



THE SULTAN

AT LENGTH OUR TURN came to enter the audience chamber.

‘Just stay behind me,’ Mr Ascham said, ‘and let Mr Giles do the talking. And if you can, please stifle any gasps of shock this time.’

I nodded vigorously and we stepped inside.

A golden room greeted me—gold thread in the carpet, gold brocade on the walls, every mighty pillar was painted gold, and mounted on a golden podium in the exact centre of the chamber stood a magnificent golden throne shaded by a golden awning.

Seated on that throne, dressed in a dazzling high-collared golden gown studded with rubies, was Suleiman the Magnificent, the Lawgiver, Caliph and All High Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. It was said that the Sultan usually only appeared to his own councillors as a shadow behind a gauze screen but clearly that was not his intention today. Now, in

front of the world, he was going to appear in all his formidable glory.

He sat in a commanding pose, legs apart, fists on his armrests, glaring down at us imperiously as a herald called in Turkish and then in Greek:

‘Sire, from England, representing that land’s most esteemed majesty, King Henry the Eighth, Mr Gilbert Giles and escorts.’

The men bowed. Elsie and I curtsied.

The Sultan cocked his wrist an inch, bidding us rise.

He had an incredibly severe face: downturned eyebrows, high pronounced cheekbones, a sharply hooked nose and a sizeable black moustache that framed his mouth like an inverted U. His dark eyes blazed with intelligence. He wore on his head a white turban with a jewel-encrusted brooch. The high collar of his golden gown glinted in the light of the oil lamps: veins of gold cord ran through its fabric like intertwining snakes.

Flanking the Sultan were a dozen men—the kind found in royal courts everywhere—ministers, advisors, clerics, plus a handful of esteemed European ambassadors based in Constantinople (one of whom was a silver-maned cardinal dressed in the scarlet robes of the Holy See, the local ambassador of Pope Paul III himself). The sadrazam stood at the Sultan’s right hand, while beside him stood a long-bearded Moslem mullah wearing the simple black turban of the Shiite sect: he was the Imam Ali, the senior cleric who I had been told despised the visiting Catholic cardinal.

And among all these men, there was one woman.

The queen.

Oddly, she was not of Persian appearance, but rather possessed the pale porcelain skin of a European. This was the famous Hürrem Sultan or, as she was known in Europe, Roxelana. Her rise from slave girl to concubine to first wife of the Sultan was the stuff of legend, a fairytale come true. She was originally from Ruthenia, but as a girl she had been captured by Tartar raiders and sold into the Sultan's harem. Through beauty, wiles and a fearsome intellect, she now shared the bed and held the ear of one of the most powerful men in the world.

Upon the mention of Mr Giles's name, the Sultan's severe countenance transformed into a delighted smile.

'Ah, so this is the famous Mr Giles!' he said in Greek. 'I have heard of you. A formidable player from the University of Cambridge. It is a pleasure to welcome you to my tournament.'

'The honour is mine, Your Majesty,' Mr Giles said.

As he said this, I suddenly saw an individual among the men gathered around the Sultan whom I recognised. I started, almost gasping out loud again, but this time I managed to stifle my astonishment.

It was the rat-faced fellow who had followed us from tavern to tavern in Wallachia. I saw him whisper into the ear of the sadrazam before he melted away into the background. Mr Ascham had been right: our shadow had been an agent of the Sultan.

It did not escape me that someone in the Sultan's employ—perhaps someone in that very chamber—had most likely tried

to poison Mr Giles on the way to Constantinople, and here was the Sultan delightedly welcoming him to his tournament. My thoughts, however, were cut off when the herald said loudly and formally: 'Mr Giles! You warrant that you are here to compete in the Sultan's tournament!'

'I do,' Mr Giles answered equally formally.

'And you warrant that you are here freely and of your own volition!'

'I do.'

'And do you come here with an answer to the Sultan's demand!'

'I have that.' Mr Giles stepped forward and handed the mysterious red envelope to the Grand Vizier.

While all this was going on, the Sultan's gaze passed idly over the rest of our party—past me and Elsie (although I think he glanced at her a second time), before coming to rest on Mr Ascham.

'You, sir,' he said. 'I am informed that you are Mr Roger Ascham, the famous English schoolteacher.'

Mr Ascham bowed low. 'Your Majesty. I am. And I am humbled that you might know of me.'

