

One

First, a silk robe, quiet and gentle against her skin. The robe is soft, warm, it needs to be for these long walks underground, through tunnels carved deep into the earth and rock beneath the Imperial Palace. The tunnels are cool, even in summer, and Theodora knows they are at their coolest now, in autumn. Here, surrounded on three sides by water, the intense heat of summer creates a moisture that sits in the still underground air and, when the world above turns cold, that moisture turns with it until the tunnel walks become dank and chill. Torches are left to burn at all times in winter, giving heat as well as light, bright pathways beneath the Palace, but at this time of year the tunnels are only lit when necessary, leaving the air purely cold, a heaviness that seeps in through the finest weave. The Empress's clothes are always only the finest weave, but even the perfect silk cannot hold back a creeping damp that edges into her bones, her knee and ankle joints, her lower back; bones that were hard-worked and twisted and fractured in childhood, and now remind her with a constant throbbing ache of every glorious tumbling leap she ever made. All of it part of the cold that sinks and settles and pains her for weeks at a time. Pain she shares with no one, not even the Palace physicians; if the walls have ears, the courtiers and attendants have all too open mouths. The girl fastens the under-robe at the Empress's waist and breast and Theodora is glad of the silk. She makes a note to herself that she should remind her husband's men to dress him for the season. If she notices the drop

in temperature, then he, eighteen years her senior, certainly feels it. The staff can be stupid, waiting for orders, and it's not the kind of thing the Emperor would pay attention to, his own comfort.

Next, a fuller gown, reaching to her feet, three-quarter length sleeves added, fitted and then fastened just below the elbow. Then her outer robe, the purple itself, heavy with embroidery in gold thread, her signature pearls sewn in around the bodice and again at the hemline, pulling the already-weighty cloth down flat from the breast. She knows the shape suits her figure, worked with her seamstresses to create this image, as comfortable as can be managed in a ceremonial robe, and flattering too. She is small, and needs the height given by a plain line. More pearls; pearls for purity, for the Christ, for wisdom. Several strands in different lengths are lifted over her neck and laid so they rest evenly across the bodice, falling from her just-covered collarbone. The longest strand drops between her breasts to create an arrow, pointing to her tiny waist. Again, the illusion of height. The arrow motif is picked up by earrings in red gold, threaded with pearls and emeralds. The girl stabs her lobe with the second earring, missing the piercing, and gasps as she does so, realising she has hurt her new mistress. The Empress gives no sign that anything is amiss other than a short intake of breath, quickly checked. The girl tries again, and this time succeeds, the earring sits, not without discomfort, but now it is merely the pain of heavy gold hanging from flesh and gristle, an everyday pain.

Finally the Imperial chlamys is carefully unfolded, spread out and then gathered back into the proper form. It is draped over her shoulders and pinned into place, from where it falls to her feet. She feels her collar and shoulders droop with the weight, despite her preparation; the readiness that insists the new dresser does not see the chlamys is a burden to the Augusta. The piece is, of course, weighty, these

particular ceremonial versions are excessively decorated, have been so heavily embroidered that the fabric has grown to two or three times its original density with intricate layers of gold and silver thread, and with still more jewels – her preferred emeralds this time, a pale green to offset the deeper purple. As well as the encumbrance of the encrusted fabric, there is the extra burden of the purple, as heavy in import as weight. And she is still the only woman to wear it. She stands inside the purple and the jewels and she becomes what they represent. It is all Theodora can do not to sway under the burden, carrying the Empire on her back.

She does not sink, will never sink. These attendants, this new girl dressing her so carefully, so nervously that she risks marring the silk with sweaty fingers, these people she sees constantly, in her rooms, going about their tasks at all hours of the day or night, have no idea how much it costs her, in physical pain, in boredom, and in the constant nagging hunger for solitude and quiet, to stand here and be dressed, to waste the time it takes in preparation. First the bath, and then the massage and the oiling of her skin, next the makeup – she applies her own, she has at least insisted on that, time to herself for the task – and then the chore of dressing. On a ceremonial day it can take half the morning from waking to fully dressed. She would rather pull on an old robe and be out in the world. Much of the time she would simply rather be out in the world, but she is Augusta and has no choice, and so she stands still, and steady, in that lack.

