

Queen of Lies

To Amalia-Eleni and Nicholas,
To the Erasmias of my life,
To David, my very own Parakoimomenos ...

... whenever they might read this

Queen of Lies

Achilleas Mavrellis

EFU ◊ *London* 2012

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Empire Forever Unlimited (EFU), London
Contact: www.empireforever.co.uk

Copyright ©Achilleas Mavrellis 2012

The right of Achilleas Mavrellis to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance
with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act, 1988

This book is a work of fiction constructed around
historical fact. Any resemblance to real people,
living or dead, is purely coincidental

A catalog record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-9575046-0-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, transmitted, lent, resold, or stored
in any form other than that in which it was purchased,
without permission of EFU or the author

Typeset in Literaturnaya

Main cover image adapted from a 9th century wall mosaic of the
Archangel Michael at the Hosias Loukas monastery, Greece
Embedded image of Claire-Monique Martin, Kaveh Beyk and Gioele
Silvestri as Ingerina, Vassilis and Michael from YouTube clip

*Esdra's witness that the race of women,
together with truth, prevails over all*

Kassia the Nun

Contents

To the Reader	9
Major characters	11
Part I: Iconoduly	14
Chapters 1–9 (842–850 AD)	
Part II: Ignominy	??
Chapters 10–19 (853–856 AD)	
Part III: Imperium	??
Chapters 20–29 (856–865 AD)	
Part IV: Infinitum	??
Chapters 30–40 (865–867 AD)	
Acknowledgments	??
Notes	??
Glossary of other characters and special terms	39

To the Reader

This is an untold tale of love, loss and the quest for power that took place during a major turning point in world history, in what was once called New Rome, later Constantinople. Although much of what I describe here is unsettling, and the way of things quite alien, the story is based on recorded events and occurrences.

The historical sources of the period complement yet contradict each other, much like disparate tesserae of a mosaic that need re-working before they can be placed together to create a single, recognizable whole. Rather than being a window into another world, the stories and people of this time – like the religious Icons at the heart of events – project out relentlessly from that world into ours, demanding some kind of response. To inform that response I offer the following context, and have provided some explanatory notes at the end, along with lists of most of the characters mentioned. I also encourage you to visit my website: www.empireforever.co.uk for background information.

You may still come across people referring to the place and time of this story as “Byzantium”. This rather unfortunate label is the product of an outdated, nineteenth century paradigm that tried to distance New Rome from its more “noble” predecessor. While Rome may have collapsed, the Roman Empire never died; in the fourth century the Emperor Constantine moved the capital of Empire east, to the ancient port city of Vyzantion, in what is now north-west Turkey. The inhabitants of New Rome spoke Latin for several centuries, before becoming completely Greek-speaking. They also drew on and evolved many ancient Roman traditions, often by placing them in a Hellenized Christian context. But they never stopped thinking of themselves as Romans.

That the New Roman Empire lasted for just over thirteen centuries is a testament to its robust self-identity and extraordinary level of political administration and largely due to a very old Roman sense of order in the face of adversity. While the Empire’s

goal – to preserve its classical heritage and Christian values until the Second Coming – was ostensibly not fulfilled, it is worth noting that Constantinople was one of the most successful cities of its time. “The City”, as it became known, was a strong draw for outsiders from China to Scandinavia for almost a millennium, much as it is today in its modern form – Istanbul.

Today the Empire lives on in invisible ways, through the ancient literature it preserved and re-interpreted, through its evolution of Roman law and through the gifts of art and written language it bequeathed to the maturing cultures of Europe. Perhaps most significantly, it was the first medieval sovereign entity in which women not only had occasion to govern, but were recognized as rulers in their own right, an ancient world view which, apart from this largely forgotten period in late antiquity, took until well into the last millennium to re-emerge fully into global consciousness.

Achilleas Mavrellis, London, 2012
www.empireforever.co.uk

Major characters

- Eudokia Ingerina** – daughter of a Viking emissary to the Romans, lady in waiting to the Regent, then Empress herself. She writes in the winter of late 879 AD.
- Vassilis** – Macedonian teenage peasant, groom, bodyguard, later Companion to the Emperor, and then some!
- Michael** – the only surviving son of Theodora and the last Iconoclast Emperor Theophilos, he became the sixty-fifth Emperor of New Rome.
- Photios** – Chief Imperial Secretary, scholar, diplomat, commander, later patriarch; he is partly responsible for what later became known as the Great Schism of the Eastern and Western Churches.
- Theoktistos the Eunuch** – Michael's appointed guardian and the Logothete, the most senior civil servant.
- Theodora the Regent** – Empress Regent and Michael's mother, also known as the final restorer of Icon worship.
- Vardas** – older brother of Theodora, soldier, patron of the arts; after his return from exile he becomes Caesar.
- Petronas** – younger brother of Theodora and Vardas, and a seasoned soldier; later a General of Thrace.
- Ignatios** – Archbishop and later Patriarch of Constantinople, a devoted Iconodule.
- Cyril and Methodios** – Greek orphan brothers from Thessaloniki; they are largely to thank for spearheading the conversion of the Slavs to Christianity.
- Symvatios** – Vardas' ex-son-in-law and the second Logothete in this tale, with his heart set on becoming Caesar one day.

Part I

Iconoduly

842–850 AD

1. The end, and a beginning

LATE FALL, 842 AD

When did this river of opportunity start, and how did it spring up and take us, especially me, by such welcome surprise?

Perhaps as a small trickle of happenstance, on a plain somewhere between the villages and hills of Macedonia. Nearly forty years ago for me now, perhaps just as the Eunuch had completed his campaign to free the Macedonians from the wild Bulgar.

I imagine my young Peasant and his older brother, Marianos, grinning in anticipation as they stalk a wild mare, its nostrils steaming in the icy wind. She stands transfixed, as we all did, by these village bumpkins.

Marianos nods to his younger brother. "Now! Take her!"

The boy hesitates. After all, he is still just a lad.

"She's yours, come on, boy, she's waiting!" chides Marianos.

The boy springs on eager heels, slides onto the mare's back, grapples, then nearly slips off as the mare bucks.

"That's it!"

The wild creature rears up, casting a hopeful eye on the open fields. Marianos is also on her now. He squeezes her to stillness with thick legs, a broad hand on his youngest brother's shoulder, arms surrounding him as he holds on to her mane. Marianos tries the old trick, to pull her over, to blind her with the glaring sun.

"She's a good one — show her who's in charge right now — and she'll be yours forever."

Young shoulders lean forward, eagerly embracing the mare. But she bucks and throws both of them off. The boys collapse into laughing limbs, oblivious now to the retreating snorts.

"Don't worry, there will be more," Marianos says.

My Peasant rolls onto his elbows and gazes into his brother's eyes. "Yes, but will I ever get one?" he asks.

Marianos gently takes him by the ears, taps forehead to forehead. "Every young prince deserves his own horse. For someone

already twelve years out of his mother's womb, I expected more! Next time we will tie you on."

Then abruptly, mock roughly, "Now get going before I give you a good beating for doubting yourself. Next time I'll tell Father about it too."

Marianos leaps up, pretending to be a ferocious predator. Hands and feet everywhere as my little Peasant scatters toward a nearby clump of trees. He is fast – Marianos reaches him late but manages to grab him by the ankle. He scoops him down onto a waist-high branch and throws open a bag, revealing some bread. The bleating of goats in the distance echoes off gray mountains and snowy peaks. A lone eagle hangs in the air.

"Why do you say every young prince needs a horse? Am I a young prince?" His eyebrows rise quizzically.