'A sultan must know many things,' the Sultan said as his eyes turned suddenly and locked onto mine.

'For if you are Ascham, then this young lady with the charming red curls must be your charge, Elizabeth, second daughter of Henry, born of Anne Boleyn, his second wife and the cause of Henry's most unpleasant schism with the Roman

Catholic Church.’ The Sultan threw a knowing glance at the nearby cardinal. ‘A schism, I might add, which I have followed with considerable amusement.’

He turned back to me. ‘But since then, this little one has been shunted down the line of succession by a half-brother born of Henry’s third wife. Welcome to my kingdom, Princess Elizabeth.’

I curtsied.

‘It is an honour and a privilege to be here, Your Majesty,’ I said in Greek, trying to disguise my surprise that the Sultan knew so much about me.

I was thus doubly shocked when he proceeded to address me in German—a language that few others in that room, even the religious men, would know.

‘I have spies everywhere, young Bess,’ he said, utilising the shortened form of my name that only those at Hatfield knew and used. ‘It is a necessary evil of being a great king. Should you ever rule England, I recommend you avail yourself of a competent master of spies. Real knowledge of the state of the world is the greatest treasure any ruler can possess.’ He reverted to Greek and with an oily smile said, ‘I hope you enjoy the chess.’

And with a nod of dismissal, our audience was over.

Speechless, I was nudged by my teacher out of the golden room.



THE OPENING BANQUET

EMERGING FROM THE SULTAN'S audience chamber—and have no doubt, I emerged quite unnerved—we stepped out into the third of the palace's courtyards. This courtyard featured several wide rectangular lawns and was bounded by the Gate of Felicity—which led back to the Second Courtyard—and the south pavilion, where our quarters could be found, a lattice-walled arcade that led to a fourth and final courtyard, and on the final side, the Harem, the Sultan's private wing.

For the evening's welcoming banquet, this Third Courtyard had been transformed into a fantasyland of light.

A thousand lanterns suspended from criss-crossing ropes bathed the courtyard in a brilliant yellow glow, turning night into day. Twenty banquet tables stood in perfect rows open to the Turkish sky. Every utensil was fashioned from silver. Place cards marked every space with the guest's name written in their native tongue.

The dinner that followed was like no other I had ever experienced. It was opulent, extravagant and everything in between: cheeses from Lisbon, olives from Florence, wines from France and Spain, grapes from Arcadia, but also delicacies of Moslem origin: the most mouth-watering spices from Morocco, the Indus River valley and Egypt, plus figs and delicious fruits I could not name but which I was informed came from the Bedouin Arabs who inhabit the harsh deserts to the south of Constantinople.

A hundred guests were waited on by as many servants, who hurried to and fro between the tables and the vast kitchens, the entrance to which was situated at the southwest corner of the courtyard. Musicians played, magicians performed, and there was even a stage on which huge muscle-bound wrestlers—their bodies glistening with oil—grappled with each other in exhibition matches. Many of the women in attendance at the dinner, Elsie among them, watched these giants with considerable interest. The largest of the wrestlers, the local champion who went by the name of Darius, had utterly enormous muscles, a very handsome olive-coloured face and long straight black hair that flowed down to his shoulders. Most of the women, Elsie included, eyed him longingly as they unconsciously bit their lips.

Speaking of Elsie, as the banquet progressed, she once again disappeared into the crowd, leaving me essentially alone, since Mr Ascham and Mr Giles were making conversation with some of our neighbours.

And so from our (very distant) table I gazed at the assembled guests: chess players from around the world, accompanied by ambassadors and dignitaries and, in some cases, their royal patrons themselves. There were not many children; only a handful who, I guessed, were royal ones like Ivan of Muscovy and myself.

I watched Michelangelo as he held court at his table. There was not a moment when someone did not arrive at the famous artist's side to pay their respects.

It came as a great surprise to me then, when, just before the main course was served, Michelangelo abruptly stood, waved away the latest supplicant, gazed around the illuminated courtyard, spotted our table and walked directly over to us.

He arrived at our remote spot, smiled kindly at me, and then to my even greater surprise, sat down beside my teacher and said most casually, 'Roger, it is so nice to see you again.'

'And you, Michel,' my teacher said easily. 'You have many admirers these days.'

