



PROFESSOR K: THE
FINAL
QUEST

A JACK ROGAN MYSTERY

GABRIEL FARAGO

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An action-packed historical medical mystery

Jack Rogan Mysteries Book 4

Gabriel Farago

Author's Note

Istanbul. Sparkling gem on the Bosphorus, where East and West collide and Europe meets Asia. I can think of no other metropolis where diverse cultures, religions, and thousands of years of history intersect in such a dramatic way. The name alone conjures up images of bloody conquests, fallen empires, armies marching into battle and stupendous buildings reaching to the heavens, where the muezzin's haunting call echoes through ancient squares, calling the faithful to prayer.

Our guide—a Turkish archaeologist—had just taken us through the Topkapi Palace and the Hagia Sophia, one the most awe-inspiring edifices on the planet.

'There's one more thing you have to see,' he said, pointing to a beautiful small pavilion next to the basilica. 'It's a turbe; a tomb. The tomb of Selim II. What I'm about to show you is a reminder of barbaric times, absolute power, and murder. Not just any murder, but the most horrific mass murder imaginable. It's a sad part of our history that's often overlooked and rarely talked about. Even the historians here would like to forget all about it.'

My curiosity aroused, I took off my shoes and followed the professor inside. Designed by Sinan—the famous Ottoman architect—and built in 1577, the stunning building decorated with colourful Iznik tiles and marble that reflected the bright morning sun, hides a dark secret. Expecting to find the tomb of Selim II, son of Suleiman the Magnificent and sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1566 until his death in 1574, I was surprised to find many additional graves.

Silently, we followed our guide along the solemn rows of sarcophagi covered in green cloth, some of them quite small. 'I can see you are a little confused,' said our guide. 'If you think this looks more like a cemetery than a tomb, you are right. It is. As you can see, Selim is not alone. There are many others buried in here with him. That may be curious enough, but who they are, and how and why many of them died, is far more intriguing and will shock you.' Our guide paused, no doubt to let the tension grow.

'To begin with,' he continued, 'we have five of Selim's sons buried next to him over there. They were all murdered on the night he died in December 1574. Why? To ensure that his eldest son, Murad III, would succeed him peacefully and without being challenged.'

‘By silencing possible rivals?’ I asked.

‘Precisely.’

‘And who are the others?’

‘Nineteen of them are sons of Murad III, who were murdered on the night *he* died in January 1595. They were all strangled by deaf-mutes with a silk chord.

‘Are you suggesting that by murdering all of his half-brothers, the eldest son secured his succession and became the next sultan?’

‘Yes.’

During the stunned silence that followed, I looked along the rows of solemn graves, each a sad reminder of a life cut short by naked ambition, lust for power, and fear. Momentarily overcome by the sadness of the moment, my mind began to wander. *What if one of them had somehow been spared?* I asked myself. *What if one of them had managed to escape, and survived? What if ...?*

For some reason, I couldn’t get these haunting questions out of my mind. They stayed with me and became the inspiration for this book.

*Gabriel Farago
Leura, Blue Mountains, Australia*

PROLOGUE
Topkapi Palace, Constantinople; 16 January 1595

I. 2 A.M.

Fear and terror spread through the silent corridors of Topkapi Palace during the night like a deadly poison. Murad III, grandson of Suleiman the Magnificent, Caliph of Islam, Amir al-Mu-minim, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques was dying.

Safiye Sultan, Murad's favourite consort and mother of Mehmed, his oldest son and heir, knew it was time. To secure her son's accession, all possible rivals had to be silenced; swiftly and permanently. Her own future and position at the palace depended on it. Upon Murad's death she would become valide sultan, and Safiye was determined to make sure that nothing stood in her way.

