
A Constantinopolitan Wedding



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The Bones of the Earth bonus

A Constantinopolitan Wedding

“We’re going to a wedding!” Flaccus led Javor and the others to a church in a neighbourhood he called the Third Hill. The church was tall and grand, much newer than St. Mary’s beside the Abbey. Outside, it had a white façade and statues of men and women. Its walls were decorated with coloured mosaics of men and women with haloes, angels with white wings and gold-trimmed cloaks. A huge cross stood in front, gold and gleaming in the afternoon sunshine. A small crowd milled about, talking happily: wealthy men and women in rich long clothes and scarves, milling around and talking happily.

The crowd extended to the building next to the church: a long, low building with a barrel-shaped roof, painted bright white. Its wide oaken doors were flung invitingly open, and the monks could see the crowd inside, illuminated by more candles than Javor had ever seen together. Even if Flaccus had not mentioned it, Javor could tell it was a wedding: women gathered in groups, all wearing their best clothes, all vying to show off. Men in separate groups, laughing deeply and heartily. There was the bride’s father, looking prosperous and proud and keeping a watchful eye that the servants were doing everything he was paying them to do, that every penny’s value was evident in the food and the decorations and the entertainment, and that all the guests, particularly the other fathers, appreciated the expense of his daughter’s wedding. And there was the bride’s mother, doing much the same, but watching the other mothers as well as the wedding party.

Flaccus led them right to the door and without a word of warning embraced the bride’s father. “Uncle Lurco!” he exclaimed. “So good to see you!”

Lurco was a heavy man with thinning black hair. He wore a heavy, brocaded dalmatica, or cloak. He looked at Flaccus with perplexity drawn on his face.

“Well, yes, so good to see you, too ...” he shook Flaccus’ hand, obviously searching for the young man’s name. “And I see you brought friends.”

“Yes, these are my closest friends from the Abbey. The tall, skinny one is Ammon, the fair-haired one is Sandulf, and the really tall one is Javor.”

“Well, pleased to meet you all,” Lurco said cheerfully. “Um, which abbey was that, again?”

“St. Mary’s in the Copper Market,” Flaccus smiled, edging toward the door, but Lurco didn’t seem so sure about letting them in. They were rescued by a fat woman in a billowing stola who came running out.

“Flaccus!” she cried in a high voice. “Oh, my, it’s been *ages*. But aren’t you supposed to be in the monastery?”

“We got a daily pass with my friend Javor, here, Auntie Evgenia.” Flaccus embraced her. She smiled at Javor, then pulled back, eyes widening.

“Oh, my, your friend is so *big!*” she exclaimed in mock shock. “And handsome.” She went back inside the hall, beckoning the four monks. “Come in, you all must meet the bridesmaids and my other daughters.” Smiling, Flaccus took her arm in his and, smiling, pushed into the press of people.

Sandulf, Javor and Ammon followed cautiously. “I don’t want to meet her daughters,” Ammon moaned.

Javor had been to wedding feasts in his village, which were pathetic compared to this affair. The hall itself was a sumptuous place, bright with hundreds of candles, mirrors and rich tapestries on the walls. Along one long wall were long tables loaded with the most fantastic foods he had ever seen, and many that he had never seen before. The centre of the display was a whole pig, or at least its head, brown and glistening with an apple in its mouth. Its sides had been carved away. There were chickens and geese on platters, roasted and carved, too. Huge loaves of different kinds of bread beside great tubs of butter. *I never thought there could be so many different kinds of bread*, Javor thought. Tables groaned under platters of fruits, vegetables, honey cakes and other sweets. People stood in front, loading up plates while chatting.

The women were almost completely covered up in several layers of long cloaks clasped by jewels at their shoulder all reached down to the ground. They

were in deep, rich colours, and some of the more affluent men and women boasted their wealth with jewels of every colour. Long scarves, decorated and trimmed in dazzling, complicated colourful patterns, graced the women's heads. When they stepped, Javor glimpsed small, pointy shoes.

