

Preface

Constantinople, 1302

The great city still looked impressive, if one did not peer too closely. It had been nearly a hundred years since the Latin Frank crusaders from the west had sacked the city, emptying it of most of its treasures, damaging and burning its buildings, raping its women and girls and desecrating its holy places. For nearly a thousand years the city named after the Roman Emperor Constantine had been a beacon of light in a dark and uncivilised world. At its height, the city's population had totalled half a million souls, but barely seventy thousand now lived within its impressive and still intact walls. It was still a great city of marble, stone and red-tile roofs when many towns and cities in the rest of the world were filled with drab buildings of wood and thatch.

Constantinople was surrounded on three sides by water, and on the landward side were strong fortifications that had resisted the attacks of barbarians, such as Persians and Muslims, but not the Latin crusaders who had so basely betrayed fellow Christians. The crusaders had breached the walls of Constantinople in the northwestern section of the city defences, in the so-called Blachernae area, from where they launched attacks into the city itself. And it was to the Blachernae area, specifically the palace of the same name, that General George Mouzalon headed, riding through the district containing the houses of Constantinople's wealthiest aristocrats, which clustered around the palace. The latter was sited on a hill overlooking the city walls and beyond them to the west the Philopation, a large park used for hunting. To the north were the sea walls of the Golden Horn, the narrow bay that was one of the finest natural harbours in the world.

The Roman emperors who ruled from Constantinople used to live in the Grand Palace, an impressive, sprawling complex built as an equivalent to the Palatine Palace in Rome. At its height it was a vast collection of individual palaces built on terraces overlooking the Sea of Marmara. But they had been so thoroughly looted and vandalised by the Franks that there was no longer a Grand Palace. Instead, reflecting the diminished status of both the emperor and the empire he ruled over, the imperial throne was located in the much more functional Blachernae Palace, in reality a palace-citadel surrounded by walls and towers.

The general rode through the gates into the huge courtyard where chariot races, gymnastics and military parades took place, though only on celebratory occasions. He looked around the largely empty space and smiled. There would be no celebrations for a long while, if ever. Guards on the walls observed him as he rode up the hill to the palace itself, burly soldiers

with axes stepping forward to block his path. Then stepping aside and bowing their heads when they recognised him. He dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to one.

‘Take him to the stables.’

‘Yes, general,’ answered the soldier in a foreign accent.

They were Varangians, the ‘axe-bearing barbarians’ who were the emperor’s personal bodyguard. Originally from Kiev-Rus, they now comprised mostly Norsemen and Danes, with a smattering of Englishmen. How he would have loved to lead a whole army of Varangians – men superbly equipped with chainmail armour, helmets, large axes, swords and shields. Soldiers who could cut through enemy formations like a hot knife through butter. Alas, the Varangians never left the palace, the emperor keeping them close to him at all times. Once they had numbered a corps of six thousand men; now only a few hundred remained. It cut him to the quick to know, despite their depleted numbers, they were still the best soldiers the empire could muster.

He walked up the steps leading to the palace and caught sight of a familiar figure. Obese, bald, a double chin threatening to obscure the solid gold torc around his neck, Timothy the Forest Dweller stood smiling at him like an oversized toad. His nickname derived from his place of birth in a densely forested area in Cappadocia, a region now lost to the enemy. The derogatory term was due to his immense power at the court of the emperor, for Timothy was not only a eunuch but also the imperial treasurer. Dressed in an apricot-coloured robe called a *kabbadion*, a kaftan-like garment with full sleeves and fastened at the front, it was richly decorated with gold on the cuffs and hem. A multitude of pearls had also been stitched on the garment but the most expensive item Timothy wore was the gold torc. The church denounced such ‘pagan’ items but such was the influence of the chief treasurer with the emperor that he ignored its denunciations.

‘Welcome, general, the emperor is expecting you.’

George Mouzalon was always surprised by the deep voice of the eunuch, that and his great size, but then he found the whole concept of eunuchs bizarre and slightly unnerving.

‘It is good to see you are unharmed, general,’ remarked Timothy as they both walked through one of the long, colonnaded corridors that filled the Blachernae. Though the palace was a functional, three-storey building, attempts had been made to decorate it in a style to make the emperor and his family feel at home. Thus, corridors were adorned with gold mosaics portraying imperial military victories, their floors paved with different-coloured marble tiles.