Finally she steps into the brocaded slippers, built up a little in the heel, to give her a touch more height, as well as an elegant shape to the ankle. If her husband notices, so be it, and if others choose to look, she does not mind. A moment to let the costume settle, to let her spirit rise to the demands it imposes, and Theodora is ready.

A call is given and answered a moment later, answered again, and again, corridors and tunnels, raised walkways and colonnaded paths echoing. There is a tangible shiver throughout the Palace, staff and servants and slaves stand to attention in readiness, even those hidden from regal view in distant offices, or in the kitchens far below. Those who believe themselves unnoticed in their menial tasks, opening gates or lighting corridors, take up a slightly more respectful stance nonetheless. The shiver spreads to the Hippodrome. They are coming. Slaves stand alert at the Kathisma doors. Thirty thousand pairs of eyes focus on the empty space that will be filled. Justinian and Theodora are on their way.

Justinian held out a hand to stop the slave opening the door before him, 'Theou doron,' he greeted his wife for the first time that day, as every day, calling her his 'gift of God', the play on her name obvious even to the nine-year-old Nubian slave hiding in a dark corner of the hallway, hoping to see the Imperial couple without being seen, 'How are you?'

And Theodora greeted him as she always had since his elevation to the purple, with a deep formal bow, her eyes low, voice quiet, 'How are you, Sir?'

Justinian smiled, masking a yawn and pulled her closer with one hand, rubbing the other over his face.

She saw the bags under his eyes, darker than usual, and asked, 'No sleep? Again?'

'There were things to do. Figures we needed to work on ...'

Theodora hissed, soft enough for only Justinian to hear, 'You are August.'

Justinian nodded, 'The purple would confirm it.'

'The Treasurer works for you, not you for him.'

‘And we need the funds his reforms will bring, the Goths and the Persians won’t wait while we arrange our finances for war ...’

‘So your Cappadocian drunk dismantles the post, knowing it’s the poor who are hardest hit?’

‘Perhaps you’ll be pleased to know he also has plans for increasing the taxes on our wealthier citizens?’

‘I’d happier if I trusted him to do his work without you overseeing every step. It astonishes me Narses allows it, I’d have his balls if he wasn’t already a eunuch.’

Justinian smiled, there was no point explaining again that his treasurer’s reforms of the Empire’s postal service were a welcome distraction from the weightier matters he also dealt with on a daily basis. Theodora was, he knew, concerned only for his welfare, and he liked that she was.

‘Good. Now you’ve finished re-castrating my Chief of Staff as well as decrying my Treasurer, shall we go? The people are keen to get on with today’s races ...’

Theodora bent her head, acknowledging the subject was closed, for now. ‘We’re still dining together?’ she asked.

‘Yes, Belisarius will be joining us.

‘And his wife?’

‘If you must,’ Justinian answered, biting his lip as he always did when agitated, ‘but keep her away from me.’

‘Antonina’s my friend.’

‘Then sit her beside you.’

‘She’s no less ambitious than her husband.’

‘I trust Belisarius,’ Justinian replied.

‘And I like Antonina.’

‘So we are balanced?’

‘In all things,’ Theodora answered him, lightly touching her husband’s hand.

They both understood her touch was a cue to let the matter drop, with the full Hippodrome waiting on their arrival, there were more pressing matters than wondering which of their circle was least trustworthy. Justinian had been brought up in the court, Theodora in the bowels of the Hippodrome, they knew there were few they could fully truly trust.

Theodora took a step back, nodded toward the rising clamour behind the closed doors, ‘Shall we?’

The Emperor of the New Rome gestured for the slaves to open the doors.

