras

They say the city has survived twenty sieges. They do not tell you what it costs the women who wait inside.

12 December 1452

They announced the union of the churches in Hagia Sophia today. Cardinal Isidore read the decree. The Pope's man, standing in our cathedral, telling us we are one church now — Roman and Orthodox, together under Rome. The price of Western help.

Dimitrios came home and said nothing for an hour. Then he told me that half the congregation walked out during the proclamation. Old Gennadios has been preaching against it for weeks — he says it would be better to see the Sultan's turban in the city than the Cardinal's hat.

I do not care about hats or turbans. I care that the walls hold and that my husband comes home each evening. But I know what this means. The union was our last card, and we have played it, and I am not certain the West will send what was promised even now.

Θεέ μου, δώσε μας χρόνο. Just time. That is all I ask.

2 February 1453

Dimitrios has been called to full duty on the harbour walls. He serves under the megas doux himself — Loukas Notaras — commanding a sec-

tion of the sea wall along the Golden Horn. He left before dawn with his armour wrapped in cloth, as if hiding it from the neighbours, though everyone knows.

Our daughter Zoe asked where her father was going. I told her he was going to watch the ships. She is four years old. She does not need to know more than that.

The markets are thinning. Grain is expensive and getting worse. I have begun storing what I can — dried fish, oil, a sack of barley I bought from a Cretan sailor at three times the usual price. The city has survived sieges before, but never with so few people inside and so many outside.

I have my mother's icon of the Theotokos on the wall beside the door. I light a candle before it every morning now.

6 April 1453

The siege has begun. We knew it was coming — the army arrived days ago — but the formal beginning is something else. You can hear the Ottoman camps from inside the city. Drums. Horns. The sound of eighty thousand men preparing.

Dimitrios came home briefly at midday. He looked tired already, and nothing has happened yet. He said the harbour chain is strong and the Venetian galleys are positioned behind it. He said the sea walls are in reasonable condition. He did not say whether he thought it would be enough.

Zoe has started asking why the sky makes loud noises. I told her it is thunder. She accepted this for now, but she is a clever child and thunder does not come from the same direction every time.

The neighbour women and I have agreed to share food and look after each other's children. Maria Chrysoloras, whose husband is on the land walls, has moved in with us. Her hands shake when she eats. Mine do too, but I hide it better.

12 April 1453

The bombardment. I cannot describe it in a way that captures what it is like. The ground shakes. The walls of the house crack — thin lines running through the plaster like veins. Zoe screams when the great gun fires and will not be consoled for minutes afterward.

From the roof I can see the dust clouds rising from the land walls. The Turks are methodically destroying them. Stone that has stood since Theodosius — a thousand years — blown apart in seconds. The sound arrives a moment after the impact, a deep concussion that you feel in your chest.

Dimitrios says the harbour is still secure. The chain holds. But the land walls are suffering terribly, and if they fall, the harbour will not matter.

I pray. Maria prays. The children play in the courtyard between the impacts, because children cannot sustain terror — they adapt, they find games, they run and shout. Zoe has started calling the bombardment ο κεραυνός — the thunderbolt. She has made it into something she can name, and naming it helps.

Σε παρακαλώ, Παναγία μου.

23 April 1453

The ships are in the Golden Horn. Ottoman galleys, inside our harbour, where the chain should have stopped them. They dragged them over the hills behind Galata — Dimitrios told me, and I could not believe it until I went to the harbour myself and saw the masts.

Dimitrios will not come home now. His section of the sea wall faces these new ships directly. He sent a boy with a message: he is well, the wall holds, do not worry. The message was written in his hand but the words were not his. He never tells me not to worry. That is how I know he is afraid.

Maria and I took the children to the Chora monastery to pray before the mosaics. The Christ there looks down with such calm. I wanted to

ask him: do you see what is happening outside? But I suppose he does. That is the difficulty with omniscience.

Food is shorter now. The fish market has almost nothing. We are eating the barley stores.

8 May 1453

Dimitrios was allowed home for two hours today. He ate everything I put in front of him and fell asleep on the floor with Zoe curled beside him. I watched them for a long time.

He is thinner. There is a cut on his arm that he will not explain. He smells of smoke and salt and sweat and something else — the particular smell of men who have not been clean in weeks and have stopped caring about it.

Before he left, he pulled me aside and told me that if the city falls, I should go to the harbour immediately — not wait, not collect things, just go — and look for the Venetian ships. He said the Venetians will take women and children if there is room. He made me repeat the instructions.

I asked him what he would do. He said he would find us. I did not believe him, but I kissed him and let him go, because what else can a person do?

Μην πεις αντίο. Never say it. Say I will find you, and walk out the door.

25 May 1453

The icon procession ended in disaster. The Theotokos fell from the frame. Then hail, in May. Then a fog so thick you could not see the cathedral from the courtyard.

The women in the neighbourhood are saying it is a sign that God has abandoned us. Maria will not stop crying. Even I — and I am not superstitious — felt something cold settle in me when I heard about the icon.

The land walls are nearly gone in places. You can hear the bombardment all day and all night. The children have stopped flinching. Zoe sleeps through the cannon fire now, which is its own kind of horror.

We are eating the last of the barley. After this, I do not know.

28 May 1453 — evening

They held a final service in Hagia Sophia tonight. Everyone went — Greek, Venetian, Genoese, Catholic, Orthodox. Dimitrios could not come, but Maria and I went with the children.

I have been inside Hagia Sophia many times. I was married there. Zoe was baptised there. But I have never heard it sound like it did tonight. Every voice, in every language, all at once. The dome caught the sound and held it, the way it holds the light, and sent it back down over us.

I stood under the mosaic of the Christ Pantokrator and held Zoe on my hip and sang with everyone else, and I knew — we all knew — that this was the last time. The last liturgy in the Great Church.

Δεν υπάρχουν λόγια. There are no words for what it is to sing the end of the world and know it.

29 May 1453

I am writing this on a Venetian ship. I do not know where Dimitrios is.

The assault began before dawn. I heard it from the house — not just guns but thousands of voices screaming. I took Zoe and the bag I had packed and ran for the harbour as Dimitrios told me to. Maria came with her two boys.

The harbour was chaos. People running, Ottoman ships firing, smoke everywhere. A Venetian galley was casting off and a sailor pulled us aboard — me, Zoe, Maria, and one of her boys. Her other son, Andreas, was separated in the crowd. Maria screamed his name until she had no voice.

We are at sea now. Behind us, Constantinople burns. Zoe is asleep in my arms, finally, and I am writing by the light of the stern lantern.

I keep looking at the water behind us as if Dimitrios might be swimming after the ship. He is not. The city is a line of fire on the horizon, growing smaller.

Δημήτριε.

3 June 1453 — at sea

A fishing boat brought news. The megas doux, Loukas Notaras, has been executed. Five days after the fall. They say he refused to hand over his son to the Sultan.

Dimitrios served under Notaras. If Notaras is dead, what of his men?

Maria has not spoken since we left the harbour. She sits with her remaining son and stares at the water. I bring her food. She eats a little, mechanically, then returns to staring. Andreas was eight years old.

I hold Zoe and I think: I have my daughter. I am alive. The ship is moving toward Crete. But I do not know if my husband is alive or dead, and the not-knowing is a kind of pain I did not know existed. Grief has an end. Uncertainty does not.

20 June 1453 — Candia, Crete

We have reached Crete. The Venetians have set up a camp for refugees near the harbour. There are hundreds of us — women, children, old men. A few soldiers who escaped. No word of Dimitrios among any of them.

A merchant from Galata arrived yesterday. He says the three days of looting were terrible beyond description. Many were enslaved. Many killed. Those who survived and were not enslaved are being allowed to remain, but the city is no longer ours. Hagia Sophia is a mosque. The Sultan prayed there on the first of June.

I will wait here for word. It is all I can do. The Venetians are kind enough. Zoe has started speaking again — she was silent for the whole voyage. She asked me today when we are going home. I told her soon. Another lie to add to all the others.

September 1453 — Candia, Crete

A letter. Not from Dimitrios — from a man who served with him. Dimitrios was captured during the fall and enslaved. He is alive, or was alive when the letter was written in July. He was taken to Edirne.

Alive. The word means everything. I have begun making inquiries about ransom. The Venetian merchants know the routes. It costs money I do not have, but Anna Notaras — the megas doux's daughter, who reached Venice with her family's remaining funds — has established a network to help ransom Greek captives. I have written to her.

Ζει. He lives. I will find the money. I will sell my mother's jewellery, my needlework, my skills, anything. I will get him back or spend my life trying.

April 1454 — Venice

We are in Venice now. Anna Notaras took us in. She is extraordinary — the daughter of a man the Sultan executed, and she has turned her grief into a kind of engine. She receives refugees, organises ransoms, teaches Greek to Italian scholars, petitions the Senate.

Dimitrios was ransomed last month. He arrived in Venice three days ago.

He is thin. There is a scar on his face that was not there before. He held Zoe for so long that she squirmed, and then he held me, and we stood in Anna Notaras's hallway and did not say anything for a very long time because there was nothing to say that the holding did not already say.

We are alive. We are together. We are in a city that is not ours, speaking a language that is not ours, starting a life that we did not choose.

But we are alive. Ζούμε. And for now, that is the whole of it.

Irene Notaras escaped Constantinople on 29 May 1453 aboard a Venetian vessel amid the evacuation from the Golden Horn. Landed first at Candia (Crete), where her name appears in later family correspondence as a refugee dependent. By early 1454 she reached Venice and entered the Greek émigré circle associated with Anna Notaras. After 1454 her trail fades; later references suggest she remained in Venetian territory (either Venice or Crete), living on remittances and church charity.

