

THE MOSAIC OF SHADOWS

Chapter 1

It was evening when the axe-wielding barbarians arrived at my door. The sun was sinking behind the western ramparts, casting the sky and all below it in copper. In the windless air the canopies and awnings of the queen of cities were still as the myriad towers and domes above them, yet by only inclining an ear you would have met the gentle, sustained notes of the chants which swelled out from the hundred surrounding churches. All day the tide of humanity had run high in the streets, the denizens of Byzantium gathering to mark the feast of Saint Nikolas and to watch the Emperor process through their midst; now that tide was slowly ebbing, slipping back into the arcades and tenements from whence it had come. I sat on my roof and watched them go, sipping a welcome cup of wine after the week of fasting.

Zoe, the younger of my daughters, announced the barbarians. From the corner of my eye I saw her face emerge from the opening at the top of the ladder, concern and puzzlement creasing the smooth skin below her piled ringlets.

‘There are men to see you,’ she said breathlessly, still standing on the ladder. She paused, reconsidered. ‘Giants. Titans. Three of them, with enormous axes - and one like Prometheus, with a beard of fire.’

My daughter has always been given to poetry, though I notice it more often now.

‘Will they fit through the door?’ I asked. ‘Or should I mount my winged steed and fly up to look them in the eye?’

Zoe pondered this. ‘They can come through the door,’ she allowed.

‘And through that opening you’re standing in?’

‘Perhaps. But they might break the ladder,’ she added. ‘Then you’d be stranded up here.’

‘Then they can buy me a new one.’

Zoe’s pouting face vanished, and a riotous noise erupted from the room below. Perhaps she did not exaggerate, for I could hear an almighty stamping, the tread of men who wield their feet like hammers and would flatten even the seven hills given half a day’s march. The ladder trembled, and I could imagine the rungs bending like fresh boughs under the burden of that weight. I waited for the wrench of splintered wood and tumbled watchmen, but my ladder - solid, Bithynian oak - held fast, bore them up out of the darkness and into the fresh, evening air on my roof.

There were three of them, as Zoe had said, and as she had said they were giants. All wore long coats of mail hanging to their knees, girded with broad leather belts and hung with heavy, iron maces. On their shoulders they carried great twin-headed axes, which not even the perilous ascent of the ladder had unseated. Even without the insignia of their legion, a blue square of fur-trimmed cloth fastened below their necks, they were unmistakable. Varangians, elite guardsmen of the palace and protectors of the

Emperor. Though I rose slowly to greet them, the wine in the cup I held was suddenly much agitated.

‘You are Demetrios Askiates, the revealer of mysteries?’

The nearest of the three giants spoke. Like his companions, he was fair-skinned, though our sun had ravaged his complexion everywhere save by the rim of his collar, where it was still the shade of milk. His hair was the colour of fire, such as nature never bestowed upon our people; a mane hanging over his ox-like shoulders. He was, in short, a perfect specimen of that race which inhabits the frozen island of Thule - Britannia, as our ancestors called it when they held sway there - though he was long since departed, I thought, judging by the confident edge to his Greek.

I nodded an answer to his question, feeling the absurdity of my self-styled epithet before this brutal, unadorned power. The Varangian, I thought, would not unveil a mystery: he would crush it to powder with his mace, or slice through it with a stroke of his axe like Alexander at Gordion. What, I wondered nervously, would he do with me?

‘You are called to the palace,’ he said. Where his left hand played along the haft of his axe, I noticed a string of notches in the dark wood, unbroken almost from butt to blade. Were those the number of his victims?

I nodded a second time, and then - in my confusion - involuntarily twice more. ‘Why?’

‘That,’ said the Varangian heavily, ‘will be revealed when you’re there.’ Under the thick beard, I thought I saw his mouth twitch.

