

Zoe

Like everyone in Constantinople, Zoe received the news of the events at Epitabai with chilling foreboding and a nauseating sense of despair. The old prophecies of doom were revived and embellished. Not only did people whisper that what began with Constantine born of Helena would end with Constantine born of Helena, They also remembered that it was not to his dominions that the statue of Constantine the Great pointed, but to the East from whence their doom would come.

Though she did not weep and wail, and beat her breast, and call out the prophecies as the townfolk did, she felt the moment keenly. The world had changed. Nothing would be the same again, and nothing could be taken for granted. Not the next instant or the next sunrise. All they had was the present. Not one grain more.

In her chamber she stood at the open window that overlooked the Golden Horn. Mist was rising, and she could hear the sea moan. The white fog was damp and smelled of burnt salt. When she looked in the direction of Constantine's imperial balcony, she couldn't see the walls, only the flower urns on the terrace and the vague outlines of the palace, fading in and out. It was seven o'clock. The day's end was at hand, and monks were singing Vespers and meditating on Creation, but instead of the golden beauty of sunset, the mood was one of fear and oppression.

For Zoe this past week had been filled with not only emotional turmoil but with a depth of despair and wretchedness of mind she had never known before. Her distress had been so acute at times that it was almost a physical pain. Her father, suspecting what she endured, had tried to help in his fashion by talking of duty and the exigencies of life. But unable to voice her pain, she had sat silently, barely listening. She knew all that. She understood the chasm between dreams and reality. It didn't help the despair. Nothing helped, except being with Constantine. For all her anguish, yesterday on the terrace was as close to happiness as she had come since the marriage treaty. Despite the pain, despite the impossibility of her hopes, the touch of his hand on hers still flamed in her memory -

Gently, so very gently, she laid her cheek on her hand, pretending it was his. *Oh Beloved, where has the time gone that should be ours?* Through the autumn mist a man's voice drifted to her, singing to the sweet notes of a flute, a song filled with yearning and lament. The words sliced through her like a sword.

She closed her eyes on the aching sorrow, and as she did, a new knowledge came to her. Shadowy at first, it gathered force until it submerged her like a giant wave. The old world was gone, and with it, the old ways. From now on, the rules they had live by no longer applied. Her eyes flew open. If he couldn't have a full draught of joy, she'd take what she could get. She would seize the cup and drain it. Before it ran dry.

Before the chance was lost to her forever.

Justiniani

That evening, at the great feast of welcome Zoe had arranged for Justiniani, the conversation touched on many subjects, including war and strategy, poetry, history, and philosophy. Zoe was impressed that a soldier of fortune should quote poetry with such ease and discourse so well on Plato and Aristotle. As they drank malmsey and fine wines and dined on pheasant stuffed with figs and mulberries, she found herself riveted by his tales of far-flung travels and the many perils he had survived. From her seat on Constantine's left, she peered at Justiniani, who sat on Constantine's right, and addressed him directly. "Have you ever been taken captive, noble sir?" she asked, taking a spoonful of *baklava*, a honied pastry sprinkled with finely crushed rose petals,

"I have indeed. In Dutch land. They are a fierce people, but fortunately, I spoke their language," he said gravely. Suddenly a grin lit up his face. "Gold is a language all the world understands."

Zoe laughed. Picking up a stuffed date, she dipped it into a dish of yogurt as Constantine leaned back to speak to his cousin, Theo Paleologus, who held the rank of *domestikos* of the imperial table. The date was exceedingly sweet and the sugar clung to her hand. She licked her fingers before wetting them with rosewater and wiping them dry on her silver-edged napkin. When she looked up, she found Justiniani watching her.

"Have you never seen dates eaten with yogurt?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Not by a beautiful Roman lady with hair the color of wine," he replied. "It is my first time in the city."

As Zoe and Justiniani shared another laugh, Theo took his leave and Constantine turned to Justiniani. "My cousin Theo suggests that I take you on a tour to inspect the walls as soon as it can be arranged."

"I am at your service, Majesty."

"Very good. Now to other pressing matters - " Constantine pushed his chair back. "*Zoste Patricia*, would you care to dance?"

"Always," Zoe smiled, accepting his hand. The minstrels picked up a bright tune. Following their lead, others rose and clapped their way to the center of the hall.

Justiniani watched Zoe from the banquet table. Clearly the emperor favored her, and why not? She was nobly born, intelligent, and impossibly alluring. But the emperor was betrothed to the Princess of Trebizond and could not marry her, however enamored he was. Duty demanded he

wed for an alliance, and by all accounts, the emperor was a man who knew his duty.

The thought elicited a smile.

He leaned back in his chair and sipped his wine. He was at a loss to understand himself. He had loved once in his life -when he was young and too foolish to know better, barely twenty. It had proved a mistake he was determined never to repeat. And he never had. Not until he strode into that hall to make his holy promise to save this city and lifted his eyes to that unforgettable face. Then everything changed. The sparkle of her eyes and the radiance of her smile had knocked his breath from his body. Unable to move, he'd stood rooted to the ground as if by a sorcerer's spell. Had he not looked away, he would probably still be there, staring into her eyes, so helpless had he been, he thought, laughing at himself inwardly.

He inhaled a long breath and upended his cup. If anyone could make him forget his vow never to love again, it was this auburn-haired Roman beauty, in this deadly game of life and death, in this dangerous place that perched so precariously on the edge of extinction.

Constantine

The estrangement with Zoe and the row with the patriarch and the monk took their toll on Constantine. For the second day in a row, he spent a fitful night, sleeping poorly, tormented by bad dreams. In his dream, Gennadius's fist had pounded a table, and with each blow, pain had shot through him. Then he saw it wasn't a table at all, but his own dead face that Gennadius punched. The monk vanished, and Zoe stood in his place. "What do you here?" he asked with joy. She had replied without moving her lips. "You dream. I am not here. You are alone." Even Halil Pasha made an appearance. "You stupid Greeks. You have slain me and killed yourself."

Constantine watched the sheer bed curtains flutter in the breeze that blew in through the lacy doors standing open to the terrace. He inhaled a long breath and sat up. For some strange reason, he remembered Phrantzes's dream on the twenty-eighth of May, the one his friend had related to him after the Georgian emissary had left. He shook himself to clear his head. When he looked again, darkness was lifting, and birds had begun their sweet chorus to greet the dawn. He threw back the bedspread of silver silk embroidered with peacocks and roses. Flinging the lattice doors open wide, he went out on the terrace. The wind blew hard, whipping his hair and woolen nightshirt, and gulls mewed as they circled overhead seeking their breakfast. He rested his hands on the stone balustrade and watched the sunrise. Magenta, crimson, and orange streaked the sky and melted away into the palest of blues, drenching the shimmering waters with their reflection. Zoe's face rose before him, arms lifted, laughing as she twirled, auburn hair mingling with the crimson dawn. Constantine tightened his hold on the stone balustrade. *Zoe*. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, a dimming moon looked down on him; then it faded, chased away by the rising sun.

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