A Gift for the Sultan

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CITY OF GOD, HORDE OF ALLAH

Thou art a gold-adorned tower,
A twelve-walled surrounded city,
A sun-drenched throne,
A royal seat of the King.
O inexplicable wonder,
How do you suckle the Master?
– Supplication to the Theotokos, Virgin Mary (from the Greek)

I want to enter the city of my body right away. I want to see the face of the King who is inside. I hear His words, but I cannot see His face. In order to see His face, I feel like giving my soul. That King’s place for retirement and worship has seven cells; I want to stroll about in all of them.
At every door there is a person who has one hundred thousand soldiers.
I will gird myself with the sword of love and slaughter them all!
– Yunus Emre, 14th century dervish (from the Turkish)
Üstte Tanrı basmasa, altta yer delinmese, Türk budunu, ilini töreni kim atar?

Simurgh

When the sun strikes her nest in the Tree of Life on the Qaf of Elburz Mountain, the simurgh stretches her neck and wings to shadow the valley below and then takes flight, the downdraft of those wings propelling the seeds of all the plants of the world to the places where they can grow.

Some say the simurgh is an enormous bird with four wings, teeth, and a human face, able to carry off an elephant in her talons. Others say that she is really a flock of birds flying in concert, hence her name Simurgh, Persian for “thirty birds”—“thirty” being a way of saying “many.” In either case, one touch of her feathers cures the direst wound, and she may rescue and even suckle lost children.

First seen and sung by seers and singers in Iran, within a few human generations villagers across the mountains in Bactria also sang of the flights of the simurgh. Soon even farther east, on the vast steppes beyond the Oxus, Turkish-speaking herdsmen were celebrating her benevolence and power. And when at last the Oguz tribes of the Turks stormed westward, wielding their recurved bows and their sharp yatagans from the backs of quick little horses, seizing or destroying all before them, the simurgh also followed. Easily she crossed the magic air space of the flying snake Zilant of Kazakhstan and the Roc and the dragon Dahâg of Persia, lingered among the messenger angels and the winged horse Buraq over Al-Jazira and Syria, until reaching the skies of the warrior archangels Michael and Gabriel, defenders of the greatest city of the Christian world.

For those Oguz Turks who had abandoned the old ways and now kept the Muslim calendar, it was the month Zilkade of the year 804 of the Hegira. For the Greek-speaking Christian Orthodox inside that city’s thick walls, it was June of the year 6909 since God’s creation of the world. For the Latin Christians who had come to defend the city or to exploit its turmoil, it was June of Anno Domini 1402, and the eleven-hundred-year-old city of Constantine was on the verge of collapse before the eastern horde.

For the simurgh, it was always Now.

Gazi

21 Zilkade, 804 Hegira
(23 June, Anno Domini 1402)

Arslanshahin Gazi pulled sharply on the reins so that his mare jolted to a stop, dancing to keep her balance as he, with knees and thighs and the pressure of hand on croup, urged her around until both faced the space beyond the cliff. The man waited while the weaving of the mare’s head and the bellows of her ribs subsided. The sweet-sour smell of sweat—his and hers—mingled with the sweeter perfume of the cliff-top thistle. The gazi stretched to full height in the saddle and peered through the mist to the City across the waters.

Arslan’s great-grandfather and his great-great-grandfather had sung of it long before they or any of the Oguz had ever seen its walls and towers. It was so much grander than any other walled place that it needed no name—men knew it simply as “the City,” the syllables drawn out in tones of awe or reverence. Now its domes glowed golden in the strong morning sun that burned into his back.
Arslanshahin’s father, the famous Kara Göne, had once been inside the City’s walls as one of nine trusted gazis on an embassy to the emperor from the great Murad. And Kara Göne had said that the thickness and the height of the stone walls were even greater than they appeared from outside, and each of its great domes was like the dome of the sky itself, but in the streets was filth.

Arslanshahin too was a gazi, a warrior of the gaza to defend the True Faith. He glanced down at the brown and yellow crown of his mare’s head and thought that if she had had wings, like the Prophet’s steed Buraq, he and she would swoop down upon the City and over its walls, to smite the Rumeli as he had the Magyars and the French and German knights at Nikopolis, or earlier, on another mare, the Serbs at Kosovo Polje. He let his sword hand drop to caress the shoulder where one of her wings should be. The muscle quivered and she nickered with pleasure. She was an excellent mare, but she had not yet learned to fly.

He closed his eyes and began a low, rumbling chant.

“Spirit of fire, spirit of darkness, spirit of the fiery dark blood of horses, spirits of my foremothers and forefathers, you like me are mere zephyrs of the breath of Tengri, who has commanded you to obey me. I, as gazi, summon you.”

His voice calmed the mare.

Soon he was doing what she could not, rising into the sky alone. He was a falcon now, Shahin, flying over the Bosporus, high above the sultan’s war galleys rocking on the water, past the tower and walls of Pera and the narrow curving inlet called the Golden Horn, crowded with the Christian galleys and galliotes of the City’s makeshift fleet and its foreign allies.

And then, not for the first time, he circled over the City itself. He did not attempt to count the defenders and their weapons or to discover weaknesses in their fortifications because he was a falcon, not a spy. His circling flight was a pure display of power and elegance, a salute and challenge to the foe, the proudest of the infidel cities and the only one of its ancient empire that had not yet fallen to the gaza of the people of the steppes. There, above him, hovered the simurgh, a sign of the power of the steppes. The falcon Shahin saluted it by raising a wing as he passed.

This time when he circled back he flew a little farther than usual, passing over his own broad-shouldered form with its many-colored cap, quiet and empty upon the mare. Then, after passing over a gully and another steep trail, the man-turned-falcon hovered over another cliff, where the son of Murad who called himself “Sultan” had built a tower from which he, too, could contemplate the City.

A sudden starting of the mare awoke the man and caused the falcon to return instantly to his breast. Falcon and lion, Shahin and Arslan, were once again one, in the saddle on the mare. Arslanshahin swiveled in his saddle and saw a flash of red and yellow. A janissary, and another, a whole squad, were running up the hill. He wheeled the mare to face them, and she reared and whinnied in anticipation.

“You, Arslanshahin!” shouted their aga, the only one on horseback. “By order of the chief vizier, Ali Pasha, you are to come with us at once.”

“Ha!” he shouted back. “I am a gazi. What has a vizier to do with me?”

“Arslanshahin, Ali Pasha is the voice of the sultan. It is Yildirim Bayezid Sultan himself who commands you.”

“Arslanshahin Gazi is the slave of spirit!” he shouted back and made the mare rear once again before galloping back down the trail, sword in hand, scattering the janissaries.

**The Princess**

21 Zilkade, 804 Hegira
(23 June, Anno Domini 1402)
Princess Theodota Palaiologina ran up the steps and leapt onto the landing into the shaft of light and stopped and turned her face to the morning sun.

“Your Highness, you wear me out,” said Olga, puffing on the stairs behind her. “Have pity on your poor slave, who has been more than a mother to you.”

The princess, as she did every morning when Olga said almost exactly the same thing at exactly this spot, shook her head sharply and closed her eyes to let the bright rays warm her face. But this morning she did not run right up the remaining few steps to the palace roof.

“Hush,” she said, knowing that Olga would want to question this change in routine.

Theodota was looking for something in the patterns of orange and red on the insides of her eyelids. Some sign, something that would tell her what she was supposed to do. All she saw, though, were splotches of purple and yellow she could make appear by scrunching her eyes more tightly closed, bunching up her cheeks and trying to make them touch her eyebrows. She turned her head slightly to the left. Slowly she turned it back to the right. A bright yellow being, a tiny angel, perhaps, a spot of light, teased her, always dancing ahead of where she tried to focus. The light-spirit remained for a moment even after she blinked her eyes open and turned them to the shadows of the marble stairway. If the angel had been trying to tell her something, it certainly was being cagey about it.

“Well,” she said with a vigorous sigh, “let’s try the birds,” and she scampered up the remaining stairs onto the roof.

She emerged into her private Eden. The marble of the doorway through which she had just passed was carved to resemble a leafy bower, and before her was a real garden with living plants. The miniature date trees and flowering plants of many varieties were cleverly arranged so as to make the whole appear larger than the fifty by seventy paces that Theodota had counted out along the perimeter, where mosaics told the story of the original Garden of Eden and the expulsion of Adam and Eve. Even the marble Adam and Eve coyly eyeing each other among the laurels were child-sized—although there was nothing childlike about Adam’s huge erection, a source of much amusement to Dota and her slaves. Aside from the marble Adam, the only male permitted here was the old eunuch gardener, who had giggled uncontrollably the day Theodota asked him if he didn’t envy the little statue.

Theodota’s garden was sixty steps above the other roofs in the women’s quarters and nearly as high as the terrace of the emperor himself where, she knew, there was a far more elaborate garden. Hers had been designed as a child’s garden, and she had in one sense outgrown it—the wall around it now came up only to her shoulder. Still, it afforded her as much privacy as she needed. It blocked the view of the soldiers stationed on the City walls, so she could come up as she had today with no headdress and, because of the warm weather, without bothering to throw a silk robe over her undergarments.

“The sunlight will be good for you, you can believe me on that.”

But Theodota paid no attention to the slave’s odd syntax. She was scanning the sky. “He told me in a dream that he would be here,” she said.

“For the Feast of Ioannes the Baptist. Yes, I know. But maybe it was a false dream that was able to get in because you wanted so much for it to be true.”

“But I saw him, Olga. He smiled and stretched out his two fingers in blessing.”

“Well, something has delayed him, then. It is God’s will.”

Up here where no one could see, the slave took some liberties. Without waiting for a command, she settled herself on a marble bench beneath the marble Eve’s hip.

It was still early, just after prayers, and the eastern sky was more gold than blue. Theodota sat next to Olga and continued looking skyward.

The Blachernae palace complex was wedged into the northwest corner of the great City, where the western land wall met the wall bordering the Golden Horn. Dimly Theodota was aware of the women’s voices and the sloshing of garments in laundry tubs from the lower roofs nearby. A small troop of horse clattered in the courtyard below. Men shouted something to each other from the direction of the
wharves, their voices rising faintly so that only the urgent tone was intelligible.

Theodota pushed these distractions from her mind and continued searching the sky for birds. Halcyons she hoped to see, or perhaps a skylark. By watching how they flew and the turns they took, one could discern the future. Bigger birds, like eres, were even better, more emphatic signs of God’s will, but they were rarer. But now she saw an enormous bird, larger than any she knew, or was it perhaps a very large, dense flock that cast its shadow over the entire terrace garden? No, she decided, a thing that big could only be the Archangel Michael with his immense wings, summoned by the purity of her faith, come to reassure her. Then, as a surer sign yet, a gray form separated from the ethereal mass, a messenger from the holy archangel.

“Olga, look!” she said, suddenly excited, more excited than she had felt for days. God had winked. Or in any case, had sent her a signal.

“There it is again. Look!”

“What?”

“There!” Theodota pointed. “It’s the angel. He’s taken the form of the bird. Look, it’s the same one, I’m sure it is. Remember? The day of the Feast of Ioannes the Baptist? The falcon, gray and white. Look how close it comes.”

“Why so it is. A falcon. Whose could it be? Your cousin the regent is no falconer. And the Turks know there’s nothing left to hunt here in the City.”

“No! It’s not from the Turks, and it is certainly not my cousin’s. It is an angel, my mother or an angel from my mother, with a message about Father. She wants me to know that he is coming back.”

“Oh, I pray so, child,” said Olga. “We need the emperor your father now to be with us.”

Theodota jumped up onto the bench and reached out her forearm, just as she had seen her father do, except that her arm was unprotected against the talons. But they were angel talons and could not hurt her, this she absolutely knew. She closed her eyes, held her back straight, her left arm stretched out like a branch for the bird to grasp, her right hand clenching the golden cross hanging from her golden belt, her golden hair thrown back to glow in God’s sun, and waited for the miracle.

But the falcon did not drop to her and clutch her arm. Puzzled, Theodota popped open her eyes and blinked. The bird continued its wide circle out over the hills to the west of the City walls.

“Mother, you are not coming?” she called out. “What is it then you want me to do?”

The falcon led her gaze to, no, commanded her to gaze at, a sight she had been avoiding. The taller tower of the emperor had always blocked her view to the southwest. But from up here on the bench she could see over its rim and had an unobstructed view due west and northwest. There were strange, ugly black spiky things that weren’t supposed to be there.

“Olga!” she shouted and jumped down from the bench, and darting between Adam and Eve and dodging plants, she ran over to the western parapet. She could see the black things on the distant hilltops, but the great western wall of the City blocked her view of what was below them.

“Olga, boost me up,” she commanded.

“Your Highness. You’re not dressed.”

“Well, the garrison. Someone may turn around. You don’t have anything on your head.”

Theodota was shaking with excitement, and before she even knew what she was doing, she had snatched Olga’s turban and planted it on top of her own imperial coif.

“What!?”

“Get me that stool.”

What she saw made her gasp. It was the evil that she had always known was there but never had been bold enough to face before. On the hills before the City walls were clustered high peaked tents, some bright-colored but most as drab as the clay around them. Long pennants of brilliant red and yellow
fluttered in the breeze. Symbols of the “gazis,” as the Turks called the fiercest of the servants of the devil they called Mahomet.

There were also squat, broader, black tents that she knew belonged to the Serbian knights who, though supposedly Christians, were allies of the Turks. Men in their strange barbarian garb were going about their mysterious routines, some sitting, some walking, some hurrying, some moving among the animals.

It was the siege camp, temporary resting place of what the Turks called the “horde.” Hellish, pulsating organism, rooted to no place and contained within no walls, a shapeless swarm that had swallowed and destroyed all the other cities that had stood in its way and that now had come to gnaw at the Mother City herself. It was the Anti-City, abode of the Anti-Christ who called himself “sultan,” which was how the Turks said Satan.

The Anti-City had muddy paths instead of paved avenues, flimsy, high-peaked domes of felt instead of marble palaces and churches, and grotesque hide-covered scaffolds that aped and mocked the City’s noble towers upon the walls. She recognized those crude hide-covered obelisks. She had seen ones like them wheeled up to the City’s walls, raining fire and arrows on the noble Christian soldiers inside and then vomiting their screaming, axe-swinging fiends onto the ramparts.

That had been when she was little, eight or nine years ago, before her father had left the City. It had happened so fast, and the knight who had been guarding her had fallen from a bolt. She had screamed for her mother, but her mother was in heaven and little Dota was alone on the trembling walls in a pandemonium of flames, crashing boulders, and the furious running of men everywhere. Then she had been snatched up into the arms of an older girl who held her tight and ran with her back down off the wall and into the chambers of the palace. That older girl was Olga, who from that day, by order of the basileos her father became Theodota’s personal slave.

The enemy’s misshapen towers of wood and hide sat quiet now, beyond the range of the City’s bowmen, in one of those infrequent and mysterious lulls that Theodota had learned not to question during the long siege. In a rough line among the siege towers, the giant bird-like machines called city destroyers rested on their haunches. Their huge, fat heads atop short, skinny necks pointed defiantly toward the holy City. When those heads suddenly bobbed to earth, their long straight tails would flip up and hurl missiles at and sometimes over the walls.

Trébuchets, the Franks called them, but “city destroyers”—helepoleis in Theodota’s language—better described their horror. The sight of them made her stomach tense.

She looked up to where the falcon now was but a speck, flying over Galata just to the north, across the Golden Horn. There she saw more of the city destroyers perched menacingly along the hilltop. Was the bird’s message then of despair? She clutched the cross at her waist more tightly, and to still her trembling jaw she began to recite a prayer.

The falcon-speck disappeared into the brilliance of God’s great rising sun. Theodota spun around on the stool, one hand behind her on the parapet, to look across to the eastern wall. She turned her head slightly away from the East, the contradictory East, land where the sun was born each morning, but also the land that spawned the barbarian hordes that threatened to engulf the City. Then she saw, emerging from the right-hand rim of the blinding circle of the sun, a dark speck that she was sure was the same falcon. It had shown her the terrible dangers, and now it was leading her gaze to the dome of holy wisdom, Hagia Sophia, God’s own most special place in His most sacred City.

“That’s where the answer is, then,” she said half to herself, As she turned to jump down from the stool, she saw a tall, stout man on the emperor’s roof. He had a big black beard and a wide turban such as only the highest-ranking Turks could wear.

Theodota froze.

On one side, God, His winged creature pointing her to His great church. On the other side, this representative of Satan. Here, in the Blachernae, on the emperor’s own terrace. This alien presence
would never have been permitted if her father, the true emperor, were still here. It was a message. The
divine when she looked east, and now this defilement of the holiest of cities when she turned west. She
stared back at the tall, fat demon in the impious turban. He smiled at her. Such horror!

Still frozen in her pose upon the stool, she closed her eyes and turned her face toward heaven,
praying God to send the strength to do His will. She felt a breeze run through her hair and thought an
angel’s wing had stirred—and then she realized that the humble little turban she’d snatched from Olga
had fallen off, and she stood bareheaded. Bareheaded and wearing nothing but her white linen
undershift. So this was how it felt to be a martyr, nearly naked before evil but girded in the light of God.
Summoning unto her God’s strength, she opened again her eyes.
Satan’s minion stood there no more. But his appearance had been a warning. She must hurry to the
great church. To see her mother, who had become one with Saint Sophia.

The müsselems have been working through the night, dragging the heavy timbers from where they
had assembled them provisionally the day before on the hills just west of the City to within range of the
archers and crossbows on the City walls. This is why the oxen and men have waited till night, death’s
favored time. They are to raise at least ten of these machines of death, called trébuchets in the West, but
here known simply as “city destroyers.” One crew of twelve has dragged the timbers and hides and
cables to a slight rise facing the Golden Gate, the great ceremonial entrance. There they raise a wooden
barrier shield and drape it with layers of hides, which they then soak with buckets of water to protect the
shield from flaming arrows. Behind this shield, their chief lights an oil lamp so they can begin the
complex assembly.

First they raise the tall upright shafts, more than twice a tall man’s height, two-thirds as tall as the
sculptured horses atop the Golden Gate. Six men try to steady them while three others are preparing to
fit the axle of the throwing arm when a sudden shift at the base almost topples the entire structure. The
chief shouts a halt. The ground has been undermined by sappers, either their own or those of the
defenders, who counter-tunnel to flood the Osmanlis’ tunnels before they can reach the City walls. Then
at the crew chief’s orders, two of the müsselems strip off the water-soaked hides, and stumbling in the
dark, they all shift the pieces to firmer ground. They have almost got the uprights lashed together when,
almost too late, they hear the clatter. The chief sees the red eyes of a horse with an iron face mask
bearing down on him and senses the spiked iron ball swinging toward his head. Now sprawled on the
ground, bruised but not dead, from behind a leg of his machine he hears the shouts and blows. The
Frankish knights they have to be. A müßelem screams and another yells about a torch; the knights are
going to burn the laboriously constructed machine, now unprotected by its hides.

But there is no time even to gasp, for now comes another clatter of horsemen, this time accompanied
by high-pitched ululation. The pointed top of a Turkish helmet catches a gleam from the Frankish torch.
A deep, loud voice, the voice of the hero of Nicopolis and Kosovo, Arslanshahin son of Kara Göne, half
grunts, half roars, “Run, Christian dogs!” Another angry voice answers an incomprehensible insult in the
Frankish tongue.

Steel rings against steel. A horse screams and crashes to the ground. Turks and Franks grunt and
shout and swirl about the still unfinished tower of death. Then suddenly the turmoil moves away. The
first bunch of riders clatters back toward the causeway across the trench, pursued by the gazi and six or
seven others on smaller, swifter horses. From the predawn shadows and the sounds, the survivors in the
city destroyer crew surmise that the Franks have passed through the gate of the outer wall, and the
pursuers must be reining in. The defenders of the City are famous for pouring Greek fire down from
their walls, a magic flaming fluid that can cook a man inside his armor.

Now the crew, what’s left of them, can complete assembly. But there are only nine of them now,
and two of those are maimed. And they have little time now before dawn. They leave the big steel-
armored Frank moaning where he lies and roll the corpses of their own back behind the tower. Hurriedly
the strongest of them settle the axle of the long, stout beam—the throwing arm—into its grooves atop
their tower. They can barely see the other city destroyers to the left and right already assembled and
loaded with their charge of stone.

They pull down the short, forward end of the beam and attach its huge square bucket, its staves
bound in iron, which causes the longer end to rise like an impudent tail. Shovel by shovel they fill
the bucket, more than a thousand times, at least two thousand pounds of earth and stones. Then, frantically
trying to beat the sunrise, they winch the tail end down, and the bucket at the head swings between the
monster’s legs. Because this is the machine that is supposed to discharge its load first, to give the signal
for the general assault.

They winch the tail of the beam all the way to the ground, until the bucket is raised to its highest
point, facing the walls of the City and its Golden Gate. The crew chief secures the beam’s tail with a peg
through an iron-clad wooden eye on the cradle at the base. He attaches one end of the long rope sling to
the end of the arm, running the rope forward through the monster’s legs, then arranges the sling’s wide
leather pocket under the massive bucket, passes the other end of the rope back through the legs, and slips
its end-loop over the curved iron point that juts from the end of the arm.

But there is no time now to load the sling with heavy boulders. The crew chief looks around and
sees the wounded Frank, still moaning on the ground in his heavy armor. “Drag him in. Into the sling!”
he orders.

The first light comes up behind the City ramparts and a moment later touches the crowns of a whole
row of bulky obelisks ranged like shaggy, bull-headed sphinxes parallel to the western wall, just beyond
the defensive trench and the lower outer wall. In another instant, the sun reveals the apex of each obelisk
to be fulcrum and axle of a great wooden siege machine, its head an enormous bucket and its neck the
end of a long beam angling toward the ground. The largest of these is the one just built, the one facing
the Golden Gate.

And so it is that by the first morning light the city destroyers, agents of Azrael the Angel of Death,
are ready. A small wiry man strides to the tail of the heavy beam and swings a mallet that knocks out the
peg holding it to the ground. The heavy bucket at the head of the beam dips, the tail swings up, it yanks
the sling and its heavy load till the sling swings up even faster and releases the wounded knight into the
air.

The charge is light compared with the iron and stone loaded into the other death machines, and it
flies higher and farther, propelling the Christian warrior nearly over the wall and back to his city.

Shadows of Blachernae
23 Zilkade 804 Hegira
(25 June, Anno Domini 1402)

The imperial astrologer steps out from under the protecting roof of the colonnade and takes four
long strides across the hot, glaring tiles of the celestial courtyard. He turns and glances down past his
black robes to the elaborate mosaic, where he positions the black and gold toe-tip of his right sandal
against a particular dark tessera at the forward edge of the hub of Apollo’s chariot. His long, thin body
casts a short, squat shadow, the tip of the flattened miter barely touching the edge of the glittering white tail of the sun god’s foreground horse. Silently the astrologer counts his breaths and watches his shadow contract. One, two, three, four—“Midday!” he cries.

The slave beside him strikes the gong, and the imperial astrologer steps back into the shade.

The shout ripples from slave to slave and guard to guard. “Midday!” shout the two stout Varangians at the entrance of the inner palace, and “Close the palace!” they add as they rest their axes against the marble floor and pull shut and bar the great bronze doors against the noonday sun.

“Midday!” bellows the Vardar chief of guards at the Tower of Anemas. “All honored guests depart.”

“Midday. You know what that means,” growls another Vardar to the tower’s sole prisoner. “Back in there, you.”

“Midday!” sings out the Thracian chief of cooks in a strong tenor, letting the syllables echo against the stone walls of his high-vaulted kitchen, and singing out again to his staff of five, “Prepare the basileos’ repast.”

“Midday, my lovelies,” shouts the Varangian guard stationed at the entry to the women’s palace, in English. “My pretty little bees must seal the honeycomb.”

“‘Midday’ indeed,” snorts Olga, sticking out her tongue at the tall, ugly foreigner with the silly grin. “Learn Greek, you barbarian.”

As the door of the women’s palace closes, she steps back into the inner chamber where the light cuts through the latticed window to form intricate patterns in the gloom. Gently she smiles at the sad, angry face of her friend, her stepdaughter, her little sister, her mistress, Theodota Palaiologina, bastard princess of the Roman Empire of the East.

“‘Midday,’” she says to her softly. “Nothing to be done, my chicken.”

“Midday, my lord,” announces the imperial cupbearer to the scowling man with the forked beard whose cheek leans heavily upon his fist, his elbow against the armrest of a gilded throne, his unfocused eyes staring out at something beyond the walls of the high-domed throne room.

“God save thee and grant thee many years.”

The man with the forked beard listens as the cupbearer crosses the chamber to close the latticed shutters against the sun. For this, he has declared, is the hour of the shadows.

Ioannes VII Palaiologos, basileos and autokrator of Romania, the Roman Empire of the East, is the chosen of God. And to be so chosen he must be physically whole. It is the fact that God has restored his sight that proves that he enjoys God’s favor. Ioannes reminds himself of this, and he insists that the priests remind the people constantly of the treachery of his relatives and this sign of God’s present grace.

The sharp-edged noontime shadows help him relive the memory. He is eight years old, a prince who is supposed to be pampered and honored. But dark-faced men have broken into the palace and they are taking him away, and his father the basileos they have taken from this very chamber, and they push the boy and his father, Andronicus, into a dark, stone cell inside the tower, the Tower of Anemas. There is a window, so small that even a boy of eight cannot fit his head through it, even when his father holds him up and urges him to try. But now the boy is alone, in a cell that is dark and damp. He knows it is noon because of the intensity of the ray of light that enters through the high window.

They have already done something horrible to his father. From a nearby cell only hours before he heard a sound he could never imagine hearing, ever: his father screaming. Now two men come in and grab his arms and strap him to an iron bed—was the bed there before or did the men bring it with them? This part has never been clear. They secure Ioannes’ head in iron clamps so his face must turn to the ceiling. There, mysterious brown splotches seem to be swaying, like anguished angels wringing their hands. The face of the imperial physician, a man he knows well and who has always treated him kindly, appears between him and the angels. The physician’s beard is so close that the boy can count its bristles, each a different shade of brown or gray or white. The kindly old face has become distorted, monstrous, the dark eyebrows clenched. Never before has little Ioannes felt such sudden despair. The physician is
not here to heal, but to do to him whatever it was that made his father, his strong father, scream. The 
angels on the ceiling do not move to help. They are merely witnesses.

Ioannes closes his eyes as tight as possible, but the physician’s fingers force the left one open. He 
gasps and sobs. Acrid fumes burn his throat and nostrils and his opened eye. Then someone pours 
boiling ointments into the eye, muttering a prayer like an incantation. The harsh fingers pounce upon 
the other eye and force it open, and the process—prayer and burning ointment—is repeated. Ioannes 
screams and screams and sees no more. He screams although he knows it is useless, screams in pain and 
rage.

His own grandfather has done this, or ordered it done, in slavish obedience to the heathen Turk 
Murad. Has ever a man committed a more monstrous crime against his own blood? Cain merely slew his 
brother Abel. He did not leave him to suffer groping in the darkness, grieving forever his lost birthright.

But that quivering, hand-licking fool, that bumbler in warfare and mendicant in diplomacy, that 
vendor of the faith he was bound to defend, that sycophant of the heathen foe, that maimer of his child 
and grandchild, that thing that called itself Ioannes V Palaiologos, disgracing the name Ioannes and the 
sacred title of basileos, that sickly vermin could not even commit a competent crime.

The blinding, like almost everything his grandfather did, was perfunctory and incomplete. Its worst 
effects lasted, he knows now, only a few terrible, dark months. His mother was allowed to enter the cell 
almost daily, with remedies provided by that same imperial physician to bathe his and his father’s eyes.

The other part of the truth is that even now, Ioannes does not see as clearly as he pretends. When he 
waives his archers practicing with their great and powerful Christian bows, he can make out no more 
than their upright forms, the shadows of their arms stretched before them and what he interprets as the 
 elbow of the other arm drawing back. Only from the shouts does he know the arrows have been released 
and if they have struck their target. For the same reason he has never been able to enjoy falconry—once 
the bird leaves his hand, it utterly disappears.

He curses the heritage and politics that force him to bear his grandfather’s hated name. He did try to 
change it to Andronicus V, but the enemies of his father are still too strong in the divided City. Greatest 
among them is Manuel, Andronicus IV’s younger brother, Ioannes VII’s uncle, usurper of the throne.

At least he has taken his vengeance on the old physician. Blinded and exiled. Ioannes VII can take 
some small pleasure from that.

“Will the basileos be lunching alone?” inquires the cupbearer.

“All? No—”

He stops himself from repeating his ritualistic phrase about always being accompanied by the Savior 
and Saints Demetrius and George, because today he does in fact want company, earthly companions, to 
consult about a plan. It has to do with Manuel, of course, as almost all his plans must take into account 
Manuel.

“Summon Niketas, the grand domestic. And my lady Eugenia, if she be so disposed.”

Manuel II Palaiologos. Uncle Manuel. The other basileos. The one the foreign kings honor, the one 
that the foreign troops and too many of our own Romaioi acclaim as the true basileos, despite the fact 
that it is I, Ioannes VII, who is the eldest son of the eldest son of Ioannes V. Well, thank God, Uncle 
Manuel is out of the way, for now. May he stay away forever!

At last report, he was in England, at the very edge of the world.

But that report took months to reach us.

“My lord.”

“Oh. Eugenia. Yes, I did ask for your sweet company. How good of you to come.”

“My lord. Basileos and autokrator,” comes another voice, obsequious.

“Who’s that? Oh, of course. Niketas the grand domestic. I was distracted in my own deep thoughts. 
You may approach.”

A sudden, subtle noise of platters and a familiar smell—wine-marinated peacock breasts, his habitual midday meal—startles Ioannes. How many minutes, he wonders, has he been lost in reverie? It is not good to let others see one so abstracted. Especially not one’s own wife and grand domestic.

“Hmm,” he grunts loudly, as though having just come to some important conclusion.

Though he has no appetite, he grabs a thick slice of breast meat and tears off a chunk with his teeth, so that the others may eat and so that he will not feel obliged to speak. Then reaching for the bread, he rattles and nearly knocks over his wine flagon, which someone, must be Niketas—

“On yesterday’s attack, my lord, I now have the full report.”

“Ah, yes, those city destroyers and rocks against our walls. Damned annoying. I wish they wouldn’t do that while I’m still trying to get some sleep. Any serious damage?”

“Nothing that can’t be repaired in the space of a few days. Large pieces from the parapet over the Golden Gate were knocked off. I’ve ordered stone from one of the abandoned palaces, one that belonged to one of your old enemies before he fled, to be used in the repairs. And of course there were some deaths among our men, and injuries, at least two dozen.”

“There always are.”

“But between our archers and the Frankish knights, we think we killed at least twenty or forty of the Turks.”

“Why don’t you say ‘sixty’ or ‘six hundred’? We never know how many were really hit. And it doesn’t matter anyway. There are always more of them. And the sultan doesn’t care how many of his peasant slaves get sent off to their heathen paradise. Am I right, Niketas?”

“Yes, of course, my lord. My lord is always right. Casualties don’t mean a thing to that Bayezid. Ours, however, are painful. We have few men to replace our losses. We’ve already ordered fourteen-year-old boys and old men, forty years old and more, to man the walls. The assault yesterday, brief as it was and concentrated in just that section, I take as a mere warning. I think the sultan and his vizier just wanted to show us what they can do, if they move up all their machines and attack at many points.”

The temporary basileos says nothing, but clutches his wine flagon with greater force.

“It is said, my lord,” Niketas whispers loudly, “that Bayezid plans to turn Hagia Sophia into a palace for his harem. Will God forgive us if we let the Anti-Christ defile His most glorious temple?”

“Huh. Too much resin in this wine,” Ioannes complains.

“It is to preserve it, my lord. Our stocks are low.”

“A harem, you say? Hagia Sophia?” Ioannes laughs.

“My lord, you laugh. But it is true. God’s own house.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure it is. That Bayezid is capable of anything. But then, what made me laugh, ah, Niketas, my man. The irony of it! If Manuel returns with a foreign army and a fleet of Latin heretics, what do you think will happen to God’s house then, eh? Why, that Latin rabble will turn the whole city into a whorehouse and the churches into stables.”

Eugenia winces, the way she does whenever Ioannes disparages her beloved Latins. But she is in on the maneuver, she understands what Ioannes is up to and smiles and nods.

“When the Latins were here last, they burned and desecrated our sacred places; they raped our virgins and stole our relics and our gold. Our churches, His holy churches, the Latins made their stables. In any case, Manuel’s mission is bound to fail, you’ve said so yourself. The Latins can’t have forgotten the disaster of Nikopolis. They’re hardly likely to risk such slaughter so soon again.”

“All is in the hands of God, my lord.

“Hmm. Yes, yes indeed. Then He’d better look out for His own house, hadn’t He? Because there doesn’t seem to be much we can do about it. A harem.”

“My lord, we must not despair. Your uncle may even now have succeeded in gathering an army of Latin Christians and a fleet. And if the Venetians support him—Ah, then there will be a fleet, a real fleet, for those heathens to contend with.”
“Yes, Niketas? And would that be good news or bad news for us? Speak the truth! What happens to us if Manuel does return in triumph with his borrowed army? Eh?”

“My lord, I don’t know what to say.”

“How unusual for my silver-tongued diplomat. I’ll tell you what’s going to happen, one way or the other. Without that foreign army, Polis and all our empire is lost. With it, and they smash the encircling Turks, Manuel returns as hero and basileos and displaces me yet again. And you too, because he is hardly going to trust a man in whom I trusted. He’ll probably put one of his brothers in charge, my uncle Theodore perhaps, or maybe he’ll get… Oh, never mind. And where would I go this time? I and my Eugenia and my loyal courtiers such as you, Niketas? Thessalonica is what Manuel promised before he left. Thessalonica. He doesn’t even have it. Once he and his borrowed army recover it from the Turks.”

He makes a rumbling noise in his throat, as though he were about to gargle. “But you know what? Thessalonica is also what the Turks themselves now offer me, if only I will let them have this city, our sacred Polis. That’s what that Nazim fellow was going on about, that tall fat Turk, sent by Ali Pasha himself. And they at least have Thessalonica to give. So either way I lose the City, either to Manuel or to the Turk. Well, good riddance, Eugenia says. Right, my empress?”

“He makes a rumbling noise in his throat, as though he were about to gargle. “But you know what? Thessalonica is also what the Turks themselves now offer me, if only I will let them have this city, our sacred Polis. That’s what that Nazim fellow was going on about, that tall fat Turk, sent by Ali Pasha himself. And they at least have Thessalonica to give. So either way I lose the City, either to Manuel or to the Turk. Well, good riddance, Eugenia says. Right, my empress?”

“He does. And then he adds, in a fluent Latin that he knows Niketas will have trouble following, but which will please Eugenia’s ears: “That Nazim—what an unctuous, sly, deceptive character. A man after my own heart. Exquisite manners too. Although I don’t think he’d ever seen a fork before.”

“He laughs, inviting Eugenia to laugh with him. She herself had never used a fork before he taught her.

“Described the palace we would have in Thessalonica,” he continues. “I could call myself emperor too and be protected by the Turks. And you’d be empress! Officially! Did I tell you?”

“Yes, you did. That was the day he came and wanted you to show him your terrace.”

“The terrace? Atop this palace?” asks Niketas, alarmed.

“If I had been here, Your Majesty, I would have prayed that you not do it. A Turk! A minister of the chief of viziers. What he wanted was to get a good look at our defenses, the thickness of our walls, how many men we had on them.”

“Well, well, perhaps. You are so suspicious, Niketas,” Ioannes answers the grand domestic in Greek. But then he switches back to Latin.

“Anyway, I could hardly be rude. After all that he had offered me. But you know, I don’t believe he even glanced at our defenses. What caught his eye was her, that little bastard of Manuel’s. She’s always up there, they tell me, in her little garden in the mornings, but of course nobody ever sees what she does, with that wall around the place. But what luck the day the vizier came. At that very moment she was, I don’t know for what reason, standing up on something, and in full view—not that I could make much out at that distance, but Nazim was much impressed.

“Then he said his lord, Ali Pasha, was seeking a way to grievously wound Manuel, to please the sultan and to punish my perfidious uncle for his insolence. And for me, Eugenia, and Niketas too, for all of us, how sweet it will be to drive a dagger into that traitor’s heart. His bastard daughter, that’s Manuel’s heart. He loves her more than his own wife. And he has so carelessly left her in my care. Foolish, trusting Manuel. So unlike Nazim—or me. Yes, we are much alike, the Turk and I. Too clever to be guiled.”

“Very well,” says Eugenia, putting aside her fork with a practiced gesture. “This new-formed plan may be our escape from these thick walls.”

“And this sour wine,” adds Ioannes, spitting out a mouthful.

“This besieged peninsula,” adds Niketas sadly.
“These shadowed memories,” says Ioannes.
“The girl will go, as my lord and husband has declared. The grand domestic will of course cooperate
with all the resources of his office.”
Niketas assents, with a woeful expression on his face so marked that even the ill-sighted Ioannes
senses it and laughs inwardly.
“And I, Eugenia, know just the man who can be trusted to deliver her into the sultan’s harem.”
She smiles, that Ioannes can tell from her voice even without looking at her.
“Yes, you will be my accomplices, you two,” says Ioannes, “and help me find good argument to do
what we already have resolved. It is time for us to abandon this old whore city. Yes, I say that, and say it
again: this whore city, which has never been grateful no matter how much we’ve suffered for her, and
which even now is ready to open her legs to her new conqueror! Well, let her. For it is God’s will, I say,
that the sultan now should be the instrument of her punishment, for the wickedness of her people who
have so injured us!”
ashamed. Shamed by Timur who only a year ago had destroyed great Baghdad and built a mountain of skulls of its murdered people and two years ago had invaded the sultan’s eastern lands, seizing the supposedly impregnable citadel of Sivas and massacring its defenders, including their commander, the sultan’s son Mustafa.

And now Timur had brought his rage and his horde once again to the fortress city of Sivas that he had nearly destroyed two years ago and was threatening to sweep the sultan from power everywhere. Ali had urged the sultan to send an embassy of distinguished beys with handsome gifts to Timur to placate him and urge him to withdraw, peacefully, as an ally in Islam. But Bayezid had instead seized the opportunity to display his contempt for his rival. Instead of offering the eastern khan gifts numbering nine, signifying culmination and thus the highest honor, Bayezid had sent multiples of ten. Ten hunting falcons, ten Arab horses, ten pearl-covered coffers. Ten implied that the giver is greater than the norm, and ten is the number at which the count begins anew, implying the overthrow of an older order and the start of another.

But it must surely have been the letter, even more than the insult of the gifts, that enraged Timur. A thunderbolt on papyrus. The sultan by his own hand had written his name in huge and glorious swirls of titles, putting Timur’s name in crabbed black letters at the bottom. And he had demanded concessions of Timur—when concessions were unthinkable from a khan still locked in the customs of the East and every bit as arrogant as the sultan.

Timur had spurned their gifts, saying they were nothing against the wealth he already commanded and the wealth that would be his when he conquered all the Osmanli realm. And he had required the ambassadors to witness a display of his horde’s might. Men on horseback in units of hundreds, each garbed in caftans of a single color, paraded before them: a horde of celestial blue, another of purest white, another blood-red, and the last in the Prophet’s own emerald green. Then lines and lines of camels, caparisoned in more muted tones of the same colors, each bearing spears or axes or other weapons of war. Then men on foot, bowmen and spearmen and swordsmen in uncountable numbers. And finally the elephants—dozens at least, each a living, moving fortress with archers and lancers in the tower on its back.

The ambassadors had returned humiliated and addled by fright. Ali was deeply disappointed but not surprised. If only the sultan would leave diplomacy to him.

There was no way out of it now; the pasha must mobilize the horde to contain Timur. It would be a great task, calling on all the sultan’s resources. But, Ali knew, it would not be enough. He must also find a solution to the sultan’s other, even longer standing concern, the seizing of Constantinople. Could he find a way to interweave the two, to confront and solve both problems at once?

There was an obvious link. He who took Constantinople from the infidels would achieve such glory that he would be unassailable by any other Muslim. There was a verse in the Holy Koran that said as much, if properly interpreted.

“Your Excellency?”

The young Thracian slave’s voice brought Ali out of his reverie. He took the end of silk from the other slave and began the deliberate, soothing winding of his turban—the one part of his dressing ceremony that he always reserved for himself.

Now Ali pushed back the curtain to enter the innermost chamber of the inner palace. He had decided not to begin with the news from Timur, but with something more encouraging. In the instant before dropping to press his face to the carpet, Ali noted the sultan’s posture and the ironic smile. He had been smoking and appeared prepared to be amused.

“Speak, Vizier,” the sultan commanded sharply. He was quite sober now, fortunately.

“Your Supreme Excellency, regarding our negotiations with the Christian regent, I have done as you commanded.”

“And so, what news? Speak, you old fool.”
Ali Pasha regarded such outbursts as practically affectionate, the insults of a ruler too proud to acknowledge how much he depended on his vizier.

"Your Supreme Excellency, on pretext of negotiations, I was able to insert my man Nazim not only within the City’s walls, but even into the palace of Blachernae itself. He reports that our siege is taking effect. He confirms what I have told you: The City is weak and hungry. Its defenders are old men, boys, and foreign knights who haven’t been paid in months and have no heart to fight.”

“Agh! So he learned nothing new, this Nazim. You and your diplomacy are wasting my time. This co-emperor, Ioannes, he wouldn’t even be on the throne if it weren’t for us. You said that you could manage him better than Manuel, and now we’re rid of Manuel, so why is not the City mine?”

“But the walls are stout, my sultan, and the Christian idolaters, even in their weakened state, are stubborn. It is true that Ioannes VII is a half-blind coward ruled by his wife and that she has never loved the City and does not even speak its language. Alone, they would quickly accept the exile that we offer them. But he is afraid, it seems, of some stubborn Christian nobles and of the foreign knights and even of certain sectors of the populace, who might revolt if they heard he planned to surrender their beloved ‘Polis.’”

“A ruler afraid of his own subjects. Ha! He should be more afraid of my city destroyers and my janissaries. I cannot accept that the surrender of the City is taking this long. Tell him to surrender now or suffer a new assault, and this time I shall destroy all that he treasures, including his wretched life and that of his foreign empress!”

“My man Nazim did bring back one new observation. He chanced to see a girl, obviously a noble from her demeanor and her place, atop one of the palace towers, even though she was simply dressed and playing some childish game. He inquired, and it seems she is a daughter of your old foe Manuel, the only one of his children he left behind.”

“What? So the old lion left behind one of his cubs?”

“It is another of his bastards, the youngest that we know of. She was born the year we took Thessalonica, when Manuel escaped us and fled to Tenedos and later to Lemnos.”

“That means she must be nearly fifteen. She would have been but two years old when I triumphed over the Serbs and became sultan.”

Ali Pasha bowed his head, concealing his frown. The mention of Kosovo Polje, the Field of Blackbirds, always delighted Bayezid, but it made Ali shiver. He remembered too vividly that early morning in the month of Rajab, as he picked his way among the corpses of men and horses, the heaps of dead or dying camels chained as a living rampart around the emir’s tent. And saddest of all, the corpse of the old emir himself, the great Emir Murad, stabbed in his tent by a madman who had entered by a ruse. There were so many dead on both sides, Serbs and Turks, that neither one could have fielded a decent army if the Bulgarians or Wallachians or Hungarians had chosen to attack.

But the young Bayezid had acted with a swiftness that surprised even Ali, who knew him well. After murdering his brother, his only rival, and decapitating the Zar Lazar and his nobles, the young chelebi declared himself the new emir, made Lazar’s daughter —the young Despina Olivera—his wife and his son Stefan Lazarevitch his vassal, so that he could combine the remnants of Stefan’s Serbian heavy cavalry with the swift Osmanli horse archers and other survivors into a new horde, able to defend itself and intimidate the Osmanli vassals in the Balkans and Anatolia.

“Well? Tell me about this girl,” commanded Bayezid, snapping Ali out of his gloomy reverie.

“Ah, the girl. As you say, she was born just two years before that glorious battle against the Serbs, Supreme Excellency. The same year I succeeded my late father as vizier to your illustrious father, the emir Murad. That was the year the emir forced the Rumeli to surrender Thessalonica, where Manuel had governed, and Manuel then fled. My informants tell me that the girl was born on the isle of Lemnos at the beginning of the Christian year, the month they call September, which in that year was our Ramadan.”
“An auspicious month. And which of Manuel’s wenches is the mother?”

“That I have been unable to ascertain, my sultan. Some whore of Lemnos, we suppose, or perhaps a slave. Manuel has kept the mother’s name hidden even from my informants in his court.”

“A slave woman, then.”

“Yes, that is what I have supposed. Possibly even a Turk, for they say the daughter has lovely dark eyes. Nevertheless, Manuel has never denied the child but has always insisted that she be known and treated as a princess. Nazim was told that Manuel left her behind only because his legal empress objected to her presence. And also as a hostage to Ioannes, as a guarantee that he would return. Theodota, they call her.

“Permit me to share a thought, my sultan. Though a bastard, she is of the House of Palaiologos. And I am assured that she is still a virgin. A marriage union with the Palaiologoi would help us secure the support of the nobles who would then be more acquiescent to your inevitable conquest of the City.”

“What? Another Christian wife? You think I don’t have enough trouble managing the despina?”

“No, pardon me, Your Excellency. I was thinking of your eldest, Suleyman. Or whichever of your sons you decide. To link the House of Osman and the House of the Palaiologoi, to ensure the loyalty of your new subjects after you take the City.”

The sultan laughed again, much harder and much longer. “Yes, very good! We shall demand her as part of the emperor’s surrender tribute. Poor Manuel, he is far away. And when he returns—if he returns—no matter how many crusaders he brings, he will have already lost his city and his precious daughter!”

Ali Pasha was a man who had seen many terrible things, but Bayezid’s laugh unnerved him. However, he was pleased that the sultan had seen the merit of his suggestion.

“Does the girl herself know who her mother is?”

The vizier’s raised eyebrows and fingers said without saying it that he did not know.

“And is she as ugly as all the Palaiologoi?”

“Nazim says she is as lovely as a houri.”

Bayezid chuckled. “As lovely as a Turk, then! So perhaps her mother was one of our people! As I remember, my father sent an ambassador to Manuel while he was in exile. That visitor didn’t happen to have a fair young woman in his party, did he? One he left behind to console the poor prince?”

“No, my sultan. No one but the galley crew accompanied the gazi that His Excellency, the emir Murad, your father, sent to Lemnos. When the gazi returned, he said that the Christian prince’s household seemed very poor and that Manuel himself was very sad, spending most of the day praying and writing. The gazi said nothing of any woman companion.”

Bayezid stared at his vizier for a long moment. “If there is to be a marriage, I want to know who was the girl’s mother. Bring me that gazi. I will question him.”

“Sire, the gazi was Evrenos, the eldest son of Kara Göne. He whom you ordered to his death in the charge at Nikopolis and whose body we found pierced by a thousand crossbow bolts.”

“Ah, he? Yes, my father would trust the son of his good friend Kara Göne on such a delicate mission. Father had a perverse fondness for that family. He used to say that Göne’s crude manners and brusqueness reminded him of my great-grandfather Osman and of the gazis of the steppes. Before we had been ‘corrupted,’ as he used to say, by Greek luxury. The insolent Evrenos, son of the even more insolent Kara Göne. Well, good riddance! I would extirpate that whole rebellious clan. There are still one or two left, though, aren’t there? Isn’t that brigand who calls himself Arslanshahin, the one who has been raiding caravans without our permission, isn’t he yet another of Göne’s sons?”

“Yes, my sultan, and his half-brother Mesud. Arslan especially has great influence among the gazis, for his audacity and because of the legends about his family.”

“Perhaps you can arrange for him to begin his journey through the underworld. Subtly, of course, without our hand being seen. As you did for that intolerable Evrenos, before he had a chance to organize an insurrection.”
“Your wish is my command, my sultan. However, before we begin ridding ourselves of troublesome gazis, there is the matter of Timur. And we shall need those undisciplined ruffians.”

Bayezid frowned, flicked away the unpleasant thought with his hand, and sighed.

“He has rejected all your gifts and the terms of your letter. Not only will he not relinquish Sivas, he is demanding that you recognize his sovereignty there. He claims that the princes of your eastern regions all proclaim him their true lord.”

“Bah! And who asked them their opinion? Does he think one rules by consensus, as in the times of the Oguz? Such a primitive is this Timur!” The sultan laughed. “So he spurned my letter and my gifts, did he? And they were such magnificent gifts!”

“He counted them,” said Ali Pasha, as quietly as he could.

The sultan burst out laughing uproariously. “Ah, yes, our poor benighted cousins in the east and their silly superstitions.”

Ten hunting falcons, ten Arab horses, ten of everything, as though to say, “I am greater than the old khans.”

“I shall have to have those beasts destroyed now, of course. A pity. Such beautiful falcons, such speed, such sharp talons. And the limper from Samarkand has forfeited his chance. Now I shall deliver a letter of arrowheads and steel blades. I shall crush his insolence. Talking to me of the will of the princes of the east. Their ‘will.’ They will ‘will’ what I tell them to will!”

The sultan was trembling and his face was red. “But first, Ali Pasha Chandarizade, we must take the City. No Muslim will dare attack the sultan who has taken Constantinople. And with Timur in our lands, we must hurry. We must make Ioannes more afraid of us than of his contentious subjects. If he and his people refuse our demands,” he muttered in a low, angry tone, “we shall do to them what Timur”—he spat—“did to my beloved Sivas.”

“With Allah’s help, I shall fulfill the sultan’s will, O my sultan. Your command will be obeyed.”

Ali backed out of the chamber. Once past the curtain, he stood erect and waited until the rustling silk fell still. Oh yes, he knew what he must do.

But first, he would see what more he might accomplish by playing one more fox, a pretty Greek lad who might be able to slip into the city. And then, thinking farther ahead, he would have to make another attempt—a much more artful attempt—to control that rebellious gazi, Arslan. The gazis were of little use in the siege, but their support would be essential in a campaign on open ground against Timur.

And he would have to accomplish this very soon, before the Iron Man met the Thunderbolt.

The Vizier’s Spy
26 Zilkade, 804 Hegira
(28 June, Anno Domini 1402)

“Up!” commanded the aga, startling Mehmed from his sleep.

He sprang to his feet in his sleeping shift, not daring even to rub the sleep out of his eyes. It was still dark in the barracks but for the sputtering oil lamp in the aga’s hand, its flickers highlighting the hairs of his beard and the underside of the aga’s mustache and his fleshy nose.

“Put those on.”

Feeling his face grow warm with embarrassment, Mehmed lifted the poor garments gingerly, while his fellow janissaries, awakened by the gruff voice of their commander, snickered and guffawed. The torn dolman and drab cotton trousers and cap that had been dumped onto the floor by his cot were such as he would have worn if he were still an ignorant Christian peasant, tending his father’s sheep back in Thessalonica. Mehmed, the only Greek-origin youth in the ten-man squadron of Vlachs and Bulgars, had
had to fight fiercely to win the tentative respect of his fellows, and now the aga was singling him out for this special humiliation. He looked up in horror when he discovered the brass cross. The aga simply frowned and said again, “Put them on. Quickly.”

Defiant, he dropped the cross and the rags back on the floor and stared at the aga, who punched him in the face so hard that he fell back onto the cot. The aga was an old man, maybe even thirty-five, Mehmed guessed, but still powerful, and because he was the aga, the janissary dared not hit him back.

“So you have spirit, eh? Well, today you’ll have a chance to test it. The chief of viziers has asked me who among my boys could do a special job, and I told him you were the one. Yes, I think you’ll do.”

Today, the aga explained in a loud voice for all his comrades in the barracks to hear, Mehmed would not wear the tall, stiff hat that he had become so proud of or the bright-yellow pantaloons and red tunic that were rightly his as a fully formed janissary. Today he would be disguised as one of the despised Rumeli, as the Turks called the Greek-speaking subjects of Constantinople. As such he would slip into the City to carry a message and bring back certain information desired by no less than the pasha, Chandarli Ali, himself.

The aga, hands on hips, an evil light in his eyes, and spittle on his beard, leaned back and ranted on about the torments that would befall Mehmed if he were discovered. The Christian idolaters, he said, were famous for the ingenuity and craftsmanship of their tortures, designed not merely to prolong the pain but to humiliate. Mehmed tried to show no reaction, but the description made him tingle. The climax, for the aga, was his prediction of certain death. But Mehmed was too young to be as frightened of death as of the possibility of disgrace. What terrified him was that he might fail the sultan and the True Faith, for he felt ill prepared for spying.

It was mid-morning when the cart drew close to the Golden Gate. Mehmed had stared at the great ceremonial portal many times during the siege, but never before had he been this close to its towers and the quadriga of bronze elephants looking down from the top. The great white marble block projecting from the duller brick and limestone walls was like a separate castle housing the great doors. Or like the arms of a powerful man, reaching to pull him in, the four yoked elephants like the man’s cap. The doors had been stripped of their gold, but were still massive and overwhelming. He felt ashamed, in this humble cart and in these peasant’s rags, to dare to enter the greatest city in the universe, Mother City of the Christian world.

“Konstantinoupolis,” he said aloud before he realized it.

“Eh?” said the peddler Eyup, driving the cart. He was a small man with a large nose and a beard that looked as though he’d hacked at it with a dull knife.

Mehmed felt himself blushing, which was unseemly for a janissary but perhaps not surprising for somebody dressed as he was now. To recover his dignity and his superiority over this simple peddler, he declared, “Konstantinoupolis. That’s the real name of this city.”

“İstanbul, we say,” Eyup grunted.

Mehmed laughed. “Eis ten polin, you mean. It means ‘to the city,’ in their language.”

“That’s just what I said, ‘İs-tan-bul.’ And you don’t have to tell me what it means. I speak Greek too, I do. Ought to. Been living next to these Rumeli almost all my life. Here, you’ll see soon enough. I’m going to call to that sergeant. But you keep your mouth shut. You have a funny accent. And hide those boots!”

Mehmed was startled by the man’s insolence. If he had not needed him as he did, he might throw him off the wagon and brandish the dagger he had hidden in his sash. As for the boots—well, yes, they were too elegant for the rest of his costume. He pulled out his trouser bottoms to cover the boot tops and found a cloth to throw over his feet on the floor of the cart.

“Good health, Dimitrios,” Eyup shouted.

The pot-bellied, middle-aged sergeant of the guards looked up and lumbered toward the wagon, spear in hand. His helmet was askew and one of his iron shin-guards lay where he’d dropped it in the
dust behind him, next to the wooden sentry box. He glanced at Mehmed, who held himself very still, pretending to be calm. A corner of the sergeant’s upper lip rose as though he was about to spit, but he looked away and into the wagon, poking among the clay jars with the blunt end of his spear.

“What kind of fool are you, to show up here in the middle of the morning?” growled the sergeant. “Stupid Turkmen. You know nobody goes through here without a müsaade from the emperor.”

The sergeant’s Greek was coarse, but what surprised Mehmed most was the Turkish word mixed in. “But Dimitrios! If I came at night, I wouldn’t find you on duty,” answered Eyup, in such a creative mix of Turkish syntax and mispronounced Greek that even Mehmed had trouble following.

“And then, our anlashma, what about it?” he concluded, resorting to the Turkish for “deal.” Dimitrios grunted. “Things have changed. They’ve got spies about now to make sure we’re doing our jobs. It’s those foreigners, foreign knights. They lost one last night, and they’re edgy.” “Oh?”

“One of the Franks. We found him this morning. Body smashed against the wall with one of those damned machines of yours. Probably meant to shoot him clear over the wall, for the emperor’s breakfast, but got the range wrong.”

Dimitrios laughed mirthlessly. “So now they’re watching us like hawks. Those Franks. Not our fault fools want to go out on raids. Lots of rumors going around. Patrols. I shouldn’t let you in at all.”

“But what would your wife say if she knew you’d turned us back? Here’s rich olive oil from Thrace, wine from Cappadocia. Rice. How long has it been since you’ve had any rice? A full barrel of the finest wheat, some barley, oats, unmilled, but that should be no problem for—Helena, isn’t it? Ah, yes, charming woman, strong, fit for a big fellow like you. A bolt of linen for her gowns. And of course, the usual gold pieces for your trouble.”

“Hmm. Price will have to be higher than last time,” the soldier growled in a very low voice. “There are others…have to be paid too.”

Eyup lowered his voice so that Mehmed could barely catch a few words. “… agreement… anlashma… man of honor.”

Mehmed studied the sergeant’s unkempt beard, the wine-stained cuirass, and the sneer that turned into a stupid smile at the mention of his “honor.”

Eyup then added decisively, in a phrase crudely translated from the Turkish, “Don’t kill the mare you’re milking!”

The sergeant grunted in acknowledgment, and the two men put their heads very close together and whispered until both seemed satisfied and their heads separated again. Eyup turned and lifted sack after sack after jar into the arms of the sergeant. Finally he opened the purse at his belt and, bending low and turning his body away from the sergeant and the wall, counted out several coins. Dimitrios signaled for another soldier, less slovenly and so, Mehmed imagined, Dimitrios’ subordinate, and together they hauled the goods back to the shade of the crude wooden sentry post.

The sergeant then stood up to his full height, shoulders back and chin raised as though posing for a statue, and to Mehmed’s astonishment cried out to the guards between them and the Golden Gate to the City, “Hear you! Hear you! Make way for a special envoy, by warrant of the regent Ioannes with full approval and seal of Manuel the Second Palaiologos!”

Their two-wheeled cart rolled over the path that divided one section of the wide, half-filled trench from another, and on through the gates of the first wall, which Mehmed estimated to be about three times his own height. A dozen archers crouched behind it barely looked up from their dice game. Some thirty paces beyond rose the third line of defense, the Golden Gate itself. Between the enormous squared stones at the top of the nearby towers, he could see the rims of silvered metal tubes, fashioned as the mouths of snarling lions. Those lions, he had heard, vomited a liquid flame more deadly than a dragon’s breath, that could boil a man’s flesh clear to the bone inside his armor’s charred and molten shell.

One half of the heavy wood-and-iron gate swung open for them to pass, and their little cart rumbled
through a long, dark tunnel like the gullet of a monster. But when they emerged into the sunlight on the 
other side and the inner gate swung noisily shut behind them, he found himself not inside a monster’s 
belly but in what seemed like—well, like the outer slums of Paradise. The palaces and gardens were the 
most splendid he had ever seen, but now half ruined. What outside the wall had been a war-damaged 
road, torn up by the siege machinery and scavenged for rocks for the city destroyers here became a 
sparkling white avenue, wider than any he had ever seen. To Mehmed, the similarity to Paradise was 
enhanced by its emptiness. Unlike a road in any earthly town, this one had neither traffic nor even fresh 
dung. Along the sides, the garden walls were broken, and the groves and vineyards within seemed long 
unattended, but still it was all too magnificent to be earthly. He wondered if a houri might not step out 
from behind a broken wall to bring him a cup of the ice-cold, honey-sweet water from the Lake of Ali, 
where—

Chungk. His tailbone rose and dropped hard on the wooden seat, causing his jaw to shut so hard his 
teeth crashed noisily.

“This was a good road once,” Eyup said with a guttural laugh that slid into the clucking noise to the 
mule. “They keep pulling up the stones to patch those walls we drove through. Still, it’s a great city, 
eh?”

“It seems unreal. All these fields, this road. Where are all the people?”

“Oh, you’ll see enough of them when we get to the center. That’s leagues ahead. And then there’s 
another bunch over there—”

He waved his arm northward, to their left, where Mehmed could see domes rising from a cluster of 
buildings beyond some hills.

“That’s Blachernae. The emperor’s palaces. No point in going over there. They don’t buy anything 
from the likes of me. But if you do, you’ll see soldiers and courtiers and monks in robes as black as their 
beards and fine ladies being driven up in their chariots and foreign merchants in all their fancy jackets 
and hats, but without any pants. Now that’s a sight! Bare, bony legs in nothing but bright-colored 
stockings. Latins they are. From Venice, Genoa, all over. And if you ever see a foreign woman, from 
Genoa or France or Hungary or somewhere out west, they don’t wear pants either. Not that you could 
tell, because they wear these big, billowing things more like a tent than a caftan, that go from their waist 
to the ground.

“Of course, there’s not half as many as before the siege. I used to come here as a boy, my whole 
family would come, into the Turkish quarter. That’s where we’re heading now, down at the end of this 
road, close to the old docks on the Bosporus—they don’t use them any more. There were taverns then, 
just for travelers like us, where a family or a single merchant like I was then could stay for a week, 
longer if they wanted.

“Ah, there were people here then. From all over the earth, thousands of thousands of them. Blacks 
from Nubia, Maltese who are almost black, big blond men from England and Russia and Sweden, 
Mongols, Jews, Genoese, Venetians. I’d go around with my eyes this big all the time. And fire-eaters 
and acrobats and singers and musicians and jugglers too. I always liked the jugglers. We’d come to sell 
my mother’s and all my sisters’ weavings and the kids and lambs we had fattened up in the village, but 
somehow it always seemed we ended up buying more than we sold.

“It’s quieter now, especially since the siege, but there’s still more people here than in any other 
place I know about, in all of Anatolia or even Thrace.’’

“I’ve dreamed about this place all my life.”

“Not long then,” answered Eyup, laughing.

“I’m seventeen!”

“Uh-huh. Sure you are, just like my mule.”

“I am!”

They drove a while in silence, Mehmed staring at stone walls of great houses, some of them half-
demolished, and at the statuary lining the deserted highway where once, he knew, imperial processions had marched in stately clamor.

“And what did they call you, son, before the sultan’s men took you?”

“Michael,” he answered with some embarrassment. “They came for me when I was twelve.”


Mehmed reddened. “I have been taught to forget it.”

“Hmm. Nobody around here told you that, I’ll bet. Must have been in the provinces, where people get so worried that one religion will contaminate the other.”

Eyup laughed. “That was in the west somewhere, wasn’t it? Thessalonica? I mean, your accent.”

“Near there. But in the countryside, about three hours walk from the city, from Thessalonica. This wide road must be the Mese?”

“Ha! Why of course it is, child. ‘Middle-Way’ it means in their language. Oh, but of course, you speak Greek, don’t you?”

The Mese. Mehmed kept looking for signs of the Varangian knights, the big blond Vikings and Russians and Englishmen who were said to guard the emperor with their huge axes.

“These days people here will pay almost anything, anything. For the olives and the wine I smuggle in,” Eyup went on, oblivious to his companion’s trembling. “Even though—look, over there is a grove of olive trees and a press, and not far from here, behind that ruined palace, are orchards of wine grapes. But city people, they like variety, and they miss the things they used to bring in from their hinterland, when they still had a hinterland. And you would be amazed at the amount of wealth they still have here. The silk—such a treasure. If I can take a load of that out on my cart, and if I can avoid the thieves on the other side of the wall, why, I can become a rich man. At least as rich as that scrounger Bardas Tzimiskes!”

Mehmed looked at him, surprised. “You know him? This Bardas?”