The men were, if anything, even more dazzling: they wore multiple layers of long robes, cloaks, dalmatics and other covers that Javor didn't have words for, all in bright, rich colours. On their heads they wore small caps, each with a different crest.

Javor felt the poverty of his own clothing. The Abbey had given him new clothes when he had arrived, throwing away his old tunic, worn almost transparent, his tattered cloak and rough sandals. "You're in civilization now, so dress like a civilized person, not like a barbarian," the older novices had told him.

He looked down at his boots, given him by Father Peter when the cold weather came: tattered, scratched and scuffed. He had barely thought about them, except when they pinched his feet.

He and his three friends wore drab grey robes and drabber, darker grey cloaks issued by the abbey. They were shabby, worn, their edges fraying. Javor tried to smooth his habit, tried to at least get the fraying fringes aligned, but gave up.

At the front of the hall was a raised platform—a stage, although Javor had never even thought of such a thing before. Young men and women in very tight tunics danced on it in a formal, stylized manner with no expression on their faces. They stepped, hopped, and swept their arms over their heads and back down again in time to music played by a small group with instruments Javor had never seen before.

There, he could see the bride, dressed in a pure white gown with a long transparent veil behind her head. She was flanked by five girls in identical blue gowns and stola that somehow made them all look fat. And there was the groom, in a similar white tunic, stola and dalmatic, sweating like a condemned man. Five young men in dark blue stolas stood beside him, each holding a large cup of wine, laughing heartily, slapping the groom on the back.

Javor saw his friends gulping down as much food at the buffet as they could, shoveling bread and cakes into their mouths like they hadn't eaten in years. Javor realized he was hungry, too—he hadn't eaten all day. He popped a small cake into his mouth and immediately felt better.

“Good, isn't it?” he heard a musical voice say. He turned: it was one of the bridesmaids in light blue. She had dark, curly hair, large brown eyes, and very white teeth. “My mother makes them, but it's really her sister's recipe.”

Javor swallowed and reached for another piece, but he could not take his eyes off the girl. She had such clear skin, such smooth cheeks, and her long, slender neck disappeared enticingly into the neckline of her long gown. “It's very good,” he mumbled around the cake. He was conscious, again, of his shabby clothes, and he wondered if his hair was neat.

She smiled, her eyes sparkling. “I haven't seen you before. Are you a friend of my cousin, Flaccus?”

“Uh, yes, I am. We live together.” *That sounds stupid.* Behind the girl, the band started playing a new tune. He looked up to see Flaccus chewing on what looked like a whole loaf of bread, and Ammon gobbling fruit.

“Oh, are you a monk, too?” Javor felt his face getting warm. His heart was beating faster.

“Oh, ah, no, not really. I mean, I live at the Abbey, but I'm not going to become a monk. It's not for me.”

“What are you doing at the Abbey, then?” she asked, tilting her head and smiling.

What am I doing there? “Mostly, studying religion.” *That's about the best I can say.*

“My name is Xenia.” She smiled again. Javor now noticed her white teeth were crooked. There was a big gap between two teeth on the left side.

“I'm Javor. I'm from the North.”

“I see you've already met our newest guest.” Javor turned to see Flaccus' Aunt Evgenia. She looked crossly at Xenia. “Come now, Xenia, you know a nice girl should never speak to a stranger without being introduced first!”

“Oh, Evgenia, don’t be so old-fashioned!” It was the father of the bride, Uncle Lurco. “There’s nothing wrong with members of the wedding party speaking with the guests.” Evgenia glared at Luco, but reluctantly shut her mouth. “So, lad, I see you’ve met my niece, Xenia. And what might your name be?”

Javor gulped down another cake and repeated “Javor. I’m from the North.”

“Well, Javor from the North, what brings you to Constantinople?”

