

Viking 3: King's Man

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Extract

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To my holy and blessed master, Abbot Geraldus, in humble obedience to your wish, I send this, the third and last packet of the writings of the false monk Thangbrand. Inauspicious was the day when I first found these pages in our library! May I be forgiven for reading them with my sinful eyes, for I was urged on by my imagination and impatience.

Here I have found false witness artfully woven into a tale intended to beguile the credulous. This serpent in our bosom levels vile and wicked allegations against our brothers in Christ, and shamelessly admits piracy and the desecration of hallowed relic. Even when among the schismatics of the East he cannot restrain his viper's tongue.

Nothing has grieved me more than to learn that this false monk made a journey to the Holy Land, a pilgrimage which is the greatest desire of those who are as poor and unworthy as I. Yet he besmirches his witness with profane mistrust, and thereby seeks to undermine the faith of all those who believe in the Incarnation of the Word. As scripture avers, to an evil, unbelieving man, the truth becomes a lie.

His spew of corruption is the more disturbing, for it touches on high matters of state. Questioned is the very ascent to the throne of England itself, and his words must surely be judged treasonable by those who have competence in these matters.

We will speak no further of this matter, but will leave the pious labours of the faithful to be rewarded and paid for by the Just Judge.

Will there ever be an end to the deceit and mendacity of this impostor? I pray for his salvation in the fear of God, for is it not said that even one sparrow cannot fall into a snare without his providence, and that when God wills the end may be good?

Aethelred

Sacristan and Librarian

Written in the month of January in the Year of our Lord One Thousand and Seventy-two

ONE



THE EMPEROR WAS pretending to be a whale. He put his head under water and filled his mouth, then came back up to the surface and squirted little spouts across the palace plunge pool. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, not knowing whether to feel disdainful or sympathetic. He was, after all, an old man. Past seventy years of age, he would be relishing the touch of warm water on his blotchy skin as well as the feeling of weightlessness. He was afflicted with a bloating disease which had puffed up his body and limbs so grossly that he found walking very painful. Only the week before I had seen him return to the palace so exhausted after one of the endless ceremonials that he had collapsed into the arms of an attendant the moment the great bronze doors closed behind him. Today was the festival the Christians call Good Friday, so in the afternoon there was to be yet another imperial ceremony and it would last for hours. I decided that the emperor deserved his moment of relaxation, though his whalelike antics in the pool might have surprised his subjects as the majority of them considered him to be their God's representative on earth.

I shifted the heavy axe on my shoulder. There was a damp patch where the haft had rested on my scarlet tunic. Beads of sweat were trickling down under the rim of my iron helmet with

its elaborate gold inlay, and the heat in the pool room was making me drowsy. I struggled to stay alert. As a member of the Hetaira, the imperial household troops, my duty was to protect the life of the Basileus Romanus III, ruler of Byzantium, and Equal of the Apostles. With five hundred fellow members of his personal Life Guard, the palace Varangians, I had sworn to keep the emperor safe from his enemies, and he paid us handsomely to do so. He trusted us more than his fellow countrymen, and with good reason.

At the far end of the baths were clustered a group of the emperor's staff, five or six of them. Sensibly they were maintaining their distance from their master, not just to give him privacy, but also because his advancing illness made him very tetchy. The Basileus had become notoriously short-tempered. The slightest wrong word or gesture could make him fly into a rage. During the three years I had served at the palace, I had seen him change from being even-handed and generous to waspish and mean. Men accustomed to receiving rich gifts in appreciation from the imperial bounty were now ignored or sharply criticised. Fortunately the Basileus did not yet treat his Life Guard in a similar fashion, and we still gave him our complete loyalty. We played no part in the courtiers' constant plotting and scheming as various factions sought to gain advantage. The ordinary members of the guard did not even speak their language. Our senior officers were patrician Greeks, but the rank and file were recruited from the northern lands and we continued to speak Norse among ourselves. A court official with the title of the Grand Interpreter for the Hetaira was supposed to translate for the guardsmen, but the post was in name only, another high-sounding title in a court mesmerised by precedence and ceremonial.