Safiye summonsed GazanferAğa, chief of the white eunuchs and head of the enderun—the Imperial Seraglio—to her chambers. 'Murad will not see the sun come up,' she said. 'As soon as he ascends to paradise you must act; without mercy. You know what to do.' GazanferAğa smiled, bowed, and took his leave. He knew that once he had carried out Safiye's deadly orders, she would be forever in his debt. This would not only consolidate his already considerable power, but elevate his position to dizzying heights. GazanferAğa had carefully prepared for this moment. Everything was ready and in place. He knew the feared deaf-mutes were standing by and waiting for his orders.

Fatma Hatun, Murad's youngest consort, lay awake in her bedchamber. Gripped by fear and worry for her only son, Osman, who had just turned 16, she realised the dreaded event she had feared since the boy's birth, had arrived. Carefully, she removed the beautiful tile behind her bedding and reached into the hole in the wall. This was her secret hiding place which contained the precious gems—all gifts from a besotted Murad—that could save her son's life. It also contained other treasures which she was about to give to him.

Legs crossed and looking tense, Osman sat on a cushion in front of his mother, watching. Blessed with striking good looks and an agile, inquisitive mind that thrived on curiosity and

learning, Osman had been groomed for this moment all his life. He therefore knew exactly what he had to do. His mother had gone over every step a thousand times before, except one. ‘This is for you, my son,’ she said, and handed Osman a small silver cylinder. ‘Keep it on your person at all times and guard it with your life.’

‘What is it?’ asked Osman.

‘Your future; open it.’

Osman opened the container and emptied its contents onto the carpet. First, a heavy little leather pouch filled with a small fortune in gold coins and gems slid out and fell on the floor. Next, he pulled out a tightly rolled-up little canvas and several sheets of paper. When he unfurled the canvas, he saw that it was a stunning little portrait of his mother he had never seen before. Surprised, he pointed to the painting spread out on the carpet in front of him.

‘This was painted by Marco Vecellio, Titian’s pupil. Your father commissioned the painting soon after I was given to him as a present by one of his sisters. I was 16, the same age as you.’

‘And these?’ asked Osman, holding up a few sheets of paper covered in beautiful calligraphy and decorated with exquisite miniature paintings at the top.’

Fatma smiled as she remembered the passionate nights spent with Murad. She had succeeded where others had failed. She had managed to reignite the sultan’s appetite for carnal pleasures. ‘These are recipes of the sultan’s favourite dishes,’ she said. ‘I copied them myself from the originals that belonged to your great-grandfather, Suleiman the Magnificent, and are still kept here at the palace. These dishes are the best in the empire and the reason you exist. They are treasures—’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Osman, looking puzzled.

‘You will. One day. Now, however, it is time; come.’

Fatma handed Osman a small porcelain cup and kissed him tenderly on the forehead. ‘Drink it,’ she said, tears in her eyes. ‘For a short while you will sink into a deep sleep. When you wake up, you will be safe ... You know what to do?’

‘Yes,’ said Osman and drained the cup.

‘There is one more thing,’ said Fatma. She took off the beautiful signet ring she wore on her right index finger—her only remaining contact with a happier past—and handed it to Osman. ‘This was given to me by my father in Venice just before I was captured by pirates and became a

slave. It now belongs to you. It will open many doors and show who you are, and where you come from. Keep it safe.'

'I will,' said Osman, his speech slurred from the powerful drug.

'Goodbye, my son,' whispered the distraught mother, 'we shall never meet again in this life. Perhaps in heaven? Who knows ...?' Fatma, a Venetian Christian, fell to her knees and began to pray.

Murad looked for the last time at his favourite dwarfs and buffoons sitting on the carpet in front of his divan, their colourful costumes a cheerful reminder of the fun-times he had shared with them in the palace gardens. Then, with his eyesight fading, he turned his face slowly towards Mecca, and died. GazanferAğa walked over to the divan to make sure that the sultan was dead. Satisfied, he gave the signal. The deaf-mute standing at the door nodded and quickly left the room.