'I know, I know,' the great man groaned. 'Fame, let me tell you, is most overrated. I spend so much time accepting praise from these people that I have less time to create the works they love. Oh, to have the splendid anonymity of my youth again.'

'It is the curse of the brilliant,' Mr Ascham said. 'And you have always been brilliant. You were commissioned to create the chess set for this tournament?'

'Two sets. And the Sultan pays handsomely. More handsomely than the Pope and more promptly, too.'

‘Are you pleased with your work?’

‘Oh, Roger, you know I am never completely pleased with any of my works,’ Michelangelo said. ‘I still look upon my David and sigh at his hands. And I wish I’d had more time on the *Doni Tondo*. The chess sets, however, are adequate.’

My teacher laughed. ‘Adequate for you means superlative for the rest of us, Michel. I cannot wait to see them.’

The great artist leaned close to my teacher. ‘I heard about that business with the Earl of Cumberland’s son at Cambridge. A most distasteful affair by the sound of it, but by all accounts you excelled yourself.’

Mr Ascham glanced at me, as if deciding whether or not I should hear about this matter. ‘Whatever the status of his father, that boy was disturbed, and even common prostitutes deserve justice.’

‘You’ll get a reputation,’ Michelangelo grinned. ‘I recall that time in Rome when you resolved the matter of those stolen chalices from the church of Santa Maria di Loreto. You proved that the local priest, far from being the victim of the crime, had sold the chalices to pay off his gambling debts. For a long time after you left, it was quite the scandal.’

Mr Ascham shrugged. ‘When all the facts were ascertained, the conclusion was inevitable. Something was done and it was done for a reason. Logic.’

‘That no-one else was able to see.’

‘All crimes are committed for a reason,’ my teacher said firmly. ‘I just uncovered the reason behind that particular crime—’

‘Oh, admit it, Roger, you simply couldn’t abide an unresolved event,’ Michelangelo said gently and with a grin. ‘You *enjoyed* unravelling it and you investigated it as an intellectual exercise, as a tribute to Averroes himself.’

‘I think Averroes would have been proud of me. Aristotle, too.’

Michelangelo laughed. ‘Roger Ascham! You have not changed one bit! Although I do fear that one day your curiosity will be the death of you. It is wonderful to see you again.’ The great artist then glanced at me. ‘And who is this beautiful young lady?’

‘This is Elizabeth. My finest student.’

‘Roger’s finest student?’ Michelangelo’s old eyes shone. ‘This is no small compliment coming from Roger Ascham. A “fine” student in his estimation is likely to change the course of history. I shall have to keep an eye on you.’

I bowed my head, blushing.

Michelangelo glanced sideways at my teacher. ‘A royal student, Roger?’

My teacher nodded with his eyes.

‘Oh, Roger! You truly are a unique educator! Only you would bring a royal heir halfway across the world in the name of her education! How wonderful!’

My teacher then introduced Mr Giles, before asking Michelangelo, ‘Where are you staying while you are here?’

Michelangelo said, ‘I have been granted special permission to stay in the Sultan’s private area, the Harem. It gives me some

blessed peace. Since I arrived at the palace a week ago—I made the journey with the delegation from the Papal States—I have been *constantly* pestered by Rome’s ambassador here, a man who must be Italy’s most self-aggrandising and insufferable—oh no, here he comes.’

‘*Il Magnifico!* There you are!’

Both my teacher and Michelangelo turned.

A cardinal of Rome stood before us in all his glory: red robes, staff, gold chains, decorated mitre. He had a flowing mane of silver hair, perfectly coiffed, and I recognised him as the cardinal who had been in the Sultan’s audience chamber, one of the privileged local ambassadors. Behind him, like a shadow, loomed a tall blank-faced manservant, a personal guard of some sort.

The cardinal extended his ring toward Michelangelo’s face. I distinctly saw the great artist pause momentarily before he dutifully leaned forward and kissed it.

‘Cardinal Cardoza,’ Michelangelo said evenly. ‘So . . . nice . . . to see you again.’ He gestured at us. ‘Cardinal, this is Mr Roger Ascham from England, and his party: Mr Gilbert Giles, their player in the tournament, and his student, Elizabeth. Cardinal Cardoza is the Holy See’s ambassador-in-residence here at the Sultan’s court.’

The cardinal was an older man of about sixty years, with pale blue eyes and silver brows that matched his flowing hair. He was also a large fellow, big but not fat, broad in the chest, a man who had perhaps been a capable athlete in his younger days.