"You are – and more besides!" Munching. "Father's father is from a land far away. Across the mountains. Across the Black Sea. The land of Hayk, or, as they say in Greek, Armenia. Great-grandfather was a king."

"Is the sea that place where there is so much water? Like a stream, but much more? How do people go over it?"

"They have boats – like big huts – that float on the water."

"Mother says there are people who live in nice places by the sea and are very happy. She is not happy because she wants to live there too."

Marianos snorts. "I think Mother says many things just to annoy Father. Wives often do that. She loves him so she always expects more of him." He casts an eye in the direction of hooves thundering nearby. He wants to try for another one.

"One day you will see such places. All you need is to be strong and brave, and have a good horse. Enough talk."

The boy yelps and drops his bread as Marianos plucks him from the tree and sets him on broad shoulders. He bucks and rides his older brother's chestnut curls before Marianos sets him down again on their own mare.

"Silence!" Marianos commands in a whisper.

They creep up to within twenty paces of the herd. Marianos slips some rope out of his sack. The herd ignores them, especially the largest, a dark stallion.

This will be the catch of the month, Marianos knows it. Many meals could be earned today if he could just get this handsome creature to the Adrianopolis market. He crosses himself, kissing the Virgin in his mind's eye, all the while hoping that Father won't want to hold on to the catch for too long.

† † †

Do you see, my darling Leo? You must not let Photios get away with telling this tale the way he has, now that I have found this myth he so cunningly thought to weave into my Peasant's past. Where did I find it, I hear you ask? Deep in the bare-stripped gloom of the Virgin of the Lighthouse chapel, but not deep enough to escape the probing of inquisitive fingers.

As Eudokia, the daughter of Inger, envoy of Thule to the Holy Realm of Vyzantion, I did not always understand how important it is to speak simply; but now, as Empress, I know it more than ever. For those who control the understanding of the people control the people themselves. Photios, with all his erudition, has never understood this.

So, my son, mark well the tears in the binding of this volume. I have removed Photios' tedious droning and inserted my pages in their place. I want you to know what happened from me, not from some old soldier turned troublemaker like Photios.

I know things he could never have known, or would be too afraid to speak about. Where was he when I held the hands and heads of both my Emperors, listened to their childlike yearnings, and kissed their eyes, when their bodies enclosed mine in a hot cocoon of love on many a lamp lit evening?

My earliest memory, perhaps when I was five or so, is that of a late autumn dawn in the Palace gardens, fresh after a night of rain. The morning service is over. Mother, Father and I walk home from the Ayia Eirene past the labyrinthine hedges, where I love to play whenever possible. The dew on the carnations sparkles in the morning light. Beads of water cling to rain-tattered spider webs like pearls poised on strands of silk. The sun rises and the hedges flash in the light. I have always found this remarkable.

Mother and Father are at each other's throats. Mother grabs me as I run between them and a hedge. Her fingers pinch me

fiercely, as if I am about to vanish, and she hugs me to her. Father seems to be serious but I can see his eyes twinkling at me.

“All I ask is that you let her go for a few days. Is that so much to ask?” says Father. “She is already old enough to be with the other girls.”

“She is still far too young. I will not have her become a slave,” says Mother, “not even to the Emperor himself. And certainly not to a filthy Icon worshiper like the Augusta.”

I slip out of her arms, and run to grab the head scarf that she had let drop to the ground, enjoying its silky feel around my shoulders as I climb onto the base of an eagle statue. The broad plinth cuts into my knees but I can just about balance on its edge when I grab hold of one of the eagle’s claws.

Father slips me a sly wink. I try to wink in return, but I haven’t mastered this skill yet, and shut both my eyes for trying, nearly slipping as well. Instead, I grin back.

“It’s just for her to play and make friends. There is no guarantee she will enter the Augusta’s retinue,” says Father. “But it might help me at court if she were invited one day to the Gynaeconitis. The Emperor holds me in high regard but . . . who knows what might happen in future.”

I launch myself at him knowing that he will catch me, then perch snugly on a broad arm, tickling my forehead on his beard, letting his long hair, gleaming red in the morning sun, fall on my cheek. “Papa, when will we go to live in the snow castle again? I want to slide on the ice and roll in the snow.” I have vague recollections of eating hot soup by a fiery hearth, and being wrapped in reindeer skins when put to sleep.

“You remember that!” Father’s amazement pleases me. “You were just a *selurinn ungvíði* then, how do you say in Greek . . . a seal pup. No, not for a while, my sweet. I think mother has had her fill of the cold.”

The Norse words fall like welcome snowflakes on my hot ears. But Mother glowers in silence.

“In a way, so have I,” he continues. “Of this cold, that is. I will be going back soon. Alone.”

Tears sting my eyes. I hate it when Father leaves us. And it breaks my heart to see Mother ignoring us now, in one of her usual fits, so I run over and throw my arms around her knees.

Then I am back in Father's arms, where I want to spend every second. He is the only one who dares throw me up and swirl me around him without any effort. I imagine I am a seagull, coasting behind him as he takes his boat away to the delicious cold and thrilling ice. Real birds must feel less dizzy though.

"Come on," he cries. "I'll race you to the pig statue, the one in the market."

He is already racing away as my feet land on the ground, and I tumble after him, my head spinning. That is what I remember. Along with the memories, later acquired, that we all share as the proud descendants of the first Constantine, the one who mounted old Rome and made it buck under him, more than six hundred years ago. So in these pages is my story, written by a mere woman who knows her letters as well as her stitches, no better, no worse. Know this, and you will know all you need to know.

How marvelous it was when Constantine left old Rome and took us Romans to this most womanly of towns, old Vyzantion. Here, washed in golden sunshine and adorned in marble and granite, Europa laid her bosom around a natural harbor into which the docile Aegean laps, stretching a lazy arm across the sparkling Bosphorus, but never quite reaching our motherland, Anatolia.

Theodosius was among the earliest to adorn that bosom, by building the walls of our great City. Much later came Justinian — the sleepless one — whose Ayia Sofia gave us the means to worship her. That all of us survive and live well, even the oldest peasant still breaking his back at the olive tree in the early morning chill, we owe to these and other great Romans.

But where would these great men have been without us women to knock some sense into their heads, eh? Where would Constantine have been without Helen, his mother? Or Justinian without his whore-empress, Theodora? Need I remind you of Theodosius' sister, Pulcheria? Not to mention your own grandmother, another Theodora, who strode rough-shod through our lives long after her Theophilos died.

Like any beautiful woman, our City was desired. But desire brings both fortune and bad luck. Perhaps we didn't take enough care of her. Surrounded by enemies on all sides our men fought bravely and well, but lost often. In our despair, we gave in too easily to an empty idea born of vanity. Remember this always,

little Leo. Ideas are far more dangerous than devils or demons. And men are obsessed with them.

They said that God had deserted the Romans, that he sided with our Abbasid foes who knelt to Allah and shunned all images. Our men struck at Icon-loving ways, claiming that these harmless images – which offered the poor a taste of heaven beyond the daily misery of life – corrupted the natural order. Women were especially to blame because they held the Icons closest to their hearts, by their bedsides, and over their hearths.

This is how ideas can turn the minds of men to the study of hate, and what lies in their hearts into the objects of that hate. Learn this well, my wise little Leo, as you embark on your own studies. We women set our City on a straight path when it stumbled along the wayside. We have been more than just mothers or wives or sisters. Some might even say that we have ruled with the wisdom of Emperors ourselves.

And they would be right!