The three Nubian deaf-mutes hurried through the corridors of the inner palace like black angels of death, their excited, sweat-covered faces glistening in the moonlight. Purchased as young, castrated boys, they had been brought to the palace as special slaves to be trained as eunuchs. Later, they had their tongues split to prevent them from speaking, and their eardrums burst with hot needles to make them deaf.

First, they dispatched the babies and toddlers. Strangling them quickly with silk chords used for executions was easy, and took only a few minutes. The teenagers were more difficult to deal with. The assassins had to work as a team to kill them swiftly, and calm their hysterical mothers.

Bribery and corruption in the palace were rife, and greed a powerful tool used by the ambitious and the ruthless to hatch conspiracies and forge alliances. Because Topkapi Palace was built like a fortress surrounded by high walls and guarded by an army of fierce janissaries, it had become a confined hotbed of power, where deadly rivals were often separated by only a corridor, a small courtyard or a thin wall. The eyes and ears of spies and traitors were therefore never far away, and trust was as precious and as rare as diamonds.

When the assassins entered Osman's room, they saw Fatma standing in front of her drugged son lying on the carpet. This was a deliberate and prearranged ploy, making him appear lifeless and limp and therefore easier to handle without arousing suspicion.

One of the deaf-mutes pointed to Osman. Fatma nodded, handed him a fistful of precious gems wrapped in a silk handkerchief, and stepped aside. The tall Nubian stuffed the handkerchief into his pocket, lifted the boy off the floor and carried him outside.

It took the deaf-mutes less than an hour to kill all of Murad's 19 other sons, put the bodies into sacks and have them removed from the Harem by trusted slaves before the household woke to the news that the sultan was dead, and had been succeeded by his eldest son, Mehmed. When the sacks containing the bodies were lined up in a row in a secret underground chamber, awaiting burial, no one appeared to have noticed that one of them wasn't dead.

II. SUNRISE

‘It’s done,’ said GazanferAğa as the first rays of the morning sun banished the darkness, giving the still waters of the harbour below the palace a pinkish glow. Safiye smiled. With her son’s accession now safe and assured, she had just become the valide sultan, the most powerful woman in the empire.

Two dwarfs entered the secret underground chamber. ‘Where are you?’ whispered one of them. ‘Over here,’ mumbled Osman. Still a little weak and feeling disorientated from the effects of the powerful drug, he began to wriggle inside the sack.

One of the dwarfs untied the rope at the top and helped Osman crawl out. ‘Here, put this on,’ he said, handing Osman clothes usually worn by the cooks in the kitchens. ‘Quickly! Everything is ready.’

Safiye Sultan sat in the walled courtyard garden which only a few days ago had been the late sultan’s favourite place in the entire palace. Elated, she looked thoughtfully across the still waters of the Golden Horn and contemplated the dawn of a new era in which she and her son, Mehmed, would rule one of the largest empires of their time. Immeasurable wealth and absolute power were at last within her grasp and years of careful, dangerous plotting were about to bear fruit. The thought of her rivals cowering in fear as they awaited their fate which she, as the new valide, now held in her tiny hands, made her heart beat faster.

She was about to close her eyes to savour the moment, when one of GazanferAğa’s dwarfs approached. At Safiye’s signal, the dwarf walked over to his mistress and whispered something into her ear. Safiye paled. ‘Get GazanferAğa; quickly!’ she commanded and hurried inside. If what the dwarf had just told her was true, her new world was under serious threat and could collapse at any moment, burying her dreams forever.