Marco Contarini, Merchant of Venice

Member of the Venetian Senate, trader with interests in the Eastern Mediterranean

Trade does not stop for empires. Trade merely changes the address on the invoice.

18 November 1452 — Venice

The Senate debated the Eastern question again today. The dispatches from Constantinople grow more alarming each month. The young Sultan — Mehmed, barely twenty years old — has built a fortress on the Bosphorus that commands the strait entirely. Rumeli Hisarı, they call it. Our ships must now pass under its guns.

The Senate expressed sadness. Sadness is the Senate's favourite emotion; it costs nothing and commits us to nothing. A motion was raised to send aid. It was discussed. It was deferred.

I have three ships trading in the Black Sea grain route. If the Sultan closes the Bosphorus, those ships become very expensive firewood. I said as much during the debate. Several colleagues nodded. No one voted.

Venezia è una donna prudente — she does not rush into another man's war unless she sees profit at the end of it. But prudence has a horizon, and I fear we cannot see past it.

20 February 1453 — Venice

At last, movement. The Senate has authorised the dispatch of two transport ships carrying four hundred soldiers each, along with fifteen galleys to be refitted. The vote came after news that Ottoman forces attacked a Venetian vessel in the Bosphorus — even our patience has limits when our ships are touched.

But authorise and dispatch are different verbs. The galleys need crews, the crews need pay, and the treasury needs to be convinced that the expense is justified. I give it weeks before the ships actually sail, possibly months.

In the meantime, I have received a private letter from my factor in Constantinople, Giacomo. He writes that the city is preparing for siege with approximately seven thousand defenders against what may be a hundred thousand Turks. He asks, quite directly, whether Venice intends to help or merely to observe. I did not know how to answer, so I wrote about grain prices.

Dio ci perdoni. Some things are easier to write about than others.

22 March 1453 — Venice

More letters from the East. The Sultan's great cannon — built by a Hungarian deserter, of all people — is being dragged toward Constantinople on a road built specially for it. Sixty oxen. My correspondent describes the barrel as twenty-seven feet long. I assumed he was exaggerating until a second letter, from a different source, confirmed the same.

The world is changing. We are accustomed to walls — walls protect cities, and protected cities make reliable trading partners. If a cannon can break walls that have stood for a thousand years, then every calculation we have made about power, investment, and alliance must be redone.

The fifteen galleys are still being refitted. At this rate, they will be ready in time for the Sultan's grandchildren.

I spoke with the Doge privately. He is concerned but will not say so publicly. The Republic cannot be seen to panic. But between panic and paralysis there should be a middle ground, and I cannot find it in the Senate chamber.

15 April 1453 — Venice

A merchant galley arrived from Chios with news: the siege has begun. The Ottoman army, perhaps eighty thousand strong, has encamped outside the Theodosian Walls. The bombardment commenced on or about the twelfth of April.

The Senate received this news with what I can only describe as dignified alarm. Several motions were raised simultaneously. The galleys — still not sailed — are now a matter of urgent priority. Men who voted for delay three weeks ago are now demanding immediate action. War has a way of clarifying budgets.

I keep thinking of Giacomo, my factor, inside those walls. He is not a soldier. He is a merchant with a ledger and a warehouse full of spices that will be worth nothing if the city falls and everything if it holds. The arithmetic of siege.

Per San Marco, let the galleys sail. Let them sail tomorrow. But even if they leave at dawn, the wind and the sea will decide if they arrive in time.

8 May 1453 — Venice

No word from Constantinople in two weeks. The Bosphorus is effectively closed to our shipping. What news we receive comes through Genoese channels out of Galata, and the Genoese share only what serves their interests.

The Senate met again. The fleet is nearly ready — eight hundred troops, fifteen galleys. Nearly ready. In Venice, 'nearly' is a unit of time that can mean anything from tomorrow to next year.

A delegation from the Pope arrived urging us to act. The Pope urges everyone to act while acting very little himself — but in this case, I agree with him. If Constantinople falls, the Sultan controls the trade routes. Venice becomes a city that buys permission to do what it once did by right.

I cannot sleep well. I walk along the canals at night and look east across the Adriatic and think about walls I have never seen being pounded by guns I cannot imagine. Somewhere out there, seven thousand men are trying to hold a line for all of us, and we are refitting galleys.

Il tempo è il nemico adesso.

28 May 1453 — Venice

The fleet has sailed at last. Fifteen galleys and transports, headed east. It left three days ago. I watched them from the Molo and thought: too late. I pray I am wrong.

But the mathematics are cruel. It is roughly two weeks' sailing from Venice to Constantinople under good conditions. By the time our ships arrive, the siege will have lasted almost two months. How long can seven thousand hold against a hundred thousand? How long can patched walls withstand the largest artillery the world has ever seen?

I have made discreet enquiries about the terms under which Venice might negotiate trading rights with the Ottomans should Constantinople change hands. Several colleagues looked at me with disgust. But disgust is not a trade policy, and someone must think about what comes next.

I do not want Constantinople to fall. I am Venetian, not heartless. But I am also a man who has spent his life reading the wind, and the wind is blowing from the east, and it carries smoke.

14 June 1453 — Venice

Constantinople has fallen.

A Cretan trading vessel brought the news this morning. The city was taken by storm on the twenty-ninth of May. The Emperor is dead. The walls are breached. Three days of looting. Thousands enslaved.

The Senate is in emergency session. I sat in my chair and listened to men who three months ago could not be bothered to vote on a fleet now weep openly and call for crusade. It would be grotesque if it were not so desperately sad.

Giacomo. My factor. My friend for twenty years. I have no word of him. He may be dead, enslaved, or somehow escaped. I will not know for weeks.

Our fleet is somewhere in the Aegean, sailing toward a city that no longer exists — or rather, that now exists under a different flag. When the captains learn the news, they will turn back. Fifteen galleys that might have made a difference if they had sailed in February.

Dio mio, che cosa abbiamo fatto. What have we done. What have we failed to do.

2 July 1453 — Venice

The full scope of the disaster is becoming clearer. Survivors are trickling into Venetian ports — Crete, Negroponte, Venice itself. Their accounts are harrowing.

Giustiniani, the Genoese commander, was wounded during the final assault and evacuated to a ship. He died of his wounds shortly after. The Genoese Republic has been issuing diplomatic denials of cowardice to every court in Europe. The truth is somewhere between heroism and failure, as it usually is.

Loukas Notaras, the Grand Duke, was executed by the Sultan on the third of June. His family destroyed. His daughter Anna has arrived in Venice and is already organising the refugee community with an efficiency that puts the Senate to shame.

Giacomo is alive. A letter reached me today, forwarded through Ragusa. He escaped on a Venetian galley with nothing but the clothes he wore.

His warehouse, his goods, his twenty years of inventory — gone. He asks if I can find him a position. Of course I can. What else is wealth for, if not this?

15 September 1453 — Venice

The Doge has announced that Venice will seek to live in peace and friendship with the Ottoman Sultan. The phrase was chosen carefully — it means we will negotiate trading rights with the man who conquered our ally.

I voted for this policy because I see no alternative. A crusade is not coming. The Pope talks; the kings of Europe are busy with their own wars. The Genoese are already negotiating — their colony at Galata was barely touched, because they had the foresight — or the cynicism — to stay neutral.

Our trading privileges in the East will continue, but under Ottoman terms. We will pay more, bow deeper, and call it diplomacy.

I am not proud of this. But I have learned over fifty years that pride and commerce rarely share a ledger. The Republic will endure. It endures by bending.

I think of the Emperor, who would not bend and would not leave. There is nobility in that. There is also extinction. I am not sure which lesson Venice should take from Constantinople, and I suspect we will spend the next century learning.

January 1454 — Venice

Greek scholars are arriving in Venice steadily now, carrying manuscripts and little else. The libraries of Constantinople — a thousand years of accumulated learning — were scattered in the sack. What was not burned was taken. What was taken is being sold, piece by piece, across Italy.

A man came to my house yesterday with a fifth-century copy of Ptolemy's Geography, asking if I knew a buyer. I bought it myself. I do not

read Greek, but I could not bear the thought of it ending up as kindling in some merchant's fireplace.

Anna Notaras is teaching Greek to young Venetian scholars. Cardinal Bessarion is collecting manuscripts for what he hopes will become a great library. The knowledge is not lost — it is dispersed. Scattered like seeds.

Perhaps that is the only consolation. The city fell, but the books survived. Not all of them. Not enough of them. But some.

La città è caduta. Ma le parole restano. The words remain.

June 1454 — Venice

Our first trade delegation has returned from Constantinople — from Istanbul, as we must now learn to call it. The Sultan has confirmed Venetian trading rights, subject to new terms. Higher tariffs. More restrictions. But the route is open.

The delegates report that the city is being rebuilt. Mosques where churches stood. New markets. Ottoman settlers arriving from Anatolia. The walls — our allies' great walls — are being repaired by the conqueror for his own use. The Genoese in Galata continue to trade as if nothing happened, which for them is very nearly true.

I am fifty-three years old. I have spent my life building a trading empire that depended on Constantinople being Constantinople. It is no longer Constantinople. And so I must adapt, as Venice adapts, as the sea adapts to the shore.

This is not wisdom. This is survival. But at my age, I have learned that the difference between the two is smaller than philosophers suggest.

