

**In Constantinople**  
*By Alexander Saxton*

She would stand in purple darkness, back pressed against one of the marble pillars supporting the window's arch, and strain her ears to catch scraps of conversation as they drifted up through the purple leaves and white flowers of the citrus trees. In Constantinople, somebody was always listening.

Discipline was looser at the old palace of Blachernae than at the Bucoleon Palace on the other end of the city, and from time to time Irene could hear the servants and eunuchs gossiping in the gardens beneath her window. She would stand in purple darkness, back pressed against one of the marble pillars supporting the window's arch, and strain her ears to catch scraps of conversation as they drifted up through the purple leaves and white flowers of the orange boughts. In Constantinople, somebody was always listening.

And in these troubled days, the rumours she listened to ran rampant. Some said the Emperor's favourite, Michael Rhadapoulos, had won a great victory against the Caliph in Anatolia. Others claimed he had been killed in battle, and that the Caliph had had him stuffed with wires, his automaton to be used as a grisly welcome for envoys at the court of Baghdad. Whenever she heard a version of this second rumour, Irene would place the first two knuckles of her right hand between her teeth and bite down, to keep from crying out with pain and loss. In her apartments, her prison, she would lose one of her last connections to the outside world, to Michael, if she was heard by the servants and they found a different garden for their secret talks.

Tonight, though, a new rumour was circulating; one that she had never heard before.

"Have you heard the news?" This first voice sounded familiar: male but strangely pitched, with a nasal, feminine tinge.

"I may have. Of which news do you speak?" This second voice was deeper, softer. Something about it made the skin crawl along her spine.

"The news about Michael Rhadapoulos," said the first.

"Ah, *him*. Well, what I have heard is what everybody else has heard; that he is dead: torn limb from limb by the ghazis, his hands and head nailed to their standard."

The first speaker chuckled at this.

"Of course *that* one isn't true," they said. "All of *my* sources tell me the ghazis were driven back into Antioch, and besieged until they paid us tribute. Not even the Emperor's Favourite could have done that with his head nailed to a pike."

"Your sources only tell you what everybody knows," said the second speaker, his soft voice curdling with a sneer. He paused: a metallic clink was followed by a small glow of light between the leaves, and then the curl of sweet opium smoke up into the moonlight. With a slow, fragrant exhalation, the soft-voiced man resumed his thought. "On the return journey, Rhadapoulos was last across the Sarus river, and the ghazis ambushed him. The Purple

Emperor's favourite is dead, and good riddance to him, for supporting a devil-worshipping usurper."

"Hah! Is this what you think of our Master, then? It's brave of you to say so Theophilus: who knows where *my* loyalties lie?"

"*Everybody* does. The *old* Emperor made you one of his guard. This purple heretic made you a *eunuch*. Hm, I just *wonder* what your loyalties could be, Ingar."

Irene's heart jumped in her chest. She knew that name, and suddenly understood why the first speaker's voice had sounded so familiar. Ingar: when last they had met in her father's house he had been every bit the viking mercenary. Now, his speech had become refined. Now, he sounded like a creature of the imperial court. Castration itself didn't change a man's voice, but perhaps it changed the man who spoke. *Did* he sound more feminine? Or merely less concerned with signing masculinity?

"Maybe you're mistaken, Theophilus," said Ingar, with a playful, almost sultry drawl. "Maybe I like life *better* as a eunuch? Perhaps the Purple Emperor has given me... *serenity*."

"Don't play games with me, Ingar: I've met your kind before. Vikings always have plans for their money and testes back in russia or daneland or wherever Godforsaken corner of the north vomited you up. If you were a Roman, the usurper could have bought you with money or favours to your family. But you're a viking. And in my experience vikings stay vikings, especially when it comes to matters of revenge." Theophilus took a slow pull on his opium pipe. "No, for the time being, I'll risk trusting you."

For a long moment, Irene waited to hear what came next. She bit down on the fingers of her right hand, reopening scabs; she wanted to lean out the window and scream, 'What about Michael, what about Michael.' Unnoticed in the darkness, a purple stream of blood was running from her middle knuckle to the curled fingers of her fist. From there, it dropped star-shaped spots on her bare feet and the tessellated floor.