GazanferAğa stood in the secret underground chamber and counted the sacks containing the bodies of the murdered princes. *19*, he thought, *it can’t be!* and counted them again. ‘Open them!’ he barked at last. Two dwarfs stepped forward and opened the sacks. GazanferAğa walked slowly along the row of bodies lined up on the stone floor and carefully looked at each of

the faces. Some—with sightless, glassy eyes bulging like the eyes of a curious fish and tongues hanging out of mouths wide open in silent terror—were so contorted by a sudden, violent death, that GazanferAğa had to look twice before he could recognise the once familiar features. *One is missing*, he thought. *Osman isn't here!*

When Safiye heard the dreaded news, she knew exactly who had to be behind it all; Fatma, Osman's mother. She also realised that Fatma could not have acted alone. This was a carefully planned conspiracy involving officials at the highest level. Safiye knew that there were many at the palace who despised her and Mehmed with a passion, and would prefer another sultan. She also realised that Fatma's plan was as simple as it was brilliant. By having removed all of Murad's sons except Osman, Safiye had unwittingly placed Osman next in line after Mehmed. Should something happen to Mehmed, Osman would become sultan. That was the law. Safiye's head began to spin as one word throbbed through her aching brain and refused to go away: *assassination!* Her son was in serious danger!

'How could this have happened?' demanded Safiye, seething.

'We'll know soon enough,' replied GazanferAğa calmly.

'You have a plan?'

'Yes. Osman must be hiding somewhere inside the palace, so much is clear. I have already alerted the guards, and my most trusted deaf-mutes are searching every corner of the Harem right now. We'll find him. Not even a mouse can leave this place without being discovered.'

'What else?'

'The three deaf-mutes who carried out the executions are in irons ...'

'And Fatma?'

'Being interrogated right now; persuasively. It won't be long before we know everything.'

'Good. I don't have to remind you that we are not safe as long as Osman lives. Mehmed is in great danger. We must protect him!'

'Already taken care of.'

Not entirely convinced, but feeling better, Safiye looked at GazanferAğa. He's the most ruthless and ambitious man I know, she thought, and therefore my best protection. He knows exactly what will happen if he fails ... And so do I ...'

GazanferAğa's janissaries—the sultan's bodyguards—searched the palace with ruthlessly efficiency, interrogating anyone without mercy, suspected of having information about Prince Osman's whereabouts. Soon, a trail of torture-blood led to the palace kitchens. There, in one of the huge, vaulted chambers, they discovered something ominous.

'We've found something,' said the captain of the bodyguards, 'come.'

Surprised, GazanferAğa followed the captain to the massive kitchens. 'Good news, I hope,' he said. The captain did not reply. Instead he pointed to a wretch lying in a pool of blood on the stone floor. Barely alive, the man—a cook—was staring at GazanferAğa with his remaining eye, blood oozing out of the empty socket of the other which had been gouged out earlier.

'What did you find?' demanded GazanferAğa impatiently.

'This,' said the captain and pointed to a rope dangling from a hook in the vaulted ceiling next to a chimney high above the kitchen floor.

GazanferAğa looked up at the tall ceiling and the open chimney at the top—just wide enough for a man to crawl through—a shiver of unfamiliar fear tingling down his spine. 'Do you think he could have ...?' he asked, shaking his head.

The captain pointed to the man on the floor. 'He just confirmed it,' said the janissary.

'When?'

'Two hours ago.'

'The roof's been searched?'

'Yes.'

'And?'

'We found another rope.'

'Where?'

'On top of the palace roof, near the main gate.'

'To help scale the wall leading outside?'

'It would appear so.'

'And Osman?'

'Nothing.'

VENICE; JANUARY, 1597

The dense winter mist hovering above the murky waters of the Canale Grande covered Venice like a shroud. *It should be right here, near the Realto Bridge,* thought the young man sitting in the back of the small rowing boat. He was watching the ghost-like facades of the palazzos glide silently past like elaborate sets in some exotic play. Visibility was poor, and even the thick woollen cloak could do little to keep out the bone-chilling cold. As the vessel scraped along one of the posts used for tying up boats, the young man caught a glimpse of a crest set into a stone arch above him. He looked at the ring on his little finger, and smiled.

