


# The Architect's Apprentice: A Novel

*By Elif Shafak*

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**From the acclaimed author of *The Bastard of Istanbul*, a colorful, magical tale set during the height of the Ottoman Empire**

In her latest novel, Turkey’s preeminent female writer spins an epic tale spanning nearly a century in the life of the Ottoman Empire. In 1540, twelve-year-old Jahan arrives in Istanbul. As an animal tamer in the sultan’s menagerie, he looks after the exceptionally smart elephant Chota and befriends (and falls for) the sultan’s beautiful daughter, Princess Mihrimah. A palace education leads Jahan to Mimar Sinan, the empire’s chief architect, who takes Jahan under his wing as they construct (with Chota’s help) some of the most magnificent buildings in history. Yet even as they build Sinan’s triumphant masterpieces—the incredible Suleymaniye and Selimiye mosques—dangerous undercurrents begin to emerge, with jealousy erupting among Sinan’s four apprentices.

A memorable story of artistic freedom, creativity, and the clash between science and fundamentalism, Shafak’s intricate novel brims with vibrant characters, intriguing adventure, and the lavish backdrop of the Ottoman court, where love and loyalty are no match for raw power.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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## Editorial Review

Review
Praise for *The Architect's Apprentice* by Elif Shafak

"An impressive achievement, a novel populated by swashbuckling soldiers, mysterious Gypsies and more than a few guileless courtesans. It's also a love poem to the cosmopolitan beauty of Istanbul. . .As she traces these characters' colorful stories, Shafak unfurls what may be her most accomplished novel –and is certainly her most expansive."–*The New York Times Book Review*

"There is great beauty in Shafak's evocations of the era, and the novel can be read as a series of fascinating vignettes on the relationship between art and religion, creativity and devotion. . .Nowhere is the novel's sense of place more deftly established than in Shafak's passages on the character of Istanbul. . .Vibrant, fresh, and lively." – *The Washington Post*

"A beautiful and intricately told tale of the bond between a boy and an elephant, set in 16th century Istanbul. . .a rogues' gallery of memorable characters also contribute to the action."–*The Seattle Times*

"A gripping page-turner that blends mystery with Ottoman history and Turkish folklore. . .an exquisitely realized historical yarn of 16th-century Ottoman empire."–*The Pittsburgh Post Gazette*

"[A story] of freedom, art, love, devotion and humanity. . .Jahan is well drawn and the scenes depicting his relationships with the elephant, Sinan, and the Princess Mihrimah are among the most satisfying in the novel."–*The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

"Architecture is a powerful motif in Elif Shafak's intricate, multilayered new novel, which excels both in its resplendent details and grand design. . .This edifying, emotionally forceful novel shows how hate and envy destroy, and how love might build the world anew."—*The Observer*

"Shafak's novel is a vigorous evocation of the Ottoman empire at the height of its power. . .a fascinating work in which building a fulfilling life can be as difficult as creating one of Sinan's masterpieces."—*The Sunday Times*

"At once epic and comic, fantastical and realistic. . .like all good stories, it conveys deeper meanings about human experience. . .*The Architect's Apprentice* explores issues of power and bigotry, creativity and freedom, but is overarching theme is love. . .a carefully crafted work of imagination that both reveals and conceals its skill. It will confirm Shafak's reputation as a writer of impressive range, who quietly resists categorization and is not afraid to ask the big questions."—*Financial Times*

"This is Shafak's most ambitious novel yet, and it is her best – told with a generous humanity that will surely realign attitudes both to the imaginative possibilities of fiction and to the constructed reality of the world around us."—*The Independent*

"Shafak paints a gorgeous picture of a city teeming with secrets, intrigue, and romance."—*The Daily Times*

About the Author
**ELIF SHAFAK** is the most widely read female writer in Turkey and an increasingly active political

commentator and columnist. Her books have been translated into more than forty languages. She lives in London and Istanbul with her family.

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Of all the people God created and Sheitan led astray, only a few have discovered the Centre of the Universe – where there is no good and no evil, no past and no future, no ‘I’ and no ‘thou’, no war and no reason for war, just an endless sea of calm. What they found there was so beautiful that they lost their ability to speak.

The angels, taking pity on them, offered two choices. If they wished to regain their voices, they would have to forget everything they had seen, albeit a feeling of absence would remain deep in their hearts. If they preferred to remember the beauty, however, their minds would become so befuddled that they would not be able to distinguish the truth from the mirage. So the handful who stumbled upon that secret location, unmarked on any map, returned either with a sense of longing for something, they knew not what, or with myriads of questions to ask. Those who yearned for completeness would be called ‘the lovers’, and those who aspired to knowledge ‘the learners’.

That is what Master Sinan used to tell the four of us, his apprentices. He would regard us closely, his head cocked to one side, as if trying to see through our souls. I knew I was being vain, and vanity was unfit for a simple boy such as I, but every time my master would relate this story I believed he intended his words for me rather than for the others. His stare would linger for a moment too long on my face, as if there were something he expected from me. I would avert my gaze, afraid of disappointing him, afraid of the thing I could not give him – though what that was I never figured out. I wonder what he saw in my eyes. Had he predicted that I would be second to none with respect to learning, but that I, in my clumsiness, would fail miserably in love?

I wish I could look back and say that I have learned to love as much as I loved to learn. But if I lie, there could be a cauldron boiling for me in hell tomorrow, and who can assure me tomorrow is not already on my doorstep, now that I am as old as an oak tree, and still not consigned to the grave?

There were six of us: the master, the apprentices and the white elephant. We built everything together. Mosques, bridges, madrasas, caravanserais, alms houses, aqueducts . . . It was so long ago that my mind softens even the sharpest features, melting memories into liquid pain. The shapes that float into my head whenever I hark back to those days could well have been drawn later on, to ease the guilt of having forgotten their faces. Yet I remember the promises we made, and then failed to keep, every single one of them. It’s odd how faces, solid and visible as they are, evaporate, while words, made of breath, stay.

They have slipped away. One by one. Why it is that they perished and I survived to this feeble age only God and God alone knows. I think about Istanbul every day. People must be walking now across the courtyards of the mosques, not knowing, not seeing. They would rather assume that the buildings around them had been there since the time of Noah. They were not. We raised them: Muslims and Christians, craftsmen and galley slaves, humans and animals, day upon day. But Istanbul is a city of easy forgettings. Things are written in water over there, except the works of my master, which are written in stone.

Beneath one stone, I buried a secret. Much time has gone by, but it must still be there, waiting to be discovered. I wonder if anyone will ever find it. If they do, will they understand? This nobody knows, but at the bottom of one of the hundreds of buildings that my master built rests hidden the centre of the universe.

Agra, India, 1632

Istanbul, 22 December 1574

It was past midnight when he heard a fierce growl from the depths of the dark. He recognized it immediately: it came from the largest cat in the Sultan's palace, a Caspian tiger with amber eyes and golden fur. His heart missed a beat as he wondered what – or who – could have disturbed the beast. They should all be sound asleep at so late an hour – the humans, the animals, the djinn. In the city of seven hills, other than the watchmen on the streets making their rounds, only two kinds of people would be awake now: those who were praying and those who were sinning.

Jahan, too, was up and about – working.

'Working is prayer for the likes of us,' his master often said. 'It's the way we commune with God.'

'Then how does He respond to us?' Jahan had once asked, way back when he was younger.

'By giving us more work, of course.'

If that were to be believed, he must be forging a rather close relationship with the Almighty, Jahan had thought to himself, since he toiled twice as hard to ply two trades, instead of one. He was a mahout and a draughtsman. Dual crafts he pursued, yet he had a single teacher whom he respected, admired and secretly wished to surpass. His master was Sinan, the Chief Royal Architect.

Sinan had hundreds of students, thousands of labourers and many more adherents and acolytes. For all that, he had only four apprentices. Jahan was proud to be among them, proud but, inwardly, also confused. The master had chosen him – a simple servant, a lowly elephant-tamer – when he had plenty of gifted novices at the palace school. The knowledge of this, instead of swelling his self-esteem, filled him with apprehension. It preyed on his mind, almost despite himself, that he might disappoint the only person in life who believed in him.

His latest assignment was to design a hamam. The master's specifications were clear: a raised marble basin, which would be heated from below; ducts inside the walls to allow the smoke to exit; a dome resting on squinches; two doors opening on to two opposite streets so as to prevent men and women from seeing one another. On that ominous night, this was what Jahan was working on, seated at a rough-hewn table in his shed in the Sultan's menagerie.