Javor had no good answer for that, so he said “I’m studying at the Abbey of St. Mary in the Copper Market,” like Flaccus had.

“You came all this way to study religion?”

“Umm ... yes.” But Lurco didn’t look convinced.

Lurco picked up a few pieces of cake and asked as he chewed, “What do you fellows do up there all day in the Abbey?”

Javor felt caught: on the one hand, he had to tell Lurco something in return for all the good food; on the other hand, he couldn’t risk giving too much away. He feared saying anything that might give away the Abbey’s secret side—even the fact that there was a secret part of the Abbey.

“We have a lot of chores,” he started. *I should eat something besides cake.* “And of course, there are daily prayers and observances.” Lurco nodded, popped a pickle into his mouth and washed it down with wine.

“We have Mass every day, and we have to wash up,” Javor added. “And there is some time for lessons, too.”

“Good, good,” said Lurco, and Javor could see he was already bored. “Well, keep it up.” He saw someone beyond Javor’s shoulder, smiled broadly, slapped Javor on the shoulder and disappeared into the crowd.

Flaccus came up and pressed a large flagon of wine into Javor’s hand. “You survived meeting Uncle Lurco and Aunt Evgenia.”

Javor tried the wine. It tasted sweeter and stronger than the ale he was used to at home. He gulped the rest down and then sampled meat, bread and cheese from the long table. “They seemed nice. And that Xenia, too—is she your cousin?”

Flaccus looked at Javor with narrowed eyes. “Yes,” he said eventually. “Don’t get any ideas. She’s practically engaged to the son of one of the richest families in the Quarter.”

“Oh, no, no. I just thought she’s pretty, is all.”

“Pretty, yes, but aggravating as hell. And don’t get caught looking at her, if you don’t want trouble. Her boyfriend, Vlassis, is a real jerk.” But then Flaccus was surrounded by a group of young men, his cousins who were enthusiastic to see him again. Javor watched them pull Flaccus away. He ate more cheese and bread.

He wander around the hall, looking at the mosaics on the walls, nibbling on cakes and drinking wine. It was becoming decidedly hot.

The music changed, and people started moving about quickly with a sense of purpose. One of the entertainers, a thin man with a long, emaciated face and a crimson robe, stood in the middle of the floor and began chanting. The wedding guests formed two concentric circles around the chanting crimson man, women on the inside circle, men on the outside.

Javor watched them, bemused and sipping wine, until a giggling Xenia skipped up from behind him, grabbed his robe and tugged him toward the outer circle. Javor resisted until two burly young men at Xenia’s bidding hooked his elbows in theirs and pulled him into the men’s circle.

Javor did his best to keep up with the circles as they danced one way, then the other, but he couldn’t match the footsteps. They danced around the women, first left, then right, then left again, in time with the musicians and the chanting of the crimson-robed man in the centre, who clapped his hands in time to the music. The women danced in the opposite direction to the men, their skirts swaying.

They unlinked arms, turned around and re-linked their elbows so that they faced the men, their backs to the chanter, and danced back and forth. Javor looked for Xenia and found her beaming back at him. She smiled in that way that only beautiful young women can smile at susceptible young men and skipped away with her circle, and then all the women turned around again so that they faced into the centre of the circle, their backs to the men again.

Javor realized all the men were turning, too. He stumbled and did a few steps left, then right, bumping and jostling Xenia's friends—*cousins? bodyguards?*—as he tried to follow them, but he couldn't predict when they would change direction.

They turned again to face inside the circle, and the women's backs. The women turned again. Javor felt disappointed that could not see Xenia's face before the men turned around one more time, their backs to the women. After that, all he could do was try to follow along with dancing left and right, turning into and then out of the circle.

Finally, the music reached a climax, the chanter cried out one last time, and the dancers stopped, men facing the women. They bowed to each other. Xenia was almost a quarter of the way around the circle from Javor, and she didn't seem to be looking his way until just before the music started up again, when she smiled at him.