2. The myth unfolds

LATE FALL, 842 AD

The myth still lingers in the murky past, at a time when my Peasant is still barely aware of his toes, let alone me, or even us. Let's give him his proper name — Vassilis. He sits on the back of their old mare as Marianos guides it around the herd, doing his best not to startle it. Marianos wants him to let the horses get accustomed to having men nearby before striking — perhaps a good lesson for the future!

A sudden lunge into the center of the herd sends the rope spiraling out, the noose mesmerizing a stallion into brief immobility. It heaves, tearing at the rocky ground as it tries to twist free. Marianos digs heels in and winds the rope around his arm. Seconds grind past.

Then he is on its back, calling out in victory, pulling its head down as it tries to rear. Vassilis circles around on their mare, desperate to be a part of the new catch.

A solitary peal of thunder rolls in from the distance toward them. The herd bolts. Marianos sees Vassilis racing away on their panicked mare, toward rising smoke on the horizon. He takes the stallion by the mane and forces it into a gallop.

Over the hilltop, the town comes into view, swarming with men on horseback, thick limbs waving firebrands, braids flying out from under iron helmets. The Bulgar colors of red, black, and white burn Marianos' heart. I'm sure the thug resorts to peasant curses at this point.

Marianos panics as he hears Vassilis scream. He spots him vanishing on their mare into a forest. An age seems to pass as Marianos catches up to where he last saw him. He picks his way through the trees but Vassilis is nowhere to be seen. Like the peasant that he is, Marianos feels instinctively the need to return home, to return to look for the boy later. After all, he expects Vassilis to know the lie of the land well.

I imagine the town ablaze, perhaps a collapsed wall lying across a bridge strewn with people scrambling, screaming, some in burnt horror, dizzy with pain, clutter everywhere, hens underfoot. Where is Vassilis? Perhaps the mare has taken him home.

Marianos gallops down the main street, then into a maze of alleyways. The Bulgar are already at the marketplace – going straight for the livestock, of course!

He leaps to the ground and charges through the shambles to the hovel that he once called home. On his knees, he tears away at the rubble that covers tattered limbs. Blood drips from his father's face. Next to him their mother groans in agony, badly burnt.

Marianos roars with rage. His wife screams his name. The smoke is perhaps too much and he passes out for a moment, but then the ground thuds against his head. He fights to get up. Where is she? A flaming beam picks her out as it topples to the ground.

Now he is pushing and kicking, doing anything he can to get the burning wood off her. She frees herself but – a loud creaking overhead – he leaps aside in time to avoid a collapsing timber pinning him to the ground. The whole place is on fire. He pulls her away, thoughts racing. What to do first? Where is the little one? Where is their dim-witted mare?

The call of a horn echoes across the town. What now? Romans as well?

Back out on the street, a clear view of the hills opened up by the toppled wall shows Cataphracts pouring through the gates. Pennants fly the Iconoclast's black cross. This is as much the fault of the Romans as the Bulgar, Marianos rages. He prays for the arrows flying across the streets to find their target in the rears of the fleeing men.

Animals mill about. The smoke drifting across the town adds to the confusion. He hides behind a smoldering pile of rubble; waiting for a chance to . . . he knows not what.

Then he lunges out at a passing Cataphract, toppling him from his horse, pinning him easily to the ground, thanks to the Cataphract's heavy chain mail. A moment later he draws the Cataphract's sword across his neck.

"Tell me what is going on before you die," Marianos hisses.

"No need, we are just in time, you are safe," chokes the Cataphract. He tries to get up.

Marianos forces him down again and shoves a knee in his throat. “How can we be safe? Where do you come from?”

“The City . . .” the Cataphract chokes. “This area returns to Roman rule.”

More invaders, under the mask of freedom. The myth that Photios has built on is that their father’s father had been forced to settle in this land by the Romans and had died at the hands of the Bulgar, who dragged Vassilis’ father to this town. Perhaps Vassilis hadn’t even been born yet; let’s say that Marianos, his senior by some seven years, had been very young when the barbarians threw their family down on the rocky ground, leaving them to struggle for survival.

Marianos brings the sword hilt down on the Cataphract’s exposed cheek, leaving a bloody gash. A burning fence nearby starts to collapse and they both jump away just in time.

But Marianos is back on him again, pinning him down in a crushing hold.

“Which city . . . Constantinople? What do you want here? Why don’t you bastards leave us alone?”

A horn sounds again.

“My commander calls,” the Cataphract splutters as Marianos tightens his grip. “Kill me or let me leave.”

Marianos lets go. The Cataphract scrambles for a horse.

Marianos watches him ride off, the sweat drying coldly on his back in the rising wind, the smell of death and chaos choking him as he struggles to decide what he should do next.

† † †

Theodora the Regent awakens in the Imperial quarters, the afternoon sleep dropping away from her eyes. But there is no peaceful calm to be had. In the long moments at waking, Theophilos’ wordless pleas fade like tired stars into dusk. His agony has returned. Their embraces over the past months have become fewer, the nights of suffering longer and more painful for both of them. Now, encased in bedclothes, only foreheads and fingers touching, not even a kiss is exchanged. His incontinence and fever are a constant, relentless battle against himself, subjugating his once fierce pride.

I imagine Theodora cursing the miserable rascal as much as she feels his pain. She had once been so gullible, this pig-farmer's daughter from the provinces. In her youthful naivety she had lavished adoration on this most noble of living Romans, convinced that the light that poured from her young Emperor was that of the Savior himself! He had rewarded her by crowning her Augusta.

Then she had watched him throw himself away, mostly on campaigns, trying to set things right, driven by guilt, by his desire for justice. The vanity of men such as him is also their greatest asset. Having taken all the faults of his predecessors on his shoulders, he felt he had to sacrifice every vestige of strength to make the Empire stand firm again.

But why squander himself on her attendants? She forgave him because, as Emperor, he gave everything of himself, and so she felt he was allowed small indulgences. But how could she forget the affronts to her family, such as the time when Theophilos humiliated Petronas, her brother, for building a house that obstructed a widow's sea view? He had ordered Petronas' mansion torn down, awarding the property and the left over building materials to the widow, and had Petronas flogged in public. Dear Leo, that was your grandfather!

But it wasn't just the dallying with her maids that left a bitter taste in her mouth, like aubergines badly prepared for a stew. His raging against her Icons, so unbecoming to an Augusta, made her love for him dissolve into contempt at his single-mindedness.

The last few weeks pass before her eyes as Theophilos tosses and groans. She had been called away on several occasions, first to meet with officials, then to announce to the people that little Michael was to be crowned, and then to the Senate that Theoktistos, the Logothete, would assist her in watching over the little Emperor until he could be let out of his cage. What pleasure was there in it for her, I wonder, to watch all those grand counts and generals scraping the ground, the senators pledging allegiance to Theodora the farmer's daughter? She would be able to bring men up or push them down, issue decrees, even engage in war. But for her it is all duty, not power.

The court officials had been terrified of Theodora from early on. She would find them hiding behind their sheaves of documents, behind their bowing and bustling, all covering intricate plots to

implicate each other while really doing as little as possible to satisfy Imperial whim. Then their scorn and arrogance would wilt under her gaze. Even before Theodora was appointed Regent, legend has it that she challenged the Comptroller and his officials openly when he couldn't explain payments that had gone astray. She tallied up the figures in her head as Leo the Mathematician had taught her; which troops were stationed at which outposts, and the costs involved, and the results disagreed with what she saw in the papers before her.

