

# 1 - FIVE EMPERORS AND ONE EMPIRE

I was asleep a moment ago, but something woke me. I thought it was you, Minervina, but no, it was not. It was the wind whirling around outside the window, searching for slits and holes to squeeze through in the dark of night like a thief.

It must have been the wind. It could not have been anyone else because everyone in the palace is asleep except for the guards on duty. And if I listen more carefully, I can hear a far-away voice carried on the wind, whispering unsettling words. 'Constantine, Constantine, let me in,' it says in a quiet, almost suggestive voice.

I have not walked in the garden for two days now. No doubt the buds have burst forth under the pressure of petals waking and stretching after a long winter. I would like to go there now and see the gift nature gives us every springtime but the night is too dark and the colours have dulled.

This morning I heard my heart beating again, grumbling restlessly without provocation. Every now and then it stopped for moment, as if taking a breath before continuing the slow trot of an old, clapped-out horse. So clapped-out it keeps getting harder to breathe.

Aah! I have no choice but to leave action behind and content myself with the accounts Theophilus gives me, filled with exquisite metaphors and gilded with a thousand and one details.

I love listening to him tell me about the most delicate work lovingly performed by the gardener's fingers to bring the best out of every little patch of earth and turn it into a garden. Theophilus's scrawny, almost childlike body has a delicate sensitivity in keeping with his femininity, which he shamelessly acknowledges because everyone can see right away that he is neither meat nor fish. But it allows him to turn the least nuance of colour into poetry.

This afternoon I ordered them to move my bed beside the window so I can breathe better. But ... it is no use. My ribs no longer shield my lungs, they have become the bars of a cell, imprisoning me, suffocating me. Even the light linen sheet covering my body is too heavy a weight to bear.

Look! The curtains are flapping about. The wind has risen and the sky is growing darker by the moment. Listen. Listen ... what is that noise? The heralding of a looming storm ... I do believe it is! It will be upon us very soon.

I should not have ordered them to move my bed. But what does it matter now? It is too late. I don't feel like waking the servants and ordering them to undo the work they have done. Tomorrow they will think me a madman, although they would not dare say it to my face. They will whisper the same things they always do, 'He is a doddery old man who no longer knows what he wants.'

I know I won't sleep any more tonight. Tomorrow morning my body will rise against me in complaint, as it does after every sleepless night, and Ticinius will scold me. He will yell at me that I am not helping the effects of the potions he painstakingly concocts with all the love that man of science invests in every single one of the tasks he performs. He is the only one who

has any authority over me. He gets angry, he shouts at me, he treats the Emperor, the most powerful man in the world, like a spoilt brat.

But what can I say against him? He is a good doctor, after all. He has got me out of a tight spot so many times. And I understand his desperation and how impotent he feels in the face of the arrogance that stops me following his orders. Every time I undress and let him examine the memory of that body—the envy of many men and the desire of many women in other times—I find a spark of tenderness in his look, a reflection of the compassion welling up in his eyes. He looks at me, prods and pushes me, and bothers me as much as he wants. He sees the result in the architecture of this building, the product of excess, and shakes his head from right to left as he purses his lips in disapproval. He takes in the portrait of what lies inside me at a glance and even when dressed I feel naked before him ...

But his knowledge does not extend to miracles and I sense that death has begun its approach. Herbs and salts are incapable of preventing the fall of a man whose life is flickering away like the light of a dying candle.

All I can do is wait until life's onward plodding stops. Then, little by little, my eyes will refuse to give me light. Even the light of the lantern that I order them to set next to my bed every night because during the few hours of darkness I must get up three or four times to relieve myself of the waste I constantly produce and cannot hold in. I do not dare keep tally because I am convinced I am starting to produce more than usual and that the losses exceed the gains.

Gods above! Life is long when you look back at the past and short when you want to look forward, when you know there is almost no time left yet still so much to do!

Death is surrounding my bed. There is no doubt about it. I feel the need to summarise the book of my life, the one we all write without words as our existence goes on, the final chapter ends, and we add a final full stop to the story of an entire existence.

Yes, it truly is better not to sleep.

Where are you, sweet Minervina? Where are you? So often I have wanted you near ... I would like you to be beside me now. You would understand the decisions that have led me to where I am now, which many people think absurd.

Everyone wonders what led me to split the Empire into five parts after I devoted my whole life to uniting it. 'So much fighting only to end up knocking down everything he built!' they cry. 'Five emperors for one empire!' they shout in horror.

Reasons are obviously hard to understand unless you know the whole story, all the circumstances, thoughts and decisions!

I feel tired.

How did I manage to end up here? I was just wondering, surprised by such a question mark after so many years of never looking back, my eyes

fixed on the future. And when I think about it I smile because now I realise it all began back in Nicomedia, when I was studying the Greeks while training in arms, when youth gave me strength and my body awoke with the burst of violence that follows the desire to enjoy all the experiences the world offers adolescent curiosity. Because ... what can I say about my childhood? That Arelate was very far away, at the other end of a vast empire wrapped around the Mediterranean and stretching beyond other seas, and that my father lived there?

I never could accept Theodora taking my mother's place when Emperor Maximian adopted my father. That alliance made him a contender for the highest position in the Empire and gave me a slither of hope of attaining (if only in my dreams) the unthinkable heights of glory that the future might hold for me. As time and events moved forward those dreams became ever more intense and the passing of the years made them come true. These were thoughts that were part of my childhood and adolescent games, which had not entirely faded away when the time came to put games behind me and take action.

I was brought up in Nicomedia on the orders of Emperor Diocletian, who was concerned, or rather scared, by the possibility that my father, General Constantius, might aspire to his throne. I was taken away firstly from my mother, and then from my father, from all the love and feelings that feed a child just as much or more than food itself.

There was little enjoyment in my childhood and little I can or, perhaps, want to remember of it.

The school in Nicomedia far away from my parents was my true home. The classrooms, the gardens, the dormitories, the gymnasium, the baths, the parade ground and the training fields were all there. I spent every hour of every day in one such place or another under the keen and watchful gaze of my tutors and trainers.

Within a few months of my arrival I knew every nook and cranny: from the slab of stone under my bed on which I hid my secret belongings (a dagger, my mother's ring, the letters from my father) to the tree trunk that gave me a step up to leap the wall into the street and enjoy some fleeting freedom. Three years later I felt the strange feeling of always having lived between those walls, to the extent I could make believe I had been born there.

The dormitory window looked onto the garden of Cyril the merchant's home, where two girls lived. Every now and again they winked at me in a clear invitation of the kind only women can give without the need for words. One night, as my fellows were asleep, I heard them talking...