“Ha! Everyone knows Bardas Tzimiskes. Especially everybody who buys or sells in this city. Well, he’s not famous like Giorgos Goudelis. Now there’s a rich man. But dreaming of being like Goudelis would be like dreaming of being the sultan. Bardas is just a poor man next to Goudelis. But he has his connections. Unless the City falls, he’ll make his fortune yet.”

“Do you know where to find him?”

“What did the vizier tell you? Mikos’ place? Yes, that’s where he’ll likely be, if he’s trying to make a deal. Some nights you may find me there too. Only, maybe my deals aren’t quite so big.”

Eyup laughed. “I’ll show you. It’s not open now, it’s a tavern. And when you’ve found him, or even if you don’t, you’ve got three days. Today and two more. Then you come back into the Turkish quarter, same place where you’re going to stay with me tonight. Come at night, and ask for Eyup the peddler, and we’ll see if we can get out of the City as easy as we got in.”

Then, some little ways past the first of the abandoned ancient fora, Mehmed turned at the clatter of a solitary mule-drawn chariot, splendidly arrayed as though headed for a phantom festival. But the driver was not big or blond or a knight of any sort. He was a dark lad who looked too thin to fight, about the same age as Mehmed, and his face was painted white with bright red lips and heavily blackened circles around the eyes. He grinned and laughed maniacally, saluting them as he passed, then wheeled his mules around and whipped them to a full gallop to clatter furiously past them in the other direction, westward toward the wall. The peddler laughed.

“They’re going crazy from being locked in here, these Rumeli. Even the aristocrats.”

Mehmed was shaken, knowing he had seen a demon.

They continued their slow progress on into a much denser section of the City, sometimes having to stop to let pass the mule-drawn chariots of more important people, dressed all in fine silks. Many elegant Politans were also on foot, men and women, the women with elaborate hair styles, the men in turbans or
silk hats, some floppy and some stiff. As they approached one ancient forum, a small troop of seven or eight mounted knights in chain mail, riding much higher than Eyup and Mehmed in their little cart, clattered by with lances in their hands.

“Franks,” said Eyup.

Mehmed had still not seen the most famous sites, especially the Hippodrome, when, just before noon, Eyup announced that they were approaching the Turkish quarter. At first it looked no different from the surrounding area of narrow wooden houses, many of them with second stories and overhanging balconies, and mostly very old and many in need of repair. But soon he felt as though he had entered a secret chamber in a very busy palace. When Eyup and Mehmed crossed a certain street, they passed through an invisible curtain, leaving behind the world of the Romaioi, as the Greek-speakers of the empire called themselves. Instead, a hum of Turkish and the chanting of prayers at the accustomed hours suddenly surrounded them.

The buildings and pathways were, as far as Mehmed could tell, entirely alike on both sides of the curtain. It was their uses and decorations that were sharply different. On the Christian side, the large, sad eyes of icons of human or human-like figures stared out from private homes, public squares, and everywhere. On the Turkish side, all such figures had been removed or covered up with decorative curls and lines in what Mehmed supposed was writing—whether Arabic or Persian, holy or profane, he couldn’t tell.

The hand and head gestures of the people were different too. Among the Romaioi, he’d seen some poorly dressed folks hovering very close to one another and touching each other’s arms and shoulders all the time, but mostly the people he’d seen—soldiers, monks, a few men walking briskly as though on important errands—had maintained a ceremonial distance. Among the Turks here in the City, men in conversation put their heads so close together they almost touched, and it seemed to make no difference if one was dressed like a grand bey and the other like a slave.

This was much more fraternity than Mehmed was used to in the horde, and he wasn’t sure it was proper—must be a city custom, he thought. It seemed to him that turbans here were larger than those of the Greeks, though most men did not wear turbans at all, but caps of various kinds. And there were no women visible here, whereas he had seen many on the long ride through the City to this section.

They were just in time for midday prayers, and Eyup took him to the one new building in the quarter, a small mosque made of stone. It was very modest, but the fact that the Turks had wrested permission to build it at all, here in the very capital of Orthodox Christianity, was a kind of achievement and proof of the great power of Yildirim Bayezid, who had demanded it be done.

“We’ve even got a kadi to settle disputes,” Eyup told him. “Impresses the vizier, I suppose, but between you and me, he’s not much use. Whenever I’ve got any dispute with another Turk, we settle it among ourselves, by the law of the bichak.” He tugged at the knife in his belt.

“And if ever I get into a dispute with a Christian, that kadi is doubly useless—no Christian in this Christian city would accept the authority of a Muslim judge.”

Mehmed disapproved of such anarchistic talk, and if he hadn’t been where he was—in a strange and awesome city of alien religion, with Eyup as his only guide—he would have denounced the peddler or arrested him himself. He also thought Eyup was rather cursory in his ablutions, neglecting the elbows as though Allah wouldn’t notice, whereas Mehmed had been rigorously instructed in ritual and was distressed by the lack of discipline among the civilian population. But once he was engaged in the ritual of standing, bowing, prostrating himself, sitting, and repeating the prayers with the dozen or so other congregants, he was no longer concerned with Eyup’s negligence.

He emerged refreshed and went to put on his boots—but they weren’t there. He stood, amazed, as the other men all found their shoes or boots or sandals. But Mehmed’s beautiful red boots were not among them. He remembered just where he left them and went to that spot and, with disgust, picked up a dirty, torn old pair of sandals and stepped over to where Eyup was putting on his own sandals.
Mehmed shook them in front of Eyup’s big nose.
“What’s this?” he demanded.
“What?” asked Eyup. “Where are your boots?”
“That’s what I want to know. I went to where I left them, and I found these.”
“A miracle! A miracle!” cried Eyup, clapping his hands. “God is looking out for you. I told you that you would get into trouble with such fancy footwear, and now Allah has heard my prayer! He has given you footwear more suitable for your mission. Allah be praised. All Merciful.” Mehmed frowned, uncertain. “All Merciful and All-Knowing, right?”
“All Merciful, All Knowing and ninety-eight other names has Allah,” declared Eyup solemnly, nodding his head vigorously.
“Ninety-seven,” muttered Mehmed. “Then wouldn’t you think He would know my foot size?”
Mehmed slid his slender foot from one edge to the other inside the extremely wide sandal.
“Allah be praised,” repeated Eyup. “A sandal so wide could only have been left by one of his divine angels. Oh, my son, clearly you are favored in God’s sight.”
“Eyup, where are my boots?”
“Let us seek guidance. One-Eye, come over here. Help us to inquire of the All-Knowing, to understand this mystery.”
A heavy, older man looked up with his one good eye and stepped slowly toward them.
“To the blind is given the power to see into the mysteries of the spirit,” explained Eyup.
Yes, Mehmed knew that, of course, but he had never experienced such inner sight.
“My friend One-Eye Hodja is only half-blind, and so sees only part-way into the other world, but surely he can help us. What do you say, One-Eye? To what angel might these sandals have belonged?”
The one good eye focused on Eyup, then scanned Mehmed from head to foot, before at last dropping to examine the sandals. “Hmm. Whichever angel it was, he got hard use out of them.”
Mehmed frowned again, wondering how the same angel who had worn such wide sandals could have got his feet into Mehmed’s boots. But he looked again at the hodja, and anybody could see from that serene, wise smile that he was divinely inspired. And who was he, Mehmed, to question the power of angels?
Eyup began chanting a prayer. “Allah, enlighten us. What divine use have you found for my young friend’s boots? What angel of Thine is now trampling the sinners with tooled red leather? Oh, Allah, we thank Thee for making us and especially my young companion here partners in Thy holy mission. Oh, Mehmed, pray with me.”
Well, thought Mehmed. He had misjudged the peddler. He really was a religious man.

Shuffling along to keep the big sandals on his feet, Mehmed followed Eyup to a corner building where they were offered kumis and sweets. Several other men, some of whom looked as though they had been sitting in the same place for hours and intended to stay for a few hours more, nodded and greeted them without curiosity. In one corner, two men were playing tavla while three or four others looked on and made sucking or humming noises at each move. The building where they had stopped, like many of the homes in this quarter, was no longer a single family’s permanent residence, but it and the neighboring houses had been converted into a kind of multi-unit caravanserai.

And here he and Eyup spent the night. In the morning, he found that the too-wide sandals had been replaced by another, slightly less worn pair that were much closer to his size. He looked over to Eyup, who was snoring softly by his side on the hard bench, and then back at his feet. How wonderful were the ways of God.

**Thunderbolt**

26 Zilkade, 804 Hegira

(28 June, Anno Domini 1402)

**Yull**

_DRRR!_  
_OOoommmm._

Flash, crash, then the moans of the dying.

_Yildirim_ is the sound of the Thunderbolt. _YILDIRIM_ is how a gazi strikes.

It was dusk when the captain of the guards of the treasure convoy on the shore of the Black Sea sensed a vibration, an unexpected presence, and looked up to scan the horizon. To the north, on the sea, the galliot rocked lightly on the waves, its single sail furled and oars raised, ready to receive its cargo. Nearer, half in the water and half on the beach, the seven skiffs swayed lightly, waiting to be loaded. To the east and south, only the evening calls of birds stirred the coastal forest through which the caravan had come.

But the heavy-laden mules were nervous. On the high ridge to the southwest the captain glimpsed a small, turbulent dark spot against the sun. The other guards had followed the captain’s movements, and one of them muttered, “It’s a jinn. A jinn in a halo.”

“Or gazis,” growled the captain.

The halo wavered, the dark center grew larger, then disappeared behind the rocks and trees. The oldest soldiers reached for their swords, their lances. There were only twenty of them, afoot beside the pack mules. They had not been expecting any trouble. They were infantry, without the privilege of mounting horses. Only their captain and logothete had horses. And they had not brought bows. The imperial archers, higher-ranking and better paid, were all aboard the galliot, which was more than a bow shot away.

The three youngest soldiers, including a son of the captain, swiftly imitated their elders, dropping the leads of the heavy-laden mules and unsheathing their swords.

Seeing this, the logothete of the drome in silk and gilded caftan grasped the jeweled cross on his breast, pointed his beard at the captain and demanded, “What is it? Why do you drop the lead ropes? We must hurry to load!”

“Gazis,” repeated the captain, louder. “The devil’s whelps.”

“No. Those impious criminals? Here? That can’t be,” insisted the logothete of the drome. “No one knew of this delivery. You must be mistaken! Pick up those lead-ropes, you. And you there, by the
skiffs, get ready to load. Quickly!”

The soldiers hesitated. The mules, alternately yanked and halted, grew more jittery and snorted and brayed.

“Listen,” said the captain. He had heard, and soon the others could also make out, a ululation, “ul-ul-ul-ul-ul-ul,” deeper and more sustained than any bird-cry. The captain glanced around for some, any defensive position on the shore. The rocks and trees to his right were just a short run away, but not with the heavily laden animals. The archers on the galliot were too far to be of any aid.

“Hurry!” commanded the logothete. “Get all the load you can into those skiffs at once.”

The captain calculated the time to load and row to the galliot, the probable number of the attacking raiders, the speed of their approach, and then once more looked back at the boulders to the east.

“To horse, Your Excellency!” he shouted. “Men! Cut those bindings!”

“What is this treason? Abandon the goods and run? Coward! Men, hold fast!”

But even he now heard the hooves coming from two directions.

“Saint Michael Archangel, save us!” he cried to the heavens. Then, to the men, “We must save the treasure! Grab those mule halters. Quickly! Get it onto the skiffs!” ordered the logothete.

The soldiers started to obey, but when they looked to their captain, remounted now and raising his sword, they left the lashings of the packs on the mules half-undone. The heavy bags on some of them now slipped thudding to the ground, and the mules, suddenly freed of part of their weight, began to move nervously, seeking a way out of the circle of agitated men.

“The mules!” shouted the logothete.

“Our skins!” shouted one or more of the guards. Or something like that, because now there were new noises, shouts from the guards and the logothete and the ululating cries of the horsemen now bearing down upon them. One of the guards took his dagger and slashed the bindings of the mule he had been leading, yanked its burden to the ground, then leapt upon the animal’s back. Others, seeing this, started to do the same. Then steel on steel, a sharp yell, more sounds of collision of steel on flesh or bone or steel, of horse against horse or mule.

The guards on foot and still standing turned and ran for the trees through which they had come, quickly to be passed by a riderless, packless mule and then by mules with guards clinging to their bare backs, and the logothete trying to ride one mule still loaded and pulling another until an arrow struck him in the back and he fell between the two beasts, kicked in the head by one and, his wide pantaloon caught on a silver vessel in the pack, dragged along the ground by the other.

“Well! That was easy,” said Mihail the tekvur, laughing.

Arslanshahin Gazi grinned with his eyes, his enormous mustache stretched wide across his face. The Muslim gazi and the Christian tekvur had collaborated before on raids, but this had been by far the simplest to execute and one of the most productive.

One of the wounded guards was still alive. Arslan nudged his horse closer and looked down at the youth.

“Allah be praised! For the love of Allah, spare me!”

Arslan straightened in his saddle and, one eyebrow raised, turned to Mihail.

“Why, so he’s a Turk! And a lover of Allah!” said Mihail, laughing again and bringing his horse closer so that he could look down on the slender figure trying to stem the blood from a gash in his side.

“A half an hour ago he was commending his soul to Christ. Weren’t you, sonny?”

The young soldier—he couldn’t have been more than seventeen—shuddered and trembled so badly he couldn’t speak.

Mihail’s face suddenly grew fierce and he roared at the youth. “Thou renegade! Infidel! Know that I, the Tekvur Mihail, am a soldier of Christ! And yet you dare call upon Allah!”

The boy trembled harder and paled so that he appeared about to faint. And now it was Arslan’s turn to laugh, a huge, deep laugh that Mihail, and then the other men, both the Christians who followed
Mihail and the Muslim warriors of Arslan’s band, joined in. The boy on the ground opened his mouth and eyes wide and began to breathe in longer, deeper breaths. The laughter of his assailants had changed the situation. Perhaps they were not about to kill him.

“Tend to him,” said Arslan to one of his men, who slipped from his horse to the ground and pulled a packet of balm from under his saddle.

Mihail looked at the scattered heaps of treasure, coffers with gold and silver binding, bags of jewels, and—most valued of all—rolls of Persian silks and bags of spices. Besides all that he saw nothing of interest but five or six dead men in unimpressive armor and, at a little distance, the heap of flesh and silk that had been the logothete.

“Too bad there are no slaves,” he said. Looking toward the galliot in the bay, where there was great agitation on deck, he laughed again and day-dreamed, “If only we could lure those chaps to shore. Then we might have some slaves worth selling! Enough for you and me.”

Arslan turned his gaze to the galliot too. He smiled sadly. “And what would I do with slaves, my brother? Well enough for you, perhaps, to sell in the towns near here. But I and my men have to travel hard and fast to return to the siege, too fast for such burdens. We’ll take what we can carry on our horses, two or three gold items, some silks, and perhaps the spices.”

“Well, you know. As many times as I’ve ridden with you, I’ve never understood your strange choices of the booty we seize. What’s the point of raiding if you’re not going to get rich? With your full share of this lot, you could build yourself a very fine castle and hire hundreds of Turkmens to fight for you to become richer still.”

“You’re right, Mihail. You don’t understand us and you never will. A gazi counts wealth differently, and with this coup, I am already far wealthier than I was yesterday. These gold trinkets are superfluous, except as proof of the power of my raids.”

Then, seeing something that his man Turgut was eyeing curiously, he ordered it be brought to him. “What’s that you’ve got?” said Mihail.

“It’s a winged warrior!” Kemal shouted. “With a sword!”

Arslan took the miniature and stared at it, as though expecting it to speak. “Hah! Why, that’s my namesake!” exclaimed Mihail. “The archangel Michael.” “Shahin,” muttered Arslan and stuck it into his tunic.

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**Merchants**

27 Zilkade, 804 Hegira  
(29 June, Anno Domini 1402)

A perfumed slave led Bardas through the vestibule, past wonderfully elaborate and obscene ancient statues and priceless vases of oriental design, to a space just off a garden where bright tulips glowed in the sun and roses gave off their scent. Goudelis, seated in a backless chair with gold feet and armrests, turned when the slave pronounced Bardas’ name. Bardas had never seen him this close. A ruddy, white-haired, and bearded face surprisingly smooth for a man of fifty, Giorgos Goudelis, he knew, was born the same year as Emperor Manuel II. But in contrast to the way the emperor looked on the day of his departure to the West, Goudelis appeared fat and healthy in what had become a city of skinny wretches.

Waving a wide sleeve, the host signaled for his guest to sit in a chair much like his own, where a soft silk cushion awaited Bardas’ posterior. “Tzimiskes,” Goudelis said, “An imperial name.”

“My family are distant cousins of the late emperors, your lordship.”

“‘Late’ indeed. The last Armenian dynasty was centuries past. They tell me, Bardas Tzimiskes, that you are a merchant.”
“A very humble one, your lordship. Not fit to tie the sandal of yourself.”
“Oh, but that can change. In this world fortunes are made, and fortunes are lost. Like sandals.”

Bardas became very conscious of his feet and the fine white boots he had put on for the occasion. Giorgos Goudelis, he was confused to see, in fact was wearing quite simple sandals. Simple, but no doubt of finest leather and very costly.

“A young merchant with ambition may be just what I need. My friends also tell me that you speak Turkish
For business, your lordship. It is useful for trading with the heathens.”

“I’ve been trying to learn it myself, the Turkish language, from a Vardar in my service. A Christian, of course. He tells me, though, that the Osmanlis speak a cruder version than the Vardars, and frankly, I’ve had hardly any time for serious practice anyway. So I will need a man who speaks Osmanli Turkish.”

“That is what I know.”

Goudelis paused, seeming to expect Bardas to say something more, but Bardas couldn’t think of anything, so Goudelis went on.

“In my youth, besides our own Greek, the languages that an ambitious merchant needed were Latin, for our greedy but naive brethren to the west, and Persian for the more adventurous of us who were after the real riches, those of the more sophisticated realms of the South and East. Ah, such palaces! And unending banquets. I learned to recite whole poems in Persian, lovely things about birds, the arcing flights of arrows, the shining black pools of a maiden’s eyes. Do you know any Osmanli poetry, friend Bardas?”

“Why, no, Your Lordship. I don’t believe there is any. Except those barbarous chants and some ridiculous stories about their heroes.” Bardas blushed at being called “friend” by the great man, even though he knew it was merely an expression.

“No, I suppose not. Perhaps one day, if they become civilized. Too bad you don’t know any of those chants. Poetry can be very useful to a merchant, especially when one deals with the potentates of the East. And even more especially, if the potentate’s chief wife invites one to a festival. Many times I was able to surprise a khan and win his trust only because I could sing the praises of his women and his food in his own favorite verses. Remember that trick, young Bardas. Find something to recite in their own language.”

“Yes, Your Lordship.”

“Ah, such sweet times. But now…The Turks, no poetry at all, except for some mystic gibberish by an illiterate dervish, they tell me.”

“That would be Yunus Emre, my lord,” interjected Bardas, happy to display at least a bit of relevant knowledge. “Very mystical, hard to make out whether they are love songs to his god or to some woman.”

Goudelis laughed. “How much better it would be if it were the Persians about to conquer us. But I don’t have to tell you, Bardas, that Polis—perhaps in a matter of weeks or even days—will be a Turkish city.”

“Polis? New Rome? Turkish, Your Lordship? That cannot be! Our walls are still strong. And even if they cede, surely God will find a way to save his Christian city. Or anyway, that is what the patriarch and the holy monks say.”

“Come, man. Let’s speak frankly. Do we have any choice? It’s surrender or the sword. You and I are merchants, not monks. Our faith is money, and our kingdom is of this earth. Open your eyes.”

“But, Polis Turkish. Those people hate cities, they destroy them. Our faith is money, and our kingdom is of this earth. Open your eyes.”
Goudelis laughed. “Neither did our patriarchs, you’ll remember! But we found ways around that restriction, didn’t we? Christian, Muslim, what does it matter? I am told that your family all were of the Armenian confession, but that you have become Roman Orthodox. Better for business, no doubt. So what does religion really mean to you? Credit? There’s always a way. And as for destroying the City, who has done more damage? Christians or Muslims? Who stole the horses of the Hippodrome and turned our churches into stables and burned our libraries and profaned our monasteries and our women? Not the followers of Allah, but men of the cross, crusaders who got distracted on their way to liberate Jerusalem.”

“The Muslims have done great damage to our walls with their terrible machines.”

“The walls will stand. They’ve stood for eleven times a hundred years. The problem is that the besiegers are starving us of trade. A city cannot live and grow without trade. Once we become part of their empire, of the Osmanlis, all the riches of the East will again be open to us. And the Venetians and Genoese and other Latins of the West will come eagerly for the silks and spices and Damascus steel and leather and Chinese embroideries and so on, no more concerned about the crescent than they ever where about the Cross of Saint George, so different from the long-legged cross they use in their countries.

“And what about the conflicts among our own Christians here in Polis, our Roman Orthodox versus Armenians, Hesychasts versus Anti-Hesychasts? Which of these devout believers would you trust to keep a bargain, eh? Every believer knows some ruse, to swear by his faith with his rosary reversed or some other trick so that he is secretly not beholden to it. Do you trust them any more than one who swears by Allah?”

Shocking ideas they were, and Bardas felt both fear and pleasure that the great man took him so into his confidence as to voice such heresies. This emboldened Bardas to exhibit his erudition and try out a speculation of his own.

“You know, Your Lordship, now that you mention it, I have sometimes wondered if some of those who call themselves Bektashis, among the Alevite Muslims, were not seeking in their trances the same divine light as Gregory Palamas tells us is sought by our Hesychast monks.”

Goudelis looked at him so sharply, and for so long without moving, that Bardas grew most uncomfortable. He looked around at the costly treasures from Venice, Bactria, and perhaps China.

“Theology,” snorted Goudelis at last. “A young man’s folly. If you get lost in such fantasies, you will be hopeless for the real religion.”

“The real religion, Your Lordship?”

“Commerce. The only faith that makes cities grow and men prosper. Hesychasts, indeed! Staring at their navel to find the divine light, as though God had put a lantern in their bellies. Would you like to see the true divine light?”

He pushed up one of his flowing sleeves, reached into a satchel on the floor next to his chair, and dumped a clatter of gold pieces onto the table. “See how they glitter?”

Hyperions and Venetian florins and other bits of gold sparkled as they cascaded from the merchant’s hands onto the marble, reflecting the light streaming in from his garden. Bardas stared, entranced.

“Lovely, aren’t they? And do you want power? Whoever controls this can send men to the farthest reaches of the earth, make fields blossom, turn peasant girls into princesses and princesses into strumpets, make wide avenues grow where only dirt trails lay before, create abundance where there was only wretched poverty.”

A mostaudacious thought came to Bardas, and before he could stop himself, he uttered it. “If commerce be religion, Your Lordship, then you must be its patriarch.”

How good it was to see Goudelis laugh! And what a relief. Bardas felt he had made up for what his host had earlier taken for a very stupid remark.

“Yes, yes, the patriarch of commerce. And you, Monk Bardas, with the completion of this mission, you may become its bishop.”
“Monk” Bardas. A “bishop” of commerce. Bardas savored the outrageous words. Goudelis was wise —his wealth, some of it inherited but more than doubled by his own shrewd dealing, was proof of that. And he had taken the humble Bardas Tzimiskes into his confidence, saying to him things that could not be said.

“Oh, something else. You do speak Latin, do you not?”

“Yes, sir. Quite passably. Business Latin, that is. I take care to protect my soul from their religious tracts.”

“‘Arma virumque cano…’” Goudelis chanted, and many more verses in the same rhythm. After a few minutes he stopped, as though suddenly remembering something, and swung his gaze from the ceiling to his guest’s face. “You do recognize that, do you not?”

“Um, poetry, is it not?”

Goudelis laughed again, dismissively. “No matter,” he said. “For the merchant empress, business Latin will be quite good enough.”

And it was then that Goudelis laid out his plan and his proposition.

Tengri
27 Zilkade, 804 Hegira
(29 June, Anno Domini 1402)

Arslanshahin stood before his tent, facing toward the land of his ancestors, in the moments before Tengri’s sun would appear over the mountain ridge. This was Arslan’s sacred time, before the Muslims’ call to prayer and before the birds first broke out in song, the time to read the first rays of sun and the shadows cast by rocks and leaves and whatever else the morning showed. Such signs could not lie because they came direct from Tengri, from heaven itself. Not like those marks in ink on parchment that the mullah had tried to teach him to read when he was still a boy called Yegenek, long before he had won his warrior’s name.

At the first glimmer of sun rimming the ridge, Arslan dropped to his knees and threw his arms wide, his head back and eyes closed, to receive into himself as much of Tengri’s power as one man could hold. He felt the light break upon his face and breathed it in, along with the smells of plants and dew and animals. And so he remained until, from somewhere in the camp, he heard the hoarse and rhythmic chant of the call to Muslim prayer and opened his eyes. He rose and forced the remaining air from his lungs.

“Uncle,” called out a young voice. The gazi had known the boy was near, for in his union with the power he always remained especially aware of every sound and presence.

“My uncle, forgive me, but may I ask? Why do you not pray like other men, facing south toward Mecca?”

The gazi half-closed his eyes against the brightening eastern sky. He turned to look over the tents and the movements of the men in his camp. He could see some of them pouring water over elbows and feet before extending themselves in prayer.

“Ask your grandmother, Kemal. She will teach you everything when she thinks you are ready.”

“When I ask her, she just repeats that verse, ‘In the line of the hare, our strength is in the ways of Oguz.’ What does that mean?”

“For Oguz is our father, and his are the ways of Tengri,’” Arslan completed the verse, looking again toward the eastern sky.

“Is Tengri greater than Allah?”

Arslan stiffened and whirled to face the boy, his sword drawn, ready to strike a demon. But it was
only the boy, his dead brother's son, the young face suddenly pale and his eyes wide. Arslan turned away and struck his sword against the ground, cutting a deep gash and disintegrating the invisible demon into a cloud of dust.

He remained silent until his breathing slowed and he had willed his head to cool. The boy was fourteen now, nearly a man and eager for his circumcision. That was why he asked such an impertinent question. Arslan had told him that he himself had not been circumcised but had become a man in the old way, in battle, as his father had before him. But Kemal had been listening to the mullahs.

“...

And do the mullahs not tell you that Allah has ninety-nine names?”
“Yes,” the boy answered doubtfully.
“Tengri is the name the sons of Oguz knew before we had heard the others.”
The boy frowned, clearly unsatisfied but not daring to ask more.
“Do you want to learn the Oguz ways? It is time. Come. And bring your pony.”
Arslan clucked “Ku-ruk!” and his little mare hopped over. He saddled her and then released the hobble from her forefeet. The boy did the same with his pony.

They rode past the other tents where the men of the band were finishing their prayers and into the hollow with all the extra horses, geldings and mares kept for riding, milk, and meat.

“As you ride through the herd, listen and watch how they move their heads. If you are a true Oguz, they will tell you something of the day to come.”

“The horses know?”
“The horses do not know, but the horse spirit of Tengri speaks through them to us. That spirit knows everything that will come to pass this day and the next and all the days after, but reveals these things to us only a little at a time, only as much as we need to fulfill our destiny as it is written in the book in the sky. But the horses, these mortal horses you see before you, they themselves know nothing. And sometimes they can be as silly as men. With practice, you will be able to tell the difference between the nervousness of a single horse or mare and the true voice of the horse spirit.”

“Arslan my uncle, is that one speaking? The roan gelding? See how his head is raised above the others, and he is not watching us, he seems to be looking for something else far away.”

“Very good, Kemal. And his ears? What do they tell you?”

“Oh, the ears! They are raised and twitching, moving as though…to catch some distant sound?”

“And where is that sound, Kemal, according to the gelding?”

“It must be—there! To the south and west.”

The gazi turned in his saddle toward those hills, then back to the little herd. Other animals now had raised their heads and were seeking something in the same general direction.

“Come. Back to the camp. It is no danger—only two or possibly three riders, from the direction of the City. We shall await them.”

Arslan recognized both visitors. The foremost rider was Nazim Bey, a second-rank vizier and thus answerable to Ali Pasha, who was answerable only to the sultan. The other was the aga of the janissaries—the man who had shouted at him to stop just days before. They had come alone, but bringing a third horse, large, intranquil, and naked but for its bridle.

“The chief of viziers, my bey Chandarli Ali Pasha, sends you greetings,” said the corpulent vizier, bowing slightly from the saddle.

“Welcome to the humble war-camp of Arslan Gazi, son of the gazi Kara Göne and servant and warrior of Bayezid Khan.” Saying this, the gazi touched his fingertips together and bowed, though no more deeply than the vizier.

“Not ‘Bayezid Khan,’ honored gazi. Yildirim Bayezid is not just ‘khan,’ he is ‘sultan’ now,” Nazim reminded him, as though the ancient title of khan were somehow inferior to the newer, foreign term.
gazi replied with an ambiguous wobble of his head, a “yes” or “no” or merely “I have heard you.”

The vizier Nazım hesitated, squirming in the saddle. The aga, half a length behind, smiled sourly and slouched comfortably, prepared to wait as long as necessary. Defying newer protocol, the gazi looked directly at Nazım in the gazi way.

The vizier was tall, stout, and awkward on a horse. Court life had fattened him. The aga was weathered and wiry, the expression on his scarred face suggesting corruption of a different source. This was a man who had taken many blows and was prepared to take many more from those more powerful, and who would readily knife his master’s enemies if they let their guard down—or his master, if that seemed necessary.

At last, satisfied that he had made the vizier sufficiently uncomfortable, Arslan smiled and gestured for the visitors to dismount. “Kemal, advise your grandmother that we have guests. And tell Turgut and your uncle Mesud that Arslanshahin Gazi requests their presence.”

Now seated on the carpet, Arslan and the aga smiled at one another, ignoring the vizier. An outsider might have interpreted the smile as mere friendliness, but it lasted too long for that, each man determined to hold the gaze of the other until at last the aga conceded and looked away. Two women appeared with a carpet that they rolled out on the ground, and another brought bowls of kumis, still fresh and warm, for each of the three men, and then another for Kemal. As slowly as though in a ritual dance, Arslanshahin reached behind his head to retie the ends of his mustache before lifting the bowl to his lips. At that signal, the aga likewise picked up his bowl. And after what he must have considered a dignified interval, so did the vizier Nazım.

Turgut, the agile archer whom the gazi trusted to ride on his left in all their raids, and Mesud, Arslan’s rather clumsy but spirited half-brother who usually rode a little farther back, arrived from different directions at the same time. They left their horses hobbled at a little distance, made their reverences—Turgut’s a quick snap of head, hands, and waist, Mesud’s deeper and slower—and took their places on the carpet, one to either side of Arslanshahin. Their arrival called for more bowls of kumis and, from Mesud, more speeches of welcome and wishes for the well-being of their two honored guests and even a vehement though ambiguous speech of praise of the great Yıldırım Bayezid, sultan and son of Murad, great-grandson of the gazi Osman, with special emphasis on the deeds of those heroic ancestors.

At last Nazım, impatient at all the rhyming genealogy, interrupted. He stated his purpose: he had been sent by the chief of viziers, Ali Pasha, to invite the honored Arslanshahin Gazi—son of the remembered and lamented great Kara Göne Gazi, added Mesud—to discuss certain matters of interest to the sultan, eight days hence.

“That is indeed an honor,” said Arslan with his head inclined forward so that his lips were concealed beneath the bulging mustache, though his eyes were bright and seemed to smile.

“In the great palace at Kütahya no less,” growled the aga.

“Inside a palace? With a roof of stone between us and the sky? The honor is too great to accept, honored vizier. But Ali Pasha is himself of the gazi tradition, is he not? Gazis should meet in the gazi way.”

“You mean…?”

“He means on horseback, each with his own men close by to cover his back,” clarified the aga.

“Oh,” said Nazım. “It is a matter of trust. Of course. You must be thinking of that misunderstanding a few days ago. I assure you, the aga was acting beyond the commands of my chief vizier, Chandarlı Ali Pasha, who wishes you no harm. The aga—” he turned to look at the man referred to “—has a warrior’s brusqueness that is sometimes excessive.”

The aga said nothing, either by word or facial muscle. Arslan raised his head, revealing his smile. Turgut turned his head and spat loudly into the dirt just beyond the carpet.

“The pasha has foreseen such an objection, and therefore authorizes me to offer this proposal. As
guarantee, the aga will remain in the gazi Arslanshahin’s camp. And my vizier and pasha invites the gazi’s young nephew meanwhile to be his guest in Kütahya. We have heard that he is a bright lad and would no doubt find much to learn there.”

“Mutual hostages,” muttered Turgut.

They sat silently, and even Kemal did his best to keep still, for about a minute.

“Kütahya!” he gasped. “The summer palace of the sultan.”

Arslan looked up again at the vizier Nazim. “You will be our guests tonight. We shall be pleased to give our reply tomorrow in the morning.”

Nazim turned to look at the aga. The aga nodded.

And to show his respect for the house of Kara Göne and for Arslanshahin personally, Nazim begged the gazi his host to accept some humble gifts.

The vizier’s gifts were three, as tradition demanded. Except that no tradition demanded that a vizier bestow anything upon a simple gazi. Arslan was being treated like a bey, although he had no beylik to rule. First was a sturdy bow and its quiver with arrows, three times three: three with heads of hardened steel for piercing Christian armor or felling a large horse, three of middle weight for normal combat or hunting deer or chamois, and three lighter still to bring down birds and other small game. Second was an elegant saddle cover of red and yellow silk with silver brocade around the pommel hole and the skirt to cover the horse’s croup. And finally the horse. It was a large mixed-breed, from a Turkmen sire and a bigger European dam. Not a gelding but a horse entire, a stallion, harder to control but quick and powerful.

Arslan well knew that by accepting these gifts he would be accepting the pasha’s invitation, or politely disguised command, to attend him eight days hence. He hesitated. The horse was especially magnificent.

Arslan reached out to caress the stallion’s deep brown flank. Stroking the horse’s long underjaw, he brought his face close so that his and the beast’s foreheads nearly touched, the animal staring at him intently with one eye. Then the gazi spoke strange words that to the vizier’s amazement calmed the stallion and made him nod. With a gesture of hand to forehead and then to chest, he acknowledged the offer. Then Nazim said something unexpected.

“The gifts of course are for you to keep, regardless of whether or not you accept the pasha’s invitation. The pasha himself instructed me to say that.”

No sooner had he said that than Arslan, as though in one movement and so swiftly no enemy, not even the crafty aga, would have had a chance to strike, leapt to the stallion’s bare back. At the touch of the reins and the pressure of his knees the animal raised its head and the newly formed centaur trotted briskly in a circle round the vizier and the aga.

“We await your decision,” said the vizier. “If agreed, the meeting will be eight days hence,” he repeated.

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**Palaces and Pigs**

27 Zilkade, 804 Hegira

(29 June, Anno Domini 1402)

Mehmed thought he knew about cities. He had been stationed in Bursa, which had paved streets and many buildings. And once, when he was little, his father had taken him inside the walls of Thessalonica, which had earlier been the second city of the empire. But compared to this, Bursa was just a bustling village and Thessalonica only a smaller replica of the true Polis.

He had left the Turkish quarter early in the morning, and now he was in the real City, the Greek Orthodox city, or—as he imagined it—the bustling corridors of the palace. And such a bustle, here in the
palace’s—the City’s—most ancient center, where the peninsula narrowed to a point. Ali Pasha had called it the finger of Rum reaching out to the nipple of Anatolia. But another time Mehmed had heard him say it was an arrow pointed at that breast. In fact, though, when you were inside it, it was a confusion of too-tall buildings, some of them three stories high, and monuments even higher and pathways and avenues.

Unlike the cozy, cramped neighborhood of last night, here the fora, the Hippodrome, the churches, all the public spaces were scaled to hold huge crowds, many times as many people as were actually out in the streets this morning. Still, there were more people than Mehmed had ever seen together in any town, mostly but not all of them men and most of them in groups of three or four. Many of them seemed to be in a great hurry, the little groups talking animatedly and walking swiftly, some in one direction, some in another, entirely unlike the disciplined horde—the only other place where Mehmed had seen so many people. Others slumped in doorways, exhausted no doubt from the previous day’s exertions.

Many of the market stalls were empty, with no goods and no merchants attending them. In others the goods piled up on the shelves looked like a hodgepodge, as though coming from different households. The only vendors haggling animatedly with clients were in one section where the counters displayed cauliflowers, olives, cheeses, stacks of flat bread, and fruits. A small pig dangled from a hook at the back of a butcher’s stall, and a haunch of what Mehmed thought was probably a camel had drawn a crowd of flies and an even angrier crowd of women shouting at the butcher. Curious, Mehmed started to cross the square to find out what they were arguing about.

“Oh, I apologize, ma’am. Please forgive me. I—oh, let me help you.”

He knelt down to grab up the little cakes and pile them back onto the woman’s tray.

She made a strange sound, a laugh and a snort. “You young fool. Who’s going to want these now? And I don’t suppose you have money to pay for them?”

“Maybe if we dust them off—Look! As good as new. Almost. Well, maybe not. Oh, I’m sorry. Were you going to sell them?”

She leaned back and looked up at him. Like everybody else he had seen in this city, man or woman, she was wearing wide pantaloons in the eastern fashion.

“Why, no, you long drink of water. I was planning to use these buns to patch our crumbling walls, to keep the Turks out. They’re hard enough, don’t you think? So we don’t have to tear down any more churches for the stones. So you see, it doesn’t matter a bit if they get a little dusty.”

It took him a second to realize that she was making fun of him. It must be some kind of urban humor, he thought, and he felt the warmth as his face reddened.

“Hmm,” she hmm’ed. “Lucky for you I wasn’t planning to sell them. You wouldn’t be able to pay, not likely. Now you come with me and explain to the navvies why their lunch buns are dented and dirty,” she said in a rapid Greek speckled with words that Mehmed guessed might be Persian.

“Come!” she commanded. And Mehmed, accustomed to obeying orders, followed her through the square, down some stone steps between buildings, and onto lower ground, where they passed between some more buildings, and suddenly Mehmed was looking out onto water. There was a galley with a Venetian pennant tied up at the dock and some smaller boats with latten sails and only four oars apiece. A gang of bare-chested men hauled carts up to the edge of the pier by the galley. A little way across the water he could see a hill crowded with buildings and on top of it a tower that confused him, because it didn’t seem to be in the right place.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said. “Is that the hisar, I mean the tower of the sultan Bayezid?”

She turned and looked at him with horror on her face. “How dare you pronounce the name of the devil?” She crossed herself.

“Not to offend, ma’am. I just called him by his name.”

“Ah, you are a clever one. ‘Called him by his name.’ That’s good, because that is the name of the devil, as far as we’re concerned. But that’s no hisar”—she evidently knew the word—“that’s a torre, is
what they call it over there, in their Catholic tongue. That’s Galata, where the Genoese live. Everybody
knows that. Where are you from?”

“Hey, Paulos!” the woman shouted out to one of the bare-chested men with the carts. “I brought you
another pair of hands. A bit feeble-minded, but he looks strong. And he owes me for these buns. Look
what he did to them! Knocked them to the ground, he did. So put him to work and let him work it off.”
Paulos glanced at the buns and looked at Mehmed, sizing him up. “What’s your name, lad?”

“What does he owe you, Mother Zoë?”

The other navvies had stepped forward to see what was going on. Mehmed considered making a run
for it—he thought he could probably outrun these broadly built, lumbering men, but he didn’t know the
city and wouldn’t know where to turn. And besides, the vizier might welcome a report from the docks.
So he looked at the men and turned his head in a friendly way and smiled. There were five of them, only
one anywhere near his own age, all with hugely developed shoulders and arms and the three oldest with
impressive bellies. They just scowled at him.

“Well, get to it!” said Paulos and, grabbing Mehmed by the shoulder, shoved him in the direction of
the carts.

And so he spent the next hours grunting and sweating and hauling wooden casks and bales tightly
bound in burlap and twine off the galley and into the carts, and then helping push and pull the carts to
where the casks and bales were reloaded onto larger, mule-drawn wagons. The casks were heavy, and
their contents didn’t shift as he would expect of grain or fruits for the hungry city. His rewards were lots
of gossip and banter in a dialect that he could barely understand. Long before break time, the men had
begun to laugh with him more than at him, having found a new audience for their old jokes.

It was late afternoon when they all took a break, and one of the older navvies, Matthew, handed him
the two dirtiest and most damaged wheat cakes, with a little olive oil and a foul mix of bad wine and
water. Mehmed hadn’t learned much that would interest the vizier, he thought. He certainly could not
repeat the dirty jokes about the sultan’s wives. And the closest thing to a political opinion he’d heard
was Paulos’ remark that the Galatans’ trading was left unmolested by the siege, because “old
Bayezounds hasn’t got three good rafts to put in the water, and besides, those Genoese merchants send
him and his little chieftains enough wine and gold and women slaves to keep ’em happy.” He didn’t
think this was anything he should report either.

The galley they had just unloaded was the only one in the port just now on this side of the water,
although he could see three others just across the Horn.

“You remember what this was like before the siege?” said one of the old-timers. “We’d have three
times as many men and be working till sundown. So many galleys and ships coming in, there’d be
collisions as they tried to get into the best docks. Phew. Half a day and just a handful of us now, and
that’s it. Well, kid, I guessed you’ve paid your debt to old Zoë.” Mehmed swallowed the last crumbs of
the plain, dry cake and a little of the watered wine before he asked, as innocently as he could manage,
“And just what is in those bundles and barrels we unloaded? Must be pretty valuable for a ship to risk
running the blockade.”

“Ha!” said the same old-timer who had spoken before. “Didn’t I just tell you that fool of a sultan
doesn’t have a real navy? Turkmens don’t know how to sail worth a damn.”

“No, but they’ve got some Greek slaves and Arabs to do it for them. It’s still tricky getting through
the straits,” opined Paulos. “But if the prize is rich enough, those Venetians will try anything.”

Mehmed felt a mix of pride and shame listening to these remarks. He wanted to remind them of the
famous navy of the emir of Aydin so they wouldn’t dismiss so quickly the skills of Turkish sailors, but
then, he wasn’t really a Turk but a Greek in the sultan’s service.

“A rich prize, then, you said?” he said. “I thought some of those casks were pretty heavy…”
But no one paid any attention to this probe. They were all looking at something behind him. Mehmed turned and saw another man, plump and ruddy and vigorous-looking despite his white hair and beard. He was dressed most elegantly in silks of pink and orange. Ignoring Mehmed, he strode up to Paulos who was sitting comfortably on a barrel just a few feet away. The slave holding his parasol had to hustle quickly, almost in a dance step, to keep up. Mehmed judged the slave to be about his own age.

“Very good, my boys,” said the newcomer. “You’ve earned your pay. Now who’s the extra lad?”

“Ah,” answered Paulos. “Don’t worry about him. He won’t cost you anything. Just giving us a little free help.”

“Mm hmm. Well, but…” The man in silk bent over and whispered something into Paulos’ ear. “Just you, you know, as usual.”

“And when do we get paid?” shouted Matthew.

“Why, you know. As always. After delivery.”

“But this delivery is a little unusual, and, well, what if it doesn’t get, let’s say, completed?”

The man in silk frowned and shook with exasperation. “I can’t pay you or your men until I myself get paid. You know that.”

“Oh, it’s not as though you were poor or anything. Give us an advance, at least. And I promise you, my men and I will keep very quiet. Right, men?”

“Aah!” It was a growl, almost a roar, that came from the merchant. But Paulos didn’t seem the least frightened. Mehmed somehow got the impression that they’d played out this or similar scenes many times before.


The man in silk now turned and looked at him with intense concern. “Who is this lad? He’s not from around here. He must be a spy. Get him!”

The navvies just sat and watched. As the slave took a step toward him, Mehmed jumped to his feet. He snatched up his shirt and put his hand to his sash, making it clear that he had a knife. The slave hesitated. Mehmed turned and ran. He heard shouts, but no one seemed to follow as he turned a corner around a building. Excited and a little dizzy, he leaned against a wall and arranged his clothes. He realized that he had hardly slept, that he had been thrown into a setting that was all the more disorienting for being both entirely new and yet vaguely familiar. Also, he had been engaged in heavy labor for too many hours now and had hardly eaten. If he could just find his way back to that tavern before it got too dark, maybe he could get something more to eat and a place to sleep.

He wandered up a path between the warehouses and suddenly realized that he was standing in front of the greatest church in Christendom. Somehow—some memory of something he had been told, long ago, in his childhood life as a Christian—told him that these immense pillars of white marble, one after another, stood before Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom. Cautiously he stepped around the nearest pillar until he could see what could only be the church itself. It was a living thing, an animal of unimaginably great size and power. Majestic, supremely confident, repository of great magic. He stared until a noise of someone passing by made him realize he was making himself too conspicuous.

Of all the people ambling by and in and out of the great church, he was the only one who seemed impressed. Mehmed felt…embarrassed. Out of place, an intruder.

Standing with his back against one of the huge marble columns in the forum before the church, he tried to make himself disappear into its stone. He stared at the city that was his and not his, at these people who seemed like the people he had known in childhood, a bearded priest in his black robes and
hat leading a small procession of monks bearing censers and a silver cross from some part of the great church to what must be the main entrance. Mehmed shook his head sadly, confused, tired. He felt tears on his cheeks as his legs gave way and he slid with his back against the pillar until he was sitting on the stone pavement. He would just rest here a little while he worked up courage to ask, in his strange accent, for directions back to the tavern where he had left Eyup.

Staring at the ground just a little ahead of him, he became aware of a pair of boots and leggings and, next to them, the toes of another pair of boots beneath the low embroidered hem of an elegant wool tunic. They had stopped right in front of him. He looked up.

The man in the leggings smiled at him, gently, almost mockingly. Mehmed turned to the other bearded face of the man in the long wool tunic. This man also looked down on him but didn’t smile. His hands, brought together across his belly, were hidden in the very long sleeves.

“This is a new one,” said the man in leggings, with amusement in his voice. He seemed to assume that Mehmed would not hear or understand him.

“I thought I knew them all, but we seem to be getting new crazies every day.”

The one in the leggings and the short tunic had a white turban wound tightly on his head, Mehmed noticed. He looked quite elegant. The other was more formally attired, with a flat, round hat, also white. This second man tilted his head slowly one way then the other. Mehmed imitated him, smiling stupidly, not knowing what else to do. The man examining him, however, did not smile. Instead he crossed himself.

“They are holy, these madmen, Melkion. These are the ones who have not given up all hope, who, hungry and suffering as they are, have not fled over the wall to the pagans. What is your name, my son?” he asked, for the first time addressing Mehmed directly.

Mehmed just grinned stupidly, afraid to pronounce a word in his strange accent, though that was foolish because he could hardly mangle “Michael.” He just wished these men would stop staring at him and go away.

“See?” said the one called Melkion. “He is mad.”

The man in the flat hat bent low, embarrassing Mehmed even further. “Bless us, my son,” he demanded. “And since God has given you foresight to fill the space once held for earthly wisdom, tell us. Will our city last?”

The grin fell away from Mehmed’s face and his mouth fell slack and open, so surprised was he by this request.

“Uh oh,” said Melkion. “Doesn’t look good, Anastasios. I think he means to tell us we’re in for serious trouble.”

“You may be right,” said his companion and sighed deeply. Then he repeated, firmly, pleadingly, “Bless us! You must bless us.”

Oh, thought Mehmed. Is that what it will take to get them to go away and leave me alone? He searched his memory for some Christian blessing.

“Kyrie eleison,” he said, raising the two fingers of his right hand as he had seen priests do.

“Oh, thank you, my son. Thank you. Melkion, give him something. Be generous now.”

“Oh, such nonsense. Still, maybe something to it.”

Melkion reached into the neck of his tunic, which evidently was where he kept his purse. He dropped a coin to the pavement before Mehmed. Mehmed looked at it, studying it.

“Not enough for you, eh?” the man said with a touch of anger.

“Melkion! He is God’s child, one of his holy madmen.”

A second coin fell next to the first. Mehmed looked up and smiled. But the two men did not see this, for they had already resumed their walk around the forum. Mehmed put the coins into his own purse, stuck into his sash next to the dagger, and stood up straight. It was time to get out of this public place. Besides, it would soon be dark.
He ducked into a crooked, narrow little street to get away from the urbane crowds near the church. He hadn’t gone far before he emerged on the edge of an open marketplace, mostly deserted. Then he saw a group of young louts about his own age that laughed and pointed at him. He supposed it was because of his ill-fitting dolman and flat-topped shepherd’s cap, but maybe there was something else odd about him.

There were six of them, all bareheaded and with the front parts of their skulls shaved, the rest of their hair so long it hung halfway down their backs. Their tunics were opened to expose pale chests, and they made wide-armed gestures or held their arms akimbo to flourish their broad blue sleeves, almost as wide as the battle banners of the gazis. Their pantaloons, in contrast, were cut narrower than anybody else’s and far narrower than the flowing janissary trousers Mehmed ordinarily wore.

They shouted insults in strange slang—“filthy Green” and “whoreson” were all he could make out—and moved toward him menacingly. Two of them pulled short, stout clubs out of their sleeves. The clubs were marked with an angular insigne and what Mehmed recognized as Greek writing, although he had never been taught to read it.

He glanced quickly around, looking for a wall close enough to protect his back, but he was too far into the open. He fingered the hilt of his dagger through the blouse. As he had been taught, he focused on the problem before him, channeling fear into energy.

“Cowards!” he shouted. “I’ll fight you, if you want to fight. Show me your strongest man, or are you all women, unable to fight unless you are all gaggled together like hens?”

“He says he wants to fight,” said one of the others.

“All right, ragamuffin, if you’re so brave. Come fight me!” said the stout leader who had spoken first. He dropped his club to clatter on the paving stones and stepped forward and swung, hard.

Mehmed jerked his head back to take only a glancing blow to the cheek and snatched the sleeve as it billowed past his face. His opponent knew how to punch, but was totally unprepared for the wrestling tricks that Mehmed had learned in the horde, where wrestling and archery had been the janissaries’ main amusements. Mehmed yanked, putting the whole force of his upper body into the twisting motion. As blue-sleeves began to stumble, Mehmed, in a follow-through of the same twist, brought up his elbow to smash hard into the side of his face. The man went down, flailing a sleeve that discharged a second, hidden club just before his body hit the pavement.

Aware of the danger from the others, Mehmed ignored his fallen opponent and braced for another attack. His left arm and shoulder shot up to fend off the blur of a club aimed at his head. Then his feet were yanked from under him and he went down. Even before his back hit the pavement, his knees snapped to his chest and he had his feet cocked, heels forward, ready to kick or spring, and the dagger was in his hand.

“Stop!” shouted the man on the ground, holding up his hand to his comrades.

“Look!” shouted one of the others. “Look at that head.”

“That was when Mehmed became aware that his cap had fallen away.

“Hey, brother, what faction you belong to? I’ve never seen any Greens like that. He shaves it all.”

“Like a janissary. Or one of those old-time wrestlers.”

Mehmed watched warily from the ground, still poised to kick or roll and spring, but the danger seemed to have passed. The man Mehmed had thrown to the ground and who had then tripped him got up, unhurriedly, eyes on him all the time. The five who were standing relaxed their shoulders and moved their heads from side to side as they stared down at him. Cautiously Mehmed put the soles of his feet down against the pavement, pushed himself up with his left hand while his right continued to point the
dagger, and crouched, then stood. The faces looked more awed and puzzled than threatening. He put the
dagger back into the sash beneath his blouse, its hilt exposed and within easy reach.

“What’s your name, brother?” asked the man who had just risen from the pavement.

“Who is asking?” Mehmed replied.

“You’re asking who we are? You don’t know?”

“Wait!” said the first one. “Maybe he really doesn’t know. You’re not from here, are you, brother? I
am Alexios, and we—Tell him, boys.

“We are the Blues of Hagios Makios,” they shouted in unison.

“The True Blues!” called out the smallest of the six, with great intensity. “The only true defenders of
Emperor Manuel the Second Palaiologos.”

“Polla ta ete!”—Many years—they shouted together at the sacred name, waving their arms to make
their sleeves flutter like wings.

“Representative of Christ on earth, upholder of the Orthodox faith, protector against the infidels,”
cried out Alexios.

“Polla ta ete!” they all shouted again.

“Now who are you, and what are you doing in our neighborhood? This better be good.”

“My name is Michael. I come from Thessalonica. I’ve come to help defend the holy city against the
siege,” he said, reciting word for word the speech the vizier had drilled into him.

“A true Christian and a patriot! Did you hear that, boys? While the cowards in the city are climbing
over the walls by the scores every night, deserting us to the Turks, this brave lad has come to share our
hardships and to fight for the true emperor and our faith. I say, let’s welcome him to Hagios Makios.”

“Hagios Makios?” asked Mehmed.

“Yeah, the church that was here in our neighborhood.”

“The traitors tore it down, ten, twelve years ago—we were kids, but we remember it. They said they
needed the stones to patch the outer walls, but they couldn’t fool us or our parents. It was a plot of that
whore Eugenia, to weaken the true emperor—”

“Polla ta ete!”

“—by wrecking the neighborhood where he had his greatest supporters.”

“So,” said Alexios, “while His Sacred Highness is—”

“Polla ta ete!”

“Shut up! I didn’t say ‘emperor.’”

“Sorry.”

“While His Sacred Highness is off in Europe on his sacred mission, to see if the faithless Catholics
of the West will help us lift this siege, it is our sacred mission to guard against rebellion here within the
walls, so that Eugenia—”

“Latin whore.”

“—and her cowardly husband don’t sell the city to the heathen Turks.”

Alexios spat. Then they all spat, and Mehmed, after a moment’s hesitation, decided he should spit
too, on the same spot, covering himself with a small, silent, explanatory prayer to Allah and Ali. He
looked up from the slimy pavement and smiled.

“So now,” demanded Alexios, “do you swear that you are not a Green? And what are you doing in
our part of the City?”

“I come from the west, from near Thessalonica. I am not a Green, and I am not a Blue. Who are the
Greens anyway?”

The Blues looked at one another. Finally the littlest one, whom they called “Turk,” said, “Oh, it
doesn’t really matter. There used to be two factions, all the people in the town were either Blues or
Greens. Or Reds and Whites, but they weren’t so important. But nobody cares about that stuff anymore,
except us. That’s why we’re the True Blues. And if you don’t agree with us, why then, you must be a
Green, even if you don’t know it.”
This didn’t make sense to him, but Mehmed nodded as though it did.
“You didn’t answer me. What are you doing in our neighborhood?”
“I’m looking for a man. Perhaps you know him or have heard of him. Bardas Tzimiskes.”
Alexios looked surprised then looked sharply at his comrades, as though warning them to keep silent. “Maybe we do,” he said. Then, changing tone, he cried out, “Boys, we have to initiate this Michael, bring him into our faction. What say, boys?”
“Polla ta ete!” shouted the one called Turk, and “Michael” grinned and shouted “Polla ta ete!”
“All right then. First thing tomorrow.”

From the little square where they’d met, Mehmed followed Alexios down one of the narrow alleyways, around a corner, and then around another corner. “You, Michael, come with me, and tomorrow I can help you find your merchant,” Alexios had said, grabbing him by the sleeve. “Blues forever,” he shouted to the other Blues, who answered “Polla ta ete” and waved their sleeves.

Mehmed had no idea where he was. Polis, this part of it anyway, was like a maze of narrow streets, and it was so dark all he could make out was the shadow of Alexios just a pace or two ahead of him. Here and there a glimmer of candlelight showed through cracks in a shutter, and in a momentary opening between the balconies overhead, he could see stars, but the alleyway itself was almost entirely in shadow. Yet somehow, he didn’t feel anxious. Excited, curious about where they were headed, but with no sense of threat. He couldn’t have said why he trusted this Alexios, but he did. The fellow was mischievous and full of tricks, like that club up the sleeve, but Mehmed didn’t believe he was evil. Besides, he had taken a commanding tone, and Mehmed was used to obeying commands.

“Here we are,” said Alexios, stopping suddenly before an especially dark patch that Mehmed, after a second, recognized as a door. Suddenly, for the first time since they’d left the other Blues, Mehmed began to feel uneasy. Still, he followed his host up the dark, dank, narrow stairway, his fingers brushing the rough, splintering boards of the walls and his feet stumbling on the uneven steps. He became acutely aware of the city’s dust and its dense, disturbing smells.

But when they got to the top of the stairs, the noise and stench startled him. The little two-room apartment was full of pigs. He remembered that he dared not reveal that he was a Muslim, so he just stiffened and smiled when a skinny, bristly boar snuffled and snorted against his leg.

“He likes you,” said Alexios’ little brother. Mehmed forced a smile.

“Mother,” Alexios called out to a frail woman on a stool in a corner, who kept nodding and shaking her head and mumbling something that might have been a prayer. “I’ve brought a visitor from the western lands, someone who is going to be a new True Blue. You see? Not everyone is fleeing the City! A few brave souls are coming from afar to help us out in our time of need. Hey, Mother?”

The woman looked up briefly at the sound of “Mother,” then resumed her nodding and mumbling. “She’s been like that for days. Since my father was killed in that last big assault. So that leaves me to take care of her and my younger sisters and little brother.”

The older girl began to set out before him something that looked like grass, with a few raisins sprinkled on top. The woman didn’t say anything and hardly spoke a word even to her own children.

“No, Anna,” Alexios said to his sister, “we can do better than that for my friend. Let us show him how we treat our guests in Hagios Makios! Bring out the holiday fare,” he commanded, just as though he were indeed the master of the house.

“We even have a plate,” declared Alexios, bringing to the rough wooden table an enamel and silver platter that Mehmed suspected had been pilfered from a church.

“Oh, no! Not a church,” protested Alexios. “The Blues are protectors of the Church. These things come from a certain rich person’s home. He, it seems, was not so honorable, and maybe some of the things he had did come from a church. This basin, for example.
“What the Blues do is not thieving, no matter what people say,” he added sharply, looking at his little brother. “It is restoring. When somebody abandons the City, whether he goes over the wall like certain of our neighbors or sails away on a rich galley like the former owner of this object, why, we say he’s gone over to the enemy. Whether to the Muslim Turks or the Catholic Latins, it doesn’t matter. It’s still a betrayal. And that person forfeits the right to whatever he has left behind.

“And even the richest ones, with the biggest galleys, can’t take everything with them. We have to move in quickly and grab everything before the imperial guards get there. Because then it would just go into the imperial treasury, and Ioannes would sell it to the Venetians for who knows what luxuries or he would give it to the Turks as tribute.

“See that chair? And that urn and the icon over there? Maybe when you’re ready to go back to your homeland, Michael, you can take them with you, keep them safe from the Turks and the Genoese in case something happens to our city. What do you think of that, friend Michael?”

Mehmed was startled. First that Alexios seemed unaware that Thessalonica was now ruled by Turks and secondly that he thought any place would be safer for Orthodox Christians than Constantinople. He just nodded his head noncommittally.


“Venison?” he asked.

“Ha! Much better than wild game. This is pork, our own prized pork.”

Mehmed gagged. When he had been a child living with his Christian parents, before he had been taught the True Faith, Mehmed too had considered this meat to be a great delicacy, a welcome relief from the mutton and goat the family ate on those rare occasions when they ate meat at all.

“My mother is too chary with the meat. She thinks our pigs are too valuable to eat.”

Mehmed looked again at the woman nodding and mumbling in the corner. Could she have any idea of the opinions Alexios attributed to her?

“And perhaps they are,” Alexios went on. “These you see here are the last of ours, and unless things change we won’t be slaughtering any more. We have to keep them in the house or the neighbors will steal them. It’s such a shame. This neighborhood has become a warren of thieves.”

Mehmed looked down at his stolen platter then back again at Alexios. “If you’re not going to slaughter these animals, why do you keep them?” he asked.

“Why, to sell them for wood,” said the older of the girls. Anna, she’d said her name was. She looked to be about the same age as Mehmed, only a year or two younger than her brother Alexios. He supposed that when she went out of the house she would cover her head, but here her soft brown hair was exposed and, Mehmed thought, quite lovely in the fading light of the evening. She reminded him of someone. His own sister, yes. Not just the color of her hair, but something about the way she moved her head, the set of her shoulders. And her name had been Anna too. Anna Eirene. Grace and peace. Mehmed had not seen his sister since he had become Mehmed; that is, since he had been seized for the janissaries five years ago, when he was about twelve. She had been about the age that this girl was now. She would be married now, Mehmed thought. He missed her.

“It’s become very valuable, you know,” Anna went on.

“Wood! We used to have so much of it. Now, pound for pound, it’s worth more than these pigs.”

Alexios snorted, pig-like.

“Father would go out and gather it or buy it cheap from the woodcutters,” said Anna, as though talking to herself in a reverie. She had her back to them, and Mehmed heard a stone strike flint. Then she turned and put a little lamp on the table. The burning oil sputtered and sent up thick black smoke, which might explain why earlier, when there had still been enough daylight to see, portions of the wall and ceiling had seemed so dingy.

“There are forests all around the Polis. When I was little we all used to go out to gather wood and
grasses and other things, and we would stay out and take our meal there and not worry about Turks or anything. But now it has become so scarce that just to cook and to keep warm in the cold months, people are tearing down the beams of the great houses.”

“And rice!” chimed in Alexios’ little brother. “That’s got even scarcer. But I know where to steal some. Alexios showed me.”

“Well, eat up,” commanded Alexios. “We must celebrate our new acquaintance. And tomorrow, if you pass the test, we shall make you one of the Blues!”

Mehmed closed his eyes and prayed for forgiveness. In order to fulfill his mission to the pasha and the sultan, which was sacred, he would have to eat this pork. He picked up a piece and nibbled. It was strange. The taste brought back an ancient memory, not unpleasant.

After the little brother had shown him to the outhouse, Mehmed was groping his way back up the stairs alone when something struck him in the knee. He heard Alexios’ younger sister, Zampia, laugh and then, still laughing, apologize. She’d forgotten he was downstairs, she said, and she’d started sweeping out the pig shit. Mehmed didn’t know what to do so he just laughed too. Pigs and pig shit, just like home in the old days.

The daughters and mother had the back room. In the front room, where they had eaten, Mehmed and the two brothers unrolled straw pallets on the floor. As a special courtesy to their guest, Alexios had slipped nooses over the heads of the six pigs and tied them all to the same iron ring on the wall. But the pigs got loose and during the night came rooting around under Mehmed’s pallet. He was surprised to find that he didn’t really mind. The pigs and their noises and their smells seemed familiar, and soon he fell asleep, dreaming of a country far away, long ago.