As the light flooded in, along with the sound, sight, and smell of thirty thousand spectators waiting for their ruling couple, Theodora whispered, ‘Head up, shoulders back, look straight ahead, then north to the horse statues, back to the obelisk, then south.’

Justinian nodded, ‘Acknowledging the highest benches as well the Senators and the wealthy in the front, yes I know.’

‘It’s the people we need on our side, as much as the rich.’

‘I agree, but perhaps you don’t need to remind me every time?’

‘It’s my job, to remind you of the people.’

‘It’s your job to be my wife.’

Theodora gave a little curtsy, ‘That too.’

Then they walked out into the light, and a full Hippodrome crowd saw the Empress arrive a half-step behind her husband, her head bowed as Justinian

acknowledged his people – he the country boy made good, she the infamous ex-dancer, ex-actress, ex-whore, now loyal, royal Augusta.

Thirty thousand spectators, and almost as many opinions about the August and his wife. Over two years since they came to the throne, almost four years since the law had been changed permitting Theodora-from-the-Brothel to marry Justinian and become Empress of Rome, the citizens of Constantinople and beyond were still divided as to whether their double act was a good thing or not. For now the division was in the new leaders' favour, but there was no guarantee it would stay that way. The Imperial couple worked daily at making their presence felt, and harder at making that presence welcome.

The Empress stood beside her husband in the Kathisma, the strength of two as one, the many as one, a symbol of the new Rome. The people cheered and Theodora waved back, feeling the rush of their approval, enjoying it as much as she ever had as an actress. Enjoying it more now because, in her plans for the City and for those closest to her, she finally had some measure of control. Her sister Comito was well married to Sittas, one of Justinian's favourite generals, and the sisters would soon begin considering husbands for their daughters Ana and Indaro. There were staff to command, her entourage to organise, extended family on both sides to care for, and always, primarily, Justinian to counsel and support.

Back in her rooms, the Empress's staff helped her remove the ceremonial robes. She'd quickly learned that while her preference was to wrench off the chlamys the moment the Kathisma doors were closed on the Hippodrome crowd, disregard for

the symbols of state did not go down well in the Palace. Many of the staff had been raised in the court, most knew far more about protocol than she did, and they all had an immense respect for the purple, if not always for the person wearing it. Emperors might come and go, and with them their political and religious appointees, but those who actually kept the Palace running, turning the cogs of state, usually remained in place. Theodora needed them on her side, not least because the rumour mill that linked one set of Palace rooms to another also spread well into the City and beyond. No longer able to charm her audience with a sly smile or a quick wink, the ex-actress now had to win her applause by proxy, letting the rumour of her brilliance within the Palace bring the people to her, not as theatrical star, but as worthy Augusta. She had been subject to the whims of the powerful all too often in her youth, now she preferred her staff to enjoy working for her because they liked and respected her, not because it was their job to do so. If she must pretend to love the heavy Imperial chlamys and venerate the purple in order to gain that affection, then Theodora would do so.

Free of the cumbersome symbols of state, she began the rest of her day's work, accepting the civil and Palace petitions brought to her by Armeneus, the eunuch who was lover to Narses, lover to her husband's Chief of Staff. Armeneus had worked for Theodora years before when she had lived in The Pentapolis in north Africa, he had known her both destitute and riding the waves of success, now he was her assistant in all the business associated with her role, just as Narses worked at Justinian's right hand. Eventually she called a halt to the requests laid before her, from the never-ending stream of needy and demanding who came to her state rooms requesting aid, to stand at the wide windows and look out, past the Palace grounds, down to the old wall, to the lighthouse and the water beyond. Theodora was used to

hard work – as both a performer and later as a religious devotee, she had become skilled in mastering her body and her will – but even as a girl she had always craved solitude. Despite the power and privilege of office, solitude was the one thing in very short supply. She took a deep breath, turned back into the room, looked at the dozens waiting on her, waiting for her judgement, waiting for her approval, waiting on the Empress, and gave up on the hope of a brief walk away from her rooms today. Her only role was Augusta, and nowhere was offstage.