'Guardsmen!' The shout broke into my thoughts. One man in the group was beckoning to me. I recognised the Keeper of the Imperial Inkwell. The post, despite its pompous name, was one of real importance. Officially the keeper proffered the bottle of purple ink whenever the Basileus was ready to sign an official

document. In reality he acted as secretary of the emperor's private office. The post gave him open access to the imperial presence, a privilege denied even to the highest ministers, who had to make a formal appointment before being brought before the Basileus.

The keeper repeated his gesture. I glanced across at the Basileus. Romanus was still wallowing and spouting in the pool, eyes closed, happy in his warm and watery world. The pool had recently been deepened in its centre, yet was still shallow enough for a man to stand upright and keep his head above the surface. There seemed no danger there. I strode over towards the keeper, who held out a parchment. I caught a glimpse of the imperial signature in purple ink even as the keeper indicated that I was to take the document to the adjacent room, a small office where the notaries waited.

It was not unusual for a guardsman to act as a footman. The palace officials were so preoccupied with their own dignity that they found it demeaning to carry out the simplest tasks like opening a door or carrying a scroll. So I took the parchment, cast another quick look over my shoulder and walked to the door. The Basileus was still blissfully enjoying his swim.



IN THE NEXT room I found the Orphanotrophus waiting. He was in charge of the city orphanage, an institution financed from the royal purse. Once again the title was no reflection of his real importance. John the Orphanotrophus was the most powerful man in the empire, excluding only the Basileus. Thanks to a combination of raw intellect and shrewd application, John had worked his way up through the various grades of the imperial hierarchy and was prime minister of the empire in all but name. Feared by all, he was a thin man who had a gaunt face with deep-sunk eyes under startlingly black eyebrows. He was also a beardless one, a eunuch.

I came to attention in front of him, but did not salute. Only the Basileus and the immediate members of the imperial family

warranted a guardsman's salute, and John the Orphanotrophus was certainly not born to the purple. His family came from Paphlagonia on the Black Sea coast, and it was rumoured that the family's first profession when they came to Constantinople was to run a money exchange. Some said that they had been forgers.

When I handed over the parchment, the Orphanotrophus glanced through it, and then said to me slowly, pronouncing each word with exaggerated care, 'Take this to the logothete of finance.'

I stood my ground and replied in Greek, 'My apologies, your excellency. I am on duty. I cannot leave the imperial presence.'

The Orphanotrophus raised an eyebrow. 'Well, well, a guardsman who speaks Greek,' he murmured. 'The palace is finally becoming civilised.'

'Perhaps someone could call a dekanos,' I suggested. 'That is their duty, to carry messages.' I saw I had made a mistake.

'Yes, and you should do yours,' the Orphanotrophus retorted acidly.

Smarting at the rebuff, I turned on my heel and marched back to the baths. As I entered the long chamber with its high, domed ceiling and walls patterned with mosaics of dolphins and waves, I knew immediately that something was terribly wrong. The Basileus was still in the water, but now he was lying on his back, waving feebly with his arms. Only his corpulence was keeping him from sinking. The attendants who had previously been in the room were nowhere to be seen. I dropped my axe to the marble floor, wrenched off my helmet and sprinted for the pool. 'Alarm! Alarm!' I bellowed as I ran. 'Guardsmen to me!' In a few strides I was at the edge of the pool and, fully clothed, dived in and swam as fast as I could manage towards the Basileus. Silently I thanked my own God, Odinn, that we Norse learn how to swim when we are still young.

The Basileus seemed unaware of my presence as I reached him. He was barely moving and occasionally his head slipped

underwater. I put one hand under his chin, lowered my legs until I could touch the bottom of the pool, and began to tow him towards the edge, taking care to keep his head on my shoulder, clear of the water. He was limp in my arms, and his scalp against my chin was bald except for a few straggly hairs.

'Guardsmen to me!' I shouted again. Then in Greek I called out, 'Fetch a doctor!'