The music started again, a little slower, and Javor followed along to the left and right the best he could. There was no turning back and forth this time, but a lot of stately, formal steps. Javor started to feel a little proud of his ability to mimic the others when the music stopped.

He was out of breath and sweaty as the groom. He unlinked from the burly brothers and stumbled to the buffet table for a drink of wine, then to the open door where a cool breeze was blowing in.

A small group of men stood on the outside steps, holding drinks and chatting good-naturedly. Briefly, Javor wondered if they were laughing at him. He took deep breaths, trying to cool down and wondered where his friends were. He couldn't see anything in the hall but the dark, scowling face of a young man with a wispy black beard. His hair was black and curly, his eyebrows thick and black and bunched together, and the top of his head came up to Javor's shoulder.

"What's wrong, barbarian, don't you like our dancing?" His words were slightly slurred and he seemed to waver back and forth in front of Javor. *Is that because of him or me?*

"I just came out to cool off. It's hot in there."

“So we’re too hot for you, is that it?” The dark man stepped closer. Javor felt his amulet stir.

“No, I just want to cool off,” he replied, looking down into the strange man’s eyes. “Maybe you should, too.”

“I saw you liked Xenia.”

This must be Vlassis. “She seems very nice.”

“She’s taken.” Javor noticed what seemed to be tiny bubbles of foam at the corner of Vlassis’ mouth. The amulet started to vibrate softly. Javor turned slightly to see two other young men in dark tunics trying to move unseen behind him. They had removed their dressy robes and dalmatics. They lunged forward, each trying to grab one of Javor’s arms. Before they could, Javor stepped ahead and grabbed Vlassis, wrapping one arm around his neck and twirling him around so that the shorter man became a shield between Javor and the attackers. They collided with each other. One fell, tangled in the other’s legs, and brought his partner down on top of him with an “oof!” Other men on the steps chuckled at their antics.

“Let me go, you barbarian!” Vlassis yelled, choking. He cursed. Javor pulled the small man’s arm up behind his back. “Get your filthy paws off me, you stinking barbarian!” Vlassis cried out again.

Javor saw the men from the steps come toward them. “Come now, boys, don’t spoil a wedding,” one said.

Javor let go of Vlassis and pushed him forward so that he fell over his friends, who were still trying to get up. “If you want to try to beat me up, don’t get your clumsy friends to do it for you.” His head seemed to have cleared. “And if you’re afraid your girlfriend likes another boy, stop being such a jerk.” He didn’t know the Greek word for “jerk,” so he said it in Sklavenic.

The man who had tried to calm them, a fatherly type with only a fringe of dark hair around his head, helped Vlassis and his friends up. “What is this, Vlassis, three against one?”

Vlassis brushed himself off, scowled at the helpful man and then at Javor and finally at his friends. “You better watch yourself, you filthy animal,” he

hissed at Javor and them stomped back into the wedding hall, his friends trailing behind.

“That’s a fine thing, fighting at a wedding,” said the bald man.

“They attacked *me*,” Javor protested.

“I know, boy, I know. That Vlassis is an angry lad. He’s very fortunate, but he thinks he knows everything.” He sighed. “Come, lad, I’ll get you a glass of wine.” He put his arm on Javor’s shoulder and pushed him into the hall. “I’m Dimitrios Michailidis, but you can call me Uncle Trios.”

“Um, thank you, Uncle Trios.” *What is this?*

Uncle Trios poured a generous cup of wine for Javor. “Drink up, lad. You’ve had quite a shock, I’m sure, being attacked by three young men.” At that, a number of the adults near the wine table took notice and drew closer.

“No, really, I’m fine,” Javor protested again. “I was not in any danger. And I don’t think I need any more wine tonight.”

“Nonsense, my boy. Wine fortifies the spirit. Drink up!” Uncle Trios insisted. “I’ll go and have a word with Vlassis’ father.”