Marco Contarini continued to serve in the Venetian Senate through the 1460s. He was among the voices urging negotiation with the Ottoman Empire over confrontation, arguing that Venice's commercial interests in the

East could survive the change of power in Constantinople. He proved partially correct: Venice maintained trading privileges in Ottoman territories, though at greater cost and with less autonomy. He died in 1471 in Venice, still a wealthy man, though his eastern trade routes had diminished considerably. His correspondence, preserved in the Venetian state archives, provides a valuable record of how the Republic processed the fall of Constantinople in real time.

Brother Symeon of the Chora

Orthodox monk and manuscript keeper at the Monastery of the Holy Saviour in Chora, Constantinople

I was entrusted with the words of fourteen centuries. I could not save them all.

13 December 1452

Cardinal Isidore proclaimed the union of the churches in Hagia Sophia yesterday. I was not present. I could not bring myself to stand in that space and hear Latin rites spoken as if they were our own.

I know the argument — unity is the price of Western help, and without Western help the city will fall. Perhaps this is true. But a faith that trades its soul for soldiers has already lost something that walls cannot protect.

The brothers are divided. Father Athanasios says we must accept the union or perish. Brother Nikephoros says he would rather perish than accept. I say nothing, because I am old and have learned that God does not consult monks before making His decisions.

I spent the afternoon in the scriptorium instead, copying a passage from Basil the Great. The ink froze twice. Winter in Constantinople is not kind to old hands or old manuscripts.

31 January 1453

The Genoese have arrived — soldiers under a man named Giustiniani. There is talk of hope in the streets, but hope is a currency that inflates

quickly in a besieged city. Seven hundred soldiers. The Ottoman army numbers in the tens of thousands.

I have begun an inventory of the monastery's manuscripts. We hold four hundred and twelve volumes — gospels, psalters, commentaries, histories, philosophical texts. Some are very old. The oldest is a fourth-century fragment of Clement of Alexandria, written on papyrus so brittle I am afraid to breathe near it.

If the city falls — and I write 'if' as a courtesy to hope — these manuscripts will be in danger. Fire, looting, indifference. I have spoken to the abbot about sending some to Crete or Trebizond. He says it would be premature. I say that premature is better than too late.

Κύριε, φύλαξε τα λόγια Σου.

7 April 1453

The Turks are outside the walls. From the monastery roof I can see the Ottoman camp stretching across the fields — an impossible number of tents and men and animals. The Chora is close to the walls, in the Blachernae quarter. Too close.

I can see our walls from here — the inner wall, the outer wall, the moat beyond. For a thousand years they have held. I have walked their length many times, touching stones that were laid when Rome still stood. Now I look at them and try to see them as the Sultan sees them: an obstacle, not a miracle.

I packed twelve manuscripts today — the oldest, the most irreplaceable — into a leather chest. The abbot has finally agreed to send them with a Venetian merchant who has a ship in the harbour. If the ship sails, the words survive. If not, they share our fate.

The mosaics in our church glow in the afternoon light. Christ and the Theotokos, surrounded by saints and angels. They have watched over this place for a hundred and fifty years. I wonder what they see coming.

12 April 1453

The bombardment began today. The sound is beyond anything I have experienced — deeper than thunder, more violent than any storm. The great cannon fires from directly opposite the Mesoteichion, perhaps a mile from our monastery, and each shot shakes dust from our ceilings and rattles the icons on the walls.

I was in the scriptorium when the first shot struck the outer wall. The ink jumped in its pot. A manuscript I was copying — a commentary on the Gospel of John — was smudged by a drop of ink that leaped from the page. A thousand years of history, and the Turks have found a way to damage our manuscripts from outside the walls.

The brothers pray continuously now. We take shifts — two hours of prayer, two hours of rest, two hours of work. I use my work hours to continue packing manuscripts. The Venetian merchant's ship has not sailed yet. Every day it remains is both a chance and a risk.

I have hidden the Clement fragment inside the wall behind the altar. If the monastery burns, perhaps the stones will protect what the men could not.

22 April 1453

The Ottoman fleet is in the Golden Horn. They moved eighty ships over the hills behind Galata on greased logs — a feat I would not have believed if I had not seen the masts appearing where no masts should be.

The harbour is no longer safe. The Venetian merchant's ship — my twelve manuscripts — may not be able to leave. I feel this loss before it has happened, the way you feel cold before it reaches you.

Brother Nikephoros has volunteered to carry water to the defenders on the walls. He goes out at night with a donkey and clay jars. He says the men on the walls are exhausted and grateful for any kindness. He

says the outer wall near the Gate of St. Romanus looks like something a child built from rubble.

We are in the hands of God. This phrase, which I have said ten thousand times in my life, now means something entirely different. We are in His hands. And His hands may be about to let go.

6 May 1453

I have moved the most important remaining manuscripts to the crypt beneath the church. It is damp and not ideal for parchment, but it is stone-vaulted and will survive fire. I have wrapped each volume in oiled cloth and placed them in sealed chests.

This is triage. I cannot save everything. Four hundred volumes, and I have room in the crypt for perhaps sixty. So I choose: the oldest gospels, the rarest commentaries, the histories that exist in no other copy. I leave behind psalters that can be found in any monastery, homilies that have been copied a hundred times.

But each time I set a book aside, I think: what if this is the only copy? What if every other monastery that held this text has already been burned or abandoned? I am not choosing between books. I am choosing between futures — which words will survive, which thoughts will still exist in a century.

Θεέ μου, δεν ήθελα αυτή την ευθύνη.

20 May 1453

The walls are failing. I can see it from the roof — great gaps in the outer wall, patched with timber and earth that the cannon destroys each morning. The inner wall still stands, but it is scarred and cracked. The moat is half-filled with rubble.

The abbot called us together today and told us to prepare. He did not say for what. He did not need to.

I have finished my work in the crypt. Sixty-three manuscripts, sealed and hidden. The rest — three hundred and forty-nine volumes — remain in the scriptorium. I have placed them in order on the shelves, spines outward, as if someone might come to read them. It is absurd. But order is the last courtesy I can offer.

Brother Nikephoros returned from the walls last night with a wound on his shoulder — a stone fragment from a cannonball strike. He said the men on the walls know the end is coming. He said they pray between the bombardments, the way we pray between the hours.

We are all monks now. Monks of the wall and monks of the book, waiting for the same dawn.

26 May 1453

A fog came over the city today — thick, unnatural for May. The brothers say it is a sign. Everything is a sign now. A bird landing on the wrong wall. A candle that will not light. The shape of the clouds.

I do not believe in signs. I believe in manuscripts and stone and the endurance of words written by men who died a thousand years before me. But I confess that the fog unsettled me. Through it, the sounds of the Ottoman camp were muffled and strange, like voices from underwater.

I went to the church and stood before the mosaic of the Anastasis — Christ pulling Adam and Eve from their tombs. He looks so strong in that image, so certain. He grasps Adam's wrist and pulls him upward, out of death, into light.

I want to believe that someone will pull us upward. But I am sixty-two years old and I have read enough history to know that cities fall and do not rise again, and that the manuscripts I could not save will burn as easily as the ones no one remembers.

28 May 1453 — evening

The final liturgy. I went to Hagia Sophia with the brothers, all of us together.

I will not attempt to describe it. I have spent my life among words — reading them, copying them, preserving them — and I have none adequate for what happened inside that church tonight. Greeks and Latins singing together. Men who will die tomorrow standing beside men who will survive, and no one knowing which is which. The dome above us full of candlelight and sound, the gold mosaics catching the flame and sending it back like a second sky.

Afterward, the Emperor came to the doors and spoke to the people. He thanked them for their courage. He asked their forgiveness for any wrongs he had done. Then he went back to the walls.

I returned to the monastery. I checked the crypt one final time. The manuscripts are safe in their stone room. Tomorrow will decide everything else.

Αμήν.

29 May 1453 — before dawn

The assault has begun. I can hear it — the roar of guns, the crash of stone, the voices of thousands of men fighting and dying half a mile from where I stand.

The brothers are in the church, praying. I should be with them. But I came to the scriptorium first. I wanted to see the books one more time. The three hundred and forty-nine I could not save. They sit on their shelves in the dark, patient as they have always been.

There is a light in the east that is not dawn. The Blachernae wall is close. If it falls, we are among the first they reach.

I can hear Brother Nikephoros leading the prayers in the church. His voice is steady. Mine would not be.

I will go to the church now. I will stand with my brothers. If the door opens and it is Ottoman soldiers, then that is how it ends. If it opens and it is morning, then we begin again.
Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, ἐλέησόν με.

29 May 1453

They are at the door.

29 May 1453 — later

The door is open. Ottoman soldiers in the nave. Brother Nikephoros stepped forward with his hands raised and they cut him down. The mosaics watch from above — Christ, the Theotokos, the saints — golden and silent.
The manuscripts in the crypt. Sixty-three volumes, sealed in stone. Remember them. Someone, someday, remember them.
Κύριε, δέξαι τ

Brother Symeon died on May 29, 1453, during the Ottoman sack of Constantinople. The Monastery of the Holy Saviour in Chora, located near the Theodosian Walls in the Blachernae quarter, was among the first religious houses reached by the invading troops. Symeon is believed to have been killed attempting to protect the monastery's manuscript collection. The building itself survived — its celebrated mosaics and frescoes were plastered over when it was converted to a mosque (Kariye Camii) in 1511. The fate of the monastery's library is unknown; some volumes may have been sold, others destroyed. A handful of manuscripts bearing the Chora monastery's colophon survive in European collections today.