This time my calls were answered. Several staff members – scribes, attendants, courtiers – came running into the room and clustered at the edge of the pool. Someone knelt down to grab the Basileus under the armpits and haul him dripping out of the water. But the rescue was clumsy and slow. The Basileus lay on the marble edge of the pool, looking more than ever like a whale, a beached and dying one this time. I clambered out and pushed aside the courtiers.

'Help me lift him,' I said.

'In Thor's name what's going on?' said a voice.

A decurion, the petty officer of my watch, had finally arrived. He glowered so fiercely at the gawking courtiers that they fell back. The two of us picked up the emperor's limp body and carried him towards a marble bench. One of the bath attendants had the wit to spread a layer of towels over it before we laid down the old man, who was moving feebly. The decurion looked round and ripped a brocaded silk gown off the shoulders of a courtier and laid it over the emperor's nakedness.

'Let me through, please'.

This was one of the palace physicians. A short, paunchy man, he lifted up the emperor's eyelids with his stubby fingers. I could see that he was nervous. He pulled his hands back as if he had been scalded. He was probably frightened that the Basileus would expire under his touch. But the emperor's eyes stayed open and he shifted his head slightly to look around him.

At that moment there was a stir among the watching courtiers, and their circle parted to allow a woman through. It was Zoë, the empress. She must have been summoned from the gynaeceum, the

women's quarters of the palace. It was the first time I had seen her close to, and I was struck by her poise. Despite her age she held herself with great dignity. She must have been at least fifty years old and had probably never been a beauty, but her face retained that fine-boned structure which hinted at aristocratic descent. She was the daughter and granddaughter of emperors, and had the haughty manners to prove it.

Zoë swept through the crowd, and stepped up to within an arm's length of her husband where he lay on the marble slab. Her face showed no emotion as she gazed down at the emperor, who was ashen pale and breathing with difficulty. For a brief moment she just stared. Then, without a word, she turned and walked out of the room.

The courtiers avoided looking at one another. Everyone, including myself, knew that there was no love between the emperor and his wife. The previous Basileus, Constantine, had insisted that they marry. Zoë was Constantine's favoured daughter, and in the last days of his reign he had searched for a suitable husband for her from among the ranks of Constantinople's aristocracy. Father and daughter had both wanted to ensure the family succession, though Zoë was past childbearing age. That had not prevented her and Romanus when they ascended the throne together from attempting to found their own dynasty. Romanus had dosed himself with huge amounts of aphrodisiacs – the reason for his hair loss, it was claimed – while his elderly consort hung herself with fertility charms and consulted quacks and charlatans who proposed more and more grotesque ways of ensuring pregnancy. When all their efforts failed, the couple slid into a mutual dislike. Romanus had taken a mistress and Zoë had been bundled off to the gynaeceum, frustrated and resentful.

But that was not the whole story. Zoë had also acquired a lover, not two years since. Several members of the guard had come across the two of them coupling together and turned a blind eye. Their tact had not been out of respect for the empress – she conducted her affair openly – but because her consort was the

younger brother of John the Orphanotrophus. Here was an area where high politics mingled with ambition and lust, and it was better left alone.

'Stand back!' ordered the decurion.

He took up his position a spear's length from the Basileus's bald head, and as a reflex I stationed myself by the emperor's feet and also came to attention. My axe was still lying somewhere on the marble floor, but I was wearing a dagger at my belt and I dropped my hand to its hilt. The doctor paced nervously up and down, wringing his hands with worry. Suddenly Romanus gave a deep moan. He raised his head a fraction from the towel that was his pillow and made a slight gesture with his right hand. It was as if he was beckoning someone closer. Not knowing whom he gestured to, no one dared move. The awe and majesty of the imperial presence still had a grip on the spectators. The emperor's gaze shifted slowly, passing across the faces of his watching courtiers. He seemed to be trying to say something, to be pleading. His throat moved but no sounds emerged. Then his eyes closed and his head fell back and rolled to one side. He began to pant, his breath coming in short shallow gasps. Suddenly, the breathing paused, and his mouth fell open. Out flowed a thick, dark brown substance, and after two more choking breaths, he expired.