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Firmans and Omens

28 Zilkade, 804 Hegira
(30 June, Anno Domini 1402)

Outside the City’s walls, but no more than nine leagues away, Bayindir Bey’s eyes glistened and a great joyous grin shone through his beard. “Allah akbar!” he shouted, raising his arms to the heavens. Then he pressed his heels into his horse’s flanks and galloped, for the third time that morning, to where the men with their long knives were slaughtering the horses and the sheep—even though his chief cook had the matter well in hand. The next moment he galloped to where other men were laboriously churning mare’s milk, insisting on sampling, yet again, and worrying aloud that the kumis would not have time to ferment. Then before the weary master of the churn could explain that they already had more than enough prepared, he was off again, shouting a prayer, to see about the precious and rarely used porcelain, the most treasured carpets, the so-so wine. It was not that he distrusted the work of his servants, who had always served him well. But never before had they or he been honored to host such a galaxy of heroes.

The gazis were coming, from all parts of Rum and Anadolu, here to his own beylik. Gazis every one of them, leaders of fearless bands of horse archers, scourges of the infidels and protectors of the just, like Bayindir himself. And Bayindir Gazi, bey of Pirinchkale and twenty leagues around, would be their host. It would be a greater concentration of valor than even at Kosovo Polje or Nikopolis.

Bayindir thought that surely his name must be known to them. He had missed Kosovo but had been at the second battle of the Maritza. And at Nikopolis, though he had arrived too late to fight, he had slain many prisoners, his arm rising and falling hour after hour under the eyes of the sultan to slice through the necks of the western knights forced to kneel before him. There was even a song about him, “The Blood-Filled Plain,” with the chorus, “And lo, the righteous executioner. / Untiringly he fulfills / the will
But it was not, he knew, because of Bayindir’s fame that the gazis were coming. It was the sultan who had summoned them all, including Bayindir, with all their fearsome cavalry. The sultan was also assembling those scruffier riders of low birth, the akinjis, and all his Christian vassals, on foot or horse, massing a gigantic horde. For what great deed had the sultan summoned so many men, enough to make the heavens shake?

Two weeks ago, Bayindir had had the first of several signs that momentous events were in the offing. In his dream, exceedingly bright stars appeared suddenly in the heavens, one after the other. And each star that followed bore the scowling face of another warrior, fierce, ancient, and powerful. The last star was the brightest, and Bayindir knew that it was the ancestor of them all, Oguz Khan himself.

Then the light of all the warrior ancestors merged and flared, turning night into day. Bayindir, trembling, called out, “My father and my clan, Grandfathers, what is it you want of me?” But then Sussan, his second wife, whose turn it was to share his bed that night, shook him awake and asked him what was the matter, and he struck her in fury because she had kept him from hearing the answer of the ancestors.

In the morning he learned from his shepherds that there really had been a shower of stars, and Bayindir became extremely agitated, and if his first wife, Ayshe, had not prevented him, he would have beaten Sussan yet again. Ayshe persuaded him that the answer would soon reveal itself, that the ancestors, once having appeared, would not return to the far place without being sure that their message was received. And sure enough, that very afternoon—women were so clever. How could she have known?—a messenger from the sultan’s palace in Bursa had galloped into his camp, his horse foaming and on the verge of collapse, and demanded to see Bayindir himself to put a roll of paper into his hands.

Before Bayindir could examine the scroll in its elaborate wax seal, the messenger demanded a fresh horse, as was his right because he was on the sultan’s business. “Quick,” he commanded, with that insolence of all who served the sultan. “I have other firmans to deliver to other beys.”

“Indeed?” asked Bayindir, and he ordered the horse and a bowl of kumis brought to the weary rider. Messengers from the sultan’s palace in Bursa had galloped out in all directions, said the rider as he turned his back to Bayindir, loosened the top laces of his leggings and trousers and began to piss, simultaneously with the exhausted horse, between the horse’s legs.

“So it is not only I who am so honored?”

“Ha!” answered the rider with that insolent, weary laugh. If he had not been the sultan’s man, Bayindir would have cut him down.

Riding, riding days on end, mumbled the rider, more to himself than to Bayindir. As far as Pristina, one of his fellows would have to ride seven days with their seven nights, leaping to the back of a fresh horse when the first one stumbled or died from exhaustion. He himself, he said, had been in the saddle two days and one night so far and had one more firman to deliver before he could take a rest.

“Two days and one night,” he repeated as he shifted his saddle from the exhausted horse to the fresh one that Bayindir’s servant had brought up. “Including two water crossings. Four leagues more to Ilig Koja and then to rest.”

The man yawned, readjusted his trousers and leggings, and, seemingly refreshed from the kumis, hauled himself up into the saddle and was gone.

Ilig Koja, Bayindir repeated to himself. Ilig Koja.

And what did the firman of the sultan have to say? “Let us hear,” said Bayindir, “what the firman of the sultan has to say.”

Then with a flourish and a scowl to show proper solemnity, he handed the roll of crisp linen paper to the mullah whom he kept in his camp for just such emergencies.

“Oh no, my bey, it is not for me to break the sacred seal of Allah’s chosen warrior, of Yildirim
Bayezid Sultan,” remonstrated the mullah.

“Quite right,” said Bayindir, and snatching the firman back, he impatiently snapped the thick wax seal with the sultan’s ornate and indecipherable signature design. He unrolled the paper, a square as long and wide as his forearm, and stared at the bold curving lines of varying width in black and red and gold. Then he handed it back to the mullah, who turned it the right way and began to read.

“It is in Persian, O my bey,” said the mullah in some distress.

“Ngh,” replied Bayindir. Not surprising. Did the mullah expect the sultan to speak like ordinary people?

Slowly the mullah sounded out the strange syllables until he found some that he recognized. “I will now say what it says in Turkish, O my bey.”

Yildirim Bayezid Son of Murad and Great-Grandson of Osman, Sultan of Rum and of Anadolu, Gazi and Champion of the Faith, et cetera, commanded Bayindir Bey, Gazi and son of Dirse Gazi et cetera, to bring his boldest fighters, mounted on their strongest steeds or marching double-time on their own two legs, to assemble in a plain called Akchayir, near the village of Oguzköy, to await the will of the sultan. They were to bring their most lethal weapons—crossbows were specifically mentioned, though Bayindir could not imagine his horsemen trying to work such bulky and slow-to-load machines. He was to supply at least four hundred men—and who would protect his beylik while they were gone?—with three horses for each and camels sufficient for their tents and goods.

Now Bayindir thought he understood the message of the ancestors. The sultan was summoning gazis from as far away as Pristina and from as close as his neighbor, rival, and brother-in-law, the younger brother of Ayshe, Ilig Koja. By their blazing light the ancestors had been telling him of the coming of the brilliant gazis. And they must want him to host them in a manner befitting the ancestors.

Oguzköy, whose Christian inhabitants still called it Theodosia, was but an hour’s ride from Pirinchkale and lay, arguably, within Bayindir’s beylik. The argument was with Ilig Koja, who had also demanded tribute from the same village, claiming it to be his. But if Bayindir were to offer there a feast for the gazis of all the realm, a grand feast in the old style—why, who then could doubt that this well-watered village with its flocks and kine and skilled craftsmen, belonged to Bayindir? Inspired by his dream, Bayindir conceived of a grand feast such as his people had known in the old days, before the great move west. He would have to move quickly, before Ilig Koja got the same idea.

So Bayindir sent riders, not with scrolls but with horsetail staffs and oral messages, to the camps of the gathering gazis. Some he knew by reputation from the songs that had been sung of their deeds; others were names entirely new to him but scions of famous clans; a few were men he had fought with shoulder-to-shoulder at Maritza or had met at Nikopolis but had not seen since; and one was his neighbor and brother-in-law, with whom he had a famous quarrel. The sultan had summoned them all, with their arms, their horses, and their fighting men, for some great confrontation, a clash of heroes that would shake the heavens. There had been other frightening portents: besides the shower of stars, there were the boars, the odd restlessness of the horses, and the talking tree. Bayindir remembered from his boyhood when such signs had appeared just before a terribly vicious raid of the Karamanlis. His grandfather, then the head of the clan, had doffed his pride and the girdle for his sword and, with a humility he showed before no man, had approached the shaman with a gift of meat, to beg her to summon the spirits and read the signs. Sharp-eyed, ancient, but with unlined face, she had threatened to turn young Bayindir into a hare if he did not stop prowling around her tent. Thanks to her, the clan was prepared, with scouts posted in the hills and the herds moved to another valley, and so had—just barely—saved themselves. But she was dead now, gone to rejoin her spirits. And the Osmanlis were no longer worshippers of Tengri the Sky God or of the spirits of fire and water and trees and horses. They were modern Muslims and were supposed to act as though those other spirits didn’t exist.

But he didn’t need a shaman to interpret the boars. He had been hunting alone in the woods, as he often did when his mind was crowded with things that were difficult to understand. He was thinking
about the stars when the horse jolted to a stop, driving his groin painfully against the pommel and his beard against the mane. Annoyed, he straightened up and kicked the horse’s flanks, but it would not budge. Cursing, he slipped to the ground and struck the animal in the face with his fist. Then he heard a breaking branch. Cursing again, he turned to look into the red-rimmed, yellow eyes of an enormous boar that had just emerged from the copse. More alert than he had been since the battles of his youth, Bayindir stood still, hunching his shoulders and trying to appear as big and fierce to the boar as it appeared to him. Then a second boar crashed through the brush, as big as the first, and snorted. The two charged at each other, at one point rising on their skinny hind legs as their broad heads snarled and the tusks tore at one another’s hair and flesh.

Too fascinated to move, Bayindir stared as they struggled. One dropped suddenly to all fours and tried to thrust a tusk into the other’s belly; the other fended him off with his great head, and both squealed and snorted until at last the second boar dealt the other a grievous wound, and he went crashing to his knees on the swirl of pine needles where they fought. But instead of going in for the kill, the victor raised his head and gave out a deep-throated, snarling shout that was almost like a laugh.

That night Bayindir consulted the flames. His grandmother had taught him how. When properly addressed, the dark heart of the bright flame responded, bobbing left for “yes” or right for “no.”

Yes, indeed, replied the flame, there will be a great clash between the two titans of Islam, the Thunderbolt and the Man of Iron, and only one will survive victorious.

“Which one?” Bayindir asked, thrilling at his own audacity in doubting his sultan.

The flame flared and spat.

He whose flame of faith burns brightest, is what he understood it to say.

But which one will be? Bayindir insisted. The flame flickered, as though laughing. Bayindir had gone too far, he knew. This was not a question the flame would or could answer.

That night he slept little, squirming and repeatedly awakening from troubled dreams whose details he could not remember. Before dawn, even before the muezzin’s call for prayers, he stepped barefoot out of the low wooden house and found the path more by touch than by the last light of the morning star. He stopped at the trunk of the mastic tree.

“Tree, wise old tree, tell me what will happen in the great clash to come? Will my sultan Bayezid triumph once again? Or will it be the other, the lame khan from Samarkand?”

A breeze caressed Bayindir’s face, rattling the clusters of thick little leaves that struck and rubbed against one another.

Timur, they said, Bayezid. Bayezid, Timur.

“But which one, little tree? Who will decide the battle?”

Siz, whispered the tree. Siz, siz, s-i-i-i-z.

“You,” it was saying.

Hidden City
28 Zilkade, 804 Hegira
(30 June, Anno Domini 1402)
Synaxis of the 12 Holy Apostles

The Queen of Cities was old, Theodota Palaiologina realized as she rode along its broken streets behind the Varangian. She had lived within the City’s walls for as long as she could remember, though she’d been told that she’d been brought here as an infant. She had crossed from one end to another many times in solemn but joyous processions, had participated in ceremonies in most of the great churches, had watched the games from the imperial compartment high above the Hippodrome. For Theodota, the
Queen of Cities had always been boisterous, glittering, fragrant. Until today, she had never seen Byzantion, the sheltering mother and guarantor of Christendom, in her tattered everyday clothes. She had never seen or even imagined her decay, her poverty. When she was little, for her own amusement and to cheer up her father when he seemed depressed, she had often played at being a princess of ancient times, and her father had told her wonderful stories of the City of many centuries back. But the City she and her father shared in those moments was not “old,” like an old person, wheezing and weak. It was eternal and eternally youthful. This did not look like the same place at all, though she knew they had not gone outside the eleven-hundred-year-old walls of Theodosius.

The two-story wood-and-stucco buildings splintered, peeled, and reeled, as though slowly collapsing before her eyes, their sagging balconies almost or actually touching across the narrow lane. The Varangian’s head passed under a splintering wooden shingle on the corner that must have been there since the time of Homer or when King Byzas, the nymph’s son, founded Byzantion. As she followed the rump of the Varangian’s horse deeper into the lane, so narrow that even now at half-past noon the sun merely dappled the tangled blond hair of the man riding ahead of her, Theodota’s anxiety and sensation of age and decay intensified. What were those awful smells? Hides, glue, acid, urine, and others less familiar, but never had she known them so strong. There was rot in the intestines of the holy city, the city she thought of as her mother, the only mother she had known. Her mother was dying.

Clip-clop, clip-clop, the horse had been trained to move its fore and hind legs together on one side, then the other, so that at this slow pace Theodota was rocked first to the right, then to the left. The swaying, the stench, the anxiety of defying her cousin’s orders and of sneaking outside the precincts of the palace with no more protection than this solitary, unknown barbarian all made her feel nauseated. The horse was a big, bony military stallion, a destrier that must have been, or should have been, retired from combat. Poor thing must never get enough to eat. So unlike the plump, gentle palfreys with their ambling gait. At least she could sit astride and hang on with her knees.

She was dressed as a boy, or at least what she imagined would be the dress of a squire of a western knight. She knew that the man riding in front of her was not really a knight, like those other barbarians, the Frenchmen, who were always riding out on their sacred missions. He was just a palace guard, one of the men with the big axes who stood around the palace looking intimidating. She had never seen any of them on a horse before. At least he’d left his axe behind.

They’d picked the noon hour, Olga and the barbarian guard somehow communicating in pidgin Greek. He managed to convey to Olga, who conveyed it to Theodota, that at that hour the other guards would be so busy sealing the palace that there would be no one patrolling the inner corridors. The corridors were all interconnected and led to a postern that opened on the side near the Golden Horn. Something about him, or something he said, made Olga trust the laughing blond man with the axe. It was strange. But Olga had spiritual powers, as Theodota knew well, and if Olga trusted him, then Theodota would trust him too. Besides, she had to. She couldn’t think of what else she could do, now that her cousin Ioannes had canceled all the usual processions indefinitely. Why he had done that she didn’t know, but it was very frustrating when she had received a sign from the heavens that she must go to Hagia Sophia.

So Theodota had hugged Olga and said good-bye and had followed the Varangian through the long corridors, from one palace through another, until they’d reached a small, dark passageway that terminated in a heavy, low door. There he’d said something to the other Varangians in that strange, harsh language of theirs, and they’d laughed and let the two of them through. And there they found a boy waiting for them with the two sorry-looking horses.

“Ride?” the Varangian asked her, rather belatedly, she thought.

“Certainly,” she replied.

The other advantage of going out at noon, according to Olga, was that there wouldn’t be as many people on the streets. And it was true. Even on this tiny back street, most of the shops were already
closed, and in others the owners were putting away their merchandise in the stone safes behind their counters. Other stalls looked as though they had been closed for months, abandoned to the dust, mice, and shadows. The crude carving of a boot on the shingle they’d passed when they’d plunged into this dark channel between the buildings showed what they manufactured and sold here, those that were still in business. Military shoes, if the sign could be trusted, for foot soldiers. Nothing fancy, certainly. That explained the pungent smells of leather and acid mingled with the sour mud and other odors, smells that Theodota associated with piss and rot.

Her horse slipped on a moist, slimy paving stone, and Theodota clutched the hairs of the mane and strove to hold back the warm, sour liquid rising into her throat. And she was afraid. But she would not cry out or demand that the Varangian take her back. She had made her decision. She would go to the great church, all the way across the City. God had told her to. But had God imagined that she might be making the trip along these back streets? Every other time she had visited the great church, she had been borne in a litter or a chariot along the widest avenues. She had been part of a procession. The avenue had been strewn with rose petals, and their perfume as the chariot wheels crushed them permeated the air so that she barely noticed the smell of the chariot-drawing mules—always white, for her father the emperor was in perpetual mourning for his father, Ioannes V.

There had been cheering crowds along the entire way, with great swells of them at each of the fora they passed, raising a great roar, “Polla ta ete! Polla ta ete!” Today there were no rose petals, no cheering crowds, just the squealing and shouting of children.

“Varangian!” she cried out to the gangly man riding in front of her. He didn’t stop or turn. Then she noticed the faces of the few people in the stalls along the street, staring at her and frowning, open-mouthed. Was it her voice, so unlike a boy’s? Or that word, “Varangian”?

Oh, how foolish! she thought. Of course. Nobody would dare cry out in such a peremptory tone to a Varangian, unless it was the Varangian’s superior, which meant someone from the palace. She would be discovered.

A boy squeezed past her on the narrow street and ran up ahead, shouting. Now the princess was truly worried. The boy ducked between the legs and under the belly of the Varangian’s horse and ran down an even narrower alley, crying out the names of his friends. Now what was Theodota to do? Would she have to bribe the boys or have the Varangian kill them? He had a short sword and looked very strong. But what if others in the neighborhood heard their cry?

Five or six boys now popped out from the narrow alley, but they paid no attention to Theodota. They were staring instead at the big man on the big horse, his head, arms, and legs bare, his leather and chain mail corselet peeking through his loose shirt.

“Varangian!” shouted the boldest of the boys. Theodota guessed him to be about twelve.

“Varangian!” shouted another one. “Show us your axe!”

Theodota watched as one of the boys jumped forward and touched the Varangian’s bare left knee. But before he could scramble away, the Varangian’s long arm had swept him up, off his feet and up to the saddle pommel. The boy squealed in terror.

“Your name?” demanded the man. His odd, rough accent confirmed, for Theodota and no doubt for the boys as well, that he could be nothing else but a Varangian, those big blond men from the North and Northwest who had guarded many generations of emperors.

“Se-Sebastian.”

“And where father?”

The boy closed his eyes tight and shook his head violently while the Varangian held him in a tight grip up against his own body, the large hooked nose of the man and the pug nose of the boy nearly touching.

“Heh?” insisted the Varangian.

“He’s gone,” cried out one of the other boys. “Over the wall.”
There were three boys crowded against the wall now and a girl, a little older, maybe Theodota’s own age.
“Over the wall, over the wall,” the boys chanted, giggling.
“Stop that!” the girl shouted, striking at the nearest of them with her open hand and missing.
“It’s true, it’s true. Sebastian and Eirene’s father went over the wall. To the Turks.” Theodota couldn’t tell which boy had shouted this time. Nor could she make out what the Varangian said next to Sebastian, who vigorously shook his head.
“He’s dead,” announced Sebastian, loud enough for his playmates to hear.
“No he’s not, he went over the wall! Over the wall! Not enough to eat so he—”
The girl Eirene’s slap across the boy’s mouth was so loud that it startled Theodota.
The Varangian released his grip and let Sebastian slip down to the ground. Something glittered—a coin—from the Varangian’s hand to Sebastian. “For your mother,” is what Theodota thought the Varangian said.
“Me too! Me too!” shouted the other boys, running up to him. But the Varangian, with only a quick reproving look back at the princess, turned straight ahead and spurred his horse on at a quicker pace, and Theodota followed, glad to be leaving the neighborhood. And at this pace, the horse’s gait was much smoother.
The road widened now, and she spurred her horse to come up alongside her escort. Then, feeling playful and relieved to be out of that narrow warren of half-abandoned shops and aggressive urchins, she spurred ahead, just to see how long it took him to catch up.
“Hey!” he shouted. But he wasn’t as clumsy as he looked. He was soon abreast of her again.
“What is your name, Varangian?”
“What?”
“Nggh. ‘Erres’ you people say. ‘Harry,’ what my people say in my country.”
“Hmm. Well, then, Erres, or—How do you say it?—Harry. How odd. Well, Harry, then. Is it true, what those boys said? Are people going over the walls to the Turks? Is that possible?”
“Hungry, Your Highness.”
“But that can’t be. The City is rich. We have plenty of food in the palace. I see men moving barley and oats and I don’t know what else in and out of the storerooms. Why just two days ago they were loading something there. And that fat merchant, oh, you know, the one who calls himself Bardas Tzimiskes, looked very happy about it.”
“Mm hmm. Not getting out to the likes of those folks, I’d guess.”
“And how would you know, Sir Harry?”
“Eh? Sir Harry! No, just plain Harry, thank you, Your Highness.”
“Well, I shall call you Sir Harry. Not now, though, you must earn it. Because if you serve me well, I shall dub thee a knight. Isn’t that something that princesses do in your country?”
“In my country, aye, Your Highness. But not in yours.”
“No matter. I am a princess. I shall do as I please. I’ve read the books, I know how to do it. But you know what, Harry? Can you keep a secret?”
“Varangians are sworn never to reveal the secrets of the imperial family, Your Highness.”
“Well, this is a secret of the imperial family and of the pseudo-imperial family of my faithless cousin Ioannes. There is something strange going on between that merchant and that Latin wife of my cousin, Eugenia.”
And before ‘Sir’ Harry could respond, she spurred her horse again—partly because it was so much more comfortable to ride when its rolling gait was a little faster.
“Princess, you shouldn’t do that,” reproached Harry when he’d caught up to her again. “What if you fall? Break your head? Think what would happen to me. You’re not even supposed to be outside the
palace. And in those pants, like any Turkmen or peasant boy, Holy Mary! Your uncle will have my head if he finds out.”

“Hnnh!” she snorted imperially. “He’s not my uncle, he’s my first cousin. And by what right does he claim to be the emperor?”

“I really couldn’t say, Your Highness.”

“I’ll tell you, then,” answered the princess, pleased to have the opportunity to spell out an issue that was very important to her branch of the family. “Ioannes my cousin makes much of the fact that he is the firstborn son of the firstborn son of my grandfather Ioannes V. That’s why, and that’s the only basis for his claim. But his father, Andronicus, my uncle, was a traitor who made war on his own father and his brothers. Then my grandfather chose my father, Manuel, to be his successor and he is the only rightful basileos, and I don’t care a fig for what Cousin Ioannes The So-Called Seventh thinks. Uh, did you understand all that, Harry?”

“What I understand is that, until Manuel gets back, Ioannes the So-Called is the man in charge. And he would have my head, no hesitation to it. Not to mention what your lady Olga would do to me

“Theodota laughed. “Ah, yes, dear Olga. She’s formidable, isn’t she? Do you think she’s pretty?”

“I couldn’t really say, Your Highness.”

“Oh, but I think you do. Yes, you two would go well together. You’re both big and blond. That’s funny, coming from opposite ends of the world like you do. However will you talk? In bad Greek, it will have to be. And sign language, like the mutes in the dumb show my father used to bring to entertain us. Well, for Olga’s sake I’ll try to be good. But not for my cousin. And certainly not for your ugly old head.” And she spurred her horse forward again. But this time Harry was ready and grabbed the rein, causing her bony horse to rear so suddenly that Theodota might have fallen had Harry’s arm not suddenly caught her around the waist.

“Well,” he said, releasing her as quickly as he safely could, “Your Highness may not think much of it, but I value my head and will do what I can to keep it on my shoulders, thank you.”

“Oh, Harry, don’t talk like that. You make me shudder. Heads! You must have separated plenty of other men from theirs, haven’t you, with that big axe of yours?”

“Aye, I mean, yes, that’s true. You make light of it, but it’s heavy on a man’s soul to see so many corpses strewn about. Even if they’re infidels. Worse yet when some of them are your mates.
There’s some as says otherwise, but I tell you from experience, a head is one of the worst things a man can lose.”

Then, as though he had forgotten that she was there, he began chanting in a low voice, “Allah’ım!. Bizden dirilerimizi, öülülerimizi, burada hazır bulunularımızı ve bulunmayanlarımızı, büyüklerimizi ve küçüklerimizi, erkeklerimizi ve kadınlarımızı afv-û mağfiret eyle!...”

“Stop that!” she shouted. “You frighten me. What kind of a spell is that?”

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Your Highness. You’re right, it is a kind of a spell. That’s the start to the prayer for the dead. It says, ‘My Allah.’ That’s their name for God, you see. Then it goes on,

“‘Our living, our dead, those of us who are present here and those of us who are not present here, our elderly and our little ones, our men and our women, Forgive!’ I don’t know the rest of it.”

“Hmm. That doesn’t sound so awful. So even those people want God to forgive them. That’s because they know they’ve been bad. But how did you learn to speak Turk, Harry? Is that what you learned from those heads you cut off?”

“Not from them.” “You were their prisoner, weren’t you, Harry? Olga told me.” The big guard didn’t reply.

“Did they treat you badly, Harry?”

“Rather not talk about it, Your Highness. Rather not think about it, until I get some of ’em in front of me when I’ve got my axe in my hands.”

“It was bad then, wasn’t it, Harry? You must tell me. I am a princess, and soon I must help my father govern this empire. I must know these things about our enemies. I command you!”

Harry looked at her sideways and leaning away from her in what Theodota took to be an insolent posture. His look reminded her that she was disguised as a commoner and a boy and hardly looked like anybody capable of commanding a Varangian. Now it was she who blushed, but she struggled to re-assert her dignity.

“Truly. Tell me, Harry.”

“Hmm. Janissaries the worst.”

“I’ve heard of them. But just what are they, Harry?”

“Janissaries? Or more like jenny cherry, that’s ‘new soldier’ in their tongue. Bayezid’s daddy Murad created them, that’s why they’re ‘new.’ Turkmens go into Christian villages and they steal the boys. It’s a kind of tax, the devshirme, they call it. They steal those little Christian boys, who might have grown up to be decent enough fellows if their families had been left alone. Make them fighting slaves, turn them into little Mohammedans and train them to fight and kill Christians. Not like ordinary slaves. Slaves of the sultan. They answer only to him, which means they can do anything to anybody else. They’re worse than the real Turkmens, the akincis and the others who fight for themselves, for booty and just for the joy of it. There’s no arguing and no bargaining with a janissary. All he knows now is the will of that monster Bayezid and that devil they pray to that they call ‘Allah.’”

They rode on. The avenue was wider here, and Theodota began to recognize some landmarks. The City looked very different when it was going about its own business and not all dressed up for imperial processions. Which was the only way she’d seen it since she was a tiny girl and first arrived, in the arms of someone she couldn’t quite remember. Her mother, it must have been.

“How did they capture you, Harry?”

“Hah! It wasn’t in battle, I can tell you that. It was treachery. When that Bayezid, he summoned your daddy the emperor.” He motioned to Theodota to rein in as he did. “Ah, this poor city,” he blurted out unexpectedly. “It’s starving and its pulse is weak. Look at that, if you will, please.”

“Just a field, where somebody’s trying to grow some olives and, oh, I know, that’s wheat, isn’t it?”

“Pretty poor crop. You don’t remember, even for all of your almost fifteen years, when this was a walled estate, and the only plants here were for making it pretty for the owners. Those owners are long gone now—maybe climbed the wall at night, like that boy Sebastian’s daddy. This city used to bring all
its wine, its olives, its beef and lamb and everything else from outside, from the richest lands in the world, and most of those rich lands were part of the empire. When there was an empire.”

“We’re still an empire, Varangian. And it’s treason to say we’re not. And nobody is starving here.”

“No, nobody in the palace. Even I can’t complain, although the wine isn’t as good as it used to be. But people outside the palace are hungry, and it’s true that every night, ten or a score of them climb over the walls to run to the Turks, who they hope will give them something to eat. You didn’t know that, eh? That Frenchman in charge of the garrison, he says not to even try to stop them, if they want to go, good riddance. But it’s sad all the same, a great city such as this. Greatest in the world, we used to think.

“And as for the empire, well, yes, if you call this space inside the walls, and maybe one or two little islands in the Marmara, an empire. But I remember when the empire stretched all down the coast of Anatolia and north into Thrace. And I’m only twenty-six. Well, that probably seems old to Your Highness. Seems old to me, all that I’ve seen. But then it was only fifteen years ago, the same year Your Highness was born, when the empire lost Thessalonica, the last great city outside of this Mother City.”

Thessalonica. Yes, she knew that. Her father had ruled there as the despot, she had been told, and there she must have been conceived, while the Turks were at the gates. She remembered vaguely hearing that she had been born on the isle of Tenedos, and only later, after he had become emperor, did her father bring his bastard daughter and her mother to the great Polis. But that woman, whoever she was, had disappeared—died of the plague, Olga said—and it was the great city itself that Theodota had been taught to regard as her mother.

“O Byzantium, such glory was once thine.”

“Byzantium!” How quaint you are, Harry. But we’ll be great again. My father will bring back a great Christian army from Europe, and a fleet, and we’ll scatter the Turks and free our city once again. This is God’s chosen city. He won’t abandon us.”

“No, Your Highness, I’m sure He won’t. The question is if the people running this place abandon it, before your father gets back. Now look there, if you please, Your Highness. There’s your big church.”

Now it was the next morning, and here he was, staring at this huge building with the immense dome, far bigger than its replicas in Bursa or Thessalonica. This was the real thing, the original, where the true power resided.

Mehmed did not want to do this. It frightened him. The church was too grand, its magic too powerful. But now that he and Alexios were standing in front of it, he didn’t see what else he could do. And Alexios had promised to help him find the merchant Bardas, but only if he went through this initiation into the Blues.

The initiation into the Blues, according to Alexios, consisted of two parts, and it was the first that bothered him. He had to pray before the most powerful image of his namesake that could be found and vow before him to be loyal to the city and to the Blues. The second part was easier. All he had to do was club somebody and steal his purse. An enemy of the city or of the Blues, which for Alexios was the same thing.

The most powerful image of the Archangel Michael, Alexios assured him, would be found in the church called Holy Wisdom. This was because the dome of the church itself concentrated God’s diffuse power, filling all icons within it with special celestial energy. But the church was so big! Where, the lad now calling himself Michael asked, would he find this most powerful image?

Alexios just laughed. “The archangel will find you,” he said.

Perhaps, Mehmed thought, he could just step into the entrance, near the door, and wait an appropriate length of time out of Alexios’ sight before coming out to report. Yes, that’s what he would do. He certainly did not want to go near any powerful archangel.

Feigning boldness, he smiled at Alexios and strode through the open doorway. He knew what the archangel looked like, or at least he remembered the simpler icons back in his childhood home. Could he
Mehmed ducked to the left, out of Alexios’ line of vision, and backed up as tight as he could against the wall. The powers of the dome would be most concentrated in the middle of the church, he reasoned. Here he might be better able to resist their effects. He closed his eyes and counted to twenty—it was as high as he knew how to count—and then counted again, and again, meaning to count twenty times to twenty, but losing track.

Holy Wisdom
28 Zilkade, 804 Hegira
(30 June, Anno Domini 1402)
Synaxis of the 12 Holy Apostles

It is not really God up at the highest point in the great dome of the church. Everyone knows that. It is only an enormous mosaic, cunningly crafted of dark and bright stones and bits of gold. It is only the image of God, much larger than a man, though so far off, so high above the church’s floor, that it seems to be man-sized.

Only the eyes are real, like all the eyes in the church. Everyone knows that too. Everyone who ever enters is watched and judged by the unspeaking, solemn images on the ceilings and all the walls.

From on high, the eyes of the image of God see everything in the great central space. The eyes of the Empress Zoë and of Constantine IX, in their gilded mosaic robes, staring out from the wall see whoever stands in front of them. The eyes of the Virgin Mary and of the Baby Jesus in her arms look out from another wall. The eyes of the archangels Gabriel and Michael look down from where their long-winged forms bend over the worshippers from the vaulted ceilings surrounding the space beneath the great dome. The eyes never blink. They never tire of watching.

It is the thirtieth day of June, the day of the Synaxis of the 12 Holy Apostles, in the Year 6909 since God created the world. The wise men of the Polis have worked out the date meticulously, scientifically, from the evidence of the sacred texts. To the Latins in the West, it is 1402, for they count simply from the year of the Theotokos, when the Eternal Virgin gave birth to Christ our Savior, ignoring the 5,507 years of the histories of the Old Testament, which are also dear to God.

It is the day of Synaxis of the 12 Holy Apostles and there is, as always on every important saint’s day, a procession. It is, however, a more modest procession than in years past. Manuel II, ever devoted to ritual, is far from the holy City, and his nephew Ioannes VII has not ventured outside the precincts of Blachernae, on the far side of the City, where there is another famous church, though not so grand and holy as this one. The patriarch is present here in Hagia Sophia, however. Perhaps he has already officiated at the emperor’s smaller church in Blachernae and now has come to honor God in the greatest of His houses.

From the highest point of the dome, the top of the patriarch’s miter is a round black disk, about the size of the iris of the eye of God up in the dome. Behind the patriarch walk the monks. Their bodies sway and their mouths move, which is how the mosaic figures on the walls and ceiling know they are chanting. The mosaic holy figures do not have the faculty of hearing, only sight. What they see is the slow bobbing of the figures as they walk, the one in the lead swinging a censer, another holding a large golden cross.

In a corner off to the side, the eyes of Ioannes the Baptist, representing Ioannes before his beheading, are the first to notice a slender young figure whose manner seems at odds with the style of dress, which is like that of a stable boy. The loose pants and tight tunic are too clean and whole, too new looking, for a real stable boy, and the movements are far too measured and graceful. Next to this small
young person stands a much bigger, tall, and rugged foreign-looking man with tangled blond hair and a
large jaw, whose open tunic reveals a chain mail corselet and muscular bare arms. The younger, smaller
person—is it really a boy at all?—advances confidently, the large man follows hesitantly, almost
timidly. They are not part of the procession and seem to take no interest in it.

Now where they stand they are in the cross-gaze of many saints, including the blessed Virgin Mary,
and there is no doubt, in the eyes of the Theotokos, the God-bearer, that the young person is herself a
virgin in male disguise. A noble girl, certainly. It is odd that she is so dressed and that she is
accompanied by a sole protector—though this sole man looks capable of mounting a fierce defense.
They stop before the Theotokos.

The tall blond man is definitely a foreigner; he doesn’t even know how to cross himself properly.
The girl, however, is equally clearly a Politan, a citizen of the Polis. She is familiar not only with the
general ritual but with this very church. She has moved decisively to this very spot, as though she knows
exactly where she is going and with which image she wishes to confer.

The girl looks up into the eyes of the Virgin Mary; virgin to Virgin look into each other’s eyes,
unblinking. The girl of flesh-and-blood is speaking to the Virgin fashioned of many tiny stones, who
sees the flesh-and-blood girl’s mouth and lips move, but the mosaic Virgin cannot hear. This often
happens, before her or before the other saints. Men and women come in and speak, their faces showing
the earnestness of their speech, and the stones silently watch. It is easy enough to understand the general
concern, the anguish or the hope, from the face and from the twisting of the body, so it is enough—it
must be enough—for the flesh-and-blood girl to hear her own words, to enter into dialogue with herself,
while the stone Virgin gently watches.

From another wall, it is the Empress Zoë who first notices another youth, taller and much more
agitated. What draws her attention is that he is trying so hard to be inconspicuous, crouching by a pillar,
turning from the gazes of the saints that look out from every wall, trembling into a semblance of stillness
where only Zoë now can see him, and even she is not looking at him directly. Her gaze, of course, is
directed to our Lord and Savior, who stands between her and her consort, Constantine IX.

The real Zoë was sixty-three years old when she ascended to the throne and took Constantine as her
consort and made him the ninth emperor of that name. The mosaic Zoë is forever youthful, not much
older perhaps than the trembling youth crouching by the pillar, and much more beautiful and elegant.
The young man is clad in pitiable rags and clasps his hands over what appears to be a nearly bald head,
with just a stubble peeking around his fingers. He holds his eyes closed tight, which is also strange.

The passing monks and the smoke wafting from their censer obscure the view briefly, and the glitter
of the cross distracts the mosaic eye of Zoë. When the procession has passed, the young man is no
longer in view.

But he is in view of others as there is nowhere inside this church where one can escape all eyes.
Even the eyes of God on high can see him now. Something has emboldened the young man to step out
into the central space—perhaps he is just disoriented and thinks from there he can find his way to
whatever he is seeking. He turns one way, then stops and turns back, his head swiveling from side to
side. Then he rushes forward, nearly bumping into the tall blond man in the chain mail corselet who is
dutifully following his protégée. She, the aristocratic young girl disguised as a poor boy in too-good
clothing, seems to have completed whatever it was she had to say to or learn from the Virgin Mary and
is crossing the open space back toward the main doors.

The young man in ragged clothes rushes past the eyes of emperors and empresses and of Old
Testament prophets and stops suddenly and looks up at the great winged figure hovering above him
from the vaulted ceiling. It is the Archangel Michael. The young man’s own mouth hangs open as he
stares at the closed mouth and the tight, noncommittal smile of the archangel. The young man’s eyes
rove all over the mosaic figure, from the crown of the archangel’s curly head to his sandaled feet, and
study with special fascination the great, long wings, tracing each feather.
Suddenly the youth drops, his knees curled under him, and stretches forth his hands and presses his forehead to the gray-and-brown-patterned stones of the floor. An odd, un-Christian movement, he looks almost like a Muslim praying to his god, except that he is facing Thrace, not Mecca. If the mosaic archangel is startled by this strange gesture, he gives no sign. But the true archangel has existed from all time, and the mosaic archangel has been in his present place for almost a thousand years, so there can hardly be anything a human being might do that could startle either of them.

The boy begins to shake, almost as though in an epileptic fit. This the archangel has seen before, though perhaps not for a very long time. Then the boy looks up. He mouths words. He seems to be saying “Michael” over and over, and other words, whole phrases. He is grasping himself, his arms crossed over his chest and his hands clutching his shoulders as though trying to keep himself from quaking. Other worshippers walk by and look at him, but walk on. Fits of one sort or another are not unusual here, but this is unusually prolonged for one so young.

At last he stops shaking. He stiffens his body and turns his head to the floor, as though deciding to look no more into the archangel’s eyes. Slowly, with labored dignity, he rises and turns—still without daring to look again at the archangel—and walks slowly, stiffly, like a wounded or exhausted man trying to appear fit and rested, back across the vast open space beneath the dome and to the great door, through which a girl and a large military man passed only half an hour ago.

**The Frankish Knight**

28 Zilkade, 804 Hegira  
(30 June, Anno Domini 1402)

Now more comfortable with the swaying pace of the old horse and the broad back of her protector, her own big foreign Saint George, Theodota barely noticed the crumbling streets and abandoned houses that had dismayed her only hours earlier, her thoughts instead on her disappointing conversation with the mosaic Virgin, whose sad, dark eyes had remained unblinking and whose gentle smile had offered no clear answers to her questions: When will the basileos my father return? Will he with God’s help bring troops and a fleet to deliver us from the dreaded Turks? What must I do in this terrible time? And what should I do about that boy Andronicus who is such a pest, with his chariot racing and his crazy yelps?

“Hallo, what’s this?”

The unexpected voice, hoarse and deep, startled her.

“A Varangian on horseback? And with his own most handsome young squire?”

Theodota felt herself blush and when she looked up, she gasped. The mocking voice had come from a centaur! The beast drew back its two heads, human and equine, and laughed. The princess clutched Harry’s arm and closed her eyes and shook her own head, hard. It had been a mistake to venture beyond the safe walls of the palace at all. There was a strange enchantment in the City. That falcon that had pointed her to the great church had not been an angel but some other, darker magic sent by someone who had cast the evil eye.

The creature laughed again and Theodota, somewhat assured by the strength she felt in Harry’s arm, opened her eyes to confront it.

“All right, Marcel,” she heard Harry say. “Leave the girl alone.”

“Girl, you say? Dressed like that?”

It still looked to her like a centaur, but now she could also see it as two more ordinary creatures, a man on a horse. The question was which was the illusion? The man’s head, like the horse’s, was bare except for dark brown hair clipped neatly just above the ears. His beard and mustache were close-cropped like the horse’s mane. The eyes of both creatures were brown and bright. The horse part bobbed
and twitched, eager to gallop or to fly, but the man part held tight on the reins with one hand while the other, in a fist, rested on his hip. The brown cloak draped loosely over his chain mail was almost the same color as the horse’s pelt. The main difference, Theodota thought, was that the man’s teeth were whiter than the horse’s when they laughed.

“Leave her alone, I said!” Harry repeated, an edge of menace in his voice.

“Who you telling to leave what alone, you English jackass?”

“Watch it, you French knave, or I’ll cut you into little slices.”

Theodota stared. The “French knave” just laughed again.

“Cut me, Varangian? With what? That little knifelet in your belt? You seem to have forgotten your axe.”

The man’s legs flicked back and his horse took three strides forward until the rider was right shoulder to right shoulder with Harry, whose bulk formed a wall between the Frenchman and Theodota.

“Tell you what,” said the man part of the centaur. “Bare hands. Two falls out of three.”

“You crazy Frank! With our feet on the ground, gladly. I’ll tear you apart.”

“Feet on the ground? Is that what you said? Pardon me, my Greek is not so good, and it is especially hard to understand that barbarous English accent. But surely you did not say ‘feet on the ground.’ Why, certainly you can’t be saying, not in front of your own little squire, and a most fetching lad too I may add—”

Theodota blushed again, more out of anger than embarrassment she thought.

“—that you dare not confront me in the only fashion that befits true fighting men of honor, on the backs of our noble steeds?”

“Why, you—” and here Harry burst into a string of explosive sounds completely foreign to Theodota and apparently to Marcel as well, and, as though for emphasis, lunged at the smaller, darker man.

Nimbly as though horse and rider were truly one, the centaur stepped back as Harry threw himself at the escaping target. Theodota gasped, certain that her protector would instantly crash to the ground. But the centaur stepped forward as briskly as it had retreated, and the Frankish knight grasped the falling Varangian and, laughing harder still, held him until Harry could struggle upright to regain his seat. But when Harry’s horse stepped away, Harry nearly fell again, and Marcel again had to catch him, with more laughter. Harry, clutching at his horse’s mane, kept shouting his incomprehensible epithets and his complexion kept growing ever ruddier.

“My apologies, young squire, on behalf of your master,” said Marcel. He looked straight at Theodota as few men were permitted to do—and certainly no one so common as a Frankish knight. These people weren’t even Orthodox.

“I’m afraid your master sets a bad example,” the Frank went on. “If you desire to learn horsemanship, do not take lessons from a Varangian. I invite you instead, be you desirous of true knightly preparation, to enter the service of a properly qualified and veteran knight, such as the humble warrior you see before you.”

And he bowed from the saddle.

“Sir Harry is a knight and a very fine horseman!” Theodota shouted. “You cheated!”

“Sir Harry? Why, Erres, you son of a cooper, your squire has gone quite daft!”

“Enough, Marcel,” said Harry, now upright on his nag. “Your Highness,” he continued, “allow me to introduce you. This here is Marcel Something-or-Other, I can’t pronounce these French names. He’s just having a lark. You understand? A lark? It’s, oh, a joke, let’s say. He’s the only one besides myself, and your slave Olga of course, who knows who you are and what we’ve been up to. I know he’s ugly and ill-mannered, but I beg you to forgive him. There aren’t many men in this city I’d trust with such secrets, no one, in fact, except this loudmouth, this twist-grin.”

“I believe ‘popinjay’ is what you said last time,” interjected Marcel helpfully. “Delightfully colorful,
these English insults, don’t you think, Your Highness? ‘Popinjay.’ I have no idea what it means. Maybe Erres here—excuse me, ‘Sir Harry’—made it up.”

The Frenchman again looked straight at Theodota, an unforgivable audacity now that he knew that she knew that he knew exactly who she was. Harry should strike the man down, she thought. But it appeared that they were friends.

“I must confess,” continued the Frankish knight, “it was I who provided the noble steeds for your journey.”

“Thank you very much,” replied Her Highness, as stiffly and coldly as she could manage. “So now we see in what high regard you hold the imperial family,” she added.

“Ah, well. I can understand if Your Highness is displeased by the quality of her mount. But you must understand, I pray you. First, it was only from our Frankish stables that we could secure any sort of beast to convey Her Highness on such a delicate mission, which your friend Erres confided to me. He could hardly have gone to the imperial stables himself and demanded your usual palfrey, now could he? And within our stables, why, almost all the beasts fit to ride are large, unruly chargers, like this one I sit upon, and that somewhat older one that chafes between the legs of my dear comrade Erres, excuse me, ‘Harry.’ Poor man. I had to find him a mount that was both big, because his legs are so long, and not too wild, because, well, you see how he is at handling horses. The smallest, gentlest animal that I could find for Your Majesty is that which now supports Her Highness’s imperial and sweetly rounded buttocks.”

“Such insolence!”

“You crazy Frenchman,” shouted Harry. “Get down off that animal and apologize. On your knees!”

“What? Did I say something wrong? Please, forgive and understand me. My Greek, it is not so good. Was it to say that Her Majesty’s buttocks are well-rounded? How in heaven could that be offensive? I meant only to be complimentary. But I see I have made a grave, grave error.”

Quite suddenly the centaur separated into two pieces, the man part sliding noiselessly to the ground and to his knees, from whence he kissed the muddy boot of Theodota.

“I beg forgiveness from Her Majesty’s most generous heart. And from her noble buttocks too,” he said most humbly.

At this Theodota could not keep herself from laughing. Marcel looked up at her with a wide, bright smile. His teeth really were much whiter than his horse’s.

Harry meanwhile had climbed down off his own horse and seemed much relieved to be back on solid ground. This left Theodota high above these two strong warriors. She rather liked the sensation. She looked from the tangled blond curls of the one to the closer-cropped brown bangs of the other. Up here, despite her humble, boyish garb, she felt more like the princess that she was.

“Well, he’s right about one thing, Your Highness. We wouldn’t have had any horses at all if he hadn’t helped us. He’s a Frenchman, and I’m an Englishman, and back home most of the years I remember our kings have been at war, but out here, well, one fighting man recognizes the mettle in another, and Marcel’s heart’s in the right place, even though he doesn’t always know where his mouth is going.”

“Very well,” pronounced Theodota majestically. “We forgive you, Marcel the Frank. This time. But, Frenchman, see that such impertinence is not repeated.”

“And Your Highness,” said Marcel, his head still bending very low so that Theodota could not see the expression on his face, “if I may dare to suggest. And I pray you make allowances for any further slips in your most noble tongue.”

“Speak, Frenchman!”

“We must needs hurry and take great care to slip you back inside the palace, without delay. I fear Your Highness’s absence may already have been noted. Please, if I may assist Your Highness to dismount. We go through that gate you see just behind me.”
A Game of Tavla

5 Zulhijje, 804 Hegira
(6 July, Anno Domini 1402)

“You play well, Arslan Gazi,” said Ali Pasha as he reached for the dice. “Better than I had expected from a Turkmen.”

Arslan’s gaze rose slowly from the game board to the fleshy face of the chief vizier, who sat on the carpet across from him, smiling pleasantly, eyes half-closed. The vizier knew perfectly well that Arslan was no Turkmen nomad, but an Oguz of distinguished family whose herds once rivaled those of the sultan’s father. It was true that since the death of his father, may he rest in Paradise, Arslan and his mother and brothers had no fixed abode, and it was also true that he and they kept to the eastern ways in dress and habits, but those things did not make him an ignorant Turkmen.

After hours of music, wine, meats, and the lulling smoke of incense laced with opium in the large tent, Arslan had to make an effort to remain alert. The noise from the vizier’s musicians—high-pitched notes of the ney against the tapping of a drum, the plucking and rolling of the cords of the tambur—had begun to sound to him like someone beating a goat to sing. Arslan blinked and frowned. He would ignore the remark, for he was still waiting to learn why the vizier had summoned him here. It was a sign of the pasha’s trust that they were alone but for the tall, thin janissary crouching nervously in the shadows, so slight a figure that he looked more like the pasha’s lover than his protector.

“Like Kara Göne, you take bold chances,” said the pasha. But unlike that honored and departed warrior, they’re calculated chances.”

Arslan tensed. “What do you know about that day in Kosovo Polje?”

“A brave man, Kara Göne. A true deli. Fearless, but also reckless.”

“No one has ever told me he was reckless on that day we met the Serbs. There was something he had to do; I don’t know what it was. His ‘destiny,’ he said. My father used to say that our destinies were written in the great book that no man has ever seen. I wanted to ride with him, but he forbade me. It was my first big battle and he said I was not yet ready for what he had to do.”

“Ah yes. Thirteen years ago. You were barely more than a child.”

“A great band of the infidels rushed at us in their black armor and on gigantic horses. My horse was jumping and prancing while in the noise and confusion I sat paralyzed. Then suddenly I saw the green-and-gold-embroidered sleeve and the flash of my father’s sword cut down the first man and horse just before they reached me. And then I knew what to do, it was as though my arm had been released from an enchantment. And once he saw that I could defend myself, he shouted for me to stay back with the rest of his men, that it was his destiny to see to our emir Murad. But there were so many Serbs and Albanians with maces and swords that I couldn’t see how far he got.”

“Yildirim himself said you fought like a lion, and that ‘Arslan’ should be your name.”

“After the battle my father’s men gave me that name. I was called Yegenek before. I have never heard that our sultan Yildirim knew of it.”

The pasha merely smiled and tilted his head back and forth, from right to left.

“After we had won and my horse could barely keep from slipping on the blood-soaked field, I slid to the ground and wandered among the corpses and shattered horses, and I learned what destiny had been written for him.”

“He took a Serb arrow through the throat, I am told.”

“Yes, there was a Serb arrow, but also a great open wound in the back of his head as though from a mace like those our akincis sometimes use.”

“Our akincis? Serbs too use heavy maces.”
“And Murad too was dead. Killed by a Serb, they said, before my father could reach him.”

“Your father was a deli, as I said. Fearless and reckless. If he had listened to Yildirim, he would not have galloped off as he did to the tent of Murad. Fearless and reckless do not have to be the same thing. You should remember that, Arslan Gazi son of Kara Göne. It is reckless not to listen to Yildirim, the thunderbolt may strike.”

Arslan looked at the vizier’s too calm, too sly face for a very long moment, to let the implications sink in. Arslan’s long-held suspicion was that it had been Murad’s own son Bayezid, called Yildirim, impatient to become sultan, who had left the old emir’s tent unguarded. When Kara Göne rode off to the rescue, the thunderbolt struck—by some other hand.

Ali clapped his hands once to make the musicians stop. The faint sputtering of a lamp was now the only sound. The gazi looked back at the board and made his move. He had left one black disk exposed and vulnerable, alone on the third point of his home board. But he now had all fifteen pieces clustered on his home board, ready to be borne off, while the vizier still had a piece on the bar, out of the game. The only way for the vizier to stop him would be to throw a three, to re-enter his exiled piece and force the gazi’s lonely scout onto the bar, and a four or better to leap over the other blockaded points. Possible, Inshallah, but unlikely.

“So, my gazi, you are well positioned. Let’s raise the stakes. If you win—”

He paused. The gazi looked at him, waiting.

“A beylik. A land of your own to rule. Like your father had before his death, but bigger and richer. Your choice of any of the newly conquered territories, the ones we are about to wrest from our enemies in the east.” The gazi bowed his head and touched his forehead with his fingertips. The offer rather unsettled him. It was Yildirim, who became sultan upon the death of Murad, who had taken the family’s land, and now it was Yildirim who offered him a reward of land. Controlling lands of his own for his herds and family would no doubt be a very good thing, but being in debt to the chief vizier would not.

“A beylik and a slave, one of the best, trained by me personally.”

The vizier let his head drift, swaying left and right. He took another pinch of the dried, rolled herbs to add to the little wad in his cheek. Then with a conspiratorial, drunken grin he leaned forward and whispered, “It will be a task that only a true gazi might perform, one that will end forever the power of the Christian idolaters in the sultan’s realms. But if you win—a beylik and a slave, one of the best, trained by me personally.”

Ali clapped twice. The strings of the tambur, the drone of the ney, the rhythmic tapping of a drum resumed, much softer than before. The girl who had been dancing for them earlier returned, her eyes cast down to the carpet before her jeweled toes. The gazi surveyed her as he would a horse or any other fine animal, from her jeweled toes on up. Ankles, calves, knees, and thighs, barely veiled by the gauzy pants, he found shapely and well suited to this creature’s function, for she was clearly bred not to ride and fight but to receive and serve a man. Hips wide enough to bear a healthy child, small belly—the pearl in the navel an invitation to caress—small firm breasts for a man to hold or a babe to suckle. Though her small feet were still, the hips and belly swayed as though controlled not by her will but by the music.

Above the small, firm breasts, the underside of her collarbone reflected the flame from the oil lamp on the carpet, and a shadow like a playful animal danced at the base of her throat. The face fascinated him. The forehead broad, the nose rather small, and the lips full, like the Christian beauties of the sultan’s western realms. But the eyes were the perfect, dark pools, almond-shaped, that Persian poets called “Turks” and that could draw a lover into their depths.

“Come, child,” Ali said to her. Then to the gazi, “She speaks Turkish as well as you or I. Also Greek
and of course Serbian, the language of her mother. We have taught her many other things.”

He then spoke to her in Serbian, a tongue the gazi did not understand but recognized. The girl moved her head in a gesture of consent and stood before the gazi, her sex just inches from his face. Then she spoke in quite clear Turkish, “I am bound to serve whatever man my lord the vizier commands.” Then she squatted and reached for the gazi’s sex.

“A lovely girl,” said Ali, “a true treasure. We call her Zilha. She will be an adornment to your beylik, when you win this game.”

“Play, then,” said the gazi, his voice somewhat slurred by wine and herb and his view of the board obscured by the creature fondling him.

The vizier, as Arslan was aware, rather preferred boys to women and had introduced his sultan to such pleasures. So the erotic skills of this Zilha could not, as he pretended, be attributed to Ali Pasha’s training.

“And now I take my turn,” said the vizier, not waiting for a response.

Arslan made an effort to withdraw his face from the girl’s warm cleavage. He was pretty sure that the vizier was taking advantage of his distraction to carefully arrange the dice in his throwing hand, but there was nothing he could do about it here in the vizier’s tent, and the warm flesh of the girl was making his own flesh stir. Ali kept up a bland chatter as he maneuvered the cubes inside his closed fist and rolled.

“Oh! Allah be praised. Why, look at what He has done. A three and a four. Hmm. And now the game turns. And perhaps I shall claim my prize.”

The gazi scowled, annoyed to be so played with.

“But no matter, my dear gazi. It appears that I have won this little game or will have shortly, to be sure. But you by your nobility and your willingness to do this great service for the sultan, you too deserve your prize.”

“I promise you,” he added after a pause, “my dear Arslan, son of Kara Göne Gazi, once you perform your mission, the beylik will be yours. And the woman too. I promise I shall save her for you. No man will touch her until then.”

In the darkest part of night, Arslan Gazi rode alone on his silver-gray gelding. It was the mount he preferred for formal visits. It was not as responsive as his little mare but larger and princelier with its pricked-up ears. Its broader back forced his thighs farther apart. He rolled his thighs still wider to keep from crushing his still swollen member. The swath of stars above suggested the gauze on swaying hips. The meager light of the quarter moon was a sad sign of a bright prize lost. It had been another of the chief vizier’s cruel jokes to offer then withdraw the slave girl. Like referring to him as a “Turkmen.”

From the chief vizier’s quarters to the west of the besieged City’s walls, the gazi’s trail up to his camp in the hills would lead him past the ugly trébuchets, the “city destroyers” with which the sultan’s men hurled rocks and sharpened chains and bombs of flaming naphtha at those walls. The big machines were quiet now, but when he passed nearer to the walls he could hear the scrape of shovels and of buckets dragged along the ground. The sappers, down below, were still trying to dig tunnels beneath the moat and beyond to undermine the City walls. The gazi rode slowly, the reins let loose.

A commotion up ahead brought him to alertness. Dark figures on horseback clattered over the causeway from out of one of the City gates, and once past the trench turned to their right, riding northward. The black mob bobbed and swayed, separated and came back together. Drawing his battle veil across his face, the gazi urged the gelding into a run.

“Arslanshahin,” he said to himself, calling on the powers of his name: Lion-hawk.

The gelding lurches over uneven ground, but the gazi rises and descends in the short stirrups so that he flies as straight and steady as Shahin. And straight and steady flies the arrow loosed from the stout new bow.

The talon strikes its prey, and the stricken knight rider throws up his arms and falls against his
horse’s neck before slipping off the horse and bumping heavily on the ground, a leg still tangled in the stirrup.

“Arslan!” he mutters, calling on himself to be the lion. Two other knights have reined in and wheeled their horses round, one spurring his charger forward. If he were on his agile mare, Arslan might wheel about and gallop as though fleeing, to surprise the knight by twisting about and firing yet again. But now he is Arslan, the lion, pouncing to tear his prey apart with claws and teeth.

Against the darkened sky rises the darker shadow of a mace. Abruptly, as the riders close, the gelding twists rightward, passing like a breeze beneath the nostrils of the taller horse, which whinnies and bucks. The gazi’s long, curved sword flashes and slashes the unprotected ribs on the knight’s left side.

Now lion and falcon at once, the gazi turns and coils to pounce upon the third knight, who quickly raises buckler and lance before his face and chest. The lion’s long claw this time slashes downward, through the Frankish horse’s throat.

The other knights, regrouped, are riding back, coming toward him with all their speed. The lion-hawk just laughs and turns, gliding hawk-like up a little knoll, past the janissaries who come running and shouting toward the raiders.

At the crest he stops and turns again, toward the dark City and its knights now desperate to return behind their walls. The gazi lets the spell expire, the shahin’s still-fluttering wings resolving themselves into the panting withers of the gelding, the arslan’s fangs turning into a bloody sword.

The halo of the next day’s sun has begun to whiten the sky behind the City’s walls, and in their shadow the mob of horsemen gallops now toward safety, pursued by janissaries and a hail of arrows.

One of the foreign knights lies on the ground, moving feebly. Not far from him, a European horse, tumbled on its side, kicks and screams, blood still gushing from its throat. The gazi smiles behind his veil. His shoulders ease, the tension leaves his forehead. From his sleeve he pulls a cloth and wipes his blade, then sheathes it. At the moment the sun breaks over the domes of the City, he pulls off his battle veil. A muezzin begins the call to prayer. The gazi snaps the reins and presses the gelding with his knees. They seem now just like an ordinary animal and man as they turn their backs to the City walls and canter off.

**A Council of the Gazis**

7 Zulhijje, 804 Hegira
(8 July, Anno Domini 1402)

And these were the heroes who rode into the camp of Bayindir on the day of the Meclis-i-Gazi. Let us see, O my bey, who were the heroes who rode into the camp of Bayindir on the day of the Council of the Gazis.

The first to arrive, an hour before the sun had reached its peak, was Bozkurt the Gray Wolf and a stranger in a tawny dolman. Bozkurt was master of a beylik near Erzinjan in the East, a hard rider and harder drinker who boasted of his slyness and the women he had seized on his raids of the villages around. Bayindir had ridden with him when both were younger against the rebellious Karamanlis of the East.

The two gazis embraced, Bayindir and Bozkurt, beard to beard, each squeezing the other’s arms to test his strength.

“Is it true what the minstrels sing? That Bozkurt is so feared by the caravans that they bring beautiful girls just for you to capture?”

Bozkurt laughed. “Bayindir, my fellow, my beard is near as gray as yours, and I’ve grown even
stouter, so good has life been to me. And yet the women still keep coming. What is a man to do but make more sons?

“And here I’ve brought a man who is like a son, my comrade and my brother-in-law, the tekvur Gregorios.”

Bayindir raised both eyebrows at the Christian name and title, which meant “headman of a Christian village.” The stranger was a younger man, of thick black beard and sturdy build and hard, stern eye. An eagle and lion device was embroidered on his dolman, and a stylized cross was worked in brass on his scabbard.

“Gregorios’ father and two brothers died at Sivas. They fought bravely for the sultan, but when all was lost and they surrendered, Timur trussed them and buried them alive.”

Bayindir frowned then brightened. “Welcome, then, friend Gregorios,” he shouted up to the scowling Armenian, who had not yet dismounted. “Today we celebrate the Hajj, but the Prophet has told us to welcome strangers.”

Somewhere the Prophet had said something like that, Bayindir was relatively certain. Or had that been the poet-dervish Yunus Emre?

The Armenian’s black beard cracked open and he dismounted to accept his host’s embrace and kiss.

Ten more were the heroes who arrived throughout the morning, each with his company of mounted fighters. Saru Kulmash and Kiyan rode in with eighty each, double the number of tradition. But there would be meat of horses boiled and roasted and kefte of sheep and kumis and wine for all of them. Bayindir’s flocks and herds were large. And on each of these heroes Mesud, the gazi poet, bestowed a sobriquet.

Saru Kulmash of the Red Turban, as Mesud called him, had ridden in to Oguzköy from Skopje at the western end of Rum, the sultan’s dominions in Europe.

Kiyan also came from Rum, but on the Black Sea, near Varna. There his name alone was enough to make his Bulgar vassals tremble and the Christians among them to hide their sons. He rode in in full armor, even with a Christian-style breastplate, as though coming to battle rather than to council so Mesud addressed him as “Varnished Steel”—Cilaçelek—and Bayindir had to turn away so as not to be seen laughing.

And here were the other gazis that Bayindir had summoned and who rode in, each from a different corner of the realm, each on his finest mount, each armed and dressed to impress the rest. And those who did not arrive with well-known sobriquets were given new ones by Mesud.

There was Boghach, already known as the Bull-Man, who, it was said, had felled a horse with a blow of his fist;

Salur the Mad, as Mesud called him, because he was one of the true delis, whose gleeful frenzy in combat knew no restraint;

Dundar, called True-Shot by Mesud, slow to speak, cautious in action, who always struck where he had aimed;

Karajuk the Devout, who in the heat of battle liked to declaim what he said were verses of the entire Koran—though Bayindir suspected him of improvising;

Uruz the Andaluz, as Mesud called him, because it rhymed and because, like many of the gazis, he wore boots made in that distant Muslim land to the west;

and Ilig Koja the Never Contented, so named, Mesud explained, for his relentless pursuit of fleeing foes, but also known for his avarice in plunder.

Mesud called out these names in a tone so joyous and boisterous that the recipients dared not appear offended, though “Varnished Steel” looked dubious, and his smile was more of a snarl. “Red Turban” appeared quite pleased with his distinction, and Ilig Koja, when Mesud called him the Never Contented, just tilted his head back and laughed through mouth and nose.

Mesud was lean and quick, quick to smile and quick to speak. His sobriquet for himself was Silver
Throat, but others behind his back called him “Simurgh.” Thirty Birds, not so much because he was known for singing that famous tale as because of all his fluttering. His beylik, Bayindir suspected, was mostly in Mesud’s head, a place watered by a sweet-flowing river whose name changed with every song. Nevertheless, Bayindir had expressly invited him, instead of certain other gazis who no doubt possessed greater wealth and could command more men, simply because he was the constant companion of Arslan.

The only gazi that Mesud did not rename was his own half-brother, Arslan. “Alp”—hero—was how he thought of him, but that would have sounded pretentious, and “Mustache” was used by those who wished him ill. When a man’s own name means “Lion,” and when that man’s reputation is the equal of his name, there is no need for more.

Kumis the girls brought before the games, to create a little explosion in each man’s head. It also kept them staggering off a little away from the group to piss.