“What happened?” asked Aunt Evgenia, who had heard just a little of the conversation.

“Oh, Vlassis and two of his friends tried to rough up your guest, here,” Trios said. “None too successfully, though!” he laughed.

“Oh, my dear, are you all right? Oh, I hate to think of our guests having troubles like this at our wedding!” Evgenia cried, holding her palm to Javor’s forehead for some reason.

“No, I’m fine. He didn’t even touch me.”

“Oh, dear, Javor, I just heard what happened,” said that special, musical voice. It was Xenia, looking concerned and excited at the same time. Behind her stood Flaccus, eyes wide, with Sandulf and Ammon. “Are you hurt?” She stepped close and took his hand in hers.

“No, I said, I’m fine. No one even laid a finger on me.” But his protests didn’t stop a cascade of mothers and aunts from clucking and fussing around him for the next several minutes. They kept saying things like “Such a thoughtless boy

that Vlassis is, fighting at a wedding,” “Well, it’s not the barbarian’s fault. He was only defending himself,” and “Someone should really talk to that boy!”

Xenia ran her fingers through Javor’s hair. “You poor dear.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed him firmly on the cheek.

Javor’s breathing stopped. He looked at Flaccus and thought his eyebrows would climb completely off his head.

He blinked at Xenia, who seemed to shimmer before his eyes. He felt drunk again. She smiled, her big dark eyes shining. His throat was dry and without thinking he drained the cup of wine from Uncle Trios in one gulp. “Thank you,” he managed to croak. “I feel much better.”

Flaccus took Javor by the elbow and said, “We had better go, right now.” He turned to Aunt Evgenia and Uncle Lurco. “Thank you so much for having us, but we really must be getting back to the Abbey, now. The Abbot doesn’t like the novices out too late. No, no, really, it’s time we were going anyway. Thank you! Good night!” And they were outside, hurrying down the street. Still in Flaccus’ grip, Javor turned to see Xenia standing on the steps watching them. Vlassis came up behind her and put his hand possessively on her shoulder.

“I think she likes me,” said Javor, his head and vision swirling again. *I shouldn’t have drunk that wine.* He thought he saw two very short men with very long beards watching him from a doorway. He blinked to clear his blurry vision, but they were gone.

“I know she likes you,” said Flaccus, trying to hurry Javor back to the Abbey. “Everybody knows. That’s the trouble. I just hope that Vlassis doesn’t get too angry with her.”

Javor stopped, nearly knocking Flaccus over. “Why? Does he hurt her? Does he hit her?”

Flaccus pulled on Javor, but it was like pulling on a reluctant horse. “No, no, I’m sure he doesn’t. He’s not married to her. Come on, let’s get back to the Abbey.”

“What will he do?”

“I don’t know. He’ll yell at her or sneer at her and call her a slut for kissing you.”

Javor turned on his heel. "I'll take care of him."

Flaccus tried to grab Javor's robes, but Javor pulled away easily. Flaccus ran around in front of Javor. "Get out of my way, Flaccus," he said, but the small monk kept blocking him. "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing, Javor?" Flaccus scolded. "Are you going to beat him up in front of the wedding party and all his friends? Do you think you can single-handedly take on all Vlassis' friends, plus all the party-goers and wedding guests? And what about when Uncle Lurco has you arrested for disturbing the peace—are you going to take down the whole civil defence force?"

Javor hesitated. "The whole force?" His amulet was silent. *I don't have my dagger.* "Well, maybe not tonight."

"No, not tonight. Exactly. It's not ... the right night." Flaccus took his arm again and slowly turned him around toward the Abbey again. Ammon took his other arm, and slowly, they staggered back toward the Chalkoprateia. Fortunately, it was downhill most of the way.

FIN

Note from the publisher

We hope you liked this bonus chapter to *The Bones of the Earth*, the first book in the Dark Age trilogy.

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