I laugh aloud when I imagine the waxen smiles of officials melting as they back away from her presence, dripping excuses as they flee. Theophilos had to acknowledge her quickness then, as well as in her private business pursuits, pursuits that he despised in an Augusta. But how he humiliated her over these later!

So what does Theodora feel when she places her hand on Theophilos' swollen, feverish belly and slides it up to his chest? Suspicion laced with pity rather than fondness? Perhaps there is a touch of nostalgia for the once handsome cheeks, now gaunt under a fragment of beard. Who can ever really know?

Someone pulls a curtain aside. Theodora nods in response. The final Lenten vespers are upon them. The court will take it amiss if they do not see the Emperor lead the procession, even if he is at death's door. Theophilos knows as well as she does the consequences of the slightest show of weakness.



So here is Theophilos' last Lent, in the darkness of the Virgin of the Lighthouse chapel, bursting with plagal chant, and in the winter of his life. Like the senators gathered behind the Emperor, and indeed like all our people, Theophilos was still trapped in the austerity of spirit that the Iconoclasts — even my own mother — once approved of.

Of course, later on Michael had the Chapel filled with every imaginable form of ornamentation. So much so that it seemed to glow with its own light when Photios officiated at Michael's union with Vassilis. This chapel is where Photios hid this volume. We ripped his own library apart at first, to find the records of the final acts against the Pope. But who would have thought of looking for

a book beneath an altar, until one of my eunuchs stumbled upon it one day, and brought it to me.

A simple cross etched into the ceiling looms over the endless bows and turns of black, purple and white robes, as sandals and soft velvet boots slide over the cold stone. A cloud of smoke coils away from a censer swinging in Patriarch John's hands. Photios writes that John the Grammarian was an intelligent man whom he would have respected much, if only he had not devoted himself to defending the Iconoclasts as much as he did.

Theophilos' lean shadow hunches in prayer and crosses itself, his mumbled prayers barely audible over the Patriarch's chant. Theodora is at his elbow as he struggles to keep on his feet, while a wooden staff strains under the weight of his other hand.

John trips over the usual words as he rushes to finish the service. "We pray for our mother and father in Christ, the Augusta and the Emperor, may they live long and carry our burdens through adversity into prosperity."

With a final "God have mercy on us" and sweep of the censer, the Emperor turns and shuffles, three-legged, out of the chapel. Do the shouted commands of a cohort of the Palace Guard assembling outside – once a source of pride to Theophilos – now startle him? To Photios he seemed very nervous near the end.

Outside the chapel, the blinding sun burns down on the Mese, the road that connects the heart of our City for seven miles to the Gates and the great walls that protect us. The guard is changing, as is usual at the sixth hour, before entering the larger formation marching toward the Gates. I imagine the midday sun making long shadows of the guards' beards on the chain mail over their broad chests, while their sweat-soaked shoulders yearn for the whisper of a sea breeze. Some of them are my people, far from Thule, home of the Norsemen. They will endure anything to find a better life in the City.

A towering brass gate swings open at the walls to reveal a moat. I have seen the midday sun strike right onto the water and watched it glisten in the bright heat. If the guards were off duty, I am sure that a quick, naked plunge would definitely be in order, though it is strictly forbidden.

Let's imagine that calls and hooves echo across the walls today. Curtains of dust make way for the pummeling of horse's

hooves, perhaps the very same Cataphracts who are returning from Adrianopolis, perhaps even from Vassilis' village. It is conceivable that one of these knights rubs his neck gingerly, still recalling his encounter with Marianos.

Now the lead Cataphract emerges from the dust and reins in his mount at the gate. He takes off his helmet, revealing a bald, long head and marble-chiseled chin, in sharp contrast to the thick-set, bearded men who ride past.

"This is the Logothete," Theoktistos the Eunuch says. "Stand down. We are needed immediately at the Emperor's side." He shakes the dust from his cloak. I smile as I imagine the pompous tones, reeking with contrived precision that accompany this declaration. Such a show-off!

The guard at the gate probably greets the Eunuch with something like "Good news for the Emperor?"

Perhaps exhaustion makes the Eunuch even more annoyed at the over-familiar greeting. He ignores it and dismisses the commanders, before easing his mount into a trot, hooves crunching the broad path, lined with fruit trees, huts and vegetable beds receding into the distance.

Surely he must be satisfied, perhaps even proud, at what he has done. Compared to the grinding failures in recent months, in particular the campaign to rescue Crete from the Emir of Córdoba — whose forces never cease trying to secure every island in the Mediterranean — this campaign has delivered a modicum of success. He knows we can never give up our struggle to preserve the City from the loss of more lands. At least his Augusta, Theodora, knows and appreciates how difficult it has been for them, and for what we now know was their hidden cause — the Icons.

The route that Theoktistos must have followed that day is a breathtaking one: along the hills of Thrace, the horses racing behind him, the great Aqueduct never far from sight to the north. How I would love to see this marvel, built nearly five hundred years ago by the Emperor Valens, its monstrous arches and pillars, like some gorgon of old, straddling forests and valleys for more than a hundred miles as its watery load races down to the bowels of our thirsty City.

Now, with the Aqueduct still on his left, close cobbles eat up the path as horse and rider sweat their way through the crowds,

along the Mese, and up a gradual but long incline. The vegetable gardens have deferred to rows of orange brick homes under a sea of flat roofs.

At the top of the hill the Palace complex erupts into view below him. A familiar sight, but one that always makes my heart stand still, a frozen topple of white marble cascading through pockets of green, up and over the next hill, to a cerulean sea flecked with white. The Ayia Sofia, toward which all good Christians are compelled to genuflect, squats in porphyry on the left. The vast expanse of the Hippodrome lies straight ahead. He casts an eye to the chariot boxes at the far end, and perhaps a gleam of sunlight from the giant copper horses above fires the illusion that they are springing into action toward him? They certainly do that to me sometimes.

Exhaustion finally catches up with him. The chill of the late afternoon breeze stirs him into motion again, and he leads his perspiring mount down the slope to the stables. He must get a fresh cloak, report to the old tyrant, and then, God willing, get home quickly to a delicious bath and his sweet bed.

3. No way back

LATE FALL, 842 AD

Everyone knows that Photios' learning knows no bounds. But how many know how well he can fabricate? No doubt all his reading provides fertile ground for this tale. But what he writes about our story is only half the story. The rest is really my story.

So mark well the pages that I have torn from the binding of his codex, my fine boy. I will take up Photios' mythology here, and tell the plight of my Vassilis, those many years ago, the one that Photios calls the Usurper in his version of this tale. I hold the power now. I have done so for the past twelve years — since your father died. And the stories of the women in this tome will be mine as well. Somehow that is very fitting — one might even say that Vassilis has taken on the nobler role of a woman himself in some circumstances!

His faithful mare gallops for what seems like an age, leaving my young Peasant nodding off, as he grows tired. He awakens to find himself lying on the ground and that his horse has vanished. Does he weep and thrash around in fear and frustration?

Of course not! He enjoys the time alone at first, playing in the streams, eating berries and trying to catch fresh fish as his brothers had taught him. He climbs trees, looking for the occasional egg, leaving many a confused nest behind. After the first few days of doing this, he stops wondering about his family, at least in the beginning. For my Vassilis is very pragmatic about these things.

I have always marveled at his simple, quiet awareness of God. It often confuses me, even terrifies me. For me, God is — to be frank — somewhat irrelevant. Why does He care about what we do? Surely people should matter more.