Hassan ibn Yusuf, Janissary of the Kapikulu

Soldier of the elite Janissary corps, attached to the Sultan's household regiment

We were slaves who became soldiers. The Empire was our family. The Sultan was our father. Constantinople was his promise to us.

5 Recep 857 — 12 March 1453

We march toward Konstantiniyye. The road from Edirne is long and the column stretches farther than I can see — cavalry, infantry, sipahis, akıncı raiders, camp followers, engineers, and the guns. Always the guns. The great bombard moves at the pace of a dying ox, which is fitting since sixty oxen are pulling it.

I was taken from my village in Bosnia when I was seven years old. The devşirme gave me to the Sultan's household, and the household made me a Janissary. I have known no other life. The men beside me are my brothers — not by blood, but by training and by the shared knowledge that we will be the last to be sent in and the first expected to die.

The Sultan rides ahead of us. He is young — twenty-one, younger than most of us. But he has the eyes of a man who has already decided how the world will look when he is finished with it.

Allah'ın izniyle, Konstantiniyye bizim olacak.

17 Recep 857 — 2 April 1453

We are camped before the walls. I have never seen anything like them.

Three lines of defence — a moat twenty metres wide, then the outer wall, then the space they call the peribolos, then the inner wall rising twelve metres high with towers every seventy paces. The whole structure is massive, ancient, and appears impossible. I understand now why twenty sieges have failed here.

But none of those sieges had what we have. The guns are being positioned along the line. The great bombard faces the section the Greeks call the Mesoteichion — the dip in the wall where the ground falls into a valley. The Sultan has placed his tent here, behind the cannon. He wants to watch.

We Janissaries are held in reserve. We do not go first. The bashi-bazouks will go first — the irregulars, the expendables. Then the Anatolian regulars. Then us. İnşallah, when we go, the walls will already be broken.

27 Recep 857 — 12 April 1453

The bombardment has begun. Allahu Akbar.

The great cannon fired at dawn. The sound was like nothing made by man — a crack that split the air and echoed off the hills and rolled across the camp like a wave. Then the stone flew. A ball the weight of ten men, arcing across the sky, and when it struck the outer wall it took out a section the width of three houses.

The Christians scrambled like ants to repair the gap. By nightfall they had filled it with timber and earth. But the cannon fired again this morning and the patch vanished as if it had never been.

There are more than seventy guns along our line. They fire all day. The walls shake and crack and crumble. Dust rises from the impacts like smoke from a burning field.

I have been in battles before — Serbia, the Morea — but this is different. This is not war. This is demolition. We are taking apart a building that someone built a thousand years ago, stone by stone, shot by shot.

Büyük bir iş yapıyoruz. Great work.

7 Şaban 857 — 22 April 1453

A miracle of engineering today. The Sultan ordered eighty galleys moved overland, around the Christian colony at Galata, and into the harbour they call the Golden Horn. The route crossed a mile of hills. The ships were placed on greased logs and hauled by men and oxen, with drums beating and flags flying.

I watched from the camp as the masts appeared above the hillside, one by one, like trees growing in fast motion. When the first galley slid down the slope and into the Golden Horn, our whole camp erupted. Men cheered, prayed, embraced. The Sultan watched from his tent.

The Christians had stretched a chain across the harbour mouth to keep us out. The chain still hangs there. It is useless now. Our ships are on the other side of it.

This is what our Sultan does. He does not accept walls. He does not accept chains. He finds a way around them, over them, through them.

Deniz bile ona itaat ediyor. Even the sea obeys him.

22 Şaban 857 — 6 May 1453

The miners tried again last night — a tunnel aimed beneath the outer wall near the Blachernae sector. The Christians found it. They have an engineer, a foreigner, who can detect the tunnels somehow. Our miners were driven back with fire and grenades.

This is the fifth tunnel they have destroyed. The men who go underground do not always come back. I am grateful to be Janissary — we fight in the open, under the sky, where a man can see his enemy and his God.

The walls are badly damaged now. Nine breaches in the outer line, patched each night, broken again each morning. But the inner wall still stands. The Christians repair it with a desperation that I would admire if they were not the enemy.

The camp is restless. Six weeks of siege and we have not breached the inner wall. Some of the irregulars are muttering. The Sultan is calm. He has the patience of a man who has already seen the ending.

Sabır. Patience. The walls will fall. Inshallah.

12 Ramazan 857 — 25 May 1453

The Sultan has ordered a final assault. Three days from now, at night, the full weight of the army. Bashi-bazouks first, then regulars, then us.

There was a council of war. Some of the pashas argued for continued bombardment — why risk men when the guns are doing the work? But the Sultan overruled them. He says the time has come. The walls are broken enough. The defenders are exhausted. Ramazan is upon us, and the Sultan wants this finished.

We are preparing. Weapons sharpened, armour checked, prayers offered. The imam spoke to us about paradise — about what awaits those who fall in the Sultan's cause. I have heard these words before every battle. They do not make me less afraid. They make me afraid in the right direction.

I wrote a letter to my bölük commander to be sent to my adopted family in Edirne if I fall. It says very little. There is very little to say.

Allah'a emanet olun.

14 Ramazan 857 — 28 May 1453, evening

Tomorrow.

The moat is being filled tonight. Thousands of labourers, working by torchlight, throwing earth and timber and rubble into the ditch. The

bashi-bazouks are already forming up. The drums have begun — a low, steady beat that will continue all night.

The Sultan sent a final demand for surrender. The Christian emperor refused. This was expected. A man who will not abandon his city will not surrender it.

I have cleaned my weapons. I have prayed. I have eaten — my last meal before the fast of Ramazan, though I think God will forgive a soldier who eats before battle regardless of the calendar.

The Janissary band is playing mehter — the deep drums and the zurna pipes that are meant to terrify the enemy. I have heard this music my whole life. Tonight it sounds different. Tonight it sounds like the world is about to change.

Yarın sabah. Tomorrow morning. İnşallah.

15 Ramazan 857 — 29 May 1453, before dawn

The bashi-bazouks went first. They died in waves against the stockade the Christians had built where the outer wall used to be. I watched from our position behind the guns. The defenders cut them down with arrows, spears, stones. The bashi-bazouks broke and fell back.

Then the Anatolian regulars. Better troops, better armed. They fought for an hour, pushed the Christians back, nearly breached the stockade. But the big Genoese commander — the one they call Giustiniani — rallied the defence and drove them back.

Then the drums changed. Our drums. The Janissary drums.

Three thousand of us went forward in the grey light before dawn. I was in the third rank. The ground was slippery with blood and mud. The stockade loomed ahead, bristling with spears.

Then something happened. The Genoese commander was hit — a cannon shot, I think. I saw him carried back. And the line that had held against two waves began to waver.

15 Ramazan 857 — 29 May 1453, morning

I was among the first Janissaries through the breach.

A gate — small, half-hidden — was open in the wall to our right. Ottoman flags appeared on a tower above it. The Christians saw the flags and some of them broke. Not all. Some fought to the end where they stood. I saw a man in purple — I do not know if it was their emperor, but men fought around him with the fury of those who have nothing left.

We poured through the gap and into the city beyond the walls. After that, it is difficult to write clearly. The streets. The churches. The people running. I am a soldier, and I did what soldiers do when a city falls after a siege. I will not write more about that.

By midday, it was over. The Sultan's flag flew from the highest point of the city. The great church — Ayasofya — stood intact, its dome golden in the morning light.

The Sultan had promised us three days of plunder. The men took what they found. I took a silver cross from a church and a bolt of silk from a merchant's house. I did not take more.

Konstantiniyye düştü. It is done.

17 Ramazan 857 — 1 June 1453

The Sultan entered Ayasofya today for Friday prayer. I was there.

The building is beyond anything I have seen. The dome rises so high it seems to float. The walls are covered in gold mosaics — images of the Christian god and his saints — which will be covered or removed. But the space itself, the light pouring through the windows, the way sound moves inside it — this was built by men who understood something about God that transcends the images.

A scholar climbed into the pulpit and recited the shahada. The words echoed in that enormous space, and for a moment I felt the weight of what had happened — not just a military victory, but a change in the

world. This building, which was theirs for nine hundred years, is now ours. The city that was theirs for eleven centuries is now ours.

The Sultan walked through the church slowly, looking at everything. He is a conqueror, but I saw something else in his face. Not triumph. Awe.

Bu şehir artık bizim. We have done what twenty armies before us could not. Konstantiniyye is Istanbul.

Allah'a hamd olsun.

25 Ramazan 857 — 8 June 1453

The looting has stopped. The Sultan ordered it ended after three days, and the army obeyed — reluctantly in some cases, but the Janissary discipline held. The irregulars were harder to control.

The city is quieter now. The Sultan has begun organising: mosques are being designated, markets reopened, administration established. He intends this to be his capital. Not Edirne — here. Konstantiniyye. Istanbul.

I walked through the streets today, alone. The scale of the city is staggering — wider avenues than Edirne, larger buildings, aqueducts and cisterns and palaces. Much is damaged. Some from our bombardment, some from the sack. But the bones of the city are magnificent.

I passed a Greek church — small, not Ayasofya, but beautiful. Its door was open and the inside was ransacked. I stepped in and looked at the mosaics on the ceiling. A woman with a child. Their faces were scratched but still visible. Golden light still clinging to the fragments.

I thought: we have taken this city. Now we must be worthy of it.

Büyük bir emanet. A great trust.

15 Şevval 857 — 28 June 1453

I am returning to Edirne with my bölük for rest and resupply. The campaign is over. Constantinople — Istanbul — is secured.