Leaning back, frowning, he inspected his design. He found it coarse, devoid of grace and harmony. As usual, drawing the ground plan had been easier than drawing the dome. Though he was past forty – the age when Mohammed had become Prophet – and skilled in his craft, he still would rather dig foundations with his bare hands than have to deal with vaults and ceilings. He wished there could be a way to avoid them altogether – if only humans could live exposed to the skies, open and unafraid, watching the stars and being watched by them, with nothing to hide.

Frustrated, he was about to start a new sketch – having pilfered paper from the palace scribes – when he again heard the tiger. His back stiffened, his chin rose as he stood transfixed, listening. It was a sound of warning, bold and bloodcurdling, to an enemy not to draw any closer.

Quietly, Jahan opened the door and stared into the surrounding gloom. Another snarl rose, not as loud as the first but just as menacing. All at once, the animals broke into a clamour: the parrot screeched in the dark; the rhinoceros bellowed; the bear grunted in angry response. Nearby the lion let out a roar, which was met with a hiss from the leopard. Somewhere in the background was the constant, frantic thumping that the rabbits made with their hind legs whenever they were terrified. Though only five in number, the monkeys raised the

racket of a battalion – screaming, bawling. The horses, too, began to whinny and shuffle about in their stables. Amid the frenzy Jahan recognized the elephant's rumble, brief and listless, reluctant to join the tumult. Something was frightening the creatures. Throwing a cloak on to his shoulders, Jahan grabbed the oil lamp and slipped into the courtyard.

The air was crisp, tinged with a heady perfume of winter flowers and wild herbs. No sooner had he taken a couple of steps than he noticed some of the tamers huddled together under a tree, whispering. When they saw him coming, they glanced up expectantly. But Jahan did not have information, only questions.

'What is happening?'

'The beasts are nervous,' said Dara the giraffe-tamer, sounding nervous himself.

'It might be a wolf,' Jahan suggested.

It had happened before. Two years ago. One bitter winter eve, wolves had descended on the city, prowling the neighbourhoods of Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. A few had crept in through the gates, God knew how, and attacked the Sultan's ducks, swans and peacocks, creating mayhem. For days on end they had had to clear bloody feathers from under the bushes and brambles. Yet now the city was neither covered in snow nor was it exceptionally cold. Whatever it was that was agitating the animals, it came from inside the palace.

'Check every corner,' said Olev the lion-tamer – a hulk of a man with flaming hair and a curling moustache in the same shade. Not a single decision was taken around here without his knowledge. Mettlesome and muscular, he was held in high regard by all the servants. A mortal who could command a lion was someone even the Sultan could admire a little.

Scattering hither and thither, they inspected the barns, stables, pens, pounds, coops and cages to make sure no animal had escaped. Every resident of the royal menagerie seemed to be in its place. Lions, monkeys, hyenas, flat-horned stags, foxes, ermines, lynxes, wild goats, wildcats, gazelles, giant turtles, roe deer, ostriches, geese, porcupines, lizards, rabbits, snakes, crocodiles, civets, the leopard, the zebra, the giraffe, the tiger and the elephant.

When he went to see Chota – a thirty-five-year-old, six cubits tall and unusually white Asian male elephant – Jahan found him high-strung, unsettled, holding out his ears like sails to the wind. He smiled at the creature whose habits he knew so well.

'What is it? You smell danger?' Patting the elephant's side, Jahan offered him a handful of sweet almonds, which he always carried ready in his sash.

Never refusing a treat, Chota popped the nuts into his mouth with a swing of his trunk as he kept his gaze on the gate. Leaning forward, his massive weight on his front legs, his sensitive feet pasted to the ground, he froze, straining to catch a sound in the distance.

'Calm down, it's fine,' intoned Jahan, though he did not believe in what he said and nor did the elephant.

On the way back, he saw that Olev was talking to the tamers, urging them to disperse. 'We searched everywhere! There's nothing!'

'But the beasts –' someone protested.

Olev interjected, pointing at Jahan. 'The Indian is right. Must have been a wolf. Or a jackal, I'd say. Anyway, it's gone. Get back to sleep.'

No one protested this time. Nodding, murmuring, they trudged to their pallets, which, though coarse and prickly and full of lice, were the one safe and warm place they knew. Only Jahan lingered behind.

‘You’re not coming, mahout?’ called Kato the crocodile-tamer.

‘In a moment,’ Jahan replied, glancing in the direction of the inner courtyard, where he had just heard a curious muffled sound.

Instead of turning left, towards his shed of lumber and stone, he turned right, towards the high walls separating the two yards. He walked warily, as if waiting for an excuse to change his mind and go back to his drawing. Upon reaching the lilac tree at the furthest end, he noticed a shadow. Dusky and unearthly, it so resembled an apparition that he would have dashed away had it not just then turned aside and showed its face – Taras the Siberian. Surviving every disease and disaster, he had been here longer than anyone else. He had seen sultans come, sultans go. He had seen the mighty humbled and the heads that used to carry the loftiest turbans rolled in mud. Only two things are solid, the servants taunted: Taras the Siberian and the misery of love. Everything else perishes . . .

‘Is that you, Indian?’ Taras asked. ‘The animals woke you up, eh?’

‘Yeah,’ Jahan said. ‘Did you just hear a noise?’

The old man gave a grunt that could have been a yes or a no.

‘It came from over there,’ Jahan insisted, craning his neck. He stared at the wall stretching before him, a shapeless mass the colour of onyx, blending seamlessly into the dark. In that moment he had the impression that the midnight haze was full of spirits, moaning and mourning. The thought made him shudder.

A hollow crash reverberated across the yard, followed by a cascade of footsteps, as if a throng of people was scampering about. Deep from the bowels of the palace, a woman’s scream rose, too wild to be human, and almost at once was stifled into a sob. From a different corner another scream ripped through the night. Perhaps it was a lost echo of the first one. Then, as abruptly as it had started, everything fell into stillness. On impulse, Jahan made a motion towards the wall in front of him.

‘Where are you going?’ whispered Taras, his eyes glittering with fright. ‘It’s forbidden.’

‘I want to find out what’s going on,’ said Jahan.

‘Keep away,’ said the old man.

Jahan hesitated – albeit momentarily. ‘I’ll take a look and come back right away.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t do that, but you won’t listen,’ said Taras with a sigh. ‘Just make sure you don’t go further. Stay in the garden, your back close to the wall. D’you hear me?’

‘Don’t worry, I shall be quick – and careful.’

‘I’ll wait for you. Won’t sleep till you return.’

Jahan gave an impish smile. ‘I wish you wouldn’t do that, but you won’t listen.’

Recently Jahan had worked with his master in the repair of the royal kitchens. Together they had also expanded parts of the harem – a necessity, since its population had grown considerably over the last years.

So as not to have to use the main gate, the labourers had made a shortcut, carving out an opening in the walls. When a consignment of tiles had been delayed, they had sealed it with unbaked bricks and clay.

A lamp in one hand, a stick in the other, Jahan tapped on the walls as he ambled along. For a while he heard only the same dull thud, over and over again. Then an empty thump. He stopped. On his knees he pushed the bricks at the bottom with all his might. They resisted at first, but eventually gave way. Leaving his lamp behind, intending to pick it up on the way back, he crawled through the hole and into the next courtyard.

The moonlight cast an eerie glow over the rose garden, now a rose cemetery. The bushes, adorned with the brightest red and pink and yellow throughout spring, looked withered, burnished, spreading out like a sea of silver water. His heart was pounding so fast and so loud he was afraid someone might hear it. A shiver ran through him as he recalled stories of poisoned eunuchs, strangled concubines, beheaded viziers and sacks thrown into the waters of the Bosphorus, their contents still wriggling with life. In this city some graveyards were on the hills, others a hundred fathoms under the sea.

Ahead of him was an evergreen with hundreds of scarves, ribbons, pendants and laces dangling from its limbs – the Wish Tree. Whenever a concubine or odalisque in the harem had a secret that she could share with no one but God, she would persuade a eunuch to come here with a trinket that belonged to her. This would be tied to a branch, next to someone else’s curio. Since the aspirations of one woman often went against those of another, the tree bristled with clashing pleas and warring prayers. Even so, right now, as a light breeze ruffled its leaves, mixing the wishes, it appeared peaceful. So peaceful, in fact, that Jahan could not help walking towards it, although he had assured Taras he would not venture this far.