But Vassilis can now wander where his heart most wants to be, freed from the clutter of village life, alone amid the forests, the plains and the peaks where only the rustling trees break the silence. For my Vassilis prays without words. Even now, when he

holds me in his arms, I wrap myself in the peace that surrounds him like a comfortable blanket. He says that God has no need of babble or priests. I agree completely. So why would it have been any different back then?

Here then is my Peasant, learning to be old at twelve, lost in the dark forest yet content with his lot, in spite of the cold. Though being alone for too long must fill him with some sort of dread, especially when he remembers that soon it will be his name day. Maybe that day is even today? How his brown eyes sting! Where are his parents, not to mention his aunts and uncles? Who do they gather around, singing the songs of the arrival of Saint Vassilis from Caesarea, bearing parchment and quill to write blessings for the start of the New Year?

Now this little one's body shakes with sobs. He cries himself to sleep. With the lightness borne of release, an empty stomach and the cool dark air, he dreams all night of his family, singing together with them at church, and then calling out greetings in the early morning hours in front of each other's homes. Sad dreams, in which they do not hear him when he calls, do not even notice him as he runs to tug at their tunics. Their tunics seem to melt away in his hands, just out of grasp.

But now the bleating and sour smell of goats poking their hot noses at him have woken up my young Vassilis, as has the shouting of strange voices and the neighing of horses. He is a little afraid, so he pretends he is still asleep.

The previous night he had curled up under some dead branches at the edge of a clearing. Now he peers out to discover that brightly colored hangings on wooden poles fill the clearing. He can't understand the strange words being spoken around him, but the men speaking them seem not to have noticed him, too hard at work to care about anything else. He slips away when they start kicking around for more sticks.

But as much as he tries he cannot resist the smell of boiling milk that coaxes his hunger into a painful flame. He moves resolutely over to the fire and sits down beside it. My Peasant is the most cautious man I have ever known, but also the bravest.

The men can't help but notice him now. Vassilis looks them in the eye, at which they shake their heads and grin. They speak but he understands nothing, and says nothing. Comments fly — one

laughs loudly, while another passes Vassilis a bowl. I am sure he takes it with a smile, that smile that still sends my heart beating. The sourness of the hot curds makes him grimace, but it goes down very well, burning comfortably in his stomach. He wanders over to the horses.

He wonders if these people might take him to Chariopolis, back to his family, or perhaps to Adrianopolis, from where he could try to find his cousins and ask them how to get home. How to explain all this in words the strangers will understand?

Now that Vassilis feels people near him I'm sure he yearns for his family even more. He fights back the tears and decides to wait and see. If he were to win their favor, maybe they'd let him tag along. There were several trees he had not climbed in the last few days, several nests recently unexplored. Perhaps the men might take him more seriously if he rounded up some fresh eggs for them?



A roaring fire darts shadows across a large oak table, across maps and charts scattered across it. To Photios' horror, the Emperor, gaunt cheeks resting in his hands, appears to be . . . drooling!

Theodora bustles in, all busy concern for her husband. She is everywhere at once, yet somehow veiled.

"Husband, you are too tired," she whispers at him. "The service was long and the fast is not yet over."

Theophilos reaches out to her and beckons vaguely. "Where is the Logothete? He knows I want him here straight from the field!"

Panic — from the fear of life's consequences — lies low in the room. Theophilos has made many choices, too many for a man of his thirty years. He has seen too much pain, both from his choices and from the stupidity of others. There is no way back. We live in the wake of our choices, as life washes back out to the great sea of approaching death. Is there a life after life? I doubt it sometimes. There is only one hell, the hell of now.

Theoktistos glides in, although I can see that he is doing his best to hide his weariness. Theodora holds out her hands as if to greet him, but brings them to her mouth instead. Then she moves to stand behind her husband, the cowed marble of her glare ready

for the worst.

“Worthiness, I’m here with good news”

“Welcome back, brave Logothete,” groans the Emperor. “Although we mourn losing our worldly wars against the Abbasid, and our very cradle of Amorion, I hope we stand firm in securing the Kingdom of Heaven?”

The Eunuch and the Augusta are behaving quite strangely, stealing glances at each other constantly. Something is afoot.

“Let’s get some rest, dear heart,” Theodora says, perhaps a bit too loudly. “You still have not recovered from the fast!” The bustling concern seems contrived, even excessive.

An earthquake convulses in Theophilos’ chest. “We stay until we are done!” he says.

Embarrassment mixed with concern alight on every forehead. Theophilos doubles up in pain, clutching his sides.

Is there perhaps divine retribution after all? Is He as capricious as the gods of old were?

I wasn’t there to see any of this. But this is what Photios wrote of events. He wrote also of Lazarus. Not the New Testament saint, that is, but the old monk who lived on Terebinthos – one Lazarus Zographos, a man who nearly lost his hands to this cruel-hearted bastard of an Emperor because he, Lazarus, insisted on painting the saints that the people revered.

Theophilos himself ordered the monk’s hands to be pressed into sheets of red hot steel. Only the stumps of his fingers remained. Far fewer know that Theodora was the one who stopped Theophilos from going any further. At any rate, the pain silenced both his lips and brush for more than a year. But it took longer for Theophilos to forgive her meddling. One wonders if he ever really forgave it?

The Emperor has regained enough strength to rant again. Sweat glistens on his forehead. “Oh God, where is my Amorion, why should it have fallen to the devious Abbasid, once our fellow worshipers of the one God but now our foes. Did so many thousands need to fall!” The fine meter and elevated language Theophilos reverted to, especially in times of anger or distress, was legendary.

The Augusta takes the Eunuch aside. She touches his arm, their eyes meet and their lips exchange a silent message. Then

she whispers to him. "He has been like this since you left. He lives in the past, his mind clinging to recent losses. I try to remind him of his earlier work, the peace we brokered with the Abbasid, the hospitals and the Bucoleon Palace so recently built and where he now refuses to rest."

"Our coffers are in a better state than expected," says Photios to no one in particular. "We won't need to raise taxes in our newly acquired Themes, at least not for the time being."

But we all know that our prosperity has been due more to Theodora's careful husbandry than anything else. Now she holds Theophilos' face in her hands and pleads with him. "Husband, husband, hear out these good men. They speak only good of what you have done. Courage!"

She straightens and turns back to the Eunuch. "Logothete, tell us your news."

"We have covered the plains and valleys of Thrace. The last of the obstinate Bulgar have been expelled and the ... Icon worshipers put to the sword. I have reappointed the General in Adrianopolis to restore the Macedonian Theme."

The Eunuch's words seem to have a calming effect, and he knows it, if his smug expression is anything to go by. That a General feels confident enough to resume responsibility for this fractious but vital Theme is an impressive achievement indeed.

"I think we can safely say we have our bulwark against the Bulgar..." he begins.

"Not good enough!" the Emperor slams his fist down on the table, nearly launching himself, like a puppet with broken strings, into the air. The flames in the hearth sputter.

"I want death to the Icon worshipers, all of them. We should not stop until they all roast in hell!"

Suddenly he doubles over and sags to the floor. A guard helps lift him to the table. It is all hands as he comes to. Everyone freezes in horror. A pendant has slipped out the Eunuch's robes. The Emperor's eyes flicker open, glazed at first, then they focus on it. A powerful gust outside sends the fire into sudden brightness, the light reflecting off a miniature Icon of a Mary Theotokos that swings in the air before everyone.

The Emperor grabs the pendant and pulls the Eunuch toward him as if to kiss him, then tries to rip the pendant from his neck.

Groaning, he vomits and lists onto the table. Theoktistos leans over him again, listening for a heartbeat, while slipping the pendant back into his tunic. His silent frown says it all.