The sudden boom of kettle drums startled Bayindir’s guests, who turned to see carpets now spread out across a stretch of meadow. Another great boom of the drums, and the acrobats came bounding out, so much alike in shape and costume and so rapid in their movements they seemed like sixty instead of six. By leaps and summersaults they merged into a human pyramid which burst apart to reform as a human tree, dropping wriggling fruit that then uncurled and bounded up to merge again in yet a new formation. From somewhere in their costumes two found masks that turned them into the front parts of horses, two others became the backs and rumps, and the two smallest leapt upon their backs to form a prancing pantomime of a gazi raid and victory.

The drums sounded again, and the two simulated gazi trios burst apart as a dozen less expert dancers skipped into their midst. These were Bayindir’s Christian peasants, the women got up in hides and with antlers on their heads, pursued by the men with stringless bows who jumped and skipped along on wooden poles with carved horses’ heads.

“What’s that supposed to be, Bayindir? They’re jumping like they’re threshing grain.”

“Wait! It was a dream. You’ll see.”

Two of the acrobats now appeared in boars’ heads, as menacing as two acrobats could be. The peasants just kept jumping up and down, and one of the deer-women slapped a boar. When it persisted and got behind her to root under her skirts, she kicked back like a goat so hard the mask came off and the young acrobat sat down hard.

“Oh, Bayindir! So now your dreams are of peasants who’ve become clowns!” guffawed one of the guests. Bayindir couldn’t be sure which one, but he suspected Ilig Koja. This was not at all what was supposed to happen. Bayindir waved hard at the leader of the drummers, who misunderstood and pounded a louder, faster beat to announce another act.

Then out into the midst of bewildered peasants and acrobats bouncing and weaving without a script toddled the dancing bear and his gypsy master. The gypsy looked around with a wide-eyed smile. When he found his patron, Bayindir, he grinned hopefully, then wistfully, then with brows raised to a peak in exaggerated grief. It occurred to Bayindir that the man was mocking him or else unconsciously mirroring his expression. The bear paid neither of them any attention, but dropped to all fours to inspect the fallen acrobat clutching the boar’s mask. The young acrobat tried to thrust the mask between him and the bear, but this seemed only to annoy the bear, who swatted the mask out of the acrobat’s hand. Other acrobats appeared, shouting and poking at the bear until the gypsy, startled out of his stupor, ran over to where they were struggling. He put his hands on the bear’s neck and started talking to it. Bayindir’s guests laughed, and every laugh was an arrow into his heart.

“Enough!” he cried.

The drummers halted, their drumsticks in the air. The peasants stopped jumping. But the bear had slipped its muzzle and was chomping on the ear of the boar’s mask. Bayindir felt he was about to cry tears of rage.
“Stop, I say! I command you.”

Commanded whom? he asked himself. He was shouting at a bear! The guests all looked at Bayindir, then at the bear, and some of them laughed again. The gypsy, frantically and uselessly, tried to tug on the animal’s shoulders, raising one leg to try to step back when the bear shrugged and turned and the gypsy ended up stretched across the bear’s back. The bear had become most interested in the shiny yellow front-piece of the acrobat’s costume and pressed his paw against the young man’s belly. Bayindir closed his eyes tight and screamed again, “Stop it, I say! Gypsy, you and your bear will be executed.”

When he opened his eyes he was amazed to see a man with a broad back and short legs bent over the bear. The gypsy had been pushed aside, and this man wrapped his arms around the bear and lifted it clear off the ground.

A hush had fallen over the crowd, broken now by cheers and laughter. It was Arslan son of Kara Göne who had picked up the bear, as he might a man in a wrestling match. And he squeezed it as a bear might squeeze a man.

Wide-legged, for the bear must be very heavy, Arslan walked with the beast, belly forward, toward Bayindir. The animal wriggled and stretched and tried to get a hind foot onto the ground, but couldn’t get purchase.

“Turn it upside down!” shouted one of the guests.

“Pin its shoulder to the ground,” shouted another. To Bayindir’s amazement, Arslan dropped the bear to the ground, and when it turned to face him, snatched it up again, upside down. A classical wrestling victory.

The gypsy had run over and was pleading with Arslan and pleading with his bear. Arslan dropped the bear again and the gypsy slipped the muzzle back on. Encouraged by laughter and applause, the gypsy turned and bowed and said, “And now, Chojuk, we show the honored gazis how you dance.”

“Get that bear out of here!” shouted Bayindir with all his strength, or so he thought. He was so embarrassed and there was so much noise all around him that he lowered his head and raised his fists, and he wasn’t sure if anyone had heard his shout. When he looked up again, the bear and gypsy were out of sight and the gazis were all crowded around Arslan, who was up on Boghach’s shoulders.

After that, the wrestling dwarves seemed anticlimactic.

All this had been the warm-ups for the horse-sports. First, a team of seven of Bayindir’s hand-picked riders, on their most agile ponies and carrying blunt spears, competed against seven of the companions of his gazi guests, chosen by lot. The visitors were brilliant riders, each a magnificent horseman, but the host riders finally overcame them, less by individual skill than because they had ridden together before and now rode and hurled their lances as a team, thus saving Bayindir’s honor. And finally the races, in which the gazis themselves rode. Only Bozkurt demurred, apologizing that he had not brought his swiftest horse. Bayindir understood that it was because his old friend had grown so fat that he’d brought instead the horse that was most comfortable to ride. He offered him the pick of any of his own horses, but Bozkurt shook his head. It wouldn’t be right, he’d said, to win a race on another man’s horse.

Six of the gazis took part in the first race, on which the men took bets. Kiyan early took the lead on a sleek Arabian mare and passed the marker first, followed closely by Gregorios on his Turki gelding. Arslan Gazi, on a handsome and exceptionally large young hybrid stallion, half Mongol and half European, started late and came in half a length behind. He had had the stallion only for a week, he explained, and was still teaching it to respond. When Bayindir praised the horse and asked how he’d got it, Arslan only with great reluctance said it had been a gift from Ali Pasha. Strange. Arslan appeared embarrassed to have been so honored by the chief of the sultan’s viziers. He did not seem pleased when Bayindir repeated this impressive news to his assembled guests.

At last it was time to eat. Of course they had been sampling savory kebabs of horse intestines and balls of fine ground meats all day, along with kumis, but now, mid-afternoon, was for the ceremonial
repaas.

“We are all beys here,” announced Bayindir, “for he who is the bey of beys is not with us today. And so,” Bayindir went on, “all places around the carpets are equal! Let us sit, each man where he pleases, and thank Allah and our forefathers and the spirits of the herds, for today we feast.”

Boghach, never one to stand on ceremony, snorted and, glancing quickly around him, sat on the far edge of the carpet, directly opposite where Bayindir had placed his cushions, as though to create a second pole of power. Steelgleam, that is, Kiyan of Varna, and Karajuk the Devout both moved to seize a place equidistant from Boghach and Bayindir, Karajuk not noticing Kiyan’s abrupt move until their shoulders bumped. Karajuk the Devout jumped back and drew his sword, and Kiyan did the same, his teeth gleaming through his smile.

“Honored warriors, you are in my house,” reminded Bayindir. And it was true, though the house’s floor was grass and it had no walls or roof. And in the host’s house, no human blood may be shed. Each man then sheathed his sword and elaborately tried to concede the place to the other, until Gregorios the Christian tekvur gently but firmly pushed the two apart, one hand on each man’s chest, and took the seat himself. Karajuk then took his place on Gregorios’ right and Kiyan on the left.

Mesud and Arslan were among the last to take their places, one on each side of Bayindir.

Bayindir had sacrificed three great stallions for this prestigious crowd and numerous other horses for the steaming coils of boiled intestines that served as appetizers. For the main course, only handsome stallions would do, roasted and served with their heads still attached and their eyes open, to remind all the feasters that they were partaking of the very spirit of life, of horse, the defining animal of the steppes. A very rare treat in these modern times, but this was a very special occasion.

Bayindir’s slaves struggled to drag the first of the roasted stallions, arranged upon a pane of tanned, stamped horsehide, into the circle. Boghach the Bull-Man sprang up and pushed the nearest two slaves away to tug at the cargo himself. At once Bozkurt, Kiyan, Ilig Koja, Saru Kulmash, and Salur all jumped up and each grabbed an edge of the food-laden leather, bumping into each other and shouting and boasting of their strength as they pulled the leather carrier and the horse over the ground and onto the center carpet. Mesud too had risen and taken a step toward them, but when he saw that his exertions were not needed, he stood where he was and improvised a verse about the noble horse of the plains, true friend of man when even other men desert him, giver of blood and meat, the wings that carry messengers, and so on. Only Gregorios, Dundar, and Arslan, and of course the host Bayindir, each for his own reasons, sat calmly, waiting and watching.

The slaves brought out kumis, and huge leather flagons of wine, then more leather panes laden with mutton—forty rams had Bayindir sacrificed, for only the males were fitting for sacrifice for such a manly gathering. Bayindir’s daughters were safely secluded, he believed, their tent barely visible beyond where his camels were hobbled, and guarded by nine eunuchs. If Gray Wolf or any of the others suddenly felt an irresistible urge to take a woman, why, he would have to do with a slave girl. He had chosen the most attractive ones to serve as decoys—just in case.

“What is this ‘Timur’ I keep hearing about?” shouted Kiyan.

Bayindir, who had been careful to remain sober, had not heard whatever it was that prompted this outburst.

“And why should the sultan be concerned? An old, lame man from Samarkand. I don’t see why the sultan needs us at all to fight this outlaw. All the way from Varna I had to come. What about you, Boghach? Surely you could deal with this meddler all by yourself.”

Kiyan laughed loudly. He was quite drunk, Bayindir noted. He’d taken off his steel breastplate to eat and allow his belly room to expand, and now, Bayindir thought, if it had been his role to give men nicknames, he would have called him Slobber instead of Steelgleam. And Boghach looked very annoyed. It was not wise to annoy Boghach, a good-natured man most of the time, but not the swiftest thinker. Well, best not to wait. Bayindir nudged Mesud and pointed with his beard, first to Kiyan then to
Boghach.

“What’s that, Grandpa?” Mesud said to him, his eyes opening wide.

Ay, spirits! Mesud drunk too. Bayindir did not at all enjoy being called “Grandpa.” He yanked Mesud’s blouse, to pull Mesud’s ear up to his mouth, and whispered loudly, “Say some verses to distract Boghach.”

“Oh!” Then, “Hey, Bull-Man!” shouted Mesud. “Shall I tell our guests how you got your name?”

Then, falling into the cadence he’d begun with this first shout, he improvised a song, and even Boghach stopped chewing.

Once there was and once there wasn’t,
In the distant land of yore,
when the white flocks crowded the gray hills
and the eagle soared in search of prey,a child called Calf-Boy romped among the flocks.

Oh, Allah save us! thought Bayindir. Calf-Boy. But at least he’s distracted Boghach. One of Bayindir’s musicians plucked the strings of his tambur and another began tapping out the rhythm on a tambourine.

Faster than the chamois Calf-Boy scampered up the hill,
and the birds all sang joyously to see him.

Where can this be going? wondered Bayindir. Kian too was staring. Probably thinks we easterners are savages, and Mesud is about to prove him right.

A monster there was that terrorized the land.
Its breath stank foul, and its teeth gleamed
like varnished steel.

Bayindir looked desperately to Arslan, hoping he would restrain his old companion. That Kiyan was squirming around, reaching for his discarded breastplate now.

Then it was that Bayindir Khan called upon the Oguz.
Upon the Inner Oguz and the Outer Oguz called my khan Bayindir.

Arslan just smiled. Bayindir shook his head and prayed.

Heroes, said he, come help me to decide.
We must take council, for our flocks are being devoured,
our women threatened, our very lives at stake.
What shall we do against the terrible monster?
Who will slay this foe?
The monster has demanded the fairest of our daughters,
one each week, to devour, and then he will respect our flocks.

“Only one a week?” shouted Bozkurt. “What kind of a monster is this?”
“Maybe he’s fasting for Ramadan,” growled Ilig Koja the Never Contented.
“More respect!” demanded Karajuk the Devout. “Let’s hear the story.”
Then one of the heroes, he of few words
But true aim—

Bayindir glanced up. Yes, Dundar appeared to have caught the allusion.

—said to Bayindir.
Let us hear what this hero said to my khan Bayindir.
Against the greatest lions,
sang True Aim,
A single arrow no wider than a finger can be fatal.
Against the mighty kings of old,
a single grain of poison was potent enough to kill.
A gnat can drive a buffalo to madness.
Let us then deploy our littlest and most potent weapon
against our greatest foe.
Calf-Boy will be the hero of the Oguzand
and save our daughters lives
and all our flocks.

Boghach frowned, but he was smiling too. Kiyan had stopped groping for his weapons and his
breastplate and sat back, looking amused.

A child we shall send, a little child.
The monster will see no threat.
“Another morsel,” he will say, will say the monster when he sees the child,
“an appetizer do they send me,
as tasty as boiled horse intestines,
to accompany my snack of Oguz maiden.”

Saru Kulmash belched and seemed surprised at himself and laughed. His red turban had come half-
unwound, and he picked up one end, dripping with the darker red of wine, and laughed again. “‘Snack of
maiden.’ I’ll have some of that,” he said.

O True Aim, said my khan Bayindir,
How terrible the thing you say.
Are we to sacrifice not only our daughters but our sons?
Oh no, my khan, True Aim replied.
For this is a very special child,
and I will give him a charm
that will let him overcome the foul monster.

“Gimme some more of that wine,” demanded Saru Kulmash of Kiyan.
“What’s he going to give that child?” shouted out Uruz.
“Your fancy boots,” Ilig Koja answered him. Mesud paid no attention.

A charm I have
that will increase the boy’s own natural force.
“Come on, come on, get it over with!” growled Ilig Koja again. Mesud looked around, saw everybody sufficiently distracted, and concluded,

And so Calf-Boy went to the monster, 
asaying the secret words to True Aim’s charm, 
a stone that made all things sharp, 
he felt the little hornlets sprout from his skull 
Turned into the Boghach you see before you now, 
And butted the poor fiend to death! 
Let this tale of the Oguz be Boghach’s, 
May the Bull-Man stay strong and butt all of the Oguz’s foes.

Mesud paused, his eyes inviting all in the circle to join him as he began to chant, 

I pray for you, my Khan. 
May your firm-rooted black mountains never be overthrown—

Karajuk the Devout, then Salur, and finally Arslan and Bayindir and even Ilig Koja joined in chorus, 

May your white-bearded father’s place be paradise, 
May your white-haired mother’s place be heaven. 
May he grant you increase and preserve you in strength and forgive your sins 
for the honor of Muhammad the Chosen of Beautiful name, 
O my Khan!

Saru Kulmash, too, he of Pristina, had mouthed the words, and so—to Bayindir’s surprise—had Gregorios the Christian. Only Kiyan of Varna pretended not to know, or perhaps really did not know, the ancient formula. What would become of the Oguz if the old stories were forgotten and if men like Mesud ceased to invent new ones?

“And now, my comrades,” said Bayindir as the sun, dropping behind him in the west, made his shadow stretch in ripples over the chunks of bone and scraps of meat and the uneaten heads of the stallions, their eyes wide and turned heavenward. “Now that we have eaten and drunk, that we have seen the wrestling dwarves and the acrobats”—he didn’t mention the embarrassment about the bear—“and have exercised ourselves and our horses—"

“And heard the new old story of Calf-Boy,” interjected Ilig Koja with a laugh.

“Yes, and heard Mesud’s fine song. And before the revelry, because, yes, the dancing girls are still to come, we must commend our souls to Allah and take council.”


“Wait, my friend of the red turban. First I must tell you what I saw, and we must take council on what it means and what we must do.”

And Bayindir told them of the stars and flattered them all by telling them how honored they had been by the ancestors. And then he told them about the boars, and that one most certainly was Timur, the other Bayezid. And that one was utterly triumphant, the other utterly humbled. And that the flame had told him that it was up to them, the gazis gathered here, to decide which was which.

And so they debated and discussed, in the following hours while sunlight remained, before the first torches were lit. And this is what emerged from those hours of discussion, while the gazis were still mostly sober and before the musicians and the girls and the stars appeared.

Bozkurt was one of those best acquainted with Timur and his force, for his beylik was far to the east,
and he spoke loudly against the khan.

“That madman is disrupting our whole life in the east. He has destroyed many of our brothers, and he murdered the relatives of my dear friend Gregorios. Worse, his men have already stolen hundreds of my sheep. No caravan will pass through the east while his horde is ravaging there, and there will be no more booty for us to seize.”

What was worse, added Gregorios, was that, through clever propaganda and bribery, he was “Turning friend against friend, winning over some of the beys in the east, bribing them and promising them lands. And because many are afraid to oppose him, even though he is an old man and so crippled he has to be carried about in a litter.”

“Well, if that’s so, then why do you need us? You people in the east should be able to swat him away without trouble. And besides, the sultan has his proud new janissaries and all those Serbs who serve him,” said Kiyan.

“Why? Because it is us, the gazis, who are the fist of Bayezid,” said Bozkurt. “If we strike, we smash all before us. But if we do not, then not all the janissaries and Serbian knights at his command can defeat the khan of Samarkand!”

“He will not be easy to defeat, this Timur,” said Karajuk. “He is most devout. So I have heard. That’s why he calls himself the Scourge of God. And he recites his poems to his scribes, who write them in flowing Persian, a flowering of verse. He has destroyed all that have opposed him. He has left mountains of skulls in the burning cities he has destroyed. His elephants and his cavalry have crushed mighty kingdoms!”

“Bah!” was the opinion of Kiyan. “Elephants or not, he can’t be as powerful as our Yildirim. Or as fast or as deadly.” He was worried, said Kiyan, that by bringing his own best forces so far east, where he was sure they were not needed, he was exposing his own lands in the west to raids from Christians or from other Turks who did not acknowledge Bayezid to be their sovereign.

“Then,” said Saru Kulmash, “what we must do, brother Kiyan, is hasten the defeat of this Timur, so we can get back quickly to our lands, covered with glory and with the booty from that eastern barbarian’s camp.”

“Barbarian?” asked Salur.

“That’s what he says of our chief’s whole line, from Osman to our Bayezid. That they are barbarians! There have been letters, I am told. Word is going all around my camp. Our sultan wrote his own name in great golden script and put Timur’s down at the bottom, very small. The khan must have been furious. And surely you’ve heard what Timur’s men are saying? That the Osmanlis spring from a tribe of slaves, while Timur is a great-grandson of Jengiz Khan himself.

“Why do you allow yourselves to be the slave of slaves?” the dervishes who wander into camp are asking. And my men then come and ask me the same question. And I tell them that those dervishes are in the pay of Timur. But it is troubling all the same. Boghach, what say you?”

“Boghach will do whatever Allah decrees,” replied Boghach.

“Very wise,” said Salur. “And how will you know what that is?”

“God will make His own will known, as He always does,” said Uruz.

“Yes? And you mean—?” Salur insisted.

“Yes, exactly that. We see which one God favors, and we throw in our lot with God.”

“Whichever one is winning, you mean,” Salur persisted.

“God will grant victory to the one he favors. A gazi must be on the side of God.”

“Interesting. And if that side, the one that is winning, is not the side of the sultan to whom we have sworn our loyalty?”

“Salur! We have sworn our loyalty to God. That is why we call ourselves Muslims.”

“Our sultan has won many glorious battles. But what do you say of what he did to Tahirten? Oh, you men from the West, perhaps you do not know of Tahirten? A bey and sipahi and gazi like us, loyal to the
sultan. But he suffered a defeat from Timur, and the sultan punished him. He has sent him back to his city to defend it but has deprived him of all his women.”


“All his harem, made to travel west to live in the sultan’s palace in Bursa.”

“That can’t be done. It’s against the holy law to deprive a vassal of his women.”

“That, dear Saru, is what Yıldırım Bayezid thinks of holy law.”

Ilig Koja intervened. “Can we be frank, my friends? We all trust one another, is that not right? Even our Christian brother Gregorios, it is all right if he hears this, for it is but a quarrel among brothers, our debate. Let us say what we really think.

“We are gazis. We are free men, slaves only of God. That is what we tell ourselves. But for a long time now, at least since this sultan’s father, even we gazis have had to give up one-fifth of our booty to the emir. Even if he has not taken part in our battle or our raids, one-fifth goes to him. And he commands us to come with our men and horses and arms to fight another battle for him. And again he will take a full one-fifth of all the booty, and the remainder we must divide among ourselves, and there are many of us. And if we say no, we will not fight, then he sends his other forces against us. And then he may do to us what he did to Tahirten, or worse. So we call ourselves gazis, but are we free?

“And yet—let us be very frank—what does this Timur offer us? He is a cruel khan of the East, like the ones whose tyranny our forefathers escaped by coming here. He is a destroyer who would not want to see us prosper. And if he should win, only those closest to him will get to be petty tyrants under his great tyranny.”

“So, brother-in-law,” asked Bayindir, puzzled as he often was by his brother-in-law’s convoluted arguments, “are you saying we should fight for Timur or against him?”

“Oh!” said Ilig Koja. “I thought I was being perfectly clear. We must fight for Bayezid, because he has told us to, and he is near and will punish us if we don’t, and because Timur would be no better a ruler.”

“But it would be best to be free of both of them?”

“Ah, my brother-in-law and host Bayindir, you say the most dangerous things.”

Bayindir frowned, hard. “I was only trying to understand what you were saying,” he protested, but clearly he had been tricked into saying what Ilig Koja preferred not to.

“Mesud, then, you haven’t spoken. What do you say?”

“If I live, I shall sing of the heroes of the coming battle, and surely there will be many on both sides. For it will be Muslim against Muslim, and all will die for glory and for Paradise.”

“But which side should be ours?”

“I think,” said Mesud, “that we should hear the lion, Arslan. He is wise in such things, wiser far than I.”

“Arslan?” asked Bayindir.

“I have listened to you all. And this feast, among so many gazis, with the horse-sports and the songs, reminds us of the traditions we had begun to lose. I shall tell you the truth: The war between the two great princes of Islam is a great offense against God, and if both are truly what they say they are, I do not believe God will let it happen.

“I would fight and happily die for the faith, as I know would all of you—even Gregorios, who would surely die for his faith if need be. I would not fight and die for this sultan, who has forgotten many of our ancient ways, in a battle against another Muslim khan. Nor will I fight for this Timur against our Bayezid. This is no secret, though I have not told any of you before. The chief of viziers himself knows it, that this is my decision. Each of you must make your own decision. But perhaps God himself will make the decision for us.”

“Tell them, Arslan,” Mesud sang out, “what the chief vizier told you!” Arslan half closed his eyes and shook his head. “You tell them, Mesud, if you so choose,” he answered.
“Ali Pasha expects finally to take the city, Polis, Istanbul. Within days. That’s what he told you, right, Arslan?”

Arslan nodded.

“And if he does, then there can be no battle with Timur! It would be sacrilege, according to the holy Koran,” exclaimed Karajuk excitedly.

“Within days, eh? After six years of siege? And suppose he does, do you think the Scourge of God will fear to commit sacrilege?” said Ilig Koja with a sneer.

And Salur cried out, “Bayindir! Bring out those girls.”

And the musicians and the dancers came out and played and danced as the men drank and laughed and finally each man of the gazis stumbled, grabbing onto the shoulders or the hips of one or two of the dancing girls to hold him upright, to the tents that Bayindir had arranged for them to spend the night.

Patriots and Collaborators
8 Zulhijje, 804 Hegira
(9 July, Anno Domini 1402)

After his disturbing experience in the great church, Mehmed—with the aid of another Turkish merchant—had hastened out of the city to report to the pasha, and now he was back in Polis, feeling renewed in his Islamic faith and more confident of his skills at handling whatever this Christian city might confront him with. But when he stepped around the corner into the marketplace where he had first met the Blues, the whole gang was there as though waiting for him, along with a couple of older fellows that Mehmed had not seen before. Nobody was wearing the long blue sleeves, however, and their heads were covered, disguising their distinctive hairstyle.

Alexios stepped up to him and embraced him. Then the gang hustled him out of the square and through an alley until they reached one of those little accidental open spaces that were frequent in the old quarters near the Marmara coast, where the streets did not always quite meet. There they slipped into the long-sleeved tunics that somebody brought out from somewhere, and they improvised a little ceremony, shouting and slapping him in the face and shoulders so hard that Mehmed thought he should fight back. But it was good, because they were making him come back to his senses—he had been remembering the odd and disorienting sensation he had had in the church. He had felt, he was sure he had felt, the wings of the archangel beating within his own chest, and he remembered panting and falling to the floor.

The two older boys—big-bellied and muscular men, really, who looked like they should be part of the garrison manning the walls—stood back with their arms folded. They hadn’t donned the long blue sleeves, he noticed, nor had they pulled off their turbans, so he couldn’t tell whether they sported the Blues’ hairstyle. They looked rather fashionable, Mehmed thought, in their short tunics open at the chest, high boots, and turbans. They were observing the proceedings very closely.

Alexios announced that only one step remained before “Michael” could be become a true Blue. If he failed, Alexios added with a tone of regret, after coming this far and learning some of the secrets of the Blues, they would have to kill him.

“But why talk of that?” he added cheerily. And turning to the bigger, older men he announced, “My friend Michael will come through, I swear by the Great Martyr Saint Marina, whose day we celebrate.”

“He’d better,” said the sharper-faced of the two big men. “Or it’s your head we’ll have.” Alexios laughed, nervously. “Sure, Stephanios. Kyril. Never fear. You’ll do it, won’t you, Michael? You’ll bring back a big fat purse and join our faction. Right?”
“And kill one of our enemies,” said the other of the big men.

“Hey, Kyril!” Alexios answered. “We hadn’t said anything about that. Kill? I mean, sure, we know that Michael here is handy with a knife, no doubt he could do it, but just for the initiation? We haven’t required that before, not for the first time out.”

“No, Kyril is sometimes a little too hasty,” said the one who wasn’t Kyril—Stephanios it must be, then. “You’re right. That’s not a job to be trusted to a new boy. A nice theft would be better to start with. But that can wait. We have something more urgent right now. It is our sacred duty to eliminate a traitor who wants to sell out our City! Meanwhile, it looks like we’re going to have a new member. Polla ta ete!”

“Polla ta ete!” they repeated, waving their arms with what Mehmed thought was feigned enthusiasm.

“Hush!” Then in a whisper Kyril added, “Boots. It’s a patrol. Scatter!”

Mehmed didn’t need to be told twice. He was already around the corner before he heard the running feet of the soldiers and the shouts. A loud, deep cry of pain made him think that at least some of the Blues must have lingered long enough to throw something at the patrol, but Mehmed/Michael was long gone.

Mehmed ventured into the City’s poorer, denser sections, with their maze of narrow walkways perpetually in shadow and their many empty buildings. He wasn’t really worried about the threat from those men, Kyril and Stephanios, whoever they were. Or so he told himself. By sundown tomorrow, he should be out of the Polis. He’d seen enough to report something useful to Ali Pasha, he thought. First, though, he had to deliver a message to a certain Bardas. The pasha had told him where he might find him.

He found the place with some difficulty—the streets in this quarter had no names and in many places were no more than twisted pathways between the buildings, but Eyup’s instructions had been precise and detailed. He still had a few nomismas in the purse at his belt and thought he would get some wine and bread for himself and Eyup who would be waiting there. He knew Eyup was not one of these by-the-book Muslims who refused to drink good wine, a scruple that was also unknown in the ordu.

But after his eyes got accustomed to the deep shadow, he saw that Eyup was not among the men and a few women lounging at or on the tables. A man he didn’t know looked up and beckoned him. A stout, short man with a very thick black beard. Beside him sat a much taller, older, beardless man with long, light-colored hair, and a younger bearded chap in black, his hands on the table with his fingertips touching, as though in prayer.

“Brother, have you come here from the valley?” asked the man who had signaled him, speaking a strangely guttural Greek. That was the sign, but Mehmed was still suspicious. Nevertheless he gave the countersign: “From the mountains I have come, on a horse as swift as the wind.”

The man laughed, clasped his hands at his chest, and bowed. “I am Bardas Tzimiskes. A merchant, a trader of many things. Here is Isidore, our strategos, supreme commander of the imperial army, what on your side your people call the pasha.” The tall eunuch, with enormous solemnity, inclined his head slightly toward Mehmed. “And here we have our prayerful friend, the monk Loukas. The patriarch’s very own secretary. Who is also a confidante of the emperor and, more especially, of his empress.”

“And I am…” Mehmed hesitated. “Michael. A visitor to this place. I was hoping to find a friend here.”

“Oh, but you have. Three friends, in fact,” said Bardas. “We are all friends of—” and here he switched into Turkish. “—an emissary of Ali Pasha and therefore of Bayezid Sultan himself. ‘Michael,’ indeed! I believe you have a message for me?”

Mehmed nodded.

“Later, then,” said Bardas, “I shall hear it.”
They remained, all four, in the tavern for hours, the eunuch Isidore and the monk speaking of literature, Bardas telling tales of the distant places to which he had traveled, and Mehmed mostly silent and wondering what was expected of him and why Bardas Tzimiskes was so important that Ali Pasha had to communicate with him and Kyril and Stephanios wanted to kill him.

Bardas called for a backgammon board—tavla, the same game Mehmed had seen the gazi play against Ali Pasha. He proposed a match between the janissary and the strategos. Isidore seemed bemused, but this was a game Mehmed had learned from a master, the chief vizier himself. Bardas watched the tosses of the dice and the moves along the painted spikes intently. Mehmed was well ahead when Bardas prodded him and frowned.

Mehmed understood and deliberately made a foolish move, leaving two pieces exposed. The strategos grinned and pounced upon one then another of Mehmed’s straggling pieces, sending both into remotest exile. Bardas looked carefully at Mehmed and nodded with new respect. Mehmed tried not to smile, but he was very pleased. Perhaps he had some talent for deception after all. The chief vizier would be proud of him.

Now that they seemed all at ease with one another, Bardas nudged Mehmed and gestured with his head toward the purse at the young janissary’s waist. Surely he did not expect him to pay?

“The letter,” hissed Bardas. “Let me see the letter.”

Mehmed hesitated a moment, looking at the other faces. The strategos and the monk both nodded. They seemed to be already aware of this communication, and whatever Bardas was up to, they were also in on it.

Bardas examined the seal on the tight roll of linen paper, small enough to be wrapped around an arrow, as though the vizier had considered that mode of transmission before entrusting it to Mehmed. He broke the seal and unrolled the linen paper, and his eyes opened wide. A frown and a smile warred for possession of his face.

“He wants—well, he wants much more than we thought.”

“And he offers?” asked the monk.

“Here. He wrote it in Greek. You can read it yourself. In fact, I’m sure that’s what he intended. Otherwise he wouldn’t have bothered with Greek.”

“You read their damned Persian?” the strategos asked, incredulous.

“Turkish,” Bardas replied, “is what these Osmanlis speak.”

“Same thing,” said Isidore. “It’s all Persian. All those squiggles, like eels or serpents. Medusa’s hair. Devil’s writing, I call it.”

Bardas just shook his head. The monk Loukas was already reading the letter.

“Ah, here it is. ‘The Patriarch will be guaranteed all his present titles and emoluments.’ Here it is, right here, in Greek. I wonder who wrote this for him?”

“Hmm. And what does it say about us generals?”

“Um, wait a minute, I saw something. ‘Strategoi.’ ‘Strategoi.’ Ah, here it is. Yes. ‘Those Christian military leaders, including strategoi, who swear their loyalty to the sultan, will be treated with all honor and respect as though they were adherents of the true faith of the Prophet, except that they will not be required to change their faith.’”

“Well, I’m glad of that. They pray five times a day, those people, don’t they? Eh? To their fiend. Well,” he added in a lower voice to Mehmed, “and you’re one of them, aren’t you? You get down and grind your face into the carpet and pray five times a day?”

“Well, yes, we’re supposed to.”

“Supposed to. Oh, yes, I know soldiers. You slack off now and then, eh? When the aga isn’t looking? You know that praying doesn’t bother me so much, might even be good discipline. We should have been praying more in our army, we could have used the Virgin’s help. Wouldn’t be in the mess we’re in now. But the thing that bothers me, and we’d never get it going in our Christian troops, is all
that washing. Scrub, scrub, scrub, every time before you pray! It’s unhealthy. All that water on your skin.” He laughed.

“And no wine,” added the monk.

“No, no!” answered Mehmed. “Well, some Muslims won’t drink wine. Dervishes, especially, but Bektashis do.”

“Bek…what?”

“And you know, in the horde—what you call the army—we have many Christians. And many men who still follow the ways of the East and have never accepted any restrictions on wine.”

“So we get to keep our religion, and we get to guzzle wine—if those Mahometans have any idea of what’s drinkable. They have that foul stuff made from mare’s milk. And it says we’ll be treated with respect. What else do we get?”

“Our lives,” said Bardas dryly. “If we don’t meet these demands, the sultan will destroy us and put us all to the knife.”

“Hmm. Hasn’t been able to so far, and he’s been trying for damned near six years.”

“And the City is weaker for it. How much longer do you think we can stand him off? How many men do you have still fit for duty? And you saw those big machines they’ve built? The city destroyers?”

“The Frenchmen have been a great help to us,” said Loukas.

“Yes, and how many of them are still able to get up on a horse? There is a rumor now that even their leader, that Chateaumorand, has got the plague. And I’ve heard there were fewer than fifteen of them who went out on that last raid, and they were lucky only one was killed outright, and another died of wounds after they got back.”

“If only they’d send that Bouci…what’s his name?”

“Boucicaut.”

“If only they’d send him back, with more of those French troops.”

“Bah!” said Isidore. “You’d trust those Latins? If it weren’t for the plague and the hunger and the miserliness of our masters, my men would cut through those Persian—”

“Turkish,” Bardas corrected.

“Whatever. Those barbarians, we’d slice them to ribbons. And anyway, there’s not going to be any crusade to rescue us. So forget about the Frenchmen and the Bavarians and the Hungarians and all the others we’ve called on in the past.”

They all fell silent, each man alone with his thoughts. The tavern keeper brought out more wine.

“We have no choice,” said Bardas at last. “Or perhaps I should say, the only choice we have is to do it well and save our skins and as much of our honor and property as possible or to do it badly and lose everything.”

“Hmm. And what about me?” asked Isidore.

“Lands in Selymbria. If we get the sultan what he wants—and soon.”

“And what about the Church?” asked Loukas.

“You just read what they promise the patriarch. He can even stay here in Polis. He won’t be the supreme religious ruler, of course. There will be imams and a kadi.”

“Speak Greek!”

“A judge of Islamic law. And the Church’s property, and the monasteries, will be respected.”

“All right. Let us suppose that you’re right. That we have no choice. That this is God’s will. What then does this sultan want from us?” asked Loukas.

“That is what surprises me. The amount is high, very high. But not just that, not just the tribute in silver and gold, which will be hard to get together, given the way things are. Isidore, you’re going to have to help me with this. Use your family connections.”

“Hmph. They all owe me anyway. Not a one of my cousins would be so rich if I hadn’t made my sacrifices for the imperial army. I’ll squeeze everything I can out of them. And their rich neighbors too.
A little visit from the imperial infantry ought to do the trick.”
“Good. That’s a start. I’ll also try to get a message to Goudelis and certain others in the business.”
“The ‘business,’” repeated Loukas.
“Yes, the business. Commerce, of course. I’ll tell them not to think of it as tribute, but as an investment.”
“To save their lives,” guffawed Isidore.
“Not just that. We don’t have to be so negative. It is also to purchase the opportunity to make even greater fortunes under the new regime.”
“Bardas, how can you even think of dealing under the rule of those infidels? Those devil-worshippers?”
Bardas leaned back on his stool and stared at the monk, one eyebrow raised and his fat cheeks and lips puckered pensively. Then he shook his head and looked back at the document from Ali Pasha. “He also expects a thousand slaves.”
“A thousand!” said Isidore. “Why, in the old days, that would have been no problem. But we have no more hinterland. Where are we going to get a thousand slaves?”
“The letter specifies ‘young and healthy,’ and he wants an equal number of males and females. Boys and girls, he means.”
The monk laughed sadly. “I wish we could just send him our urchins,” he said with a sigh.
“Eh? What do you mean?”
“No, just a joke. I was just thinking the sultan wants a thousand young males and females as slaves. And he would feed them and clothe them, of course. They would be just fine. Except that their souls would be lost. But until the day they died and went to the hell where all infidels must go, they would want for nothing.”
“Yes,” said the strategos. “There are worse things than being a slave of the sultan.”
Mehmed smiled but kept silent.
“And,” Loukas went on, “I was just thinking, here we have all these children, poor orphans, many of them from once-rich families, not used to the hardships of these times. And we cannot provide for them.”
“Plus of course all those poor devils who have always been poor, those damned little cut-purses and insolent, snot-nosed brats. There’s a whole organized gang of them, breaking into houses. Every time my men catch some of them, we give them a good beating. But the rascals keep at it. It would be quite a joke to hand them to the sultan. Rid ourselves of pests, and let them make his life miserable,” said Isidore, laughing. He banged his cup on the table to demand more wine.
“You’re saying we take these orphans as slaves to the sultan?” Bardas inquired. His voice was low, thoughtful.
“No, no. I was just making an ironic comment about how wretched our youth are here.”
“Send ’em off, I say!” said Isidore, a little more loudly than necessary. “Capital idea.”
“You know, Loukas, that may really be the solution,” said Bardas. “It’s either that or force every aristocratic family in the Polis to give up their own slaves. And they won’t want to do that. Of course, they can’t look like street urchins when we present them to the sultan. If we offend him, that could be fatal.”
“Oh, fine!” said the strategos in his high, petulant voice. “Now you’re talking about…about what? Dressing them up? Getting them to act like well-mannered slaves? Our street children? Ho! That’ll be a job and a half. And where do you suppose we find them? Have you got a bunch of orphans in your monasteries, Loukas?”
“There are some, but hardly enough. No, the ones I was thinking of are all those poor young souls living on their own, many of them in the buildings abandoned since the siege began, and begging or stealing to stay alive. But I wasn’t serious about making them slaves for the sultan. That would be
horrible. They would be circumcised. They would be made to worship that devil they call Allah.”

“And why not? You sentimental censer-waver. All you long-ropes, no practical sense. What do you think would become of your little darlings once the sultan takes over? You think he’ll tolerate a mob of young thieves and beggars? He’ll have his janissaries hunt them down and kill them. And as for circumcision,” added the eunuch, “well, there are more serious fates.”

“Oh, General! Don’t talk like that. It’s an unbearably sad idea.”

“Hmm. Perhaps not, friend Loukas. Making them slaves of the sultan might be to do them a favor. What do you say, young man?” Bardas said, turning to Mehmed.

“Yes. It is an honor and a privilege to be a slave to Yildirim Bayezid Sultan.”

Loukas and Isidore stared at him.

“You’re a janissary, aren’t you?” Bardas asked.

“Yes.”

“And that means you’re a slave of the sultan, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you look healthy enough to me. There, my friends, you see? We will be doing God’s work, saving the lives of these young people, and saving our city too.”

“And tell me, my child. Did you not regret the circumcision? The cutting away of part of what God gave you?”

“There he goes, worrying about foreskin again. Look you, churchman, we have a city to save. A civilization! And you’re worried about some little beggars’ pipis.”

“Saving it by surrendering it,” said Loukas mournfully.

“Saving it from destruction. And your patriarch will be safe,” Bardas assured him. “He’s been negotiating these points with Ali Pasha ever since Manuel II left us. Even before.”

“You knew that? Well, yes, I admit it, it’s true. But I thought only I and the patriarch himself knew that. I am his secretary,” Loukas explained to Mehmed. Then turning back to Bardas, he added, “But keep your voice down. If word got out…”

“Say, even I didn’t know that,” said Isidore. “And I speak with the grand domestic every day. How did you find that out, Bardas?”

“I guessed it. From some communications of my own with our young janissary friend’s masters.”

“Excuse me,” asked Mehmed. “Who is Giorgos Goudelis?”

“Ah! Giorgos Goudelis. Thank you, my boy. Why do you ask? Oh, of course. You heard me mention him. Did I mention his first name, though? Didn’t think so. No matter, it’s a good suggestion. Yes, Giorgos Goudelis will be our source, one source, our main source for fulfilling another part of the sultan’s demands. All that gold and silver. There is no richer man in Polis than Goudelis. Unfortunately he’s not here at present.”

“Not here? You mean at this table?”

“Not here in this city. He sailed the day before yesterday. Unloaded a ship he’d contracted and up the Bosporus to the Black Sea. He was in a terrible fit. Some band of gazis had just raided a convoy up there on the coast. You must tell your pasha to keep better control of those bands. Part of that treasure was destined for tribute to the pasha himself.”

“Mostly, though, old Goudelis has been doing very well during this blockade. The prices he gets for whatever he brings back. He can hire good sailors, Genoese mostly, and Arab boys. I don’t know whether he bribes your Ali Pasha or whether they’re just better sailors than the Turks, but his ships always get through.”

“How much does the sultan want? In gold and silver, I mean?” asked Isidore.

“Here.” Bardas showed him the letter, pointing with his finger to the passage.

“Whew! I swear by the holy eleven thousand virgins. Even Goudelis can’t have that much stored away.”
“And there’s something else,” Bardas added. “Something beside the treasure and the slaves and the keys to the Golden Gate.” His voice sounded portentous. The others waited, watching him.

“He wants the Princess Theodota Palaiologina. For his son’s harem.”

Isidore laughed. “The emperor’s bastard? I haven’t seen her for years. She must be quite the grown-up lady now. Pretty little kid, she was. Manuel used to dote on her. Pity he couldn’t take her with him when he left. Wife wouldn’t let him, I suppose. Lord in heaven. What would Manuel say if he knew?”

“But that’s terrible. Why would he make such an outrageous demand?”

“And what’s he need her for, this sultan? He’s already got at least one Christian princess for a wife. And probably a dozen others and all the little boys he wants to play with too.”

“General!” remonstrated Loukas.

“Well, it’s true. You’ve heard the rumors. The Princess Theodota. My!”

“I think,” said Bardas, “that we had better get to work.”

That night Mehmed slept in the tavern, where the merchant had arranged for him to have some company. “A young colt needs a mare to mount,” he’d said.

But the girl ran shrieking from the room when she saw that Mehmed was circumcised. It took Bardas—who had remained talking in the tavern even after Mehmed and the girl had retired—much rapid explanation and a generous bribe to restore calm to the inn. At last Mehmed, on the hard shelf that served as a bed in a curtained-off corner of the inn, dropped off to sleep.

**Streets and Knights**

9 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(10 July, Anno Domini 1402)

He must have been having a bad dream, because when a hand touched his shoulder Mehmed jumped and groped for his knife.

“Your friend’s here to see you,” said the girl, a little older than Mehmed and much calmer. She smiled and seemed about to laugh at his discomposure.

“Friend? What friend?”

“The Turk.”

Mehmed frowned. Could he still be dreaming? Wasn’t this Christian Constantinople, Polis, he was in? And wasn’t this a Christian girl looking down on him with amusement? What Turk? Eyup, maybe?

“He’s out back, behind the kitchen. Come on. I’ll show you. What happened to your hair? You’re not a wrestler, are you?”

“Mmh,” replied Mehmed.

He’d slept in his clothes, but not his cap. He blinked hard and looked around the room until he found it and shoved it down hard on his shaven skull, now sharply bristly to his touch.

“Well,” said the girl when he offered no explanation, “it’s no business of mine. I don’t care what you do, as long as you don’t do it here. You’re awfully skinny for a wrestler, though. You’ll be wanting to piss, I suppose. That’s out back too. Hurry up.”

Feeling very disoriented, he did as she commanded, got through the empty kitchen—it was much too early for anybody to be cooking—and to the back doorway. There he saw, why, it was the smallest of the Blues, the one they called Turk.

“What a surprise,” said Mehmed. “Where’s Alexios?”

“And good morning to you too,” said Turk.
“Where’s Alexios?”
“Never mind Alexios. I’ve got a message for you. From the top.”
“The top?”
“The big guys. First, my man says, congratulations on making contact with Bardas. Second, remember, you’ve got until sundown tonight.”
“Till sundown?”
“To kill him. Don’t you remember anything? You’re just lucky they didn’t kill you. The city is full of spies these days. Kyriel doesn’t trust outsiders. Look.” He reached into his tunic and pulled out a large gilded cross of a design unfamiliar to Mehmed.
“See those marks? That’s writing, in Latin. We knocked one of those knights off his horse. A rock and a sling was all it took. They’re not as tough as they look. We beat him pretty good. Grabbed his bow and his sword too. I wanted to keep the horse, but there’s no place to hide it. And if they catch one of us on a big Frankish horse, why—”
“Wait a minute. The Blues are defenders of the City, right? And all that shouting about the Emperor Manuel II? Why are you attacking your allies?”
“Boy, you don’t know anything, do you? Because they’re foreigners, baldhead! They don’t even speak Greek among themselves. They’ve sworn allegiance to that foreign priest, the pope, in that other Rome, old Rome. They’re heretics. We didn’t kill him, though. Those Latin knights are still useful. Just roughed him up to let him know what we think of his kind. As for you, well, we’re still testing you. The only reason my man trusts you at all is because your new friend Alexios spoke up for you. Also they thought you might be useful. But only if you carry out your mission.”
“My mission. Kill Bardas.”
“By sundown.”
“Tell me, Turk, why do they want me or anybody to kill Bardas? What’s he done?”
“You’re pretty nosy for a foreigner. Just remember what we do to spies.” Turk smiled a very cruel smile. Mehmed wanted to squash the little guy.
“We caught one last night. Well, he’ll be telling no more tales to that Ali Pasha.”
“Oh? What happened?”
Turk grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him around the corner of the building. Mehmed wondered if the girl who had wakened him was watching. “He was one of them, a Turk in the service of the sultan.”
“But you’re a Turk too, aren’t you, Turk?”
“I’m a Christian Turk! My whole family. But this one, the one they caught last night, he couldn’t even speak proper Greek. A smuggler. We were just going to rob him, but then we found a letter with the seal of Ali Pasha in one of his wine jugs. And that’s not all. We found a pair of boots. Beautifully tooled, red leather military boots, wrapped in linen like something precious. And they didn’t belong to that smuggler, that’s for sure, with his big square feet.”
Mehmed suddenly felt faint. He put a hand against the wall. “So what did you do?”
“With the boots? Kyriel wanted them, but they were too narrow to go up over his calves. I would have taken them myself, but Kyriel wanted to keep them, I don’t know who for. He thinks the smuggler must have been keeping them for somebody, some confederate he’s got in the City. Another spy. Too bad we can’t ask him.”
“Who?”
“The smuggler. Alexios wanted to get him to talk, but it was too late, Stephanios had already slit his throat.”
“You killed him?”
“Stephanios did. That’s what happens to spies. Now we just have to keep an eye out for whoever belongs to those boots. Hey, what’s the matter with you? I didn’t think you’d get pale just hearing about
a knifing. You’ve still got it, haven’t you? That big knife you flashed when we first saw you?”

“Yes. I’m all right. Must have had too much to drink last night, that’s all. Give me a moment. I’ve
got to take a piss.”

“Yeah, me too. We’ll water their garden. Make the vegetables tasty for the guests at the inn.”

Mehmed hadn’t been counting on this, but he managed to use his hand to shield his circumcised
prick from the curious eyes of the Christian Turk with the shaved forehead and the long hair from the
back of his head now tied behind him with a ribbon.

“And what was in the letter you found?”

“Boy, that’s something we’d really like to know. Do you know how to read?”

“No.”

“Hmm, too bad. Kyril said he thought it was Greek, though, so it should be easy to find somebody to
read it. Problem is you never know if you can trust any of these monks. Half of them are traitors too.
Ready to sell out the city just as long as their own little privileges are guaranteed. Disgusting. And they
call themselves Christians!”

He adjusted his trousers and looked down at Mehmed’s suspiciously pale, sandaled feet.

“Remember. Sundown tonight. And if you can get his purse, so much the better.”

“And if I don’t?”

Turk grinned and ran his index finger across his throat. “Until later,” he said and disappeared.

“Who was that?” asked Bardas as Mehmed stepped back into the kitchen.

“Boys like that are dangerous,” said Bardas pensively. “They’re not really bad boys usually. Think
they’re doing something good for their city, making all that noise for an emperor who’s abandoned
them. But they’re wrong. He was one of the Blues, wasn’t he? Stay away from them if you can.”

He’d been speaking Greek, but now Bardas suddenly switched to Turkish, speaking in much lower
tones. “It would be very bad for Ali Pasha, and very very bad for you, if something should happen to
me. The letter your pasha sent me said you were a highly trained warrior, surprisingly skilled and bold
for one so young. I want you to stay by my side. I may need some protection in order to carry out the
pasha’s and your sultan’s wishes.”

Mehmed nodded. What else could he do?

“But come to think of it,” Bardas mumbled on, as though to himself, “maybe they can be useful. Not
bad boys, really.”

He grinned, as though at a private joke. Then he noticed Mehmed watching him and grinned even
harder at the young janissary.

“You too. Maybe you’ll be useful. Tell me, which one of them was it who gave the command to
murder me?”

Mehmed gulped. “You heard us?”

“The girl did.”

“Which one, you asked?”

“There are two of them at the top. It’s quite a little racket they run. I’m just an honest tradesman, buying and selling, providing people in the City with the things they need. But it behooves me, you understand, to avoid dealing with the agents of the grand domestic. If I paid all the taxes the imperial treasury demands, why, I’d be out of business in a week, and then who would supply my customers? So I have been obliged to use the services of the Blues. To keep things safe, as they say. Safe from them, mainly. I’ve dealt with both of them. Kyril and Stephanios, Stephanios and Kyril. There’s always been some tension between them. Kyril is a little smarter, Stephanios a little more brutal. I was just wondering which one was plotting to do away with me. Take over my business, I suppose is what they want. Has to be Kyril, right?”

“I don’t know. They were both there. They had me surrounded, the Blues did, in the street somewhere. I don’t know just where we were, but we had only come a little ways from Holy Wisdom. They said they’d kill me if I didn’t kill you.”

“Hmm. That sounds like Stephanios. But he couldn’t even begin to run the business without Kyril. Did they tell you about the Frankish knight?”

“Turk, that little guy who was just here, said they’d attacked one.”

“Last night. That had to be Stephanios. Kyril is not that dumb. Unless Kyril put him up to it, as a way to get rid of Stephanios and the boys who hang closest to him. Those Franks stick together. You’d better watch out yourself. They’ve been out since dawn, little groups of three or four mounted men, in all the little streets of Hagios Makios and the other poor neighborhoods, grabbing any teenage kid they can who’s got a funny haircut. Ah, it won’t be gentle. I’m going to have to talk to their leader, the Franks, I mean. Meanwhile, young Michael, can you get a message to the Blues? Let Kyril know I want to see him? That is, if he’s still at large.”

“I don’t know. I could go to where I first met them. I know where the house is of one of them.”

“Good. Tell them one of their favorite clients wants to see Kyril, urgently. That there may be gold in it for him. That’ll draw him. Or simple curiosity will.”

He had got only as far as the next street when Mehmed saw that it was true—foreign knights seemed to be swarming everywhere. It took Mehmed an instant to recognize that he had seen only three, so great was the commotion they made. They squeezed through the narrow space between buildings, single file on their big horses. One of them saw Mehmed and gave a shout, but before he could turn his horse around Mehmed had ducked into a doorway, nearly knocking over an old man, and out to a little patio in back where a woman doing laundry looked up, put a finger to her lips, and pointed to the low wall behind the building.

He flew over it and into a puddle of water and then, ducking low, ran through another narrow alley and on to the next street. When he looked out around the corner, he saw three more knights. Behind them were four or five boys Mehmed’s age or younger, and a girl who might also have been sixteen or seventeen. She was the only one shouting defiantly. The boys all looked subdued and bruised. Their hands were tied behind them with scraps of rag, and they were tied together by a long rope looped around each neck. The rope’s end was tied to the pommel of one of the knight’s saddles, and they were being marched in the direction of the Golden Horn.

Dodging patrols and moving very cautiously, it took Mehmed all morning to get to Alexios’ house, especially since with all the detours he got lost several times. The door was smashed, and one of the skinny pigs rooting in the street ran up to him in joyous, grunting greeting. Mehmed ran upstairs. A girl, Alexios’ younger sister Zampia, looked up at him and screamed, then began to cry. Her mother sat slumped on the floor—her chair had been smashed—weaving her head back and forth and moaning.
It took a while for Mehmed to set the mother up in a more comfortable position and to calm the girl. At last, between sobs and then in a much calmer rage, Zampia told him what had happened. The men who burst into their apartment didn’t even speak like Christians, she said. They kept shouting the name of Alexios; it seemed to be the only Christian word they knew. Anna shouted back at them that he wasn’t here, and one of them laughed and tried to grab her breast and she broke one of Alexios’ precious urns over his head, but he had a helmet on that rang like a bell. Then another of the men, one who seemed to be in charge, slapped the first one and gave an order in their strange language, very nasal sounding, and they tied up Anna’s hands and marched her out to join a whole string of youngsters, all tied up together, and marched them off. As for Alexios, she had no idea what had happened to him or where he was.

“Well, when you do see him,” Mehmed told her, “tell him the merchant Bardas Tzimiskes wants to see the leader of the Blues. Kyril.”

“Kyril? That nasty man who’s been after Anna? He can’t be the leader of the Blues.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s not the same one. This is a big, heavy man, about twenty-two or twenty-three years old—”

“Yes! Yes!”

“Well, tell Alexios, anyway. It’s important.”

“And what are you going to do about Anna?”

“I don’t know yet. If I can do something, I will. I guess someone will have to talk to the Frankish knights.”

Already, someone had.

The Princess’s Duty
10 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(11 July, Anno Domini 1402)

“You treacherous spirits!” Theodota spat out at the little statues in her garden.

“And you treacherous heavens!” she added, turning her face upwards. “What sort of fiendish bird was that that you sent me, to lure me astray?”

She noticed a stork perched on the eastern parapet of her terrace. Its head was down so that its long red beak crossed the long white neck to form a chi, X, the first letter of Christos.

“Oh. No, not you, friend stork. I meant that other bird, that gray falcon that tricked me into leaving the palace grounds. Did you know him?”

The stork turned its head so that it gazed at her from its other eye, its beak now crossing its neck in the opposite direction.

“Yes, it’s true. Listen, friend stork, and carry the word to all the good birds of heaven, to watch out for the gray and white falcon. He is an agent of Satan. And you! What are you grinning about?” She turned on the marble Adam, looking at him more critically than ever she had.

“Aha! I see you now. I see you for what you are. What do you think, friend stork? Do you think this being here is really Adam, God’s most noble creation who began our race of men upon the earth? No? Who is he then?”

The stork raised its beak and partly opened its black-tipped wings in what Theodota took for a shrug.

“No. He is not!” she shouted, wheeling back to face the statue.

There was a flapping sound behind her, and when she turned the stork was gone.
“Just so. You are right. This is no place for a pure-hearted creature like you. I pray you carry the message as I said,” she said half-aloud, her eyes following the stork as it flew low over the roofs of the City.

She stepped over to the marble statue. She dropped her hand carelessly to rest on the long, slender stone erection, and turned to look across to its partner, the statue she had always thought of as Eve. But she was not Eve, and this was not Adam, and they were probably not even meant to be a pair. The female had a blockier, squarish body, as though crafted by a different sculptor from whoever had made the delicate veins in the belly of the male, the curly marble hairs lower on the belly, the smile that she now saw as nasty beneath a wisp of marble mustache. Also, the female was a bit too big for the male, she thought, and the hands before her sex and breasts seemed to be inviting more than covering.

“Oh!” She dropped her hand from the stone prick and looked sternly into the hollow-irised, laughing eyes. “You are both ancient pagan idols, aren’t you? Let’s see— aha, these nubs up here among your curls. There were horns here once, weren’t they? A satyr is what you are. But then you should have hooves.”

The feet, however, whether goat’s or man’s, were concealed between a pair of giant, flat-topped toadstools that came up to the figure’s mid-calf and some vaguely carved foliage in the middle. Theodota pondered the toadstools, on which she had often sat. Now that she was taller, if she put one foot on each—there, like that—she could hike up her skirt to straddle…ah, so that’s what this was for. There had been oblique, giggling references to an ancient empress who had played such naughty games.

She laughed at her discovery. The statues weren’t to blame—they had been her companions here for years and had never harmed her. It was as though they had been patiently waiting for her to recognize them for what they were, the signpost for the outside of a lupanar and an orgy-toy for inside. It was fortunate that no one had seen her, but she wished Olga were here to share her laughter—and her sorrow and her rage.

Olga. It was Theodota’s fault that the loyal slave had disappeared. Someone had seen her; the secretary of the grand domestic had seen Theodota as she was sliding stealthily along the corridor back to her quarters. At first the man must have taken her for a stable boy lost in the palace, but then he had recognized her. It was the falcon’s fault or whoever sent the falcon. Someone had cast upon her the evil eye and summoned that bird to lead her far astray. No one in the palace had dared touch her, of course, not Theodota, who though a bastard was still a princess, a Palaiologina. But they had taken Olga away, God only knew for what punishment. All because of Theodota’s rashness in sneaking out of the palace.

There was that noise again. Shouting, some of it triumphant, and other shouts of anger. She couldn’t see into the narrow streets to tell just what it was, but something had been going on, intermittently, all morning. She’d heard a crash, as of a rock against metal, and some yelps of pain, including some female voices. And it wasn’t coming from the Turks outside the walls, but from somewhere nearby in Polis itself. There. A blast from a trumpet, like the cavalry used.

She peered down into the palace courtyard. Men with axes were milling around, agitated but moving with no purpose. Varangians, but they were not at their posts guarding the entryways. Varangians. Of course. That Varangian Harry would know what was going on. Or at least would know more than Theodota could tell from here.

She straightened out her skirts, winked at “Adam,” and hurried down the stairs into the palace itself. She stopped in her chambers for a mirror and to cover her head modestly. Oddly, the corridors were empty. Everyone must be out in the courtyard or running about somewhere. She hurried to the doorway where a pair of Varangians was supposed to be on guard at all times. They had stepped away, but as soon as she called out, two of them rushed back to take their places.

“Varangian!” she addressed the nearest one, a stout, very broad man with brown beard and hair. “Do you know a Varangian Erres?”

The man looked at her with a startled frown.
“Or ‘Harry.’ Do you know that name?”

The man smiled. “Harry,” he repeated.

Good heavens, these men had been here for years, didn’t they understand Greek? Very slowly and deliberately she said, “I…need…to speak…to…do you understand? I…need…to…speak…to…a man…a Varangian…named Harry.”

“Oh, ‘Arry,” he said, and in quite passable Greek continued, “You should have said so. Begging your pardon, Your Highness. We’ve got two ‘Arrys in the company. One’s this little fellow, shorter than me, red hair. That the one you want?”

“The man I’m looking for is tall, taller than you by at least half a head. And blond.”

“Oh, that’ll be Harry of Deptford. And may I ask, so as to deliver the message properly, what Her Majesty desires of Harry the cooper’s son from Deptford?”

Tell him I wish to speak to him.” She was irritated now, and her voice must have showed it.

“Yes, yes, Your Highness. Right away, Your Highness. Richard, my man,” he said to his companion, “you stay at your post now, and see if Her Highness needs anything else. I’m going to go find Big Harry.”

The other man smiled slightly and nodded as the first one strode briskly away.

“So you are Richard.”

The man shifted his axe from his shoulder and bowed deeply.

“And the other one, what’s his name?”

“Thomas, Your Highness,” he said in a very hoarse voice.

Two women servants had by now seen Theodota and rushed over and bowed. She recognized Harry by his stride. A helmet covered his blond hair, and he was in full battle regalia now, the big axe borne easily over his left shoulder. The heavier, shorter Thomas had to make an effort to keep up with him. He stopped in front of her and bowed. “The princess summoned me?”

She had wanted to talk to him privately, but clearly that would be impossible. If Olga had been around to act as a go-between, she was sure it could have been arranged. But she couldn’t very well take this man directly into the women’s quarters.

“I wish to know what is happening outside. There have been many shouts and much other noise.”

“Oh, why, any of us could have told Her Highness that,” said Thomas. “But I guess Her Highness has already found out that Harry is a good talker.” He looked meaningfully at the taller man.

“There have been some disturbances, Your Highness. Between some segments of the populace and the Frankish knights.”

“The Frankish knights?” Her voice must have betrayed alarm. She thought of Marcel, the centaur, the only one of the knights she knew.

Harry explained what had happened and that in some quarters of the City people, young men mostly, had set up barricades. Besides the knight battered and robbed the day before, at least three more had been injured badly enough to have to be carried off the streets and back to their quarters, by what had been a hippodrome attached to the Blachernae. One knight had been brought back unconscious.

Harry must have noted something in Theodota’s face, for he added, “None of the injured men is a knight known to the princess.”

Thomas and Richard both looked at him with renewed curiosity. Thomas bent his head and opened his mouth as though about to say something, when Harry added, “—though I am sure she grieves for them all.”

“But how? Who are they fighting? And why?”

“Well, Your Highness, maybe I can explain. Begging your leave, Captain,” said Thomas. Big Harry nodded, and Theodota looked at him with increased respect.

“It seems that a party of knights went out this morning to find the fellows who had assaulted their comrade. They arrested some chaps, who shouted for help, and then—they were over in a poor
neighborhood, one they call Hagios Makios for a church that was torn down there—some other fellows, and some girls too, started pelting them with paving stones. The thing spread, and soon somebody started throwing rocks at a couple of knights in Bootmakers’ Alley.”

Theodota frowned. “Bootmakers’ Alley?”

“Aye, a very narrow stretch, hard by the palace here, where there’s a fulsome stench of glue and leather, and plenty of poor youth.”

Oh. Then those children she had seen…She drew herself up as tall as she could and looked hard at the jutting chin of the captain of the Varangians. “So then some foreign knights, with all their armor and their steel helmets, are hurt,” she said sternly. “And what about our people? Our Politan children? How many of them are injured?”

“Your Highness,” said Harry, “I can assure you nobody’s been killed yet, as far as I know. The Franks have hauled in quite a lot of them. Boys, mostly, and some old enough to be doing proper military service, it looked like to me. I just came from there, where they’ve got them all massed together, in the emperor’s courtyard just through that other palace building—”

“Yes, yes. I know where the emperor’s courtyard is. How many?”

“Oh, there’s over a hundred, I’d say.”

“A hundred hundred, could be,” amended Thomas.

“A hundred hundred?” Arithmetic was not Theodota’s strongest suit, but that sounded like an overly big number. “And what is going to happen to them?”

“Ah, that’s what they’re talking about now. We can’t very well have the people and the knights at war with each other, not with the Turks outside our walls. The grand domestic has summoned the patriarch. His secretary, the monk Loukas, Her Highness surely knows him, he’s there already, and there’s this old general, Isidore, he got into a furious argument with the commander of the knights.”

“That’ll be Shadowman,” offered Thomas, nodding and smiling, eager to please.

“Chateaumorand,” said Richard in that hoarse voice, the first word he had spoken unbidden. “The commander of the Franks.”