He gripped his shepherd's crook in one hand and in the other he held an unusual device: it looked like a horse's tail, a small whip-like thing with multi-coloured lengths of hair that the cardinal used to flick away any insect that dared approach his face.

Despite Michelangelo's courteous introduction, Cardinal Cardoza completely ignored us. He struck me as the kind of fellow who always gravitates to the most important person in a room and clings to that person like a leech. I had seen many such people in my father's presence back home.

The cardinal said to Michelangelo, 'I was just speaking to Cardinal Farnese. Farnese tells me that His Holiness is *delighted* that you have accepted his invitation to take over as the architect of his grand basilica.'

'Your Grace is most kind,' Michelangelo said. 'I am an old man. I had actually thought my time for building grand edifices had passed.'

Cardoza said, 'Not at all! The Pope grew weary of Sangallo's moods and you have *infinitely* more experience and skill anyway. You know, I became close with His Holiness during our days together in Ostia. I know him very well. In fact, in a more private environment, I could inform you of some of his personal preferences so that your designs might please him.'

'You are too kind.'

'It is nothing.'

'I'm sure I shall see you later,' Michelangelo said.

Cardinal Cardoza smiled. 'Enjoy the dinner. I have partaken

in far too many banquets like this, so I am going to enjoy a private meal in my rooms. *Magnifico.*' He swept away, trailed by his silent manservant.

Michelangelo watched him go, then turned to my teacher. 'Be wary of that man, Roger. He is a cunning one. Slippery. It is said that Queen Roxelana cannot abide him and simply leaves the chamber when he arrives for an audience with the Sultan. And I have it on good authority that the citizens of Ostia were happy to see the back of him; there were allegations of . . . impropriety . . . with some boys of the district.'

My teacher watched Cardinal Cardoza cross the courtyard and arrive at his table, where he collected the visiting cardinal, Cardinal Farnese, and the two of them headed off together.

Mr Ascham said, 'What about the other cardinal, the Pope's brother, Cardinal Farnese? I was most surprised to see him here, given his statements about the Moslem faith.'

The artist sighed. 'God, give me patience. I had to ride in a carriage with him all the way from Rome. Cardinal Farnese is a pig, with his snout buried deep in many troughs. He is also a fool who offends more out of ignorance than intent. Archduke Ferdinand of Austria has despised Farnese ever since he discovered that Farnese sold him indulgences at ten times the price paid by the Polish king, Sigismund. The Jesuits find him embarrassing. The Imam has told his Moslem followers to ignore him, yet four times on our way through the city, crowds of young Moslem men held up the soles of their sandals as Farnese rode by.'

‘Excuse me, sir, but I don’t understand,’ I interrupted politely. ‘What is the significance of that act?’

My teacher answered: ‘To Arabs and Moslems, it is a most insulting gesture to point the sole of one’s shoe at someone. Those young Moslem men were protesting against Cardinal Farnese’s views.’ Mr Ascham turned to Michelangelo: ‘Which begs the question: why would Pope Paul send Farnese here?’

Michelangelo said, ‘My view is that the pontiff wanted to be provocative, to stick a thorn in the Sultan’s side during his great international event. The Sultan would not dare allow a visiting cardinal of Rome, even one as offensive as Farnese, to be harmed at his tournament. It would be an embarrassment in front of the very world the Sultan is seeking to impress.’

‘I did not know the Pope engaged in such petty schemes.’

Michelangelo shook his head. ‘It has been my life’s joy to create works for the greater glory of our Lord and His Church. Only sometimes I wish our Lord employed better people.’

As he made to depart from our table, Michelangelo told us that we should accompany him to the palace’s kitchen, where he wanted to call on the assistant chef, one Brunello of Borgia.

‘Brunello was the finest chef in Florence,’ Michelangelo told us as we headed toward the kitchen area in the corner of the courtyard. Ten enormous chimneys rose above it, each one venting a gigantic oven. ‘The Sultan brought him to Constantinople specifically for this occasion. He has been here for three months, teaching the local cooks how to prepare

dishes that the Sultan's European guests will enjoy. I am keen to see the kitchens here. I have heard they are larger than any in Italy.'

The great artist marched ahead of us at a spritely pace.

'How did you come to be so intimately acquainted with Michelangelo?' I whispered to my teacher as we hurried along behind him.