Theodora reaches across her husband, shuts his eyes, and rests her head on his chest. Yet her expression belies no real emotion.

Upright again, she pulls a small pendant of John the Baptist from her robe. She places the miniature Icon to his lips, then on his forehead. Then she is back on her feet — all business again.

“Let it be known that the Emperor of all the Romans passed into heaven this hour with the Mother of God on his lips,” she announces. “Enough talk. We must move quickly. There is no time for a great mourning. A brief display will suffice. We crown the infant on the morrow. Bring me the Patriarch now.”

† † †

Indeed, I can see how Photios’ fiction has worked, how his myth that Vassilis is descended from kings, rather than just horse thieves, has smoothed his path back to the Patriarchate.

But I will not shirk from relating absolutely everything I imagine or know to be true. For I know my Peasant in ways no one else would dare relate, and I want you to know of them, my boys — may the Theotokos shield you from all harm!

I can see a clearing, and a squirrel darting off one end of a fallen tree. My young Peasant sits perched on the other end. The surrounding purple peaks peer down at him and themselves in the smooth waters of a wide river below.

The bread in his mouth tastes flat. He has decided that the men are Abbasid, from stories that Father had told the boys. Distant travelers, olive-skinned, friendly, though clearly weaklings. All is slowness, comfort to them. Though their horses are handsome beasts, much better even than what his brothers would normally bring home from the hills around Chariopolis.

He strolls to the nearest tent. The caravan has brought him all the way to this river, the river Marianos had told him about once — a river he had only dreamed of seeing. But he has no real idea where the men are headed.

They have stopped on a steep bank beyond which Vassilis imagines he can see the river mouth to the east, through grow-

ing mists. He wonders if the sea is beyond that and whether they will take him there. Or are they going north, to the wilderness that haunts every Macedonian child's dreams, bedeviled by wolves and bears, and fierce tribes such as the Bulgar? He is not afraid. Let the Theotokos show him the path.

A hand touches his shoulder. He throws it off, but regrets it straight away when he sees the toothy grin and cheerful eyes facing him. These people look so different, Vassilis thinks. Just like women, long and thin, with shapely hips and slender hands. Especially this fellow — perhaps seventeen or so, almost as old as Marianos. The young Abbasid hands him a bowl of soup and squats, his strange, harsh sounds contradicting gentle gestures.

“Hello, stranger,” Vassilis says pointing at the horses. “I like my new friends. They are good and true, and want nothing from anyone in return for work and hardship.”

The Abbasid points at himself and says something ending in “Wasim”. That must be his name.

Vassilis takes in the strange smells from this one: horse leather, sweat, and something like . . . organum. He marvels at the fellow's cinnamon skin and shining black curls.

“I don't understand. Can't you speak Greek?” Vassilis says. “Doesn't matter.” He gropes for something to break the tension, sips from the bowl and puts it down on the log.

Wasim says something, points to a horse, and indicates a riding motion. Vassilis takes a moment to understand, then nods. A chance for a ride with a new friend!

They fly away from the caravan, down the slope, to the river. The saltiness of the sea blows in from nearby. The restful smell of warm fir trees fills the air. He finds it hard not to feel a little bit happy again. The sand whips up from the horses' hooves as they race beside the river.

The boys dismount, sweating from the sprint. The horses nuzzle, the stallion roughing his nose along the mare's back.

The boys rest on some rocks covered in mussels. Vassilis dips his hand below the waterline to touch them. These rough, indifferent little creatures amaze him. Where would a mountain boy like him have seen them before?

Wasim's hand is not far away. It too runs over the mussels and reaches Vassilis' fingers, covering and squeezing them for a

moment. Vassilis doesn't know where to rest his eyes. Then he notices that the stallion is very much at attention – the mare must be in heat.

“Who has a better time? The stallion or the mare?” asks Vassilis, pulling his hand away to mime the act. His gestures are unmistakable. Wasim laughs and stands up, his feet in the water. The dent in his tunic makes it obvious that he too is at attention.

Vassilis feels a strange tingling in his groin, as if he needs to relieve himself, and blood rushes to his head. Wasim pulls him down and falls on top of him. He bites Vassilis on the shoulder, then more tenderly on the neck, then on the mouth. Shoulders meet chests as tunics get pulled over their heads. Taut nipples scrape. Vassilis is not sure what is going on and turns away.

Then Wasim pushes him down, onto the sand, and shoves his groin at Vassilis' mouth. Vassilis is strong for his age, but Wasim is bigger – he rolls Vassilis over onto his stomach and pins his arms down.

Vassilis yelps with pain as his arm twists at a strange angle, but his protests are ignored. He resists Wasim tugging at his britches, then freezes with terror as they are pulled away. First a lick of river water, then a cold breeze slaps at his bare backside.

Sudden agony scalds my beloved, forcing a howl from him. His clenched lips rub the sand as Wasim thrusts into him. Images flash through his mind of when he and Father chanced upon two older boys in the alley behind a neighbor's home: the naked torso of one cupped itself so neatly around the slender buttocks of the other; their britches half-way down to bare, dusty toes curled up in pleasure; their faces frozen in shock as Father lashed out a thick arm at them.

Now Wasim tenses up and stiffens, before collapsing on top of Vassilis, pushing his face further into the sand.

You needn't be shocked my little ones, though I do not think you know of this side to the man they call your father. But this is nothing. What I have seen as he writhed against my body will shock you no less!

Thundering hooves echo off the cliffs. Suddenly Wasim is on his feet, Vassilis clambering up after him. Back on their mounts they race across the heady green, toward the camp.

Here Vassilis finds the same iron-breasted horsemen that chased him from home, their braids zigzagging across the tents, overturning pots, kicking aside cushions and grabbing sacks and rolls of silk. Could they show him the way home?

But my young Vassilis decides quickly that these are enemies, not friends. He dismounts and leaps into the fray.

The Bulgar must be confused by the spectacle of a mere boy racing at them without even a weapon in his hand. Vassilis leaps onto a marauder's horse and disengages a short sword, stabbing it at the rider's back but nicking himself instead. Blood drips over their legs, making the horse's back slippery. The fury builds inside my brave little Peasant and must be let out, the terrible rage that has always driven him forward and that I have come to fear. The rider falls to the ground, taking Vassilis with him.

Another joins in, trying to pin Vassilis down. He rolls and writhes. From somewhere inside himself he finds the strength to resist them, but then a third piles in. He feels a sharp pain as a sword hilt meets him in the temple. The darkness is not welcome.

Characters and special terms

Abbasid – One of several terms (among others such as Ishmaelites or Hagarenes) that the Romans might have used to denote in a generic way the predominantly Muslim nations that occupied huge stretches of the Mediterranean, from Andalusia and across North Africa to southeastern Anatolia, including major islands like Corsica, Sicily, and Crete. In fact, the Abbasid were just one of several dynasties which the Romans would have encountered – another would have been the Umayyads, dominant in southern Spain.

Admiral – A military commander with the title of *Droungarios tou Ploimou*, or Admiral of the Imperial Fleet, the latter usually stationed in the Golden Horn.

Akritai – Literally “border tenants”. Successive Roman Emperors since the sixth century had begun a policy of devolving more responsibility to regional administrations, through the creation of semi-autonomous military provinces known as Themes (see below), and in order to deal with the increasingly fractious nature of border politics. Thus Akritai is a non-specific term used by an increasingly myopic Imperial administration to refer to inhabitants of the settled regions at the edge of the Empire who maintained the border through their presence and encountered, on a fairly regular basis, numerous barbarian tribes in the north, as well as Muslim nations and their supposedly heretical Christian allies to the east.

