

Ezio knew that Federico bore him no ill will over the fact that their father confided more of the family business in him than in his elder brother. Federico would die of boredom if confronted by a life in banking. The problem was, Ezio had a feeling that he might be the same. But for the moment, the day when he donned the black velvet suit and the gold chain of a Florentine banker was still some way off, and he was determined to enjoy his days of freedom and irresponsibility to the full. Little did he realize just how short-lived those days would be.

‘We’d better hurry, too,’ Federico was saying, ‘if we want to avoid a bollocking.’

‘He may be worried.’

‘No – he knows we can take care of ourselves.’ Federico was looking at Ezio speculatively. ‘But we *had* better get a move on.’ He paused. ‘You don’t feel up to a little wager at all, do you? A race perhaps?’

‘Where to?’

‘Let’s say,’ Federico looked across the moonlit city towards a tower not far away. ‘The roof of Santa Trinità. If it’s not going to take too much out of you – and it’s not far from home. But there’s just one thing more.’

‘Yes?’

‘We’re not racing along the streets, but across the rooftops.’

Ezio took a deep breath. ‘OK. Try me,’ he said.

‘All right, little *tartaruga* – go!’

Without another word, Federico was off, scaling a nearby roughcast wall as easily as a lizard would. He paused at the top, seeming almost to teeter among the rounded red tiles, laughed, and was off again. By the time Ezio had reached the rooftops, his brother was twenty yards ahead. He set off in pursuit, his pain forgotten in the adrenaline-fuelled excitement of the chase. Then he saw Federico take an almighty leap across a pitch-black void, to land lightly on the flat roof of a grey palazzo slightly below the level of the one he had jumped from. He ran a little way further, and waited. Ezio felt a glimmer of fear as the chasm of the street eight storeys below loomed before him, but he knew that he would die rather than hesitate in front of his brother, and so, summoning up his courage, he took a massive leap of faith, seeing, as he soared across, the hard granite cobbles in the moonlight far beneath his feet as they flailed the air. For a split second he wondered if he'd judged it right, as the hard grey wall of the palazzo seemed to rise up to meet him, but then, somehow, it sank below him and he was on the new roof, sprawling slightly it was true, but still on his feet, and elated, though breathing hard.

'Baby brother still has much to learn,' taunted Federico, setting off again, a darting shadow among the chimney-stacks under the scattering of clouds. Ezio hurled himself forward, lost in the wildness of the moment. Other abysses yawned beneath him, some

defining mere alleyways, others broad thoroughfares. Federico was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly the tower of Santa Trinità rose before him, rising from the red sweep of the church's gently sloping roof. But as he approached he remembered that the church stood in the centre of a square, and that the distance between its roof and those of the surrounding buildings was far greater than any he had yet leapt. He dared not hesitate or lose speed now – his only hope was that the church roof was lower than the one he would have to jump from. If he could throw himself forward with enough force, and truly launch himself into the air, gravity would do the rest. For one or two seconds he would fly like a bird. He forced any thought of the consequences of failure out of his mind.

The edge of the roof he was on approached fast, and then – nothing. He soared, listening to the air whistle in his ears, bringing tears into his eyes. The church roof seemed an infinite distance away – he would never reach it, he would never laugh or fight or hold a woman in his arms again. He couldn't breathe. He shut his eyes, and then . . .

His body bent double, he was steadying himself with his hands and feet, but they were supported again – he had made it, within inches of the edge, but he had made it on to the church roof!

But where was Federico? He clambered up to the base of the tower and turned to look back the way he

had come, just in time to see his brother flying through the air himself. Federico landed firmly, but his weight sent one or two of the red clay tiles slithering out of place and he almost lost his footing as the tiles slid down the roof and off the edge, shattering a few seconds later on the hard cobbles far below. But Federico had found his balance again, and he stood up, panting for sure, but with a broad, proud smile on his face.

‘Not such a *tartaruga* after all,’ he said, as he came up and clapped Ezio on the shoulder. ‘You went past me like greased lightning.’

‘I didn’t even know that I had,’ said Ezio briefly, trying to catch his breath.

‘Well, you won’t beat me up to the top of the tower,’ retorted Federico, pushing Ezio to the side, and he started to clamber up the squat tower which the city fathers were thinking of replacing with something of a more modern design. This time Federico made it first, and even had to give a hand up to his wounded brother, who was beginning to feel that bed would be no bad thing. They were both out of breath, and stood while they recovered to look out over their city, serene and silent in the oyster-light of dawn.

‘It is a good life we lead, brother,’ said Federico with uncharacteristic solemnity.

‘The best,’ Ezio agreed. ‘And may it never change.’

They both paused – neither wishing to break the perfection of the moment – but after a while Federico