There were no more than thirty paces to the stone building in the background. Half hiding behind the bole of the Wish Tree, Jahan peered around very slowly, only to pull himself back at once. It took him a moment to dare to look again.

About a dozen deaf-mutes were scuttling left and right, going from one entrance through to another. Several were carrying what seemed to be sacks. The torches in their hands traced streaks of umber in the air, and each time two torches crossed paths, the shadows on the walls grew taller.

Unsure what to make of the sight, Jahan sprinted towards the rear of the building, smelling the rich earth, his strides as imperceptible as the air he inhaled. He made a half-circle, which brought him to the door at the far end. It was oddly unguarded. Unthinking, he went in. If he started to reflect on what he was doing, he would be crippled by fear, he knew.

Inside it was damp and chilly. Groping in the semi-dark, he went on, even though the skin on the back of his neck prickled and the hairs stood up. It was too late for regret. There was no going back; he could only move forward. He crept into a faintly lit chamber, sidling along the walls, his breath coming fast. He looked around: mother-of-pearl tables with glass bowls on each; sofas topped with cushions; carved and gilded mirror frames, tapestries hanging from the ceilings, and, on the floor, those puffed sacks.

Glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was coming, he inched ahead until he caught sight of something that froze his blood – a hand. Pale and slack, it rested on the cold marble, under a mound of fabric, like a fallen bird. As if guided by an external force, Jahan loosened the burlap sacks, one after the other, and opened them halfway. He blinked in confusion, his eyes refusing to admit what his heart had already grasped. The hand was attached to an arm, the arm to a small midriff. Not sacks, not sacks at all. They were dead bodies. Of children.

There were four of them, all boys, laid side by side, from the tallest to the shortest. The oldest was an adolescent, the youngest still a suckling infant. Their royal robes had been carefully arranged to ensure they

retained in death the dignity of princes. Jahan's gaze fell on the closest corpse, a light-skinned boy with ruddy cheeks. He stared at the lines on his palm. Curved, sloping lines that blurred into one another, like markings in the sand. Which fortune-teller in this city, Jahan wondered, would have foreseen deaths so sudden and so sad for princes of such gentle birth?

They seemed at rest. Their skin glowed, as if lit from within. Jahan could not help but think that they had not died, not really. They had stopped moving, stopped talking, and turned into something beyond his comprehension, of which only they were aware, hence the expression on their faces that could have been a smile.

Legs trembling, hands quivering, Jahan stood there, unable to stir. Only the sound of approaching footfalls yanked him out of the fog of his bewilderment. Barely mustering the strength but finding time to cover the dead, he made a dart towards a corner and hid behind a ceiling-to-floor tapestry. In a moment the deaf-mutes entered the room, bringing another body. They put it down beside the others, gingerly.

Just then one of them noticed that the cloth on the corpse furthest away from him had slid off. He drew closer and looked around. Unsure whether it was they who had left it like that or someone else had sneaked in after they had left, he signalled to his companions. They, too, stopped. Together they started to inspect the room.

Alone in the corner, a flimsy fabric separating him from the murderers, Jahan was breathless with fright. So this was it, he reflected; his entire life had come to naught. So many lies and deceits had carried him this far. Oddly, and not without sadness, he recalled the lamp he had left by the garden wall, flickering in the wind. His eyes watered as he thought of his elephant and his master: both must have been innocently asleep by now. Then his mind wandered to the woman he loved. While she and others were safely dreaming in their beds, he would be killed for being where he was not supposed to be and seeing what he was not supposed to see. And all because of his curiosity – this shameless, unbridled inquisitiveness that all his life had brought him only trouble. Silently, he cursed himself. They should write it on his gravestone, in neat letters:

Here lieth a man too nosy for his own good,

Animal-tamer and architect's apprentice.

Offer a prayer for his ignorant soul.

Pity, there was no one to relay this last wish for him.

The same evening, in a mansion at the other end of Istanbul, the kahya* was awake, a rosary dangling from her hand, thumbing the beads. Her cheeks wrinkled as dry raisins, her thin frame hunchbacked, she had gone blind with age. Still, as long as she was within the confines of the master's abode she had excellent sight. Every nook and cranny, every loose hinge, every creaky stair . . . There was no one under this roof who knew the house as well as she did, and no one as devoted to its lord and master. Of this, she was certain.

It was quiet all around, save for the snoring that rose from the lodgings of the servants. Every now and then she caught a soft breathing, so faint as to be scarcely perceptible, from behind the closed library door. Sinan was sleeping there, having worked till late, again. He would ordinarily spend the evenings with his family, retreating before supper to the haremlik, where his wife and daughters lived and where no apprentice ever ventured. But tonight, as on many nights, after breaking his fast, he had gone back to his drawings and fallen asleep amid his books and scrolls, in the room that welcomed the sun before the rest of the large, generous house. The kahya had prepared a bed for him, spreading a mat on the carpet.

He worked too much, despite being eighty-five years old. At his age a man ought to rest, eat well and make his devotions, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. Whatever strength was left in his limbs he should use to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, and if he perished on the way there, all the better for his soul. Why was the master not getting ready for the hereafter? And if he was getting ready for it, what on earth was he doing on construction sites, his elegant kaftans covered in dust and mud? While the kahya was cross at the master for not taking better care of himself, she was also cross at the Sultan and at every passing vizier for working the man so hard; and she was furious at Sinan's apprentices for not removing the extra load from their Lord's shoulders. Lazy lads! Not that they were lads any more. She had known the four of them since they were clueless novices. Nikola, the most talented and the most timid; Davud, eager and earnest but impatient; Yusuf, mute and full of secrets, like a dense, impenetrable forest; and that Indian, Jahan, who was always asking questions, Why is this so, How does that work, though he scarcely listened to the answers.

Pondering and praying, the kahya stared for a while into the abyss inside her eyes. Her thumb, forefinger and third finger, which had been pushing the amber beads, one by one, slowed down. So did her muttering, 'Alhamdulillah, Alhamdulillah.'* Her head began to droop, and her mouth opened, releasing a gasp.

A moment or an hour later, she couldn't tell, she woke up to a noise in the distance. The clatter of hooves and wheels on cobblestones. A carriage was travelling at full tilt, and, by the sound of it, heading in their direction. Sinan's house was the only residence on a deadend street. Should the carriage round the corner, it could be coming only for them. A shudder ran through her, as if a sudden chill had passed down her spine.

Murmuring a prayer against unholy spirits, she stood up briskly, despite her years. With short, swinging strides she went down the stairs, along the corridors and out on to the patio. Divided into raised terraces, adorned with a pool and redolent of the sweetest fragrances, the garden filled the heart of every visitor with joy. The master had made it by himself, conveying water to the house with a special permit from the Sultan – thus arousing the jealousy and resentment of his enemies. Now the water-wheel turned serenely, its steady gurgle assuring her with a predictability that life itself always lacked.

Above her, the moon, a sickle of silver, hid behind a cloud, and for a fleeting instant, in slate-grey, the sky and the earth were welded together. Down the path to her right there was a steep-sided grove, and, far below, a bostan where they grew herbs and vegetables. She took the other path, wending her way up towards the courtyard. On one side stood a well, its water icy cold, winter and summer. Clustered in the opposite corner were the privies. She avoided them, as she always did. The djinn held their weddings there, and whoever disturbed them in the pitch of night would be left crippled until doomsday, the curse so strong it would take seven generations to wipe it out. Since she hated using a chamber pot even more than visiting the privies in the dark, every day after dusk the old kahya would stop eating and drinking, so as not to be at the mercy of her body.

Distraught, she reached the gate that opened on to the street. Of three things in this life she expected no good: a man who had sold his soul to Sheitan; a woman proud of her beauty; and the news that could not wait till the morning to be delivered.

Shortly the carriage came to a halt on the other side of the high fence. The horse gave a snort; heavy footsteps were heard. The kahya smelled sweat in the air, whether of the beast or of the messenger, she couldn't tell. Whoever this intruder was, the old woman was in no hurry to find out. First she needed to recite Surah al-Falaq seven times. I seek refuge with the Lord of the Dawn, from the evil of everything He has created and from the evil of the dark and from the evil of the women who blow on the knots . . .

In the meantime, the messenger was tapping on the door. Polite but persistent. The kind of knocking that would escalate into pounding if left unanswered for a bit too long – and indeed, very soon, did so. The

servants, only just waking up, scurried to the garden one by one, carrying lamps, pulling their shawls over their gowns. Unable to postpone the moment any longer, the kahya uttered Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim* and drew back the bolt.

