

# SINFONIA

10 April 1815 – Indonesia

The water rose up in a wall like the end of the world.

The ship's prow dropped down – down – so far down it seemed impossible it could ever lift again—

Spilling off a monumental weight of water, it began slowly to rise.

The Flores Sea blazed, darker than indigo, every wave crest tipped with crimson and carmine.

*Yes, we are a day late. The dark of the moon was yesterday. But perhaps, perhaps we will not all be dying for nothing—*

Ranieri glanced back through the glass of the steam-ship's wheel-house. Two of his men grappled with the captain: a grey and grizzled man in a salt-worn peaked cap. By his lip movements, he appeared to be shouting.

*Protesting where we're taking his ship, no doubt.*

The steam-driven paddles made it in advance of all its kind; keel laid down in France by special order. *That alone must make it ours, to do with as we wish,* he thought.

A pain sawed at his waist, from the rope that bound him to the rail.

The wind, hot and abnormally dry, snatched the voice from his mouth. He shouted to the woman:

'Now! – *Sing—!*'

Identical ropes trapped her. The same wind snapped her black

hair out in a pennant, and slapped it back in her face. Against the violet sky, she appeared a ghost from Byron or Shelley; her skin visibly white through the skirts of ash and spray.

Her gaze riveted, not on him, but on the child he held.

The girl, her daughter, had no ropes lashing her to the rail. Nothing held the six-year-old safe on the pitching, yawing deck – except the grip he had on her shoulders.

*'Ranieri!'*

He read it from her lips. Not his real name, but he has been answering to it from Rome to Indonesia.

*'Give me Maria Grazia! Anything else is yours!'*

The ship's prow strained, lifting towards the vertical. As if the baying of the gale were nothing, he mouthed his order again at the woman. And lifted one hand free of her child.

The woman frantically nodded, her hand shielding her mouth against the snowfall of ashes.

Air cleared unnaturally around her face.

She began to sing.

It should not have been possible to hear her over the storm. That he could hear a thread of sound, no matter how soft, under the ear-battering gale, made his spirits rise immeasurably.

The whole hull thrummed with the straining side paddle-wheel's engines. Barely a dish-rag of canvas high on both her masts kept her facing into the seas.

The ship stood all but upright on her stern at the top of the alizarin and scarlet wave. The prow pitched forward; down. Spray deluged him, tightening the hemp ropes painfully. A hill of water momentarily cut off the wind from his right-hand side.

At one and the same moment, he heard the singer's voice leap up into a spine-shivering soprano, and saw clear across the seething ocean to the island.

*Sumbawa Island – at last!*

Sumbawa: one among an archipelago of thousands of islets that make up the Lesser Sunda Islands, on the border between Indonesia and the Indian Ocean. Twelve thousand miles from Europe, and fifteen miles away, now, from their foundering ship in the tiny Flores Sea. An island-shape barely visible in the dimness.

He could not have seen it at all if not for the single cone of the volcano, Mount Tambora. A lightning-filled pillar of smoke plundered upwards from the volcano: dark violet and deepest black.

Hard to be sure in the spray and detritus-filled air . . . He slitted his eyes, and made out a red spark of lava beginning to snake down from the peak.

‘Sing louder!’ He shrieked into the momentary lull of the wind, barely audible over the slamming of steam-pistons, and the shrill sound of rivets popping free of the side paddle-wheel casing. ‘Sing!’

The woman sobbed a note, reaching out her hands to her daughter.

Ranieri picked the child up. He put a distasteful hand over her mouth to stop her blaring; ignored her kicking, stained legs, and held her out – to the full length of his arms – so that she would fall directly into the glistening slide of the wave’s trough, never touching the ship’s side.

He did not need to voice the threat. Only the exhortation:

‘Sing louder! *better!* than you have ever sung before!’

Terror and desperation gave her voice power.

Ranieri drew in a breath, sour with the volcano’s exhaled gases, and sent his own ringing tenor to join her, spiralling upwards in a duet.

*Unfortunate that I am the only one of our people with a true voice*, he found himself wryly thinking at this last moment, that must be his last moment. *I wonder, will this work?*

His voice reverberated in his chest, as if he sang in the nave of a cathedral, or some pagan amphitheatre; he felt himself join with her and her anguish.

The words sang of love and death.

At the aching zenith of the duet, soprano and tenor went beyond themselves into an apotheosis of sound, barely seeming that of human voices.