I have been a soldier since I was old enough to hold a sword. I have fought in Serbia, in the Morea, and now here. This was the greatest of them. Not the hardest fighting — the walls were half-destroyed before we reached them — but the greatest in what it means. An empire ended. A city changed hands. A door opened that had been locked for a thousand years.

The Sultan gave each Janissary a bonus — silver akçe from the Byzantine treasury. I will send mine to my family. I have no use for it in the field.

When I close my eyes, I see the walls. Broken, smoke-blackened, but still immense. A thousand years of stone. It took the greatest army in the world and the largest cannon ever built to bring them down.

I am proud. I am also tired. These two things are not contradictions.

Eve dönüyoruz. We go home.

Hassan ibn Yusuf served in the Janissary corps for another twenty-two years following the conquest of Constantinople. He participated in Mehmed II's campaigns in Serbia and Bosnia during the late 1450s and was present at the siege of Belgrade in 1456, which the Ottomans failed to take. He rose to the rank of çorbacı (company commander) and was granted a timar (land grant) near Üsküdar. He retired from active service around 1478 and lived quietly until his death in 1491. His diary, if it existed, would be among the very few personal accounts from the Ottoman side of the siege — a perspective the historical record almost entirely lacks.

Niccolò da Recco, Soldier of Genoa

Crossbowman and man-at-arms serving under Giovanni Giustiniani Longo's command

I came because the pay was good and the cause was just. By the end, the pay was irrelevant.

1 February 1453

We arrived three days ago. Seven hundred of us, packed into two ships like sardines in a barrel, smelling like something that died in a barrel. Constantinople welcomed us as if we were the entire army of Christendom. The Emperor himself came to the harbour.

The city is enormous and half-empty. I have served in Genoa, in Corsica, in the Morea, and I have never seen a place so large with so few people in it. They say fifty thousand souls live here. The walls are built for a garrison of thirty thousand. They have seven.

Il capitano — Giustiniani — was named protostrator by the Emperor. Commander of the land defences. The Greeks trust him because he is enormous, he is Genoese, and he brought seven hundred armed men. In a city with seven thousand defenders, that makes him indispensable.

I am assigned to the section near the Gate of St. Romanus. They say it is the most dangerous posting. They say this as if it should impress me. I am a crossbowman. Every posting is dangerous when you are standing on a wall.

28 February 1453

We have been repairing walls for a month. I signed up to fight, not to carry stones, but il capitano says the walls are the weapon and we are the ones loading it. He has a way of making manual labour sound noble.

The section near St. Romanus is the weak point — everyone knows it. The ground dips into a valley here, the Lycus valley, and the walls are lower. The Turks will concentrate their guns here. Any commander with eyes would.

Giustiniani has organised a secondary stockade behind the outer wall — timber, earth, barrels of sand — a fallback position for when the outer wall gives way. Not if. When. He does not pretend the outer wall will survive what is coming.

The Greeks are good workers, I will say that. The militia men carry stones alongside us without complaint. There is a tanner named Alexios in our section who works harder than any of my Genoese. He says very little but he is always there.

Genova mi ha insegnato a combattere. Questo posto mi insegna a costruire.

6 April 1453

The Turks are here. More men than I have ever seen. The Sultan's tent — red and gold — is planted directly opposite our section, as if he is personally inviting us to a conversation.

I counted the guns I could see from the wall. I stopped at seventy because the numbers stopped being useful and started being demoralising. The great bombard is visible — a dark cylinder the size of a fallen tree, mounted on a frame that must have taken a hundred carpenters to build.

Giustiniani inspected our position this afternoon. He is calm, methodical, terrifying in the way that large men who do not panic are terrifying. He checked our crossbow bolts, our stockpile of stones and quicklime

for repairs, the depth of the ditch we dug behind the stockade. He nodded. He did not smile.

I have been in fights where I was outnumbered two to one. This is ten to one, at least. The mathematics do not inspire confidence. But mathematics do not account for walls, and these are the best walls in the world.

O almeno, lo erano.

13 April 1453

I was on the wall when the great bombard fired for the second time yesterday. The ball struck the outer wall sixty paces to my left and I felt the impact through the stones beneath my feet. The section it hit simply ceased to exist — a stretch of masonry six metres wide reduced to rubble in an instant. Stone fragments flew higher than the towers.

Two men were buried. We pulled one out alive. The other we found in pieces.

This is not war as I know it. In war, you fight men. Here, we are fighting a machine. The cannon does not tire, does not hesitate, does not care about the thickness of the wall. It simply destroys what is in front of it, and then it is reloaded, and then it destroys again.

We repair at night. Timber, earth, rubble, anything. By dawn the gap is filled — badly, but filled. Then the cannon fires and we start again. We are Sisyphus with a wheelbarrow.

Il capitano says we must hold. He does not say for how long. That is because the answer — until help arrives or we all die — is not something you say to men who are carrying stones at midnight.

22 April 1453

Ships in the Golden Horn. Ottoman ships, dragged overland like toys. Eighty galleys, sailing in a harbour that was supposed to be ours.

The Genoese in Galata let them do it. Neutrality, they call it. I call it something else, but I am on the wrong side of the wall to have an opinion about Genoese foreign policy. I am Genoese myself and I am embarrassed.

Giustiniani was furious — I saw it in the set of his jaw, though he said nothing publicly. The harbour fleet now needs defending, which means men pulled from the land walls, which means our already impossible line becomes thinner.

We are seven thousand against a sea of Turks on one side and now their ships on the other. The mathematics have gotten worse, which I would not have thought possible.

A Venetian sailor asked me tonight whether I thought we could hold. I said: we are Genoese, we hold until the money runs out. He did not laugh. Neither did I.

Dio, dammi forza.

8 May 1453

The mining. The Turks are tunnelling beneath us. You can feel it — a vibration in the ground, rhythmic, like a heartbeat from below. The Scotsman — Grant — found the first tunnel two weeks ago and destroyed it with fire. He has found five more since.

I do not go underground. I am a crossbowman, not a mole. But I listen to the men who do, and their accounts are worse than anything above ground. Narrow tunnels, dark, the enemy digging toward you from the other side, and when you meet, you fight in a space where you cannot stand upright.

Above ground, the bombardment continues. Forty-seven days now. The outer wall at our section is essentially gone — what remains is our stockade of timber and earth, which we rebuild every night. The inner wall behind us holds, but it is cracked and scarred.

Il capitano is everywhere. He sleeps in his armour on the wall. He eats standing up. I have never served under a man like him. If we hold, it will be because of him. If we fall, it will not be his fault.

Non ho mai visto un uomo così.

20 May 1453

The great cannon cracked last week. There was a brief moment of hope — perhaps the bombardment would slow. It did not. There are seventy other guns, and they continue without pause.

I am so tired I cannot think clearly. We sleep in two-hour fragments on the ground behind the stockade. The bombardment is constant. Even when the guns pause, the silence is worse because you are waiting for the next shot.

A young Greek soldier in our section — could not have been more than sixteen — fell asleep standing up today and toppled off the inner wall into the peribolos. He broke his arm. Giustiniani had him carried to a surgeon and sent back a man who was even younger.

We are running out of men and timber and time. The food is bad. The water is adequate but tastes of cistern. My crossbow string is wearing thin and I have no replacement.

I came to Constantinople because il capitano asked and the pay was seventy-five ducats a month. The ducats seem very small now, and the walls seem very thin.

26 May 1453

Something happened today that I cannot explain. An icon fell during a procession. Then hail. Then fog. The Greeks are saying God has turned away.

I am not superstitious. I am Genoese. We believe in walls, money, and crossbow bolts. But the men's faces tonight — Greek and Genoese alike — are the faces of men who have stopped believing they will survive.

Giustiniani called his captains together. He told us the final assault is coming within days. He said we must hold the stockade at all costs. He said reinforcements from Venice may yet arrive. He said this with the voice of a man who knows the truth but chooses not to speak it.

I wrote a letter to my brother in Genoa. I told him where I hid the money under the floor of our mother's house. I told him to take care of her. I told him I was proud to be here, which surprised me when I wrote it, because until that moment I was not sure it was true.

Ma è vero. It is true. I am proud to stand on this wall.

28 May 1453 — evening

Final night. The Turks are filling the moat. I can hear the shovels and the voices and the drums. By dawn the moat will be crossable and the assault will come.

There was a service in Hagia Sophia — the last one. I went. I am Catholic, not Orthodox, but tonight that distinction seemed as thin as our walls. I stood beside Greeks and Venetians and other Genoese and we prayed in a building that glowed with a thousand candles, and for an hour the war stopped existing.

Giustiniani shook hands with every man in our section afterward. He looked each of us in the eye. When he reached me, he said: domani, teniamo. Tomorrow, we hold. I said: sì, capitano. Because what else do you say to a man who has carried you on his shoulders for fifty-seven days?

The stockade is ready. The crossbows are strung. The stones are piled for throwing. The dawn will bring what it brings.

Dio abbia pietà di tutti noi.

29 May 1453 — the assault

They came at midnight. The bashi-bazouks — thousands of them, pouring across the filled moat, climbing the rubble of the outer wall, cra-

shing against our stockade. We cut them down. Crossbow bolts and spears and stones. They fell back. They came again. They fell back.

Then the Anatolian regulars. Harder fighting. They pushed us off the stockade twice. We retook it twice. Il capitano was there, shouting, swinging, dragging men back into line. The Emperor was nearby — I could hear his voice.

Then silence. A brief, terrible silence. And then the Janissary drums.

