

# THE STOLEN ALTARPIECE

Jack Rogan Mysteries Book 8

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First published 2023 © Gabriel Farago

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## Prologue

### Topkapi Palace, Constantinople: 16 January 1596

Safiye Sultan, the mother of Mehmed III, was the most powerful woman in the Ottoman Empire. Since her son's controversial accession to the throne a year earlier, she had lived in constant fear.

Upon the death of her husband, Murad III, she had ordered the execution of all of Mehmed's nineteen brothers by strangulation to ensure that her son's accession went unchallenged. All went well until it was discovered that one brother, Osman, had escaped the deadly net of the deaf-mutes who carried out the horrific murders during the night. While fratricidal succession was by no means uncommon, it caused huge animosity and unrest among the mothers of the murdered boys in the harem.

The reason Safiye had lived in constant fear had nothing to do the wrath of the women in the harem, but was due to something far more serious: her son, the sultan, was in constant danger as long as he didn't have a male heir, and his brother Osman was alive. There was a simple explanation for this: if something happened to Mehmet, like an assassination for instance, Osman would become sultan. That was the law. By having murdered all the other brothers, Safiye had unwittingly made Osman the next in line to the throne after Mehmet. As long as there was no son, Mehmet wasn't safe, and that presented a huge problem for Safiye who guarded her position at court with ruthless vigilance. Any opposition was instantly silenced, and rivals banished into exile.

One of those rivals was the beautiful Fatma Hatun, Osman's mother, who had been Murad's youngest consort. Safiye was well aware that Fatma had been behind the plot to save her son and facilitate his daring escape through one of the chimneys in the palace kitchens during the night his eighteen brothers had been brutally murdered. Despite rigorous questioning, Fatma had given nothing away, and Osman's whereabouts had remained a mystery despite extensive enquiries by agents sent into every corner of the empire to find him.

On top of all that, Fatma was very popular at court and, Safiye suspected, had secret allies and followers in the harem which was a hotbed of intrigue at the best of times. The reason Safiye had kept Fatma at court was also simple. She had hoped that somehow, Fatma would lead her to Osman, but that had not eventuated. Osman had disappeared without a trace, and it was time to make his mother disappear as well. To harm her at court was far too dangerous, and to execute or assassinate a consort of the former sultan – especially one so popular – unthinkable. Something far more subtle and imaginative was needed.

Fatma entered Safiye's palatial day chamber overlooking the magnificent Topkapi gardens where she had spent many a sunny afternoon entertaining Murad, her late husband, with her wit and conversation.

'You sent for me,' said Fatma, the tone of her voice confident, her bearing defiant and almost regal.

*She is so beautiful. No wonder Murad was smitten,* thought Safiye, a twinge of envy clawing at her heart because her own beauty had faded years ago. *No matter, I am the Valide Sultan, and as long as my son is on the throne, she is in my power.*

'Do you know what date it is?' asked Safiye, watching Fatma carefully.

'I do. Murad died exactly one year ago, and you had all his sons except your own killed during the night to make sure that Mehmed became sultan.'

'All his sons except Osman.'

Fatma nodded, but didn't reply, a look of contempt clouding her blue eyes and making her flawless, pale skin glow.

'You were brought here as a young slave girl to entertain the sultan, never forget that!' said Safiye, reminding Fatma of the capture of her Venetian father's trading vessel on route to Beirut by pirates. Fatma who had been on board was taken to Alexandria by the pirates and sold on the slave market.

'You are right, I was brought here to please the sultan. I did just that and gave him a son. It seems that no one can do the same for Mehmet. As long as Osman lives and Mehmet has no male heir, he will always look over his shoulder, and so will you. *Never forget this!*'

Seething with anger, but holding her tongue, Safiye kept staring at her insolent rival. No one else in the palace would dare speak to her like this.

‘My life here is over,’ continued Fatma, ‘my flame was extinguished when Murad died, but it lives on in Osman. ‘I have nothing left to lose.’

‘Don’t be so sure,’ said Safiye, speaking softly, the tone of her voice threatening. ‘You came here as a slave, and you shall leave here the same way. You will be taken to a faraway slave market and sold to whoever wants you. Should you dare to return and enter the empire, you will be instantly put to death. I never want to set eyes on you again. *Now leave!*’

‘With pleasure,’ said Fatma. Holding her head up high, she turned slowly around and walked to the door. Just before she reached the door she stopped. ‘Memories of happy times I will take with me, the rest I leave gladly behind. I will be free, even as a slave, but you will live in fear here in this golden cage. Remember, as long as Osman lives ...’ With that, Fatma took a mock bow, and left the chamber.

Gazanfer Aga, chief of the white eunuchs and head of the Enderum – the Imperial Seraglio – had enjoyed a meteoric rise since Murad’s death. As the facilitator of the dramatic, but risky fratricide during the night Murad began his journey into paradise, he had become indispensable to Safiye. She relied on him not only to protect Mehmet, but he and his spies were her eyes and ears in the palace where treachery and betrayal lurked around every corner. It was therefore only natural that she should turn to him to arrange Fatma’s exile and return to slavery.

When she wanted to discuss something important and sensitive, Safiye met Gazanfer Aga at a fountain in the garden. This was one of the few places where they couldn’t be overheard in the palace where curious eyes and ears were never far away, vicious gossip was rife, and privacy almost non-existent.

Safiye sat on a stone bench next to the fountain, a silver tray with fruit on her lap, and watched Gazanfer Aga approach. She could tell from the spring in his step that he must have good news. Gazanfer Aga stopped in front of Safiye and took a bow.

‘Come, sit next to me.’ Safiye reached for a persimmon and handed it to her trusted ally.

‘It’s all arranged. Fatma will be taken to a notorious market town in Uzbekistan. A dark place with a fearful reputation. One of my most loyal janissaries will be in charge—‘

‘Is that far enough?’ said Safiye, looking anxious. ‘I want her gone, banished, never to return.’

Gazanfer Aga smiled. ‘Have no fear. The market town I have in mind is one of the most dangerous and remote places along the Silk Road. It’s in the middle of a desert and it has only one claim to fame.’

‘You speak in riddles. Please explain.’

‘*Slaves*. It’s a market like no other, perhaps the most notorious slave market in Asia. Definitely not for the fainthearted. My janissaries have all the contacts and will go with her. It’s a place of no return, I assure you. Especially for a young white woman of great beauty. Traders will pay a small fortune in that market to have something so rare and desirable to offer in their tents. She will most likely be sold on, to a sultan, or khan, or even a maharaja, and disappear forever. Just the mention of the market’s name sends shivers of fear—

Mollified, Safiye nodded. ‘What’s it called?’

‘*Khiva*.’

**\*\*\*\*END OF PROLOGUE\*\*\*\***

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