Varangians stood guard at every doorway, round scarlet shields decorated with a double-headed eagle in gold slung on their backs. In the throne room itself, more Varangians stood along the walls and around the platform on which the emperor sat on a throne of gold inlaid with precious stones. Occupying it was Emperor Andronicus, a man in his early forties but who

looked twenty years older. His hair was greying and his cheeks were sunken, accentuated by his narrow face and long nose. His brown eyes were pools of weariness and the gold crown suspended by a gold chain above his head resembled a Sword of Damocles rather than a bejewelled orb of power. A deeply religious man, he wore a forked beard to signify his moderation, reverence and graveness. He lifted a hand to Mouzalon.

‘Welcome, general, we are glad to see you.’

The general doubted that, but he thanked God his emperor was indeed a man of moderation and religion, else his head would most likely already be decorating Constantinople’s walls.

‘How many men did we lose, general?’

Michael, the emperor’s son, was not so moderate or pious. A man in his mid-twenties whom his father had made co-emperor, his eyes bored into the general. He was the future of the empire of Constantine and he did not look favourably on anyone who jeopardised that future. The recent defeat of an imperial army at Bapheus, a plain east of the city of Nicomedia, in the province of Bithynia, near to Constantinople, had resulted in yet more territory being lost to the Muslims.

‘A couple of hundred, highness,’ replied the general.

‘Then you will be retaking the field against these infidels,’ snapped Michael.

The general sighed. ‘Alas, no, highness. Half the army, the Alan contingent, deserted before the battle began, which makes attacking the Muslims foolhardy in the extreme.’

The Alans, originally an ancient Iranian tribe, had occupied the areas north of the Caspian and Black Seas, before the Huns had forced them west into Europe, though others ventured south into the Caucasus. Famed horse soldiers, they had been hired as mercenaries by Roman emperors for centuries. However, like all mercenaries they quit their service when their pay ran out.

Andronicus looked at the general. ‘Deserted?’

‘They were paid for three months’ service, highness,’ said Mouzalon, ‘which unfortunately expired the day before the battle.’

‘If we lose Anatolia,’ stated Michael, ‘the empire loses all its recruiting grounds, and our army will wither and die. We must retake the lands the Muslimss have captured, otherwise they will be hammering on the gates of Constantinople itself.’

Mouzalon nodded. ‘I agree, highness.’

He glanced at the Varangian Guards standing around the emperor's platform.

‘Perhaps I could have the Varangian Guardsmen as a cadre, around which I could build a new army.’

The emperor’s eyes opened wide in alarm.

‘The Varangian Guard? They exist to defend the imperial family, general. Would you rob me of the only thing that stands between me and ruination?’

It was a fair point, especially as the only things standing between Andronicus and the victors of Bapheus were the Varangian Guard, another indigenous guard unit called the *Paramonai*, the city garrison and the empire’s navy anchored in the Golden Horn, though many of the ships were manned by Genoese mercenaries.

Andronicus shook his head. ‘For a thousand years, this city and the empire it built has stood as a beacon of light and hope in a dark and uncivilised world. God will not abandon Constantinople in its hour of need, general. But I will not allow the Varangian Guard to leave the city.’

The emperor turned to his son and co-emperor.

‘What of the counts in Thrace and Greece? They must surely be able to raise an army between them to fight the Muslims?’

Each province of the empire was ruled by a count, who commanded all the military resources his province could muster. And any force raised by a count was made up of natives rather than foreign mercenaries, which in theory made it more reliable on the battlefield. But, as with so many things in the empire, the provinces had shrunk in number following the contraction of the empire’s borders. And just as provinces in Anatolia had been lost to the Muslims, those on the western side of the Bosphorus, the narrow strait that divided Europe from Asia, were under threat from the Serbs and Bulgars.

‘Alas, father,’ said Michael, ‘if we strip the western provinces of troops, our enemies will seek to take advantage and we may lose Greece altogether. A blow from which we may never recover.’

‘There must be some soldiers somewhere we can use to reclaim our territories in the east,’ wailed Andronicus pathetically. ‘The march of the Muslims on our eastern frontier is an affront not only to God, but also to me.’

His tired eyes looked at George Mouzalon and Michael in turn, though neither had an answer to his miserable plea. The emperor’s gaze eventually turned to Timothy, who was smiling in a self-satisfied manner.

‘Something amuses you, lord treasurer?’ asked the emperor icily.