A stranger appeared as the moon slid from behind the clouds. Short, stocky and, by the shape of his eyes, a Tatar. A leather flask across his shoulder, a swagger in his pose, he frowned, not hiding his annoyance at finding so many people watching him.

‘I come from the palace,’ he announced, in an unnecessarily loud voice.

The silence that ensued was anything but welcoming.

‘Need to talk to your master,’ the messenger said.

Straightening his shoulders, the man was about to walk in when the kahya raised her hand, stopping him. ‘Are you entering right foot first?’

‘What?’

‘If you are crossing this threshold, you ought to come in with your right foot first.’

He peered down at his feet, as if he feared they might run away; then the messenger took a careful step. Once inside, he proclaimed he was sent by no other than the Sultan himself on a matter of urgency, though he didn’t need to say any of this: they had all understood as much.

‘I’ve been ordered to collect the Chief Royal Architect,’ he added.

The kahya trembled, her cheeks drained of colour. She cleared her throat, the words she could not utter piling up inside her mouth. She would rather inform this man that she could not disturb the master, who had already slept so little. But, of course, she said no such thing. Instead she muttered, ‘You wait here.’

She turned her head to one side, her eyes flittering into empty space. ‘Come with me, Hasan,’ she said to one of the pages, who was there, she knew, because he smelled distinctively of grease and of clove candy, which he popped into his mouth on the sly.

They set off, she leading the way, the boy following with a lamp. The floorboards creaked under their feet. The kahya smiled to herself. The master erected magnificent buildings near and far but forgot to repair the floors in his own house.

Upon entering the library, they were surrounded by a balmy smell – the scents of books, ink, leather, beeswax, cedar rosaries and walnut shelves.

‘Effendi, wake up,’ the kahya whispered, her voice soft as silk.

She stood still, listening to the rise and fall of her master’s breathing. She called again, louder this time. Not a stir.

The boy, meanwhile, having never been this close to the master, was scrutinizing him: the long, arched nose, the wide forehead with deep lines, the thick, hoary beard that he restlessly tugged at when lost in thought, the scar on his left eyebrow – a reminder of the day when, as a youngster working in his father’s carpentry workshop, Sinan had fallen on a wedge. The boy’s gaze slid to the master’s hands. With strong, bony fingers and rough, callused palms, they were the hands of a man accustomed to outdoor work.

The third time the kahya called his name, Sinan opened his eyes and sat up in bed. A shadow fell on his features as he saw the two figures by his side. He knew they would never have dared to awaken him at this hour unless a calamity had occurred or the city had burned to the ground.

‘A messenger arrived,’ the kahya explained. ‘You are expected in the palace.’

Slowly, Sinan heaved himself out of bed. ‘May it be good news, insha’Allah.’

Holding out a bowl, pouring water from a pitcher and feeling rather important, the boy helped his master to wash his face and get dressed. A pale shirt, a kaftan, not one of the new ones but an old, brown one, thick and trimmed with fur. Together the three of them clambered downstairs.

The messenger bowed his head upon seeing them coming. ‘I beg your pardon for disturbing you, effendi, but I have commands to take you to the palace.’

‘One must do one’s duty,’ Sinan said.

The kahya interjected, ‘Can the boy accompany the master?’

The messenger raised an eyebrow, staring directly at Sinan. ‘I’ve been instructed to bring you and no one else.’

Anger, like bile, rose in the kahya’s mouth. She might have snapped had Sinan not placed a calming hand on her shoulder and said, ‘It’ll be fine.’

The architect and the messenger walked outside into the night. There wasn’t a creature in sight, not even a stray dog, of which there were so many in this city. Once Sinan was settled in the carriage, the messenger closed the door and hopped up on to the seat next to the driver, who had not spoken a single word. The horses lurched, and soon they were speeding through the drab streets, bobbing up and down.

To hide his unease Sinan moved aside the tightly drawn curtains and stared outside. As they galloped through crooked streets and under boughs that bent with sorrow, he mused on the people sleeping in their homes, the rich in their konaks, the poor in their shacks. They passed by the Jewish quarter, the Armenian quarter and the neighbourhoods of Greeks and Levantines. He observed the churches, none of which were permitted to have bells, the synagogues with square courtyards, the mosques roofed with lead, and the mud-brick and wooden houses that leaned against each other as if for solace. Even the gentry had their houses built of poorly baked bricks. He wondered, for the thousandth time, how a city so rich in beauty could be crammed with houses so poorly built.

Finally, they reached the palace. At the end of the first courtyard the carriage drew to a halt. The palace runners came around for help, their movements deft and practised. Sinan and the messenger made their way across the Middle Gate, which no one save the Sultan could pass through on horseback. They strode past a marble fountain that glowed in the dark, like a being from another world. The pavilions by the seaside, which loomed up in the distance, resembled sulky giants. Having recently expanded parts of the harem and renewed the imperial kitchens, Sinan was quite familiar with his surroundings. Suddenly he stopped, seeing a pair of eyes looking at him from the depths of the dark. It was a gazelle. Big, shiny, liquid eyes. There were other animals around – peacocks, turtles, ostriches, antelopes. All of them were, for a reason he could not comprehend, awake and alarmed.

The air was chilly and crisp, tinged with myrtle, hellebore and rosemary. It had rained earlier in the evening, and the grass yielded beneath their feet. The guards moved aside to let them pass. They reached the massive

stone building, the colour of storm clouds, and passed through a hall illuminated with tallow candles trembling in the draught. After crossing two chambers they halted in the third. No sooner had they reached this room than the messenger excused himself and vanished. Sinan squinted to accustom his eyes to the vastness of the place. Every pitcher, every cushion, every ornament cast eerie shadows that squirmed and writhed on the walls as though they craved to tell him something.

In the opposite corner the light was softer. Sinan winced when he noticed the sacks on the floor. Through an opening he could see the face of a corpse. His shoulders sank, his eyes watered, as he observed how young the boy had been. He understood. There were rumours this would happen, though he had refused to believe them. Dazed, aghast, he staggered against the wall. His prayer, when he could find the words, was slow, interrupted by a gasp each time he fought for breath.

He had not yet said amin, not yet wiped his face with both hands, when a creak came from behind him. Finishing his prayer, he glared at the tapestry hanging on the wall. He was sure that was where the sound had come from. His mouth dry as chalk, he shuffled towards it and pulled the fabric aside – only to find a familiar figure, shivering and sallow with fear.

‘Jahan?’

‘Master!’

‘What are you doing here?’

Jahan leaped out, thanking his lucky stars – the stars that had sent not the deaf-mute to throttle him but the one person in the entire world who could come to his rescue. On his knees, he kissed the old man’s hand and put it to his forehead.

‘You are a saint, master. I always suspected. Now I know. If I get out of here alive, I shall tell everyone.’

‘Sssh, don’t speak nonsense and don’t shout. How did you get in?’

There was no time to explain. Footfalls pounded down the corridor, echoing off the high ceilings and ornamented walls. Standing up, Jahan inched towards his master, hoping to become invisible. The next moment Murad III entered the room, his entourage following. Not tall, rather portly, he had an aquiline nose, a large beard close to blond and bold brown eyes under arching brows. He paused, deciding which tone to employ: his soft one, his harsh one or his harshest one.

Sinan quickly composed himself, kissing the hem of the sovereign’s kaftan. His apprentice bowed low and went rigid, unable to look up at the Shadow of God on earth. Jahan was puzzled not so much by the Sultan as by finding himself in his imperial presence. For a sultan Murad had now become. His father, Selim the Sot, had tripped on wet marble in the hamam, falling to his death, three sheets to the wind, so they gossiped, even though he had repented of his ways and sworn never to touch wine again. Just before dusk, amid much adulation and praise, and a cascade of fireworks, drums and trumpets, Murad had been girded with the sword of his ancestor Osman and proclaimed the new padishah.

Outside, far off, the sea soughed and sighed. Not daring to budge, Jahan waited quiet as a tomb, sweat breaking out on his forehead. He listened to the silence weighing down his shoulders, bringing his lips so close to the floor he could have kissed it like a cold lover.

‘Why are the dead here?’ asked the Sultan as soon as he glanced at the sacks on the floor. ‘Have you no shame?’

One of his attendants replied immediately: ‘We beg your pardon, my Lord. We thought you might wish to see them one more time. We will take them to the mortuary and make sure they are respected as they should be.’

The Sultan said nothing. He then turned towards the figures kneeling down before him. ‘Architect, is this one of your apprentices?’

Sinan replied, ‘He is, your Highness. One of the four.’