I stood rigidly to attention. There were the sounds of running feet, of tumult, and in the distance a wailing and crying as news of the emperor's death spread among the palace staff. I took no notice. Until a new Basileus was crowned, the duty of the guard was to protect the body of the dead emperor.

'Thorgils, you look like the village idiot standing there in your soaking uniform. Get back to the guardroom and report to the duty officer.'

The instructions were delivered in Norse and I recognised the voice of Halfdan, my company commander. A beefy veteran, Halfdan had served in the Life Guard for close on ten years. He should have retired by now, after amassing a small fortune from

his salary, but he liked the life of a guardsman and had cut his ties with his Danish homeland, so he had nowhere else to go.

'Tell him that everything is under control in the imperial presence. You might suggest that he places a curfew on the palace.'

I squelched away, pausing to collect my helmet and the spiked axe which someone had obligingly picked up off the floor and leaned against the wall. My route to the guardroom lay through a labyrinth of passages, reception rooms and courtyards. Romanus III could have died in any one of his palaces – they all had swimming pools – but he had chosen to expire in the largest and most sprawling of them, the Great Palace. Standing close to the tip of the peninsula of Constantinople, the Great Palace had been extended and remodelled so many times by its imperial occupants that it had turned into a bewildering maze of chambers and anterooms. Erecting ever grander buildings was a fascination bordering on mania for each occupant of the purple throne. Every Basileus wanted to immortalise his rule by leaving at least one extravagant structure, whether a new church, a monastery, a huge palace, or some ostentatious public building. Romanus had been busily squandering millions of gold pieces on an immense new church to the mother of his God, though it seemed to me that she already had more than enough churches and monasteries to her name. Romanus's new church was to be dedicated to her as Mary the Celebrated, and what with its surrounding gardens and walkways and fountains – and the constant changes of design, which meant pulling down half-finished buildings – the project had run so far over budget that Romanus had been obliged to raise a special tax to pay for the construction. The church was not yet finished and I suspected it never would be. I surprised myself by realising how easily I was already thinking of Romanus in the past tense.

'Change into a dry uniform and join the detail on the main gate,' the duty officer ordered when I reported to him. No more than twenty years old, he was almost as edgy as the physician

who had attended the dying emperor. A Greek from one of Constantinople's leading families, his family would have paid handsomely to buy his commission in the Life Guard. Merely by placing him inside the walls of the palace, they hoped he might attract the attention of the Basileus and gain preferment. Now their investment would be wasted if a new Basileus decided, out of concern for his own safety, to replace all the Greek officers. It was another deception so characteristic of palace life. Byzantine society still pretended that the Hetaira was Greek. Their sons prided themselves on being officers of the guard, and they dressed up in uniforms which denoted the old palace regiments — the Excubia, the Numeri, the Scholae and others — but when it came to real work our Basileus had trusted only us, the foreigners, his palace Varangians.

I joined twenty of my comrades at the main gate. They had already slammed the doors shut without asking permission of the keeper of the gate, whose duty it was to supervise the opening of the main gate at dawn, close it again at noon, and then reopen it for a few hours in the early evening. But today the death of the emperor had removed his authority and the keeper was at a loss to know what to do. The decurion decided the matter for him. He was refusing to let anyone in or out.

Even as I arrived, there was a great hubbub outside the gate, and I could hear thunderous knocking and loud, impatient shouts.

'Glad you've got here, Thorgils,' said the guard commander. 'Maybe you can tell me what those wild men out there want.'

I listened carefully. 'I think you had better let them in,' I said. 'It sounds as though you've got the Great Patriarch outside, and he's demanding admittance.'

'The Great Patriarch? That black-clad old goat,' grumbled the guard commander, who was a staunch Old Believer. 'Lads, open the side door and allow the monks through. But hold your breath. They don't wash very often.'

A moment later a very angry group of monks, all with chest-length beards and black gowns, stormed through the gap between

the doors, glared at us, and hurried off down the corridor with a righteous-sounding slap of sandals and the clatter of their wooden staffs on the marble floor slabs. In their midst I saw the white-bearded figure of Alexis of the Studius, the supreme religious authority of the empire.

