

ONE



512 A.D.

CONSTANTINOPLE, BYZANTINE EMPIRE

Theodora had heard the word “rebellion” before, but now she listened to the deafening roar of a real one, not far off, and it exhilarated her. The very sound evoked in her mind the image of a bear, as big as a mountain, snapping its head, opening its maw, and spewing thunder upon the whole city. Only this roar went on and on, never waning, and she felt an urgent need to see it. From her perch at the edge of the rooftop, Theodora craned to get a glimpse of the upheaval, but a wall of apartment dwellings obstructed any view. So, she glanced instead at the spaces in between the buildings, at the mouths of alleyways, where the ominous rumble spilled into her neighborhood.

“Careful, Theodora,” said her older sister, Comito, her black hair lashing in the chilly breezes. “Do you want to fall and kill yourself?”

“I can’t see anything, but it sounds so close,” she said without looking

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back at Comito. Although her sister had a boy's name, Theodora knew she hated the activities of boys, things like prowling on rooftops to spy upon the city. "Besides, you heard Pata. He wants to go out there and fight," Theodora said as she leaned further over the roof's edge to peer down at the front portico. Her neighborhood street was mostly empty, a sight at odds with the distant mob noise.

"Pata wouldn't be fool enough to join a riot," said Comito. "What good is a bear trainer in a street fight anyway?"

"That's the whole idea of a rebellion. Pata says that when the factions fight the emperor, everyone gets called into the battle." But before she could explain further, Theodora spotted their father—or rather, the top of their father's balding head as he appeared suddenly below. He stepped out and looked both ways down the street. "There's Pata," she said and pointed.

"Where?" Comito dared to lean forward for a look, but quickly pulled back. "Maybe he just wants to see the uproar for himself."

"I don't think so." Theodora's father sometimes spoke of rebellion with his friends in the Green faction, but always in whispers and always after much drinking. Her father once told her that the Green faction was one of the city's civilian militias, one that rebuilt city walls or put out deadly fires when the city was under attack. But the faction could also be amassed to oust an emperor if need be. He assured Theodora that such a dangerous scheme would never happen. And yet, here it was . . . unfolding out there somewhere.

Theodora watched a group of about thirty men march up the street and toward her father. They carried swords and wore the olive-colored sashes of the Green faction. Her pata had his own green sash tied around his bulging belly. In his hand, Theodora spotted a coiled whip, one of many he used to keep the circus bears at bay. The approaching partisans howled and chanted with fists in the air. How confident the men all looked, she thought, working men who seemed to think themselves indestructible. Theodora stared at them for a long while. She admired the world of men, all the strength and vitality and, admittedly at times, even the violence. The world down below was their world after all, but how she wished she could join them.

And when Theodora saw the faces of individual men, the hard creases around their eyes, the thick, black beards of their jaws, and the girth of their arms below their tunics, she instinctively grabbed her hood and pulled it over her head. Even at age fourteen, Theodora understood that her face attracted peculiar attention from men, both wanted and unwanted. She had dark olive skin in an unvaried hue, with obsidian black hair, long and plush, both gifts of her mother's Greek Cypriot descent. Her eyes, though, were hazel like her father's, with a natural black line that encircled them and made them prickly with lashes. The eyes of men always seemed to find her and linger on her, and though her mother didn't know it, Theodora often smiled back. Because she found men interesting, because she wanted them to find her interesting. Men were daring in the way she was daring. Men went out into a world that she desperately wished to be a part of. Such desire filled her belly as a constant and nagging exuberance, an urge to be part of these goings-on, to be regarded as important. Her pata always remarked that Theodora had an overly female nature, but her mother came to the opposite conclusion, likening Theodora to boys due to a fearlessness and knack for troublemaking.

And now, such trouble came sweeping right into her neighborhood, right where she could almost touch it. Theodora's heart raced when she watched her father hail the approaching men and step into the streets.

"He's joining the partisans," said Theodora excitedly.

The men greeted him with cheers and swats on the back as if to say *even the bear trainer is out amongst us*. Strange energy bloomed inside Theodora's chest—an anxiety, an elation, a sudden fear for her father.

"Oh, Pata, don't go," Comito said in a childish whine.

Theodora stood and brushed the dirt from her hands. "I'm going down there to stop him."

"We can't go down there now in these silly disguises. Mother needs our help with Anastasia and—"

"Anastasia's asleep with a fever," said Theodora, referring to their younger sister, who'd been sick since that morning. "You don't have to go. I'll be back before anyone even knows I'm missing."

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Theodora and Comito both knew women weren't allowed on the public streets of Constantinople unaccompanied. The sight of a young woman in the streets was reserved only for beggarly children and the thieving daughters of vagabonds.

"You think you can just sneak around like some alley rat?" said Comito, who looked frightened. "You'll be seen and maybe even killed."

"I've done it before—you just never knew."

"When?"