‘Stop! We are here,’ he shouted, pointing to a tall, ornate building rising out of the mist. The man at the oars pulled over and tied up the boat. ‘Wait here,’ said the young man excitedly. He climbed out of the boat and almost slipped on the wet, slippery wooden steps leading up to a narrow, moss-covered stone landing. Then he looked first at the massive portal, and then at the crest set into the stone above it, and nodded. *This is definitely it,* he thought and pulled his dagger out of his belt. Using the heavy hilt, he knocked on the iron-studded wooden door, his heart beating like a drum.

The destination he had been dreaming about for two long years was finally within his grasp. Yet, now that he appeared to have reached what he had yearned for, doubts began to claw at his empty stomach, churning up uncertainty and a little fear.

For what seemed an eternity, he stood in front of the door in silence and listened. Nothing. Then he knocked again – this time harder – and placed his ear against the door. After a while, he thought he could hear footsteps. Then a key turned in the lock and the heavy door creaked slowly open. A small, wizened old man, his face a creased map of a long life of hardship, looked at him with watery eyes. ‘What do you want?’ he growled.

‘I would like to see Cosimo da Baggio,’ replied the young man, taken a little aback by the almost hostile reception.

‘He’s not receiving; go away.’ Before the old man could close the door, the young man took a step forward and blocked it with his boot.

‘I think he will,’ he said calmly, pulled the ring off his finger and handed it to the old man. ‘Give him this.’

The old man looked at the ring, his eyes wide with astonishment and surprise. ‘Who are you?’ he asked after a while.

‘His grandson.’

‘Wait here,’ whispered the old man and closed the door.

The grand da Baggio family palazzo had seen better days. Built in the early 16th century to impress and show off the wealth of the influential merchant family that had produced two doges, several cardinals, one pope and even a saint, was in obvious decline. The large entry foyer and the central atrium with the imposing staircase the young man had heard so much about from his mother, should have been adorned with paintings by famous Venetian artists like Giorgone and Titian. Instead, the palazzo was empty, with only a few lonely family portraits gracing the corridors. Cold and damp, evidence of neglect was everywhere, a sad but accurate mirror of the family’s waning fortunes.

‘Not exactly what I expected,’ said the young man, following the old man up the stairs, ‘what happened?’

The old man stopped in front of a tall door on the first floor, caught his breath, and opened it. ‘You’ll find out soon enough,’ he replied. ‘The master is dying,’ he added sadly, before stepping aside to let the young visitor enter.

At first, the young man couldn’t see anything because it was almost completely dark in the room. The windows were covered with heavy brocade drapes, a fire crackling in a huge stone fireplace on the opposite side the only source of light in the dank room smelling of sickness and decay. As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, the young man could make out a huge four-poster bed in front of the fire. Otherwise, the room appeared to be empty.

‘Come closer where I can see you,’ said a surprisingly strong voice coming from the bed.

The young man walked over to the bed and looked at the gaunt face staring at him.

A bony, shaking hand held up the ring. ‘Where did you get this?’ demanded the face.

‘It’s a long story.’

‘I’m a good listener; sit.’ The bony hand pointed to a chair by the fireplace. The young man pulled the chair across to the bed and sat down.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Osman.’

‘Hm... I am Cosimo da Baggio. Now tell me all about yourself.’

Over the next hour, Osman told his extraordinary story. He explained who he was, where he had come from, and why. He spoke of his mother with tenderness and love, and described life at the court of the Sultan of the mighty Ottoman Empire. He spoke of growing up in the harem at Topkapi Palace, watched over by his mother who had taught him Italian, brought him up as a Christian in a Muslim world, and had told him many stories about Venice and her childhood in the very palazzo they were in. He recounted events and places in surprising detail only a person intimately acquainted with the da Baggio family and its history could possibly have known, all proof of who he was, and the truth of what he was telling. Cosimo only interrupted once, when Osman described his dramatic escape from Topkai Palace and the reasons for it.

‘Are you suggesting that 19 of your half-brothers were killed the night your father died, to ensure your oldest brother’s succession to the throne?’ asked Cosimo, the incredulity in his voice obvious.