Below the sea-bed, below the abyssal rock that strains with the pressure of the subduction zone, the magma chamber reaches breaking point. Liquid rock, fire and gas surge upwards.

The volcano of Tambora is far too narrow a channel to contain it.

The girl-child panicked, spasmed out of Ranieri's hands, and fell, vanishing into spray and coiling water.

It's too late now, even though the mother goes from song to agonised, horribly comic screech. It is done. He thinks desperately, *Will they know, back home, what we have achieved here? That we have succeeded? We are so far away—*

The island of Sumbawa detonates.

The explosion of the volcano Tambora is the loudest sound heard on the planet since the Neolithic age and the super-eruption of Mount Toba. The ancient Plinian rupture of Vesuvius is nothing to it; Krakatoa, decades later, will not outdo it. Twelve cubic miles of rock lift into the atmosphere.

An ash-and-cinder cloud will extend six hundred miles, turning the sky to night. The eruption is heard clearly in Sumatra, twelve hundred miles away, where it is mistaken for artillery.

It is not heard in Europe.

Europe does not take notice of news in the Far East. They are too busy with the upcoming end of their own wars against the Emperor of the North.

They don't hear how it's pitch-dark in Indonesia for two days – and, afterwards, it's discovered that eleven or twelve thousand people died in Tambora's pyroclastic surges, and perhaps seventy thousand in the floods, starvation, and disease that comes after.

But the following year – AD 1816 – is known throughout the northern hemisphere as 'the Year without a Summer'.

A generation-long war is over: a Gallic tyrant has scraped a desperate victory on the field of Waterloo, and consented to an Armistice; and now they desire to enjoy the peace. But in Europe and America, cloud and a persistent dry sulphurous fog cover the sun each month. Storms wrack the winter. Snow falls in June, and a bitter frost comes all year round. The potato, wheat, and oat harvests fail. Livestock die.

The desolation of the wars is barely gone before the resulting extensive famine. Typhus and cholera outbreaks follow hunger. And rioting, looting and arson follow them.

Men look at the skies and talk of the punishment of God.

A very few men do not.

They talk of a ship lost in the seas around Mount Tambora, on that rash and vital voyage.

'Gentlemen, ladies – "Matteo Ranieri".' A man raises his glass to their fellow-conspirator. 'One of the Prince's Men has fallen – but the Prince's Men go on.'

They drink deep, around the table, but do not afterwards smash their crystal glasses. Valuable things are only to be broken when it becomes necessary.

Now their experiment is proved, they can begin to plan.

All that stands between them and success is time.

# 1

## Some years later – Napoli, Port district.

He could not remember the notes.

The sounds fell away from Conrad like tides receding across a beach—

He rose out of what he realised was a dream.

The backs of his eyes hurt. Conrad felt with tentative fingers at the flesh around his right eye-socket, and found it puffy. Pain centred at the retina of the eyeball—

*Light!*

—drilling its way through his brain as his eyelid slitted open.

The lemon-yellow of Naples' morning sun, rising south and east of Vesuvius, stabbed through his window and roused nausea. Conrad Scalese rolled over – having just time to wonder, *What am I doing in bed fully dressed?* – and made the edge of the mattress.

He vomited onto the bare floorboards.

'Padrone?'

Tullio's deep voice cut through his head, making Conrad clutch both hands back over his eyes.

The man-servant deftly wiped his face clean. 'Too much getting pissed at the after-show party? Or's your head again?'

'Sick,' Conrad managed.

It wasn't that sensible an answer, since it could be equally taken to refer to a hangover from too much celebratory drinking. Tullio Rossi murmured something consoling, however. Conrad clamped

his eyelids shut, behind his palms, and listened to the click of spoon against glass; the sound of water pouring.

The remains of his dream fell through auditory memory: dry sand through his fingers. Every note is gone.

*But it won't have been mine, he realised. Not mine – words are my talent, not music. It'll be something I heard at some opera house—*

The cold edge of a glass tipped against Conrad's mouth. He swallowed Tullio's usual remedy by reflex, the touch of laudanum just distinguishable. The residue tasted bitter.

'Sorry, padrone, I thought you were drunk last night.' Tullio's baritone carried the rough edge of his army days even now; too much shouting of orders over the explosion of cannon and screaming of horses. He held the volume of it down to quiet questioning. 'Sick headache?'