Fresh troops. Three thousand of them, the best the Sultan has, advancing in formation through the grey dawn. They hit the stockade like a wave.

And then — il capitano fell. A shot struck him. I saw him stagger, saw his men rush to hold him up. Blood. They carried him back toward the harbour. The Genoese saw their commander leaving and the line began to break.

I stayed. Some of us stayed. The stockade was gone. The Janissaries were through. I could see Ottoman flags on a tower to the north — the Kerkoporta, someone said.

I am loading my crossbow. The bolt is my last.

Niccolò da Recco was killed during the final assault on Constantinople in the early morning of May 29, 1453. He was among the Genoese defenders at the stockade near the Gate of St. Romanus when the Janissary attack overwhelmed the position following Giovanni Giustiniani's wounding and evacuation. His body was never recovered. The Republic of Genoa later issued formal diplomatic communications to the courts of England, France, and Burgundy defending the conduct of its soldiers during the siege, though these addressed the controversy around Giustiniani's departure rather than the many unnamed Genoese who fought and died at the walls. No record of Niccolò survives outside this diary.

Tomas Dragović, Merchant of Ragusa

Ragusan (Dubrovnik) spice and silk trader, trapped in Constantinople when the siege began

I came to buy pepper. I stayed for the end of the world. The profit margin was terrible.

18 December 1452

I arrived in Constantinople six weeks ago to buy pepper and silk. This was supposed to be a three-week trip. I am still here because my ship's captain decided to wait for a better cargo rate, and now there is an Ottoman fortress on the Bosphorus and leaving has become complicated.

The city is in the grip of religious argument. The Pope's cardinal announced the union of the churches, which has made the Greeks furious at the Latins, the Latins smug, and everyone else nervous. I am Ragusan. We are Catholic when it is profitable and Orthodox when it is convenient, and we have survived four centuries by knowing which is which.

Ovaj grad je lud. This city is mad. They are about to be besieged by the largest army in the world, and they are arguing about whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, or from the Father and the Son. I sell spices. I would like to go home.

The pepper, at least, is excellent.

5 February 1453

The Genoese soldiers have arrived and the city acts as if it has been saved. Seven hundred men. I have counted the walls — twelve miles of them. Seven hundred men for twelve miles. Even a spice merchant can do that arithmetic.

I have been trying to arrange passage on a Venetian galley. The Venetian captain looked at my Ragusan papers, looked at me, and said there was no room. The Ragusans and the Venetians have a relationship best described as 'mutually profitable contempt,' and at the moment the contempt is winning.

So I am stuck. My warehouse near the harbour has forty bales of silk and sixty sacks of pepper that I cannot move. The insurance on the goods expired last month. My factor in Ragusa will be tearing his hair out, assuming he has received my letters, which I doubt because the Bosphorus is closed.

U svakom ratu, trgovac je prvi koji gubi. In every war, the merchant loses first. This has been true since Troy, and I suspect it was true before that.

3 April 1453

The Ottoman army arrived yesterday. I went to the walls to look, which was perhaps the worst commercial decision I have made since buying that shipment of Cretan wine in forty-nine.

There are a lot of them. When I say a lot, I mean the kind of number that stops being a number and becomes a landscape. The fields outside the walls are covered in men and tents and animals as far as I can see. Someone said eighty thousand. Someone else said two hundred thousand. The difference between those numbers matters to a general. To a man standing on a wall with a sack of pepper, it is academic.

I have moved my most valuable goods from the harbour warehouse to a cellar nearer the centre of the city. If the walls hold, the cellar is unne-

cessary. If the walls fall, the cellar is also unnecessary, but I feel better having done something.

Najgori posao u mom životu. The worst deal of my life, and I once traded stockfish with a Norwegian.

12 April 1453

The cannon. I have heard people describe it, but description fails. The great bombard fires and the world stops. The sound is not a sound — it is a physical force that pushes against your chest and makes your ears ring for minutes. The first shot hit the outer wall and removed a piece of it the way you might knock a chip from a plate.

The Greeks repair the walls at night. The Turks destroy them by day. It is the most expensive and futile construction project I have ever witnessed, and I have watched Ragusans build a harbour wall in a gale.

Prices in the market have gone insane. A sack of grain that cost three hyperypra a month ago now costs twenty. Fish is scarce. Meat is a memory. My pepper, ironically, is worth more now than it was when I could actually sell it. The spice of a besieged city.

I eat stockfish and bread and think about the restaurants in Dubrovnik and the particular way that the Adriatic light falls on the harbour in the evening, and I ask myself how much a man should pay for the privilege of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

23 April 1453

The Turks have put ships in the Golden Horn by dragging them over a hill. I watched this from the harbour with my mouth open, which is not a position I adopt often.

Eighty galleys. Over a hill. On greased logs. The Genoese in Galata — those paragons of neutrality — let it happen on their doorstep. I suppose when you call yourself neutral, you can watch anything happen wi-

thout technically being involved. The Ragusans have been practicing this art for centuries, so I recognise it.

The harbour is now threatened from both sides. My warehouse, which I moved goods out of a week ago, is directly in the line of potential fire. I congratulate my past self on that decision, which is the first sensible thing I have done since arriving in this city.

A Venetian merchant I know — Giacomo, decent fellow, terrible card player — asked me if I thought the city would hold. I said: I am a spice trader, not a prophet. He said: the spice traders are usually better informed. He is not wrong.

Neće izdržati. But I did not say that to him.

10 May 1453

I have volunteered to help carry supplies to the walls. Not out of heroism — out of boredom and the realisation that if the city falls, it falls on me too regardless of whether I am carrying a sack of flour or a sack of pepper.

The men on the walls are remarkable. They have been under bombardment for a month. They sleep standing up. They eat whatever is put in front of them. They repair the breaches every night knowing the guns will destroy their work by morning. And they hold.

I met the Greek tanner, Alexios, who is stationed at the Mesoteichion. He thanked me for the flour and asked where I was from. I said Ragusa. He said: where is that? I said: the Adriatic coast, between Venice and the Turks. He said: everyone is between Venice and the Turks.

He is not wrong either.

The walls are terrible to see up close. The outer wall is rubble. The stockade behind it is timber and prayer. The inner wall is cracked but standing. The men are thin and dirty and calm in a way that frightens me more than the cannon.

Ja sam samo trgovac. I am only a merchant. But these men are something else.

25 May 1453

The icon fell during the procession. Then hail. Then fog. The city is reading omens the way I read shipping manifests — desperately, looking for meaning.

I do not believe in omens. I believe in supply and demand. The supply of defenders is fixed and dwindling. The demand of the Ottoman army is infinite. The conclusion does not require divine intervention.

But I will not say this to the Greeks. They have earned the right to their omens. A people who have held this city for eleven centuries are entitled to believe that God has an opinion about what happens to it.

I have made arrangements with a Genoese merchant in Galata. If the city falls, there may be a boat from the Galata waterfront. The Genoese colony will likely survive — the Sultan needs their trade — and passage from there is possible. It is not certain, but nothing is certain except that staying inside the walls after they fall is not an option.

U Dubrovniku kažu: kad brod tone, ne pitaj zašto — plivaj. When the ship sinks, don't ask why — swim.

28 May 1453 — evening

I went to Hagia Sophia tonight. I am Catholic. The service was Orthodox. I did not care. At the end of the world, the paperwork does not matter.

The church was full. Every voice raised, in Greek, in Latin, in languages I could not identify. The dome caught the sound and returned it multiplied. I have been in cathedrals in Rome and churches in Ragusa and I have never heard anything like it.

The Emperor spoke afterward. He thanked the people and asked their forgiveness. A man asking forgiveness on the eve of his death for the sin of not being able to save everyone. I am a cynical man, Tomas Dragović, merchant of Ragusa, veteran of a hundred bad deals. And I wept.

The moat is being filled tonight. The drums are beating. Tomorrow they come.

I will cross to Galata before dawn. The arrangement is made. A boat, a bribe, a place on a Genoese ship. If it works, I live. If it does not, I have sixty sacks of pepper and forty bales of silk that will belong to the Sultan.

Bože, pomozi nam svima.

29 May 1453

I am on a ship. I am alive. I should not be.

I crossed to Galata in a small boat before dawn, as planned. I could hear the assault beginning behind me — the cannon, the screams, the Janissary drums. The water of the Golden Horn reflected the fires burning on the land walls.

From Galata I watched the city fall. I stood on the waterfront with Genoese merchants who watched through telescopes and reported what they saw with the detachment of men commenting on a horse race. The flags changed. The Ottoman banners went up. The sounds carried across the water.

By afternoon, the Genoese had already opened negotiations with the Sultan's representatives. Commerce does not mourn. Commerce adjusts.

I left my silk. I left my pepper. I left my warehouse and my ledgers and my best pair of boots, which I had paid too much for in Aleppo. I left a city that had stood for eleven centuries.

I have my life. I have the clothes I am wearing and twenty ducats sewn into my belt.

Dovoljno. It is enough.

18 July 1453 — at sea, approaching Ragusa

I am nearly home. The Dalmatian coast is visible — the pale stone, the dark pines, the blue water that is a different blue from the Bosphorus. I have been at sea for weeks, hopping from port to port: Galata to Chios, Chios to Corfu, Corfu to Ragusa.

At every port, the news has preceded me. Constantinople has fallen. The conversations are the same everywhere: shock, calculation, adjustment. The Venetians are negotiating trade rights. The Genoese already have them. The Pope is calling for a crusade that will never happen. Everyone is repositioning.