"Why so quiet all of a sudden, Ingar?" Theophilus said. "Have I hit a nerve? Come come: tell me this alleged *news* of yours."

There was a moment's pause, and Irene could almost see the slight narrowing of Ingar's pale eyes as he decided how much to trust the soft-voiced man. Inwardly, Irene was torn: between longing to hear news, any news of Michael, and longing for Ingar not to trust this man.

"Alright, Theophilus," Ingar said at length. "The news is this. Michael Rhadapoulos *is* alive. And he's coming back."

"*Back?*"

"Back."

"You cannot mean--"

"He is going to overthrow the Purple Emperor."

"And what: become a usurper himself? Some favour he'd be doing us..."

"When it's done, he plans to restore the old dynasty."

Theophilus scoffed.

"What, with some pretender? The old Emperor is dead, Ingar. He had no children, and his brothers are dead. If you want proof, their heads are still stapled to the Golden Gate."

"The Emperor is dead, yes. But last I checked, his widow still survives. And is living *here*, if memory serves."

In the window above, the bottom had fallen out of Irene's stomach.

"*Irene?*" said Theophilus. He coughed a little on the smoke, performatively incredulous. "That up-jumped scullery maid? I know she's half-viking, but really Ingar, you're out of your mind if you think anyone will accept that *stupid bitch* as..."

"Keep your voice down, Theophilus. You're talking about the *Empress*."

Something had crept into Ingar's voice. All of a sudden he sounded much more like the man Irene remembered from her childhood: the man whose axe was notched like a dragon's spine. But Theophilus seemed not to notice.

"I'm talking about the *Empress?!?*" In his sudden agitation Theophilus' voice cracked. "Do you *hear* yourself Ingar? This is ridiculous. You've brought me here for the sake of folly. I have to go."

"Go, Theophilus? And where do you think you're going?"

The hair on Irene's neck began to rise. The approach of violence was like electricity before a storm.

"Get out of my way, Ingar, I have business to attend to."

"I know your business, Theophilus; I know who you report to."

Irene put a hand over her mouth and fell back against the pillar. A moment of silence fell, through which a breeze crept, trembling the purple trees. Then, just as the wind died out: a sound of daggers drawn, a scuffle in the dark in the dark and fragrant gardens. Just below her, somebody was thrown against the wall. A soft thud was followed by a soft gasp, and the sound of a metal point grinding into crimsoned bricks.

Then silence fell again, except for the distant sound of ship's bells drifting over from the Golden Horn. A last tendril of saccharine smoke wafted up against the purple night.

"Irene?"

She could have cried with relief. It was the voice she remembered so well.

"Ingar, is that you?"

"It's me, Irene. Michael sent me. I'm here to get you out."

She dug fingernails into the skin of her forearm, but the pinching did not wake her from any dream.

"How long until he's here?" She whispered. "What if they catch us on the road?"

"Irene," said Ingar. "We're not taking any road. He's here in the city already. It's happening tonight."

She could not believe it. But at the same time she wanted so badly for it to be true that she could not *not* believe it.

"I'm coming up," said Ingar. "Gather only what you need. We must be gone before someone discovers Theophilus."

"I'll only be a minute," Irene said. But her own voice sounded thick and distant in her head. It was all unreal, all a dream; after so long beneath the purple lock and key, she could not comprehend what freedom meant.

In dreamlike purple darkness, she wandered back through her apartments, her luxurious cell. Purple shadows hung behind the silk curtains of her bedframe and windows. Gold braziers

cradled red-gold coals, casting gold through the purple gloom, and through the arch of windows, lights from the exurb of Galata shone gold on the purple waters of the Golden Horn.

She considered what to bring.

She had gems and gewgaws of amethyst and topaz; of porphyry and gold. She robes of brocade purple and vestments of cloth-of-gold, but none of them meant anything to her.

Instead, she went to an unremarkable chest buried under silk and damask in the closet. There, just where she had left them so many years before, she found a dark set of old soldier's trousers, and a quilted tunic purple-stained by ancient wine. Beneath them, she left undisturbed her father's helmet and coat of mail, but took the one possession which mattered to her most. Unspotted by rust, and pattern-welded so its head seemed to writhe with gold and purple in the flickering light, she found her father's axe.