Harry nodded.

“There was another man with the strategos, a plump chap I’d never seen before. Isidore kept stopping to consult him. I asked, and people said his name was Bardas, that he has some connection to Giorgos Goudelis.”

“ Richest man in Polis, that Goudelis,” said Thomas.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” said the princess.

Though of course she knew that Goudelis was said to be very rich. It was Goudelis’ grandson Andronicus who had been making such a fool of himself, with his chariot and those wild costumes, showing off for Theodota. But now that she had met some real men, Harry and Marcel, Theodota had no further interest in the boy Andronicus or in his whole family, and she was not about to concede them any importance.

“If Your Highness will permit me,” said Harry, “I believe it is my duty to get back to those discussions. The Varangians should be part of any decision that has military implications.”

“Oh. Why, of course. Go, do your duty.”

She was startled at the thought that Harry was important enough to be included in such deliberations. Thomas and Richard both stood stiffly erect and raised their axes in salute as Harry bowed to the princess, turned, and marched back the way he’d come. He was their commander, she realized. Of course. That was why he had been able to arrange that secret outing, and why he knew…Was Marcel then also a man of rank among the Frankish knights? He’d been able to get horses. He must be! She felt a little thrill in her chest, remembering Marcel and his elegant, comical gestures. She smiled, eyes half-closed.

“Princess! Princess! We’ve been looking for you.”
“Yes?” She opened her eyes to see the little eunuch gardener bowing before her.
“They asked me to go up to your garden to see if I could find you.”
“Who asked?”
“The Empress Eugenia herself, Your Highness. She requests your presence. At once, she said. It is urgent, she said I was supposed to tell you. Please forgive me.”
“Eugenia? She’s never said two words to me.”
Empress, indeed. Wife of the Usurper was more like it, but of course she could not express such subversive sentiments in front of two Varangians whom she hardly knew.
“Very well. But she should send me my slave, so that I can be properly coiffed before appearing in such august presence.”
“Very urgent she said it was, Your Highness,” the gardener repeated nervously.
“Well. You then,” she said to the two women who had been hovering next to her. She recognized them but didn’t know their names. Mother and daughter, she thought they were, from a family that had once been prosperous in Adrianople, before it had fallen to the Turks.
“Come with me to do my hair and pick a gown.”
“Urgent, she said it was,” repeated the little eunuch, almost whining now and in great distress.
“Tell the Lady Eugenia of Lesbos that the Princess Theodota Palaiologina of Constantinople will be honored to attend upon her. Anon.”
Many minutes later, the young princess emerged from the palace tower, newly coiffed and gowned and followed by the two serving women. She crossed the courtyard, where a female slave was waiting at the entry to the empress’s quarters.
In a room whose gray-white marble and porphyry walls glowed coldly in the late morning July sun, the short, plump figure of Eugenia sat on purple silk cushions upon a small throne of carved ivory and gold. The back of the chair was carved as an imperial crown of gold and gemstones in relief behind and above her head, and from the crown rose a gilded cross. The Archangels Gabriel and Michael and the Saints Peter and Stephanios looked inward from its four corners toward the Virgin and Child in the center where the four arms met. The whole was enclosed in a canopy supported by four slender ebony and gold pillars, itself shaped somewhat like an older style imperial crown. Eugenia’s gold-and-scarlet booted feet, Theodota noticed, barely reached the top of the cushions piled upon the stool that had been set before her.
“How good of you to come,” said Eugenia with icy cordiality.
Theodota, still bowing, no more deeply than she thought absolutely necessary, answered the formula with a formula, “It is my honor and pleasure to serve you.” She anticipated that Eugenia would be annoyed that she did not add “your highness” or any other term of honor and obeisance, but if so, the wife of Ioannes VII made no show of it.
Theodota was wondering how the usurper’s wife would manage in Greek once they got beyond the well-worn formulas when Eugenia herself answered the question.
“Because, as you know, your tongue remains to me foreign, I have commanded one of my distinguished subjects to—what is it again? Traduce.”
“Interpret, my empress. To interpret,” said a man who stepped forth from the shadows to Theodota’s great surprise. She had not supposed that that bulk of drapery beside the canopy contained a man.
“If Your Majesties will permit me—”
Eugenia nodded. Theodota merely stared at the dark-bearded, short, and heavy-set man in a dark silk tunic whose sleeves reached to the floor.
“My name is Bardas, to serve you, to serve both Your Highnesses, and any other rightful highness of Romania. Her highness Eugenia has asked that I assist your conversation.”
Eugenia now spoke loudly and more confidently in Latin, a language that Theodota had been forced to study but of which she understood little. Bardas seemed to have no difficulty. Filtered through his
beard and singsong baritone, Eugenia’s words reached Theodota thus:

“You have been left in our keeping by your supposed father, who is uncle of my husband, the emperor of Romania.” Theodota’s stomach tensed twice during this double insult, but she held still and willed her face not to redden.

“Though we have no certain knowledge of your origins, and whether you be truly kin of ours, my husband the emperor, out of the deep respect and affection he holds for his uncle Manuel, has chosen not to question what his uncle has declared. Therefore we hold you to be a princess, though not of the first rank.”

Deep respect and affection?

“You may speak.”

But what could Theodota say to all that? That she was indeed a real princess and of a far higher rank than the little foreign woman whose voice overflowed with contempt? That no one before Eugenia had ever expressed a doubt that the Palaiologan blood in her veins was real and pure? That this Eugenia herself was but the daughter of a mere count of Lesbos, an island where the people were uncultured and in their ignorance or confusion followed the Latin heresy?

“The nobility of my lady Eugenia’s sentiments does honor to the well-known distinction of her lineage,” Theodota replied after taking a moment to construct the phrase precisely.

She tried to follow whether Bardas had conveyed the bite of her words, but she doubted it because his Latin seemed so much wordier than the original, and she had been taught that Latin was pithier. Eugenia reprimanded the interpreter and then switched to Greek so that both could hear. “I understand more than you presume,” she said.

Eugenia then continued in Latin, again transfigured by Bardas’ mouth and beard to come out thus:

“We can ignore the insolence of your words, but not the insolence of your behavior. It has come to our attention that you have left the palace unauthorized and further that you did so in the guise of a male. Is that not true?”

“I had needs fulfill a sacred vow.”

“A vow? In male dress?”

“For humility. My lady Eugenia may not understand the ways of our ancient faith.”

“I understand quite enough. And I do begin to suspect that no true lady of imperial lineage could bring herself to venture anywhere as a commoner and a male. But as I have said, for the affection we hold for the man who believes himself to be your father, we do not here accuse you of imposture. A sacred vow, you say. And may I ask, without intruding on the secrets of your ancient faith, what, in a general way, was the object of that vow?”

“To serve the City, my lady. Every true Palaiologan burns with the love for our dear Polis, and I sought divine guidance to find the way that I might serve her.”

“‘Burns,’ you say. Yes. My dear husband knows something of the Palaiologoi ‘burning’ for this city. So you will serve Polis, as you call this place. You will, I presume, as a true Palaiologina burning with your love for this city, do anything within your power, make any sacrifice that may be needed to save it?”

“Yes, indeed. Without an instant’s hesitation. I would sacrifice my very life to save her for our people and our faith!”

The lady on the throne paused. She propped an elbow up on the silk-cushioned armrest and brushed her hennaed and bejeweled fingers against her little, rounded jaw.

“Very well. I had doubted. But now I see that we can trust your faith. We shall give you your opportunity to save your sacred city. Now I do believe that you, dear princess, and forgive me if I seemed to doubt your lineage—it was necessary to test your faith. Princess Theodota Palaiologina, then, will have the opportunity to make a sacrifice that will most please God and be the instrument of the salvation of this city.”
Theodota was stunned. She turned her head sideways, looked back from Eugenia to Bardas, wondering if this had all been rightly translated. Eugenia, seeing her concern, spoke now in Greek.

“Princess Theodota Palaiologina will have her wish.” Then back to Latin, which Bardas translated:

“You are to be guided by my trusted subject and advisor Bardas Tzimiskes,” said Bardas Tzimiskes, “(that is, you understand, by me). He (that is, I) will guide you in what you must do to save the Second Rome, Konstantinopoulis, our sacred Polis.”

Waiting
11 Zulhijje, 804 Hegira
(12 July, Anno Domini 1402)

“It is getting near to noon,” said Mesud.
“They will come,” answered Arslan.

Mesud squinted up toward the sun, then turned back in the saddle to resume staring westward over the water and toward the city.

Arslan sat tall on his handsome gray gelding, slightly higher than Mesud, who was also on his best-looking mount, a dark red mare that he had personally groomed that morning. Arslan’s gray stood calm, erect, alert. Mesud’s mare, in contrast, kept shifting her weight from hoof to hoof, jerking her head and flaring her nostrils and twitching her ears.

It was always like that, Mesud reflected, annoyed and perplexed. No matter what animal Arslan mounted, no matter which one Mesud got on. Once, less than a year ago, they had dismounted after a raid to gather loot when Mesud spotted approaching riders. In panic he scrambled to the seat of the nearest animal, before he realized it was that little mare that Arslan so loved. Terrified at what he’d done, Mesud gestured his apology and started to swing his leg to dismount, but Arslan had already leapt to the back of Mesud’s horse, a half wild blue-black stallion that had always been cantankerous. And the stallion obeyed his new rider as though the two were old acquaintances, while Arslan’s docile, agile mare balked and nearly stumbled before deciding to gallop after the stallion.

And never a word was said, after they’d got away—without the loot—and dismounted again, and Arslan handed him back the reins of the stallion and recovered his mare, who seemed overjoyed to see him, nickering and grinning and extending her head to be scratched. The stallion betrayed no such emotion toward Mesud. But then, stallions never did, thought Mesud.

“Nearly noon,” he said again. “We’ll have to get down to pray.”
“For this, Allah will be content to wait,” said Arslan.

Mesud turned, startled by such blasphemy. But Arslan was incapable of blasphemy, Mesud was certain.

“For this,” said Mesud tentatively. Then more confidently, realizing what must have been on his brother’s mind, he added, “The All Merciful will be content to wait a little longer for the end of the thousand-year rule of the idolaters.”

Arslan did not visibly react, but just kept looking calmly toward the city.

“And it will mean the end of the threat from that Timur too. Once our sultan is master of the City, no man of our faith will dare attack him. Isn’t that right, my brother?”

“So say the mullahs of the chief vizier,” was all that Arslan would say.

Mesud smiled. No man knew Arslan better than Mesud. They had ridden together for so long that the loquacious Mesud believed he could read his elder half-brother’s silences.

Of all of Kara Göne’s many sons, these were the two who most resembled each other, or so Mesud
believed. And Arslan, of those who survived, was the one who most resembled Kara Göne. Except the eyes.

It was for his eyes as much as for his terrible rages that Göne had been called Kara—“black.” Mesud’s eyes were gray-blue like his Thracian mother’s, and—or so he had been told—dreamy. Arslan’s, from his Seljuk dam, were deep, deep brown like polished chestnut, clear and steady. When he looked at them, Mesud understood why the Persian poets, to praise a lady’s eyes, called them “Turks.”

But Arslan’s eyes revealed nothing of his thoughts, not even to Mesud, who instead was used to reading his brother’s thoughts from the slightest signs—his posture on a horse, the slightest movements of his head, how near his hands were to sword or bow. Today at least one sign was dramatic and disturbing.

Arslan had forsaken his customary cap for an enormous white turban. Mesud himself still refused to wear one, as had Arslan until this day. Among their people it had always been a woman’s head cover, but that had been before the sultan himself and all his viziers had taken to wearing it. Sensing more than seeing the great bulk of silk atop his brother’s head, Mesud, still looking straight ahead across the empty water between them and toward the City, felt uneasy but could not have said just why.

In contrast, no garment could be more manly than Arslan’s silk-lined, dark green caftan with the black and gold floral pattern, which had once belonged to Kara Göne himself. As had the golden belt buckle, where lion-serpents with red-gem eyes grappled. The caftan was a bit tight about Arslan’s shoulders but still quite splendid in its old-fashioned way, and the buckle possessed great power. It hardly mattered that the colors and style were so different from the rich new saddle cover. Mesud had found himself a caftan of almost identical colors, though with a different pattern, but his buckle showed no animals and therefore did not have the same power.

“There! Is that a sail?” he shouted.
“Quiet. I told you they would come.”
“Look. There are two of them. Two sails, two galleys. Why two?”
“It is a very great gift.”
“Oh, it’s hard to believe. Allah be praised! The end of the Polis and its rule.”
“The end of idolatry.”
“We shall put them to the sword.”
“We shall fulfill our vow.”
“I made no vow! You mean your vow.”

Then Arslan’s right arm struck out with such force that Mesud nearly fell from his horse, the side of his head burning from Arslan’s fist. It was something that had not happened since they were boys.

“Vow or ride!” commanded Arslan.
“Arslan my brother, what do you say?” Mesud struggled to regain his seat and his composure.
“I have made a vow to the chief vizier to serve the sultan in this deed. Your vow must be to serve me to serve the sultan, or else ride, now.”
“But they are Christians!”
“My vow and the task of this kervan is to deliver them safely and entire to Yildirim Bayezid.”
“Christians,” Mesud repeated. “And we must ride along with and protect them.”
“They are now the sultan’s Christians, to dispose of as he will. I shall protect them with my sword and honor, even against another of our faith. Do you understand?”
“Yes, Arslan. I understand. And if I am to stay with you, I must do the same. Right?”
“Do you stay?”

Mesud looked out at the two galleys. They seemed to be having trouble navigating, even though the waters of the Bosporus now looked quite calm. Perhaps there was some dispute on board or some uncertainty by the pilot. Two imperial galleys. Coming to surrender the whole of what remained of the Roman Empire of the East. Bearing treasure, great treasure surely. And a princess. That much had
Arslan told him.
“I stay with you, my brother and my bey. I shall do as you command.”
Mesud wondered if the turban had not done something to the inside of Arslan’s head. His face, and
more than his face, his pride, still burned. He looked down toward the beach where the galleys would
soon arrive. And his eyes wandered again over the men of their band, their horses feeling the agitation of
their riders and stirring excitedly as the two galleys approached. Some of those men he knew well; some
had fought for Arslan from the days of Nikopolis or even earlier; some were kinsmen whose fathers had
fought for Arslan and Mesud’s father. But some were new. And the treasure would be of dazzling
quantity.
“I pray the journey be brief,” said Mesud.
“Insallah,” said Arslan. And that Arabic piety on the lips of Arslan also seemed odd to Mesud.

**TIMUR’S CHESS**

*O* land of Byzantium, *O* thrice-happy City, eye of the universe, ornament of the world, star shining
afar, beacon of this lower world, would that I were within you, enjoying you to the full! Do not part me
from your maternal bosom.

*Konstantin Manasses, 13th century*

*E* grek said, ‘Ters Uzamish, is cutting off heads and spilling blood a clever thing to do?’ ‘Of course
it is,’ he replied. Ters Uzamish’s words had their effect on Egrek; he rose and asked Prince Kazan’s
leave to go on a raid.

*Dede Korkut, “The Story of Segrek Son of Ushun Koja”*

**Urban Murmurs**

12 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(13 July, Anno Domini 1402)

“Well. What do you make of it, Stasi? Watch your sleeve there.”
Anastasios snatched back one long sleeve where a silk thread had caught on a broken stone of the
parapet. He muttered a curse.
“Now, now, that’s easily fixed,” said his companion. “Compared to this.”
Mekion waved his more modestly sleeved arm out over the wall. Just days ago an army of
thousands had been camped there. The men and tents and animals had all disappeared from the tortured
hills, now bare of the grass and bushes Mekion remembered from before the siege. All that remained
were the dismantled poles and beams and hides of the tall siege towers and the squat rock-throwing
machines that had threatened the city for six years.
“God has delivered us from them,” said Anastasios.
“Or maybe to them. I don’t like this, Stasi. Not one bit. This is one more devious trick of that
Bayezid. To lull us, it must be.”
“Hah. If that be so, then let us praise God and thank Him for this ‘lull.’ We can come up here and look out peacefully, without fear of those heathens’ rocks and arrows. And it’s quieter inside the City, too. Praise be to God.”

“Too quiet.”

Melkion turned, leaning his back against the parapet, amazed that the city was suddenly secure enough that he could do this. Eastward over the roofs, he could just make out the top of the dome of Hagia Sophia.

“Doesn’t feel like the City. No urchins running around begging and shouting. I was in the market this morning—hardly anybody. Of course, there’s been almost nothing to sell for months, but there were always people there, just hanging out to exchange news. Aside from those patrols of Frankish knights—never saw so many of them active in the City before, and now they’re always in full battle gear, at least three or four together. And a few old people, because they don’t have anyplace else to go. But even they seemed quieter than usual.”

“Well. It was time the authorities took a hand in controlling all those beggars and young cut-purses.”

“Stasi, do you know what you’re saying? Listen to yourself! ‘Took a hand.’ Your emperor took them and sold them as slaves to the heathen sultan, our Christian boys and girls. Manuel would never have done that. Manuel’s the only emperor for me. And I’ll say it louder now, after what your Ioannes has done.”

“Melkion, keep your voice down. You’re talking treason.”

“Treason? Who’s committing treason? Who is it who is trying to surrender our holy city to the enemies of our faith and our civilization?”

Melkion wheeled around again to face the hills, empty of all but the siege camp’s rubbish. “You don’t know that. Be patient. Look, now I’ve torn my sleeve! It’ll cost a fortune to repair this. That’s gold thread in the silk.”

“Yes, I do know it. The whole City knows it, or suspects it, anyway. And so do you. You’re just willfully denying the evidence before your eyes and ears. How much did they extract from you, those cataphracts with their swords and armor, marching just as though they were going into battle? Terrorizing honest citizens when they should be out killing Turks!”

“When they got to my house, it was their strategos Isidore himself who led them. Said he knew I’d understand it was my duty to the emperor and to God to give over all the gold and silver I could find. And why is that, I asked him. Why? Why, to save the City, he said. And how is my gold and silver, what little I have of it after all we’ve been through, how is that going to save the City? Tell me just where is it going.

“Isidore is a nephew of my cousin, you know, and I didn’t think he’d let his men use their swords on one of the family. My wife was white as a novice’s mantle.”

“Hmm. Cousin or no cousin, that was imprudent, Melkion. You cannot interfere with the cataphracts when they are performing their sacred duty. I of course gave all that I had. And look—it has brought us peace.”

“All that you had. Indeed.”

Melkion ostentatiously eyed his companion’s finery until the other frowned and turned away from him.

“And yes. Peace,” Melkion continued. “That’s just what Isidore said when he took me aside. That Ioannes VII had reached an agreement with the sultan that would bring us peace, but that it would be very expensive.”

“And don’t you think it was worth it, or even twice the price? Look, the siege has been lifted, we can move freely now. Soon the Genoese and the Venetians both will be back with their goods. Our men will even be able to ride out into the countryside, to bring back food and supplies. We’ll be able to get fish from Marmara instead of just the little there is in the Golden Horn.”
“Peace, huh? Is that what you think it was for? A tribute to the sultan is what it was. Along with all those slaves. And the princess, Manuel’s own daughter! Don’t look at me like that, as though it were a surprise. Yes, they took her, before dawn. The youngest one. Just go into any tavern where you’re likely to find a drunk Varangian, and he’ll tell you all about it, because they took some of his fellows too, a whole company of Varangian guards, to accompany the princess. She’s just a girl. What is all that for, if not surrender?”

“Are you sure? Manuel’s daughter? The youngest of his bastards? Why, the youngest one is only—let’s see, she was still a babe when Manuel came back from exile, so, yes, she would be about fifteen. Or nearly.”

“Marrying age. And she’s very lovely, they say. You and I saw her ourselves two years ago, at the feast of the Theotokos, when she still had baby fat, but you could already see she would be a beautiful woman.”

“No, honestly, Melkion, I didn’t know that. That they’d sent the girl. I thought it was just those one hundred fifty camels laden with gold and silver and silk.”

“One hundred fifty? Are you sure? How do you know?”

“I too have friends who tell me things, Melkion. But I didn’t know about the girl. This is serious. If the house of Palaiologos is to be joined with the house of Osman…And now I wonder about something else.”

“Yes? What?”

“The man who told me about the camels—he works in the imperial stables, he’s the brother of a man who works for me. He caught a glimpse of something that that merchant, Bardas, the young upstart who’s so close to Eugenia, was trying very hard to conceal. In fact, if that Bardas hadn’t been so anxious about it, turning his back and spreading his big sleeves to hide it, the man I talked to probably wouldn’t even have mentioned it.”

“Yes?”

“He said it looked like a coffer, the most beautiful he had ever seen. Gold and silver and much bigger than the ones for most saints’ relics, he said. Instead of just a finger, say, this was big enough for a saint’s whole arm-bone up to the elbow.”

“Don’t be a fool, Anastasios! A Christian saint’s arm-bone. What would the pagan sultan want with that? You know what I think it holds? The key to the City.”

Anastasios turned pale.

Angel in a Cage

12 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(13 July, Anno Domini 1402)

Theodota pressed her nose against the lattice and stared at the vast, strange world outside. For hours she had sprawled, stretched, and fidgeted in this traveling box, the kafes the Turks called it, thinking and seeing things for which she had no words.

Outsized flowers burst from anarchic tangles of darker plants, and behind them a mob of too-tall trees waved their twisted limbs in a bizarre dance. Beyond those she glimpsed the jagged crest of a mountain, huger than the dome of Hagia Sophia but without its symmetry. Instead of rose petals strewn across a broad avenue, she smelled the sweat of animals, dust, and droppings. And instead of being borne on an open throne by perfumed slaves, she sat inside an upholstered box that swung and bounced between two mules, one in front and one behind, plodding on an endless unpaved trail.
A dreadful chill darted up her spine and a demon chortled into her ear. “Don’t you see you’ve been abducted?” it hissed. “Your cousin and his wife have tricked you and are delivering you to the Turks in this coffin.”

Yes, that surely was their intent—to get her as far from Polis as possible so that she could not be a witness to their treachery. And Olga too—her dear Russian slave who was also on this journey, somewhere behind the princess’s swinging cage. They had returned her, trembling and sobbing, just before sundown, and put her on the galley with her this morning. She said they had been questioning her about what Dota had been up to, dressed as a boy and a commoner. But Olga had suddenly forgotten how to speak Greek, so they hadn’t found out from her about the trip to the church or that lanky Varangian.

The monotonous thuds of the hooves and her confinement for hours and hours in this swaying cage had made it hard for Theodota to recover the vision, which she had experienced just before a loud noise had awakened her this morning. What she did remember was feeling herself an angel and spreading her huge wings over the rooftops and streets and fields of the city from the Sea of Marmara to the western wall, shielding her mother Polis from those sinister machines, the city destroyers, the trébuchets. But at the same time she felt that Polis was protecting her, reaching its walls around her in an embrace as she pressed her face against the great dome of Hagia Sophia, soft and tender as a breast.

Then had come the banging and a shout, and she woke up wingless and curled around a pillow in her own dark bedroom. The noise she took to be a signal from God, and heedless of Olga’s protests, she ran down the stairs barefoot.

At the doorway, she almost ran into the monk Loukas who fell to his knees. The patriarch’s secretary was often in the palace, always serene, haughty, and obsequious at the same time. But now his eyes bulged and rolled wildly, glittering in the torchlight, his robe and beard all askew. His tense hands clutched at unseen things in the air. Theodota understood. While she had been hovering protectively over the City, Loukas had had to struggle with the demons that her wings had scattered. Even now he batted at the little monsters in retreat.

“O, Daughter of Manuel herself, bathed in holy light,” he gargled. Then he had collapsed to the pavement, his cheek against the stone and his back rising and falling convulsively. “Peace be upon you, brave monk,” she said, extending the first two fingers of her right hand as she had seen her father do and countless other emperors and empresses in icons.

“Wicked demons, get ye hence!” she cried. “In the name of Saint Sophia, I command you. Sons of Beelzebub and all ye nameless monsters, abandon my monk Loukas, Loukas, Loukas, our good Christian Loukas, and return to your dim and clammy nether darkness.”

And the demons obeyed. The monk’s convulsions subsided. Looking skyward, Theodota saw Saint Sophia smiling from beyond the ring of torches, tall and robed in blue and white. The young princess smiled back and said in a loud voice, “I am ready to fulfill my mission.”

“My princess!” The cry startled Theodota into awareness that there were others about and that she was standing in an open doorway before two men bareheaded and in her nightgown. Quickly she looked up again, but Sophia had disappeared.

“What is this mission?” Olga pleaded. “How is it you didn’t tell me?”

“I don’t know,” Theodota said in confusion, as though waking from a dream. Then she saw the plump merchant, Eugenia’s interpreter, standing behind the monk. He seemed very nervous, evading her eyes as he tried to smile. He began to babble, words that made no sense, at least not to Theodota in her exalted state, and sentences that had no ending, until at last he managed to get out,

“We must get Her Highness ready, uh, for her, uh, bestowment.”

Such an odd, ill-chosen term. “Bestowment?” On whom or what? No, “transfiguration” would be the word for Theodota’s destiny.

“And quickly,” Bardas added, very brusquely but then with a bow and a smile.

And swiftly, before Bardas could find another word to say, she ducked back into the still-dark corridor of the palace. How foolish of her not to have prepared a wardrobe for this life-changing event, whatever it was to be. She would combine wardrobes, then. Purple for imperial power, white for her virginity and faith, blue for the honor of the house of Palaiologoi. And gold for God. She knew just which cross and other pieces to take because those she had set aside for any divine emergency. They included a locket of prayers and the portrait of her honored father, marked with another precious cross, to shield and guide her and make it easy for the saints to follow her path. And one other item that was not religious but had accompanied her since childhood and would be a reminder of all her past life: a belt-clasp with a snarling dragon of lapis lazuli and gold, so tiny and ferocious that it had become her talisman, something to grasp whenever she needed extra strength.

Then came the rush to the wharves, her canopied chariot flanked by a contingent of Varangian guards trotting on either side. Soon she was on shipboard, listening to oars rhythmically dipping into the waves of the Bosporus. The sound reminded her of something, perhaps a memory from infancy. Or perhaps it was the whisper of her wings in last night’s dream. The galley moved toward the rising sun, and she imagined that she had lifted her wings and risen above the City’s walls to follow in the direction of the gray falcon that she had seen the day the sultan’s emissary appeared on her cousin’s roof. She was off to demonstrate the power of her faith to the sultan and thus to bring about in some mysterious and yet unknown way the salvation of her City.

Now, many hours later and caged in this swaying box, the demon had suggested a more terrifying image: that she was being taken as a prize to the terrible sultan. To Bayezid, who called himself the Thunderbolt. She had heard of his cruelty and knew that he was a monster. But, she reminded herself, she would stand before him and overwhelm him with the glow of her virgin goodness and her faith, and he would be so awed by this demonstration of the true God’s power that he would renounce his false religion and his cruel siege.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps before God worked His miracle He would let the sultan subject her to horrible tortures, as that cruel Roman governor had done to her namesake, the holy martyr Theodota. That cruel Roman had suspended the poor virgin in chains and had her raked by iron hooks. Then she’d been cast into a fiery furnace and then into a cauldron of molten iron, and when all that failed to kill her, he had had her sawn in two and finally beheaded. Only then had the saint’s spirit slipped free from her destroyed and martyred body.

*If that should befall me, thought Princess Theodota, I would then truly be an angel and would fly back to Polis to bless my people before rising to sit with God and the Virgin and Saint Sophia for eternity. Transformed into a beam of light, weightless, my earthly body a crushed and charred and bloody heap...*

At the image, Theodota shuddered. Through the lattice on her left and right, she could glimpse men on horseback with pointed caps and recurved bows and quivers in bright colors. Their dolmans and saddle covers were crowded with intricate, abstract designs in a demonic code. They sang out mysterious, rhyming calls to each other and, she imagined, to the animals.

Now something else was happening. Inside her. *Please God, not now. Why now? The pain. The shame.* The smell. She was not due for another two weeks. Where was Olga, what had become of her? Then she heard the familiar, loud fluttering blu-blu-blu-blu-blu followed by the stench. The lead animal had farted again. She pressed her sachet to her nose and screamed, “Get that cursed animal away from me, you ignorant heathens!”

This could not be part of her martyrdom. None of the great martyrs she had ever read about had been asphyxiated by mule gas or strangled by menstrual cramps.
Someone shouted a command, and the kafes lurched forward so that she was thrown against one wall. Oof!

“Don’t any of you cutthroats understand Greek?” she shouted again.

Hooves approached and shadows fell against the lattice. She shivered and endured a sharp pain in her womb. All she had to press against herself to stop the bleeding was the throat-cloth of her hat, loosened hours ago.

“Musunuzmumugloo?” she heard, or something like that.

“Your Highness?” sounded another, younger voice. It was that same young heathen who had spoken to her earlier in Greek. He spoke it well, though with a comical western accent.

There was more of that unintelligible pagan-talk among the cutthroats then the younger one who spoke Greek said again, “My lady, my master the gazi Mesud, brother of the commander of our kervan, asks if you are well.”

Theodota closed her eyes. “I am Princess Theodota Palaiologina Porphyrogenita,” she shouted as clearly as she could. The pain in her womb made her wince and clench her teeth.

“Porphyrogenita” was not literally true—“born to the purple” was only for the emperor’s legitimate children, but it should impress these savages. Again she shouted: “I demand to speak to the man in charge. Not his brother or his servant or his slave or anyone else. The man in charge.”

She heard the two voices conferring then one of the horses moved away. They had come to a halt.

She felt nauseated.

Minutes went by.

A horse approached.

“Your Highness?” came the boy’s voice. “My bey does not speak to Christian women.”

“What? I am a princess of Romania. I command the heathen chieftain to attend me.”

There. She was sure they heard that.

More conferring in that odd gibberish. Then another horse approaching. Another man’s voice, deeper, commanding. She peered out. A man with very dark, flashing eyes stared at her from under an enormous green turban. Across his nose and cheeks he wore a dark green, almost black veil that bulged oddly at the sides. Then the younger man called out.

“I beg your pardon, Your Highness. With all honor due to your noble lineage and your most exalted self, my bey commands me to say that we cannot wait.”

The man in the veil shouted a command, and the kafes lurched forward.

“No! Wait! If you do not wait, I will kill myself right here. I—”

Then, without knowing why or even that she was doing it, she snatched the bloody linen from her thighs and thrust it with her fingertips through the lattice.

The lurching halted. She heard the three men’s voices again. She felt faint.

“You Highness, my bey says you must come with us.”

“What? Who is he to command me?” She said it, knowing the answer. He, whoever he was, was the master of the kervan, and she, for all her imperial ancestry, was at his mercy.

“You must be properly covered,” said the Greek-speaking man with the western drawl.

“Covered? You mean my face?”

“Oh, no. Our women don’t do that. We mean your hair and arms and so forth.”

“Oh, of course.” She struggled to get her big hat properly set atop her head—it was very high and very wide at the top, so she had had to remove it to fit inside the kafes—and, unaided and without a mirror, rearranged the hat’s now-bloody drapery around her hair and neck. She felt the kafes being lowered gently to the ground.

She had expected the young heathen to assist her as she gathered her skirts, extricated her hat and head, and then struggled to step out upon the ground. But when she reached out, the person who grabbed her hand was Olga. Two paces away stood the young Greek-speaking heathen, under a white hat almost
as tall as the princess’s own but coming to a point at the top. The mounted man behind him wore a low, colorful cap like the other horse archers, but his jacket bore far more splendid designs in gold and silver. And there on a mule was that fat merchant, Bardas. Acting as Eugenia’s agent, no doubt. Trying to get the best price for the princess.

Theodota noted with satisfaction that he seemed rather the worse for wear. His silk coat of bright orange, his thick black beard, and his once-jaunty turban were covered with thick gray-white dust, and though he tried to look jolly when Theodota turned to him, his mouth trembled and he looked away.

“And where is this emir of yours?” Theodota demanded of the Turk with the narrow-brimmed cap and the elegant dolman. “Is this he?”

The one in the high white hat answered, “No, Your Highness. There is no emir here. Our only emir is the padishah, sultan of Rum and Anatolia, Yıldırım Bayezid, son of the emir Murad Gazi of blessed memory.”

Theodota shuddered at the name and titles. “Well, who is in charge then?”

“My bey is Arslanshahin Gazi, Your Highness. That is he, over there on the tall, dark horse.” It was the man with the turban and the veil.

“This man you addressed is his brother, Mesud. He does not speak Christian.”

Mesud, at his name, inclined his head and touched the first two fingers of his right hand to his forehead.

Theodota shuddered and looked away from the veiled man in the turban. Seeing him had reminded her of something else she’d read, utterly different from the raking with hooks, the burning, the beheading of the holy martyr Theodota. A new idea was beginning to occur to her.

She remembered the story of Digenes Akrites, frontier man born of two peoples, and the romance of his parents. A beautiful princess of Byzantium who had won the heart of the fierce and handsome Saracen emir.

She turned again toward the dark-browed green-veiled man, but he was gone. She rotated her shoulder blades, hoping to feel the weight of her invisible wings, but she couldn’t. All she felt was a certain wobbliness in her legs. Olga held her arm and steadied her. They began to walk through a cordon of mounted men.

Then she noticed that with the men was a Turkish boy about her own age or younger, staring at her wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Surprised, she started to smile. Then, remembering the solemnity of her mission, she scowled and straightened up to stand as tall as she could. She tipped back her head defiantly, so that the slave and the men would see her proud face and not just the enormous hat. She looked around. Then she fainted.

The Veiled Man
12 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(13 July, Anno Domini 1402)

“Mesud! I gave no order to stop. I have to deliver this merchandise before I can be free of this vow.”

“Permit me, my brother. The merchandise is delicate and may bruise and thus lose its value to the sultan or his son.”

“We cannot halt. We should have reached Adapazari long before midday and been nearly to Kütahya by dark tomorrow.”

“Yes, my brother. All Anatolia knows that Arslanshahin can fly. But we have a princess of Rum in a
kafes borne by mules and her camels heavy-laden. We would need the simurgh to carry such a burden to Kütahya as swiftly as you or I can gallop. The girl is more like a child than a woman, though I am told she is nearly fifteen. These Greeks are very tender.”

“Fifteen? A woman then. She should ride like ours.”

“Arslan, what do you say? She is a Greek imperial princess, used to soft silks and cushions, with slaves to carry her everywhere. You can’t expect her to ride like your mother or our sisters.”

“A camel. We’ll put her on a camel. With cushions, if need be. And we leave that kafes behind, that’s what’s slowing us. I’ll send one of the men—Turgut would be good, we can spare him for a few hours—to see that the thing gets transported to Kütahya or Adapazari and arrange for it to be shipped back safely to the pasha. I’m sure he will find other uses for it. Tell me, how is the girl?”

“Oh, surprisingly pretty in the face, for a Greek. She could almost be Turkish, with those big, dark eyes. Narrow hips, though, too narrow for my liking, and her breasts are only beginning to blossom.”

Arslan snorted and pulled off his veil. “No, Mesud, that’s not what I meant, the width of her hips is no matter to me and should not be to you. She is destined for another. I meant, how is she to travel?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know. She had the female bleeding, and she shocked our men by showing the blood on a rag. I don’t know what she was saying, but she seemed so excited that it may be her first time. She looked very pale. And her screams were making those axe men she brought nervous.”

“Showed the men the blood? Disgusting. They have no modesty, these city creatures. All right. I’ve ordered that Serbian girl to attend to her. She speaks the city language and can calm the creature. Then as soon as she is rested, onto the camel. Both of them, the Serb and the Greek. One on each side. Ah, such an impossible task the pasha has set us! A damsel who acts like a baby but bleeds like a woman. And a heathen Christian besides, shouting incomprehensibly. We have to get this trip over soon and turn her and the rest of the goods over to the sultan.”

“And then?”

“And then we will be free of these disgusting Christians.”

“And we will be back to galloping with the wind.”

“Yes, there will be more caravans to raid, my little brother.”

“And with Timur and the sultan maneuvering for their great battle, we will have the run of the territories with no interference from janissaries and the like.”

The gazi Arslan laughed before covering again his mouth and mustache with the veil, and Mesud laughed with him.

Illuminations
13 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(14 July, Anno Domini 1402)

Light intruded first, then sound, then the touch of cloth against her cheek, and lastly a bouquet of unfamiliar scents. It must be morning, but where?

In her north-facing bedroom in the palace, the sun would wake her gently, followed by a nightingale’s sweet song. Here, someone had thrown open a tent flap to Helios’ full assault, which made the Christian princess blink and squirm. Brass clanged against stone, warblers warbled, and instead of the chanting of the palace monks, a lone male voice, loud and clear, sang strange verses in an even stranger key while a camel whined and snorted in response. A camel! And also, she discovered, a rug lay over her. She made it rustle as she uncurled her legs and torso.

Elsewhere garments swished and little feet scuffled and thumped against a carpet. Wood smoke, perfume, and some more pungent odor rose from a kettle hung above a flame. The princess’s knuckles
hurt from where she had been pressing them against her teeth. All these new sensations scattered the shreds of dream, leaving only the fading image of a winged figure flying away and a single feather spiraling slowly downward. With a sigh she gave up the chase of the fleeing angel and pushed herself up on one elbow to try to make sense of her surroundings.

The woman on a stool only a few paces away looked vaguely familiar. Theodota had seen her last night before she had fallen asleep. Now there she was, nursing an infant. Pagans, surely, but they looked like the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. Shocked at herself for this blasphemous comparison, Theodota sent a silent plea to God for forgiveness.

The woman looked up and smiled. “Good morning. I pray you slept well. I am Zilha, to serve you and make you comfortable in our tent.”

Theodota blinked. She had not expected a false icon to speak. “And God’s grace on you, good woman.” It was a phrase she had heard her father use to his humblest subjects. “Where is Olga?”

Zilha laughed. “Don’t worry about that big Russian girl. She speaks such funny Greek! She said, or at least that’s what I thought she said, that she preferred to stay with the other slaves than in a Turkish tent, so she is with those Christian children that you’ve brought with you. But she is nearby, and she’ll come if you call her. She looked at me so fiercely I thought she wanted to bite my head off!” And Zilha laughed again.

How dare she laugh, thought Theodota, this insolent heathen with her gaudy robes open to expose her naked bosom? But Zilha was not even looking up at her, smiling instead at the infant gurgling at her breast, his tiny hand beating against the flesh. She pulled the baby away, and Theodota was surprised to see the size of the red-brown nipple. Who, Theodota wondered, had nursed her when she was a babe? It was not fair that this little infidel, its soul condemned to eternal hell, should know its earthly mother, while a princess of God’s most holy empire did not.

The bigger of the girls ran over to her, the smaller sister stumbling after. She chattered and reached to touch Theodota’s hair.

“She wants to know if it is really gold,” said Zilha.

Theodota touched her own head and said, “Tell her that there is gold thread woven through it. Hey!”

She felt a sharp tug.

“They mean no harm,” said Zilha. “They have never seen such hair. It is very fine. Suitable for a princess of Byzantium.”

“‘Romania’ is what we—Ouch!”

The smaller child had grabbed a lock and yanked. Now she giggled.

“Tickle them,” said Zilha.

“What?”

“Tickle them. That’s what they love. And it makes them helpless.”

Theodota grabbed the littlest one and pulled her down to the carpet and tickled until the child was convulsed with laughter. Her older sister clutched Theodota’s arm and rubbed her head against the princess’s shoulder.

“Oh, you too, eh, you little scamp?” said Theodota and began tickling that one with a vengeance. By now she was laughing as hard as they were. She had never done anything like this to anybody, though she remembered someone—her father, perhaps, but no, that was unlikely—tickling her when she was little.

A sharp command from an older woman sitting in the back of the tent stopped the girls, who became quiet and sat back. Then slyly the older one, followed by her sister, turned to Theodota and grinned.

“My lady Beyazgülü says it is time for all of us to get going,” said Zilha. “We must reach Kütahya in time to catch the sultan.”

“Lady Beya…”?

“Beyazgülü Hatun. Lady Beyazgülü. It means ‘White Rose.’ She is the mother of our gazi. And over
there is Nilüfer, the mother of these little girls. And over there, the sad-faced one, is Saljan.”

Before Theodota could ask where or what was Kütahya or why they had to “catch the sultan” — Shouldn’t he be galloping eagerly to meet her? — Zilha thrust the baby into her arms and left the tent. The baby squalled and Theodota shook him—she remembered someone had said it was a boy—but that didn’t work, so she pressed his little red face against her breast, which just made him madder. The older girl reached up and put a finger in the baby’s mouth, and he smiled and gurgled contentedly. So that’s how it’s done, thought Theodota. The infant calmed and nestled in her arms. It felt rather nice, even though he was a little pagan.

They gave her sweet dates to eat and the perfumed beverage from the kettle and they dressed her in strange, wide trousers tied at the ankles and a loose tunic of many colors. But when Saljan tried to place a flat-topped headdress with dangling ornaments on her head, Theodota recoiled. By gestures, she demanded her imperial hat of Christian white and carefully arranged its bloodstained drapery around her neck, ignoring Beyazgül’s scowl and Nilüfer’s wide-eyed, open-mouthed astonishment. Then she allowed Saljan and Nilüfer to lead her outside.

A group of Varangians rose from a squat and saluted her with their axes. They must have been guarding her tent all night, she imagined. She recognized Thomas and his quiet friend Richard among them. Then she saw Zilha, standing by a kneeling, sleepy-eyed white camel. Zilha invited her to climb into a basket-like seat on the right side of the beast, while she climbed into another basket on the other side. The weight of the contraption seemed to rest on the animal’s ribs. She ducked to get her tall hat under the canopy and was barely settled when a sudden upward, rearward-swinging motion nearly made her fall out. The camel stood erect.

She tried to get used to the rhythm of the camel’s walk. Down, forward, up; down, forward, up. And meanwhile swaying from left to right.

“Where are we going?”

“To Kütahya. The sultan has one of his palaces there.”

Through the fringe she could see many other camels, some with passenger-baskets and canopies like her own, others canopy-less, burdened with goods. Just ahead of her, the small company of Varangians marched briskly, straining to match the gait of the camels. Below her, but higher than the marching men, rode Osmanli horse archers.

A princess of Polis wasn’t meant to travel like this. Her hat kept bumping into the pole of the canopy with every uneven lurch, and already her neck and shoulders felt stiff from trying to hold her head up constantly at a safe angle. Zilha’s flat-topped headdress gave her no such problem. But if Theodota gave up her hat, who would she be? Those women had got her into these ridiculous trousers and a tunic covered with odious little designs, like bright-colored little animals crawling all over her. If it weren’t for her hat and the big gold cross that she kept clutching tightly, she would be like one of them.

“Zilha, why am I dressed like this?”

“It is more comfortable for the journey. Before we arrive, you will be able to change into your ceremonial garments.”

The constant swaying was uncomfortable, but she was glad to be above the dust and noxious odors of the animals.

“At least this is better than that awful box I was in yesterday.”

“Oh, do you really mean that? I am so glad you think so. I will tell our gazi. He thought you would be shamed by riding in the open. The kafes is what we usually reserve for the most honored persons. It is our traveling throne. But the gazi’s mother, Lady Beyazgül, thinks that this is more dignified, and more, she said, ‘Oguz.’ Well, I’ll explain that to you later. She herself has always refused to ride in a kafes. She says it feels like a cage, can you imagine? That is because she is a rough woman, used to riding her own horse. Then when I saw that you were going to have a camel, I suggested to her that I should accompany you. To help teach you some things. I hope you are not displeased.”
“No, not at all. I’m glad to have someone to speak to in this strange company. Teach me what?”

“There is much to know before you enter the harem.”

“Harem? No, you are mistaken. I am not going to any harem.”

Theodota straightened her hat after another bump against the canopy pole.

“I am on a mission from God, to speak to the sultan and explain to him God’s truth, so that he may see it and cease to be our foe.”

“Then they didn’t tell you? That rich merchant Bardas assured our gazi that all had been settled and that you were going willingly. But I am sorry. I see that I have offended you.”

Theodota said not another word. Offended! Hardly. She felt only contempt for the woman’s ignorance. To think Bardas rich! The man wasn’t even from a decent family; you could tell that by his ridiculously ostentatious manners and that costume. And the nerve of him, a merchant, talking about a princess to a barbarian chieftain.

It would be useless to try to explain the class distinctions of Polis to this heathen woman, as futile as to expect her to understand the holy mysteries. Marriage to one of these barbarians! Such a terrifying, ridiculous, and depressing image she had conjured up.

The procession paused, and someone reached Zilha’s baby up to her, and they resumed their journey.

“He gets so hungry,” said Zilha, opening her clothes modestly so that no one but Theodota and the baby himself might see her breast. “He is tiny now, but Arslan believes he is destined for greatness. Yes, little Beyrek, you will be a handsome, bold warrior like your father and his father before him, a gazi through and through!”

Theodota winced to think of the innocent-looking baby grown into a laughing, wild-eyed, sword-wielding heathen. What her companion had said earlier was ridiculous, but—just to pretend. What would it be like to marry a Turk?

“These Turks have many wives, I see,” she said.

Zilha looked up, eyes wide, surprised. She rocked her head from side to side for several seconds.

“Not so many for my Arslan. He could have all he wanted, a hero like him. More than that old gazi Bozkurt who is so boastful, but—I tell you this as a woman’s confidence, not to be shared with the men—Bozkurt’s children don’t look like him at all. As for our gazi Arslanshahin, he took Nilüfer as only his second wife. Saljan accepted this, even though Nilüfer, well, she is not very bright.”

She laughed and put her nose very close to the baby’s to make him laugh too. “Very pretty, though. And she got pregnant once, and she got pregnant again, but both times they were girls. But finally she gave birth to this little hero. He will be Arslan’s successor.”

“Oh! I thought you were its mother.”

Zilha merely smiled and nuzzled the babe.

“And you then must be his, the gazi’s, third wife, no?”

The dark-haired girl lifted her face from the baby to the rocking canopy overhead and sighed and muttered what sounded like a prayer but in some strange language, neither Greek nor Turkish. Then she turned to the princess and laughed, the way people do who want to pretend that something is of no importance. Theodota looked at her quizzically. She waited, counting five strides of the camel, down, up, and rocking from side to side.

“No,” said Zilha at last. “I am not his wife nor will I ever be. But—” She turned and grinned at Theodota without seeing her. She had a surprisingly wide mouth, thought Theodota, before this reflection was interrupted by a squeal.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful? To be a woman honored and respected, the wife of a famous gazi. With such strength, such vigor, such manliness! And free!”

Theodota was startled, first to think of that gruff gazi as the object of a woman’s desire and, second, that this obviously attractive and energetic young woman might not be accepted into what she imagined
as a completely promiscuous harem. Then she remembered the romances she had read and the many
tales Olga had told her of love, and she thought she had the solution.

“Well, if that is what you want, you just have to make him notice you.”

The older girl laughed again. “Oh, he notices me! But it cannot be. His mother would never permit
it.”

The gazi’s mother! That made her think of her own mother and of a remark she thought she had
heard between two servants when she was little and the servants thought she was asleep. Or perhaps she
really had been asleep and dreamed it. It was that her real mother must have been a Turk, because her
father Manuel was too ashamed ever to reveal her identity. The five- or six-year-old Theodota had been
hurt and confused by the outrageous suggestion, but what if it were true? Someone else had once said to
her that she had Turkish eyes, meaning it as a compliment. And would her mother then have been as
forceful as the gazi’s mother evidently was?

So lost was she in these reflections that they had gone some distance before she remembered to ask,

“Zilha, why would the gazi’s mother object to your marrying her son?”

“Because I am a Serb.”

Theodota stared.

“To Arslan that does not matter at all, but it bothers Lady Beyazgül.”

“Then you are a Christian?”

“Christian and Orthodox like you. Or so I was born. I know the rites. There are many of us among
the vassals of the padishah. The sultan doesn’t care how we worship as long as we obey his orders. His
own first wife is the Serbian despina, Olivera, the daughter of the king he killed at Kosovo, and she has
kept to her faith. And Arslan—well, he has his own beliefs.”

Theodota pondered this silently.

“Look, he loves anything that shines! You hold him.” She lifted tiny Beyrek over the camel’s hump
to Theodota.

It was a sign. The babe’s wet nurse a Christian, and the babe himself reaching for the cross. God and
Saint Sophia were telling her that her brave mission would succeed.

Thus engaged with the infant in her arms, resisting his struggle to pull her gold cross to his mouth,
she didn’t immediately notice that the rocking motion of the camel had ceased. It wasn’t quite noon, so
she didn’t know why they’d stopped. Then she saw that the Varangians had broken formation. They
must be tired after so much quick-paced marching. Perhaps they were just taking a rest.

But they didn’t look like they were resting. There were only a dozen in all, a disrespectfully small
number to accompany an imperial princess on a holy mission, she thought. Six of them now crowded on
her side, their backs so close that if she had not had an infant in her arms she might have reached down
to touch the helmet of Harry, the tallest of them. Stretching up and looking past Zilha, she could see the
axe-heads and helmet plumes of the other six.

“Zilha, what is going on?” she said softly. Then more loudly, she demanded, “Captain Harry, tell me
what is happening.”

“We will not go a step farther, Your Highness.”

“Kütahya, you told us, Harry,” said a hoarser voice that she recognized as Thomas’.

“Kütahya, that was our mission. Nobody can change our orders but the emperor. And certainly no
—” and he spat some foreign words mixed in with “big-mustached Muhammad man horse-thieving,
wench-raping, back-stabbing, gibberish-chanting, God-defiling caravan robber!”

“Captain Harry, order your men to be silent and tell me what is happening.”

“This, these people, Your Highness. We’ve just been told, a rider must have come, there’s been
some news, they want us to change our direction of march. That boy speaks Greek, he rode up to us to
tell us.”

“Tell you what?”
“The sultan is not in Kütahya now, he told us.”
“Gone off to fight that Timmerlink,” shouted Thomas. “I knew it.”
“Close it, Tom, or I’ll whack you. Your Highness, our orders from her highness Empress Eugenia were to see your honored self safely to the sultan in Kütahya.”
“The princess and the goods, that’s what your oily friend Bardas said she wanted. What Old Yildirimms wants is to get his henna-painted hands on that coffer that that fat merchant has been trying to keep out of sight.”
“And now, Your Highness, we think maybe it was a trick and that Tom’s right. That blind toad who’s taken over from your father the real emperor wanted to do his treason far outside the city walls where nobody could stop him.”
Then all twelve of them began jabbering in that barbaric language of theirs until Harry said something that made them all shut up.
“We’ll take their heads off first!” shouted one of the shorter Varangians in Greek, raising his axe.
“Arsla-a-a-an!”
Zilha’s shout was so loud that Theodota nearly jumped out of her basket. The baby she was holding started to scream. Zilha half stood to reach over the hump to take him but Theodota instinctively recoiled and grabbed the baby tighter. The fear she saw in Zilha’s face and the arms frantically reaching toward her made her freeze in panic. The cross, she thought. Her cross was in the baby’s mouth, so to protect her from the mad woman clawing toward her, she clutched the baby tighter still against her chest.
A new threat caught her eye, and she snapped her head around to see the mass of horse archers part before a black angel swooping through their ranks. Or no, not an angel, but a giant falcon, which rose as though to pounce upon her.
After a few seconds she willed herself to open her eyes and look again. The black figure had become a man. Perhaps he had had his arms extended as he galloped up, and the big black horse he rode must have reared. It was that broad-shouldered commander that she’d glimpsed yesterday, but today he wasn’t wearing a turban, just a round cap like the others. And no veil. She saw a clean-shaven jaw and the thick mustaches that had made the veil bulge. His glowing black eyes went from her across to Zilha then back to Theodota and down to the baby in Theodota’s arms. She followed his glance. The baby had grown quiet, sucking on a corner of the gold cross with all his might and staring at the man staring at him.
Some of the Turks had drawn their bows, but at a signal from their chief they slid them back into the cases suspended at their waists. Zilha called out again, and the man—the gazi Arslan he had to be—replied in a very firm, short sentence that seemed to calm her.
Harry shouted something to him in Turkish, and the gazi nodded and turned and gave an order. She thought she heard “Bardas,” though it was hard to tell because the Turkish vowels were so distorted. But she must have heard correctly, because in a minute or so the fat merchant appeared on a large white mule. She almost forgot her fright, so indignant was she when she saw him in a caftan trimmed in imperial purple.
“Bardas Tzimiskes, what is the meaning of that costume?” she demanded.
“Ah, Your Highness. By your leave. The badge of my office. As ambassador plenipotentiary of Emperor Ioannes VII and his consort Empress Eugenia, I have been granted the powers to negotiate all matters concerning the empire with this noble gazi and his lord, Yildirim Bayezid Sultan.”
“You just ask him what those matters might be, Your Highness,” bellowed Thomas.
There was a commotion to her right, and then she saw her beloved Olga pushing her way between the riders, shoving the ponies apart with her hands. The riders shouted out, then one of them laughed, and they let her through. She stopped a few feet away and looked at Harry and then up to find Theodota’s face in the shadow from the canopy. She seemed distraught, but Theodota was very glad to see her.
The tall-hatted, Greek-speaking youth on a pony seemed to be translating for the gazi. She heard Zilha say, “Give me the child,” and she did.

“Zilha, I meant no harm. I was frightened. Tell me what is going on.”

“I don’t know. Just listen.”

The gazi spoke and the boy translated.

“Before Allah the Beneficent of Ninety-Nine Names I have sworn a sacred oath to deliver the gift of the infidel city to the sultan wherever he may be. You yellow-haired axe-men who have come so far from your homes, your sergeant tells the truth. The sultan is no longer in his palace in Kütahya. Our kervan delayed one night too long, to accommodate your princess, and the sultan chose not to wait. He has taken the great Osmanli horde against an enemy in the East, and now it is even more urgent that we overtake him, for this great gift will bring him strength against the foe. It is the sultan’s wish and it is my command.”

“Kütahya, that was our orders!” shouted Harry, in Greek this time.

“Our orders were to guard the princess and deliver her to the sultan in Kuta-whatsis, not to chase an army to someplace else we don’t even know where it is!” added Thomas.

The gazi conferred with another man, the one she had been told was his brother, while the Varangians talked excitedly to each other in their own language. Theodota was feeling very confused. Something momentous was going on, something involving her, and she had no idea what it was about.

The gazi addressed them again, and again the boy translated.

“Axe-men, you have now reached the turn-off to Kütahya that was in your orders. Therefore you can tell your emperor that you have fulfilled your duty, and now you may return. Put down your weapons and go in peace. To make your journey swifter, we will fetch you horses from the sultan’s stables, and you will carry this horsetail lance as a sign to all that Arslan Gazi vouches you safe.”

“And the princess?” Harry called out.

“We can’t just leave the princess on a road to nowhere,” said another of the Varangians—and then came a string of harsh sounds in that other language.

“And all that treasure?”

“And that coffer Bardas has got, that’s what I want to know about! If we go, it goes back with us, right, Harry?”

The gazi hesitated only long enough to hear the first part of the translation. “The gift belongs to the sultan, and to him we shall deliver it. You men may return in peace, as I have offered, or you may come with us to see it handed to the sultan. But I warn you that in that case we will have to move much faster. You will have to ride. Or you may return at once to your city, and I and my men alone will guard delivery and the surrender of your city to the righteous ruler of Islam.”

“Aha! You see, Princess?” said Thomas, very excited now. “I told you all this was no ordinary buy-a-month-of-peace tribute. That traitor who sits on the emperor’s throne is giving it all up!”

“Calm down, Thomas.”

“Why, Harry, don’t you see? That chest that greasy Bardas has been hiding, that’s the keys to the City, just like I suspected. We come all the way out here, to the end of Christendom, to save the faith, and that half-blind, cowardly so-called emperor goes and surrenders everything, God and His city, to the very devil himself! Well, we won’t let him have it, will we, boys?”

“No, no,” shouted Bardas. “You don’t understand.” He started toward the men but then pulled his mule’s head back sharply when the nearest Varangian brandished an axe.

“Please,” Bardas continued, “please, you must...you must understand. It’s not really a surrender. Well, it is, but not the kind you think. Your lives will all be respected, we have the sultan’s word on that. The sultan will not tear down the walls and churches, as has happened in other cities, if we throw open the gates and welcome him. And the Christians will be allowed to keep our faith. There’s really no alternative, don’t you see? We either accept the sultan’s generous offer, or...or he will come back and
destroy the City!”
“You traitor to your faith!”
“You make me sick, you dog,” said Harry, growling himself like a dog. “And you want us to turn over this girl to this other dog?”

“Men, men, noble Varangian guards!” Bardas’ voice was pleading now. “Listen to me! There are only twelve of you, what can you do? There are more than a hundred archers all around you. Put down your axes. Go home to Polis or even to England if you want to.”

“Twelve was the number of Christ’s apostles!” shouted Thomas.

True, thought Theodota, but most of them ended badly. Surrender, so that’s what this was about. The surrender of Polis. City of Constantine. New Rome. She was sick with the news, wanting to throw up. She had been abandoned by the cousin who was supposed to protect her, and he had given away the city that she had come out to save.

Then Harry made an announcement that froze her spine. “Merchant, tell your crony with the mustaches that we’ve got his woman and his babe, and tall Richard over there has a very sharp axe, and by God, he knows how to use it.” Theodota paled and looked over to Zilha rocking convulsively and holding little Beyrek so close she was sure he couldn’t breathe. Beyond them the pale blue eyes of Richard glared steady beneath his helmet, his big curved axe-blade poised high and ready to strike. She heard a sudden loud clatter of wood on wood and looked up. All around them, archers had drawn their bows and nocked arrows. The gazi’s face was red and his eyes had grown larger. His sword was in his hand. His horse restlessly pawed the ground, impatient for the order to charge.

“Wait!” she screamed. Theodota tore at the cloth around her neck and pulled off her hat so that she could stand beneath the canopy. “Good Varangians, honored guard of the imperial family, listen to your princess, daughter of your lord and the temporal voice of God on earth, Manuel the Second Palaiologos. You are sworn to defend our Polis, our New Rome. Go back to her, I tell you. She needs you now. I therefore by the authority of my father release you from your oath to protect my person. God and Saint Sophia will be all the protection I need. I go to the sultan to plead our cause, to make him see God’s truth. And know, courageous guardians of the faith, Saint Sophia has revealed to me that there are Christians even among the sultan’s people.

“This babe that you were about to murder, Richard, he is a Christian! He took my cross to his infant mouth, inspired by the love of God. Dear faithful Richard, put down your axe. I, Princess Theodota Palaiologina, by the authority God has bestowed on me and my family, I order you. All of you, put down your axes. Accept the gazi’s offer. Return to our City, and with God’s power do her whatever service you can in this her greatest trial. When my father the true emperor returns, you will be rewarded in this world as surely as you will be in heaven.”

Richard’s scowl drained from his face and his eyes dropped, and then his axe. There was a murmur in English among the men. Then Harry spoke to her.

“Tell them too, Your Highness,” he said, nodding toward the archers aiming at them.

Oh! she thought. Now she would have to address them and their chief. Well, somebody would translate. She forced herself to look right at the man with the mustaches. His eyes widened even further. Maybe no woman had ever done this to him before. But she was a princess, she reminded herself, and with Saint Sophia by her side, she could do things that ordinary women could not.

“Arslan Gazi, though we are of different faiths, I know that you are a man of honor. Honor now your word, and fulfill your offer to vouchsafe my Varangian guards to return to the City. They will not raise a weapon against you, nor will they harm a hair of this dear infant or his mother, for so I have commanded them. And they know that I alone am the only legitimate voice of my father Manuel the true emperor here in Romania and Anatolia. Tell your archers to stow their arrows and their bows, and let us together fulfill our missions, yours to your sultan and mine to God.”

She waited, but no one translated. The tall-hatted boy just stared at her with his mouth open. Bardas,
who knew enough Turkish to do it, was tight-lipped and drew back. If one of the archers had not moved to block him, he would probably have removed himself entirely from the scene.

The gazi’s fury slowly abated. He still held his sword, but lower now. He frowned and after many seconds called out to Zilha. And Zilha answered, sobbing at first, then recovering her strength and firmness of speech. He asked her something else then in a gentler tone, and her answer was shorter and assured. At last he smiled, leaned back in the saddle, and using his sword as a pointer, called out to the Varangians. The boy translated, imitating the gazi’s gruff, jovial tone.

“Well, axe-men, do you obey your princess?”

The archers were still aiming at the Varangians, who murmured among themselves, seemingly coming to a consensus.

“We obey Princess Theodota Palaiologina of New Rome. Polla ta ete!” cried out Harry.

“Polla ta ete!” repeated the others. Theodota began to cry.

The camel stirred and she grabbed the canopy pole to keep her balance, knocking it askew. For the first time, she felt the strong midday sunlight directly against her head.

“Holy Mother of God!” cried Harry.

She looked down. All the men were staring at her, their mouths and eyes wide open. Quickly, one after another, they crossed themselves, the wrong way around, the way Christians did it in their homeland.

Thomas dropped to his knees. “A saint,” he said in hoarse, hushed tones. “We thought we were guarding only a princess, but now we see you are a saint.”

Theodota realized that she had been trembling. No wonder the camel had become restless. “I am no saint, good men. Why do you say that?”

“Ah, she doesn’t even know! Such purity of heart! But we can see the wreath of golden light glowing about your head, O holy princess.”

Olga was still standing in the same spot. She too crossed herself, the right way, but she did not look awed. Rather, she looked proud.

“Olga,” said the princess, “they think I am a saint.”

Olga smiled. “You are my dear, you always have been. Even when you were being bad. And wherever you go, remember your dear slave, who wove that halo into your hair.”

Now Olga was weeping openly, but smiling as she did so.

The camel stirred again, and Thomas rose to his feet and extended up to her the trampled white hat.

“I don’t know if you’ll be needing this anymore, Your Highness.”

He was eyeing her Turkish costume, fully visible to all. So much tension had been relieved so suddenly that all she could do was laugh, and cry, and she let her hands slide down the canopy pole as she slumped back into her camel-perch. The white hat with its purple trimming had been crushed and torn by a camel’s big flat foot, and the yellow-brown dust of the trail was ground into it.

“No, no,” she said. “Thank you, Thomas, but I won’t be needing that.”

“Then, by your leave, I’d like to keep it, as a relic of a saint.”

She laughed again and sobbed and held up her cross. “I have this,” she said and smiled. “Take the garment and go well and defend our City.”

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Kismet

14 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(15 July, Anno Domini 1402)
As he often did while riding for hours on campaign, and as his father the chief vizier before him had taught him to do while serving Murad, Ali Pasha rehearsed the chronicle of events so far, to read as far as possible that which had been written, in attempt to anticipate and prepare for his kismet, the pages yet unread, the unknown, inevitable destiny.