'Wonder what's brought them down from their monastery in such a hurry,' muttered a Varangian as he pushed shut the door and dropped the bar back in place.

His question was answered later, when we came off duty and returned to the guardroom. Half a dozen of my colleagues were lounging there, smirking.

'The old bitch has already got herself a new husband. The moment she was sure that old Romanus was definitely on his way out, she sent someone to fetch the high priest.'

'I know, we let him and his crows in.'

'Well, she certainly didn't summon them to give her beloved husband the last rites. Even while the priests were on their way, the old lady called an emergency meeting of her advisers, including that foxy creep, the Orphanotrophus. She told them that she wanted her fancy-boy to be the new Basileus.'

'Not the handsome rattle-brain!'

'She had it all worked out. She said that, by right of imperial descent, she represented the continuity of the state, and that it was in the best interests of the empire if "my darling Michael", as she called him, took the throne with her.'

'You must be joking! How do you know all this?'

The guardsman gave a snort of derision. 'The Orphanotrophus had ordered four of us to act as close escort for the empress in case there was an attempt on her life. It was a ruse, of course. When the other courtiers showed up to dispute the idea of Michael's succession, they saw the guard standing there, and came to the conclusion that the matter had already been settled.'

'So what happened when the high priest arrived?'

'He plunged straight into the wedding ceremony for the old

woman and her lover-boy. She paid him a fat bribe, of course, and within the hour they were man and wife.'

This bizarre story was interrupted by the arrival of another of our Greek officers, who scuttled into the room, anxiously demanding a full sovereign's escort. We were to don our formal uniforms and accompany him to the Triklinium, the grand audience chamber. He insisted that there was not a moment to be lost.

Thirty of us formed up and marched through the passageways to the enormous hall, floored with mosaics, hung with silk banners and decorated with rich icons, where the Basileus formally received his ministers, foreign ambassadors and other dignitaries. Two ornate thrones stood on a dais at the far end of the hall and our officer led us straight to our positions — to stand in a semicircle at the back of the dais, looking out across the audience chamber. A dozen equerries and the marshal of the Triklinium were busily making sure that everything was in order for the arrival of their majesties. Within moments the Empress Zoë and Michael, her new husband, entered the room and hurried up to the thrones. Close behind came the Orphanotrophus, some high-ranking priests, and a gaggle of courtiers associated with the empress's faction at court. Zoë and Michael stepped up on the dais, our Greek officer hissed a command, and we, the members of the Life Guard, obediently raised our axes vertically in front of us in a formal salute. The empress and emperor turned to face down the hall. Just as they were about to sit down there came a tense moment. By custom the guard acknowledges the presence of the Basileus as he takes his seat upon the throne. As the emperor lowers himself on to his seat, the guards transfer their axes from the salute to their right shoulders. It is a signal that all is well and that the business of the empire is continuing as normal. Now, as Zoë and Michael were about to settle on their throne cushions, my comrades and I glanced at one another questioningly. For the space of a heartbeat nothing happened. I sensed our Greek officer stiffen with anxiety, and then, raggedly, the guard

placed their axes on their shoulders. I could almost hear the sigh of relief from Zoë's retinue.

That crisis safely past, the proceedings quickly took on an air of farce. Zoë's people must have sent word throughout the palace, summoning the senior ministers and their staff, who came in one by one. Many, I suspected, arrived thinking that they would be paying their respects to the body of their dead emperor. Instead they were confronted with the astonishing spectacle of his widow already remarried and seated beside a new husband nearly young enough to be her grandson. No wonder several of the new arrivals faltered on the threshold, dumbfounded. The matronly empress and her youthful consort were clutching the emblems of state in their jewelled hands, their glittering robes had been carefully arranged by their pages, and on Zoë's face was an expression which showed that she expected full homage. From the back of the dais I watched the courtiers' eyes take in the scene – the aloof empress, her boyish husband, the waiting cluster of high officials, and the sinister, brooding figure of John the Orphanotrophus, Michael's brother, noting how each new arrival responded. After a brief moment of hesitation and calculation, the high ministers and courtiers came forward to the twin thrones, bowed deeply to the empress, then knelt and kissed the ring of her bright-eyed husband, who, less than six hours earlier, had been known as nothing more than her illicit lover.