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Crossing the Horn by small boat, Michael Rhadapoulos, the Emperor's favourite, entered the city by means of a rope ladder hung from the walls by a loyal agent near the church of St. Acacius. During his time in Anatolia, he had grown a beard and taken to wearing his hair cut short. A new scar had changed his face, once known for boyish prettiness. Few would now recognize this thin and quiet man.

Alone, he walked beneath the square shadow of the Isaurian Tower, and followed the ruined walls of Severus. In places, these fortifications had been stripped to the ground for building bricks, but now and then they rose like ancient tombs in the moonlight: commemorating all the passing days of governments and emperors.

His route brought him to the very doors of the Bucoleon, beneath the eyes of sentries whose task would have been to kill him, if they had known this hooded figure in the dark. But they did not know him. And as for him, he barely knew himself, or this city that for so long had been his home.

Great streamers of purple silk had been draped from the palace parapets, running down like blood or ink in night or day or gloom. The new master of Constantinople had named himself the 'Purple Emperor'; a reference, some said, to the purple robes of royal office.

Others said, however, that it was because he had donned these robes while still purple with his predecessor's blood. And yet others whispered of a cryptic significance to the name: of secret cults that he had joined in hidden years of exile in the East.

And the colour, like a mould or skin disease, had spread its way throughout the palace. Even servants, eunuchs, now whispered down the purple halls in robes of reddish indigo. The palace walls were studded now with purple gems; and amethysts defiled the eyes of icons and mosaics in the capital's great churches. A new figure had established itself in the city's religious art, as if all at once, as if seeping, inklike, through the walls to stain the paints and carvings done a thousand years before.

This figure was an angel with purple wings, a purple robe, and crowned with a diadem of eyes. The Church Patriarch had demanded to know the meaning of this... unorthodox character. The palace claimed it was the Angel Gabriel, but the scenes where he appeared were unfamiliar. Nobody could remember a tradition where Gabriel punished the unrighteous by

taking out their eyes. Nobody could remember a tradition where Gabriel had been a crucifixioner of Christ. When the patriarch was unconvinced, the palace had him sacked. He disappeared thereafter, and his replacement proved more pliant.

All these thoughts, and darker ones as well, were running blindly through the darkneses of Michael's mind as he came upon the silent, ancient church of Sergius and Bacchus, the military saints.

A light was burning above the door's arch, casting dim gold fingers down the purple streets. Michael glanced from side to side. The streets were silent, and he knocked.

A monk answered. His eyes widened at the sight of the Emperor's Favourite on his doorstep, but he said nothing, for his vow of silence had been tightened by the removal of his tongue. But perhaps the monk was not so surprised to see Michael Rhadapoulos at his door, when he was supposed to be dead or far away in harsh Cilicia. Since the days of Theodosius, monks had played their role in Constantinople's plots.

"Forgive me," Michael whispered. "I know that it's late."

The monk dipped his head.

"Saints Sergius and Bacchus watched over me on campaign. I vowed to pay respects at their shrine the moment I returned."

The monk dipped his head again. Michael wasn't sure if the man believed him, or even cared. He had been a patron of this church for a long time, since Irene had shown him the secret in the crypt. Maybe that patronage had bought him loyalty. Or maybe, he had lured himself into a trap.

Without further acknowledgment, the monk led him inside the dim-lit church, where cool ceilings arced purple as sunset through the gloom. At a small door behind the altar, he unlocked a door of iron bars which creaked, too loudly, in the silent hour. Below, a stairwell ran down into darkness and the monk led on, unguided by even a single candle's insufficient light. The passage was too short for a man of Michael's height, and too narrow for a man with his fear of close spaces. Nevertheless, he followed, clamping down on the clammy fear inside his chest.

They emerged into the great darkness of an unlit catacomb where, by implicit memory, the monk found a flint lighter, and struck sparks into a dish of oil left beside the door.

The oil caught flame with a sound like wings, and a reddish glow bled across the low ceiling of that ancient chamber. Like dark feathers, row after row of black, curving shadows fluttered from the stone benches that spread like wings, like dark wings, around a low stone dais. Two sarcophagi stood out upon the dais, carved from porphyry that glimmered softly in the awful light. Between them, shining with gold leaf, stood an ikon depicting the twin saints.