There was still light in the sky as we came outside, but already the shopkeepers’ tables were drawn indoors, and the crowds of the day reduced to a scattering of hurried figures. Few would care to be caught abroad after dark, when the Watch came out. And fewer still would want to be found near the phalanx of guardsmen - a dozen more - who were, to my shock, drawn up in the street outside my house. That would do little for my reputation among doubtful neighbours, I thought ruefully. No wonder there were no children playing games in the road, no fruit-sellers and sweet-merchants hawking their wares.

It was some half hour’s walk to the palace, but with a company of armed Norsemen at my back, and their red-headed captain silent before me, it felt ten times longer. Mingled glances of pity and suspicion fixed upon me from the passers-by: *he did not wear chains*, they observed, *but nor did he dress as one who warranted such a retinue*. Everywhere we walked the day was fading, with only lingering scents to tell what had passed: the stench of tanners and dyers, the warm homeliness of the bakers, the blood of the butchers and - as we at last reached the head of the avenue - the thick sweetness of the perfume-sellers.

The marbled arcades of the Augusteion were ahead of us now, with the palace gate beyond it and the vast dome of the great church on our left. The questions which clawed at my mind had reached a ringing intensity, yet were suddenly thrown into still greater confusion as the captain turned abruptly to his right, away from the palace and down a long street whose wall, I could see, was formed

by the vast rim of the hippodrome. A greaved forearm against my shoulder steered me helplessly down into the darkness after him.

‘The palace is that way,’ I called, extending my already harried strides.

‘The palace,’ retorted the captain over his shoulder, ‘has many gates, and not all of them serve for everyone. The fishmongers, for example - they keep to their own gate. To keep out the stink,’ he added pointedly.

The walls now above us were pocked with arches and embellished with all manner of pagan and holy statues, extending far out of sight in every direction. We came under them and passed through an iron gate, a lesser entrance left curiously unlocked. For a moment we were in darkness, giddied by the echoing slap of our feet on the stone; then the purple sky opened above us and I felt warm sand trickling through the straps of my sandals. We were in the arena, on the racetrack still chewed and furrowed from the day’s activity. It was empty, but the silence of a hundred thousand absent spectators only served to press the vastness upon me further, while before us a host of shafts and columns bristled from the central spine like a sheaf of spears.

‘Come,’ said the captain, his words muted in the oppressive expanse. He led me across the track, our feet crunching in the yielding sand, and up a narrow staircase cut through the spine. Now we were directly below the thrusting monuments, as if between the fingers of a giant hand, and for a single ludicrous second I imagined the hand closing around us in a stone fist. It was a ridiculous vision, but I could not keep from shivering.

My escorts, stout though they were, showed no more inclination than I to delay there. More steps brought us back down onto the arena floor, now on the far side of the stadium; we walked some way along the track, across to the opposite wall, and up another flight of stairs between the ranks of empty benches. These stairs led onto a terrace; the terrace, in turn onto more stairs which doubled back on themselves so often I felt dizzy. The sky was all but invisible now, only a shade removed from complete darkness, and already one horn of the crescent moon was pricking up behind the walls, but the soldiers’ pace was unflagging. It was with much tripping and stumbling that I mounted the last few steps to emerge, breathless and disoriented, onto a broad balcony high above the race track.

‘Welcome to the Kathisma,’ said the Varangian captain, and though my lungs faltered from the climb I somehow found the air for a heartfelt gasp. True, I had been told I was going to the palace, but I had expected a side-door and a clerk’s desk in one of the public courtyards; not this, not the Kathisma. This was the imperial loge itself, the dais where the Emperor paraded his untouchable majesty to the world - his world - and received its acclamation. I myself had seen him here a hundred times, though only from great distances.

One of the guards drew flame from an alcove and touched it to the lamps which hung from the ceiling. Fire sparked in the glass, and was in an instant echoed back a thousand-fold: off the golden chains which held the lamps; off the golden mosaics set between every archway; and off the golden throne which stood, empty, in the middle of the room. Suddenly I was surrounded by a great host: the

flickering silhouettes of a hundred kings and heroes leaped out of their gilded background, while from above the great charioteers of old seemed to be driving their horses hard down upon me, as if coming for Elijah.