The next day we buried Romanus. Overnight someone – it must have been the supremely efficient Orphanotrophus – arranged for his swollen corpse to be dressed in official robes of purple silk and laid out on a bier. Within an hour of sunrise the funeral procession had already assembled with everyone in their correct place according to rank, and the palace's main gates were thrown open. I was one of the one hundred guards who marched, according to tradition, immediately before and after the dead Basileus as we emerged on to the Mese, the broad main avenue which bisects the city. I was surprised to see how many of the citizens of Constantinople had left their beds this early. Word of

the Basileus's sudden death must have spread very fast. Those who stood at the front of the dense crowd lining the route could see for themselves the waxen skin and swollen face of the dead emperor, for his head and hands had been left uncovered. Once or twice I heard someone shout out, 'Poisoned!', but for the most part the crowd remained eerily silent. I did not hear a single expression of sorrow or regret for his passing. Romanus III, I realised, had not been popular in Constantinople.

At the great Forum of Amastration we wheeled left, and half a mile further on the cortège entered the Via Triumphalis. Normally an emperor processed along this broad avenue to the cheers of the crowd, at the head of his victorious troops, as he displayed captured booty and files of defeated enemy in chains. Now Romanus was carried in the opposite direction in a gloomy silence broken only by the creaking wheels of the carriage which carried his bier, the sound of the horses' hooves and the muted footfalls of hundreds upon hundreds of the ordinary citizens of Constantinople, who, simply out of morbid curiosity, joined in behind our procession. They went with us all the way to the enormous unfinished church of Mary the Celebrated that was Romanus's great project, and where he was now the first person to benefit from his own extravagance. Here the priests hurriedly placed him into the green and white sarcophagus which Romanus had selected for himself, following another curious imperial custom that the Basileus should choose his own tomb on the day of his accession.

Then, as the crowd was dispersing in a mood of sombre apathy, our cortège briskly retraced its steps to the palace, for there was no a moment to be lost.

'Two parades in one day, but it will be worth it,' said Halfdan cheerfully as he shrugged off the dark sash he had worn during the funeral and replaced it with one that glittered with gold thread. 'Thank Christ it's only a short march this afternoon, and anyhow we would have to be doing it anyway as it's Palm Sunday.'

Halfdan, like several members of the guard, was part-Christian

and part-pagan. Superficially he subscribed to the religion of the White Christ – and swore by him – and he attended services at the new church to St Olaf recently built near our regimental headquarters down by the Golden Horn, Constantinople's main harbour. But he also wore Thor's hammer as an amulet on a leather strap around his neck, and when he was in his cups he often announced that when he died he would much prefer to feast and fight in Odinn's Valholl than finish up as a bloodless being with wings like a fluffy dove in the Christians' heaven.

'Thorgils, how come you speak Greek so well?' The question came from one of the Varangians who had been at the palace gate the previous day. He was a recent recruit into the guard.

'He licked up a drop of Fafnir's blood, that's how,' Halfdan interjected. 'Give Thorgils a couple of weeks and he could learn any language, even if it's bird talk.'

I ignored his ponderous attempt at humour. 'I was made to study Greek when I was a youngster,' I said, 'in a monastery in Ireland.'

'You were once a monk?' the man asked, surprised. 'I thought you were a devotee of Odinn. At least that is what I've heard.'

'I am,' I told him. 'Odinn watched over me when I was among the monks and got me away from them.'

'Then you understand this stuff with the holy pictures they carry about whenever we're on parade, the relics and bits of saints and all the rest of it.'

'Some of it. But the Christianity I was made to study is different from the one here in Constantinople. It's the same God, of course, but a different way of worshipping him. I must admit that until I came here, I had never even heard of half of the saints they honour.'