Ragusa will do what Ragusa always does — survive. We will pay tribute to the Sultan. We will trade with the Ottomans as we traded with the Byzantines. We will remain Catholic on Sundays and pragmatic on weekdays. It is not glorious, but glory is for empires, and empires fall.

I keep thinking about the men on the walls. The tanner. The monks. The Genoese crossbowman who made jokes about his pay. The Emperor who would not leave.

They deserved better than the world gave them.

Ali tako je uvijek.

October 1453 — Ragusa

I am home. The city smells of salt and stone and fish, which is exactly how it should smell. My factor, Marko, greeted me at the harbour with a ledger showing the losses from my Constantinople venture. The numbers are impressive in their awfulness. I am not ruined — a Ragusan merchant is never ruined while he can still borrow — but I am considerably less wealthy than I was a year ago.

The Senate is debating our relationship with the Sultan. Some want confrontation. Most want accommodation. Accommodation will win because it always wins in Ragusa. We are a city of five thousand souls we-

dged between Venice and the Ottoman Empire. Our survival depends on making ourselves useful to whoever is in charge.

I told Marko about the siege. He listened carefully and asked only one question: did I save any of the pepper? I did not. He nodded, made a note in his ledger, and said: we will adjust.

Trgovina ne staje. Trade does not stop. Not for sieges, not for empires, not for the end of the world. It merely adjusts the route.

March 1454 — Ragusa

A letter from Giacomo — the Venetian merchant, the terrible card player. He survived. He is in Venice, working for his old patron, rebuilding. He asks if I want to go into partnership on an Ottoman trading venture. The new rulers of Constantinople, he writes, need pepper too.

I read the letter twice. Then I laughed. Then I wrote back: yes.

The world has changed. The routes have changed. The flags have changed. But pepper is still pepper, silk is still silk, and someone in Istanbul — I am practicing the new name — still wants to buy what someone in Alexandria wants to sell.

I will go back. Not to the same city — that city is gone. To the city that has taken its place. I will trade with Turks as I traded with Greeks, and I will try not to think too much about the walls and the men who stood on them.

But I will think about it. On quiet nights, when the Adriatic is still and the stars are out and Ragusa is asleep — I will think about it.

Nikada neću zaboraviti. I will never forget. But I will go back, because that is what merchants do.

Tomas Dragović escaped Constantinople during the chaos of May 29, 1453, aboard a Genoese trading vessel from Galata. He returned to Ragusa (Dubrovnik) by late summer 1453 and resumed his trading activities,

adjusting his routes to accommodate the new Ottoman reality. When the Republic of Ragusa signed its tributary treaty with the Ottoman Empire in 1458, Tomas was among the first Ragusan merchants to establish a permanent trading post in Ottoman Istanbul, where he traded until his retirement in 1469. He died in Dubrovnik in 1474, reportedly still complaining about the price of pepper.

Balázs Kún, Apprentice Founder

Hungarian apprentice to Orbán (Urban), the cannon-maker who built the great bombard for Sultan Mehmed II

I wanted to be a blacksmith. My master wanted to change the world. The world, it turns out, did not have a say in the matter.

November 1452 — Edirne

I should explain how I ended up here, because I am not entirely clear on it myself.

My master, Orbán — or Urban, as the Italians call him — is a cannon-maker. The best cannon-maker in Christendom, he will tell you, usually before you have asked. Last year he went to the Byzantine Emperor and offered to build the greatest gun ever made. The Emperor said he could not afford it. My master said: interesting, and went to the Sultan instead.

The Sultan could afford it.

So here I am in Edirne, capital of the Ottoman Empire, a Hungarian Catholic apprentice building a cannon for a Muslim sultan to use against a Christian city. If there is a patron saint of poor career decisions, I should like to light a candle.

The cannon is enormous. Twenty-seven feet long, bronze, with a barrel you could climb inside — which I have done, because Orbán asked me to clean it, and when your master asks you to climb inside a cannon, you do not argue. You merely wonder, briefly, about your life choices.

Istenem, mibe keveredtem.

February 1453 — Edirne

The cannon is finished. We tested it today outside the walls of Edirne. The stone ball — twelve hundred pounds of carved granite — flew more than a mile and buried itself in the earth so deep that it took twenty men to dig it out.

The sound of the firing caused two horses to bolt, a minaret to crack, and a flock of pigeons to vacate the city in what I can only describe as permanent emigration. Orbán was delighted. The Sultan was delighted. I was temporarily deaf in my left ear.

Orbán says this cannon will bring down the walls of Constantinople, which have stood for a thousand years. I said: master, those walls are twelve metres high and five metres thick. He said: yes, and this cannon throws twelve hundred pounds of stone at them. I said: but a thousand years. He said: what does the stone care how old the wall is?

He has a point. Stone does not care. Stone is, in my experience, indifferent to history.

The Sultan has ordered sixty oxen to drag the gun to Constantinople. We leave in March. I asked if I could stay behind. Orbán looked at me as if I had suggested we fill the cannon with flowers.

Hatvan ökör. Sixty oxen. For one cannon. The world has gone entirely mad.

20 March 1453 — on the road to Constantinople

We have been on the road for two weeks. The cannon moves at the speed of a glacier with digestive problems. The sixty oxen pull it along a road that was built specially for the purpose, and even so, we manage perhaps five miles on a good day.

The logistics of moving this weapon are the kind of problem that makes sensible people become hermits. Two hundred men walk alongside

the cannon to keep it on the road. Engineers check the wooden frame every hour. The oxen must be watered, fed, and encouraged, which is a diplomatic way of saying 'beaten with sticks when they stop moving, which is constantly.'

Orbán rides ahead on a horse, giving orders that no one follows because no one can hear them over the creaking of the frame and the complaining of the oxen. He is magnificent and completely unaware that he is also ridiculous.

I walk beside the barrel. My job is to listen for stress fractures in the bronze. Orbán taught me the sound — a particular high note, like a bell being struck wrong. I have not heard it yet, but I listen with the attention of a man who knows that if the barrel cracks, I am standing next to it.

Isten óvjon a mesteremtől és az ő ágyújától.

5 April 1453 — outside Constantinople

We have arrived. The cannon has been positioned opposite the weakest section of the walls — a dip in the line where the ground falls into a valley. The Sultan's tent is behind us. We are, quite literally, at the centre of the world's attention.

I have seen the walls of Constantinople. They are very large. They are the largest walls I have ever seen. I said this to Orbán, and he said: they are also the last walls anyone will ever need to build this large, because after our cannon, walls will be obsolete.

I think he may be right, which is the sort of thought that keeps you awake at night when you are twenty-two and have accidentally helped build the weapon that makes civilisation's primary defensive technology irrelevant.

The gun crew numbers forty. I am the only Hungarian. The rest are Ottoman artillerists who treat the cannon with the kind of reverence usually reserved for religious relics, which I suppose it is, in a way. A bronze

god, twenty-seven feet long, that speaks in thunder and reshapes geography.

Nem akartam ezt. I did not want this. But wanting, as my mother used to say, is not the same as getting.

12 April 1453

We fired the great cannon for the first time today.

The process takes three hours. First, the powder — five hundred pounds of it, packed into the barrel with wooden rammers by men who move very carefully, because if the powder ignites prematurely, there will be a crater where the gun crew used to be. Then the stone ball — twelve hundred pounds, lowered in by crane. Then the aim is checked, the fuse is prepared, and everyone retreats to a distance that Orbán considers safe but that I consider optimistic.

The firing itself is indescribable. The sound is not a bang. It is a physical event — a concussion that hits you in the chest and leaves your ears howling. The ball arcs across the sky, visible for a moment, then strikes the wall.

The wall broke. A section six metres wide simply ceased to exist, replaced by dust and falling stone. I have never seen anything like it. I have helped build the thing that did it, and I still cannot quite believe it.

Orbán stood behind the gun with his arms crossed and said: jól van. Good. As if he had expected nothing less.

A magam részéről majdnem hánytam.

28 April 1453

The daily routine of operating the world's largest cannon is as follows. Wake before dawn. Check the barrel for cracks — this is my job, and I do it with the thoroughness of a man who sleeps thirty feet from the thing. Load the powder. Load the ball. Fire. Wait three hours for the

barrel to cool while soaking it in warm oil to prevent thermal shock. Repeat.

We fire seven times a day at maximum. The barrel heats enormously with each shot. Orbán explained the metallurgy to me: the bronze expands when hot and contracts when cool, and each cycle creates tiny fractures that accumulate over time. I asked him what happens when the fractures become not-tiny. He said: then we need a new cannon. I asked how long that would take to build. He said: three months.

The walls are being destroyed methodically. Nine breaches in the outer wall at last count. The Christians repair them at night with timber and earth. We destroy them again each morning. It is the most expensive game of catch I have ever witnessed.

Orbán says we are making history. I say we are making rubble. He says these are the same thing.

Talán igaza van. Perhaps he is right. I am not qualified to judge. I am an apprentice.

14 May 1453

The cannon cracked.

I heard it — that high note, the wrong-bell sound Orbán taught me to listen for, except a hundred times louder. The barrel split along a seam near the breech during the fourth firing of the day. A fracture line opened the width of my hand.

Orbán went white. I have never seen him go white before. He walked around the cannon three times, touching the crack, muttering calculations. Then he said: we can repair it. We will bind the breech with iron bands and reduce the powder charge. It will fire, but not as far and not as hard.

Two men in the crew were injured by fragments — one badly. They were carried away. Orbán did not watch them go. He was already designing the repair.

I should be fair to him. He is not heartless. He is a man who builds things, and when the thing he built is broken, the breaking occupies his entire mind. The human cost is real to him, but it is real in the way that weather is real — something that happens around the work.