In the first place, the capacities of the sultan and of his immediate foe, the terrible Timur-i-link, their ambitions, pretensions, and (if they could be found) the probable fears of each, and their preferred tactics; important also were the numbers and skills of all the tribes, clans, and tight-knit raider bands, along with the amorphous pools of conscripted peasants composing the sultan’s horde and what Ali could glean from his spies or intuit from his general feelings about the East to anticipate the composition and capacities of the opposing horde. And he had also to estimate their probable loyalties, to take account of the remembered humiliations and desires that might turn a sword-edge one way or another in the heat of combat. Finally he reviewed what he knew of their mounts and weapons and the spare horses and supplies that they were carrying with them on this campaign deep into the mountains of eastern Anatolia.

To the pasha’s left, almost close enough for him to touch had he dared, rode the sultan, his scowl framed by his thick brown beard and eyebrows, his silk-brocaded torso erect upon his well-groomed horse, his huge white turban bobbing above the other horsemen. Ali had been a boy of ten when Bayezid had been born to Murad’s brown-haired Greek wife Gülçiçek, “Roseblossom.” Now, in this year of the Hegira 804, the man who called himself Thunderbolt was forty-one, vigorous and in excellent health. Timur, Ali calculated, must be at least twenty-five years older, almost as old as the emir Murad when he was murdered at Kosovo. And, as everyone knew, a cripple—Timur-i-link, “Timur the lame” they called him. And yet the old khan was wily and ruthless. He should not be underestimated.

The lightning almost takes away their sight, says Verse 2.20 of “The Cow” in the blessed Koran. Ali feared that the Thunderbolt might be blinded by his own brilliance.

As he rode with the horde eastward toward the foe, Ali thought back to when he had first seen Bayezid enraged against Timur, only two years earlier. The news was even worse then, so terrible and urgent that he dared not deliver it himself and had instead sent a slave to interrupt the sultan’s orgy. Ali had been able to observe through a spy-hole cut through the sacred verse that adorned the sultan’s chamber.

The slave’s voice had barely wavered as he crouched, forehead to the carpet, before the tangle of human limbs of Yildirim and the naked boy.

“As Iblis defied Allah, O Sultan, so does Timur defy thy rule,” improvised the slave. Good, thought Ali. That reference to the rebellious angel was inspired.

The slave went on, “He has destroyed the fortress city of Sivas, rock-perched guard of the East. He has thrown down its mighty walls, causing them to crumble into tunnels. Those who defended it, the brave and loyal warriors who loved thee, O Sultan, he has buried alive, betraying them into surrender by promising that no blood would be shed and then trussing them like goats and hurling them into a ditch to be covered with dirt. He has ordered his men to ravish the women of Sivas and those that are comely he has sold into slavery, the wives of the beys and of thy brave Armenian vassals has he sold. The skulls of their infants has he ordered shattered by the hard-hooved ponies of war,” wailed the slave.

Slowly Bayezid Yildirim, Thunderbolt, ruler of Serbia and Thrace and Anatolia and Syria, defender of the faith, sultan of all Rum, began to take human form. His naked head and shoulders rose like a prayer rug lifted from one tasseled end. The tassels became long, clotted tangles of hair. Red-rimmed eyes glowed through the opium haze then disappeared. Ali could just barely make out the brown beard pressed against the thick brown and gray hair of his chest. On the carpet beneath the sultan squirmed a peach-pink mass—the spine and buttocks of a teenage boy, one that Ali himself had selected for the sultan’s pleasure. Absently the sultan’s jeweled right hand caressed the young, firm flesh, which quivered. The messenger slave tried to bury his face more deeply into the carpet’s pile.
The sultan’s nakedness glimmered in the lamplight. He was lightning made flesh, the Thunderbolt itself—Yildirim—unsheathed. Behind him a shadow danced against the wall like a second, taller man, as dark as Bayezid was light.

The man of lightning sat back, one shiny knee raised behind the shivering boy. A glowing pale arm, a spike of light shot out two thin finger-spikes that came to rest on the sultan’s forehead, beneath the tangled cords of hair. Beneath them the red-rimmed eyes blinked twice and closed. The eyelids fluttered again and opened wide, focused on something above and beyond the crouching slave. The shiny raised knee bobbed and the boy yelped in pain and rolled onto his back, his outflung arm grazing the slave’s head before thudding into the carpet. Ali’s glance lingered on the boy, a pretty lad that he had chosen for the sultan from the latest group of janissary recruits from Thrace.

The sultan’s sword hand slithered into his lap, seeking the organ of generation like a blind foal seeking a teat. Shivering, the slave peered up again. The sultan’s eyes now seemed to find the slave.

“Thing! That dares to bring the name of the Despised One into my presence, and to bear his foul message.”

“O, Your Magnificence,” the slave stammered. “Have mercy on your poor slave. It is not the one you say, the Misshapen One of the East, may Iblis take him, but your own chief vizier, Ali Pasha, who has commanded me to bring the terrible news.”

Ali said a little prayer for himself. The slave had not been supposed to say that.

“You dare to contradict me?” roared the sultan. “What manner of jinni are you, to test your fire against the Yildirim? Surrender your name, that I may send it and you and all your seed hurtling to hell!”

Stuttering, stammering, through chattering teeth, at last the slave managed to say, “Yakoub.”

A shriek, as of a thousand demons, made the slave cringe more. The sultan’s face twisted in a horror that Ali had rarely seen. He writhed, screaming a horrible laughter.

“No, no jinni but my own brother! Once dead was not enough. Do you think to have your vengeance, Brother, by doing the work of the cripple of Samarkand?”

The outburst caught even Ali by surprise. The opium that he had supplied was of the best quality. Could it nonetheless have so confused the sultan that he took this poor slave for his own brother, whom Bayezid had ordered murdered eleven years before, after the battle of Kosovo Polje? Strangled by a bowstring, for one should not spill the princely blood?

“Bayezid will not be betrayed!” the sultan shouted and lunged, the thunderbolt extended by a dagger in his fist.

The shadow behind the sultan had been Azrael, the angel of death.

It was only later that Ali noticed that the sacred verse through which he had been peering, carved to mimic the sultan’s own ornate calligraphy, was “O men! Serve your Lord who created you and those before you so that you may guard against evil.”

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In the two years since that terrible battle, Bayezid had crushed all rivals and retaken his domains in eastern Anatolia, and since he had already destroyed the Christian crusaders at Nicopolis he had extended Osmanli rule from Lake Van in the east to Varna and beyond, in the mountains of Europe. Soon he would hold as his own the proud and ancient city of Constantinople—in fact, any day now Ali expected to see the delegation bringing the key to the City and a Christian princess that would dramatize the formal surrender. Such a great prize would ensure the sultan’s glory for all time and, Ali hoped, make Timur renounce war on such a hero of their shared Islamic faith and solidify the sultan’s power over the world’s only empire in Asia and Europe. That is, if that rebellious and independent-minded gazi did not betray him.

But no, Chandarli Ali Pasha put that thought out of his mind. The sons of Kara Göne had ample reason to be angry with the sultan, but they were men of the old tradition, incapable of breaking their word. If the surrender prize had not yet been delivered, it must be because that gazi Arslanshahin had
not learned in time of the sultan’s departure from Kütahya and had not know of the campaign’s route—or had something else gone wrong? If they had not caught up to the horde by tomorrow or the day after, perhaps Ali would have to send out scouts to find them. Because once that delivery had been made, then the sultan’s power would be secure. He would be the greatest monarch in the world, ruling all the points of commerce between Europe and Asia.

**Lady Sun-Moon**

15 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(16 July, Anno Domini 1402)

“**Merhaba, Zilha.**”

“Kemal! So you come back to the women’s tent? I thought you had forsaken us. You had got too big for us. Gone to the men, you said.”

“I want to see my mother. Besides, my uncle says we won’t do the circumcision until we reach the sultan’s camp, so I’m not really a man yet.”

“Lady Saljan is inside. But I don’t think you should go in. The Rumeli princess is in there with her.”

“I want to see her too.”

“It is not right for a man to see her in her quarters.”

“But I’m not a man yet. I told you. Uncle thinks she is very beautiful.”

“Arslan said that?”

“Well, no. Not exactly. You know how he is. But that’s what he thinks. He wants me to convey his thanks for what she did the day before yesterday, when those yellow-hairs raised their axes.”

“Kemal, tell the truth. Kemal. You have never lied to Zilha, isn’t that right? Your uncle Arslan said no such thing.”

“Please, Zilha. I want to see my mother. I’m still a boy. It’s all right.”

“I’ll call her.”

“No, I want to go in.”

“To see the princess.”

“Yes. I won’t lie. Uncle didn’t send me, but he did say to his brother Mesud that she’d spared your life and the little baby’s, so that means he must be grateful. I’ve never seen a princess up close. This may be my last chance.”

“Why?”

“The scouts found out that the sultan is camped in Ankara. That’s only a day’s ride from here, Mesud says.”

“Ankara?! Why…what is this place called, where we are now?”

“Oh, Zilha! You don’t know anything. We just left Gerede. Where we saw the camel wrestling? They’re famous for that.”

“Gerede.”

“That was yesterday. So now we are much closer. If we weren’t carrying all this baggage and these camels and that funny fat Christian in the purple costume, who takes so long on his mule, we might even reach the sultan’s camp tomorrow. As it is, it may take us a day, maybe two at most. Then she’ll be gone. Please, Zilha, I won’t tell anyone I was here, and anyway, it’s all right, as long as I haven’t been circumcised anyway.”

“I must tell Lady Beyazgül.”

“Wait! Before you get Grandma, tell me her name. The princess, I mean.”

“Theodota Palaiologina.”
“What? ‘Fododa?’ Say it again.”
“Theodota. Theodota Palaiologina.”
“‘Fododa Bababa.’ Ngh! What an ugly name for such a pretty lady. My uncle Mesud said to Uncle Arslan that day when we saw her standing up and her hair shining golden in the sunlight and her pale, round, sad face, that she was like the sun and moon together. He called her Mihr-u-Mah. That’s much easier to say.”
“Mihr-u-Mah?”
“It’s Persian. You know how Mesud likes the Persian poets.”
“Mihr-u-Mah. You’re right. It is easier to say. I think she’d like that.”
“She’s going to marry the sultan’s son, right? The chelebi Suleyman? Then she can’t have an ugly name that nobody in the Divine Gate can pronounce. I’ll tell her that.”
“You are a clever boy, Kemal. But you may not enter the tent, at least not unless your grandmother says you can. Here, hold the baby. And don’t strangle him.”
“Strangle him? Zilha, why would I do that? I am not Bayezid.”
“I know, Kemal. That’s why I trust this baby to you. Wait here. I’ll get Saljan and, if she’s willing, Theo—Mihr-u-Mah.”

Inside the tent, it took Zilha’s eyes a few seconds to adjust and make out the two figures seated on the carpet at the point farthest from the entrance. Saljan, the taller and heavier of the two, was pointing to things and saying their names, and the little foreign princess imitated her gestures and her sounds. Nilüfer’s little girls were supposed to be napping, but the older of them stared up at Zilha. Nilüfer herself, Zilha knew, would be in Arslan’s tent. Lady Beyazgül was out somewhere.

“Saljan, where is Mother-in-Law? Did she say where she was going?”
“Why, no. She never does. She must be gathering herbs. Or riding. You know how she loves that.”
“Your son is here, Saljan. He says the sultan is in Ankara and that it’s only a day’s ride ahead of us.”
“Ooh! Tell the princess her bridegroom awaits her. What wonderful news. There will be a great wedding feast. And then maybe we can settle down someplace. I get so tired of these travels.”
“No. I’d better wait. We’ll let Mother-in-Law tell her, if it’s true. Your son wants to see you, Saljan. He is also very curious to see our guest. I think he has a crush on her.”
Saljan laughed.
“What did you say?” asked Theodota in Turkish.
“You speak Turkish! How wonderful. Saljan, you are a marvelous teacher.”
“What? What did you say?” the princess repeated.
“That’s all she’s learned so far. ‘What did you say?’ and the names of some of these things.

Princess, what is this?”
“Headdress.”
“Very good. And this?”
“Necklace.”
“This?”
“Uh—”
“Belt.”
“Belt.”

“Beautiful belt,” Zilha added. Then switching to Greek, she said, “When you become the chelebi’s wife, you will wear a belt even more beautiful than Saljan’s. And your headdress will have even more gold dangling from it and precious jewels.”
“You think it’s true then,” Theodota said in her own language. “That I must marry the infidel. But Saint Sophia will save me from that fate or else will help me make the sultan’s son a Christian.”
“It’s a good thing you don’t know how to say that in Turkish, my dear. You would frighten Saljan. And if Lady Beyazgül should hear you…Her grandson Kemal, nephew of Arslan Gazi, is waiting
outside the tent. He says he has a message for you from his uncle.”
“A message?”
“And a new name.”
Zilha switched back to Turkish to repeat what Kemal had said about the name. Saljan laughed again.
“He is like his father, that boy. So poetic.”
When the three women stepped out into the sunlight, Kemal jumped to his feet and stared. He handed the baby back to Zilha. Zilha watched him grasp his mother by her ample waist and bury his face in her soft shoulder, and she also saw him peek up at the foreign girl with hazel eyes and the virgin’s headdress in the style of Saljan’s own home village. Without the headdress, she would be only barely taller than the boy.
“I told her that you wanted to give her a message from your uncle,” Zilha told him. But he just stared.
“Merhaba,” said the princess.
“She speaks Turkish! Merhaba, Fododa.”
The foreign girl frowned. “Tell her, Kemal.”
“No, you. I forget.”
Zilha switched back to Greek. “Kemal said that his uncle the gazi thanked you for what you did two days ago. And he, Arslan Gazi—or maybe it was really Kemal—has suggested a new name, a beautiful name for you. It is a great honor. The name means ‘Sun and Moon.’”
“Sun and Moon. That sounds like pagan magic. Is this a curse?”
“No, no. It is magic, but it’s good magic. The moon is the light of the underworld, the sun the light of heaven, and in combination they are very powerful. It is Persian, the language of poetry. We say ‘Mihr-u-Mah.’”
Theodota stared at Kemal’s thick black eyebrows and his dark eyes until the boy turned away, red-faced. “Tell him,” she said, “that I thank his uncle the gazi. And tell him he looks just like he must have when he was little. All he’s missing, besides size, is those big mustaches.”
“Oh, no!” said Zilha. “You are mistaken. Kemal’s shoulders are much too narrow.”
“No,” she said. “Tell him.”
So Zilha swallowed her irritation and translated. Kemal broke out into a big smile, and Saljan fluttered around the princess, cooing.
“What was that name he said?”
“Mihr-u-Mah,” Zilha told her.
“Mihr-u-Mah,” Theodota repeated. Then she smiled and launched another Turkish phrase.
“Teshekkür ederim, Kemal.”
“Thank you very much.” Zilha was impressed. Most wellborn Christians from the great city would not deign to sully their mouths with Turkish syllables. The princess was acting more practically, like Zilha herself, and most other Serbs she knew.
“Ask her,” said Kemal, “why she looks so healthy and happy when the other infidels are all sick or crying.”
“What?” asked Zilha.
“What did he say?” the princess asked. And then, as though suddenly remembering, she repeated the question in Turkish—not perfectly, but Kemal understood her.
“Tell her,” demanded Kemal. “The infidel slaves look all worn out, and we haven’t even been traveling for much more than a week. Well, a little more, but not yet two weeks. Torgut says it’s because they’re from the City that they’re so weak. But Mihr-u-Mah looks fine. Ask her if it’s because princesses are made of stronger stuff.”
Zilha translated the gist of it, and the smile fell from the princess’s face and she looked suddenly frightened and worried.
“What Christians? Traveling with us? I must see them.”
Then, beyond the princess, Zilha saw a familiar green and gold headdress. “My lady!”
“Greetings, Mother-in-Law,” said Saljan.
“Peace be on you, Grandmother.”
“What’s this?” Beyazgül demanded. “Is this a boy or a man I see before me? If a man, how dare he violate the tent of Beyazgül Khatun and the sacred harem? And if a child, why does it wear a warrior’s clothes and bow?”
“Grandmother, forgive me, I have only come to give you important news.”
“Oh, yes, I’m sure you did. Just as Nasreddin Hodja went into his neighbor’s chicken coop only to soothe the feathers of a startled hen.”
“Mother-in-Law, by your pardon. Kemal has brought news. The sultan…”
“Is in Ankara,” completed Beyazgül. “And that means that you and I have some work to do. And you too, man-boy. You can slaughter the animals.”
“Grandmother?”
“We will not have this foreign despina with us much longer. We must do her proper honor before we dispatch her to her new harem. I have spoken with my son. We shall have tomorrow for our feast.”

The Wit of the Gazis
16 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(17 July, Anno Domini 1402)

In the walled cities of the world there are philosophers who insist that rocks and trees are lifeless things and that even water has no soul. The gazis have heard such ignorant tales and laugh at them. The gazis, or most of them, have not forgotten how to summon and to heed the spirit messages of Tengri, who rules the firmament, and his consort Earth Goddess, and Water, their grandmother. The gazis sense those spirits’ growing strength with every horse-stride eastward, nearer to the ancestral land beyond the Oxus. The spirits of Islam—the angels and ifrits and jinn, the hatifs—work more surely when abetted by these more ancient powers.

The gazis feign indifference to the black-armored Serbian Christian knights urging their big, soft-footed horses up the scarps. They keep their faces straight as the Serbs mutter curses in their language against the tree branches and the slippery shale that can send a man and horse tumbling into a gorge.

The Serbs—there are many hundreds of them—try to keep apart from the swarms of rough Turkish horse-soldiers, the sipahis, who, they rightly suspect, summon the forest and mountain spirits to play tricks on them. But riding apart is dangerous too, because in the defiles and slopes and forests of the eastern wilderness a party of strangers is easily lost, and an alternate path may turn into a ledge so narrow that a rider can neither advance nor dismount nor turn around and must instead coax his beast to back, step by cautious step, undoing in an hour the distance gained in minutes. Twice already since they left Gerede, the sultan has sent a sipahi scout to find a company of lagging Serbs. The gazis know this, and snicker at their plight.

Bayindir snickers at a distance, however. The Serbs can crack a helmet and a skull with their heavy maces. Their prince is a brother-in-law and faithful vassal of Yildirim Bayezid, who would be displeased if he knew the tricks the gazis played on them. For the gazis, the problem with the Serbs is not their Christian religion, but that they make poor allies. They are too ignorant of the language and customs to be drawn into gazi intrigues. They will not know when the spirits call for prudent flight, guileful surrender, or a strategic switch of sides. Nor are they reliable raiding partners. They get so engrossed in
single-minded combat that sometimes they even forget to plunder. When the battle comes, thinks Bayindir, a man would be wise to stay clear of them.

Not far from Bayindir and his hundred and fifty men rides Bozkurt the Gray Wolf, with two hundred. Bozkurt and Bayindir understand each other. Even when their two bands are separated by rocky outcroppings or by trees, a simple whistle or a birdcall is all that’s needed for one to locate the other. If victory is to be with the sultan, there will be much in Timur’s camp to plunder, and between Bayindir and Bozkurt they have brought enough extra horses to carry off a goodly portion. What bothers Bayindir, however, is Bozkurt’s ties to that Armenian, Gregorios, which may upset these plans.

Gregorios’ force is small, a mere fifty men, and not all of them are yet men, and some of the others are already past their prime. And they’ve brought only a single extra horse apiece. But they are not to be ignored. Gregorios is bold and capable, and his men and boys and old men are all set on a single cause: revenge. Every one of them lost a brother, a father, a son, or a sister or a mother or a wife in Timur’s massacre at Sivas. But the desire for vengeance can blind a man, both to dangers and opportunities.

This Bayindir learned long ago. The Armenians ride like Turks and are armed like Turks, but they don’t fear Tengri, they don’t hear the voice of the horse spirit, they don’t even believe in more modern spirits like the jinn. Like the Serbs, they may prove stubborn.

His fellow gazis do not worry Bayindir so much, except his brother-in-law Ilig Koja, who will at the first opportunity carry off Bayindir’s share of the booty as well as his own if Bayindir does not watch him like a hawk. And, naturally, Ilig is also watching Bayindir. This is why scouts from the two bands are always scurrying back and forth, giving unnecessary greetings, bestowing unwanted little gifts, spying.

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**Royalty and Slaves**

18 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(19 July, Anno Domini 1402)

The spirits had been good to Beyazgül, the White Rose, widow of fierce Kara Göne, mother of bold Arslan and of the murdered Evrenos. That was because she had always treated the spirits with due respect. She knew their names and how to call them and also knew to accept their gifts when they came unbidden. This time, they had truly surprised her. They had made Kemal appear where he was not supposed to be and to speak up when he was supposed to remain silent and thus had aroused some other, foreign spirit in the slender Rumeli princess. That unknown spirit had taken possession of the princess and agitated her incomprehensibly.

“Beyazgül Hatun,” the little foreigner had cried out and then a whole string of rapid phrases from some other world. It was clearly a very powerful spirit that had possessed her, but unlike any Beyazgül had ever known. It had made the girl suddenly want something desperately, but not any of the normal things that the spirits of the steppes might make a girl desire.

Zilha said something to the young princess that made her calm down a little. Beyazgül caught the name “Mehmed,” and the word “Romaoi,” which was what the Rumeli, the Greek-speaking Christians, called themselves.

“Zilha, what is she saying?” demanded Beyazgül.

“It’s about Christians, my lady. I don’t know exactly—I can’t follow it.”

“Christians? What Christians? Kemal, run and get that janissary, Mehmed. He knows their tongue.”

There was something about the young Rumeli girl that appealed to Beyazgül, even though her behavior was sometimes very strange. The girl had the vital force, a woman’s form of cazibe, like
Beyazgül herself at that age and even now in her ripe maturity. The way the girl had stood up on the camel and dared to speak right to her son’s face—that was something one rarely saw in girls these days, though in the old days, before the Great Migration when women and men rode and hunted and did battle together, it would have been quite normal—or so the stories said.

Her son Arslan, she was sure, had been quite surprised, though he did well not to show it at that moment. Afterwards, though, she had seen him strike a man, knocking him to the ground with a powerful back-blow of his fist. There had been no need for that; Arslan’s men all loved him and would follow him to death, and she was sure that none of them had so much as implied a snicker.

Good. It was good that some woman could affect him so and that some woman besides his mother dared to speak up to him, even if it were in a language he didn’t understand. He was a good son and did what he could to protect his women, and he was, as his name said, a lion among men, but a man’s very manliness can carry him away sometimes, make him do foolish things. It had been that way with Arslan’s father, Kara Göne. And it was when he was apart from her, and merely to prove an audacity that needed no further proof, Kara Göne had fallen into the vizier’s trap and died—bravely, of course, but unnecessarily—at that terrible battle of Kosovo Polje.

Beyazgül permitted herself to dream. Would it be too great to imagine this gold-headed Christian, whose hazel eyes glowed like coals and whose tongue could soothe or lash, as a woman of Arslan’s? She was not tall, but she might yet grow some inches, and her hips were wide enough to bear lusty sons. She better than Zilha or any of them might be able to restrain Arslan from the delirium that ran in his blood. An audacious thought, because the Rumeli princess was promised and especially because of whom she was promised to. But many things could happen, and it would be sacrilege for a mortal to presume to know what is written in the Book of Fate.

Beyazgül knew that she had not always been prudent, but she and her son and their whole band were on the verge of an extraordinary moment that called for unaccustomed caution. It would be prudent to act as though what the padishah had commanded was identical to the unseen text in the great book. For now, therefore, she must assume that this bright and attractive Christian girl was destined to become the bride of Suleyman, said to be as capricious, cruel, and corrupt as his father but with only half the energy—“Lamp-sputter” to his father’s “Thunderbolt.”

And Suleyman, with all his faults, might well become the heir to Bayezid and ruler of all the Osmanlis—unless one of his brothers killed him first. Thus it would be important for Beyazgül and Arslan, and for Arslan’s present and future sons, to have an ally in the household of the chelebi. So she would wait to see what it was the girl wanted so desperately, and if possible, she would satisfy her.

Beyazgül turned to see Mehmed and Kemal hurrying toward them. Several paces behind, huffing and puffing and holding the hem of his robes up above the dust, came that Christian trader Bardas, uninvited. The janissary stopped in front of Beyazgül and, after a moment’s hesitation, dropped to his knees and touched his head to the dirt before her feet. The merchant, however, was focused entirely on the princess. Beyazgül shouted to him and Kemal stepped deftly into the fat man’s path with his dagger drawn. That got his attention.

The princess became even more excited when she saw Bardas, and the spirit shouted through her voice the most insulting, vilest things imaginable—or so Beyazgül imagined. The fat man blanched and stammered and bowed most humbly, and the princess burst into tears. Abruptly she turned her back to him and to face Beyazgül, pleading unintelligibly with voice and gesture.

“Janissary,” commanded Beyazgül, “tell me what she is saying.”

“Honored khatun, mother of Arslan Gazi, the Rumeli princess begs a boon.”

“Yes?”

“The children. She means the young people we have taken as slaves from the City, as a present to our sultan Yildirim Bayezid. She says that they are not well, that she has heard that many are sick, and that they have not been able to perform their Christian devotions.”
“The slaves? She’s worried about the slaves? When has a Christian imperial princess ever concerned herself about slaves?”

Mehmed turned and began to say something to the princess, but Beyazgül interrupted. “No, you don’t need to translate that. Only translate when I tell you to.”

“She says it is her duty, honored khatun. Her sacred, Christian duty to protect those of her same faith, and it was for that only that she has consented to be part of the kervan.”

“What?” Beyazgül laughed. “Consented,” as though the princess had been given a choice. As though women, Christian or Turk, were ever given a choice. Still, she admired the arrogance of the reply. “Serb, what do you make of this?”

“My lady?”

No wonder Zilha looked surprised. Beyazgül never asked her opinion about anything and generally even avoided speaking to her. But as a Christian, even a lapsed Christian or however she understood herself, the Serb might have some insight into the princess’s strange behavior.

“Yes, what is this about a ‘Christian duty’ to look after slaves?”

“I think, my lady, that it must be like the despina Olivera, wife of our Bayezid Sultan and princess of Serbia, who is herself a protectress of the Christians in the sultan’s lands.”

“Protectress of Christians, yes. The sultan’s horde has too many of them, all those Serbian cousins of yours, so I suppose somebody has to look after them. But I’ve never heard that Bayezid’s despina took any interest in slaves.”

“By your leave, my lady, may I ask the princess?”

Beyazgül waved her consent as though the matter had no importance. After some murmuring between the Serbian girl and the Rumeli, the Serb turned and said, “My lady, the princess wishes to tell you a true story of her faith, and she asks that I translate it for her.”

A story? Beyazgül loved a story. But this was not the time. “Tell the princess Mihr-u-Mah that I shall be eager to hear her story this evening under the waning moon, which is the time for stories. In the meantime, you, and Mehmed too, accompany the princess to see about the condition of her cherished slaves, and whatever it is that she says needs be done, see that it is done. Tell those who guard them that Beyazgül Khatun so disposes. I do this in the name of my son, Arslan Gazi, knowing that he is responsible for the welfare of these slaves and their delivery in the best possible condition to the sultan. Tell her what I said.”

When she had heard, Theodota’s face seemed to glow. She ran over to the khatun and threw herself at her feet. She yanked off her headdress and began wiping Beyazgül’s sandals with her golden hair.

This was bizarre behavior, especially from such a highborn personage. It felt especially strange when the girl began kissing her toes, but Beyazgül understood and was pleased that the spirits had once again let her triumph. She would make a sacrifice—a fat ewe, perhaps—to thank them for this gift. Then she noticed Bardas, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and frowning.

“Mehmed, you make sure this sweaty pig in the robes understands my orders too,” she commanded.

“Your servant the sweaty pig understands quite well, honored khatun,” said Bardas, to her surprise.

“Oh, Ambassador. You have misunderstood me. I said ‘the imperial plenipotentiary.’ Turkish is such a difficult language for you foreigners.”

When they had all left but Saljan—even Kemal, ever curious, had gone with them to see the Christian slaves—Beyazgül strode off alone to the shade of an aged olive tree and sat down.

**Timur’s Chess**

20 Zulhijje 804 Hegira

(21 July, Anno Domini 1402)
Shah Rukh laughs at his long purple shadow slithering over the ground. “How bold and boastful thou art,” he calls out to it,

When the winds of dawn blow cold,
When the bearded gray lark is singing,
When the Arab steeds see their master and neigh,
When the long-bearded Persian recites the call to prayer,
When white begins to be distinguishable from black
When the sun touches the great mountains with their lovely folds,
When the heroic warrior chieftains come together,
At break of day…

He grins and leans forward to form a shadow centaur. How Ulugh would enjoy this game! Shah Rukh laughs for him. It has been almost a year since he has seen his little son.

His laughter fades as he approaches his own father’s tent. Would he ever seem to Ulugh as overwhelming as Timur did to him?

He swings his leg in front of him to jump down to the ground facing outward in a warrior’s crouch, as he has been taught. He straightens his body and his dolman, rests his left hand lightly on the pommel of his sword, and repeats a short prayer. The guards step aside and Shah Rukh enters the great tent.

Timur sits there alone. The figure in the shadows behind him to his right is not another person, but simply Timur’s extra limb, the slave who assists the maimed conqueror in getting up or sitting down, lifting wine to his lips or cutting meat or shitting or pissing, and noiselessly completing a thousand other daily tasks. He is the third such slave that Shah Rukh can remember in his father’s service, and this one has been with his master now for many years. The slave has no name as far as Shah Rukh knows, and because his tongue has been cut out, he tells no secrets.

Timur sits at ease upon his cushioned platform and with his good left arm and hand touches his forehead in cursory acknowledgment of his son’s reverence. Before him on a low table lies a chessboard, the big board, the one for “great chess.” Obeying one finger of that left hand, Shah Rukh sits on the cushion opposite his father.

“We shall play a match,” Timur declares.

Shah Rukh nods. The father who sits before him has grown even more awesome and more terrible than the vigorous, uninjured man of twenty years before, when he would laugh and toss his little son into the air. His hair had been white since youth, but it glows more brightly now, its mystic power increased. Though he can no longer mount a horse unaided and is carried in a litter almost everywhere, the Timur of today commands tens of thousands of men at arms and sweeps armies from the field as easily as chessmen from the great board.

Shah Rukh has grown up playing this game, and his very name is a chess move: when the shah—what Westerners call the king—changes places with the rukh, suddenly altering all the possibilities.

In great chess, the board has extra ranks and files plus one square projecting from each side, the “citadels,” where a shah can take refuge, immune from attack. Camels move like horses, but with a greater range; scouts and siege machines offer variations on the moves of bishops and the powerful rukhs. So many possibilities make for a complex game of protracted struggle until the cry shah mat—“the shah is dead.”

“I will make the first move,” says his father.

Shah Rukh nods.

“I shall play the red pieces, which will be the forces of that Osmanli slave who calls himself
Yıldırım. You will play the white pieces, for Timur.”

Shah Rukh frowns and stares at his father, not daring to speak.

“Therefore, for the glory of God, you must win!”

Timur laughs, and Shah Rukh hears an echo of the laughter from when his young, strong father would toss him high into the air, so high he was sure he was about to disappear, to be snatched in the air by the great simurgh, the woman-faced bird with four wings that lives behind the magic mountains, who would carry him off never to return again.

“Inshallah,” says Shah Rukh softly.

Scouts
21 Zuhijje 804 Hegira
(22 July, Anno Domini 1402)

“Wait.”

Turgut raised his hand, and Mehmed, riding just behind him, tugged the reins. The gelding stopped almost instantly and, with the slightest nudge, edged up next to Turgut’s horse.

“What?”

“Hush.”

Mehmed looked, but saw nothing unusual on the gently ascending trail or in the brush on either side.

Turgut motioned with his head to his right, then stepped his horse into the brush to the side of the trail. They moved almost silently, Mehmed just behind. Both reined in when they heard a laugh and another man’s shouted reply. Turgut looked back to the janissary and waited a moment. Then they continued, cautiously.

Mehmed’s horse snapped a branch and they halted again, waiting until again they heard the voices. The unseen men were somewhere ahead, just over a little rise. There were at least four of five of them, he guessed. They sounded cheerful, almost gleeful, still unaware of the approaching riders. Their language was Turkish, and one was singing a song popular in the horde but with new, obscene verses.

At the top of the hill Turgut crouched low in the saddle to squeeze under the limbs of some trees while Mehmed waited behind. Slowly Turgut stretched to his full height in the saddle, squinting at something ahead of and below him. His teeth flashed white from within the beard. Without turning, he held up his left hand toward Mehmed, extending all five fingers, then closed his fist and raised two more. He waited a few moments, then turned to Mehmed and nodded toward another, thinner cluster of trees to the left. He made a rolling gesture under his beard and opened his fist repeatedly in front of his mouth so that the fingers seemed to be shooting out.

Mehmed thought he understood. Now he could see the little group of men, scavenging in the remains of a military camp. The one singing was bent over gathering things, while others were already tying objects to their saddles. From the trampled grass, the remnants of staves lying here and there, the scattered coals of cook fires, Mehmed knew that a large part of a horde had camped here not long before.

Turgut drew his sword. Mehmed drew his.

“Hut!” Turgut grunted and charged down the hill, crying out, “Allahallahallahallahallahallah…”

Mehmed, after a second’s hesitation, did the same, ululating and racing toward the nearest target, the singer of the obscene song, while Turgut veered off toward the others.

Mehmed’s man glanced around then, still clutching an armload of bulky objects, started to jog toward a nearby horse. Something fell and he picked it up, then he dropped something else, and then he
threw up his hands to dump everything and leapt up onto the horse’s back. For an instant he pivoted on his belly across the saddle, his legs one way and his arms the other, fluttering like the wings of Buraq. By the time Mehmed was upon him, he had got himself seated and slapped his hand to where his sword should be—but it was in the pile of things on the ground. Mehmed, unsure what he was supposed to do, raised his sword and shouted for him to stop.

The man jerked upright and whirled around, grabbing the janissary’s wrist so suddenly and with such force that Mehmed let the sword slip and it dangled from his wrist by its cords while he grasped his horse’s mane with his left hand to keep from falling. The other man grinned, and a knife flashed in his right hand.

“Allahu akbar!” cried Mehmed, expecting death.

At once the grip on his wrist loosened, the grin slackened, the knife blade wavered and darted to the side. Mehmed struggled back upright and grasped his sword again, rejoicing in the unexpected power of his call to God.

Then he noticed red liquid bubbling through his opponent’s beard around a glistening arrowhead. “Janissaries!” Turgut grunted in disgust as he rode up, bow still in hand. He pushed the dying man to topple from his horse. “They don’t teach you much about fighting on horseback, do they, janissary?” Mehmed was breathing so heavily he could hardly speak. “You’re hurt,” he finally gasped out. Turgut coughed like an irritated horse. He touched his sleeve to the gash above his left eye, and Mehmed saw that his buckler had been slashed through and his forearm was bleeding as profusely as his forehead.

“Blood is sweet.”

“And the others?”

Turgut turned his head and spat onto the ground. “Two have begun their journeys through the underworld. One other, I regret to say, is hurt no worse than I, and with three other treacherous fiends has got away to the evil spirits that sent them.”

“There were seven then?”

“A sorcerer’s number. May they all soon practice their magic in the underworld.”

He looked around. “Janissary, hobble this horse and go get that other one over there, it looks so nervous it might run. I shall assist that crippled mare that’s crying to join her ancestors.”

Mehmed passed one dead man, his neck nearly sawn through with a sword, and just beyond he saw the other corpse clutching his armpit where an arrow had penetrated. The man moved—not yet a corpse. Mehmed jumped down to inspect him, but taking no chances, drew the dagger from his sash. Turgut suddenly appeared, on foot. Mehmed had not heard him approach.

“Who sent you, son of Iblis?” Turgut shouted and kicked the man, but not with full force. “Tell me or you’ll begin your wanderings in the underworld in little pieces.”

The man’s eyes narrowed and he sneered. “Do what you will,” he said. “I have made my peace with Allah. The tribe of Karaman will never be vassals to a slave.”

“Eh?”

The man’s chest heaved and he made little choking sounds as he stared up at Turgut, and then his gaze fixed on Mehmed’s knife.

“A Karamanli, right? And why did you desert the horde? First you betray the sultan then you come back rooting around the garbage of the horde like a filthy swine.”

The man’s eyes narrowed and he sneered. “Do what you will,” he said. “I have made my peace with Allah. The tribe of Karaman will never be vassals to a slave.”

“Eh?”

The man’s chest heaved and he gathered a little strength. He tried to spit, but his mouth was dry. “Your Yildirim, I owe him nothing. The Osmanlis were Seljuk vassals who turned against their masters. You who fight for Yildirim Bayezid are slaves of slaves.”

“Oh? Well, I’ve heard all this before, but perhaps my young companion has not. What else do you have to say about my sultan, son of Karaman? From the look of this camp, the horde passed through here not long ago. His janissaries must still be nearby. Perhaps we’ll turn you over to them. Let them
chop you into kebabs.”

“Ha! Janissaries! Those fancy footmen won’t be back here, not soon, maybe never.” He coughed when he tried to laugh. “Your sultan keeps those janissaries close by him. Trusts them more than he trusts his own sipahis and his gazi. Allah will see how much good they do him now.”

The man on the ground turned his eyes toward Mehmed. “This is one of them! I know you, even without your tall hat. You’re a Greek slave-soldier, aren’t you, boy? Where did you come from? Did you desert too? Go on and get off with you to the rest of your slave comrades in Ankara.”

“Ankara?” Turgut repeated.


“I am a good Muslim,” Mehmed told him, feeling bolder now and offended by the arrogance of a dying man.

“A new Muslim, then. And a slave. Slave of a slave-dog who wants to live like an infidel king, surrounded by infidel troops.” He coughed again, and his chest heaved deeply.

“So that’s what you say of Yildirim Bayezid Gazi, is it?” Turgut’s tone was mocking.

“Your sultan is no gazi. And no true gazi will ride with him into battle against real Muslims. You will see, when finally he meets Timur, his horde will amount to nothing more than his Christian Serbs and slaves. Allah will see to his disgrace.”

“I see,” said Turgut. “And if you despise the Serbs so much, how is it that you came scavenging in their camp? This horseshoe didn’t come from a Turkmen gelding, and that dented helmet your partner found has a cross embossed on it. Eh? Tell me, why was a proud man like you rooting around the Christians’ refuse?”

“Hah! Because your rich sultan, with all his luxury and all his tents and his women all traveling with him and his fine food and his falcons, his camels laden with nothing but wine and opium, your sultan Yildirim Bayezid, great-grandson of the brigand Osman, hasn’t paid any of his troops for months! My brothers and I were not going to go home empty-handed.”

Turgut sat back on his heels and looked off into the distance. Then he looked back down at the man on the ground.

“So that’s it, is it? All this talk about faith and the true gazi. And what you really wanted was your wages, like any mercenary. And you pretend to be a gazi.”

The man on the ground coughed. Then he said, with little energy but intense anger, “Timur is a son of Jenghiz Khan and the Scourge of God. And he has paid his men seven years in advance!”

Mehmed looked up at Turgut, who was still looking down at the dying man. Turgut’s eyes were sad, but something like a smile shone from within one side of his beard. He drew a long knife and with a quick, deft movement, slashed the man’s throat.

“Go get that other horse,” he said to Mehmed. “We should leave before others of this tribe come back.”

When Mehmed returned, tugging the reins of the second horse, Turgut had already slain the wounded mare and had plunged his knife deep into her flank. Neatly he cut out a hand span of quivering pink horseflesh.

“Hmm. Take this. You probably don’t know how to cut your own.” He thrust the bloody thing up toward Mehmed who gingerly took it.

“Well?” said Turgut.

Mehmed held it at arm’s length.

“Ah! They don’t teach you anything. Watch me.”

Turgut cut out another chunk and held it up, pleased. Then he stood and clucked for his horse. With his free hand he loosened the cinch and then carefully placed the bloody flesh between the saddle and his horse’s back.

“There. You do the same.”
“What sort of pagan magic is this? One horse to protect another?”

“Magic?” Turgut laughed. And laughed. Then his voice turned sharp. “Do as I say. When the time comes, even one as stupid as you will know what to do with it.”

On the way back, Turgut kept leaving the trail whenever there was a convenient nearby rise to look east toward where they’d met the scavengers. After they’d ridden about a league and a half, he seemed to relax a little, merely scanning the bushes and outcroppings along the trail ahead of them. At a wider, high point in the road, with a view of more than a league in every direction, he signaled to halt.

Mehmed was so stiff he could hardly dismount. He imitated Turgut, stretching his back and kicking out his legs, but Turgut—though probably about ten years older—recovered much faster. Turgut smiled, not at Mehmed particularly, but at the world.

“Now it will be good,” he said.

He loosened the cinch and worked out the piece of meat he’d placed under the saddle hours before. He tore off a piece with his teeth and chewed happily.

“Try it,” he said with his mouth full.

Tentatively Mehmed got out his own chunk of horseflesh. It was warm, and the blood had been beaten out of it and the fibers had been tenderized by the hours of riding. Hairs from his horse’s back were embedded on one side, but he could scrape some out with his knife and avoid the others. Mehmed was hungrier than he’d been aware.

“Janissary, this territory is become more dangerous than my bey Arslan supposes. Since we have few men to spare, I may ask him to send you to ride as scout with me again. But then I shall have to teach you many things.”

Mehmed took a swig from his water bag and belched. “Turgut, that man back there. The one we killed. You killed.”

“Ngh.”

“What he said about Timur. Is that eastern khan really the better gazi? Is it true he’s paid his men in advance? How could that man you killed have heard so much about Timur Khan?”

“‘Gazi,’ janissary? What’s a ‘gazi’ these days? All the Osmanlis have been gazis, from Osman’s father right down through his grandson Bayezid. But times have changed. Now we have ‘janissaries.’ And a cavalry of Christian vassals. And the sultan’s many lands—and taxes. And cities, where people laugh at the old ways.”

“And Timur?”

“He has none of these. His people are herders, with no fixed place. His warriors are free men, each one sworn to fight for his bey, each bey sworn to the khan. As in the old times. And they don’t pay taxes, they bring tribute, from the riches of their herds or from the booty from the lands they pillage. And when Timur and his horde come to a city, they destroy it. They grind out all its wickedness.”

Mehmed remembered his visit to Polis, the great city. Wickedness, no doubt. But so much else besides. After a moment, he dared another question. “And still you would fight against Timur and for the sultan?”

“I fight for my bey, child, for no man else. For Arslan Gazi.”

**Apricots**

21 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(22 July, Anno Domini 1402)

Ankara lay a mere ten leagues over the mountains, a distance that Beyazgül herself, even at her
present age, could cover easily in a day’s ride. When Arslan was a little babe called Yegenik strapped to her back, she and Kara Göne had ridden much farther in a day to raid a Christian caravan, with Arslan’s older brother Evrenos straddling the saddle with his father.

Ah, there was a man! There would never be another, though Arslan looked like him and wore his mustaches and swaggered the same way. Kara Göne had been a true *deli*. Her most cherished memory was also her first of that man, of black Göne: Beyazgül was seventeen, a little older than the Rumeli princess, and already promised by her father to the village butcher, a good but unexciting man. She and her sisters were in their father’s orchard gathering apricots when she heard the hoof beats and a laugh. A rider steered his trotting pony agilely through the trees, then reined in next to her. He ripped the veil from his face and revealed immense mustaches. “Black,” *Kara*, he was, for the color of those mustaches and for the blackness of his insolence. She knew then who he was, the bandit gazi of Edirne, Kara Göne. And like Princess Saljan of the story when she first saw Kan Turali, “a handsome and perfect warrior,” Beyazgül “went weak at the knees, her cat meowed, she slavered like a sick calf.”

His laughter broke her spell. “Little flower, give me something sweet to bite,” he demanded, grinning down at her.

She smiled and tossed an apricot up to him and said, “Take it, Kara Göne, for I see you know my name.”

“I do?” His dark eyes opened wide as his teeth bit into the fruit.

“You called me ‘Little flower.’ That is my name. Almost. I am Beyazgül, White Rose.”

“Then I must pluck you!”

And in one gesture he tossed away the apricot and reached down and grabbed her waist. She felt her feet leave the soil and she seemed to float up closer and closer to that handsome, grinning face. She did not resist but only squirmed to wedge one hip between his warm, firm thighs and the hard wooden pommel. She heard her sisters shriek and turned to smile and tell them all was well, but the youngest was already running screaming toward the village.

Was she really so light then that his gelding could gallop with the two of them? That was so long ago, and the memories become confused with other times that she and Kara Göne had ridden together. Their life was exciting, difficult, agitated, never long in one place. They lived from what they could take in their swift raids, often fleeing soldiers or caravaneers or villagers, and always there was Kara Göne’s laugh. Her one regret—besides the other women and then the death of Göne and their firstborn son through that treason at Nikopolis—was that never again did she have an orchard where she could gather apricots.

Now she deserved one. Alas, in this as in many other things, Arslan was like his father: he would be no use at flattering the sultan. For that Beyazgül would need the foreign princess as her ally.

The delivery of the great City had been the dream and obsession of the peoples of the steppe since they had first driven their herds into the empire’s eastern pastures. It would be especially welcome at this moment, when the capitulation of the City would bring the sultan such prestige that Timur would have to recognize his primacy and withdraw, saving the two greatest rulers of the True Faith from spilling each other’s blood. And the man who effected this great delivery would deserve the highest honors. In a properly run emirate, he would be rewarded by a large beylik in a rich and fertile area. He might even be named beylerbey, bey of beys. His sons—and Beyazgül was certain that one day there would be many more besides Kemal and tiny Beyrek—should also be assured of powerful posts.

But the sultan was capricious, so it would be most helpful for Beyazgül to have an ally in the harem of the sultan’s eldest son. And now it seemed she would have one.
The sultan’s court traveled with the horde. Turning his head only slightly, the sultan could find with his eyes his eldest sons, Suleyman and Mehmed, riding on his left and right. When it came time to confront the insolent Timur, Suleyman would command the left wing, just as Bayezid himself had done at Kosovo. Mehmed, the impetuous second son, would command the right. The younger and less experienced Isa, Musa, and Mustafa he would keep in the center under his own watchful eye. Or so, at least, Ali had advised him.

Far to the rear were the wagons of four of the sultan’s five wives, all but his first one, the mother of Musa, Isa, and Mustafa, left behind in Kütahya. The sultan’s Christian wife, the despina Olivera, daughter of the Serb Prince Lazar whom Bayezid had defeated and then beheaded at Kosovo, had her own wagon and traveled with her own Orthodox priest. The decision was the sultan’s, but Ali had approved, perhaps for different reasons. The sultan acted out of indifference to religion, unconcerned about his wife’s matters of conscience and so casually acceding to her wish. For Ali, however, the concession to the presence of a Christian priest, and thus pleasing the despina, was politically astute. She was the sultan’s link to, and hold over, her brother, the Serbian prince Stefan Lazarevich, who commanded the Serb cavalry. Without their help, victory over the insolent Timur would be much more doubtful.

On this 24 Zulhijje of the year 804, or what for the Christians was 25 July of their year 1402, with still no sign of the kervan bringing the surrender of Constantinople, Ali Pasha admitted to himself that he was worried. If there was to be a battle, he knew he could count on the janissaries and the Serbian heavy cavalry, but the greater strength of the horde was still in the rowdy Muslim irregulars, especially the gazis. To keep their loyalty, Ali had to persuade them that Bayezid Sultan himself was still a gazi like his forefathers, but this was hard to argue when the horde included all those Christian Serbs and when the enemy was a Muslim who called himself “the Scourge of God.” Already some gazis had disappeared.

And all the while, the pasha wanted to believe, the sultan had not forgotten his other more ancient tradition, that he was a descendant of gazis. But while his great-grandfather Osman and Osman’s own father, Ertugrul, had ridden at the head of a yoldash of 440 riders, Bayezid, with Ali’s indispensable assistance and continuing the work of his father Murad, had multiplied that force five hundred times into a great horde composed of much more than the gangs of mounted plunderers that Great-grandfather Osman had to manage. The mounted plunderers, the yoldashes of the gazis, were still indispensable, but at the core of the new horde was a new force, the janissaries, slave infantry that would obey without question. And supporting them, the heavy cavalry of his Serb vassals, disciplined and loyal. Such a horde should be invincible.

For Bayezid was a gazi, but he was more than a gazi. He was Yildirim, the Thunderbolt, blessed by the magical aura and fortune—the cazibe—that surrounds a brilliant and audacious warrior. And with that coupled to Ali Pasha’s tactical genius, Bayezid would never be defeated. That is, if the cazibe held and if Ali’s information and his military calculations continued to be accurate.

At Kosovo and the Field of Blackbirds, with two armies so evenly matched, tactics were not enough, and with Murad dead, it was the young heir’s cazibe alone that saved them—Bayezid’s wing surprised even Ali by holding firm while the other wing under his brother Yakoub fell back before the furious charge of the Serbs. But at Nikopolis and other battles, Ali was convinced that the victory owed more to his cool-headed tactics than to the sultan’s unbridled vehemence. The problem was always finding the right balance.
Ali Pasha was not worried about the loyalty of the Armenians or the Serbs. He was also quite confident of the infantry and most particularly the janissaries. There were only twelve thousand of them, but in their magnificent garb of red and gold and their superb discipline, they set the pace and standards for the tens of thousands of shepherds and farmers from all the vassal beys, most of them armed with wooden shields and spears and many with bows and arrows. The racket from the janissaries’ cymbals, drums, and bagpipes inspired the whole horde and, Ali hoped, would instill fear in any enemy. Ali Pasha was well pleased with his janissaries. No other fighting man was as deadly and as disciplined as a well-trained slave.

In wooded areas, in defense of camps from behind rocks or palisades, in assaults on citadels, infantry would be far more effective than mounted men who needed open plains to maneuver and charge. The janissaries could move swiftly through the forest, their high hats strapped to their backs as they dodged under tree branches, their bows and their swords at the ready. The untrained peasant soldiers always lagged behind, stumbling and crashing through the brush. Some day soon, thought Ali, the sultan would have janissaries enough to do without those oafs, but for now, to confront Timur, Ali and the sultan needed as large a horde as possible. The peasant troops would be thrown into the front ranks, to take the first onslaughts of the enemy, preserving the janissaries to strike after the enemy had wearied from slaughtering peasants. This had in the past proved to be an effective strategy.

But then, Ali imagined, if when the mighty horde finally caught up to Timur, they should meet on an open plain instead of in the woods, he would follow a similar strategy but with his mounted forces. First he’d let the crazy gazis loose for the reckless raids they loved so much. In the old days, their fury would have been enough to carry the day. The gazis and their mounted archers would attack so swiftly that the enemy would be thrown into confusion and abandon the field, leaving its treasure behind—knowing full well that the gazis would then be too busy amassing the abandoned treasure to pursue them. This was more or less the way the Osmanlis and the Selchuks and the other Oguz had operated for generations. But against Timur, such reckless and undisciplined bravado would not be enough.

Ali thought again about Timur’s forces and how to defeat them. Almost all of Timur’s force were mounted men, so they would seek to fight in open plains. But they were like the Osmanlis themselves were only one or two generations back—if necessary, a horseman would readily dismount to scamper up a fortress wall or dig a tunnel under it. Such men took their joy from the fight itself, certain of achieving paradise if they left this world in battle, and seldom stopped to gather plunder until the last of the foe was slain.

Timur was also said to put men in towers on the backs of elephants. Elephants! Ali tried to imagine what that would be like. Would the huge beasts be able to crash through the woods after his infantry? Could they be frightened by flame?

Yes, the best plan would be to test the enemy’s strength by letting loose the gazis. They would soon show him just how formidable were Timur’s horse cavalry and his elephants. Then, if any gazis survived and broke through the enemy’s lines, the sultan could claim another sudden victory, another blow of the Thunderbolt. But if not, as Ali expected, then he would at least know where to hurl the heavy cavalry, the black-armored Serbs on their big, armored horses, in an attempt to squeeze Timur’s forces from both ends and drive them toward the sultan’s deadly janissaries. And after the battle, it would be good to have fewer anarchic gazis to contend with as he built the sultan’s modern army of disciplined slaves.

Ali Pasha suddenly looked up as the sultan raised a hand and called a halt. They had reached a thickly wooded valley on a cloudless morning. There had been no news from Ali’s scouts as to Timur’s whereabouts, so the sultan could assume that the enemy must not be near. There was time, time for the sultan to indulge his favorite sport and to demonstrate his utter indifference to imagined danger from the barbarian of Samarkand. Well, perhaps this delay would be for the best, thought Ali. It might give time for that gazi Arslan to bring the gift of the City’s surrender that was causing Ali such anxiety.

The sultan, however, seemed not to be thinking of the great city behind him nor of the enemy
somewhere in the forests and mountains before him. Rather, he was behaving with all the assurance of an unchallenged ruler. And so he devoted the morning to a hunt—at first on horseback, while his men formed a wide circle and beat the bushes to drive the game to him. Ignoring the smaller creatures, the sultan brought down a stag with only the third arrow and wounded a boar mortally so that his men would have little trouble finding it after it had run grunting and squealing back into the woods. And then, finally, after he had sufficient exercise riding wildly from one point to another of the wide circle of action, Ali knew that he would call for his falcons. His lowest-ranking troops, the peasant soldiers, Ali would order back to make noise and scare up fowl, and the sultan would release his favorite falcons, one after another, to pursue and snare the winged prey. By lunch time, he would be happily exhausted. Unfortunately, from the pasha’s point of view, his men would also be exhausted, less happily. But that was of no concern to the sultan. The pasha would have to keep them in line.

Baskania
24 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(25 July, Anno Domini 1402)

It had been thirteen days since they had set out from Polis—he had been counting—and eleven since the child princess had made her stupid, infantile gesture that put them in such danger, and Bardas Tzimiskes was feeling very uneasy. But a merchant must never show anxiety. Giorgos Goudelis had taught him that. Already the expedition had gone on four times as long as Goudelis had told him it would, and he was not at all sure he should believe the latest rumor that the sultan was only a day or two ahead of them. And as for the lack of escort… When he first realized, after the second of the imperial galleys had left off its cargo and the two ships began their slow oar-sweeping turn back toward home with no third sail in sight, that his sole protection among a mass of bright-garbed sipahis with recurved bows and murderous looks would be a dozen Varangians from the palace guard, and these on foot and armed with clumsy axes, he had wanted to shout to the galley captain to turn around and take him back. But by then it was too late. Up until the last boarding-rail was lifted on the second galley and the portside oars dipped into the stream, Bardas had assumed there would be a third galley bearing a contingent of mounted Vardars or a company of Frankish knights on their prancing horses, perhaps even a company of Greek-speaking cataphracts to keep these Turkmen bandits at bay. Vardars would have been especially good because, as Christianized Turks, they would speak the language and be up to the tricks of their Muslim Osmanli cousins. Surely, he had thought, Goudelis’ influence over Ioannes and Empress Eugenia, and his own newly exalted stature as ambassador plenipotentiary, merited no less. And now, thanks to a pre-adolescent with a head filled with martyr stories, even those axe-men were gone. Crude as they had been, with their barely intelligible Greek and their Latin-style Christianity, the Varangians at least belonged to the City and saluted its emperor. He missed them. The savages in the gazi’s yoldash, as he called his band, looked capable of discharging an arrow or three through a Christian’s neck or chest for sheer amusement. More disconcerting than their menacing scowls were their unprovoked bursts of laughter when any of them pointed to Bardas’ mule or to his person. No doubt the sipahis had never before seen the purple-edged robes of an imperial ambassador and were unaware of the great dignity of a pure white imperial mule. That they had not yet attempted any violence Bardas attributed solely to their palpable fear of the gazi, whose mere glance they took as a command and who, Bardas was certain, would not hesitate personally to lop off the head of the first insubordinate.
It was also true that Bardas had never before traveled so far and for so long overland from Polis. His merchant voyages had all been aboard Greek or Venetian galleys, where the food was familiar and everyone, even the crew, spoke one or the other of the two Christian languages. The waves had sometimes made him sick, but that was nothing compared to this. The narrow trails winding ever higher into the mountains made him dizzy when he looked down beyond the sharp white rocks and dusty gray-green brush into the abyss. The hours in the saddle on his mule had made him terribly sore. The July sun was brutal and the horse offal and sour milk that the Turks considered food was inedible for civilized stomachs.

On the other hand, although a carpet in a tent was hardly his idea of a bed, he had to admit that, compared to lying stretched on top of a blanket over his shipboard merchandise it was the epitome of comfort, especially welcome after hours and hours of bumping along on a mule. And there was a good part to this martyrdom: the very intensity of his suffering would cleanse his mission and his reward of what some narrow-minded persons might consider their ignoble aspects.

But more disturbing than all of this was that Bardas had no one with whom he could share his concerns. No tavern where he could go to play tavla and check his impressions and his fears with the strategos Isidore or the monk Loukas or his other pals or pick up gossip from that pompous Anastasios and his idle son Andronikos, who sometimes had information from the highest circles. Or the rougher taverns where he could find men like Paulos the burly stevedore to watch his back. Or, speaking of the very highest circles, no one like Goudelis who, to Bardas’ amazed delight, had actually summoned him and treated him as a colleague, almost a son. For Bardas this was more glorious and unexpected than it would have been to be summoned before the emperor himself. For Bardas Tzimiskes could not dream of being emperor, but he could and did dream of becoming a Goudelis.

Now, jouncing along on a mule, breathing dust and the mixed stenches of horses, camels, and sweaty men, sticky with sweat himself in his purple robes under the hot sun, Bardas sought solace in the memory of that cool, sweet-smelling place where he had been accorded great dignity. A perfumed slave had led him through the vestibule, past wonderfully elaborate and obscene ancient statues and priceless vases of oriental design, to a space just off a garden where bright tulips glowed in the sun and roses gave off their scent. Goudelis, seated in a backless chair with gold feet and armrests, turned when the slave pronounced Bardas’ name. Bardas had never seen him this close. A ruddy, white-haired and bearded face surprisingly smooth for a man of, Bardas guessed, sixty. He looked fat and healthy in what had become a city of skinny wretches. Waving a wide sleeve, he signaled for his guest to sit in a chair much like his own, where a soft silk cushion awaited Bardas’ posterior.

“Tzimiskes,” Goudelis had said. “An imperial name.”

And so it was that Bardas found himself as interpreter for the fatal interview that decided the fate of Manuel II’s youngest bastard daughter. And that had been his first and only contact with Empress Eugenia. If his mission prospered, he hoped also one day to be presented to the emperor Ioannes VII himself.

And now he was in charge of a two-fold treasure, the greater in the emperor’s estimation being the empire’s gift of itself in the form of the key and the princess. But for Bardas, the more important part was the gold and silver put up by Goudelis and his associates for Bardas to negotiate a trade deal with the sultan’s vizier Ali Pasha. Goudelis was already dominant in the Black Sea routes. Now he wanted a monopoly of the land routes too. All the Christian West would have to go to him for their nutmeg, pepper, cloves, and cinnamon, and Bardas hoped to be his factor.

It was a bitter irony, a cruel trick of baskania, the eye of envy, that the only other person in this whole kervan who belonged to Polis and spoke the City’s Greek and recognized the emperor as God’s vicar on earth was the one person he was least able to talk to. Since Bardas had promised to deliver her to the Turk, it was perhaps understandable that Emperor Manuel’s daughter absolutely refused to receive him. In fact, since that day she had stood up on the camel and sent the Varangians home, she would not
even look at him. What Bardas found much harder to understand was that she seemed to prefer the company of the wenches in the barbarian chief’s harem and even consented to dress like them.

Bardas would overcome all these difficulties. He would build a new circle of acquaintances and confidantes in tune with the times. For it would be a different city with the sultan at its head. Bardas was perhaps even better suited than Goudelis to survive in the new circumstances. Being younger and free of the many social debts and commitments that Goudelis had acquired over the years, he would be more adaptable. He would thus be better able to create such a new circle of friends and informants, truly new. Some of them would be Armenian Christians like himself, and some would be Greek Christians like most of his friends back in Polis, and some no doubt would be Turks and Muslims—men who shared the common “religion” that Goudelis talked about, in the new Polis.

“Hey, you! Michael. Come over here,” he shouted when at last they had stopped for something to eat and for the barbarians to say their prayers.

“Don’t call me that,” the boy answered when he had approached. “My name in the faith is Mehmed.”

“Hmm. How dare you give orders to an imperial ambassador? No, no, don’t turn away! Come back here. Mehmed. Please.”

The boy turned back toward Bardas, who was stomping and stretching and rubbing his backside after so many hours on his mule.

“I, the ambassador plenipotentiary of Emperor Ioannes VII saying ‘please’ to a barbarian slave. O Lord, deliver thy servant from such humiliation! Mehmed! I want to speak with you, lad. In the Christian tongue that you and I both learned in the cradle. Look, do you know how long we’ve been riding? Since we left Polis?”

“It was the day after the last day of the Hajj, the eleventh of Zulhijje. My sheikh said that was auspicious.”

“Eleven nothing. It was the twelfth day of July, day of Saint Ephemia, when we left Konstantinopoulis. O Byzantium, when will I ever see you again, city of my heart? It is now the twenty-fifth day of July. Yesterday was Saint Christina the Great Martyr. Do you remember your Christian saints’ days? That was twenty-four July. Thirteen days it’s been. Thirteen days!”

The janissary broke into verse in Turkish, to Bardas’ great surprise. It must be poetry, because it had rhythm and internal rhyme, even though as Bardas translated it for himself the sense seemed hardly poetic.

“A balance is suitable for one who would be a grocer or one who would be a jeweler or a seller of perfume. ‘”

Just stupid doggerel. How vulgar to mention a “grocer.” But Bardas had a reply.

“Better a grocer or a jeweler than spending entire days bouncing around on a hard saddle because some gazi has decided he has to take you up the steepest mountain passes to catch his sultan. And where is that sultan anyway? They say he’s rampaging around somewhere in those forbidding mountains up ahead.”

“Hajji Bektash Veli teaches us that distance is nothing. It is possible for a man to travel thousands of leagues without ever rising from the carpet in his tent.”

“Ah, wonderful. Then tell him to get me off that saddle and fly me to Bayezid Sultan, forthwith.”

“It is necessary to have a pure faith in the allness of God and His power, and for that, to find the way to faith, one needs have a great teacher. Hajji Bektash Veli had faith so pure that he could knead rocks into bread. He could sit quietly in his house and let his soul fly to Mecca, and that is how he performed the Hajj. Many dervishes who follow him, though few have attained such purity of faith, they still can make wondrous meals appear on a stone in the desert and can transform themselves into doves to travel great distances.”

“Birds. Soul travel. I tell you that’s all nonsense. What we should really be worried about is the Eye
of Envy.”

“Baskania!”

“Ah, so you haven’t forgotten everything.”

“My mother warned me against it.”

“Yes? And what else did she say?”

“She said one should never look proud or pleased by his success, because then the envious ones
would work their baskania on him. But the sheikh told me that was just a Christian superstition, that I
should trust in Allah.”

