

LILITH'S LOVE

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THE CHILDREN OF ARTHUR: BOOK FOUR

BY

TYLER R. TICHELAAR

Lilith's Love: The Children of Arthur, Book Four

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“The Draculas were, says Arminius, a great and noble race, though now and again were scions who were held by their coevals to have had dealings with the Evil One. They learned his secrets in the Scholomance, amongst the mountains over Lake Hermanstadt, where the devil claims the tenth scholar as his due.... There have been from the loins of this very one great men and good women, and their graves make sacred the earth where alone this foulness can dwell. For it is not the least of its terrors that this evil thing is rooted deep in all good, in soil barren of holy memories it cannot rest.”

— Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

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PROLOGUE

CONSTANTINOPLE, MAY 29, 1453,
JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT

“The city will be both founded and lost by an emperor
Constantine whose mother was called Helen.”

— Ancient Byzantine Prophecy

FOR FIFTY-THREE DAYS, the siege had held. He had never thought he would be able to hold off the Turks for as long as he had. Had Pope Nicholas V and the rest of Europe come to his aid, it might have been different; even so, his people had been remarkable in their determination not to surrender to the enemy. But any day now, even any hour, it was bound to end.

And he would be the last, he, Constantine XI, the last Emperor of the Romans. For fifteen centuries, there had been an empire, and for more than eleven centuries, the capital had been here in Constantinople, but now all that would come to an end. He had done everything he could, trying to negotiate peace with the Turks, striving to get the Orthodox

Church to concede to the Pope's demands that they become Catholic, imploring the rulers of France, England, Hungary, Venice, whoever would listen, to come to his aid, but it had all been to no avail. The Turks far outnumbered those in the city.

And the city was not even worth taking; Constantine knew that. Its wealth had diminished to almost nothing in the last two centuries, ever since the Latins had used a crusade to the Holy Land as an excuse to sack the city and then rule as its emperors for most of the thirteenth century. Although the Romans had regained the city and the throne in time, the empire had continued to shrink and weaken; continually, Constantine and his imperial predecessors had sought to keep the Turks at bay, the emperors wedding their daughters to the Ottoman sultans and doing anything necessary to ensure the empire's survival.

And as the last emperor, Constantine knew the blame would lie upon his head, without regard to how little chance he had to stop his enemy or how all of Christendom had abandoned him and his people to their fate. What would they call him? His first namesake was Constantine the Great. Would he be called Constantine the Defeated, Constantine the Failure, Constantine the Unworthy? Perhaps the best he could hope for was to be killed in battle so he would be remembered as Constantine the Martyr.

He stood alone now on the battlements, his soldiers knowing he wished to be alone with his thoughts. He looked out at the vast hordes of Turks encamped around the city. Even now they were battering at the walls, hoping to topple any one of them, not even seeking sleep as the night moved toward dawn.

How had it come to this? To some extent, Constantine could understand the reluctance and ignorance of his fellow rulers to come to his aid. Even the Pope, the supposed leader of the Christian world,

he could forgive for his stubbornness when he considered that they were all men, full of weaknesses, but how could God Himself turn His back on them? How could the Holy Virgin to whom the city had been dedicated, desert them?

And there was no doubt they had been forsaken. The Holy Virgin had shown she would no longer protect them. The city had been dedicated to the Virgin since its ancient days. In desperation, the people had cried out to her ever since the siege had begun, and just three days ago, her most holy relic, the Hodegetria—an icon of her, believed to have been painted by St. Luke the Evangelist himself, which had saved the city on numerous occasions—was brought forth from Saint Sophia and carried in a procession through the streets. It had been mounted on a wooden pallet and lifted onto the shoulders of several strong men from the icon’s confraternity. The people followed as the Hodegetria traveled through the city, while the priests offered up incense, and the men, women, and children walked barefoot to show their penance. Hymns were sung, prayers said, and the people repeatedly cried out to the Virgin, beseeching her protection: “Do thou save thy city, as thou knowest and willest. We put thee forward as our arms, our rampart, our shield, our general: do thou fight for thy people.”