‘I had asked for you to come alone. Did the messenger disobey my orders?’

‘It’s my fault,’ Sinan said. ‘Forgive me. At my age, I need help.’

The Sultan considered this for a moment. ‘What is his name?’

‘Jahan, my felicitous Lord. You might remember him as the palace mahout. He looks after the white elephant.’

‘An animal-tamer and an architect,’ the Sultan scoffed. ‘How did that happen?’

‘He served your glorious grandfather, Sultan Suleiman, upon whom be Allah’s peace. Seeing his talent in building bridges, we took him into our care and have trained him since he was a youngster.’

Unheeding, the Sultan murmured, as though to himself, ‘My grandfather was a great sovereign.’

‘He was praiseworthy like the prophet he was named after, my Lord.’

Suleiman the Magnificent, the Law Giver, Commander of the Faithful and Protector of the Holy Cities – the man who had ruled for forty-six winters and spent more time on his horse than on his throne; and, even though buried deep down, his shroud decomposed, he could be recalled only in a hushed tone.

‘May the mercy of Allah be upon him. I thought about him tonight. What would he have done in my position, I asked myself,’ Sultan Murad said, his voice cracking for the first time. ‘My grandfather would have done the same. There was no other choice.’

Panic gripped Jahan as it dawned upon him that he was talking about the dead.

‘My brothers are with the Sustainer of the Universe,’ said the Sultan.

‘May heaven be their abode,’ said Sinan quietly.

Silence reigned until the Sultan spoke again. ‘Architect, you were ordered by my venerable father Sultan Selim to build a tomb for him. Weren’t you?’

‘Indeed, your Highness. He wanted to be buried by the Hagia Sophia.’

‘Build it, then. Start the work without delay. You have my permission to do what is necessary.’

‘Understood, my Lord.’

‘It is my wish to bury my brothers next to my father. Make the turbeh so grand that even centuries on people can come and pray for their innocent souls.’ He paused and added in an afterthought, ‘But . . . don’t make it

too spectacular. It should be just the right size.'

From the corner of his eye Jahan saw his master's face go white. He picked out a smell in the air, or rather a mixture of smells, perhaps juniper and birch twigs, with a sharp undertone, possibly burned elms. Whether it was coming from the sovereign or from Sinan, he did not have a chance to find out. Panicking, he bowed again, his forehead touching the floor. He heard the Sultan heave a sigh, as if searching for something else to say. But he said nothing. Instead he came closer, closer, his frame blocking the candlelight. Jahan shivered under the sovereign's gaze. His heart skipped a beat. Had the Sultan suspected that he had trespassed into the inner courtyard tonight? Jahan felt his royal eyes running over him for another moment, no more, after which he strode off, his viziers and guards at his heels.

And this is how, in the month of December, an early day in Ramadan, in the year 1574, Sinan, in his capacity as Chief Royal Architect, and his apprentice Jahan, who had no place at this meeting and yet was present, were given the task of constructing inside the gardens of the Hagia Sophia a monument that was large and impressive enough to befit five princes, the brothers of Sultan Murad, but neither so large nor so impressive as to remind anyone of how they had been strangled, on his orders, on the night he ascended the throne.

What none of those present could foresee was that years later, when Sultan Murad died, on another night like this, as the wind moaned and the animals in the menagerie cried, his own sons – all nineteen of them – would be strangled with a silken bowstring, so as not to spill their noble blood, and, by a twist of fate, buried in the same place that was built by the architect and the apprentice.

## Before the Master

The Prophet Jacob had twelve sons, the Prophet Jesus twelve apostles. Prophet Joseph, whose story is told in the 12th surah of the Qur'an, was his father's favourite child. Twelve loaves of bread the Jews placed at their tables. Twelve golden lions guarded the throne of Solomon. There were six steps up to the throne, and, since every climb had a descent, that meant six steps down, twelve in total. Twelve cardinal beliefs wafted through the land of Hindustan. Twelve imams succeeded the Prophet Mohammed in the Shia creed. Twelve stars ornamented Mary's crown. And a boy named Jahan had barely completed twelve years of his life when he saw Istanbul for the very first time.

Skinny, sunburned and restless as a fish in midstream, he was rather short for his age. As if to make up for his height, a thatch of black hair grew upwards and perched on his head like a creature with a life of its own. His hair was the first thing people saw when they looked at him. Next came his ears, each the size of a thug's fist. But his mother said that some day girls would be charmed by his dazzling smile and by the single dimple in his left cheek, a cook's fingerprint on soft dough. This she had said; this he believed.

Lips red as a rosebud, hair lustrous as silk, waist thinner than a willow branch. Nimble as a gazelle, strong as an ox, blessed with the voice of a nightingale – which she would use to sing lullabies to her babies, not for idle chatter, and never to defy her husband. Such was the bride his mother would have wanted for him had she been alive. But she was gone – the vapours, the physician had said, though Jahan knew it was the beating she received every day from his brute of a stepfather, who also happened to be his uncle. The man had cried his heart out at the funeral, as if it was someone else who had caused her early death. Jahan had hated him with all his being ever since. When he had boarded this vessel, he regretted leaving home without having taken his revenge. Yet he knew if he had stayed either he would have killed his uncle or his uncle would have killed him. Since he was still too young, and not strong enough, it would have probably been the latter.

When the right time arrived, Jahan would return for retribution. And he would find his beloved. They would marry in a ceremony of forty days and forty nights, stuffing themselves with sweetmeats and laughter. Their first daughter he would name after his mother. It was a dream he told no one.

As the caravel approached the port, the boy began to see birds in greater numbers. And a greater variety: seagulls, sandpipers, curlews, sparrows, jays and magpies – one of them carrying a shiny gaud in its beak. A few – the brave or the foolish – alighted on the sails, too close to the humans. The air carried a new odour underneath, foreign and foul.

After weeks of sailing in the open sea, catching sight of the city had a strange effect on Jahan's imagination – especially on a misty day such as this. He peered ahead at the line where the water lapped against the shore, a strip of grey, and could not make out whether he was sailing towards Istanbul or away from it. The longer he stared the more the land seemed like an extension of the sea, a molten town perched on the tip of the waves, swaying, dizzying, ever changing. This, more or less, was his earliest impression of Istanbul, and unbeknown to him, it would not change even after a lifetime.

Slowly, the boy walked across the deck. The sailors were too busy to mind him being under their feet. He reached the end of the bow, where he had never been before. Ignoring the wind on his face, he squinted into the heart of Istanbul, which he couldn't quite see, not yet. Then, little by little, the mist dissolved, as though someone had pulled back a curtain. The city, now clearly defined, opened up before him, burning bright. Light and shadows, crests and slopes. Up and down through hill after hill, covered here and there with groves of cypress, she seemed like a wen of opposites. Denying herself at every step, changing disposition in each quarter, caring and callous at once, Istanbul gave generously and, with the same breath, recalled her gift. A city so vast she expanded left and right, and up towards the firmament, striving to ascend, desiring more, never satisfied. Yet enchanting she was. Though he was a stranger to her ways, the boy sensed how one could fall under her spell.

Jahan hurried to the hold. The elephant was in a crate, turgid and listless.

'You've made it. Look, you are here!' This last word he uttered with a slight quaver, since he didn't know what kind of a place 'here' was. It didn't matter. Whatever awaited the animal in this new kingdom couldn't be worse than the voyage he had just endured.

Chota was sitting on his haunches, looking so still that for a moment the boy feared his heart had stopped beating. Detecting the animal's soft, ragged breathing upon approaching him, Jahan felt a small relief. The glimmer, however, had gone from the beast's eyes, the lustre from his skin. The day before he had not eaten, not slept. There was a scary lump behind his jaws and his trunk was visibly swollen. The boy splashed water on his head, uneasy about yet again using seawater, which left salty marks all over his skin that must have prickled.

'When we get to the palace, I'll wash you with sweet waters,' Jahan promised.

Gently, carefully, he applied turmeric to the elephant's swellings. The animal had lost weight. The last stages of the journey had been particularly tough for him.

'You'll see. The Sultana will dote on you. You'll be the darling of concubines,' Jahan said. Then, as another possibility came to mind, he added, 'If it turns out they're not kind, you can run away. I'll come with you too.'

He would have gone on longer in this vein but he heard footsteps on the stairs. A sailor dashed in, bellowed, 'Oi, the Captain wants to see you. Now!'