"Thank you," the Emperor's Favourite murmured.

The monk nodded.

"I would prefer to say my prayers in private," Michael said. The monk nodded again, but as he turned to climb back up the narrow stairs, Michael caught him by the sleeve.

"If it's all the same to you, I would prefer nobody knew I was in the city. I would *strongly* prefer it."

By his tone, he indicated to the man that this was a threat, and to drive the point home, he drew aside his cloak, revealing the pommel of his sword. The monk's eyes did not widen. He merely dipped his head once more, and retreated up the stairs.

Alone at last, Michael approached the dais. Some remnant of his childhood schooling in the Faith jangled at the thought of blasphemy. But his mouth twisted into a gruesome smile. If God was on his side, he would commit worse sins than blasphemy before the sun was up. If not, then he worse things to worry about than hell.

Climbing the dais, he placed both hands on the lid of St. Sergius' coffin. Hidden ball-bearings responded to his touch, and with little effort he pushed the heavy lid aside. Within, the darkness of the tomb stared up at him, and he took a moment to stare back, the darkness reflecting purple from his grinning teeth. Straddling the sarcophagus's edge, he swung himself over and allowed himself to fall. He landed hard. It was cold inside the tunnel. Above his head, by the work of some secret mechanism, or the hand of some secret angel, the sarcophagus lid rolled back into place.

In pure darkness Michael Rhadapoulos, the Emperor's favourite, stepped down into the cold and drew his sword.

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From the Bucoleon palace, the House of Justinian, no lights could be seen across the water, as they could at Blachernai. There was only deep, purple night, rolling in from the still vastness of the Marmaran Sea.

In the Imperial chambers, where men of uncertain legitimacy had ruled since the days when Leo was crowned by Aspar and his Goths, a cold wind from the water billowed through the marble arcades like sails. In his bed, the Emperor stirred, and moaned in his sleep. Palace rumour had long held that the Usurper did not sleep easily, and some joked that the only thing purple about this Emperor were the circles underneath his eyes.

In a wooden chair by the foot of the Emperor's bed, the Grand Chamberlain dozed with a naked sword across his lap. The breeze stirred in his hair, and he blinked awake. Once upon a time, the role of chamberlain would have been filled by a viking of the Imperial guard. But the Usurper trusted none of them, suspecting them of loyalty to the past regime. Now, the ranks of his personal guard were filled by the strange men he had brought from the mountains near Kapaghak, in farthest Armenia. These men rarely spoke, and they had never deigned to learn greek. Most had devotional tattoos of an intriguing nature: sometimes a cross, othes a crescent, sometimes a flame, but always, always, a purple set of wings.

Rising from his chair, the Chamberlain stepped out onto the balcony, and watched the purple night with purple eyes. The wind stiffened, and he raised both hands, like wings, feeling the subtle lift beneath the pinions of his outstretched fingertips. In the moonless night, he mouthed a prayer, though to whom, or what, it would have been impossible to tell, unless, like the Emperor, you spoke a certain strange dialect.

He leaned forward over the balcony, poised perilously on the cusp of flight, eyes shut as the wind ruffled his purple garments like feathers. Lost in the exaltation of the feeling, he neither saw nor heard as a figure emerged from the shadows behind him. In one step, Michael

Rhadapoulos, the Emperor's favourite, had closed the gap between them. The sword in his hands broke the base of the chamberlain's skull like a beak breaks an egg. The sound was dull and flat, and the impact sent the chamberlain up and over the railing, to fall through purple darknesses below. In the scant moment between the railing and the waves, it seemed to Michael that the chamberlain soared instead of tumbling, his spread arms and rich brocades catching wind like the purple wings of a vulture in the mountains.

But the splash came, and after a few moments, Michael knew that heavy cloth would have filled with seawater, gold jewelry would have sought the seafloor, and there would be no evidence of his crime but the smear of blood on his sword, the purple mist of droplets on his face.

He breathed deeply. The inky wind filled his hair and open mouth. He could feel its purple filling him, turning him Imperial breath by breath. He spun slowly, until he was facing through the open arch to where the Usurper writhed in restless sleep. Breath by breath, he stepped toward the royal bed, each breath one closer to the Emperor's final breath, and Michael's first as Emperor.