If the pain hadn't half-blinded him, Conrad would have sworn violently.

'I don't get "sick headaches". Women get "sick headaches"!'

'Absolutely, padrone.'

Only a man who knew him very well could have distinguished amusement in the ex-rifleman's tone. Conrad knew him very well.

Gritting his teeth, Conrad got out: 'The ancient Greek physicians called it "hemicrania" – "migraine"—'

'Oh. Megrimis. My old mum used to get those. Not on the rag, are you, padrone?'

Conrad suppressed what he could of the pain to say encouragingly, 'You're fired, Tullio.'

'Yes, padrone. Third time this month. Drink up, now.'

Pain stabbed from Conrad's first cervical vertebrae, up across his skull. Half his face by now seemed something between numb and squashy. It felt as if the air itself pressured him, squeezing his head in a vice, exactly as it had felt during the very first of these episodes, after a twelve-hour continuous artillery barrage in the war.

Conrad gave the glass to Tullio and rolled gingerly back on the bed, supine, gathering as much dignity as he could be bothered to assume.

‘If anyone calls, I’m . . . naturally tired after last night’s success. They can come back with their congratulations later.’

Tullio eased the shutters three-quarters closed. That cut out most of the early sunlight. ‘If anybody calls at this hour, I’ll tell them to go fuck a mule!’

Amusement hurt.

Conrad hauled a pillow over his head, wincing as cotton scraped at flesh unaccountably tender. He tensed, restless despite the opiate; hearing his tendons and ligaments stretching with a crack that did not dilute pain. Tullio’s laudanum held Conrad on the edge of sleep and waking. Time stretched and contracted oddly. He suspected it had been only a few moments when he heard the quiet noises of Tullio with a cloth and bucket, cleaning up the mess beside the bed. The smell of vomit faded.

‘Sorry for that.’

‘Shoulda guessed. You had a bad night.’ The forty-year-old man voiced sardonic amusement. ‘Another master would give his servant a raise, mind you . . .’

‘I don’t pay you,’ Conrad obliged him by pointing out.

‘Well, it won’t hurt you to agree to the raise, then, will it?’

Conrad made a noise half-laughter and half-groan. ‘Please – stop consoling the sick, you don’t have the knack of it!’

‘Padrone, I was there for *Il Terrore di Parigi, ossia la morte di Dio*—’

Tullio Rossi struck a dramatic attitude, somewhat hampered by the mop.

‘—*The Terror of Paris, Or, The Death of God!* That’s drama. I think we’re finally going to be rich!’ He dropped the operatic stance, and muttered. ‘You deserve it, Corrado.’

‘There might be money for more than second-rate, second-floor lodgings . . . I need this libretto to make my name. I need to finally pay off my debts.’

He did not say, *I need proper wages for a man-servant who consents without argument to subsist on bed-and-board*; but he made a private solemn resolution.

‘Sleep, you.’ Tullio’s rough voice was affectionate. By the sound of it, he took bucket and mop together in one hand; using the other to open the bedroom door.



It closed behind him with a click that made Conrad wince.

Sleep pulled, with a promise of pain gone when he woke.

He pushed dream-thoughts aside, drawing his own success to himself as if he were a dragon hoarding maidens.

*People will think I drank myself into a stupor last night, but why would I? I didn't want to miss a minute of it!*

*Il Terrore di Parigi*, put on as the second opera of this Carnival season, just before Lent – since Naples, unlike other Italian states, doesn't close its opera houses at the start of Lent. Set against the background of that Enlightenment September when Robespierre made Paris's famous noxious mud turn red in the streets.

*Who can resist heroes and heroines in danger from Madame la Guillotine? Four acts – a good three hours, counting the interval – and the script and staging all Conrad Scalese's.*

For a moment Conrad was beyond the pain, luminous with a memory of absolute satisfaction. Music and human voices intertwining with precision and drive, building to a heart-shaking climax, and – after the end of the opera's last act – twenty-seven seconds of pure silence. (He counted each, breath stopped in his throat.)

Every level of the opera house from boxes to pit exploded in applause. *Brava! Bravi! Bravissimo!*

Conrad Scalese, librettist – no – *poet*. Creator of stories . . .

Conrad rolled over, half-burying himself in sheets and blankets.

. . . *Finally successful! Finally there.*

The world broke apart with a shattering, literal, crash.