A moment later the boy was in front of the Captain's door, listening to the sound of hacking and spitting coming from inside. He was scared of the man, though he tried not to show it. Captain Gareth was known to all and sundry as Gavur* Garret or Delibash Reis – Captain Crazyhead. One moment he could be joking and laughing with some sailor, and the next pulling out his sword to butcher him into a thousand pieces. Jahan had seen it happen.

Born in a coastal town in England, this seadog, who loved nothing more than a slab of slow-roasted pork belly and a draught of ale, had, for a reason no one quite understood, betrayed his countrymen and joined the Ottoman naval force with precious secrets under his hat. His fearlessness had made him dear to the palace and earned him a fleet of his own. It had amused Sultan Suleiman no end that he attacked and plundered Christian ships with a ferocity no Ottoman seafarer had ever displayed. The Sultan granted him protection but did not trust him. He knew that a man who stabbed his own companions in the back would never be a true friend to anyone else. The creature who arrived at your door, having bitten the hand that fed him all along, would not hesitate to sink his teeth into your flesh once he was inside.

When the boy entered the room, he found the Captain sitting at his desk, looking less scraggly than usual. His beard – washed, combed and anointed – was not the dark chestnut that it had been for weeks on end, but a lighter brown, almost tawny. A scar ran from his left ear to the corner of his lips, making his mouth seem like a continuation of the wound. Having cast off his everyday umber shirt, he was clad in a loose, pale shirt and a camel shalwar; a string of turquoise beads against the evil eye was around his neck. On the table beside him were a candle burned to a stub and a ledger where he noted down the booty captured along the way. The boy noticed him covering the page, although there was no need. Jahan could not read. Letters were not his friends but shapes and pictures were. Mud, clay, goatskin, calfskin, on whatever surface he could he drew. Throughout the voyage he had made endless sketches of the sailors and the ship.

'See, I'm a man of my word. I brought you here in one piece,' Captain Gareth said and spat with force.

'The elephant is sick,' the boy said, eyeing the bowl where the phlegm had landed. 'You didn't allow me to take him out of his crate.'

'When he tramples solid ground he'll mend in no time.' The Captain's tone grew condescending. 'What is it to you anyway? It's not your beast.'

'Nay, it's the Sultan's.'

'That's right, lad. If you do as I say we'll all benefit from it.'

Jahan lowered his gaze. The man had mentioned this matter before, but Jahan had hoped he would forget about it. Apparently, he hadn't.

'The palace is full of gold and gems. A thief's paradise,' said Captain Gareth. 'When you get there you're goin' to steal for me. Don't try to ransack the place – the Turks will chop your hands off. You'll do it slowly, bit by bit.'

'But there are guards everywhere, I cannot –'

Swift as a thought the Captain pounced on the boy. 'Are you sayin' you won't do it? You forgotten what happened to that miserable mahout, eh?'

'I have not,' said Jahan, his face ashen.

‘Remember, you could have met the same end! If it wasn’t for me, lad like you would never have survived.’

‘I’m obliged,’ said the boy quietly.

‘Show your gratitude with jewels, not empty words.’ He coughed, spittle dribbling from his lip. He pulled the boy closer. ‘The mates would’ve chopped up the elephant and fed him to the sharks. And you . . . They’d have mounted you, all of ’em. When they tired of your pretty arse, they’d have sold you to a bawdy house. You owe me, little scamp. You’re goin’ to the palace straight away. You’ll pretend you’re the beast’s tamer.’

‘What if they notice I don’t know anything about elephants?’ said Jahan.

‘Then that means you’ve failed!’ said the Captain, his breath sour. ‘But you won’t. A canny lad like you. I’ll wait till you find your feet. I’ll come and find you. If you go against me, I swear to God I’ll have you gutted alive! I’ll tell everyone you are an impostor. You know how they punish a man who lies to the Sultan? They lift him to the gibbet . . . higher and higher . . . and then . . . drop him down . . . on an iron hook. It takes three days to die. Imagine, three bloody days! You’d beg for someone to kill you.’

Jahan wriggled out of the man’s grip. He bolted out of the cabin, sprinted across the deck and ran down into the hold, where he crawled in beside the elephant, who, though silent and sick, had become his only friend. There, he wept like the child that he was.

Once the ship docked they waited for the freight to be unloaded. The boy listened to the flurry upstairs, and, although he longed for fresh air and was starving, he dared not move. He wondered where the rats had gone. Did rodents, like genteel passengers, disembark in file when a boat was in the quay? In his mind’s eye he saw dozens of red-black tails scurrying in all directions, disappearing into the warren of streets and alleys that was Istanbul.

Unable to wait any longer, he climbed to the deck, which, to his relief, was empty. As his eyes scoured the dock ahead he saw the Captain talking to a man with an elegant robe and a high turban. A senior official, no doubt. When they noticed him the Captain made a gesture for him to approach. Jahan crossed the rickety wooden plank, jumped down and walked towards them.

‘The Captain tells me you are the mahout,’ said the official.

Jahan hesitated for the briefest moment – that passing doubt one feels before uttering a lie. ‘Yes, effendi. I came from Hindustan with the elephant.’

‘You did?’ A shadow of suspicion flickered across the man’s face. ‘How is it that you speak our language?’

Jahan was expecting this question. ‘They taught me in the Shah’s palace. I learned more on board. The Captain helped me.’

‘Very well. We’ll get the elephant out tomorrow afternoon,’ said the official. ‘First we need to unload the freight.’

Aghast, Jahan threw himself on the ground. ‘If you would be so good, effendi. The beast is sick. He’ll die should he stay in that hold another night.’

There was a surprised silence until the official said, ‘You care for the animal.’

‘He’s a good boy,’ the Captain said, his eyes cold despite his smile.

Five sailors were assigned the task of getting the elephant out. Eyeing the animal with disdain, swearing a blue streak, they tied ropes around him and pulled with all their might. Chota didn't budge. The boy watched the men toil, his anxiety growing with each passing moment. After much deliberation, it was decided not to force the elephant out but to winch the crate up with him inside it. A brigade of haulers unlatched the covers of the hold, leaving it wide open, and tied hawsers to four sides of the crate, which they coiled around aged oak trees. When ready, the men towed in unison, their arms jerking in tandem, their cheeks puffed with exertion. With one last tug, a large plank came off, falling down with a crash, miraculously not hurting anyone. Bit by bit, the crate levitated, then stopped. Down below, people gaped in astonishment at the elephant, which they could see through the gaps in the crate; he was dangling in the air like some half-bird, half-bull creature, dabbat al-ard, the beast of the earth that the imams said would appear on the Day of Judgement. Other men ran to help, the crowd of spectators thickened, and soon every person in the port was either watching or pulling. Jahan scampered back and forth, trying to lend a hand but not knowing quite how.

When the crate landed it did so with a loud, sickening thud. The elephant's head hit the roof-slats. The haulers did not want to bring him out for fear the beast would attack them. It took the boy a lot of pleading to assure them that Chota would not.

Once out, Chota's legs gave way. He collapsed like a puppet without strings. Limp with exhaustion, he refused to move, shutting his eyes as if he wanted this place and these people to disappear. They pushed and yanked and hoisted and flogged him, ultimately managing to thrust him on to a mammoth cart pulled by a dozen horses. Just as Jahan was about to hop on, an arm clutched at his elbow.

It was Captain Gareth. 'Farewell, son,' he said loud enough for everyone to hear. Then, dropping his voice to a whisper, he added, 'Go now, my little thief. Bring me diamonds and rubies. Remember, if you do me wrong, I'll cut off your balls.'

'Trust me,' Jahan mumbled – words carried away by the wind as soon as they left his lips – and climbed on to the cart.

In every street through which they passed, people moved aside in fright and delight. Women drew their babies close; mendicants hid their begging bowls; old men grabbed their canes as though in defence. Christians made the cross; Muslims recited surahs to chase Sheitan away; Jews prayed benedictions; Europeans looked half amused, half awed. A big, brawny Kazakh went pale, as if he had just seen a spectre. There was something so infantile in the man's fright that Jahan could not help but chuckle. Children, only they, stared up with sparkling eyes, pointing at the white beast.

Jahan glimpsed partly hidden female faces behind latticed windows, ornamented birdhouses on the walls, domes that caught the last rays of sun and lots of trees – chestnut, linden, quince. Wherever he turned he saw seagulls and cats, the two animals that were given free rein. Perky and pert, the seagulls soared in circles, diving to peck at the bait in a fisherman's bucket, or the fried liver on a street vendor's tray, or the pie left to cool on a windowsill. Nobody seemed to mind. Even when they chased away the birds, they did so reluctantly, making a show of it.