Mr Ascham gave me a sideways look. 'This surprises you?'
'A little, yes.'

'I must confess I quite enjoy surprising you. Some years ago, Michelangelo read a treatise I wrote as a student about education and he invited me to Rome to meet with him. Of course, I leapt at the invitation. I ended up instructing his beloved grandnephew for six months and in so doing we became friends. I watched him paint some of *The Last Judgment*, one of the greatest privileges of my life.'

I had never actually contemplated my teacher having a life before he began teaching me, let alone one of exotic travel and of meeting great artists.

And there was another thing. 'And what happened with the Earl of Cumberland's son at Cambridge? My father also mentioned this in his note to you.'

Mr Ascham's face darkened. 'It was a most unpleasant affair involving the son of a powerful man and his . . . distasteful . . . proclivities. It is not a story for young ears.'

'Was it to do with passion?' I said in a voice that I hoped sounded mature and experienced. 'Fornication even?'

My teacher gave me a long look before he answered. ‘It did indeed have something to do with the young man’s urges. He would hire prostitutes from other towns and . . . do things . . . to them before killing the poor women. But you do not need to know the whole sordid tale. I was brought in to act as an impartial judge on the matter but due to my, well, overzealous curiosity, I discovered more than anyone wanted to know. Now, please, let us engage in more pleasant topics and enjoy this marvellous evening.’

As he said this, we passed through a large doorway in the very corner of the courtyard and entered the kitchens.

I beheld a bustling madhouse of activity: hurrying slave girls, shouting cooks, blazing fires, smoking ovens, turning roasts, squawking chickens, quacking ducks, thudding cleavers and the most delightful mix of aromas I had ever smelled in my short life.

Shouting above the din was the head chef, a fat Moslem wearing a blood-smeared apron and an enormous turban.

Standing near him at a long block-like table, commanding his own small army of Turkish cooks, was a squat bearded man of Italian appearance wearing a small crucifix around his neck: Brunello of Borgia.

‘Why did the Sultan feel the need to bring a European chef to Constantinople?’ I had quite enjoyed the local fare. ‘When one travels, shouldn’t one taste the unfamiliar local dishes on offer?’

‘Yes, I agree, one should, but the bellies of old men are not as accommodating of new foods as are the stomachs of the

young,' Mr Ascham said with a gentle smile. 'It is not uncommon for visitors to these lands to fall terribly ill after eating the local spices and meats. The Sultan is most wise to provide an alternative for his esteemed guests.'

Amid all the mayhem, Brunello saw Michelangelo and he quickly wiped his hands on his apron and hurried over to us.

He was joined by a woman as wide as she was tall, and a gangly boy of about fifteen.

'Signor Buonarroti,' Brunello bowed, 'welcome to my kitchen. It is an honour.'

'Brunello,' Michelangelo said, 'the honour is mine. You are an artist yourself. The only difference between us is that your art is literally consumed by its audience and so sadly does not remain afterward for later edification. Its joy is in the moment.'

'You are too kind,' Brunello said. 'Signor, my wife, Marianna, and my son, Pietro.'

Michelangelo bowed to Brunello's family.

I have to say the way the great artist interacted with his social inferiors had a great effect on me. He would have been well within his station to treat everyone from the cook to the cardinal with disdain and even outright condescension. But he did not. Quite the contrary: he treated the chef's skinny son with the same gentle courtesy with which I had seen him treat everyone else.

My father, on the contrary, treated every inferior—from his wife to the noble whose wife he took to his bedchamber—with open contempt. I assumed my father thought this kind of

behaviour reinforced his status but upon seeing Michelangelo's courteous decency to all, I realised that the truly powerful do not need to put their power on display at all times.

Michelangelo shook the boy's hand. The boy lowered his head meekly and I wondered if he was shy or just overawed by the great man. I couldn't tell.

Michelangelo then introduced my teacher to Brunello and a pleasant but brief conversation was had.

As they spoke, I noticed that Brunello's wife wore a rosary around her own neck. Attached to the rosary's crucifix was a small black ribbon tied in a bow.

'Are there many Christians in Constantinople?' I asked her politely in Italian.

When she spoke, her voice was flat, uninterested. 'Owing to its long history, there are many Jews and Christians in the city as well as Moslems.'