Conrad sat bolt upright before he was perfectly alert, automatically pushing at the blankets. Cold wind sliced across his body.

Small fangs of pain sliced into his skin.

He got his eyes open, realising all in one moment, *The shutters are fully open – the window is broken! The floor – the bed—*

*—I'm covered in broken glass!*

'What in hell, padrone!'

Tullio Rossi shoved through the bedroom door. The last of the window pane fell to the floor in guillotine-sharp pieces. Rossi

wrenched the broken shutters aside, and stumbled, his foot catching against a brick on the floor among the glass.

*'Merda!'* Shards of glass stood out from Conrad's hands, his dazzled attempts to remove them only seeming to drive them deeper.

The red clay brick lay surrounded by dust and brilliant shards on the floorboards. Undeniable and present.

Tullio snapped his fingers. Conrad relinquished his hands to Tullio: army experience would let him remove the splinters more cleanly.

*'Corradino!'* The voice from below in the street was a familiar clear bass. *'Conrad! What does it take to wake you up!'*

*'Spinelli – you idiot – I have a fucking front door—!'* Conrad clamped his eyes shut. He could not smell smoke, he realised. *So, the building's not on fire, no excuse!*

Being still clothed meant he had his shoes on. Conrad staggered upright, crunching over the glass on the floor. Tullio cursed, following, attempting to deal with his master's injuries.

With no regard for splinters still in the frame, Conrad kicked the glass doors open and put one foot on the balcony, leaning off the side so that he could see down into the street.

Blazing sunlight over the Bay of Naples skewered his right eye. He squeezed his eyelids together, blinking away tears, and snarled with intense quietness:

*'JohnJack, I'm going to fucking kill you!'*

*'Kill me later. Come down here now. And get your coat on – you're leaving Naples!'*

Before his other eye watered shut, Conrad saw that Gian-Giacomo Spinelli – called *'JohnJack'* on occasion, for his having sung at the Theatre Royal in London, God bless the English for their ignorant love of opera – had his own coat pulled hastily on, and a low hat tugged down over his eyes.

He also had the collar of his jacket folded under itself, his crimson cravat badly tied, and every other sign of having dressed hastily (and conceivably in the dark).

A carpet-bag bulged at his feet.

Tullio firmly seized Conrad's hands one at a time, ensuring each

was free of glass. The cold February wind made Conrad's mind feel more clear.

'Has everyone in Napoli gone mad this morning?'

'Get to the carriage, I'll tell you on the way!' JohnJack Spinelli glanced left and right, and looked up at Conrad again. 'I had to come round the back – the front of your building's being watched.'

'Watched!'

'Leave this way and you won't be seen. The rest have packed up and gone already. Fanny's on her way to Milan with Persiani. We broke down the door and Barjaba's lodgings are deserted. They say the impresario was seen fleeing over the rooftops, clutching a carpet-bag full of the house takings, on the way to a hired carriage—'

Conrad spluttered disbelief.

'—He's gone!' JohnJack snarled. 'The others have left on the public stage or the first ship they could get out of Naples harbour. I waited to get you. Tullio, get him packed, we don't have any more time!'

Vomit burned in the back of Conrad's throat.

He was aware that Tullio moved away, and a moment later returned with a jacket that he urged on over Conrad's slept-in shirt and waistcoat. And, over top of that, a faded and battered greatcoat, surviving from the war. As if it were still war-time, when a man must up and move without warning and only the vaguest idea of why.

Tullio moved around the room behind him; the sounds unmistakably those of things being thrown into carpet-bags and travelling trunks.

The disparate parts of the morning failed to make any sense.

Conrad opened his eyes cautiously. Below, the tall, skinny coloratura basso stepped from foot to foot, either against the frost on the cold earth, or in urgency. While pale in the face, he did not appear to have a hangover – *Though he should*, Conrad thought. *Given what he drank last night—*

All the previous night overwhelmed him, pushing aside the pain. Five ovations; singers and audience made into the closest of drunken friends after the performance; and Conrad himself in the middle of it, for the first time one of the centres of success.

‘No.’ He gestured at Tullio to stop packing. ‘No, I’m not going anywhere! We had the success of the season last night!’

‘Yes.’ Spinelli sounded grim. ‘And in the early hours of this morning, just before dawn, that same Teatro Nuovo opera house where we had the success? Burned down to the ground! Struck by a lightning-bolt from God.’