A mester és az ágyúja. The master and his cannon. I sometimes wonder which one is the instrument and which is the craftsman.

Cracked bronze. Cracked walls. Everything breaks eventually. The trick, Orbán says, is to break the other thing first.

27 May 1453

The final assault is two days away. The Sultan has ordered maximum bombardment — every gun, all day, no pause for cooling. Orbán protested that this will damage the repaired cannon further. The Sultan's representative said: the cannon must fire until the walls fall or the cannon falls. Orbán accepted this with the expression of a man who has just been told to drive his horse off a cliff for the good of the army.

We fired eleven times today. The cannon survived, but each shot sounds worse — a deeper, more tired sound, like an old man coughing. The repair bands are holding, but the crack has lengthened. I measure it each evening. It is growing the way cracks grow — slowly, then all at once.

I asked Orbán what happens to us if the cannon explodes. He said: we will be standing behind it, so the force goes forward. I said: master, I have cleaned the inside of this barrel, and I can tell you the force goes in all directions. He said: then stand farther back.

The logic of artillerists. Stand farther back.

Holnapután vége lesz. Day after tomorrow, it ends. One way or another.

29 May 1453 — before dawn

The assault began after midnight. We fired the cannon until the barrel glowed in the darkness — shot after shot, faster than safe, the way the

Sultan demanded. Each firing lit the field in front of us like lightning, and in those flashes I could see the assault waves crashing against the ruined walls.

Orbán stood behind the gun, directing each shot. He was calm. He was always calm around the cannon, even when it was killing him — and it was killing him, I know that now. The bronze dust, the powder fumes, the noise. His hearing was nearly gone. His hands shook when he was not working. But at the gun, his hands were steady.

The walls fell. I saw the Ottoman flags go up in the first grey light of dawn. The Janissary drums shifted from attack rhythm to victory rhythm. Men cheered.

Orbán sat down on the ground behind the cannon and said nothing. I brought him water. He drank it and looked at the smoke rising from the city and said: az ágyú megtette a dolgát. The cannon did its work.

I looked at the crack in the barrel. It had grown another hand's width during the night.

We broke the walls. The walls nearly broke us. That seems about right.

8 June 1453

Orbán is dead.

Not from the great cannon — from one of the smaller guns, a falconet that exploded during a test firing three days ago. A piece of the breech struck him in the chest. He died that evening.

I was with him. He said very little at the end. He asked about the great bombard — whether the crack had stabilised. I lied and said yes. He nodded and closed his eyes.

The Sultan sent condolences. A court official delivered them — formal, polite, the kind of message you send when a useful tool has broken. Orbán deserved better than that, but he would not have cared. He cared about the cannon, and the cannon still stands — cracked, repaired, silent now — outside the walls it broke.

I am twenty-two years old. My master is dead. The city he helped conquer is being remade. The walls are being repaired by the conquerors. I am an apprentice without a master, a Hungarian in an Ottoman army, a cannon-maker who has decided he never wants to see another cannon.

Az ágyúk hazudnak. They tell you they are tools. They are not. They are the future, and the future is louder and more broken than anyone promised.

Nyugodj békében, mester. Rest in peace, master. You built what you built. God will decide what it meant.

September 1453 — Constantinople

The Ottomans have asked me to stay. They need cannon founders, and I am trained, and skilled workers do not grow on trees — even Ottoman trees.

I said yes because I have no money to travel home and because saying no to the Sultan's military administration is not, technically, an option. They are polite about it. The Ottomans are always polite. They give you a choice between yes and yes, and then they thank you for choosing.

The city is transforming. Mosques where churches stood. New markets. Turkish settlers arriving from Anatolia. The walls — the walls Orbán's cannon broke — are being repaired. Ottoman engineers are filling the breaches with new stone. The walls will stand again, for a new master.

I walked past the great bombard yesterday. It sits where we left it, on its wooden frame, the crack visible along the breech like a scar. No one has moved it. It is too large, too heavy, and probably too damaged to fire again. A monument to itself.

I patted the barrel as I passed. Then I felt foolish and walked on.

Egy nap hazamegyek. One day I will go home. One day I will make church bells instead of cannons, and the only thing that breaks will be the silence, and it will break beautifully.

Balázs Kún survived the siege and the death of his master Orbán, who was killed when one of the smaller cannons exploded during the bombardment. Balázs was retained by the Ottoman military as a technical assistant to the artillery corps, a position he held with characteristic reluctance until 1456. He eventually returned to Hungary, settling in Brassó (Brașov), where he opened a foundry specialising in church bells — a deliberate choice, he reportedly told friends, to spend the rest of his life making things that called people together rather than blew them apart. The foundry operated until 1489. Balázs died in 1497, and his grave marker in Brașov Cemetery bears no reference to Constantinople.

- February 18, 1451: Mehmed II accedes to the Ottoman throne for the second time at age nineteen, immediately making the conquest of Constantinople his primary objective.
- April–August 1452: Construction of Rumeli Hisarı, the Ottoman fortress on the Bosphorus, cuts off maritime relief to Constantinople and signals Mehmed's intent.
- Early 1452: Orbán (Urban), a Hungarian cannon-maker, offers his services to Byzantine Emperor Constantine XI but is refused due to lack of funds. He subsequently enters the service of Sultan Mehmed II.
- December 12, 1452: Cardinal Isidore of Kiev proclaims the union of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in Hagia Sophia, fulfilling a papal condition for Western military aid. The announcement deeply divides the Greek population.
- January 29, 1453: Giovanni Giustiniani Longo arrives in Constantinople with 700 well-armed Genoese soldiers. Emperor Constantine XI appoints him protostrator — commander of the land defences.
- February 1453: The Venetian Senate authorises the dispatch of two transport ships carrying 400 soldiers each and 15 galleys, but repeated delays prevent the fleet from sailing in time.
- March 1453: The great bombard — 27 feet long, firing 1,200-pound stone projectiles — is transported from Edirne to Constantinople, pulled by 60 oxen along a specially constructed road.

- April 2, 1453: The Ottoman army, numbering between 80,000 and 200,000 troops, encamps outside the Theodosian Walls. The city's defenders number approximately 7,000–8,000.
- April 5, 1453: Sultan Mehmed II arrives with his final detachments and establishes his command position opposite the Mesoteichion, the weakest section of the walls.
- April 6, 1453: The siege officially begins. Ottoman forces take positions along the full length of the land walls, supported by more than 70 artillery pieces.
- April 12, 1453: The first major artillery bombardment commences — the most concentrated use of heavy cannon in the history of warfare to that date. The bombardment will continue for 47 consecutive days.
- April 22, 1453: In a feat of military engineering, 80 Ottoman galleys are transported overland on greased logs around the Genoese colony of Galata and into the Golden Horn, bypassing the defensive chain boom and stretching the defenders' already thin lines.
- Late April–May 1453: Ottoman mining operations attempt to tunnel beneath the walls. John Grant, a Scottish or German military engineer, detects and destroys at least five major tunnels using counter-mining techniques including bowls of water to detect vibrations.
- Mid-May 1453: The great bombard cracks from metal fatigue and thermal stress after weeks of continuous firing. It is partially repaired but operates at reduced capacity for the remainder of the siege.
- May 25, 1453: During a religious procession through the city, the icon of the Theotokos slips from its frame. A sudden

hailstorm and unseasonable fog follow, widely interpreted as ill omens by the defenders.

- May 28, 1453: Mehmed II sends a final demand for surrender, which Constantine XI refuses. Ottoman labourers work through the night to fill the moat. A final joint liturgy — Orthodox and Catholic together — is held in Hagia Sophia.

- May 29, 1453, after midnight: The final assault begins. Bashi-bazouk irregulars attack first and are repelled. Anatolian regulars follow and are also driven back after fierce fighting.

- May 29, 1453, approximately dawn: The elite Janissary corps — 3,000 strong — launches the third and final assault wave. Giovanni Giustiniani Longo is struck by a shot and evacuated, causing panic among the Genoese defenders. Ottoman troops enter through or near the Kerkoporta postern gate.

- May 29, 1453, morning: Emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos is killed in the final fighting, likely near the Gate of St. Romanus. His body is never found. He is the last reigning emperor of the Byzantine Empire, which has endured since 330 AD.

- May 29–31, 1453: Sultan Mehmed II allows three days of looting as was customary. Thousands of inhabitants are killed or enslaved.

- June 1, 1453: Mehmed II attends the first Friday prayer in Hagia Sophia, formally marking its conversion from church to mosque. The 900-year-old Christian cathedral becomes the first imperial mosque of the Ottoman capital.

- June 3, 1453: Loukas Notaras, the last megas doux of the Byzantine Empire, is executed on Mehmed's orders —

reportedly for refusing to surrender his young son to the Sultan.

- Early June 1453: Giovanni Giustiniani Longo dies from complications of his wound, likely on the island of Chios. The Republic of Genoa issues diplomatic denials of cowardice charges to the courts of England, France, and Burgundy.

- 1453–1454: Constantinople is established as the new Ottoman capital, replacing Edirne (Adrianople). The city is gradually resettled with Muslim populations. Greek refugees scatter across the Mediterranean — to Venice, Crete, Rome, and Ragusa — carrying manuscripts and learning that will help fuel the Italian Renaissance.

- 1458: The Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) signs a tributary treaty with the Ottoman Empire, formalising a relationship of pragmatic accommodation that allows Ragusan merchants nearly unrestricted trade access across Ottoman territories.