'Not surprising,' grumbled the Varangian. 'Down in the market last week a huckster tried to sell me a human bone. Said it came from the right arm of St Demetrios, and I should buy it because I was a soldier and St Demetrios was a fighting man. He claimed the relic would bring me victory in any fight.'

'I hope you didn't buy it.'

'Not a chance. Someone in the crowd warned me that the huckster had sold so many arm and leg bones from St Demetrios that the holy martyr must have had more limbs than a centipede.' He gave a wry laugh.

Later that afternoon I sympathised with the soldier as we marched off for the acclamation of our young new Basileus, who was to be pronounced as Michael IV before a congregation of city dignitaries in the church of Hagia Sophia. We shuffled rather than marched towards the church because there were so many slow-moving priests in the column, all holding up pictures of their saints painted on wooden boards, tottering under heavy banners and pennants embroidered with holy symbols, or carrying precious relics of their faith sealed in gold and silver caskets. Just in front of me was their most venerated memento, a fragment from the wooden cross on which their Christ had hung at the time of his death, and I wondered if perhaps Odinn, the master of disguise, had impersonated their Jesus. The Father of the Gods had also hung on a wooden tree, his side pierced with a spear as he sought to gain world knowledge. It was a pity, I thought to myself, that the Christians were so certain that theirs was the only true faith. If they were a little more tolerant, they would have admitted that other religions had their merits, too. Old Believers were perfectly willing to let people follow their own gods, and we did not seek to impose our ideas on others. But at least the Christians of Constantinople were not as bigoted as their brethren further north, who were busy stamping out what they considered pagan practices. In Constantinople life was tolerant enough for there to be a mosque in the sixth district where the Saracens could worship and several synagogues for the Jews.

A hundred paces from the doors of Hagia Sophia, we, the members of the guard, came to a halt while the rest of the procession solemnly walked on and entered the church. The priests had no love for the Varangians, and it was customary for us to wait outside until the service was concluded. Presumably it

was thought that no one would make an attempt on the life of the Basileus inside such a sacred building, but I had my doubts.

Halfdan let my company stand at ease, and we stood and chatted idly among ourselves, waiting for the service to end and to escort the acclaimed Basileus back to the palace. It was then that I noticed a young man dressed in the characteristic hooded gown of a middle-class citizen, a junior clerk by the look of him. He was approaching various members of the guard to try to speak to them. He must have been asking his questions in Greek, for they either shook their heads uncomprehendingly or ignored him. Eventually someone pointed in my direction and he came over towards me. He introduced himself as Constantine Psellus, and said he was a student in the city, studying to enter the imperial service. I judged him to be no more than sixteen or seventeen years old, about half my age.

'I am planning to write a history of the empire,' he told me, 'a chapter for each emperor, and I would very much appreciate any details of the last days of Basileus Romanus.'

I liked his formal politeness and was impressed by his air of quick intelligence, so decided to help him out.

'I was present when he drowned,' I said, and briefly sketched what I had witnessed.

'You say he drowned?' commented the young man gently.

'Yes, that seems to have been the case. Though he actually expired when he was laid out on the bench. Maybe he had a heart attack. He was old enough, after all.'

'I saw his corpse yesterday when it was being carried in the funeral procession, and I thought it looked very strange, so puffed up and grey.'

'Oh, he had had that appearance for quite some time.'

'You don't think he died from some other cause, the effects of a slow-acting poison maybe?' the young man suggested as calmly as if he had been discussing a change in the weather. 'Or perhaps you were deliberately called away from the baths so someone

could hold the emperor underwater for a few moments to bring on a heart attack.'

The theory of poisoning had been discussed in the guardroom ever since the emperor's death, and some of us had gone as far as debating whether it was hellebore or some other poison which was being fed to Romanus. But it was not our job to enquire further: our responsibility was to defend him from violent physical attack, the sort you block with a shield or deflect with a shrewd axe blow, not the insidious assault of a lethal drug in his food or drink. The Basileus employed food-tasters for that work, though they could be bribed to act a sham, and any astute assassin would make sure that the poison was slow-acting enough for its effect not to be detected until too late.

