

Byzantium

By Stephen R. Lawhead

Chapter One

I saw Byzantium in a dream, and knew that I would die there. That vast city seemed to me a living thing: a great golden lion, or a crested serpent coiled upon a rock, beautiful and deadly. With trembling steps I walked alone to embrace the beast, fear turning my bones to water. I heard no sound save the beating of my own heart and the slow, hissing breath of the creature. As I drew near, the half-lidded eye opened, and the beast awoke. The fearful head rose; the mouth gaped open. A sound like the howl of wind across a winter sky tore the heavens and shook the earth, and a blast of foul breath struck me, withering the very flesh.

I stumbled on, gagging, gasping, unable to resist; for I was compelled by a force beyond my power. I watched in horror as the terrible beast roared. The head swung up and swiftly, swiftly down—like lightning, like the plunge of an eagle upon its prey. I felt the dread jaws close on me as I stood screaming.

Then I awoke; but my waking brought neither joy nor relief. For I rose not to life, but to the terrible certainty of death. I was to die, and the golden towers of Byzantium would be my tomb.

And yet, before the dream—some time before it—I had gazed upon a very different prospect. Such rich opportunity does not come to every man, and I considered myself blessed beyond measure by my good fortune. How not? It was an honour rare to one so young, and well I knew it. Not that I could easily forget, for I was reminded at every turn by my brother monks, many of whom regarded me with ill-disguised envy. Of the younger priests, I was considered the most able and learned, and therefore most likely to attain the honour we all sought.

The dream, however, poisoned my happiness; I knew my life would end in agony and fear. This the dream had shown me, and I was not fool enough to doubt it. I knew—with the confidence of fire-tested conviction—that what I dreamed would be. Sure, I am one of those wretched souls who see the future in dreams, and my dreams are never wrong.

Word of the bishop's plan had reached us just after the Christ Mass. "Eleven monks will be selected," Abbot Fraoch informed us that night at table. "Five monks from Hy, and three each from Lindisfarne and Cenannus." The selection, he said, must be made before Eastertide.

Then our good *abb* spread his arms to include all gathered in the refectory. "Brothers, it is God's pleasure to honour us in this way. Above all else, let us put aside jealousy and prideful contention, and let each one seek the Holy King's direction in the days to come."

This we did, each in his own way. In truth, I was no less ardent than the most zealous among us. Three were to be chosen, and I wanted to be one of them. So, through the dark months of winter, I strove to make myself worthy before God and my brothers. First to rise and last to sleep, I worked with unstinting diligence, giving myself to those tasks which naturally came my way, and then going out of my way to take on the chores of others.

If any were in prayer, I prayed with them. If any were at labour, I laboured with them. Whether in the fields, or the cookhouse, the oratory, or the scriptorium, I was there, earnest and eager, doing all in my power to lighten others' burdens and prove myself worthy. My zeal would not be quenched. My devotion was second to none.

When I could not think of any chore to do, I took a penance upon myself—as severe as I could devise—to chastise myself and drive out the demons of idleness and sloth, pride, envy, spite, and any others that might stand in my way. With a true and contrite heart, I did humble my willful spirit.

Then, one night...

I stood in the swift-running stream of the Blackwater, clutching a wooden bowl tight between shivering hands. Mist curled in slow eddies over the surface of the river, softly spectral in the pale light of a new moon. When my flesh began to grow numb, I dipped the bowl into the icy water and poured it over my shoulders and back. My inward organs shuddered with the shock of the cold water on naked skin. It was all I could do to keep my teeth from clashing, and my jaws ached with the effort. I could no longer feel my legs or feet.

Ice formed in the still places among the rocks at the river's edge and in my wet hair. My breath hung in clouds about my head. High above, the stars shone as flame-points of silvery light, solid as the iron-hard winter ground and silent as the night around me.

Again, and yet again, I poured the freezing water over my body, enforcing the virtue of the penance I had chosen. "Kyrie eleison..." I gasped. "Lord, have mercy!"

In this way, I held my vigil, and would have maintained it thus if I had not been distracted by the appearance of two brother monks bearing torches. I heard someone approaching and turned my stiff neck to see them clambering down the steep riverbank, holding their torches high.

"Aidan! Aidan!" one of them called. It was Tuam, the bursar, with young Dda, the cook's helper. The two slid to a halt on the bank and stood for a moment, peering out over the moving water. "We have been looking for you."

"You have found me," I replied through clenched teeth.

"You are to come out of there," Tuam said.

"When I have finished."

"Abbot has summoned everyone."