And then, the ominous roar of the city erupted, like the Hippodrome crowd when one of the chariots won a race. Louder than that. More frightening than that. Theodora and Comito snapped their attention to the south, and for an anxious moment, neither spoke.

Theodora knew her sister would never do anything daring unless forced to. So, she spun and ran toward the adjacent roof edge. When she came to the end, she leaped into the air, spanned the thin chasm between apartment buildings, and landed surefootedly upon slanting clay tiles. "Let's go!" said Theodora. "Pata's already turning onto the Street of the Candlemakers. We'll lose him if we don't hurry."

Comito ran toward Theodora, but more out of panic. She also leaped across the chasm, but awkwardly and without grace.

Theodora's idea to save her father now had a moral imperative, one even her sister couldn't refuse. She scrambled across the sloping roof, scattering pigeons and clattering the pottery-like tiles with every step. She kept her eyes fixed upon her pata, tracking his path, as surely as a hawk follows a field mouse. How suddenly alive she felt. The mysterious and colorful world enveloped her on all sides. Below her, the streets beckoned with the prospect of a deadly fall, while above, the autumn skies dizzied her with an immovable blue, teetering her sense of balance. Just as she turned to check on Comito, one of the clay tiles cracked beneath her foot and slid away. Theodora slipped and landed hard on the rooftop. She then felt an airy terror in her belly as she slid toward the edge of the roof, her body rattling over the ridged surface, her fingertips grazing tile after tile. She finally grabbed one firm tile, and her body jolted to a stop. Her dread, though, turned to

awe as a panoramic, unobstructed view of the city rebellion lay now before her.

Constantinople had gone mad.

Thousands, no, tens of thousands of men crowded the city center, pitching and roiling like an angry ocean. Interspersed above the masses, she spotted swords jabbing skyward, matching the cadence of an unintelligible chant. Some men hoisted effigies of the emperor above the meshing throngs, doll-like bodies that blazed in whipping flames. Rocks sprang into view, hurled aimlessly from one side of the street to the other. Theodora also saw random fires burning unattended in the streets here and there, with crowds forming wild circles around each one. And everywhere there was smoke, wafting through the expanse in sickly black and ghostly white.

Above and behind the riotous horde, Theodora raised her eyes to gaze upon the Great Hippodrome of Constantinople, the monumental chariot-racing stadium that loomed over everything. The Hippodrome glowed with the orange hue of dusk, a marble leviathan that lay in a pool of its own spectators. Theodora pressed a hand against her chest as if to suppress the anxiety that burned there.

“Let’s turn back.”

Theodora flinched and turned to see Comito, who crouched behind her with unblinking eyes.

Her sister continued. “Look at them all.”

Theodora needed a moment for the mesmerizing sight of violence to release her. Her sister was right. The streets seemed warlike and full of chaos, but she noticed that their father and his friends had stopped where the Street of the Candlemakers faced out to the city center. They now stood like statues as they gazed upon the rebellion.

“He’s having second thoughts,” said Theodora with certitude. “If he sees us, he’ll have no choice but to walk us back home. It’s worth the risk,” She then scanned the roof line until her eyes came to rest on the bushy top of a cypress tree. “Come on.”

Theodora jumped into the tree, which swayed terribly against her weight. Limb by limb, she climbed down through the mossy fragrance of

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cypress, but she kept thinking about her pata. He wasn't a fighter. The sight she beheld only a moment ago was far beyond her father, a domain of young and dangerous men, soldiers, criminals, and tavern brawlers.

Theodora finally slipped from the tree limbs and landed on the ground like a cat, splashing up puddle water. She stood in the debris-ridden corner of an alley that faced out to the lawless Middle Way. *We're coming, Pata!* She crouched and studied the foot traffic, trying to judge her best route through the crowd, and fully aware of the danger she was about to pass through. When a frightened Comito drew up behind her, Theodora had to shout. "He's across the street. Stay close!"

Comito didn't seem to hear Theodora. She held a fearful face and glanced distractedly at all the chaos around them. Theodora tugged at her sister and then darted out of the alley, making her way openly through the crowd. Torsos and chest plates and hips with sword hilts moved past her vision. Several times, she collided with bodies that appeared suddenly in the maze of crisscrossing people and open spaces. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Comito struggling to follow, hunching up, and reaching out as if to seize the other side of the street with her hands.

The waning sun cast strong orange light and shadows against the citizens on the street. Theodora glanced up as she raced, staring at the faces of countless men, getting such good looks at their features this time, getting right up close like never before. One man steadied a massive basket atop his head as he observed the rioting. Another man led an elderly blind man away from the area, while beardless young men pushed by, hoping to join the fighting. The people were all so fascinating to Theodora. Her chest burned with excitement as she passed among them for these precious few moments, as if she were a ghost, unseen, yet in full view. Passing through cook smoke, eyes burning, colliding into pack animals, hearing excited voices from all directions, breathing in the heavy aroma of wax from the candlemaking shops, feeling the chill of wet air on her hooded face, her senses were overwhelmed.