But the young man's other suggestion, that I had been lured away to leave Romanus unguarded, alarmed me. If that was the case, then the Keeper of the Inkwell was certainly implicated in the Basileus's death, and perhaps the Orphanotrophus as well. I remembered how he had tried to send me on to the logothete of finance with the parchment. That would have delayed me even more. The thought that I might have been a dupe in the assassination of the Basileus brought a chill to my spine. If true, I was in real danger. Any guardsman found to be negligent in his duty to protect the Basileus was executed by his company commander, usually by public beheading. More than that, if Romanus had indeed been murdered, I was still a potential witness, and that meant I was a likely target for elimination by the culprits. Someone as powerful as the Orphanotrophus could easily have me killed, in a tavern brawl, for example.

Suddenly I was very frightened.

'I think I hear the chanting of the priests,' said Psellus, interrupting my thoughts and fidgeting slightly. Maybe he realised he had gone too far in his theorising, and was close to treason. 'They must have opened the doors of Hagia Sophia, getting ready for the emergence of our new Basileus. It's time for me to let you

go. Thank you for your information. You have been most helpful.' And he slipped away into the crowd.

We took up our positions around Michael IV, who was mounted on a superb sorrel horse, one of the best in the royal stables. I remembered how Romanus had been a great judge of horseflesh and had built up a magnificent stud farm, though he had been too sick to enjoy riding. Now I had to admit that the youthful Michael, though he came from a very plebeian background, looked truly imperial in the saddle. Perhaps that was what Zoë had seen in him from the beginning. Halfdan had told me how he had been on duty when Zoë had first gazed on her future lover. 'You would have been an utter dolt not to have noticed her reaction. She couldn't take her eyes off him. It was the Orphanotrophus who introduced him to her. He brought Michael into the audience chamber when Zoë and Romanus were holding an imperial reception, and led him right up to the twin thrones. Old Romanus was gracious enough, but Zoë looked at the young man as if she wanted to eat him on the spot. He was good looking, all right, fresh-faced and ruddy-cheeked, likely to blush like a girl. I reckon the Orphanotrophus knew what he was doing. Set it all up.'

'Didn't Romanus notice, if it was that obvious?' I asked.

'No. The old boy barely used to look at the empress by then. Kept looking anywhere except in her direction, as though her presence gave him a pain.'

I mulled over the conversation as we marched back to the Grand Palace, entered the great courtyard and the gates were closed behind us. Our new Basileus dismounted, paused for a moment while his courtiers and officials formed up in two lines, and then walked down between them to the applause and smiles of his retinue before entering the palace. I noted that the Basileus was unescorted, which seemed very unusual. Even stranger was the fact that the courtiers broke ranks and began to hurry into the palace behind the Basileus, almost like a mob. Halfdan astonished me by rushing off in their wake, all discipline gone. So did the

guardsmen around me, and I joined them in pushing and jostling as if we were a crowd of spectators leaving the hippodrome at the end of the games.

It was unimaginable. All the stiffness and formality of court life had evaporated. The crowd of us, ministers, courtiers, advisers, even priests, all flooded into the great Trikilinium. There, seated up on the dais, was our young new emperor, smiling down at us. On each side were two slaves holding small strongboxes. As I watched, one of the slaves tilted the coffer he held and a stream of gold coins poured out, falling into the emperor's lap. Michael reached down, seized a fistful of the coins, and flung them high into the air above the crowd. I gaped in surprise. The shower of gold coins, each one of them worth six months' wages for a skilled man, glittered and flashed before plummeting towards the upstretched hands. A few coins were caught as they fell, but most tumbled on to the marble floor, landing with a distinct ringing sound. Men dropped to their hands and knees to pick up the coins, even as the emperor dipped his hand into his lap and flung another golden cascade over our heads. Now I understood why Halfdan had been so quick off the mark. My company commander had shrewdly elbowed his way to a spot where the arc of bullion was thickest, and was clawing up the golden bounty.

I, too, crouched down and began to gather up the coins. But at the very moment that my fingers closed around the first gold coin, I was thinking to myself that I would be wise to find some way of resigning from the Life Guard without attracting attention before it was too late.