“Hmm. What does a sheikh know about such things? A sheikh is a poor man, he has nothing for
anyone to envy. It’s real, I tell you. I myself have felt the power of baskania. Baskania is an evil force
that comes from the eye of the man who cannot stand to see that you have more than he. Or from a
woman. Yes, I’ve often felt its power when I was in the presence of Empress Eugenia. She turned it on
the princess, and look, she has destroyed her!” Bardas enjoyed the look of perplexity on the young
janissary’s face.

“Princess Theodota is to become an honored bride in the harem of the first son of my sultan, the
Padishah Yildirim Bayezid. Her sons may be rulers of this land. There’s no evil in that.”

“Oh, come, boy. She is a daughter of the old emperor of Romania, Bayezid’s greatest enemy in all
the Christian world. A child of the greatest city on earth. Being married off into the harem of a roving
madman who despises her religion and has done nothing but horrors to her family is the absolute worst
fate that anybody could dream up for her. Now do you see? Baskania is a true force, I tell you. And woe
unto him who laughs at it. The princess failed to take the proper precautions. She aroused the baskania
of Eugenia.”

“Precautions? A charm?”

“Wait. I’ll show you, a thing of power to deflect the evil eye. And you, of all the young men in the
sultan’s service, are going to need it. Ah, the envy they will all have of you!”

“Of me?”

“How many janissaries are on this caravan?”

“Why, I am the only one.”

“Exactly. And what is it that this caravan is carrying? Besides the princess, which is itself—herself
—a very great prize to carry to the sultan.”

“What else? Why, silver and gold it must be. All those camels.”

“Yes, yes, a great, great treasure of silver and gold. And the finest silks. But something else far, far
more valuable.”

“More than silver and gold and silks and a princess? It must be something magical.”

“Ha! You are a bright lad. Yes, magical it is, because it is a thing of great power, the power that the
sultan most desires. And you will be the only janissary in the group that brings it to him. Oh, how the
sultan will love you! And your fellows will look at you—with baskania!”

“What is this thing?”

“You can keep a secret? Swear.”

“I swear on Ali and on the twelve imams.”

“Hmm. I thought the twelve were apostles. That’s all very well, but swear on something Christian.”

“I am not a Christian.”

“But you were, and I am, so to be at rest in my soul, and so that I can trust you with this great secret,
swear on, well, on your old namesake, the Archangel Michael.”

“No! Not him. Something else. I’ll swear on…on the Virgin.”

“Very well, on the Virgin then. Come.”

He led Mehmed to a nondescript, dun-colored camel chewing on thistles. It merely glanced at them
and kept on slowly chomping as Bardas stepped to the basket hanging over the left side of its hump and
lifted a dusty burlap cover. In the bottom nestled a coffer with gold and silver ornaments, barely
discernible in the deep shadow.

“There. That is what holds the greatest magic, the power the sultan most desires. You must swear to
help me protect it from any thief who might misuse it."

“Is it a jinni inside?”

“More powerful than any jinni. In this coffer is the key to the Golden Gate of the City. Mehmed, this
is the key to the empire. What the sultan and his ancestors have craved for generations. He who
possesses this key possesses not only the greatest city on the earth, but the Bosporus itself, the gateway
for all that passes between Asia and Europe. The riches of the world.

“Now that you know the great power that you will help me guard, you must protect yourself from
the eye of envy, and here is just the thing.”

So saying, Bardas reached into his purse and pulled out an eye-shaped mirror that would reflect the
envy back to its source. “Here. I have a pin. Put it on your tall hat.”

Mehmed grinned, embarrassed and about to giggle.

_Birds_

25 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(26 July, Anno Domini 1402)

It had been two days since the hunt when Ali Pasha rode up to the sultan and informed him, “There
it is, just over that hill. The citadel of Ankara. Now we’ll find out what news there is of that despised
cripple from Samarkand.”

“My sultan,” said the messenger whom Ali summoned to approach. The man, a hard-riding akinci,
bowed his forehead to touch his horse’s beribboned mane then, standing in one stirrup, prepared to
dismount.

“Stay,” commanded Yildirim. It was time for an ayak divan, a council on horseback. It was a sign of
the sultan’s impatience.

“The khan of the east has camped at Sivas, my padishah.”

“Sivas?” shouted Yildirim. But this should not be a surprise. Ali himself had informed the sultan
months ago that Timur had reoccupied the city he had nearly destroyed two years before.

“Yes, O mighty Yildirim, he has gathered there with his entire horde. He is said to be planning to
move toward Tokat”—several leagues to the north.

“We must stop him there,” declared the sultan. “Ali Pasha, give out the order immediately. It is my
will that nothing be allowed to move through any of the passages between Sivas and Tokat.”

“It will be done, my sultan.” And so Ali gave the orders. Peasant foot soldiers backed by small
companies of janissaries were sent to every point that Timur might use to take his forces from Sivas to
Tokat, especially through the mountains of Yildiz Dagh. So tightly must the region be sealed that even
the birds would see that it was useless to overfly it, declared Chandarli Ali Pasha.

The simurgh, however, had not heard the order, or if she had heard, she did not acknowledge it. Not
that day nor the next nor the next. Until for the Muslim Turks and Persians and Arabs and Mongols on
the ground it was the morning of 27 Zulhijje of the year of Hegira 804. For the Serb Christian cavalry,
the Armenian mounted bands, and those Greek-born janissaries who had not forgotten, it was the sain
t day of Righteous Irene Chrysovalantou, 28 July, of the year 1402.

The simurgh felt the pull of anxious prayers coming from many points on the ground below, some in
the accents of the East, from beyond the Oxus, others in the accents of Oguz long resident in the West, and some even in Greek or Armenian or Farsi. The force of those prayers kept the great bird flying in slow, wide circles over the hilltop citadel and the plain before it and farther out over the woods and streams beyond the plain. Near the citadel, in a semicircle before it, tens of thousands of men, some on horseback but many more on foot, clustered around banners of red and yellow.

Before them and facing them the simurgh could see still other clusters, more tens of thousands, even more than in the first group, each cluster distinguished by a different color of banners and tunics and masses of mounted men. The greater number were on horseback, their movements telling the simurgh that they were anxious and ready for battle. But behind the horsemen was another group on much larger beasts. The experienced eye of the simurgh knew them to be her friends the elephants, each bearing a padded turret with archers and lances on its back.

The plain was Çubukovasi, and the citadel was Ankara.

Dove and Falcons
26 Zulhijje, 804 Hegira (27 July, Anno Domini 1402)
Day of Saint Panteleimon the Great Martyr

Late in the afternoon, a sipahi pointed into the sky and a dozen pointed caps tipped back. High above, a falcon circled as it waited to attack...something.

Half a dozen arms shot up and half a dozen voices shouted, “A dove!”

A tiny thing of white flashed below the falcon, moving westward toward the sun. The dark figure above it suddenly grew larger, then much larger still as it spread its wings and thrust its talons forward. Mehmed tensed, waiting for the crunch and then the rising with its prey. But no—almost incredibly, the falcon had missed! The talons clutched only air.

Then, before Mehmed could locate the dove, he and the men around him were distracted by another figure much higher in the sky. It too could only be a falcon or a kestrel. It descended in a rapid stoop, its brown color becoming apparent. The first, darker falcon had righted herself and circled, as though searching for the dove. She sensed the attack in time and spun to one side, but the black and brown wings collided, sending both birds tumbling in the air. The brown one careened downward for a few more yards before turning upward to pursue the black one, which was flapping furiously to higher air as dark feathers floated downward. The combat continued almost as a dance, each bird trying to gain advantage above the other. They rose so far that soon the men on the ground were unsure which was which, while air currents pushed them gradually eastward until they were hidden by the ridge of White-Cleft Pass just beyond the mountain stream. Mehmed could not stop staring. Many times he had seen falcons hunt, but never fighting each other.

“All glory to God the All-Merciful,” swore an archer on the horse next to Mehmed.

“The dove must be protected by the smile of Allah,” said another man.

“The dove! What happened to the dove?” asked Mehmed, scanning the sky.

“Merhaba.” Startled, Mehmed turned to the voice. It came from a small, elderly man with a white beard and dressed all in white, from his twelve-pleated cap to his slippers, and even further, to the white legs and hooves of the donkey beneath him. He held his right hand over his heart, thumb up, ring and small finger together and the others spread wide apart as he inclined his white head slightly toward the group of archers.

“Merhaba, old one,” replied one of them. “Our janissary must have been asleep, to let you come so close!”
Mehmed started at this remark and turned to the camel of the princess, which he was supposed to be protecting. The gazi’s nephew, Kemal, had reached over from his pony to hold the bridle while the princess and the gazi’s prettiest wife, the one with the baby, were looking up at the sky and talking. Mehmed had been daydreaming, but everything seemed to be all right. He turned back to the newcomer.

“Merhaba, Father,” he said, returning the little man’s open-hand-over-the heart gesture.

“May your reward be the divine love, O you who have attained to the real,” said the elder.

“And may your love be rewarded by the happiness of beholding the divine beauty,” answered Mehmed.

“Oh!” exclaimed the archer, finally catching on. “Forgive me, Father. I meant no rudeness.”

Taking no notice of the archer, the baba looked straight at Mehmed. He touched his thumb to his lips, then lowered it to just below his heart and bowed his head toward Mehmed, who returned the gesture.

“I have come from afar and must soon continue my journey. First, though, I must have word with your bey, Arslan Gazi, for I bring news.”

Mehmed inclined his head toward the gazi, who was mounted and in conference with Mesud and Turgut at some distance from the rest of the troop. The baba smiled and turned his donkey toward them. When he had listened to the baba, Arslan rose from the saddle and bent back his head and screamed the name of God. Rapidly he repeated it, AllahAllahAllah. As the men scrambled to their horses, Arslan wheeled and cantered to them. He shouted for guards around the princess, the camp, and the baggage. He made a sweeping gesture with his arm of the men who should ride with him. Mehmed decided that he had been included in that arc.

“Hey, look!” cried the archer who had been talking with Mehmed. He pointed up and toward the west.

“There goes that dove. God is great!”

The baba’s news could not be doubted, Mesud insisted. “He had the twelve-pleated cap and the white robes, and he made the sacred secret gestures. And he arrived as a dove and he left as a dove. Arslan, my brother, his messages can only come from trance-travels in the higher realms of heaven.”

“Hnnh. Perhaps,” replied Arslan. He sat very still on his favorite mare and looked over his men, now restless on their mounts and awaiting his command, the camels bunched all together and spitting and coughing, some with human passengers in their baskets and some with imperial coverlets over their loads and others with the irregular silhouettes of cooking utensils and yurt poles rising above their humps. Beyond these were the extra riding horses and the dwindling herd of horses for eating, and at the tail end of the kervan, he could see the heads of the taller of the Christian children, those still able to walk—because since the intercession of the princess and his mother, Beyazgül, the gazi had permitted the weaker ones to ride in the baskets on the camels and even, because they were many children, on the short fat horses meant for eating.

“Perhaps,” repeated Arslan. “But if the baba’s spirit has flown to heaven, it could not have got beyond the lowest levels. The baba has foretold a battle, but not its outcome. What good is that? No, Mesud, I suspect that he’s a charlatan, that he hasn’t trance-traveled at all.”

“No? He sounded like one of the enlightened. And if what he told us is true—”

“And what if it is? He has merely performed the common trick of turning himself into a dove. A poor sort of baba this, not like those of the old days who could reach the ninth level, so far they felt and shared the light of Tengri.”

“The ninth level? My brother, you demand too much. Surely, compared to the babas of our grandfathers’ time, turning oneself into a dove may not be much, but it has allowed him to see what all that is in the sultan’s and the enemy’s camps. Everything is in place, he said. Tomorrow the greatest battle of the history of the world will begin. And that we were bearing ‘the key.’ Anahtar, he kept repeating. What did he mean by that?”

Arslan Gazi sighed and looked again over his force of men, the camels laden with treasure, the
canopied camel bearing the Christian princess, and then back over the mountain ridge between them all and Ankara.

“Too soon,” he muttered, just loud enough for Mesud to hear.

The gazi had calculated reaching the outskirts of Ankara on the nearly moonless night of 29 Zulhijje, two days hence. Then they would have all the next day to prepare. They would enter the sultan’s camp with great ceremony on 1 Muharram, the beginning of the new moon and the first day of the new year—the very most auspicious time to begin a new venture.

His hope was that the sultan might invite Timur himself to the feast to witness the surrender of Christendom, the handing over the keys to the false religion’s most sacred city. The bestowal upon the sultan’s son of a princess of the Palaiologoi would also be an impressive spectacle. Then if he followed the ancient traditions, Bayezid would bestow great gifts on his rival from Samarkand, perhaps nine treasures from the rich tribute in Arslan’s kervan, and the crippled khan from Samarkand could then withdraw with honor.

Such had been Arslan’s thoughts up till now. But the baba’s news was that the battle would surely begin and end tomorrow. Would Arslanshahin Gazi then fail to prevent Muslim from drawing Muslim blood? Tomorrow Boghach, Bayindir, and the others would trade arrows and sword slashes with the hosts of the mightiest enemy their sultan Bayezid had confronted in all his years as padishah. More terrible than the crusade that perished at Nikopolis, more even than the great host assembled by Lazar on the Field of Blackbirds, Kosovo Polje, where Bayezid became the prince of princes and where Yegenik, second son of Kara Göne, so young his mustaches barely reached his cheeks, first drew Christian blood.

Too late to prevent the battle’s start, but perhaps not too late to stop it. Between two such chiefs, the battle would go on for hours. The baba had said that in each horde were more than forty times forty thousand men, on horse and foot and elephants. Neither Timur nor Bayezid would surrender or retreat while he had an archer standing or a lancer mounted. If he traveled with only that which was essential, Arslanshahin would demonstrate once again why the swiftness of his yoldash was so famed.

“Torgut!” The gazi startled Mesud and his other men with his shout.

“Horsetail banner, with its crescent! Make sure it is dyed bright red. And where is that youth who rode with you, the one who speaks Christian? Send him to me. Fly!”

And when the janissary appeared, panting and eager, the gazi said, “You. Child of two worlds who speaks the Rumeli tongue and knows the Rumeli ways. Are you loyal to our sultan, the Padishah Yildirim Bayezid?”

“O mighty gazi, most loyal am I, loyal to my last breath. I await only the orders and the opportunity to die for my sultan Yildirim.”

“Boy, what do they call you?”

“Mehmed, my gazi.”

“Mehmed, tell the princess’s slave she must prepare her to meet her betrothed.”

“Yes, my gazi. Do you mean now?”

“Now.”

“Yes, my gazi. As you command. But, my gaz—?”

“Now!”

“Yes, my gazi.”

“Stop! Before you go, also tell my mother to remember what I told her and that she should see that the princess is prepared. In the kafes. And, Mehmed, find out what banner the Christians have brought in all their baggage. It must be large. Now go!”

The gazi knew why the janissary had hesitated, but this was no time for explanations. The battle may already have begun.

“Mesud, you will remain with the camels, slaves, and women here, with twenty of our men. The ones that remain after I pick the other twenty who ride with me. Aydin, you’re one of them. See to the
kafes. We take the princess with us, and she must be in the proper vehicle. But hitch it to horses, leave the mules with Mesud.

“And you, Ertugrul, you come with me as well. Summon the Christian ambassador. Bring him by force if need be. We take him and the coffer too. Ah, Mehmed, you’re back. Good. The horsetail and—what’s this you’ve brought? A dragon looking east with its four legs spread?"

“It’s Christian magic,” Torgut said. “You see it in all their houses. A weak sort of thing, though, this animal. No teeth or claws.”

“They don’t think of it as a dragon, my gazi,” said Mehmed, “but as magic letters. What you see as the open legs is called the ‘chi,’ and the dragon’s head and the line extending down is called the ‘rho.’ It is for the name of their prophet, Christos.”

“All right, you will hold it up high at the front. Torgut will carry our sultan’s horsetail and crescent behind me and on my heart-side. This dragon thing of the Christians you hold next to Torgut, on my right. Oh, at last, here is our imperial ambassador. What is he jabbering about? What, he understands Turkish? Merchant of the goods of this world, you shall come with us. Do you understand? Your treasure we leave behind, except the coffer and the girl…Silence! Your goods, they are the sultan’s goods now. They will be safe with my own brother Mesud. Safe, I say. Stop blubbering, I said.”

It was not easy to make out what the fat man was saying, and there was so little time one would have to deal with him sharply, ambassador or not.

“Yes, you must come with us to the sultan’s camp. Who told you of the fighting? We start tomorrow at dawn. You must change into your imperial costume, that robe with the purple things. And if you have a big cross, wear it. You will need to make a speech when we arrive, after you run before the sultan—you do understand that, that you will be made to run—and bow down. And get rid of those terrible eyes.”

The gazi didn’t know what power they held, but they made him feel uneasy. He had seen some of his men with them and made them hide them in their clothing. He was pretty sure they were not necessary to the Christian rites.

“We shall be going very fast. If you fall behind, keep on as fast as you can. Ertogrul here will ride beside you to see that you make the trip.”

“Aha, tomorrow you will see what riding is like, my boy,” Arslan heard Turgut say as the young janissary brought his horse up next to the sipahi’s.

Yes, Arslan thought, tomorrow they would do some real riding. They would be moving so fast they would not have time for fear. This felt much better. A gazi should not be a kervan leader, but a kervan raider. The kafes would be the only thing to slow them down, but not so much with fast ponies in relay.

Even if they reached the battleground tomorrow by mid-afternoon, entering with great pomp and the symbols of the Christian City joined to those of the Osmanlis, Arslanshahin Gazi might still be able to save the two greatest hordes of all Islam from mutual destruction.

“Inshallah,” he murmured, barely loud enough for Mehmed and Turgut to hear and repeat. And silently, for the spirit alone to hear, he added, “Bir Tengri.”

**Shah Rukh (Castling)**

26 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(27 July, Anno Domini 1402)

“My father, the insolent son of the slave Osman has left his camp.”

“Yes.”
“His camp is in a very good site for men on foot. On high ground, yet with a stream from higher
ground and forest beside it. From there he has a clear path if he should need to call for reinforcements
from the citadel of Ankara.”

“Or to flee there.”

The old centaur’s white mane shakes with laughter, and one boot stretches out and smacks the dirt.
In the soft predawn light the son can see him as he must have been, years before the son was born, when
Allah and the spirit of their great ancestor Jenghiz Khan had made Timur master of the lands beyond the
Oxus. The white mane glows with powers from beyond.

“Father, you said that I was to play ‘Timur.’”

“And I ‘Bayezid.’ You must beat me then. Look carefully at the board before you, and tell me your
move.”

He gestures, not toward the alternating ebony and ivory squares at their feet, but to the plain before
them.

“I have thought about it, my father. The sultan Bayezid, I believe, does not suspect that Timur’s
main force is so near, my father. He thinks the main force is looking for him in the valleys and the
forests, while nearby are only scouts.”

His father’s grunt, “Ngh,” could be taken as assent.

“I think he has left the camp but lightly defended. It is a good camp for Bayezid. Too good.”

“Ngh. And so your move?”

“I call it **Shah rukh**. We seize the camp and force Bayezid to fight out on the open plain before it.”

“Hmm. You have learned well, my son. But now I am ‘Bayezid.’ When I see that my enemy
‘Timur’ has played this trick, I rush my horde back to the walls of Ankara.”

“Then it may be a long siege. And that is what a skillful player might do. I don’t think the real
Bayezid will retreat.”

“Don’t you? It would be the prudent thing.”

“Forgive me, Father. I do not contradict you. What I mean is that, from his insulting letters and ten-
fold gifts, and the stories we have heard from our spies about his mistreatment of his own men while he
indulges in his pleasures, I know that he is not a prudent man. But perhaps we should station a **tümen**
to cut off that escape.”

“So you would force him out to fight in a field of our choosing. The open plain just over that hill.”

“Yes. Where our cavalry would cut his archers and janissaries to bits.”

“But you must always examine the board, my son. In that field you have chosen, the stream that runs
by the camp still flows. His men will be able to quaff their thirst under the hot summer sun, and his
archers will have strength to wound many of my beautiful horses and unhorse my brave men.”

“Oh! Yes, Father. Then—as you did when we attacked Sivas—we can divert the stream!”

The old man smiles and looks at his son through half-closed eyes. “I, Timur, took the liberty of
playing for ‘Timur.’ The stream was dammed while you slept. But I have left a channel open.”

“So that?”

“When the Osmanli assembles his forces in the morning, the stream will look normal. Then—”

“A sluice-gate, as we did at Herat. The Osmanlis will be without water for the whole of the battle.”

Shah Rukh feels his face redden. “The great Timur plays brilliantly for Timur,” he says, his head
lowered.

When he lifts his eyes, he sees that his father is studying him, the way he might study a horse to
decide whether it would be better for racing or for warfare—or for eating.

“Ah,” says Timur at last, “but now I must play for the noble Bayezid, who has been put at a great
disadvantage on the chess board.”

Shah Rukh looks down at the board of ivory and wood. He frowns then looks up at his father. But he
does not cry out, “Ata, you’ve moved my men!” First, because he has never called his father “ata” as
other men do, and second, because in Timur’s realm it is a grave accusation. Instead he cocks his head and examines the board. The white horse and elephant and camel have been placed in positions where, in combination, they are poised to crush the opposing pieces, while an extra camel—one that had not been on the board when Shah Rukh left it—cuts off the red shah’s escape route to the “citadel.”

He stares at the board and, in his mind, tries to work backward to see how, starting in the positions where he last left the board, he might have played to reach his present advantage. It would not have been possible, except by magic—or a sudden exchange of pieces. The Persian script carved into the border of the great board spells out Timur’s motto, Rasti Rousti. “Straight” and “strong.” Fiddling with another player’s chessmen is not “straight.” But Shah Rukh’s present position is certainly “strong.” He looks up at his father, questioning him with his eyebrow and his cocked head. Timur’s eyelids drop halfway over his eyes while his lips give the faintest suggestion of a smile.

“Shah rukh,” says Prince Shah Rukh, gesturing with his arm not to the great board, but to the plain before them. “Shah mat.” And Timur laughs.

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Simurgh

26 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(27 July, Anno Domini 1402)
Day of Righteous Irene Chrysovalantou

Beyazgül rose silently and silently stepped out into the cool thin air. Night after night Zulhijje—the twelfth month—had drawn her veil until now only a thin reverse ‘alif of moon shone low in the western sky. But in the east the morning star—Oguz, the ancestral hero of her people—had burst the black curtain Tengri drops just before the dawn. Together with the heroes and heroines that shine like opals on Tengri’s curtain, the light of Oguz guided Beyazgül past the sleeping sentry to the black bulk of outcropped stone.

Three things are more holy than all the rest. Tall trees reach from earth to Tengri, the taller the tree the greater its power. Water is life, sent by Tengri to nourish earth—no matter how channeled or how swift or slow its stream, it retains its power. Stone is the weight of the earth, the counterbalance that defines Tengri’s above-ness and, like Tengri, is eternal. It remembers all things that have happened on earth.

The bare rock appeared to her like the mountain’s fist punched through the dirt and brambles, or from another angle it became the head of a bull. The fist or bullhead had pierced the earth beside a single tall pine, and around both wound a mountain stream that trickled, even this late into the summer. Anyone who remembered the old ways could see that this was a very sacred spot.

Beyazgül looked back to the dome of her yurt. The sentry was not asleep after all, but sitting very still, his eyes alert and turned toward her. From the slight rightward hunch of his posture, the result of an old wound, she knew him as Ertugrul. She nodded. Ertugrul raised the first two fingers of his heart-side hand to his forehead.

A distant movement caught her eye, and on a knoll between her and the eastern sky she saw the outline of a standing man, his face to the rising light of Oguz. Kara Göne, she thought. Often had he stood like that. But Kara Göne had left this earth to become a star on Tengri’s curtain. One of his souls, though, had entered Arslan, Arslan-shahin, Lion-Hawk, the eldest of Beyazgül and Kara Göne’s surviving sons. This son’s stance was proud, defiant, and—something rarely seen in his father—contemplative.

She bowed nine times to the large and jagged stone before kneeling to ask the three times three
questions that the spirit laws allowed. She did not form them in words, which the stone would not acknowledge, but in the truer language of feelings. They were the nine sides of a single disquieting question:

The day that was coming would be decisive for her son, for the sultan, for the foreign princess, for her city, and for the world. The universe was about to tilt, but in which way? And what would it mean for all of them?

She exhaled and, more abruptly than intended, opened her heart to spill out upon the stone the loss of her husband and of her eldest son in the sultan’s wars. Then more painfully yet, because it was a disaster that had not yet occurred and therefore had not been mourned, she poured out her fear for the one remaining, the one who even now was standing nearby and looking into the heavens for guidance. Finally she admitted to the stone what she had not dared to say to any human, that she felt neither pride nor grief, but something else, unnamable, a burning anger toward the gaza—the unending war for the
faith—and all those who called themselves gazis. And as the light from the face of Oguz rose and flared, a shadow on the craggy cheek of stone narrowed and lengthened like a tear—or was it a sword? It was both, she feared. Beyazgül knew that the stone had understood.

Then, almost as an apology for her initial brusqueness, she caressed the stone with three softer thoughts. She told it of her strange but not unpleasant feeling, almost maternal, toward the Christian princess who now spoke a few words of the Oguz language like a little child. Also Beyazgül admitted to a softening of her hostility toward the too-slim Serb woman, who knew neither Islam nor the old ways, but who might bear her son a son. Perhaps these feelings were wicked, because the Oguz were now supposed to be Muslims, the enemies of the Christians.

But, she reminded the stone, the Oguz had known Tengri longer than they had known Allah or the sad-eyed prophet of the Christians, and Beyazgül did not see why these three great spirits couldn’t all live together, each respecting the others’ powers. Beyazgül also remembered those other little females, Nilüfer’s daughters who were her granddaughters, the third of the softer thoughts. But all were wrapped in foreboding, all related to the future of her line.

The stone again responded. As the light of the morning star diffused into the brightening sky, the shadows on the face of the rock formed an image of the hare, totem of her father’s clan. It was a sign, but of continuity or of climax?

Now the ribbon of fire was widening over the eastern ridge, and hurriedly she asked the most troubling questions of all. What could she do with the murderous rage she felt against her sultan, a rage that burned and singed even her memories of the man she had most loved? She imagined her rash and handsome Kara Göne laughing as he flung himself against a Christian spear, to prove his loyalty to that most frightening sultan. And could she control the love mixed with rage she would send out this day with her son Arslanshahin? But there was no way she could manage the angels and demons that tumbled from her heart; she asked only reassurance that her son would come back.

But before the stone had answered, a raucous screaming startled her and she looked up. Her first thought was of a janissary band gone wild up in the sky.

“Simurgh!” cried out Kemal.

Beyazgül was almost as startled by the boy’s presence as she had been by the immense and noisy cloud of birds. Rarely was she taken by surprise, but she had been somewhere else in her conversation with the stone.

“It is the Simurgh that Mesud sings about,” Kemal shouted.

Beyazgül smiled. Yes, it was possible. The great bird made up of many birds, that was the way Mesud sang the tale, though it wasn’t the way she had heard it as a child. This noisy thing was made of many birds, thousands probably, and of many kinds that don’t usually fly together—blackbirds, sparrows, even hoopoes and larks. But looked at another way, it was all one bird, immense. This then must be the stone’s way of answering her final set of questions.

Her eyes narrowed until she made the writhing multicolored mass merge into a single bird. She tried to see its four wings and woman’s face, its giant feathers brilliant and of every color.

The simurgh is not like the roc, which will devastate a herd or flock by lifting a score of beasts in its talons. The simurgh is instead benevolent toward mankind. She nests in the Tree of Knowledge, where the seeds of all the fruits of the world originate, and when she flaps her four huge wings to lift off from the nest, the downdraft sends the seeds scattering to all parts of the world.

The simurgh has such gentle power that the mere touch of one feather will heal the most grievous wound, Beyazgül remembered. The most grievous wound. Fighting, then. The simurgh had been summoned by the scent of blood—and the simurgh is fertility and succor. Perhaps that meant Arslan would be hurt but would survive.

“Mother.”

The deep voice startled her.
“It is time,” he said in gentler tones than his men had ever heard. “Prepare her.”
She extended her hands to his so that she might pull herself up by her son’s strength. She looked past the thick mustache, pulled back and tied tightly in readiness for action, and up to the dark eyes, so like Kara Göne’s when he was young but with more sadness than gaiety in their steady gaze.
“And Mother, a request. See that she carries the charm.”
Beyazgül blinked. Then after a moment, she assented with her eyes.

The Ear of Polis
26 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(27 July, Anno Domini 1402)

“Melkion, is that you up there?”
“Stasi! Out of bed early today, aren’t you? Come on up. It’s perfectly safe. I was talking to this sergeant here. The stairs are right over there. Look. Yes, to your right.”
“Oof. That’s steep. All these broken steps. Oh, hello, Sergeant. Keeping a close watch, are you? There’s a good man. Melkion, what are you doing up here? I haven’t seen you for days. My, it’s bright. The sun off the water like that, why, at this time of morning a galley could come right up to the wall before you saw it.”
“More than two weeks it’s been since last we spoke. That was also up on a wall, remember? Right after the Turks had left. But the western wall. The City looks different from this end, doesn’t it?”
“Well, of course. You can’t see the Hippodrome from there or Justinian’s column or the Great Palace, and of course the Hagia Sophia is much more impressive up close.”
“All the oldest and most famous structures. But I meant something else. This wall we’re standing on. Look at it. Does it remind you of something?”
“Hmm? Well, it’s not as high as the one on the west. Remind me? Of what?”
“It curves, you see. Around the Great Palace and all those churches.”
“Well, yes. And we’re at the outer edge of the curve. I suppose we could say it’s like an arm, embracing the City.”
“It is the shell of an ear.”
“An ear! You’re in a trance, Melkion. You’re talking like a Hesychast.”
“No, no, not a trance. A poetic image, if you wish. This wall facing east has become a giant ear. Listening, trying to catch the rumors. And you know why that is strange, Anastasios?”
“It’s strange, all right, but you tell me why.”
“Because for centuries and centuries and centuries, for over a thousand years, this City has thought it was the source of all the news for all the world that mattered. We didn’t need to hear any of the noises that originated beyond our walls, because none of it mattered until it was repeated here. This curved wall was not an ear but the bell of a trumpet, whose boom would silence all the other rackets. But now, instead, we cower inside, straining to hear the slightest whisper from outside, for those whispers may decide our fate.”
“Who wrote that? I don’t recognize it.”
“Why, no one. I just said it.”
“Oh. Sounded like poetry. Trumpet. Ear. ‘Whispers that may decide our fate.’ What whispers?”
“Tell me, Anastasios, does the absence of our besiegers mean something more than a brief respite or is it the prelude to catastrophe? It’s been almost three weeks now, and the whispers have been coming constantly, almost since that first day. The little boats from the islands have become bolder, sailing into
the straits with their fish and other goods. Their sailors whisper that the war galleys of the Venetians and
the Genoese remain in harbor, that they have seen no great fleet massed to sail to our rescue. That means
that whatever is going to decide our fate is going to come from the east, over there. And there have been
whispers from there as well.”

“Tell me.”

“The Franks are riding out now, much farther than before, not finding any force to oppose them. But
yesterday they did come across a disordered band of Türkmens that fired a couple of arrows and then
took flight.”

“Yes? And then?”

“But the Türkmens’ horses were exhausted, and one of them stumbled and the Franks caught it and
the man riding it. And he had been wounded, and he said there had been a great battle and that the souls
of many tens of thousands of believers had flown from their bodies to Paradise.”

“To hell, more likely. They’re believers in the devil.”

“And when they asked him who had won, he said the horde of God. And when one of the Franks
who spoke his tongue asked whether that meant Timur or Bayezid who commanded the horde of God,
the scoundrel turned red and screamed the name ‘Allah’ and lunged at the nearest knight with a dagger
from his blouse, slashing him badly before they killed him. So we know no more.”

“And what do you make of that?”

“That our fate has been decided though we don’t know it yet.”

“You expect Bayezid to come back with his horde.”

“No, no. That’s what I don’t know, whether Bayezid or Timur. It makes a difference.”

“If Bayezid…”

“If Bayezid, we lose our souls. I told you, days ago, I suspect that your Emperor Ioannes agreed to
open the gates to him. Thus does Ioannes betray God Himself, delivering His most holy city to—”

“And if it’s Timur?“And if Timur, then even the shell of the City, its very walls and temples, will be
razed, for he will do to us what he’s done to every other city he’s conquered. He’ll build a pyramid of
our skulls. Maybe he’ll put yours on top. It’s big enough.”

“Don’t talk like that! Our men will defend these walls.”

“You think so? Just look.”

“Hnn?”

“Over there. The sergeant, came on duty only an hour ago and already half asleep. A belly for wine
but not for war. He used to be stationed at the Golden Gate, he told me, but since the siege was lifted
there were no more bribes to extract from the smugglers—or so he implied with a lot of winks and
snorts. So he asked for reassignment to the eastern wall because it’s a shorter walk from his home and
his favorite tavern, somewhere in that warren of collapsing buildings you can just make out from here.

“So that’s our defender. As for the rest of our Orthodox forces, the good ones are dead. Most of the
others have deserted out of hunger or out of rage at the treachery of your incompetent Ioannes. And so
we’re left with those too lazy to desert or too indifferent. And the foreigners. Frankish knights, half of
them too sick to ride. And those other Latins, the Varangians, oafs with axes. No, if it comes to that, it
will be up to good Orthodox citizens like you and me, Anastasios, to defend our Mother City, with
sword and javelin.”

“Javelin? I’m no fighter.”

“But have no fear. All men must die, and you at least will die honorably, Christian sword in hand
and the cross of Saint George on your breast, to the glory of God.”

“No need to talk like that. I too have heard ‘whispers.’ From inside the City.”

“Yes, I’m sure you have. What have you heard?”

“You were so worried about that embassy that the emperor sent to Bayezid with the princess and all
those riches and the coffer you were sure contained the key to the City.”
“Yes?”
“Well, you were right about the coffer. But a big part of the tribute that that young merchant Bardas was carrying came from Giorgos Goudelis.”
“Aha! Well, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. To buy his own safety, I presume?”
“As a guarantee for the lives of all of us nobles of Konstantinopoulis and a guarantee that we can keep our faith. So if the sultan has won the battle, we can go on about our lives as we would under our own emperor.”
“And you would accept that bargain? Ah, Anastasios, you have no shame. Willing to sell the City to the Mohammedan for your own safety. And what if Bayezid has lost, and it’s Timur who comes crashing at our gates?”
“Wait. That is the other ‘whisper.’ From Isidore the strategos, who is in Goudelis’ confidence. The day after he dispatched the gift of the princess and all to the sultan, Goudelis sent another embassy, also with the emperor’s blessing and with even greater treasures to Timur.”
“Hah! Are you sure? A costly adventure. And so if Timur wins?”
“He will accept this tribute and leave our city in peace.”
“Hey! What’s that?”
“Just some old hag arguing with your sergeant friend. Leave them be. She’s just a commoner. She probably smells.”
“He has no business grabbing her like that, no matter who she is. Hey! You! Let that woman go!”
“Stay out of it, Your Lordship, if you please. I know this woman, and I know what I’m doing.”
“Let go of her. She looks ill. Madame, what is your business here?”
“She don’t talk, your lordship. Hasn’t talked for months. Lives in the building next to mine. Now hold still, you. Stop that struggling. I’m just trying to do what’s right for you. You see, Your Lordships, she’s been crazy like that—no, stop that, you, don’t scratch me, I’m your neighbor, you know me, and I know what you’re up to. She’s been crazy like that since her husband died, hasn’t said a word. But she was quiet at least, peaceable, until they took her boy and her oldest daughter. Now stop that, I told you. My Christ, she’s strong!”
“Who took her children?”
“Why, them Franks did. Said the emperor needed them. Then I heard they’d been sent off as slaves. Too bad about the girl, she was a sweet one. Nobody’ll miss that boy, though. That’s right, my dear, you can squirm and grimace all you want, but I’m telling these gentlemen none of us will miss that son of yours, a regular delinquent he was, a leader of delinquents.”
“Sergeant, I demand you let her go.”
“Hey! You pulled my arm off her! Hey! Stop her! Sir, you don’t know what you’ve done. Catch her.”
“What’s she doing?”
“Off that wall, you. Come down here!”
“Alexios!” came the scream as the filthy, ragged woman leapt off the wall just ahead of Dimitrios’ swipe to grab her ankles. The three men leaned over the wall and looked down upon her body smashed against the rocks.

**Ek Stasis**
27 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(28 July, Anno Domini 1402)
Day of Righteous Irene Chrysovalantou
“Most holy Theotokos, save us.”

This was the day she had been preparing for, yet still Theodota felt unprepared. The long shadows and the chill air of the morning had given her a fright and made the mountain wilderness seem like the entrance to the land of the dead. And when Saljan and Zilha propelled her toward the cedar kafes, it looked like a coffin and she gasped.

Enclosed once more in her wooden cage, slung between two ponies that looked too small to bear the weight and rocking and swaying toward an unknown destination, Theodota raised her face to the roof of the kafes, eyes closed tight, and sang the Small Paraklesis to the Theotokos. The absence of Olga’s voice sent a sharp sadness through her chest. She who was the closest to a mother that Theodota had ever known should be with her on the most fateful day of her life. But the cruel Turks had not allowed it.

“All the nations have surrounded me,” she sang, closing her eyes still tighter and clutching her gold cross to her breast, “but in the name of the Lord, I have overcome them.”

The vehicle suddenly swayed and Theodota heard the contralto response, “God is the Lord and has revealed himself to us; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

She dared not open her eyes lest the mysterious singer vanish. That is the way it is with angels and other spiritual beings. They reveal themselves only to those who do not doubt them.

The next verse she sang alone, but then she heard it again.

“To the Theotokos, let us run now most fervently,” she sang, accompanied again by the second voice. Could it be the Theotokos herself, the God-bearer, the eternal Virgin Mother of God? Actually, it sounded at first like Olga, but then the voice lost its Russian accent and continued in a drawl that was not quite foreign though not quite of the City either—like the Greek spoken by that young janissary who rode with the Turks. Something about the voice made her remember herself as very small and cradled in arms that felt warm and secure and smelled of lemons.

She sang on, skipping over parts that were hard to recall. “From the years of my youth many passions combat me.” Her carefree youth of just weeks ago seemed as far in the past as that mysterious woman who smelt of lemons. This was only right, because next month, if she survived this day, she would be fifteen.

“But you who are my Savior, assist me and save me. You haters of Zion shall be put to shame by the Lord Almighty, for as grass in the fire, you shall all be withered.”

Her unseen companion repeated the verse, and together they sang it yet again. “Zion,” the mysterious voice reminded her, was God’s kingdom, and the great city she had left in order to defend was its earthly manifestation.

Careful not to look in the direction of the voice, she turned toward the side and opened her eyes to peer through the lattice. Staring fiercely at the haters of Zion riding alongside her, she imagined them withering like grass in the fire, the divine flames consuming them from their wide-topped boots to their flowered sashes, then up to their embroidered dolmans and reaching up toward their astonished mouths as they screamed and begged for forgiveness but too late. Ertugrul, Aydin, Torgut—she had learned the names of several of them—blackened and crackling like boars on a spit, all their pagan fierceness gone up in smoke. It was cruel, but it was God’s law, and it was just. But what about that boy Kemal, shy and playful? And the women who had taken such gentle care of her? And the babe and the little girls? All to the flames! The chanted prayer decreed it. And their proud pagan chief as well, that man they called the Lion-Hawk, unless Theodota could make him see the error of his ways and make him embrace the one true God.

“You are an aid in our affliction, O maiden.”

Now that the promised day had finally come, Theodota Palaiologina would have to throw herself more entirely than she had ever done before upon the mercy of the Mother of God, to separate herself from her narrow cage, outside her earthly self, _ek stasis_.

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_Most holy Theotokos, save us._

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The next verse she sang alone, but then she heard it again.

“To the Theotokos, let us run now most fervently,” she sang, accompanied again by the second voice. Could it be the Theotokos herself, the God-bearer, the eternal Virgin Mother of God? Actually, it sounded at first like Olga, but then the voice lost its Russian accent and continued in a drawl that was not quite foreign though not quite of the City either—like the Greek spoken by that young janissary who rode with the Turks. Something about the voice made her remember herself as very small and cradled in arms that felt warm and secure and smelled of lemons.

She sang on, skipping over parts that were hard to recall. “From the years of my youth many passions combat me.” Her carefree youth of just weeks ago seemed as far in the past as that mysterious woman who smelt of lemons. This was only right, because next month, if she survived this day, she would be fifteen.

“But you who are my Savior, assist me and save me. You haters of Zion shall be put to shame by the Lord Almighty, for as grass in the fire, you shall all be withered.”

Her unseen companion repeated the verse, and together they sang it yet again. “Zion,” the mysterious voice reminded her, was God’s kingdom, and the great city she had left in order to defend was its earthly manifestation.

Careful not to look in the direction of the voice, she turned toward the side and opened her eyes to peer through the lattice. Staring fiercely at the haters of Zion riding alongside her, she imagined them withering like grass in the fire, the divine flames consuming them from their wide-topped boots to their flowered sashes, then up to their embroidered dolmans and reaching up toward their astonished mouths as they screamed and begged for forgiveness but too late. Ertugrul, Aydin, Torgut—she had learned the names of several of them—blackened and crackling like boars on a spit, all their pagan fierceness gone up in smoke. It was cruel, but it was God’s law, and it was just. But what about that boy Kemal, shy and playful? And the women who had taken such gentle care of her? And the babe and the little girls? All to the flames! The chanted prayer decreed it. And their proud pagan chief as well, that man they called the Lion-Hawk, unless Theodota could make him see the error of his ways and make him embrace the one true God.

“You are an aid in our affliction, O maiden.”

Now that the promised day had finally come, Theodota Palaiologina would have to throw herself more entirely than she had ever done before upon the mercy of the Mother of God, to separate herself from her narrow cage, outside her earthly self, _ek stasis._
“By many temptations am I distressed; in search of salvation, unto you have I taken flight; O mother of the word, ever-virgin, from all ordeals and afflictions deliver me; most holy Theotokos save us; still the attacks of the passions that disquiet me and overfill my soul with despondency, O maiden, with the calmness of your own Son and your God, O all-blessed one. Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

This had to be the big day, when she would have the chance to perform her divine act of conversion of the sultan and his son.

“Wedding day,” Zilha announced when she roused her before dawn.

“What?” Theodota demanded. But there was no further explanation, and the older lady had taken over, hurrying her three daughters-in-law to dress her. The heathen lady talked so soothingly and with such authority that Theodota pretended to understand and did not resist.

As they, with Olga’s help, garbed her once more in the raiment of the Christian empire, she felt great calm amid the rush of fingers and unintelligible voices. Though she no longer had her hat and most certainly could no longer use the glittering Turkish headdresses with their mysterious pagan meanings, Olga had improvised a glorious solution. The night before she had hurriedly washed Theodota’s hair and dressed it, still damp though it was, with so much gold thread that it was like a golden crown. But then this morning the lady, the gazi’s mother, had clasped the strange big belt around her waist.

Theodota had looked to Olga, who had frowned, but after conferring with Zilha, reassured her.

“Yes, my pigeon, my princess. It will be your talisman, to give you safe entry to the sultan’s court. These ladies mean you no harm, and they know the ways of the sultan.”

When they hurried her to the kafes, she saw a lance with horsetails held by a rider who moved up in front, and next to him Mehmed was carrying her family’s big purple banner with the gold chi-rho.

Sacrilege! How could they put those things side by side? But as Saljan and Zilha rushed her to the kafes, she saw that neither they nor the camels with the treasure nor any of the pack animals would accompany them.

Last night while Olga was trying to dry her hair around the last coals of their cooking fire, Theodota had recounted—with Zilha interpreting—to the four Turkish ladies and Kemal the story of the virgin martyr Paraskevi, whose day, July 26, had just passed. How Paraskevi had been thrust into boiling oil for maintaining her faith in Christ and how she was saved by God and how she then saved the emperor from blindness and remained a virgin despite many other temptations until at last she was beheaded by another, crueler emperor on this very day, 26 July, in some long-ago year. Theodota had got quite emotional, improvising and improving on parts of the story she did not quite remember, but Zilha’s translation could not have been quite right. When she was done, the others had looked at her quizzically as though expecting more, and Nilüfer—oh, such ignorance!—asked why God had punished Paraskevi by not letting her marry and have many children.

Between revery and chants, Theodota passed the hours in the kafes until now she could see the sun had nearly reached its zenith. At one point in the journey it had seemed they were heading westward, and Theodota had experienced a moment of panic that they were returning her to the City, her mission unfulfilled, but soon they had turned again and continued their hurried movement in what seemed to be generally a southeastward course, ever higher over winding mountain trails. Soon, very soon, she would confront the sultan himself and would see the Osmanli prince that they intended to be her groom. Would he be as dark and intense as the gazi who was riding somewhere ahead of her?

She heard a shout and the kafes stopped with one last jolt, swinging forward and causing the ponies to scramble to keep their footing, forcing Theodota to brace herself against the satin. So the moment had come.

The only sounds now came from the ponies, snorting as their riders shuffled them a little one way
and then a little another. Frustrated by the lattice, Theodota could catch only glimpses of the men as they passed in and out of view—except for the nearest, a veteran called Turgut. He sat almost still, his eyes scanning the forward distance that was completely blocked from her sight. And even he kept fingering the feathered ends of his arrows and caressing the bow, strung and ready to fire, in its case at his hip. If she could only speak enough Turkish she would whisper loudly to ask him where they were headed and why they had stopped and, most urgently, what they were waiting for.

Another verse of the Paraklesis came to her, as though she heard the lemon-scented woman singing it.

“Listen, O daughter, and see and incline your ear and forget your people and your father’s house, and the king will desire your beauty.”

She looked down at the brilliant and elaborate buckle of her strange belt. The gold and silver antlers of a stag spread wide as the branches of a mastic tree, and some other beast had sprung at its throat, a she-wolf. So this was to be her talisman to the sultan.

Shah Mat
27 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(28 July, Anno Domini 1402)

It was at least an hour past noon when the little party reached a stream at the foot of the last of the high passes before the descent to Ankara. Mehmed was sure he heard a distant tumult, many voices rolled together like thunder which then died away as the wind shifted. Small vultures circled overhead. Arslan called a halt to let every man change mounts and to rest the horses attached to the kafes and to allow any man who so desired to do his ablutions and say his prayers. Mehmed watched him take a roll of muslin from behind his saddle and begin the slow, unfamiliar gesture of winding a ceremonial turban around his cap.

“Turgut, do you pray?” the gazi called out.

Turgut just looked at him with one eyebrow raised.

“Go up to the top to see what you can see. I heard a horse. There may be men there.”

Mehmed dismounted and carefully stuck the butt of the pole with his banner, the chi-rho, in the ground next to Turgut’s horsetail lance. He was stiff from hours of riding. Making sure he was out of the line of sight of the princess, he peed in the dirt and stretched. Then he heard Turgut’s cry and saw him galloping toward them.

“Many men!” shouted Turgut. “Thousands and thousands. They are coming this way and are just over that ridge.”

“Osmanlis or Timurids?” demanded the gazi.

“I couldn’t tell for sure, they have no banners and there’s no order in their ranks. I know they saw me, but no one signaled and no one gave an order, they just kept coming slowly toward us.”

“Turgut, stay with those five men there and guard the kafes. Mehmed, your magic stick, that cross thing, ride to my right. Aydin, you take the horsetail on the heart side, the left. Where are Ertugrul and that merchant ambassador? Turgut, if they do catch up, keep them here till I get back. The rest of you, mount fresh horses and follow me.”

There were fourteen men in the group that splashed across the stream to gallop up the trail Turgut had just descended.

At the crest, the gazi reined in suddenly and his stallion reared and waved its hooves, trying to climb the air. Before them hundreds, even tens of hundreds of mounted men swarmed toward them up the
eastern slope, which was gentler than the one Arslan, Mehmed, and the others had just ascended. The approaching men rode or walked in clusters of five, ten, twenty, or more, jostling each other on the narrow trail. In the far distance, Mehmed could see more men rushing downward along the face of a higher hill farther east, some riding singly, apart from the rest. Many wore the dark dolmans and turbans and carried the lances of akinjis, but there were also Christian yayas and müsellems in floppy gray caps, the cooks and horse-tenders who had been in the horde’s rear guard. Some were on mules, some on foot, and some on horses about to collapse. A cluster of bright yellow janissary tunics punctuated the expanse of brown, brown-red, and dark gray of the akinjis.

A compact mass of forty mounted men, bristling with lances, reined in at the sudden appearance of Arslan, no more than three horse-lengths away. They wove in their saddles and jerked their lances unsteadily as their weary, nervous horses shifted and bumped into one another and twisted their jaws against the sudden pressure of the bits.

“Who has ordered you to approach here?” bellowed Arslan. When no one answered, he bellowed again, “Who is in command?”

“Command?” yelled back a burly akinji, pulling himself up straight as he steadied his horse. “Why, I am, Alaadin of Erzurum! I am in command. Of these boys, anyway.” He laughed mirthlessly, waving the point of his lance in a tight circle around the group of forty. “And we’ll go wherever I please! We hear there’s a little caravan out here somewhere, carrying a rich treasure. So if you and your little mob’ll just move aside—this trail is a little narrow for all of us, don’t you see?—why, we’ll just go and help ourselves!”

“No man passes this point without my word!” Arslan retorted, drawing his sword with a swift, sweeping gesture.

Instantly Mehmed lowered his banner and drew his own sword with such enthusiasm he nicked the ear of his horse, which bucked and jerked its head violently. Mehmed was thrown forward against its neck and had to clutch the mane to keep from falling. Looking around, he became aware that other men in the approaching swarm were reaching for their weapons. A clicking noise nearby startled him, and he turned to see that Aydin had nocked an arrow to his bow. The other dozen men the gazi had brought did likewise.

The akinjis lowered their lances to the halfway position, ready to attack. Their leader raised his own high in the air and shook it. “Bold words from one who commands so few!” he shouted. “And by what name do we call the brave corpse who pronounces them?”

But before he could finish his laugh, there was a blur of dark horse and rider and Alaadin of Erzurum rose halfway out of the saddle. Arslan’s upward stroke had scooped him up, cutting halfway through his neck and into the bone of his jaw. He fell hard against the man on his right, throwing him off balance so that his lance-butt struck the face of a third. Arslan’s charge had shoved one horse against the others, creating such confusion that some men dropped their lances to clutch the horses’ necks with both hands.

Arslan’s stallion seemed to bounce off the compact mass of horses and men and then to cut through it, Arslan slicing at another akinji and yanking another from his horse by his own lance. Having passed through that knot of men, the horse and rider wheeled and galloped back to the higher ground. Mehmed realized that all this time—seconds, really—he had been holding his own sword high in the air, uselessly. But then he saw that Arslan’s long-time companion Aydin had also stayed in his place and concluded that maybe that was the way it was supposed to happen.

“Praise be to God,” muttered a frightened voice behind Mehmed. He turned to see Bardas on his mule. “There must be ten thousand of them!” the merchant let out in Greek, then spoke a prayer in some language Mehmed didn’t know but supposed to be Armenian.

Arslan spoke again, louder. His chest was heaving but he lacked no breath for his words. “No man will pass this point without orders from the Padishah Yildirim Bayezid Sultan himself!”
His voice carried far, but even those men too far back to make out the words had to be impressed by seeing their westward flow interrupted by a figure with sword drawn and turban askew outlined against the sky.

A man just behind the front rank and a little to their left urged his horse forward, the others making way for him. He was tall, much taller than Arslan and much thinner and seemed unnaturally relaxed, almost slouching in the saddle, but his eyes, between the scraggly black stubble on his cheekbones and heavy black brows, shone bright and alert.

Mehmed recognized him as a janissary, even though he had discarded the tall hat and wrapped his head in a red turban. The turban was adorned with a silver battle trophy, a head of a Mongol dragon-horse. The turban with its magic beast bobbled above the crowd as horse and rider moved up through the riders in the first rank and stopped just a few paces in front of Arslan.

"Peace, brother. Sheathe your sword, and tell your archers to put away their arrows. I see you are a man of the True Faith, as are we. We mean no harm. Tell us your name, for it is not proper that a warrior hide his name!"

“I am Arslanshahin Gazi, on mission for Yildirim Bayezid, Sultan al-Rum!”

“Arslanshahin! Yes, I thought it must be you. Who but Arslan would charge so furiously into a troop of scoundrels, who but Arslan whose sword is guided by the hand of the Prophet’s son-in-law Ali could so swiftly end the earthly career of Alaadin, the greatest of traitors. We know your reputation, and now we see you are every bit the man your legend says you are.”

“Tell me your name, janissary, and why you call Alaadin a traitor.”

“My name in the horde is Fuad, and yes, I was a janissary, but no more. I call Alaadin a traitor because he was one of the first to betray our sultan. These akinjis are the first to arrive here, because they were the first to flee! They and almost all your brother gazis deserted the sultan on the field.”

“Bayindir? Bozkurt?”

“I don’t know their names. Some disappeared with their men even before we met Timur. Some fought until it was clear our side was losing, and then they fled. Some saw their princes fighting in Timur’s horde, and they switched sides. And I have survived, to my shame, because my unit was cut off by a squadron of Tatars who turned against their sultan, and only five of us broke out. And then I found this horse, left riderless by one of Timur’s men we felled with our arrows.”

“And this slave dares call us cowards?” shouted one of the akinjis.

“It is no treason and no cowardice to fear God, and Timur is the Scourge of God!” shouted another.

“I was a slave, yes, of the sultan, and proud to be one. But today I am the slave of no one but Allah, as are we all. Bayezid the Thunderbolt is no more.”

Arslan lowered his fist to the pommel of his saddle, keeping the sword blade vertical. Mehmed also lowered his. The archers eased the tension on their bows but kept them at the ready.

“Dead? Yildirim Bayezid? How is that possible?”

Fuad shrugged. “Dead or a prisoner, I don’t know. But in any case, lost. There is no sultan of the Osmanlis now. The fighting still continues, as you hear. But all is lost. Except for us who were cut off by traitors, the janissaries still stood by Bayezid to the end, those few of my comrades who were still standing at all. And Stefan Lazarevich and the Serb cavalry had lost many men, but they too were standing firm when last we saw them. But if they have not already withdrawn, they can’t last much longer. The foe has many many tümens, forty times forty, all mounted, each company with its own colors. They were all on horse, except some hundreds more terrible yet who fired from the castles mounted on the backs of elephants. Except for these akinjis, and the gazis who mostly have deserted with their bands, we almost all were on foot, and the enemy maneuvered us to fight on open plain where their cavalry had the advantage. And without water, for he had diverted the stream. And now—”

He rose in his stirrups to impressive height, twisted his long torso and swept one long arm over the hundreds and hundreds of men behind and below him on the slope. Some carried lances, others bows,
most no more than swords and daggers, with here and there a wicker shield split through right to the iron boss. Some had black bruises on their faces, others splotches of dark blood that seeped through their head wrappings or the slashes in their dolmans. The men nearest the front had a strange, vacant look, their eyes mournful and desperate, their mouths curled as in a frightful laugh.

“This,” said Fuad, “is what remains of Bayezid’s horde. This and half a dozen other bands that headed, some north, some south toward the White Sea, some westward like us, roaming these mountains with no leader and no aim but to pillage to survive.”

“And the sultan?” demanded Arslan.

Fuad’s smile revealed a broken front tooth. He turned again and shouted, “Falconer! The birds!”

A rider approached, raising his forearm where a large, dark, almost black falcon perched, gripping with its talons the thick wrapping on the falconer’s arm. It kept opening and closed its wings to keep its balance. The falconer reined in next to Fuad, reached into a bag hanging from his saddle, and pulled out a feathery brown mass. The sight of it excited the black falcon, which agitated its wings as though about to take off and opened and closed its beak, stretching its neck toward it. The falconer held up a stiff, dead falcon by its feet. Black blood matted its once brown feathers.

“As this bird, once the pride of the sultan’s hunt, so now is the sultan himself, fallen victim to Timur—whose wild black falcon this must be. Hear you!” shouted Fuad to the men behind and around him. Then, turning forward, added, “And you too, Arslan, for it is a hard truth, and do not punish me for being the bearer. There are no more slaves of the sultan because there is no more Sultan al-Rum al-Anadolu!”

“Shah mat,” muttered Aydin. “The game is done.”

Mehmed looked up when he heard a rough-throated shout.

“Look out! Timur’s men are behind us!”

The rush of horses and men bumped against him so suddenly and so hard he dropped his banner. There were too many and they were too close for arrows. Mehmed saw Arslan, Aydin, and the others slashing with their swords, but then he lost sight of them in the frantic swarm that crashed through the fence of Arslan’s archers and plunged over the ridge and down the trail to where they had left the kafes.

THE KEY TO THE CITY

Come, come, whoever you are.
Wanderer, idolator, worshipper of fire,
come even though you have broken your vows a thousand times,
Come, and come yet again.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī

Ascension
27 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(28 July, Anno Domini 1402)
Day of Righteous Irene Chrysovalantou
... Screams, ululations, and pounding hooves burst into Theodota’s calming chant. The apocalypse. At last.

She almost expected to hear Gabriel’s trumpet. What she did hear was a clear loud shout that she recognized as the gazi’s, but coming from a great distance, and then from someplace nearer she heard Torgut call back. Then she was thrown hard against a wall of her cedar box. The two horses attached to her vehicle must be trying to run in opposite directions. A scream that she thought was of demons she then realized was coming from those frightened beasts. When she tried to look out her head banged hard against the lattice. All she could see were flickering shadows through the rising dust. The dust entered to make her cough. Men were shouting and someone cried out in pain. She heard dull thwacks she guessed were steel biting leather, the clangs of steel on steel, the irregular pounding of hooves on dirt, grunts and panting of men and beasts coming very close then receding then approaching again. Then sudden darkness and then

a crack of thunder,
a jolt,
a burst of light.

Free. She was free and sprawled on the ground, sprung from her cage into chaos, her rouged and painted mouth and her eyes full of dust. A horse beside her lay writhing on the ground, seemingly screaming though she couldn’t hear it. The world had become suddenly silent. She turned to see the other horse still dragging its broken poles. It rushed then stopped and jerked forward again, trying to find an opening between the other horses swirling in battle. She didn’t know what God wanted her to do, but she had to get away. She had a thought of catching the frightened pony and mounting it to heaven. She couldn’t stay where she was, stretched across the splintered cedar and satin of the ruined kafes. If she were to die it should be standing upright, not from a kick in the face that would disfigure her for heaven.

“Most holy Theotokos, save us.”

Unexpectedly the Theotokos’ response was to restore her hearing. Alas, that meant she could not hear the angels’ voices above the din of heathens murdering heathens. Her limbs were stiff, and as she pushed herself up to her knees to prepare to stand, she became aware of painful bruises on her hip and shoulder. She pressed her palms to block her ears—carefully, so as not to crush the ornaments of her coiffure—and closed her eyes and repeated, “All the nations have surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord, I have overcome them.”

She was not Mihr-u-Mah, she was Princess Theodota Palaiologina of Romania, acknowledged and beloved daughter of the sole authentic basileos of Romania and supreme head of God’s one and true Orthodox Church Manuel the Second Palaiologos, a virgin pure and faithful to the Lord. She rocked back onto her heels and straightened her back. She opened her eyes to look beyond the mêlée and into the clouds, to a serene female face that perhaps only she could see, smiling gently and sadly toward her. She was sure it was the face of the spirit that had comforted her with her song and scent in the long ride in the kafes, the same one she had taken for Saint Sophia that morning when her adventure beyond the City had begun.

Squatting as elegantly as though seated on a throne, Theodota flicked the dirt and splinters from her garments. She straightened her hair woven into its tall crown of gold. For she saw that it was true: Today she was indeed to become a bride—not of the son of the sultan but of the Son of God.

When she reached for the cross hanging from its ribbon around her neck, her fingers brushed the she-wolf and the stag on the big pagan belt buckle and she flinched as though stabbed by Satan. With one hand she tore at it but could not pull it off without letting go of the cross in her other hand. She gave up the effort and, clutching the silver and golden cross in both hands, stood straight up.

“Rumeli kiz!” someone shouted. It was one of the few phrases in Turkish she had learned, what Saljan and the others called her when they didn’t want to use her name. “Roman girl.” The attackers,
whoever they were, had recognized her.

She imagined what she looked like to that female spirit looking down on her from the heavens. Nothing could harm her true self, her eternal virginal soul. It was merely her fleshly icon that stood straight and still as a horse and rider charged toward her, the horse’s breast and wide-flared nostrils expanding wonderfully and the rider’s wide-sleeved arm like a dragon’s wing raising a scepter that in an instant would release her and her eternal soul from its earthly bondage whence, still virgin pure, she would fly to the lady in the clouds and her true bridegroom. Again she closed her eyes.

“O holy Theotokos, save us.”

There was a loud noise but no pain, no smashing of a mace through her golden crown and skull. How quickly and easily had come the release!

But then some bulky steaming thing knocked her over and made her realize she had not yet left her body after all. She scrambled back onto her feet to see two men on horseback struggling above her. One was a stranger, but the other with turban askew and a torn veil that now covered only half a bulging mustache she knew. Suddenly she felt the fear. The fear had finally broken through the twelve-walled citadel of her faith and threatened the gold-adorned tower itself.

She expected to be trampled to bits in an instant, but the demon horse veered and separated from its demon rider who seemed to roll through the air. The other horse miraculously stretched out a wing. She felt herself grabbed around the waist. She was rising; her silver-slippered feet had lost contact with the ground. Her heavenly transport had begun. She swooned.

Or no, she realized as the jolting ride continued, they were not rising to heaven but up a steep and irregular mountain trail. And the chest she was clutching was that of the gazi.

Pilgrims
28 Zulhijje 804 Hegira (29 July, Anno Domini 1402)
Day of the Martyr Theodota of Bythinia

Bardas Tzimiskes woke up panting. A storm of hooves and flaring nostrils, swords, axes, and arrows had exploded from the rocks, smashing and dismembering everything before them, just as he had been about to reach a golden crown glowing on the mountaintop, all that Bardas had or hoped for. He tried to cover his head—and it was day.

The monsters were gone, but above him three vultures circled unhurriedly. And the morning breeze carried the stench of death.

He shuddered and pulled his purple and white silk raiment tight around him. He heard it tear, widening some previous rent. Beyond the shadows of the red-brown rocks where he crouched, a weave of gold and purple winked in the sun. The fallen chi-rho banner and his torn clothes were all that remained to him of his exalted mission as ambassador plenipotentiary of the empire. He wept.

At last he wiped his eyes and stood. He pressed the overhang of his sleeve to his mouth and nose against the stench of death and, banner in hand, climbed out of his hiding place and up to the trail. A glance confirmed: it was all over. The storm of men and horses had passed, littering the ridge with corpses of a horse and perhaps half a dozen men. Their bodies had not been merely slashed or pierced, but mashed, disjointed, and riven, limbs separated from trunks, each chunk now covered by a flutter of dark wings.