(Omar) al-Aqta, the Emir of Melitene – Ruler of part of south eastern Anatolia, the capital of which was Melitene. He is a formidable source of instability to eastern Roman territories in Anatolia.

Antigonus – Vardas’ young son, precociously appointed general in his teens before his father’s unfortunate demise.

Augusta — A title for an Empress who reigned as the female equivalent of an Emperor. It is important to note that not every consort of an Emperor was crowned an Augusta. This honorific allowed the bearer to rule by decree, hold court, and wear Imperial clothing, in short behave as an Emperor in every respect. As an aside, Irene was the only Augusta to go one step further and seal her decrees and letters with the male honorific for Emperor — Vassileos.

Augusteon — The central forum in the Great Palace complex and the site of formal announcements to the court, and Imperial weddings.

Ayia Sofïa, Ayia Eirene — Literally “Holy Wisdom” and “Holy Peace,” these names refer to two churches at the center of worship for many centuries. The original Ayia Sofïa was erected in the fourth century as a rectangular basilica, possibly by Constantine the Great, and rebuilt after fires in the fifth and sixth century, in the latter case by Justinian who gave it its enormous vaulted dome. It is still a wonder to behold: the dome conveys the illusion from within of suspension without visible support. The Ayia Eirene is older by some thirty years and was built by Constantine the Great. Both still stand today.

The Balcony — The *Kathisma* (literally “The Seat”) was the partially covered Imperial viewing balcony at the side of the Hippodrome, connected directly to the Daphne Palace complex by special passageways, seating the Emperor and his family along with selected courtiers so that they could enter the box unseen and enjoy the chariot races in private. It was also used for Imperial announcements.

Bishop’s Meadow — The Battle of Bishop’s Meadow, also known as the Battle of Lalakaon, was fought in 863 AD in central Anatolia near a tributary of the Halys River. This was a victory for New Rome and marked the end of a long period of often unsuccessful campaigning against the Abbasid.

The Blues and the Greens — The only two surviving sporting, military, and political factions out of an historical four (the Reds and the Whites had ceased to function two centuries before), with their origins in the now powerless talking shop that had become the Senate, these hereditary “associations”

extended into all levels of society. Their main role lay in influencing popular opinion, providing a focus for allegiance in sporting events, and reinforcing links with tradition through their participation in ceremonial functions. Their leaders were senior courtiers who sat at the Emperor's table.

Boris(-Michael) – Nephew of Presian, the first Bulgar Khan in our story, and Khan himself from 852 AD onward. Boris takes the name of Michael for his baptism.

Caesar – An honorary title for the second most senior statesman, second in rank only to the Emperor.

Caliph of Baghdad, al-Mutawakkil – The Abbasid supreme ruler of one of several Muslim empires active across Africa and the Middle East at the time, he was open to diplomatic relations with Constantinople, culminating in the exchange of prisoners on two occasions, thanks partly to the work of Photios and Cyril.

Caliph of Córdoba – An Umayyad supreme ruler, whose ancestors had broken away from the Abbasid Caliphate and established themselves in southern Spain. The Umayyad Caliphs also extended their presence throughout the islands of the Mediterranean.

Cataphract – An elite cavalryman in the primary assault troops of the land forces, clad in chain mail or plated armor (as was his mount) and armed with sword, mace, or lance.

Charles the Frank – Charlemagne.

Chief Imperial Secretary – The duties of a *Protoasekretis* might have covered a wide remit. Given Photios' experience and learning, it probably included the provision of general advice to the Imperial family as well as the role of Comptroller of the Treasury on occasion.

Christoferos – The third Logothete (Secretary of State) in this story and a distant cousin of Ingerina's.

Companion – A translation of the Greek term *Parakoimomenos*, literally "He who sleeps alongside," this was the honorary title of Lord Chamberlain, given to a leading courtier who was entrusted with the care of the Emperor's person. This was typically one of the most sought after roles for a eunuch.

Comptroller – *Sakellarios* in Greek, this was the chief official in charge of the Treasury.

- Constantinos** – Vassilis’ first son, by his first wife, Maria. He is not to be confused with references to Constantine the Great – the first Roman Emperor who founded Constantinople, or the Emperor Constantine VI – the blinded son of the earlier Augusta, Regent Irene, or passing mention to the official Constantine Myares.
- Damianos** – Michael’s boyhood companion, later Companion of the Bedchamber.
- (Lady) Danielli** – A rich merchant widow from the city of Patras in the Peloponnese, in southern Greece, her trading empire covered the known world.
- Daphne** – Name given to a central area within the Palace complex housing the main Imperial Quarters. Its focus was a large courtyard with lawn, fountains, trees, and hedges.
- Demestikos** – Full title: *Demestikos ton Scholon*, literally “Domestic of the Schools”. This position began, in the fifth century, as a title for the Head of the Palace Guard and evolved, by the ninth century, to the role of Commander in Chief of the armed forces.
- (Father) Diomedes** – Pastor of the Church of the Mother of God Valinou along the southern shores of the Golden Horn.
- Eparch** – Municipal Governor of the City, akin to Lord Mayor in modern terms.
- Epi tou Kanikleiou** – Literally “Keeper of the Inkstand,” a title for the most senior civil servant, in the first instance held by Theoktistos along with the title of Logothete, and then by Dekapolitessos, Michael’s father-in-law.
- Eudokia** – Symvatios’ second wife and one of the many Eudokias at court, hence the confusion and rumors caused by Vardas’ dallying with the ladies.
- (Eudokia) Dekapolitessa** – Michael’s neglected wife, daughter of Dekapolitessos, a court official.
- First Lady** – The title of Zoste Patrikia, or “Noble lady of the girdle,” was the most important and perhaps the only specific female rank beneath Augusta – other women bore the titles of their husbands. As well as making the bearer first within the Gynaecoonitis, this title conferred with it a very high rank at Court, ranking even above the title of Magistros.
- Gemma** – Member of Theodora’s retinue both before and after the Regent is banished, and an associate of Ingerina.

- General** – In Greek *Strategos*, or *Strategoï* (pl.), these military commanders reported to the Logothete and had full responsibility for a Theme. On campaign, generals ceded both strategic and tactical control to the Emperor and his immediate advisors if the latter chose to be involved actively in the engagement.
- Golden Horn** – The remarkable natural harbor of Constantinople, essentially a deep, curved bay, opening out onto the Bosphorus. It stretches far enough inland to function both as a port and naval base, but is narrow enough to seal by laying a set of gigantic chains across its mouth, should the need arise. Though the opposite shore did not form part of the City, it had been settled since ancient times by locals, and by the ninth century it had started to become a place for foreigners to occupy, especially merchants from the west.
- Grozdan** – A Bulgarian envoy.
- Gryllos** – Literally, “Pig”. He was Michael’s court jester.
- Gynaeconitis, and the role of women** – “The court of the women” was a generic term both for the areas that high-born women congregated in during the day and for the gatherings themselves. These provided an environment which was practical and comfortable, especially in great houses such as the Daphne Palace, for carrying out the many duties which were not only expected of women, but which they also felt they were best at. Though the poor often did not have the luxury of having access to such quarters, women of all classes were expected to be the main source of knowledge regarding children, health, food, plants, music, dance, and the weaving and making of clothes, even at court. By spending most of their waking hours together women could carry out these activities collectively and efficiently, often learning on the job, so to speak. This was not a place of confinement, though men would have felt quite out of place, and thus seldom were present except for good reason, such as when the Augusta wished to conduct some item of business away from the more male-dominated Throne Room.
- Hall of the Nineteen, and dining** – A vast banqueting hall connected to the Palace complex, it comprised nineteen windowed apses, nine to a side and one at the far end, in which

tables were set with Roman couches around them. The couches were arranged in a “C” shape, with their armrests closest to the table in the center, so that one could recline with the right arm and take food and drink with the left. The most senior person at the table sat on the extreme right of the “C”, followed by the second most senior on the extreme left, in descending order of rank from left to the right. The innovation of cutlery was just being introduced, which did not lend itself particularly well to this old Roman style of eating. Hence it was not long before the practice of eating in the seated position was adopted as more practical — something monastics and the lower classes had been doing for centuries.