The Usurper rolled onto his back. In the gloom, Michael still knew the silvery hair and beard, the shadowed eyes, the worry lines that carved his brow and cheeks. Michael reversed the sword in his hand, raising it aloft, with pommel to the moon and point toward the sleeping heart. He hesitated.

Suddenly he was a boy again, crowded against the edge of a sun-spattered street in Thessalonica as this man returned in glory, tossing silver coins from the head of a company of horse. Michael had caught one of these coins, brushing his thumb in wonder across the stamped face of some Bulgar king. Though his family had been poor back then, he had never spent that silver coin. Even now it was still with him, its long-accustomed weight suddenly heavy on the cord around his neck.

He was suddenly a young officer again, exhausted and bloody, and looking on in disbelief as this man returned from exile unannounced, and leading the soldiers of Kapaghak to the empire's aid. He was suddenly this man's young lover once again, the one who helped him plot and gain the throne.

The sword-point quivered. Michael's hands had become unsteady. His mouth had gone dry.

But there was blood already on the sword, and he had already rolled his dice. If he turned back now, the Emperor would take his eyes and send him to live out his ruined life in lonely exile. But if he went forward, then all would be his. He would never want for silver coins again, or warm the beds of cold and aging tyrant kings.

He took a slow breath. The blade steadied in his fingers. He lifted it to the height of his collarbone, and gazed for the last time into that face which he had once loved. He exhaled, and with the flow of his breath brought down the sword to slide between two ribs and pierce the Purple Emperor's heart.

A pair of eyes snapped open in the gloom, and the Emperor gasped as blood welled up around the blade, purple in the darkness, orchid-dark as it welled up in his throat to spill across his cheek and pool amongst the white silk folds of his bedding. He spluttered once, sending up a plume of purple mist, and then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he was still.

Michael took a step away. For a moment, the wind had died out of the room, and all was silent. The sea itself seemed to have stilled its movements, and the only tides Michael could hear were the ones that boomed in his ears.

He stepped out onto the balcony to let the wind wash over him as it rose again. He rubbed his eyes. When he looked down at his hands, he found, to his surprise, that they were clean. It had been a tidy murder, and he wasn't sure what to think about that. He returned to the chamber, and looked down at the body in its tangled sheets. The sword stood up from the Emperor's chest, like a cross raised over a new-filled grave.

Michael's mouth was still dry. He knew that the rest of the night was vital, that now was the time to rally his supporters, to purge the Armenians, to find the Patriarch and have himself crowned, but a deep exhaustion had filled him up. Just a moment, all he needed was a moment to come to grips with what he had done. Sitting down on the end of the bed, he buried his head in his hands. He breathed deeply. For a moment, that last flashing of the Emperor's eyes was seared into his mind. But as he sat, he found that image replaced by a better one: an image of himself, Emperor Michael Rhadapoulos, Michael the Restorer, dressed in purple robes and crowned with the Royal diadem, parading in the Hippodrome with Irene at his side, his Empress, while the citizens of Constantinople cheered and showered them with rice, rejoicing at the return to orthodoxy and legitimate rule.

A slow smile, the same smile that had crossed his face in the crypt, crept back across his features. But then...

"Michael."

Michael froze.

"Michael... Why did you do it?"

Slowly, he turned.

"Of all the people, of everyone, I never thought it would be you, Michael. I never thought it would be you."

The Emperor was sitting up in his bed. The sword was still protruding from his heart, but it was clear that heart was beating once again, for every second, a fresh gout pumped out along the weapon's edge to drip and gather at the hilt. Likewise, as he spoke, each word sent blood throbbing from his mouth to stain his beard and pool at the join of neck and collarbone.

Speechless, Michael stood and backed away. The Emperor groaned, laughing slightly from the pain as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

"Ahh, Michael. It's been so long since somebody last killed me. I'd forgotten how bad it was, I'd forgotten the pain."

With a deep breath he stood, stretching so that bones and tendons in his back and shoulders crackled. By now he was empurpled head-to-toe. At last he lived up to his name.

"You've done a number on me, Michael, in a number of ways. I wish I could say the emotional pain was worse, but..."