Jahan learned that the city had twenty-four gates and was composed of three towns: Istanbul, Galata and Scutari. He observed that people were attired in different colours, though according to what rule, he could not fathom. There were water-carriers with dainty china cups and pedlars hawking everything from musk to dried mackerel. Here and there he spotted a tiny wooden shack where they sold drinks in earthenware cups. 'Sherbet,' said the official, smacking his lips, but Jahan had no clue what it tasted like.

As they drove along, the official pointed things out: This cove is Georgian, that one Armenian. The scrawny figure over there is a dervish, the one beside him a dragoman. This man, a wearer of green, is an imam, for

only they can put on the colour favoured by the Prophet. See the baker around the corner, he is Greek. They make the best bread, those infidels, but don't you dare eat any, they draw the sign of the cross on every loaf. One bite and you'll turn into one of them. This shopowner is Jewish. He sells chickens but can't kill the birds himself and pays a rabbi to do that. That fella with sheepskin over his shoulders and rings in his pierced ears is a Torlak – a holy soul, some say, a sluggard if you ask me. Look at those Janissaries over there! They are not allowed to grow beards, only moustaches.

The Muslims wore turbans; Jews had red hats; and Christians, black hats. Arabs, Kurds, Nestorians, Circassians, Kazakhs, Tatars, Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Abkhazs, Pomaks . . . they walked separate paths while their shadows met and mingled in knots.

'There are seventy-two and a half tribes,' the official said; 'each has its place. As long as everyone knows their limits we live in peace.'

'Who are the half?' Jahan asked.

'Oh, the Gypsies. No one trusts them. They are forbidden to ride horses, only donkeys. They are not allowed to breed but they multiply anyhow, they got no shame. Stay away from the whole cursed bunch of these stinking heathens!'

Nodding, Jahan decided to steer clear of anyone who looked like a Gypsy. Gradually, the houses became sparse, the trees grew taller, and the din subsided.

'I ought to make the elephant ready before we present him to the Sultan,' Jahan said eagerly. 'A gift from the Indian Shah must look handsome.'

The man raised an eyebrow. 'Don't you know, lad? Your padishah is gone.'

'What do you mean, effendi?'

'Al-Sultan al-Azam Humayun . . . While you were on that ship, he lost his throne. All he has left is a wife and a couple of servants, we heard. He's not a ruler any more.'

Jahan pursed his lips. What would happen to the elephant now that the king who had sent him was king no more? He had no doubt that should Sultan Suleiman ship the animal back he would die on board. Perturbed, he said, 'Chota won't survive another voyage.'

'Don't fret. They won't return him,' said the official. 'We've all sorts of beasts in the palace, but never had a white elephant before.'

'Do you think they'll like him?'

'The Sultan won't be bothered. He's got important tasks. But the Sultana . . .'

The official lapsed into silence. A haunting look came over his face as he stared hard and long at something in the distance. When Jahan followed his gaze, he saw, looming high atop a promontory, the outline of a huge building, its torches twinkling in the dark and its gates closed like lips guarding secrets.

'Is this the palace?' Jahan whispered.

'This is it,' said the man proudly, as if the place belonged to his father. 'You are now in the abode of the Lord of East and West.'

Jahan's face lit up with expectation. Every chamber under its roof must abound with silks and brocades, he thought. Every hall must echo with joyous laughter. The Sultana's diamonds must be so large that each has a name prettier than that of a concubine.

They reached the Imperial Gate, under the stern gaze of the guards, who showed no interest in Chota, as though they were used to seeing a white elephant every day. When the party arrived at the Middle Gate, which had conical towers on each side with flaming torches, they got down from the carriage. The wind shifted just then, carrying a putrid smell. It was in that instant that Jahan, on impulse, glanced up towards the shadows in the background. He froze as he caught sight of the gibbets. There were three of them. One short, two tall. Mounted on each was a severed head, silently rotting away; swollen, empurpled, the mouth stuffed with hay. The boy caught an almost imperceptible movement, the insatiable greed of maggots crawling inside human flesh.

'Traitors . . .' said the official under his breath and spat with force.

'But what have they done wrong?' asked Jahan, his voice frail.

'Treachery, as likely as not. Either that or theft, I'd say. They had it coming, for sure. This is what happens to those who play false.'

Dazed, whey-faced, dwarfed by the columns ahead of him and suddenly bereft of words, Jahan trudged through the massive gate. Though he was gripped by an urgent desire to run away, he could not bring himself to leave the elephant. Like a convict trudging to the gallows, surrendering to a fate he could neither avoid nor accept, he followed the official and entered Sultan Suleiman's palace.

All the boy glimpsed that night, as on the ensuing nights, were massive walls, a mammoth door with iron studs, a courtyard so vast it could have swallowed the world, and more walls. It occurred to him that you could live in a palace all your life but never see much of it.

They were taken to a barn with an earthen floor, thatched roof and lofty ceiling – Chota's new home. Inside was a sullen, sinewy fellow of indeterminable age. He had magical fingers that healed animals, though they were of no use when it came to human diseases. His name was Taras the Siberian. Although there were no horses in sight, they could hear them shuffling about and neighing nearby, made nervous by their presence. Since time immemorial horses had disliked elephants, Taras said. It must have been an ill-founded equine fear, he added, since he had never heard of an elephant laying into a horse.

Taras examined Chota's mouth, eyes, trunk, excrement. He glared at Jahan, clearly blaming him for the animal's condition. The boy felt small, ashamed. They had been on the same ship, but Chota was on the brink of collapse while he was healthy as the crescent above.

Deftly, gingerly, the healer applied some foul-smelling ointment to Chota's lumps, and wrapped his trunk with burlap full of crushed leaves and a fragrant resin that Jahan later on learned was called myrrh. Not knowing how to help, the boy brought a bucket of fresh water, which he placed next to the piles of shrubs, apples, cabbages and hay – a banquet after the awful grub in the ship. But Chota didn't even look at them.

Jealousy gnawed at the boy's heart. He was torn between wishing, with all his being, for this man to make the elephant better, and dreading that once back on his feet the animal would love the healer more than he loved him. Sultan Suleiman's gift Chota might be, yet deep down Jahan saw him as his own.

Laden with such shabby thoughts, he was ushered outside. There, another man welcomed Jahan with a wide smile. An Indian by the name of Sangram, he was ecstatic to meet someone who spoke his mother tongue, and moved towards the boy the way a cat inches towards a stove, in need of warmth.

‘Khush Amdeed, yeh ab aapka rahaaish gah hai.’*

Jahan stared at him deadpan.

‘What’s the matter? Can’t understand what I’m saying?’ asked Sangram, now in Turkish.

‘Our words are different,’ said Jahan quickly. He told him about the village he came from, so high in the mountains that they slept above the clouds, lodged between the earth and the firmament. He talked about his sisters and his late mother. His voice trembled slightly.

Sangram regarded him with a puzzled stare. He seemed about to say something grave. But then, brushing aside whatever had crossed his mind, he sighed and smiled again. ‘All right, let me take you to the shed. Meet the others.’

As Sangram explained the ways of the Ottomans, they strode down a path that snaked between the garden pavilions and towards a large pond where all kinds of fish splashed around. The boy had a slew of questions regarding life inside the palace, but each time he got a curt whisper by way of an answer. Still, he was able to pick up a few things. Though he had yet either to see or to hear them, he learned that there were lions, panthers, leopards, monkeys, giraffes, hyenas, flat-horned stags, foxes, ermines, lynxes, civets, dogs and wildcats, all within reach. Beneath the acacia trees to their right stood the cages of wild animals – the animals it was their responsibility to feed, clean, pacify and keep safe day and night. Recently a rhinoceros had arrived from Habesh but had not survived. When not in demand the beasts were sent to other menageries across the city, and their tamers along with them. The larger animals sojourned in the old Palace of the Porphyrogenitus. The imperial residence that once hosted the Byzantium nobility and those born to the purple was now home to the animals of the Sultan. Other creatures were kept in an ancient church near the Hagia Sophia. Chota would have probably been sent to the church, but, because he was still an infant and exceptionally white, it was decided to keep him at the seraglio for now.

Some of the caretakers originated from the four corners of the empire, others from unmapped islands. Those responsible for the birds and fowl dwelled in another lodging, south of the aviary. From dawn to dusk, gazelles, peacocks, roe deer and ostriches roamed in and out of the pavilions. The Sultan’s menagerie was a world unto itself. And, while full of ferocious creatures, it was, all in all, really no wilder than the city outside.