Hippodrome — Literally “The horse road,” this was a half-mile long, U-shaped, Coliseum-like stadium at the center of Constantinople standing at the center of public life for everyone. It could seat more than fifty thousand, and served as a venue for chariot races as well as a forum for Imperial declarations.

(Ali) ibn-Yahya, the Emir of Tarsus — Ruler of Arab-held Armenia, the capital of which was Tarsus. He was a close ally of Omar al-Aqta.

Iconoclast, Iconodule — Icon destroyer, Icon worshiper. Icons were sacred images of Mary, Christ, the saints, and holy martyrs venerated by all members of the early Church. Iconoclasm was a multi-faceted religious crisis, similar to the Inquisition in its single-mindedness, but targeted at the physical obliteration of religious images. Priests and individuals in the public eye who refused to give up Icon worship, such as Icon painters, also suffered, but perhaps also the common folk as well, we can’t be sure.

Ignatios — A senior extremist Iconodule clergyman closely aligned with the Pope, and the third patriarch in this tale. He is appointed by Theodora after Patriarch Methodios dies, then is deposed by Michael and Vardas to allow Photios to be appointed. The rivalry between Ignatios and Photios is one of the catalysts of the great schism between eastern and western Churches.

Inger — Ingerina’s father — he was probably an emissary to Constantinople from the Norse lands who adopted the

Hellenized last name of Martinakios. This is why Ingerina is sometimes referred to as Martinaka.

(Augusta and Regent) Irene – The first Empress to reverse Iconoclasm, living approximately half a century before.

John Chaldis – A disaffected young commander in the Palace Guard.

John Daniellis – Lady Danielli’s adolescent son, an intimate of Vassilis’ in Patras.

John the Grammarian – The first patriarch in this tale and a staunch Iconoclast, and scholar.

Karveas – Leader of the Paulicians, an Iconoclast sect that rejected Theodora’s restoration of Icon worship. His people lived in northeastern Anatolia and formed alliances with the leaders of several Muslim emirates (see Ali ibn-Yahya and Omar al-Aqta).

Kleisourai – Literally “guards of the mountain passes”, this was the name given to the more militarized Akritai who lived in the mountainous regions of southeastern Anatolia and who came into regular conflict with the Abbasid.

Leo – Ostensibly Vassilis’ third son, but very likely Michael’s first born by Ingerina. A child who is probably Vassilis’ second born, and Ingerina’s first-born, dies at birth. Ingerina addresses him throughout the text.

Leo the Mathematician – An Iconoclast scholar who became metropolitan (senior archbishop of a provincial diocese). He travels to Baghdad but returns to help found the University of the Magnaura.

Logothete – Full title: *Logothetis tou Dromou*, literally “Master of the Ways” or “Master of the Courier Service”, the highest title in the civil administration, this role encompassed the roles of Secretary of State and Foreign Secretary.

Magistros – A formerly administrative title of high rank, usually associated with membership in the Senate, this role was evolving into more of an honorary title during the late ninth century.

Magnaura – Probably a corruption of the Latin *Magna Aula*, literally “great hall,” this was the Senate House within the extended Palace complex, which also provided a venue for the re-founded University of Constantinople.

Maria — A courtier in the Bulgar court, daughter of a Bulgar father (see Tervel) and a Greek mother from Thessaloniki, later Vassilis' first (common-law) wife.

Marianos — Vassilis' oldest brother, some ten years his senior, later a common foot soldier who rises to the rank of cavalry squadron commander, one of the highest ranks in a Theme.

Methodios (the Patriarch) — The second patriarch in this tale, a moderate Iconodule, and Theodora's spiritual adviser (not to be confused with Methodios the monk).

(The) Paulicians — See reference to Karveas above.

(Pope) Nicholas I — Pope of old Rome and partly responsible for initiating the schism with the Eastern Church.

Oryphas — Eparch of Constantinople, later an Admiral of the Fleet and a close associate of Vardas.

Patriarch, or Pope — The five most senior clergymen of the medieval Church bore these titles. The title of Patriarch was used actively by four of them: the Patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. But by the ninth century, the title of Pope, borrowed from the Patriarch of Alexandria in the sixth century, had become the norm for the Bishop of Old Rome.

Presian — The Khan of the Bulgars until his death in 852 AD, and Boris' uncle.

Spatharios, Protospatharios — *Spatharios* means "Sword Bearer," a member of the Imperial bodyguard and one of a number of titles of intermediate rank for non-eunuch courtiers. The next step up was *Protospatharios*.

Stephen and Alexander — Vassilis' fourth and fifth sons by Ingerina.

Stoudion and the Stoudites — The Stoudion was perhaps the most learned and powerful of the monasteries in Constantinople, whose monks, the Stoudites, had remained staunchly anti-Iconoclastic at all times. They were a political force to be reckoned with, and may almost be thought of as Icon-worshipping "extremists."

Tervel — An elderly Bulgar courtier and Maria's father.

Thekla, Anna, Anastasia, and Pulcheria — The first three are Michael's much despised older sisters, the last a younger sister.

- Theme** – A Theme (*Thema* in Greek) was a militarized region under the control of a general – or sometimes a count or duke for the older, more established, and hence less militarized Themes – and could vary in size from that of a city to that of the Peloponnese (the whole of southern mainland Greece). New Themes continued to be defined over the years, in response to external conflicts. (See Akritai above.)
- Theognostos** – An acolyte of Bishop Ignatios.
- Theophilites** – A courtier in semi-permanent residence in Patras, distant cousin to Vardas by marriage and close friend of the Lady Danielli's.
- Theotokos** – Literally, “Christ-Bearer,” this was the epithet most commonly applied to the Virgin Mary in the eastern Church. By the ninth century the veneration of Mary appears to have evolved to cult status in Constantinople. She was considered to be its patron saint, and regularly invoked by everyone at every opportunity.
- Throne Room** – This was called the *Chrysotriklinos* which can be translated as “Golden Reception Hall”. Its main focus was the double-seated throne set on a marble platform raised to eye level at one end. The double seat was meant to emphasize that the Emperor shared this space with Christ, a physical representation of the ancient Roman belief that spiritual and temporal power were united in the supreme ruler.
- Thule, Thulians** – Terms to describe the Northern lands (most likely modern-day Denmark and Sweden) and those that came from them to Constantinople, which was known to the Norsemen as *Miklagarð*.
- Vassilianiscus** – A Syrian patrician, newcomer to Constantinople who wins Michael's favor.
- Vyzantion** – This was an ancient Greek port city taken over in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, and on which he founded Constantinople, which itself means “Constantine's City”. Vyzantion is also the origin of the seventeenth century term “Byzantium”.
- Wasim** – An Abbasid youth who encounters Vassilis as a young lad in the forests of Macedonia, and later in the City.