Then, before anyone realized it was happening, the Hodegetria slipped from the hands of its bearers. They struggled to grasp it, but it was too late. The people ran forward to pick it up, but it was as if it were weighted with lead, refusing to be raised. Eventually, when it was raised again, the procession had barely restarted before thunder burst through the clouds and lightning split the sky. Then the heavens poured down rain, soaking the procession and all the penitents. The downpour became torrential so that the procession had to halt; water, inches deep, filled the streets, making them slippery, and the flood soon

threatened to wash away the children in the procession. Struggling, the icon's bearers eventually managed to return the Hodegetria to Saint Sophia as gloom settled over the city, less from the weather than the omens that clearly stated the Virgin had refused their prayers and penance.

Worse, the next day, God's grace had left the city. Since its construction by Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, Saint Sophia had held within it the Holy Light as its protector. But that night, a great glow was seen in the sky. First, the sentries on the walls and then people in the streets had cried out in fear that the city had caught on fire. All the sky lit up, but the flame was located only on the roof of Saint Sophia. The flame shot forth from the window and circled the entire dome several times before gathering itself into one great and indescribable flash of blinding light that shot up into the heavens. Clearly, the Holy Light had returned from whence it had come, no longer offering God's protection to the city. The sight had been so overwhelming to Constantine that now, two days later, it still made him sick to think of it. Had he himself lost favor with God? At that fatal moment, such a thought had caused him to go numb throughout his body and collapse to the ground in a faint, remaining unconscious for hours.

When Constantine finally woke, the people had begged him to flee the city before it was too late, but he had insisted he would not do so. To leave his people solely to save his own life would be to heap immortal ridicule upon his name. And even if he did leave, what life would remain for him, without a throne, marked as a coward for not standing by his supporters in their hour of greatest need? Better he stay to fight, and if need be, die with his people.

He had seen both these catastrophes with his own eyes, but

the most shocking event he alone had experienced. Early the next morning, when he had gone out walking in the palace gardens, he had come face-to-face with an old man with a flowing white beard in a tattered black robe. Constantine had never seen the man before, and he could not understand how the man had entered his private gardens. But before he could accost the man, the stranger looked him square in the eyes, his own eyes piercingly gray, and without showing fear or deference for Constantine's station, he said, "Greetings, Constantine, last of the Romans."

Constantine had frozen, feeling himself unable to speak or move. His mind went blank for what seemed the longest time as the question "Who are you?" struggled to rise to his lips. His first fear was that the man might be an assassin, sent by the Turks—who but an assassin would dare to enter his private garden at dawn? But then, slowly, the answer came to his lips in a whisper.

"The Wandering Jew."

Before the words fully escaped Constantine's mouth, the man turned and disappeared behind a clump of trees. Constantine ran after him, so stunned that he pursued him into the bushes, scratching himself on their branches but unable to see anyone. After a couple of minutes, he calmed himself and returned to the walkway, fearing his people had seen his frantic behavior. Had he dreamt it, or had he truly seen the man? But he could remember those words clearly; they yet rung in his ears: "Greetings, Constantine, last of the Romans."

He knew such a meeting forebode great ill. The Wandering Jew—he whom Christ had cursed to wander the earth until His return—had long been rumored to appear at pivotal moments in history. Stories claimed he had been seen in the city once before, back in 1204 when the Latin Crusaders had sacked Constantinople. He had also been

seen at the surrender of Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187, amid the mob during the Peasants Revolt in England in 1381, and most recently in the crowd when the Maid of Orleans had been burned at the stake in Rouen, France in 1431. Constantine had heard rumors in recent days that the Wandering Jew had been sighted in Constantinople's streets, but he had dismissed such rumors as folk tales. Now, he could not imagine who else this man could be who dared to address him as "last of the Romans"—an ominous reference, indeed.