Bardas vomited, splattering the vulture nearest with the acid wash of yellowed bits of horsemeat and yogurt that had been his diet for nearly a month. The bird shrieked and flapped, then settled back to tear
again at some bloody flesh that yesterday had been a man’s arm. Bardas’ stomach convulsed again, but this time the spray was light and the vulture just shook it off and continued tearing.

Bardas sank to his knees, looked up beyond the circling vultures, and wailed, “O God, why have you done this to me? I who would have built you a church with my new wealth had you but let my mission prosper.”

He looked down, averting his gaze from the vulture’s feast. “Yes, I admit it, I never made You such a vow, Lord God. I was hoping to surprise You.”

His stomach convulsed once again even though he had nothing left to expel. “No, no, enough. I confess, I confess. I am a pitiful, woeful sinner, O Lord. Forgive me. I was not thinking of You, but only of my own miserable self. But have You not punished me enough? I know this was no mere mortal baskania at work, but Your will. And truly wretched have You left me.”

Let the whole world hear him, let the angels look down and weep. He screamed. He wailed. He beat his head again and again with the banner’s broken staff. He shook its silk at the heavens, cried again, but finding no response, he turned and stumbled down the trail and past more mangled corpses.

At the bottom of the hill he came to a fragment of the ruined kafes, an entire cushion covered in green silk brocade and tacked to a cedar board lying splintered in the dust. He fell to his knees and, dropping the banner, clutched the precious remnant. He ground his nose and brow against the cloth and soaked it with his tears.

This then was all that was left of the princess and of the treasure entrusted to him by Ioannes and Goudelis, all that was left of the empire’s grand gift of itself to the sultan.

“O God, take pity on me, for this too is the end of your servant Bardas, all of whose hopes he has deposited in this mission.”

He rocked backward and sat in the churned and bloodied dust.

The fallen banner pointed to a corpse he recognized. The vultures had not yet gotten at the face. It was Turgut, one of the first of the gazi’s men to take from him a talisman against the evil eye. Turgut, who boasted he could fire an arrow that would pass clear through a horse with strength enough left to kill a man on the other side. Turgut, who had laughed when Bardas grimaced at the taste of kumis, but who then had somewhere found him a skinful of wine, for which he was most grateful. An axe or sword had chopped through the wood and ivory of Turgut’s famous bow, another axe or mace had smashed through the cloth wound protectively around his cap and had driven the blood-soaked turban into his skull.

Bardas sat up and surveyed the other corpses. From what he could make out from clothing and those who still had faces, all were strangers. As he expected, several had been felled by arrows. He chose to believe those arrows had been Turgut’s. He closed his eyes and remembered, trying to understand how he himself had survived. Yesterday, when that mad gazi had charged into the midst of all those men and murdered those poor akinjis right and left, Bardas—like everybody else, it seemed—had been too stunned to react. But then, after that tall one had told them of the sultan’s unimaginably disastrous defeat, someone shouted the name “Timur!” and the fugitives had panicked in a stampede that broke through the gazi’s line. Bardas might have escaped if he could have turned his horse and just got out of their way, but the war pony they’d put him on had charged forward unbidden. When that boy Mehmed flung the chi-rho banner away from him, Bardas caught it by some involuntary reflex he didn’t know he had. Then, trapped among the screaming lunatics, he tried to hide behind the sheet of colored silk as though it were a shield. And miraculously, it was.

Someone shouted, “Sihirbaz!”—“Magician”—and the onrush parted around him like a river around a tree trunk. He twisted around to watch, and they seemed to plunge over the ridge behind him, a cataract of flailing men and horses. These rough artisans of carnage, their shields and garments splattered with enemy blood and their axes, swords, or bows gripped tightly in their hands, had been afraid of him, a soft, plump merchant who had never killed a man and never wanted to, whose only
weapon had been his tongue.

So great is the power of the name of Christ, the mighty chi-rho, even to barbarians who can’t read.

As soon as the human current thinned, he jerked his horse’s head around and the animal bounded to a break in the rocks, where Bardas found a spot where he could dismount and crouch concealed.

Hours later, when he thought it safe, he started to climb back up to look around, but before he got far, he saw a ribbon of green rippling down the slope from the direction of Ankara. They were hundreds of horsemen approaching rapidly and all wearing the same bright color, even to their horsecloths. Behind the green ribbon came another mass of riders, equally orderly, but all in white. An extraordinary sight, like a living pennant streaming toward him.

He ducked back down and waited.

These must be Timur’s men, he thought, the victors pursuing the vanquished. He should reveal himself to them as the ambassador plenipotentiary of New Rome, bearing effusive greetings from the Orthodox Empire to the new master of Anatolia. What had been a gift for the sultan could be an inducement for the khan, to negotiate a deal with Timur as profitable as the one he’d planned for Bayezid. But his ambassadorial costume was dirty and torn and he had no gifts to present. In fact he had nothing to offer but his banner. The accursed gazi had separated him from his camels and their treasure. And besides, these men of Timur might kill him.

The hooves thundering past pulverized his hopes. Late at night, there had been more hoof beats, a small group, three or five horsemen perhaps, galloping furiously. Messengers. Fugitives. Bandits. Ghosts. Anything seemed possible.

A horse’s snort woke him from these memories. The pony must have followed him down the hill. They were superbly trained, these little Turkish mounts. Kneeling as he was, he could see its underparts and noticed for the first time that it was a mare. A particular mare, an individual now, because she had become his. Or, from the way she was behaving, he had become hers. Tawny and brown, he noticed. Its color had not impressed him yesterday, but now he decided that it was a pleasing color combination for a mare. Using the banner’s staff, he rose to his feet. The sun was beginning to warm him and his hope revived. He caressed the pony’s muzzle the way he’d seen the Turks do and prayed aloud.

“O blessed warrior saints,” he said aloud. “Saint Giorgos and Saint Demetrios, intercede for me with our Lord and make sure He understands that I was only trying to save our holy city from destruction by surrendering it, and surely there is no sin in that. But bringing the girl”—he carefully brushed the dust from the green silk cushion—“that was not the idea of your servant Bardas. It was the emperor’s wife Eugenia who commanded, and how could I have refused? Intercede for me with our Lord, O my saints.”

Then an odd thought came to him, and he wondered if it were impious.

“And for these men who lie here,” he added. “I know that they were heathens, gone now to their underworld, but some at least were decent chaps who died to defend our Christian princess. And they were warriors like you. I plead that you intercede for them too before our Lord and I dedicate this chi-rho to the redemption of their erring souls.”

He shook the banner at a vulture that had lunged at the dead Turgut’s face until the bird screamed and fluttered away. Then on an impulse, he thrust the broken end of the staff into the ground beside the corpse.

“And may this fluttering silk and the name of Christ our Savior be a shield for them as it was for me, and keep the black birds of death from dishonoring their mortal remains.”

Bannerless, he mounted his mare and continued on the trail. Saints Demetrios and Giorgos would take charge of the dead. Bardas now turned to the merchant’s saint for his own welfare.

“Nicholas of Myra, you whose own father was a merchant and who has so often helped other merchants in distress, help me to restore my lost wealth. I promise most solemnly that with it, I shall do good works and build a church. Blessed saint, I put all my trust in you, and in this Turkish pony, to show me the way.”
And he rode on.

A shout, repeated, jolted him awake. He had no idea how long he had been asleep in the saddle. The sun was high and his cowl had fallen, leaving his head bare to the heat, and he was weak from exhaustion and hunger. In such a state men are prone to see ghosts shimmering in the trail before him.

“No-o-o-o!” he shrieked. They were the souls of the children, fifteen or twenty of the two hundred Christian street waifs he had rounded up to be slaves of the sultan. But surely he was not the one they should be haunting. It had been the monk Loukas’ suggestion, and he couldn’t have acted without Ioannes’ approval.

“It was not I, Saint Nicholas,” he cried aloud, “believe me.”

At that one of the ghosts replied, “Hey, look, it’s the merchant.”

“The one who sold us.”

He trembled and clutched the neck of the pony. They were all on foot. There were boys and girls, most still in what remained of the finery in which they had started from Constantinople. They crowded toward him, thin but rather solid for ghosts.

“Are…Are you dead?” he asked a tallish girl with dust-streaked face.

“Dead? Not us,” she said wearily. “Not yet. We are the ones who survived.”

“Then…the others are all dead?”

“No, not all. No thanks to you. Servant of the devil!”

He fainted and fell from his horse. When he came to, the children had tugged him off the trail to a patch of grass and brought him water one of them carried in a bag.

“We were attacked just before sundown,” the girl Eirene said. Bardas guessed she must be about thirteen.

“I know,” he said eagerly. “That’s what happened to me too.”

But Eirene wasn’t interested in his story. She went on with hers, almost as though in a trance. “They were Turks too, but the people in the camp didn’t know them. We heard their horses only a minute before we saw them, and we thought it was the princess and those other men coming back. My little brother Sebastian ran out to see what the noise was. They trampled him. I heard his screams, even over the noise of hooves and smashing. The people in the camp, the Turks, they were shouting and running and they grabbed their bows. The women too. I saw that older lady, the one who always rode on horseback like the men, she shot two of the raiders herself. Our Greek boys even joined the fight, the older ones who called themselves the Blues. They were hitting at their horses with sticks and trying to hit the men with stones.

“Then they all rode away, the Turks who had attacked, the ones who hadn’t been killed or knocked off of their horses. And those that fell, the Turks who were with us, they killed them all.

“Then the younger lady who spoke Greek told us that we all had to leave the camp at once, that greater danger was on its way, and if we wanted to go with them we could but we were free. And some of the boys and even two of the older girls said they would go with the Turks because they felt safer with them and because they had no one left alive back in the City. And they were mounted on horses with the men. The rest of us said we would go back, home to Polis.”

“Except that older girl, from the palace,” interjected a boy of about eleven. “I wanted her to come with us, because she was nice, she used to tell us stories about Russia and look after the sick kids and she knew a lot of magic to keep us safe. But after those mean Turks had gone, she started shaking and crying, like I’d never seen her do before. She said they could kill her, she wasn’t going to go anywhere without the princess.”

“Olga? So what happened to her?” asked Bardas without much interest. But any information might prove useful.

“Oh, that Turkish girl or Serbian or whatever she was, the one with the baby, who spoke Greek, she went to the old lady who was taking charge of everything—I mean, you could tell even the gazi’s
brother Mesud and all the other men were waiting to see what she told them to do. And when the Greek-speaking girl came back she told Olga that she had to go with them, that they would find the princess wherever she was.”

“Where did they take the princess?” the boy asked. “She was a princess, but I liked her anyway. She was pretty.”

Bardas shook his head. To avoid answering, he asked, “And where are you going?”

“To the City, of course. Home,” said Eirene.

“That girl asked if we needed horses, but none of us knew how to ride and we said that we would walk. She told us to hurry into the woods and not to stay in the camp. And then they all rode off into the mountain, even though it was getting dark.”

“And the camels?” asked Bardas. “What happened to all the camels and all the goods they carried?”

“They took them with them. We saw them load up all the camels with all the goods, the tent frames, and rolls of felt, and the big baskets of things. They took them all.”

“All except the big white one with the imperial crest, the one that had the biggest boxes of all,” shouted the boy.

“Yes, Nikas,” confirmed Eirene. “All but that big white one. Maybe they thought it was too wide for the little trail they took.”

Bardas’ heart jumped. “And what happened to that one camel and its burden?”

Eirene rocked back on her heels and looked at him. The other children were stretched out on the ground. They all looked exhausted and some were obviously pale and sick. In contrast, Bardas, sitting cross-legged with his back against the boulder, felt more alert than he had been since running from the battle.

“We are a long way from home,” the girl said.

Bardas looked at her and frowned. The girl seemed to be entering her trance again.

“There are bad men on horses around here, killers and bandits,” she added, droning. Bardas nodded.

“They killed my little brother,” she went on, in a higher and tenser voice. “My cousin and two other girls from Bootmakers’ Alley and one of the kids from Hagios Makios are so weak we have to almost carry them.”

Her voice had become positively shrill. “AND YOU’RE WORRIED ABOUT A CAMEL?”

Her scream threw him back against the ground. Cautiously he pressed his elbow against the dirt and pushed himself back up to a sitting position. At last he muttered, “It is a very special camel.”

“I don’t know,” the girl said in a dead voice. “Maybe it’s still there.”

“It’s dead! It’s dead!” shouted the boy of about eleven. “I saw.”

“What did you see, Nikas?” Bardas asked him.

“Just before we went in to hide in the woods, I saw them take the camel and I followed. That’s why it took me so long to find you afterwards, Eirene. If you hadn’t all been crying in the woods last night, I never would have found you.”

“Nikas,” said Bardas as gently as he could manage. “Tell me about the camel. The white camel.”

“They had it all loaded up, with those big boxes and the emperor’s silk covering, and they pulled it and made it go up the hill, to where that big rock was, next to the tree. And they killed it. First they said a lot of magic words, one of the men chanted something, and then all the women chanted back. And then that taller one, Mesud, he took a big knife and he slashed the camel’s throat. Ooh, so much blood, he did it so the blood poured into a little stream that ran by there. I saw the camel fall to its knees, and I turned around and ran down the hill because I was afraid if they caught me they’d do the same thing to me.”

Bardas was thoughtful for a moment. “Have you got anything to eat?” he asked.

“Are you going to take us home?” Eirene asked in turn.

“Home? Me? Take you?”

“To the City. We weren’t sure if we were going the right way. The others, about forty of the bigger
children, they didn’t wait, they started off at once, led by that boy Alexios who declared himself their
captain, to walk to Polis. Even before the Turks left. We were hoping maybe we would catch up to them.
But they have too much of a head start. And now we’re not sure if this is the right way.”
“To walk! May God save them and you,” said Bardas aloud.
“We don’t have much food. The Blues took most of what the Turks gave us. But if you are going to
take us home, back to where you got us, then we can let you have some of our food.”
“Of course, my children. Of course. Back to Polis.”
What a disgusting thought. Back to Polis with no princess, no deal with either the sultan or the new
khan Timur, and no riches but a mob of starving urchins. Oh, the embarrassment! Oh, the repayment that
Goudelis would demand! Oh, the torture machines of the regent emperor and especially of that little
monster Eugenia! Or maybe he would first run into the Varangians, who would be happy to chop him up
with their axes before anybody else had a chance.
His only hope was to recover some part of the riches of the gift for the sultan. But the camels were
gone. Even the princess was gone, if he had imagined using her as bargaining chip.
But wait! The casket held the golden key to the City. And if he, Bardas, possessed the evidence that
Ioannes VII had tried to surrender Polis— Saint Nicholas, he prayed, forgive a little deception, because
as I’m sure you understand, it is for business. And if the business prosper, then I do renew my vow. A
church and good works. I know! I shall found an orphanage if you allow me to gain this wealth.
“Yes, my sweet children, my angel-souls. I shall lead you home. But first I must return to the place
you left this morning, for there is something that was on that camel, something of great and holy power
that will help us make the trip in God’s grace and with His protection.”
Eagerly he tore into the hard, dried meat—horse or goat, he was too hungry to tell—and fruit that
the girl extended to him. He really should leave them some of these dates, he thought, but he was so
hungry. And heading the way they were, they weren’t going to live long enough to enjoy them anyway,
poor dears.
“Now, children, as soon as you are rested, just continue on the way you have been going, and I shall
catch up to you as soon as I finish my important mission, entrusted to me by the emperor and by my vow
to the Theotokos herself.”
“Are you sure?” Eirene asked. “This way? I’m confused, because it’s afternoon, and the sun is over
there, and I think we should go the way the sun goes to go home.”
“No, my child, the road has twists and turns, just like the road of life. Just continue in the direction
you were going, and you will soon be home.”
Home to God, he added silently, for only God can protect you now.
And he mounted again his brown and tawny mare. The boy Nikas waved, and Bardas smiled,
chuckled even, and turned westward. The key to the City, that would be his key to salvation.
If only the Turks have left that casket, he thought, if only I can find it and keep it with me till I
return to Polis.

Dance
29 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(30 July, Anno Domini 1402)

The back of Theodota’s head hurt, as did her right buttock and shoulder where they pressed upon a
hard, uneven surface. A flute had awakened her, muffled as though by a heavy curtain, its melody in
those strange, mournful intervals of the heathen peoples from the East. This was not her bed. It was not
even the carpet she had become used to since starting out in the kervan. And the sound that had awakened her was not of the palace. She felt underneath her. She lay on a rug. Her fingers found the edge where it overlapped another rug, then tunneled between them until they passed the edge of the bottom rug and touched cool earth. Another rug, much lighter, lay on top of her. On a sudden impulse her fingers leapt to her belly, chest, and hips. She was decently clothed, but not as she had been when she was last awake, in the palanquin. Someone had dressed her in a fine wool, loose garment that was unfamiliar to her. She opened her eyes.

A lamp somewhere—the tallow smelled vaguely like a horse—outlined strange shapes wavering against the cloth wall that rose beside her on her left. High above was a black circle with two small, bright, white lights. It took her a moment to understand that that was the smoke hole of the tent and that the lights were stars. The dark object to her right she recognized as one of the coffers that her cousin had sent with her as a present to the sultan. But this tent was not the sultan’s, she felt certain. The sultan’s tent would be much bigger and would surely have had a real bed for her.

The gentle, muffled music diminished and stopped. She heard the voice of a man shout what she took to be a command, which startled her. She was even more startled to hear a woman’s laughter and rush of words that, though incomprehensible, sounded playful. She felt a thrill course through her body, not fear exactly, or not only fear. A warming in the hands and legs, a stirring in the bottom of her stomach and a pounding of her heart in anticipation of some new event. She suddenly felt, for the first time in all her almost fifteen years, that she was beyond the power and protection of her mother city.

The man shouted again—it was the gazi! Her gazi. The man who had saved her from the murderous heathens, the fierce warrior who must secretly love her and whom she was destined to convert to Christianity. Oh, the gazi. Arslanshahin, Lion-Hawk. She thought back to that rough ride on his stallion, when she sat across his knees and clutched his waist, her head against that broad chest as he so bravely rode through the terrible enemies, scattering them to left and right. Then she must have swooned. And now here she was, in his very tent!

There was a rustle and scraping just outside the tent. The music started again, but a livelier tune, and with the addition of a drum and a plucked string instrument like the ud the Arab musicians in the court at home would play. Theodota, ignoring the stiffness and pain in her neck and shoulders, pushed and wriggled on her back until she could see around the edge of the big coffer.

There stood the man, the gazi, her Lion-Hawk. His naked back toward her and his head down as though looking at something near his feet. He looked like a dark angel in the flickering lamplight. The black, long curly hair radiated from around a glistening bald spot that glowed in the lamplight like a halo. The black hair hung down to his shoulders, which also glistened as though oiled, glittering as they rotated sensuously, left shoulder then right, to the rhythm of the music. Theodota curled her legs under her, preparing to spring up and grasp him around the waist as she had grasped him on the stallion.

But now, slowly rising over his shoulder, there appeared the head and then the face of a woman. Her hair was also black and curly and long, loose but not wild, as though she had just unpinched or unbound it. Her kohl-lined eyes were large and black and reflected the flickering of the lamp, her black brows met like a double-curved bow. Her reddened lips puckered forward as though reaching toward the man. Theodota could not be sure whether she had seen this woman before, perhaps only hours ago—the Turkmen women all looked so much alike. There must be some mistake. They had put her into some other man’s tent, some one of the gazi’s warriors whom she had mistaken for the gazi in the weak light.

The woman was beautiful, in an eastern, whorish sort of way, Theodota thought, although quite mature—she must be at least twenty. Her bare, slender arms rose high above her head, twining like serpents and reaching toward the curly head of her taller partner as the music gradually accelerated. The man’s head rolled back and swiveled, eyes closed tightly, until the face turned full in Theodota’s direction.

It was the gazi Arslan! His mustaches, untied, drooped down to his sweating chest, which was
beginning to heave in time with the strong, accelerating beat of a complicated rhythm. Having completed its arc to the right, the head rolled back and swooped back to the left. And now she saw that the woman, her eyes wide open and fixed on his face, was the Serb Zilha, swaying sensuously to the music. Her large rings caught the lamplight as her fingers reached around to touch the back of the man’s neck. Intricate, lacy designs of henna dye covered those fingers, which touched the gazi’s neck ever so lightly before continuing their motion back toward herself, where in a slow and flowing motion in time with the music, they opened her embroidered jacket.

With a wriggle that seemed part of the dance, she freed her shoulders from the garment and brought her fingertips to the underside of her naked breasts, which she held up toward the man who appeared to be lost in his own trance. Theodota stared and swallowed air.

The music picked up its pace and the dancing woman smiled, her eyes half-closed, and grunted loudly. A beat or two later the gazi emitted a deeper grunt, more pained than exuberant. Theodota, levering herself by an elbow, pulled herself to where she had an unobstructed view. As she had half hoped and half feared, the dancing woman was as naked as the statues in the Roman baths at home, save only for her jewelry and a narrow silk girdle that arced over her hips and descended to a golden tassel that fluttered over the dark hair of her pubis, glittering in the light as she swayed and gyrated to the still quickening rhythm.

The gazi stood bootless, but his lower body was draped in a sash and wide pantaloons like those he had been wearing earlier. His hips also swayed, but the greater motion of the dance was concentrated in his thick, shining shoulders, which rolled sensuously, up and forward and back, while his belly also seemed to roll, starting drawn in deep at the level of the sash, then the muscles pulling the deep indentation higher and higher until it outlined the sharp ridge of his rib cage, then rolling back down, in a cycle that grew faster and faster. The woman’s fingers then touched the top of his sash and must have grazed his belly, for he shuddered and now twisted more violently, sucking in his belly out of rhythm and pulling away in a short, abrupt movement so that the sash in her fingers pulled away. Theodota watched as he raised his arms over his head in a gesture that mirrored that of the woman an instant before. He spun suddenly, twice around, leaving the sash unwound completely in her hand. He turned his face toward the smoke hole in the tent roof, his eyes closed fiercely, as his partner gave a quick yank to the cloth and caused the wide pants to drop down to his ankles as the music built to a crescendo.

Then the gazi, his upraised arms bent slightly so that his hand just grazed the tent roof, gradually lowered and extended the right arm as he turned, his hips swaying to the music, rotating full around. For a moment, something from his dark groin was pointing right at her, something she had heard about but never seen in such a state except—yes, now she remembered. The statue in her rooftop garden, the insolent marble figure she called “Adam.”

In profile the thing projecting from her gazi’s groin was like a blunt lance or crossbow dart curving upward, and then it disappeared as the gazi continued his turn and stood with his back to Theodota, facing his sweating partner. He then twisted forward, extending his right arm, which the woman, with a quick upward swing of her long, slender, bare leg, straddled. Now they turned together, and when the dark-haired woman’s back was toward her, Theodota saw something very odd, like a brownish, multi-legged creature wriggling between her legs. It was the man’s hand, his fingers curling up and seemingly into her backside. As they danced, the dark woman rubbed her thighs against his forearm until the gazi, straightening, lifted her on that one arm. She lunged forward toward his shoulders and suddenly, noisily, with grunts and a soft thud, they dropped from sight.

Theodota, without even thinking what she was doing, hitched herself up almost to a sitting position until she could see, off on the far side of the tent, the writhing bodies entwined on the carpet. A thrashing of the gazi’s knee toppled over a jug of dark, sweet-smelling wine. The music from outside the tent diminished. The entwined couple, their bodies heaving, slowed their struggle, and suddenly all was silent. Theodota screamed.
At the sound, the woman on the carpet jerked up her head to look. The princess and the naked dancer stared at each other for a moment in mutual astonishment. Then the dancer laughed. She said something to the gazi, who reluctantly stirred himself and turned to look at Theodota with a fierce scowl.

“No no no!” she screamed again, pounding her fists on the rug and scrambling her her feet.

The two naked figures, sweaty and panting and lying only four of five paces away, stared at her uncomprehendingly.

“I hate you! I hate you both!” Theodota screamed yet again then, twisting wildly from one side to another, she ran to where she thought the exit was, turned back and grasped and felt around the tent wall until she found the flap and ran out past the startled musicians into the night.

The Key to the City
30 Zulhijje 804 Hegira
(31 July, Anno Domini 1402)

It was almost dark when Bardas nearly fell from his mare into what he thought might be the place they’d set out from that morning. He wouldn’t have found it at all if he had followed his own instincts, but he had fallen asleep in the saddle and the mare, in the mysterious way of her kind, had found the way. He recognized it because of the huge, oddly shaped boulder that jutted out from the hillside next to an unusually tall pine and a stream he had drunk from the morning of the fateful day when all the world changed.

He braced his belly against the pommel and swiveled until he could slide off the horse, which shook itself and trotted up the hill toward the little stream. Bardas too was thirsty, but first he simply slumped to the ground and surveyed the emptiness. There were no camels, no horses but the one he had arrived on, and no people besides himself. Only trampled grass, churned earth, and shadows, now growing longer by the second.

“Hey, you dog’s ass tub of lard!” The shout was in perfectly clear, vulgar Greek.

Bardas jumped and then fell down again on his knees. “No no, blessed saint, don’t speak to me like that, do not abandon me, Nicholas, forgive me! I tried to explain, remember?”

“No saint will help you now, you unspeakable piece of toad’s intestine! I’ll kill you!” screamed the same voice again, and then it burst out crying. Bardas looked around. At first he could see nothing. Then a figure stepped out from behind a rock. A stoutish young man with one of those curved swords like a sickle, a yatagan, the Turks called it. He also carried a knife and a mace stuck through the Turkish sash he had tied around his Greek tunic.

“Who are you?”

“You don’t know me, but I know you, Bardas Tzimiskes, toad slave of Giorgos Goudelis, licksplittle of the traitor in Blachernae who would surrender our City to Satan himself. Better than false Christians like you, I’ll take my chances with the heathens. Some of them at least know how to protect children.”

“Wait. You are no child.”

“No. Not now, certainly. I have become the man my father couldn’t be”

“Who are you, and why do you hate me? I’ve never hurt a soul.”

“Bardas Tzimiskes, you are the one who delivered me and a hundred ninety-nine others like me and much younger still to be handed over as slaves to the devil’s own servant, the sultan of the heathens. Young Christian souls of Polis, seized to advance your ungodly schemes. I was supposed to kill you weeks ago. Such a pity I didn’t get the chance.”

“Wait, you are Alexios, aren’t you? Stephanios’ boy in Hagios Makios. I saw some of those poor
children yesterday. They told me you had gone and were leading a group to Polis.”

“I was, but I came back. I slipped away when the others were napping. Because there’s treasure buried here somewhere, the Turks must have buried it when they fled, and I’m not going back to Polis without it. And you’re not going to stop me, you toad.”

“Wait. Stephanios and I, we go way back. We were partners in some business, you know.”

“And you betrayed him. That’s why he wanted me to kill you. Well, now I have the chance.”

“No, no. It was all a misunderstanding. I was going to pay him. And anyway, you can’t kill me, because I alone know where the true treasure is.”

“Oh?”

“A deal, let’s make a deal. We need each other. You are young and strong, I am older and know business. When we get back to Polis, we won’t need Stephanios. We’ll go into business for ourselves, Alexios and Bardas. Why, we can build a new church—”

“Rebuild Hagios Makios!”

“Uh, sure. Or a new church, even better. And we can regild the Golden Gate. That will impress everybody. And all will be forgiven. With the treasure that you are going to help me carry to Polis.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“What can I do? You have the weapons. And why should I trust you? Young man, we need each other. I know the accusations against you, for theft and other things in Polis. If you go back alone, and as an escaped slave, Alexios, what do you think they’ll do to you? Prison would be too kind. But with the treasure of which I speak, we shall have no fear from the emperor’s forces.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The key to the City, Alexios, the golden key to the Golden Gate. If Polis learns that their emperor was about to give it up to the heathens, why, they’ll drag him through the streets and tear him to bits like they did his great-great-grandfather. And he knows this.”

“The key to the City? The key to the Golden Gate of Constantinople? So that’s what you planned to deliver to the Turks. You cur! You’re even worse than I thought, you traitor!”

“Oh! Stop that.” Bardas wiped the spittle from his face. “It wasn’t my idea, Alexios. I assure you. It was that Ioannes…”

“The usurper!”

“Yes, yes, Ioannes the miserable usurper.”

“And that foreign bitch Eugenia, his whore.”

“Uh, yes. Quite. Terrible woman, that Eugenia. I quite agree.”

“We should drag them both through the streets. Knock out all their teeth with a hammer. Gouge out their eyes. Rip out their entrails and burn them. Then we’ll kill them!”

“Ah, yes, yes, I understand your anger. Perhaps we won’t be able to do all that, but don’t you see, boy, how we shall have our chance at revenge? It is just because he fears the rage of the populace that we shall have him do our bidding.”

“Blackmail? You want to blackmail Ioannes? If you try to blackmail that half-blind dog who sits on the emperor’s throne, he’ll have you murdered in a day. Aaagh, I know several fellows who would do it themselves—and for a low price.”

“Well, yes. That’s why I need you, Alexios. You and all the Blues. You will be my safeguard. And I shall be yours. You see, we do need each other.”

“You are a pig. And I know pigs. But to destroy that vile Ioannes—yes. All right, then. That will be sweet. Where is this thing, this key to destroying the usurper?”

“Come. I think I know.”

Bardas climbed the hill, a bit nervous to have a notorious murderous youth at his back. As he walked, he tried to plan his next move, but he feared he would just have to trust to luck. He really had no idea what he would find at the top.
When they reached the rock by the tree by the stream, the first thing he saw was the headless body of the white camel, gray now in the dusk. Then he saw the head staring down from atop the big rock. He followed its sightless gaze toward where the roots of the pine met the edge of the stream. The larger treasure box had been broken open, and a few of its priceless objects of gold and silver had been left spread in an arc and spattered with blood—a sacrifice, Bardas supposed, to some pagan spirit. And in the middle lay the casket.

“There it is,” he said. “That is all the treasure we need.”

“Open it.”

Through all his troubles, Bardas had managed to hold on to the tiny key of the bone-and-ivory clad casket, wherein lay the larger golden key to the Golden Gate. He started to reach for it within his tunic, where it hung from a silk ribbon around his neck. He stopped.

“You know,” he told Alexios, “that without my testimony as to what it represents, what you shall see inside here will have no value.”

“What are you saying? You think I want to kill you? No, I swore, and if what is in there is what you say it is, your life is safe with me.”

Bardas carefully inserted the small key. The casket had been banged about a bit, and the key didn’t go in as smoothly as he expected. Exasperated, he jiggled and maneuvered the key, finally giving the casket lid a powerful thump with the heel of his hand. It popped open.

“Let’s see!” Alexios lunged forward.

Inside was a stone, with a crude drawing of a hare. Bardas felt the blow of the club against his skull then all went black.

Princess of the Oguz

30 Zulhijje 804 – 1 Muharram 805 Hegira
(31 July – 1 August, Anno Domini 1402)

Beyazgül heard the snap of felt and looked up to see a shadow dart from her son’s tent. For an instant she thought ghul, the shape-shifting female jinn, had come to seduce her elder son. But then the outline of Arslan himself, faintly backlit in the opening of the tent, appeared bare-shouldered while seeming to be holding up his pants with one fist at the waist, and she remembered that she and the other women had laid the unconscious infidel princess in his tent as the safest place in the tumult. Ah, Beyazgül exhaled, then it was only that girl. Arslan had finally taken her as his. Or tried to! But why had she run away in fright? Had not the girl’s every gesture and glance shown that whenever she looked at Beyazgül and Kara Göne’s handsome son, her cat meowed and she slavered like a sick calf?

But then Beyazgül was startled to see another face looking out over Arslan’s shoulder. That Serb Zilha! Just what mischief had Arslan been up to? This was not the way of the Oguz. Many women, yes, for a manly man. But not two on the carpet at the same time! Such filthy practice was for the moral-less city people, the unbelieving Christians and those who had been corrupted by their ways like our late sultan, may God have mercy on his soul.

She would have words, strong words, for Arslan, but right now it was most urgent to find that girl. Something terrible could happen to her, especially if she should find her way outside of this refuge. There were marauders everywhere now and crevices and sharp rocks and even wild animals that could harm a city child. She was a foreigner, an infidel, and a burden on the band’s flight, but she was their charge, and the family of Kara Göne was honor-bound to keep her safe.

“Kemal!” she called. “Wake up. That Christian girl has run off into the woods. She may have
headed up that peak. An eagle could attack her or she may fall. Go, quickly. Find her.”

The boy sprang to his feet and did as he had been told. Beyazgül meanwhile turned in another direction. No one knew this little canyon better than she. This was where she and Kara Göne had often ridden after their more daring raids. It was difficult to find and even more difficult to enter because of the narrow trail and overhanging rocks. Also, it was watered by a mountain stream. There was barely room enough for their whole band, those who had survived, but they could remain here as long as necessary, until they judged it safe to guide their horses carefully through the only opening wide enough for them to pass. There was only that one way out, unless one were a chamois or a bird.

Guided by the faint light of stars, as silently as a mountain animal skirting sharp rocks, touching here and there familiar pines, stopping again and again to listen and sniff the air, Beyazgül stepped toward that opening. She had nearly reached it when she heard something that did not sound like a fox or a startled hare. A sob, a human sob. She stood very still until she heard it again and turned toward it and peered to find the source. Then she stepped toward it, into the shadows of rocks and trees, and stretched her right hand forward and touched a shoulder, a thin, trembling shoulder that jumped at the touch and then relaxed.

Beyazgül stepped closer, no longer concerned about the sound of her steps or her garments, and reached around the girl. The girl shivered, then pressed closer to Beyazgül’s body, and finally reached her own arms out and around to clutch herself to the older woman.

Beyazgül hummed a low, wordless tune, till the slender heathen’s breathing slowed to match that of her embracer. She hummed a lullaby that she had sung or hummed to all of her children, including the three boys who had survived infancy. Brave but impetuous Evrenos, killed in a reckless charge at Nicopolis six years ago. The next son, her bold but also calculating lion-hawk, Arslanshahin, now the hope for all her clan. And hopelessly dreamy Mesud, skilled with bow and sword but much happier plucking a tambur. The girls had all died very young. She remembered one after another as she hummed and rocked the young pagan.

Strangely, the words to the lullaby came to her mind, though she had not summoned them. Then she realized with a start that it was the child in her arms who was singing them. Not whole words, and some of the syllables were garbled, like an infant’s efforts to imitate an adult’s speech. She grasped her even tighter then, thinking that by some magic her own lost daughters had returned to inhabit this foreigner. How had this Christian child learned this song?

Then the girl said something that Beyazgül didn’t understand until she repeated it, and it became clear. She was speaking Turkish! What she had said was, “Are you my mother?”

Beyazgül told her, slowly, soothingly, that no, she was not her mother, but that she would take care of her, because she had come under the protection of the clan of the hare, of the family of Kara Göne, and though she was a Christian she was also a she-child who must be kept safe. The girl said nothing but nestled more deeply into the woman’s embrace. And then, Beyazgül went on, whatever her son had done to offend her, she would assure her it would not happen again, for the lion-hawk Arslanshahin was a man of honor—

At the mention of that name the girl shivered again and tried to break away, but Beyazgül hung on tight. Then she began singing the song that earlier she had been humming, with the words the way they were supposed to be. The Christian princess then seemed to awake from a trance and spoke in that foreign, harsh-sounding tongue.

“We must return to the camp,” Beyazgül told her when she had become quiet again. And the girl, whether she understood the words or not, allowed Beyazgül to pull her up to her feet and to guide her back, but not to Arslan’s tent. To hers. And Beyazgül set her mind working on where this child had really come from.

In the morning, long before the first rays had found the bottom of the canyon, Beyazgül sought out
her son. As she expected, he was standing a little apart from his tent, looking east over the ridge, waiting
for the glow before making his devotions.

“We must take care of that princess,” she said in a commanding whisper.

Arslan continued looking east, toward the outline of the ridge. “We must ride west,” he said. Then
he turned to face her.

They stood looking at each other, each trying to guess the other’s meaning.

“West,” she said.

“To the Balkans, the mountains of Rum, the part the Christians call ‘Europe.’ That is where the
wealth is now.”

“And where Timur is not.” He looked at her for a long minute. “Mother, do you think I am afraid?”

“No, my son. I think that you are smart. With the sultan’s horde dispersed into all its tribes and
clans, all fighting for the same spoils, and with Timur’s victorious tümens chasing whatever remnants of
the horde our Osmanli princes can assemble, perhaps it is time for us to continue the journey our
ancestors began, ever westward.”

“Ever farther from our ancient grasslands.”

“Our ancestors’ graves.”

“Our spirits.”

“No, my son. The spirits are with us still. Tengri is not only in the sky but also in our hearts. And we
must keep him there. Kara Göne spoke to me in a dream last night and told me just what we had to do.”

“Yes, my mother. Tell me then what my father in the land of the spirits said to you.”

“First, he said that he has been proud of his son Arslan for many things. His chant from that place in
the land of the dead reserved for great heroes began, ‘My son Arslan has led our band bravely, has slain
many enemies and brought riches to our clan and to his yoldash. He has even managed to trick that
master conniver, the disreputable Ali Pasha, who doing the bidding of that wicked traitor to his father
and murderer of his brother Bayezid, killed me at Kosovo and arranged the death of Evrenos later at
Nicopolis. He has tricked that trickster into entrusting to him the treasures of the Rumeli city, and for
this great deed alone, beyond all the bloody slayings of his sharp kilitch and the glittering booty of his
many raids, as daring almost as those of his father, he has proven himself an alp whose songs will be
sung for forty generations in the seventy-two nations and should therefore be his father’s greatest boast
in the meclis of the spirits when we gather to brag about our sons.’

“Or so he had believed until now. But now, he says, he fears that he has been shamed, too shamed to
boast to the other spirits in the land of the dead. He is ashamed before the great Oguz himself.”

The sun’s growing glow made Arslan’s sudden pallor shimmer. “What do you say, my mother? Whence this shame?”

“Tell me, Arslanshahin, what your dead father already knows but what he felt too ashamed to tell
me. What did you do to frighten that Christian girl last night? And with that nasty Serb?”

“What I did with Zilha—those are things that a mother need not know.”

“I thought so. You may properly conceal it from me. But it is no use to hide it from Kara Göne. You
cannot hide anything from the dead.”

“This I can assure you, and my father must already know it. My father has no cause for shame. He
may face all our honored ancestors and even the mighty Oguz himself with pride. I did not touch that
Christian girl. I was not even aware of her presence until she shouted and ran out of the tent.”

Beyazgül stared at him a moment, doubting. “Do you swear this before your father’s spirit?”

“He surely already knows, and yes, I do so swear. I don’t know why he bothered even to say
anything to you about this in your dream.”

“Perhaps because there is something else. He is worried about that girl. The Christian girl, I mean
the Greek Christian, not that Serb.”

“Is there something wrong with her?”
“She was meant for the sultan or one of his sons.”
“Yes.”
“But she, she remains our charge, ours to bear, because we—because you, Arslanshahin Gazi—made a solemn promise.”
“To deliver her to the sultan. But the sultan is no more.”
“Exactly. The sultan is no more, and his sons, whether they are alive or dead, they no longer have any claim on our loyalty.”
Arslan said nothing for a moment. And then, “And then?”
“You must take her to be your new wife.”
Arslan turned his great mustaches again toward the sun, the glistening on the thick black hairs mirroring the widening glow above the ridge. “I do not disobey my mother, but what she says, I cannot do. I look to Tengri and see that it is written, that this is not to be. And how could she be my wife? I can’t even talk to her. And she does not know how to ride.”
Beyazgül continued looking at her son while he continued looking with a fierce face toward the brightening sky. As the light grew stronger he squinted and then closed his eyes tight, and without turning added, “I am a gazi. A gazi! And now more than ever, now that order has been destroyed in Anatolia, now that the sultan no longer commands and these mountains and valleys are all prey to quarrelling bands, now more than ever I can live and can protect you and all our band only by leading us in riding, fighting, raiding. Riding hard, striking, and riding even harder afterwards.
“Your know that life, you led it with my father. You, and Saljan, Nilüfer, and even Zilha, can keep up with me and my men from campsite to campsite. Once we reach the Balkans, there will be land to seize and I can create a beylik where you can have your apricots, if they will grow there. And as for that Zilha, we will need someone who speaks the languages, even if it is only to demand surrender. But the Christian girl, who doesn’t even know how to ride a horse, no, she cannot be a companion to a gazi. And pampered and sheltered as she has been all her life, she will be no use to you in growing apricots.”
“Either you marry her or we must return her to her people.”
“And why do we owe her such a favor?”
“Because—and this your father also confided in me, but it is to be a deep secret.”
“Yes?”
“She is really one of us. Her mother was an Oguz. And of a lineage that is especially dear to Oguz himself. Kara Göne would not say, or does not know, which lineage precisely, but Oguz does, and he wants her protected.”
“A Turk? He said she was a Turk?”
“Her mother was. And a highborn Turk of one of the most famous clans. She even taught the girl a few words of our Oguz lullabies. I know. I heard her.”
“She could have learned them from hearing Saljan singing to her daughters.”
“Ah, but she also spoke to me in Turkish. She asked me, ‘Are you my mother?’”
“That is two words, two words in our language.”
“I’m just saying what your father told me in my dream. Her mother was a Turk, an Oguz Turk. And because her father was the prince who now is emperor of the Rumeli, you know that the woman he lay with could only be of the highest rank. Someone, as your father said, that is especially important to Oguz. For Oguz and for your father, we must take care of her.”
“The sun has risen,” he said, turning his face again toward the east.
“Risen from our ancient homeland,” she answered. “From the land of our ancestors.”
“Whose word is law.”
“Whose word is law.”
“I can’t take the girl with me.”
“You would disobey your father?”
“No. I will take her to her city. To Istanbul, or whatever she calls it in her language. And we, we
will make new lives for ourselves in the mountains, the balkanli, west of the Marmara. Tell my father
that.”

“He knows, my son. I am sure. And he will be pleased. Though I don’t know what he thinks about
that Serb girl.”

“He must know that that too is written. We take the Serb because we go to her lands, where there are
already many of our people but more of hers. In that new world I will bring him such honor that his
boasts will shame all the other spirits whose sons have done much less.”

“May it be so, my son.”

PURPLE SUNSET

“The sun acts like an Emperor (ho helios basileuei).”

A Visit from Castile

15 Rebiyülahır 806 Hegira
(1 November, Anno Domini 1403)
Name Day of Saint Theodota

“Why, Melkion! What a surprise. I haven’t seen you since, well…”
“Since all that fawning over that lackey of the Turk.”
“You mean Stefan Lazarevich, Prince of Serbia? Please, Melkion, watch your tongue. Really, you
must accept that times have changed. Thanks to some miracle of God he survived the battle and has
come back to the fellows of his Christian Orthodox faith. And with so many Turkish bandits now raging
in the Balkans, it is only prudent for our emperor to keep a Serbian ally.”
“Yes, and very comfortable for him to remember his faith now that his Turkish master is dead. For
all our sins, it is a mystery why God turned that second fiend back to his eastern lands without
destroying us as well.”
“It proves that God still smiles on his most blessed City. Ah, but you know, not all of our faith think
Timur such a fiend. You see that crowd over there, with Hilarion, admiring the icons. The ones in the
funny clothes. They’ve been touring all our churches! Well, they’ve come all the way from Castile, in
distant Hispania, on the western edge of the world. And not just to meet with our Basileos Manuel and to
admire our churches. No. This is just a stop for them. They are an embassy that the king of Castile is
sending to the old cripple Timur, who must be somewhere near Samarkand by now. The Castilian has
some notion of forming an alliance with him, with Timur, I mean. He thinks that since the Great Khan of
Samarkand was the enemy of the sultan, he must be a friend of the Christians!”
“Latin fools. What do they know of easterners? Timur is such a barbarian he has no more notion of
civilization than to destroy it. The sultan was cruel and half-mad, but he was also half-Greek and he
loved our luxuries. That’s why Ioannes thought he could bribe him with a princess and a load of silk and
gold to spare our lives. And it probably would have worked. But Timur—”
“Oh, don’t worry about Timur. He did God’s will, he destroyed the sultan, and now he has gone
back east to where he belongs. Thank God. Thank God he didn’t do to our city what he did to Smyrna.
“But where have you been? I didn’t see you the day that insolent Frank brought the princess back. What a sight that was! And she in that barbaric costume. She looked like a Turk. People have always whispered that she really was half-Turk herself, and when we saw her with that janissary by her side, she really looked the part.”

“I was in my private monastery. This is my first day out. The day of Saint Theodota. I thought it would be propitious, the day of God’s gift. And the name day of that little princess.”

“In your monastery? With all these things happening in our City, and you closed in with your books?”

“Yes, precisely, with all that has been happening in our City. That was the problem. Too much was happening in our City. After we learned of the battle at Ankara, that the sultan who had tormented us had suddenly disappeared but that the terrible Timur had sacked Smyrna and laid waste to all the lands between there and Ankara, I could scarcely breathe, I was in such a state. Our whole world had changed; I was expecting at any moment some new disaster to befall us.

“When Manuel Palaiologos finally returned at least I could breathe again, because I believed, and still believe, he wouldn’t betray us the way his nephew Ioannes had tried to do, but the fright had been so great and the reversal so unexpected that I felt I could no longer discern God’s will, I had to pray and meditate and re-read the sacred texts. This is my first morning out—my children had almost forgotten my name. It’s chilly here in the shadows, but I feel safer here in the nave of this church.”

“And now you have come out. Did you reach some new understanding of God’s will?”

“No. But closer. Something in the preachings of the divine Chrysostom seemed to be telling me that there was something else I need to know, more clues that would be key to an understanding. That is why I have come out on this day. The day of the Gift of God, of Theodota. I thought I might see the princess here, on this her saint’s name day.”

“Not likely. She’s in a convent now.”

“Hmm. Yes. A janissary and a single slave girl were all the company she had. He’s Greek, that boy, from near Thessalonica. A good lad, it seems. And now he has come back to our Christian faith and wants to be known as Michael, which was the name he had before the Turks took him. He’s fed up with warfare, he told me, and Goudelis had sent one of his men to see him, thinks he might use him. A boy who speaks fluent Turkish and knows their customs can be an asset in Goudelis’ business. There he is, over there, with Hilarion and those funny-looking foreigners. The tall young fellow. He’s dressed like any normal Politan now. I had a chance to talk with him the other day.”

“How strange and unexpected that she should come back, and with such company. My wife and the other women can’t stop talking about it. What did that young man say?”

“Why, he said that he had been riding with a gazi band, which he didn’t explain. I think he must have been sent along as a spy for Ali Pasha. That’s because it was the same band that was supposed to be taking the princess and all that treasure and, if the stories are to be believed, the key to the City to the sultan. But then when Bayezid was destroyed and they couldn’t deliver their charge, their chieftain ordered them all to ride west for new territory in Europe, as far from Timur as they could imagine.

“And when they got close to Kotiaion—the boy only knew the name in Turkish and he called it ‘Kütahya’ but it’s the same town, it’s just a day’s ride away on a good horse—when they got to that place, the gazi ordered him to bring the princess back to the City. Just the two of them.”

“But why didn’t that gazi bandit keep her for a slave or an imperial ransom? They’re all robbers, those Mohammedans, especially the gazis.”

“Yes, impenetrable, these Orientals. But they have their superstitions. It seems the gazi chief had sworn to his god not to hurt her, and he didn’t want to take her all the way to the Balkans because she was slowing them down. That’s what the janissary said, anyway. And as you’ve no doubt heard, she was outfitted like a Turk, with all those dangling things on her headdress and riding a horse straddling it like
a man, when they ran into a scouting party of Frankish knights. The captain of those Franks at first thought they were both men. He didn’t even see the slave girl, who was following along far behind. And the janissary, that Mehmed-Michael lad, he thought they were going to attack and he pulled out his sword and the Franks were about to charge, but then the girl, the princess, recognized the Frankish captain and shouted out his name. Marcellus or something, one of those Frankish names.”

“She knew the Frank’s name? The princess?”

“That’s what young Michael said. God knows how they knew each other. But it’s not for us to question what goes on inside the palace walls. Anyway the Frank, why, he was so surprised it took him a moment to recognize her, all got up in Turkish pantaloons and tunic and headdress. But he held back his men, and then the princess shouted to Mehmed or Michael in Turkish to put his sword down, and he did.”

“Ah, so she was given the gift of tongues!”

“You know, you’ve heard those stories, that her mother must have been a Turk.”

“No, I never believed that. I think her mother must have been a Christian, because some angel has been protecting and instructing her. And now, you say, she has gone to live in a convent?”

“Yes, it must be boring after her adventures across half of Anatolia. But I’m sure she is more comfortable than most nuns, now that her father, Manuel, is back in the palace. You must be relieved. You were never a partisan of Ioannes.”

“What you have told me, Stasi, makes clearer the message the holy fathers had hidden in their texts. For look at this girl, this frail-limbed princess, snatched from these walls and placed at the mercy of the cruelest of the Turks, an uncultured and pitiless gazi. Who despite his pagan savagery has sent her back to her Christian home. Yes, I think I have come to understand that even God’s most holy and most solid city cannot protect us, that it is a sin of idolatry to put all our faith in her stout walls as though they themselves were God’s divine power. Faith alone is our best protection.”

“Amen. But a little help from a Genoese fleet would be welcome too. And meanwhile, I’m glad the walls are there.”

**Sunlight in Blachernae**

15 Rebiyülahır 806 Hegira
(1 November, Anno Domini 1403)
Name Day of Saint Theodota

The morning sun illuminates a halo of white beard and hair framing dark eyes and a smooth, ruddy forehead. A narrow-shouldered and quiet figure sits on a stool before a table set under the central window of the high-ceilinged, vaulted library. On the table, a sheet of goatskin parchment glows as white and bright as his beard beside other, darker bulks—big, squarish books, one so ancient its pages are of cracked and browning papyrus. Flashes of red, green, and purple wink from the jewels in the gold collar of his purple robe as he raises his right arm to begin the sign of the cross, then opens his fingers to pick a quill from its inkstand. The wearer of such a robe, its creases reflecting hues of deep-dyed purple, can only be the basileos of Romania, emperor and supreme pontifex of the Orthodox Christian world, Manuel II Palaiologos.

Behind him, the dome of the gold and jeweled imperial crown sits in shadow on its stand next to the throne, which is in deeper shadow upon a thickly carpeted platform dominating the small carpeted area reserved for the reverences of only a few courtiers. For this is not the principal throne room, far larger and more magnificent, but a work area, where the basileos—bareheaded now—composes the essays that
have spread his fame even among the heretics who follow the Latin version of the Christian faith.

The basileos has finished his morning’s rounds of meetings with his ministers and petitioners—as usual, he has started receiving these visitors shortly after sunrise—and has dismissed his logothete and even his guards, now posted outside the door, so that he can do what he loves most, to think and write.

He reads over his draft of his reply to his younger brother Theodore, despot of the Morea. The Morea, the Peloponessus, is the empire’s last remaining possession in Greece, in fact, its last remaining hold anywhere in mainland Europe. Things are going better for Theodore there at present, after decades of precarious survival against onslaughts of Venetians, Catalans, Osmanlis. Theodore’s short message notes, however, that there are more Turkish marauders seeking to raid his villages now than ever, the sultan’s disaster at Ankara having driven the gazi bandits westward from Anatolia.

But Manuel reminds him that at least they are not united under a leader as canny and dangerous as Bayezid. Not yet, anyway. But perhaps he should strike that phrase, “Not yet.” Theodore needs no reminding of the dangers.

He lifts and then with some regret sets aside another parchment where he has begun what he hopes will be one of his most lasting contributions to empire and to the faith, letters to his now ten-year-old son, Ioannes, the first of his legitimate children, for him to read and study when, at some future date, he will be crowned basileos as Ioannes VIII.

Manuel’s most ambitious literary efforts up till now have dealt with subtle issues of theology, which certainly must be a Christian ruler’s first concern. But in these letters he considers it important to take up more practical matters, on virtue and the goodness of a ruler and how best to achieve those two most important temporal virtues, peace and justice. May his son and any other future ruler avoid the chaotic rule of Manuel’s father, the pathologically indecisive Ioannes V. Mistaking peace for the mere avoidance of conflict, Ioannes V had sought to comply with whatever pressure was most immediate, whether from the Venetians or the Osmanlis or his own nobles, pleasing no one and achieving neither peace nor justice. Manuel had had to rescue him several times from his various disasters.

On the other extreme, Manuel also insists that his son must shun the unbridled cruelty of a far more decisive ruler, the Osmanli Bayezid, the well-named “Thunderbolt,” who among his other crimes had for a time held Manuel captive, forcing him to fight against his own co-religionaries and then threatening to blind him before Manuel at last escaped.

But those reflections can wait another day. Today is the day of Hagia Theodota, the saint called “Gift of God,” the name he gave his love-child who was his greatest comfort at a time of great distress. She was born just nine months after Manuel, having been sent into exile from Constantinople during one of his father’s irrational fits of compliance with his enemies, first found himself on Lemnos. On that poor and rustic isle. He thinks back now on that girl, the goat-herder’s daughter, a lovely, gentle Christian soul so unlike the cynical connivers in Constantinople, the mercenary Venetians, or the superstitious and violent Osmanlis.

Eirene, “Peace,” he called her—though her parents called her by another name in the island dialect. His beloved bastard daughter is now nearly sixteen, the age her mother was when Manuel first loved her.

Manuel is aware that people in Polis think he has concealed that lover’s name because it would be embarrassing to him, but no, a relationship with an honest goat-herder’s daughter could not be a source of shame to the basileos. He concealed her identity at first, while they were still on Lemnos, to protect her from his many enemies. And then, when she died shortly after giving birth, to protect her family. He had secretly sent the goat-herder, and later his widow, a stipend every year whenever he could.

Perhaps now that she is more mature and her grandparents are both dead, he should tell Theodota herself who her mother was. But it hardly seems necessary. She has grown up thinking she is a daughter of the City’s spirit, of Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia, and in a sense that is true, truer than the carnal mother she could never know.

So instead he will write to her of God, to praise her for her Christian goodness and to add his
strength to hers to remain strong in her faith.

She is my gift from God, my Theodota, that my nephew wished to make a gift to God’s enemy the sultan. But God has preserved her, and has returned her to His holy city, so that she may give of herself now as a gift to God.

The Virgin of Sure Hope

15 Rebiyülahır 806 Hegira
(1 November, Anno Domini 1403)
Name Day of Saint Theodota

“Oh. Excuse me, uh, Your Highness. I didn’t know…”

“Hmm? Is that—? Oh, it’s Eirene. Olga, show her in. Come in, child, come in.”

Theodota watched in the mirror as Olga lifted her combs, revealing the delicate rolls of hair still waiting to be threaded with pearls. With only the slightest turn of her eyes, she could see the reflection of the doorway, where she could make out a bit of knee and shoulder in a simple dark cassock barely intruding into the room. She turned her eyes to Olga’s in the mirror and with a quick raise of an eyebrow, signaled to her former slave, who turned and motioned to the figure in the doorway. A skinny, awkward girl with plain, unfashionably red hair parted in the middle and pulled down and back as though to hide it shuffled into the room.

“Oh!” the newcomer gasped again when she looked up. “But there are two of…Oh, I know, it’s a mirror! Then—is that me? Oohh! Forgive me. I didn’t mean it, to look into the face of Your Exalted Highness.”

Theodota smiled and almost laughed. “No, no, not ‘Highness.’ Here we are all sisters. You may call me Sister Dota. Or Sister Sophia, which may be my new name in the faith.”

Theotokos Bebaios Elpidos, the Virgin of Sure Hope, was a small monastery near the palace, with a large garden and famous library and an exceptionally cultured mother superior, and thus was the monastery of choice for women from the best families of Polis—widows, wives separating from husbands after the children were grown, women considered unmarriageable because of smallpox scars or other defects, and an occasional rare, healthy young woman from a monied family with a strong religious vocation. And, like other monasteries, Sure Hope also took in poor girls and women who could offer no money gift to the monastery but might or might not be able to help with the menial chores of laundry, housekeeping, and food preparation. All told, twenty-five nuns and novices.

Eirene had been admitted at the insistence of Theodota. She had appeared along with a dozen other urchins outside the city walls some weeks after Theodota and Olga’s more celebrated arrival. A fisherman had taken pity on the ragged children stumbling through the dust and ferried them across the Bosphorus, but not daring to enter the Golden Horn, he had left them farther south on the bank of the Marmara, near the Fortress of the Seven Towers. They were at first taken for beggars from one of the villages devastated in turn by Osmanlis and Timurids. But then the patriarch’s secretary, the monk Loukas, summoned to quiet them, had recognized them as survivors of the hundred or so Christian child slaves that he himself had helped round up as a gift to the sultan. Though their clothing was soiled and in tatters, the tatters were of fine spun linen and their accents when they shouted for help were unmistakably those of the City.

Embarrassed and ashamed, Loukas ordered them taken to a monastery-orphanage until it could be decided what to do with them. When Theodota learned of this new miracle of the children’s survival, she most humbly supplicated the mother superior that the girl from Bootmaker’s Alley also be admitted to
Sure Hope. And a supplication by a daughter of the basileos could not easily be dismissed.

Theodota was aware that Eirene shared a room with another novice and three older nuns back near the kitchen, but it had not occurred to her until now that they would have no mirror. She herself enjoyed a large suite of rooms from which several older nuns had been displaced and which the basileos’ servants had furnished only a degree more modestly than her old quarters in the Blachernae palace.

“Such beautiful hair. And will you let them cut it all off?”

Theodota laughed. “Now why would I do that?”

“But no one can be a nun without the tonsure.”

Theodota sat up more stiffly. Gently, very gently, she raised her hands to touch the large rolls of hair interwoven with pearls that Olga had arranged atop and around her head.

“Well, then, I just may remain a novice.”

“I want to take the vows as soon as I turn sixteen. It’s nice here in the monastery, with just women. It smells so much nicer than Bootmaker’s Alley. And the food is better, though much plainer than what we used to get in the caravan. And there are no horses almost trampling you, no men shouting at you, no fighting and killing. And I don’t really mind all the work here, compared to those long marches we had to take in the mountains.

“But I almost forgot, Sister Highness. I’ve brought you something. A messenger from the basileos your father left it this morning and said to give it to you right away. May I?”

“May you what?”

“I left it just outside the door. Two things, really. A letter and a coffer. If I may.”

“Yes, get them and bring them to me. From the basileos my father you say. How sweet. My name day, Saint Theodota.”

The letter was pleasant and formal, like her father, and disappointingly impersonal, Theodota thought after she had gotten through most of it. It was mostly admonitions to trust in God and to remain humble and prayerful, and it congratulated her on her entry into the monastery. Theodota wondered if her father really remembered who she was. Or even if he did, he didn’t know her now, after he had been away for two years and she had been in a kafes, on a camel, and finally on horseback halfway across Anatolia in the company of Turkish warriors.

What Eirene had called a coffer was really a beautifully worked box of ivory, gold, and silver, which opened to reveal an icon of the warrior saint, the famously brave and handsome Theodore Stratelates. In the letter her father said he was commending her to this saint’s care. Yes, he was handsome, with his sad eyes and his beard and his strong arms swinging a sword and slaying a dragon. So she was to be a tonsured nun, in the care of the warrior saint. She held the icon up to her cheek, then a little away from her.

Through a window of her room she could see the monastery garden, and beyond that she knew, these days she really knew, was Anatolia, the world, with mountains and forests and strange people. The warrior saint who would protect her. She would ride with him across the mountains.

She stood up and carried the icon to the bench where Olga had laid out all her face and hair-coloring implements. She put the icon of the warrior saint down on the bench and picked up a brush. She found a little heap of powder of a color like that of Saint Theodore Stratelates’ cheeks and forehead and dabbed it on the saint’s chin over the beard. And then a bit more of the skin-colored powder over the jaw and neck. She was aware that Olga was watching her, and that was good, that Olga should see this.

But she had forgotten about the red-haired young novice behind her until she heard her cry out, “It’s him! He even has the turban. It’s the gazi with the mustaches!”

Startled out of her reverie, Theodota lifted the brush and turned stiffly to the cross on the wall beside the window before looking again across the garden and up to the eastern sky. “No, Eirene. Not the gazi. I meant my saint to be Digenes Akrites,” she said. “The warrior of two peoples.”
A single rider cantered up the trail just as the sun had begun to drop toward the higher mountains to the west. His skullcap with upturned brim and the loose dolman over his shirt showed him to be a Turkish warrior. His stallion, larger than usual for a Turkish mount, was having no trouble with the climb, moving with contained energy, ready for a burst of speed if it should be needed. But they, horse and rider, continued at the same brisk but unstrained pace to the very top of the hill, which dominated a river valley to the west and a wide plain to the east. The rider reined in and turned his horse toward the east.

Behind them the sky was beginning to turn purple with layers of gold and red. Before them, the first sliver of the new moon shone like the curved blade of a yatagan poised to strike. The rider paused and breathed deeply, his chest rising and falling for several moments. Then he quickly raised his hands and grasped the ends of the mustaches that drooped all the way to his chest and pulled them back and knotted them behind his head, under the brim of his cap, with a ribbon of green silk. The greens and reds of the back of his dolman glowed in the strong rays of setting sun, while his face and front were shadowed. The horse snorted and pawed the ground and the man’s head and chest jerked as though with a little laugh.

They waited as the sky before them darkened, the rays of sun behind them growing narrower and more intense. Now the new moon and its companion star shone more brightly in the heaven. Tengri’s heaven. The rider reached down to a leather bag tied to the pommel of his saddle, a bag that had once been the bladder of a horse but now was decorated with tassels and beads and semi-discs of silver. From the bag he drew an object almost as long as his forearm and raised it toward the new moon in the east, toward the great city that he and his fellows had left behind, for the time being. And as he raised high as an offering to moon and star the golden and silver key to the Golden Gate of the City on the Bosphorus, he laughed.

NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


Turkish phrase, Üstte Tanrı basmasa, alıta yer delinmese, Türk budunu, ılini töreni kim atar? : “Unless the sky collapsed, the earth was pierced, Turkish nation, who can destroy your land and your tradition?”

Chapter “The Chief Vizier”: Citation of Osman’s dream from Edward Shepherd Creasy, History of Osmanli Turks; From the Beginning of their Empire to the Present Time (1878), quoted in Wikipedia, Osman’s Dream (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osman’s_Dream).


Chapter “Birds”: “So tightly must the region be sealed that even the birds would see that it was useless to overfly it, declared Chandarli Ali Pasha.” Based on this passage: “Arrivé à Ankara, Bayazid apprit que Timur se trouvait avec son armée à Siwas et qu’il avait l’intention de se diriger vers Tokat. Le Sultan promulguait immédiatement un irade, ordonnant d’obstruer tous les passages de la route de Siwas à Tokat, notamment les défils du Yildiz Dagh. Cet ordre fut exécuté avec une telle minutie que les oiseaux jugeaient inutile de voler dans cette région, dit Idris Bitlisi dans son style imagé.”


In addition to the works cited above, I am especially indebted to Cemal Kafadar, Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State. (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1995)

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