In Rome, eunuchs had been classed as lower than beggars, but in Constantinople they had always been accorded high status, aristocrats often having their sons castrated so they could more easily become governors, ambassadors, generals, admirals and other important posts in the empire. The Orthodox Church regarded eunuchs as ‘angels on earth’, and emperors saw them as being reliable and free of the vice of sexual desire, which was far from the truth. They could thus be trusted to carry out duties in the women’s quarters, as well as being relied upon to undertake the education of royal princes and princesses. For centuries, the rulers of Constantinople had surrounded themselves with high-ranking eunuchs to provide them with loyal service and valued advice. Timothy the Forest Dweller did not disappoint his master.

‘This is God’s city, highness, which as you say has stood for a thousand years and will stand for a thousand more,’ began the eunuch. ‘He who loves this city, its emperor and its people will not allow the infidel to foul its holy precincts or indeed approach its sacred walls.’

‘Get to the meat of it,’ snapped Michael.

Timothy remained unflustered. ‘You will have heard of the War of the Sicilian Vespers, my lord?’

Michael wracked his brain. ‘No?’

Timothy fought the urge to laugh in Michael’s face. The emperor, though, was not so ignorant.

‘The conflict between the Angevin French and the Aragonese Spanish over control of the island of Sicily?’

Timothy bowed his porcine head. ‘Indeed, majesty.’

‘What of it?’ asked Andronicus.

‘The war has recently ended, highness,’ said Timothy. ‘The brother of the Spanish King James, King Frederick, has been recognised by the Angevins and the false Bishop of Rome, the so-called pope, as the legitimate ruler of Sicily, thus bringing hostilities to an end.’

‘I thank God for bringing this about,’ reflected Andronicus. ‘The people of Sicily have been subjected to the cruelties that war brings for twenty years. Glad as we are for this miracle, lord treasurer, I fail to see how this benefits Constantinople.’

‘There are mercenaries in the pay of King Frederick, highness,’ said Timothy, ‘who are now without employment. Mercenaries, moreover, who have proved themselves to be ferocious soldiers. We should look to bringing these mercenaries to Constantinople, highness, to fight against the Muslims.’

‘They are Catholics,’ said Michael. ‘Why would apostates fight for the true church?’

‘Money, lord,’ sighed Mouzalon. ‘If they are paid, they will fight. They have, after all, been happily fighting and killing their fellow Catholics for twenty years.’

Andronicus was unsure. ‘The empire has a long history of hiring mercenaries, which has cost the imperial treasury much money, often for little success. We currently employ Alans and Genoese, and in the past have hired Cilicians, Cumans, Georgians and Hungarians to fight our enemies. Why should I pay for yet *more* mercenaries who might run away from the enemy, just as the Alans did?’

‘Two reasons, highness,’ answered Timothy. ‘First, and to be blunt, we have little choice. General Mouzalon has valiantly endeavoured to hold back the Muslim tide, but without additional resources he cannot withstand them.’

Mouzalon was nodding his head in agreement, which was noted by the emperor.

‘And the second?’ asked Andronicus.

‘These mercenaries,’ said Timothy, ‘comprise a self-contained army, an army moreover that has tasted victory after victory in Sicily, against the flower of Frankish chivalry.’

‘Is there such a thing?’ sneered Michael.

The emperor ignored his son. ‘You are certain these mercenaries are no longer employed, lord treasurer?’

‘My spies inform me King Frederick desires to be rid of them as speedily as possible, highness.’

‘Even if they are willing to fight for us,’ said Mouzalon, ‘Sicily is hundreds of miles from Constantinople, which means weeks of marching. By the time they arrive, the Muslims will be knocking at the gates of this city.’

‘I am reliably informed that the commander of these mercenaries has his own fleet of ships,’ replied Timothy. ‘Transportation will not be a problem, general.’

Andronicus brought his hands together, rested his chin on his thumbs and closed his eyes. Silence filled the chamber as all eyes looked at the emperor, the heir of Constantine and the man responsible for defending the true Christian faith. Andronicus opened his eyes and looked at Timothy.

‘Very well, lord treasurer, use your spies to make an approach to the commander of these Catholic mercenaries. They are to relay a message from the Roman emperor that he has selected them to defend the city of Christ from the infidel Muslims.’

So it was that the Emperor of Constantinople, on the suggestion of a eunuch, took a decision that would have profound consequences for the empire he was desperately trying to preserve.