‘You are Demetrios, the unveiler of mysteries? The illuminator of shadows? The master of the apocalypse?’

The voice which called me was mellow, like honey, but at its first words I cowered like a kitten, for it seemed it came from the walls themselves. There was neither menace nor malice in its tone, but it was with a trembling heart that I turned my gaze upon its source - and for a moment feared that indeed the wall had come alive, for I saw instantly a figure moving forward out of the golden shadows. Only as he came into the light could I see the substance of him: the sumptuous robes stitched with the gems and insignia of high office, the round head, the beardless face as smooth as a girl’s. His eyes were very bright, glistening in the lamplight like the oil in his dark hair as he stared intently upon me.

‘I am Demetrios,’ I stammered at last.

‘I am Krysaphios,’ he replied elegantly. ‘Chamberlain to his serene majesty the Emperor Alexios.’

I nodded slowly, saying nothing. The ritual with which I usually greet my clients would have seemed pathetic in this august place, and there was something in the eunuch’s eye which proclaimed that he already had the measure of me.

‘You unravel the riddles which perplex other men, I am told,’ he said. ‘You reveal what was hidden, and give light to the truth.’

‘The Lord has blessed some of my efforts.’ I answered with more humility than I might normally have felt in those efforts.

‘You found the Eparch’s daughter, when her family had already arranged her funeral,’ prompted the eunuch. ‘That was well done. I have need of such talents.’

He had been holding his hands clasped behind his back; now he extended a fat palm towards me. The skin was fleshy and soft, but there was no softness in what it held, in what he offered me. At last I began to see why he might have brought me here, why my unorthodox skills might be necessary to him. There was much of which I remained wholly ignorant, I knew, but if the matter involved the palace, and commanded so urgent a secrecy, then it must touch on the highest possible authorities. And possibly, I thought absently, the richest possible fees.

The item which Krysaphios held was about as long as the span of man’s hand, as thick as his finger, and formed from a wooden shaft with an iron tip, which had first been hammered into a crude block and then filed into a fearsomely sharp triangular point. This point, and a good half of the protruding shaft, were encrusted with a wine-coloured stain that should, sadly, have been far less familiar to me than in fact it was. The frayed remnants of what might have been feathers were set around the blunt end.

‘An arrow?’ I guessed, holding it cautiously between my fingers. Despite its size it was unexpectedly heavy. ‘But it seems too short for such a purpose - it would have fallen off the bow well before it was tensed.’ I thought furiously, aware of the eunuch watching me. ‘From a siege engine, a ballista, you could fire it, perhaps, but that

would be like harnessing a plough to a dog.’ I became aware that I was speculating too much aloud, and too much from ignorance, neither good professional practice. ‘However - it is a weapon, I deduce, or at least a tool which has been used as such.’ The dried blood told me that much - and more. ‘Recently, I should say.’

Krysaphios sighed, and for the first time I saw lines of tension beneath his marble skin.

‘It was shot,’ he said, ‘like an arrow but with immense power - how we do not know - at a guardsman today. Such was its force that it passed through his armour and deep into his ribs. He died almost immediately.’

‘Extraordinary.’ For a moment I grappled dumbly with his words - they seemed nonsensical. Or perhaps it was my exposition of the weapon which had been nonsense. In the interim, while I struggled, I reached for the well-worn safety of aphorism.

‘What a tragedy for the soldier,’ I mumbled. ‘And for his desolated family. My prayers...’

‘Your prayers can wait for the church,’ snapped the eunuch. ‘The soldier is an irrelevance. What is significant,’ he added, pressing his plump fingers together, ‘is that when he died he was standing, in a public street, as close as I am now to you, beside his master. The Emperor.’

I had been wrong again, I chided myself. The fees for this commission would not be rich - they would be truly beyond all imagining. If, of course, I could earn them.