'What does the Moslem Sultan have to say about these rival faiths worshipping in his capital?' I thought this was a most astute and adult question, but her response was still completely devoid of interest.

'He does not seem to care,' she answered blandly.

I was saved from further efforts to engage her when Brunello excused himself, saying that the main course was about to be served. This was also the time at which the players in the tournament would be introduced, so we took our leave from the kitchens and returned to our table out in the courtyard.



THE PLAYERS

WE ARRIVED BACK AT our table just as Elsie returned from the other side of the courtyard leading a striking young Persian girl by the hand.

The girl was an Arab beauty. Perhaps sixteen, she had a tiny waist yet full breasts and high curving hips which she wore tantalisingly exposed between gaps in the gorgeous silver sari that entwined her body. She had a deep olive complexion and the most perfect almond-shaped eyes I had ever seen.

‘Bessie, Bessie,’ Elsie said breathlessly. ‘You must meet Zubaida here. She is an acquaintance of the Crown Prince, the Sultan’s firstborn son and heir.’ Elsie threw a look over to the elevated table at which the Sultan ate. A very handsome young Turk sat beside him looking profoundly bored: the Crown Prince.

Elsie’s voice softened to a whisper. ‘Zubaida says that the prince will be holding an unofficial gathering later tonight in his rooms inside the Harem.’

The girl, Zubaida, leaned in close. ‘The prince is known for his Dionysian gatherings. There will be music and wine and dancing and ganja and I am told that some of the wrestlers have been invited!’

She and Elsie tittered excitedly at that news.

By virtue of my classical education, I knew that Dionysus was the Greek god of wine and winemaking, and also ecstasy and a certain kind of free-spiritedness. But I was unsure what a Dionysian *gathering* was. I guessed it was a reference to the wine. There was also something else Zubaida had mentioned that I did not understand.

‘What is ganja?’ I asked.

‘It is the strange weed that many smoke here,’ Elsie said. ‘They say it relaxes the mind and calms the soul, and sometimes gives wondrous visions. Oh, Bessie, we simply must go to this private party!’

I glanced at Mr Ascham. ‘I don’t know, Elsie. I don’t think Mr Ascham would approve—’

‘Oh, goodness gracious me, aren’t you the goody-goody,’ Elsie said quickly and a little nastily. ‘Do you always do only what your teacher approves? You’re starting to sound like Primrose Ponsonby. And there I thought you were old enough to understand . . .’

‘I’m old enough—’

‘We shall see. Later tonight, when your teacher is asleep, I plan to slip out of our rooms and go to this party. We will see if you are brave enough to join me.’

I hesitated, uncertain and uncomfortable.

Zubaida said, ‘The gathering will be held in the prince’s private quarters inside the Harem. Tell the guards at the entrance that you are *a privileged friend of the Crown Prince* and you will be granted entrance.’

At that moment, some horns blared and Zubaida hurried away. The official ceremony was about to begin.

The official opening ceremony of the All High Sultan’s Invitational Chess Championship of 1546 began with a speech from the Sultan himself, first in Turkish, then in common Greek. In his speech, he welcomed the various champions to his kingdom and wished them well in the tournament.

Then the Sultan returned to his throne and the Grand Vizier stood and in a loud voice proclaimed: ‘Ladies and gentlemen! It is my pleasure and privilege to introduce to you . . . the players!’

One by one, the sixteen players were introduced and brought onto the stage.

There was the talented Spanish monk I had seen earlier, Brother Raul of Seville, playing on behalf of the Papal States. Rumour had it that he had not lost a match in six years.

Then there was the other Spaniard representing King Charles, Pablo Montoya of Castile. The nephew of the famed chess master Luis Ramirez de Lucena, it was said that Montoya had read his uncle’s book, the *Repetición de Amores y Arte de Ajedrez con ci Juegos de Partido*, over a dozen times.

Maximilian of Vienna represented the Archduke of Austria and the Habsburgs, while a young man named Wilhelm of

Königsberg ascended the stage on behalf of the new Protestant duchy of Prussia.

And, of course, there was our man, Mr Gilbert Giles, who the sadrazam very diplomatically announced to be representing ‘the Christian kingdom of England’. A few other western players were introduced and the crowd clapped politely.

Then came the eastern players.

A brutish Wallachian fellow named Dragan of Brasov—the same Dragan the tavern owner in Wallachia had mentioned.