‘Yes.’

‘Unbelievable.’

‘He’s telling the truth,’ said a deep voice coming out of the darkness. Osman turned around, surprised. He had assumed there was no one else in the room. Slowly, a tall figure emerged out of the gloom and came closer, the skullcap, black cassock, purple sash and heavy gold pectoral cross a clear indication that he was a prince of the Church. ‘I’ve heard reports about that horrible event, and the new sultan’s men were looking for a young courtier last year, right here in Venice ...’

The bony hand pointed again; this time to the tall figure standing next to Osman.

‘This is Cardinal Urbano,’ said Cosimo, introducing his brother.

‘One thing bothers me,’ said the Cardinal. ‘The fratricide took place almost two years ago ... *Where have you been during that time?*’

‘After my escape from the palace, I made it safely down to the harbour and went into hiding. My plan was to somehow join a merchant ship and get away as soon as possible. This turned out to be much more difficult than expected. The sultan’s janissaries were everywhere; looking for me. I was a great threat to the new sultan, you see. Because he had killed all possible contenders

to the throne, I was the only surviving rival. Should he die without an heir, I would become sultan. That was the law. As long as I lived, he wasn't safe ...'

Osman paused, collecting his thoughts.

'What happened next?' prompted Cosimo after a while.

'After lying low in a warehouse, I managed to get on board one of the ships by hiding inside a barrel. The ship sailed the next morning, and I became a stowaway. I had some food and water that would last for a couple of days, and no one came down into the hold in the bowels of the ship to inspect the cargo. For the first time since leaving the palace I felt safe. However, this illusion didn't last long ...'

'Oh? How come?' interjected the Cardinal.

'On the third day of the journey, the ship was attacked by pirates. Fierce fighting erupted on deck, and I decided it was time to show myself. This I did, and joined in the melee. I thought that perhaps by making myself useful in repelling the attack – I am a good swordsman – I could find acceptance among the crew. For a while things looked promising, but then the pirates gained the upper hand and took the ship. Most of the crew was killed.'

'But not you,' interrupted Cosimo.

'No. I was captured and taken to the slave market in Alexandria. I was young and strong, and the pirates thought I was worth something to them alive. I was sold to a spice trader and began to work for him in his warehouse. Looking back, I think this saved my life. The sultan's agents and spies were searching for me everywhere. They were sent to every corner of the empire and a huge reward was offered for my capture.'

'I heard about that,' said the Cardinal, nodding his head.

'Inside the spice trader's warehouse, no one gave me a second look. I was a slave toiling from sunup to sunset. I was invisible. I stayed there for a year, until a fortuitous event changed everything.'

'What happened?' asked the Cardinal.

'A fire broke out. It wiped out most of the neighbourhood. The spice trader's warehouse burnt to the ground, many were killed, but I managed to make my escape. After that, I reinvented myself, became a seafarer and joined a Spanish merchant ship. This wasn't too difficult in Alexandria. Merchants were always looking for crew. After many a journey, I finally made it to Venice; and here I am,' said Osman quietly. He reached inside his tunic and pulled out the metal

tube his mother had given him the night of his escape from the palace. ‘Somehow, I’ve been able to keep this safe during all that has happened to me,’ said Osman. ‘No one thought of searching a poor wretch like me for anything valuable. I managed to conceal this container on my person and keep it with me at all times, just as my mother had instructed me to do.’

Osman opened the container and pulled out the rolled-up little painting. ‘She asked me to give you this,’ he whispered, his eyes misting over, and began to unfurl the painting. Leaning forward, Cosimo pushed himself up on his elbows to get a better look; the Cardinal came closer.

‘What is it?’ asked Cosimo, frowning.

‘Here,’ see for yourself,’ said Osman and placed the exquisite little painting on the bedcover in front of his grandfather. ‘Your daughter sends her love; and me.’

END OF THIS SAMPLE

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