The wildlife in the palace came in two sorts: the feral and the ornamental. The former were here because of their savage nature; the latter because of their winsomeness. Just as leopards did not mix with nightingales, so their keepers did not rub elbows. The trainers of the fiercest animals were a separate bunch. Among the hundreds of slaves amid these walls, they were neither the highest paid nor the best fed, though they remained the most respected.

Jahan’s accommodation was to be a lean-to made of lumber and baked bricks. There were nine men inside. A hulk of a red-haired, red-moustached fellow who was in charge of the lions and was called Olev; a cross-eyed Egyptian giraffe-trainer by the nickname of Dara; an African crocodile-tamer who had scars all over his body and answered to the name of Kato; Chinese twins who took care of monkeys and apes and, as Jahan would soon find out, were addicted to hashish; a bear-trainer known as Mirka, who, with his broad shoulders and heavy legs, resembled a bit of a bear himself; two Circassian ostlers who attended to the thoroughbred horses; and the healer he had met earlier, Taras the Siberian. They greeted him with an irritated silence,

surprised by his youth, exchanging glances, as if they understood something about him that he couldn't grasp.

Sangram brought him a bowl of sutlach.* 'Have some, it tastes of home,' he said and added in a conspiratorial whisper, 'Their food is not as good as ours. Better get used to it.'

Jahan wolfed down his dish while they all watched him with mute curiosity. His hunger was not sated but nothing else was offered and he didn't ask. He changed into the garments they handed him. A pale shirt with wide sleeves, a fleece vest, a shalwar and, for his feet, soft leather boots. Afterwards he and Sangram took a stroll. The manservant popped a round, waxy substance into his mouth. Little did the boy know that it was a paste made of spices and opium. In a little while Sangram's face softened, his tongue loosened. He told Jahan about Sultan Suleiman's silence code. Although it did not apply as strictly in the first and second courtyards as in the third and fourth, everyone everywhere was expected to be quiet. Talking loudly, laughing or bellowing were forbidden.

'What about singing? Chota likes to listen to lullabies before he goes to sleep.'

'Singing . . .' Sangram repeated, as if he were explaining something he himself did not quite comprehend. 'Singing is allowed if done in silence.'

Having thus approached the garden walls, they stopped. There they found copses of tall firs, like soldiers standing guard, their branches forming a canopy.

'Don't go beyond this wall,' said Sangram, his voice tight.

'Why?'

'Don't question. Obey your elders.'

Jahan felt a lurch in his belly. His discomfort must have been apparent, for Sangram said, 'Your face is all wrong.'

'What?'

'You're pleased, it shows. You're scared, there it is.' He shook his head. 'Women can't hide their feelings because they're weak. Lucky for them, they hide behind veils. But a man has to learn to mask his emotions.'

'What should I do?' asked Jahan.

'Hide your face, seal your heart,' said Sangram. 'Otherwise it won't be long before they make a hash of both.'

About an hour later, on his first night in Istanbul, Jahan lay stiff on a coarse pallet, listening to the sounds of the evening. An owl hooted nearby, dogs barked somewhere in the distance. Inside the shed it was no less noisy, his companions snoring, tossing, talking, farting, grinding their teeth in their sleep. One of them, though he couldn't make out which, spoke in a language he had never heard before, if it was a language at all. His stomach joined the ruckus, rumbling. He reflected on food, particularly spicy meat pasties, but this always brought his mother to his mind, so he stopped. He rolled towards the window, stared up at a chink of sky. It was so unlike the blue yonder he had seen, day in and day out, on the ship. He thought he would never be able to sleep, but his weariness defeated him.

He woke up with a start, surfacing from dark, disturbed dreams. Somebody was breathing down his neck,

rubbing himself against his haunches. A hand covered his mouth as another hand yanked at his shalwar. Jahan squirmed out of his grasp, but the man, being stronger, pushed him down and pressed him hard. The boy choked, unable to breathe. Only then did the man, realizing he was almost suffocating Jahan, move his hand aside. It was in that moment that Jahan sank his teeth, with all his might, into his assaulter's thumb. A gasp of pain was heard. Sudden, galled. The boy jumped to his feet, shaking. In the powdery light from a candle stood the bear-tamer.

'Come here,' Mirka hissed.

Jahan understood from his tone that he didn't want to be discovered. So he shouted, at the top of his voice, against every silence code, not giving a damn as to what would happen if the guards heard him. 'You touch me again and my elephant will trample you! We'll kill you!'

Mirka stood up, pulling his shalwar. Without so much as a glance at the other tamers, who were now awake, he strode to his pallet, muttering, 'Your elephant is a baby.'

'He'll grow,' howled Jahan.

The boy noticed that Olev was observing him with a mixture of affection and approval. The lion-tamer interjected from his corner: 'Mirka, you sod! If you touch the Indian again, I'll nail your balls to the wall, hear me?'

'Curse you,' said Mirka.

His heart hammering, the boy crawled into his bed, this time turning his back to the window, so as to keep an eye on the room. He understood that inside the palace he had to be vigilant at all times, even in sleep. He couldn't stay here long. He had to find out fast which chamber the Sultan's riches were kept in, fill his bags and leave. He would have to abandon the white elephant, he realized sadly. Chota was a royal creature; Jahan was not.

Little did he know that down in his barn Chota was also awake, listening, worrying. Somewhere in the heart of the inky night, so dense that it subjugated every other colour, he had picked up the scent of the only animal that filled him with fear – the tiger.

No one could tell for sure how many souls resided within the palace walls. Taras the Siberian, who had been around longer than anyone could remember, said it was as many as the stars in the heavens, the hairs in a pilgrim's beard, the secrets wafting in the lodos.* Others believed it was at least 4,000. At times Jahan caught himself staring at the gigantic gates separating them from the inner courtyards, wondering what kind of people lived on the other side.

He wasn't the only one who burned with curiosity. Every animal-tamer that he knew prattled on in muted tones about the various residents of the palace – the head of halvah-makers, the master of ceremonies, the tasters who savoured each dish before it arrived at the sovereign's table. Eager to find out more about them, the tamers gossiped in earnest, relishing every scrap of tittle-tattle, sweet as boiled sugar in their mouths. Above all, they were fascinated by the concubines and the odalisques. That they were invisible to all men, save the Sultan and the eunuchs, allowed the tamers to imagine them in any way they wished. In their minds they could paint freely the women's faces, blank and promising like empty scrolls. One could never prattle on about the favourites of the Sultan, not even in whispers, unless it was the Sultana, whom everybody seemed to hate and felt justified in slandering.

They had heard plenty of tales about the harem, some real, most fanciful. Its gates were guarded by black eunuchs who had been castrated so badly that they could pass water only with the help of a tube they carried in their sashes. Since Islam forbade castration of any kind, Christian and Jewish dealers employed slave merchants to do the job elsewhere. Boys were captured from the deepest recesses of Africa and unmanned. Those who survived were bought by the palace and shipped to Istanbul. Of these many died during the voyage, their corpses dumped into the sea. If they were lucky and talented, they made their way up. Thus a sin for which no one took the blame, yet to which everyone contributed, lived on. Sangram said it wasn't just their balls that had been removed but also, much too often, their hearts. The mercy that they had been denied in the past they now denied to all. If a concubine attempted to escape, it would be these eunuchs who would be the first to find her.

The harem flowed through life in the palace, hidden but forceful. They named it the darussaade – 'House of Happiness'. Every single one of its rooms and halls was said to be connected to the bedchamber of the Valide, the mother of the Sultan. For years, she and she alone had scrutinized what hundreds of women ate, drank, wore and did every day. Not a cup of coffee was brewed, not a song was chanted, and not a concubine caught the eye of the Sultan without her blessing. The Chief Black Eunuch had been her ears and her eyes. But now she was dead. And all her power, and much more besides, had passed into the hands of the Sultana.

Hurrem was her name, yet many called her witch, zhadi. Of admirers and foes, she had plenty. They said she had put a spell on the Sultan, poisoning his sour-cherry sherbet, sprinkling potions under his pillow, tying his clothes into knots on nights of full moon. Breaking a 300-year-old tradition, the Sultan had married her in a ceremony so lavish it was still the talk in every tavern, brothel and opium den in town. Not that the boy knew anything about taverns, brothels and opium dens, but Sangram did and he loved scattering bits of gossip. Most of Jahan's knowledge about what was happening inside and outside the palace came from him.

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