An Oriental named Lao from the Chin lands at the end of the Silk Road.

The champion of Muscovy: a grim fellow with a hard wrinkled face and a perpetually downturned mouth. As he ascended the stage, the little prince Ivan clapped loudly and vigorously.

A handsome Hindu prince from the Moghul Empire named Nasiruddin Akbar. He had deep brown skin and a slight build and was reputed to have played chess since he had been an infant.

There was an old and gnarled librarian from the House of Wisdom in Baghdad named Talib. He was the oldest player in the tournament but a most respected one. He had long been an *aliyat*, the title given to the highest rank of players, those who could see a dozen moves ahead in a given game.

And last of all, there were the local Moslem heroes, two of them.

The first of these was the palace champion, a handsome young man of royal birth named Zaman. He was a cousin of

the Sultan's and had only recently attained the rank of *aliyat*, the youngest ever to achieve the title.

The second was Ibrahim of Constantinople, and when his name was uttered a great roar went up from the kitchen staff watching the announcement ceremony from the wings. Ibrahim was the people's champion, the winner of a chess tournament that had been held in Constantinople the previous year. He was about the same age as his compatriot, Zaman, perhaps in his mid-twenties, but there the similarities ended. Where Zaman was dashing, well dressed and regal, Ibrahim was emaciated, dirty and hunched; a peasant. He had no formal chess ranking.

When it was all over, sixteen men stood on the stage facing the assembled crowd, accepting its applause and adulation: men from every corner of the civilised world, representing their kings, their faiths, their nations.

Over the din, the sadrazam called, 'Tomorrow morning, a draw will be held to determine the first-round matches! Each match will consist of seven games, the winner being the first player to win four of the seven games. All matches will be played in the Ayasofya with the spectacular chess sets created by the renowned artist Michelangelo Buonarroti. The winner of the tournament will take home one of those chess sets as a trophy for his king. Play well, gentlemen, for your people's pride depends on you! Ladies and gentlemen, honour the champions, and may the best man win!'

The crowd's applause was deafening.

As the cheering reached its height, I felt a tug on my sleeve. It was Elsie. Her new friend Zubaida had returned and was at her side.

‘Bessie!’ Elsie said. ‘Come on! Zubaida says there are fireworks to be set off shortly above the Fourth Courtyard! Let’s sneak out there and get a good spot.’

My teacher heard this exchange and at my beseeching look said, ‘Oh, go on.’

We scurried away from the banquet area, heading for the rearmost courtyard. We dashed through the lattice-walled arcade that separated the Third Courtyard from the Fourth and slipped through one of its ornate gates and beheld the rear courtyard: some stairs led down to a broad lawn overlooking the Bosphorus. A striking oblong reflecting pool lay at the base of the stairs and off to the right stood a lone white building (which I would later learn was the Catholic embassy).

All of a sudden, with a shrill whistling noise, the first firework rocketed into the sky, fired from a position atop the latticed arcade. It burst in a dazzling star-like shape and we heard the crowd in the other courtyard ooh and ahh with delight. This, it appeared, was the signal to bring all the guests into the Fourth Courtyard for the fireworks show, for at that moment some ushers pushed three other gates open.

And at that exact moment, I saw something in the shallow pool and with a start, I caught my breath—

Suddenly there came shouts.

They were followed by a rush of movement at the gate behind us. A phalanx of palace guards rushed to the gate.

THE TOURNAMENT

More guards dashed toward our position on the stairs, yelling, ‘Get back! Get back!’ before pushing us through the gate, back into the Third Courtyard and slamming the latticed doors shut behind us.

But my eyes had already glimpsed the dreadful image that the guards had not wished anyone to see.

By the dying light of that first firework, I had seen the hideous corpse of a man—enormously fat, naked and bearing many stab wounds—lying motionless beneath the surface of the shallow reflecting pool at the base of the stairs.

Even in that brief instant, I could tell who it was.

With its broad face, many chins, its distinctive black hair with silver tips above the ears and its bloated obese belly, the corpse was that of the visiting cardinal from Rome, none other than the Pope’s brother, Cardinal Farnese.

And even when seen through the rippling water of the shallow pool, I could see that the lower half of Farnese’s face had been monstrously mutilated, the skin wrenched away so as to expose the flesh under his cheeks, the white curve of his jawbone and every single one of his teeth.