As she drew up to the violent crowd, she pulled her hood low to cover her feminine face. Nary an eye could see her. Then she spotted two men brawling in the street, right up close. They moved so fast as they grappled,

with rose-red blood upon their faces and knuckles. Veering away from the scuffle, Theodora spun into an empty arched doorway and pressed against one side. She peered around the edge of the doorway as Comito finally crashed in behind her. They were so close. Pata had been standing across the street right in the area she now stood, but a mass of bodies obstructed her view. All the faces were unfamiliar. "I think I lost sight of Pata," said Theodora, feeling a sudden bout of panic.

"Oh, Theodora, what are we doing out here?"

But then, Theodora noticed the two brawling men stop fighting and slowly rise to their feet. Strange that they would forget their fighting, Theodora thought. Their attention shifted northward, toward a common sight. The riotous crowd around them suddenly cleared away, as if retreating. Theodora turned to follow their gaze and spotted something that made her breath stop. A fully armed column of Roman soldiers approached up the Street of the Candlemakers, as if out of nowhere. Perhaps two hundred soldiers now advanced ominously, with shields lifted to cover the bottom half of their faces, spears aimed skyward with glistening tips. She heard the shout of the commanding officer, who seemed to be preparing the soldiers for a clash against the rioters.

Theodora suddenly realized that she and her sister were caught between the rebellious mob and a company of Roman troops. A rock whizzed by and banged against a Roman shield, then another.

"You've trapped us!" said Comito, squeezing her eyes shut. "I hate you for this."

Theodora pulled her sister into the doorway and fell over her protectively. She suppressed her own panic just as rows of Roman soldiers marched by them, sweeping autumn air into the doorway, the rhythmic sound of their footfalls and the clank of their armor overtaking all other sound.

Each soldier wore heavy-looking shirts of chain mail that hung from their shoulders down to their belt line with white sleeves and tunics beneath. Steel helmets shaped like half of an egg crowned their heads and shadowed their faces, while strips of red leather bounced off their thighs. Worse yet to Theodora, the soldiers appeared ready for violence. The front ranks lowered

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their spears, which settled between each red oval shield. An officer shouted so closely and so loudly that Theodora and Comito both covered their ears.

“Form up! Get the auxiliaries into position!”

Theodora finally spotted her father turn and flee into the thousands of rioters. *Not that way*, she thought as the column of troops moved by her and took up a pitched position in the street. She reached over and took up Comito’s cold, shaking hand. “I just saw Pata.”

“Spears!” shouted the commander.

And Theodora watched the troops in the front line suddenly hoist their spears up to their ears, rear back, and hurl the weapons through the air.

She gasped and leaped from the doorway to trace the arching path of the spears through the sky. “No,” she muttered to herself.

She heard howls of agony as the spears plunged into the faceless mob. The rioters broke ranks in all directions, while the Roman troops formed a shield wall and marched forward again. Theodora didn’t even flinch when a brick struck the street near her feet and skipped away. Smoke gusted into her eyes, and she couldn’t see her father anywhere. She spotted a few rioters lying on the ground and bleeding, spear shafts sticking out from their bodies. None were her father though.

“Pata!” Theodora screamed as frantic people ran passed her. She called out for him again and again, but a strange sense of futility grew inside her. Just then, someone wrapped her with both arms, heaved her into the air, and spun away from the street. Before Theodora could react, deafening hoofbeats clamored by her, followed by a cold gust of wet leaves and air. When she opened her eyes again, she saw the buttocks of a dozen white stallions as Roman cavalry guards galloped by.

“Do you want to be trampled, child?” said a man’s harsh voice.

Theodora realized that she was in the arms of another soldier and so she kicked and twisted until he set her down. But her hood had come off, and the soldier stared right into her eyes. He had no violence in his countenance, but his big brown eyes burned with intelligence and authority. His face was clean-shaven, like a rich man’s, Theodora thought—intense, but not battle-ready like the other soldiers she’d just witnessed. He wore the

white and purple armor of a Palatine guardsman, an imperial guard of the Daphne Palace. And he was completely handsome, which made Theodora stare, despite her anger.

“You girls need to run,” he said as if issuing a command. “There’s nothing but bloodshed out here tonight.”

“We’re trying to get home, Commander,” said Comito, who took the lead, grabbing Theodora by the arm and pushing by the Palatine guardsman. “Please. We’re so sorry.” Theodora let herself be guided away but kept her gaze on the dashing Roman. She couldn’t take her eyes off him. She found herself hating his natural authority over her and hating even more that striking face beneath the shadow of his helmet. At the last instant, not knowing how else to defy him, Theodora stuck out her tongue. The gesture was childish, she knew, but it reassured her against following some order.

Finally, Theodora turned away and raced after Comito. “We’re sorry, Para,” she said aloud but didn’t dare look back.