The next day, Constantine knew his death was certain when twelve Venetian ships arrived to aid the city, bringing with them the news that no larger fleet nor other enforcements would come. Twelve ships would be of little help against the incredible Ottoman navy and the hordes of Turkish soldiers preparing for the final assault they all knew was coming. No one could accurately tell the numbers, but a city of just over fifty thousand souls—a city that in its glorious past had been home to a million residents—was being protected by an army of less than twenty thousand against some one hundred thousand Turks, plus their allies. Surely, the situation was hopeless.

Constantine had little doubt that tonight was the last time the sun would set on the city before it was taken, and pillaged, and perhaps even destroyed. The walls could well be broken through before dawn. The Turkish cannons had already damaged them beyond repair. The conquest would happen as soon as Sultan Mehmet II led the next charge.

Nothing was left to do but offer prayers, though prayers now seemed of little help. Nevertheless, Constantine had spent the last day at service in Saint Sophia, on his knees before his people and God, begging forgiveness for their transgressions. Afterwards, he had spent time here on the ramparts with his longtime friend and advisor

Sphrantzes. And then he had sought some time alone, time to prepare himself for what he did not doubt was his imminent death. He would do so nobly, as Emperor of the Romans, and in a manner to make his ancestors proud, but he would be dead nonetheless, and he had his doubts that God would have mercy upon his soul after the signs he had already seen.

“Your majesty.” He turned to hear himself addressed and found the captain of the guard speaking. “The Turks are about to break through the wall. You must return to the palace. You must look to your own safety.”

“You know better,” Constantine replied, already in his armor. “Come; we will fight together, and may God have mercy on our souls.”

The Turks were firing their cannons. It was almost half-past one in the morning. Just as the emperor joined his army before the St. Romanus Gate, a cannonball came ripping through the wall, sending stone and men flying, and by the time Constantine and his men recovered from the shock, three hundred Turks had poured through, their voices roaring as they entered the city. In panic, some of the Romans fled into the streets, desperate to see to their own and their families’ safety, but most stood fighting beside their emperor and the officers.

The Romans fought violently, but they were far outnumbered, and while the battle raged at the great crumbling opening in the wall for several minutes, eventually, the Romans were cut down as the Turks began to spread and pillage throughout Constantinople.

Constantine found himself covered in blood as his sword continued to slice at the Turks before him, but within a few minutes, he was surrounded by his enemies. He had taken care not to wear anything to make the enemy suspect he was the emperor, for he knew if they

discovered his identity, his life would be spared, but only because the sultan would want to hold him as a prisoner. No, he would much rather die here with his people than be forced to go down on bended knee before Mehmet II, or worse, be paraded through the streets by his captors.

Suddenly, Constantine felt a great pain in his back. He immediately became dizzy; for a moment, he felt his knees buckle and he thought he would collapse, but then he experienced a great lifting feeling, as if he were floating into the air. He could only think that his soul was leaving his body. Had he been slain? Was he now dead? Was he being taken to Heaven—could death be this quick?

Looking up, bending his head all the way back, he saw he was in the arms of a great winged man, a beautiful gorgeous man, a man a good couple of feet taller than him—no, not a man but an angel.

And then all went black.



When he opened his eyes, Constantine found himself lying on a cot inside a barren room all built of stone. He could see the sky, but nothing else from the window, making him assume he was quite high up. All he heard were birds chirping and a breeze rustling through the trees. No screams of his people. No cannons booming. And most surprisingly, he felt no fear.

Was he dead? But, surely, Heaven did not look like the barren room of a castle.

For a moment, he relished the quiet, but his curiosity overcame him. He sat up and continued to look out the window. From his sitting position, he could see what appeared to be a marsh, and beyond that

a river, and then just a green row of trees and a lush countryside. He appeared to be in the middle of nowhere. Certainly, he was far from Constantinople.

“Where am I?” he muttered, about to put his feet on the floor when the door opened. In walked a man whom Constantine had only seen once before.

“You!” Constantine gasped.