He dissolved into bitter laughter as he reached for the hilt embedded in his chest, and then screamed with pain as he snapped the blade in half and sent the pommel spinning to the floor. Retreating, Michael found himself out beneath the moonlight with his back against the railing. Behind and beneath him, the slow, purple sea ground endlessly at black and bitter stones. Now, filling the entrance to the chamber, the Emperor hunched again, steadying himself



against the doorframe as he pointed his hand and thrust the fingers deep inside his own chest. The pain must have been extraordinary; his screams ratcheted up through octave after octave, but all the while he was lurching toward the man who'd tried to kill him, slowly drawing the sword's broken, shining point from his chest until it was gripped in his bleeding hands like a dagger. Michael shrank down into a crouch, sobbing with horror as the Emperor leaned over him, holding the young man's face between lacerated palms.

"How could you betray me, Michael? My favourite, my all? How could you turn against me when I gave you everything?"

*"How are you still alive?"*

"Don't you know, Michael?" the Emperor whispered. "Haven't you heard tell of my heresies? Of *pacts* made the mountains, of *powers* I've come to serve? *A Purple Angel for a Purple King, behold!*"

And the Emperor's sleeves had slid down slick and skinny wrists, revealing forearms wrapped in scars and brands and purple ink tattoos, all of them in the shape of spreading wings.

"And look how I've been rewarded, Michael, see what gifts the Angel gives me in return. You poor boy, poor beautiful boy, you never had a chance to..."

But before he could finish the thought, a heavy sound opened up the night, and the Emperor's face was driven forward to smash against the marble banister. Hot blood poured over the Emperor's Favourite, and he shouted in dismay as the Emperor's body collapsed atop him, eyes blank and staring, grinning with broken teeth.

Something dragged the body backwards and aside, and when Michael wiped the stinging blood and tears from his eyes, he found himself looking at Irene. She was standing tall and faded in the night. In her upraised hands, smeared from fingertip to wrist with purple ink, was her father's axe.

For a moment, they stared at one another in silence, horrendous with gore. Then, from the floor beside him came the sound of low laughter.

"...Not that easy... Not that easy."

Jaw slack with horror, Irene took a step back. Then, as the Emperor put one hand beneath his body and began to push himself up, her face changed, and she swung the axe again with both hands, thudding into his spine as if into timber. Again and again she struck: cold, determined, merciless, and cleaving spine and skull alike, breaking joints, slicing limbs, and tearing tendons from their sheathes. But still, the Emperor laughed.

"Not so easy, not for the Angel's chosen, not for me."

At last she screamed, and with a final effort, crunched the axe into the Emperor's neck, silencing the flow of air from lungs to throat. For a moment, she stood wheezing with exertion and fear. At the entrance to the chamber beyond, someone had begun to pound against the doors. On the floor below her, in the midst of spreading seas of purple blood, tattered shreds of opened lungs began to twitch with life again.

"Come on," said Irene. Her voice was low and calm, in spite of all. "We have to go."

Wordlessly, Michael allowed her to pull him to his feet. This time, the close darkness of the passage came to him as a relief, after the horrid purple moon, the nightmare vastnesses of the open, indigo sea. They closed the passage door behind them, even though their bloody

footsteps would show pursuers where to go. As the stones slid back into place, they heard the beginnings of choking laughter.

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They met with Ingar in the crypt. He had only to look at their faces in the low red light to know that they had failed. They did not see the silent monk as they fled up to the dark streets, to the dim and hellish glow of braziers burning from the Bucoleon's purple parapet; to the distant shouts of royal soldiers raising the alarm, and showing reddish spearpoints to the bloody light.

They raced through shuttered streets, soldiers' footsteps ringing all about them. Twice they were challenged on their way to the Kontoskalion harbour, and twice Ingmar killed the man without a second thought. A longship was waiting for them, crewed by vikings who had once sailed with Irene's father. And though ships were sent out after them, by daylight they were well out over the black sea, and their pursuers were shrunk with distance across the endless purple water.

In later years, Empress Irene and Michael Rhadapoulos made a meager living off the rocky soil of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. And away in the south, year after year, the Purple Emperor's armies brought new lands, cities and peoples under the benevolent wing of the Purple Angel. And what the Angel wanted with them, nobody could yet say.