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Written by C. C. Humphreys

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A PLACE CALLED ARMAGEDDON

Constantinople 1453

C.C. HUMPHREYS



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To the Reader . . .

A city's fall is rarely as sudden as Pompeii's. Like an old man tottering on a precipice, it is a long decline that has brought him to the edge.

In 1453, such a city is Constantinople.

Blessed by geography, straddling the continents of Europe and Asia and the most important trade routes on earth, Constantinople and its Byzantine Empire had thrived, at one time controlling two-thirds of the civilised world.

Yet a thousand years of wars – foreign, civil, religious – has sapped its strength. Other Christians plundered it. The great powers of Venice and Genoa colonised it. By the mid-fifteenth century, the empire consists of little more than the impoverished city itself. Now, with doom approaching, those fellow Christians will only send help for an unthinkable price – the city has to give up its Orthodox Christianity and unite as Catholics under the Pope.

While the people riot, the emperor has no choice but to agree. Because he accepts what they do not.

The Turks are coming.

The Prophet foretold Constantinople's fall to jihad. Yet for eight centuries, the armies of Allah have broken themselves on the city's unbreachable walls. Even Eyoub, Muhammad's own standard-bearer, died before them.

Then a young man picks up the banner. Determined to be the new Alexander, the new Caesar, Mehmet, sultan of all the Turks, is just twenty-one years old.

The old man totters on the precipice . . . and prays that he has not given up his faith in vain. Prays for a miracle.

PROLOGUS

6 April 1453

We are coming, Greek.

Climb your highest tower, along those magnificent walls. They have kept you safe for a thousand years. Resisted every one of our attacks. Before them, where your fields and vineyards once stood, are trenches and emplacements. Empty, for now. Do you expect them to be filled with another doomed army of Islam, like all the martyrs that came and failed here before?

No. For we are different this time. There are more of us, yes. But there is something else. We have brought something else.

Close your eyes. You will hear us before you see us. We always arrive with a fanfare. We are people who like a noise. And that deep thumping, the one that starts from beyond the ridge and runs over our trenches, through the ghosts of your vineyards, rising through stone to tickle your feet? That is a drum, a *kos* drum, a giant belly to the giant man who beats it. There is another . . . no, not just one. Not fifty. More. These come with the shriek of the pipe, the seven-note *sevra*, seven to each drum.

The *mehter* bands come marching over the ridge line, sunlight sparkling on instruments inlaid with silver, off swaying brocade tassels. You blink, and then you wonder: there are thousands of them. Thousands. And these do not even carry weapons.

Those with weapons come next.

First the Rumelian division. Years ago, when you were already too weak to stop us, we bypassed your walls, conquered the lands beyond them to the north. Their peoples are our soldiers now – Vlachs, Serbs, Bulgars, Albanians. You squint against the light, wishing you did not see, hoping the blur does not conceal – but it does! – the thousands that are there, the men on horseback followed by many more on foot. Many, many more.

The men of Rumelia pass over the ridge and swing north towards the Golden Horn. When the first of them reach its waters, they halt, turn, settle. Rank on rank on the ridgeline, numberless as ants. Their *mehter* bands sound a last peal of notes, a last volley of drumbeats. Then all is silent.

Only for a moment. Drums again, louder if that were possible, even more trumpets. Because the Anatolian division is larger. Can you believe it? That as many men pass over the hilltop again and then just keep coming? They head to the other sea, south towards Marmara, warriors from the heartland of Turkey. The *sipahi*, knights mailed from neck to knee, with metal turban helms, commanding their mounts with a squeeze of thigh and a grunt, leaving hands free to hoist their war lances high, lift their great curving bows. Eventually they pass, and then behind them march the *yayas*, the peasant soldiers, armoured by the lords they follow, trained by them, hefting their spears, their great shields.

When at last the vast body reaches the water, they turn to face you, double-ranked. Music ceases. A breeze snaps the pennants. Horses toss their heads and snort. No man speaks. Yet there is still a space between the vast divisions of Rumelia and Anatolia. The gap concerns you – for you know it is to be filled.

It is – by a horde, as many as each of those who came before. These do not come with music. But they come screaming. They pour down, and run each way along the armoured fronts of Anatolia and Rumelia. They do not march. They have never been shown how. For these are *bashibazouks*, irregulars

recruited from the fields of empire and the slums of cities. They are not armoured, though many have shields and each warrior a blade. Some come for God – but all for gold. Your gold, Greek. They have been told that your city is cobbled with it, and these tens of thousands will hurl themselves again and again against your walls to get it. When they die by the score – as they will – a score replaces them. Another. Each score will kill a few of you. Until it is time for the trained and armoured men to use their sacrificed bodies as bridges and kill the few of you who remain.

The horde runs, yelling, along the ordered ranks, on and on. When at last it halts, even these men fall quiet. Stay so for what seems an age. And that gap is still there, and now you almost yearn for it to be filled. Yearn too for the hush, more dreadful than all those screams, to end. So that this all ends.

And then they come. No drums. No pipes. As silent as the tread of so many can be.

You have heard of them, these warriors. Taken as Christian boys, trained from childhood in arms and in Allah, praise Him. Devoted to their corps, their comrades, their sultan. They march in their *ortas*, a hundred men to each one.

The janissaries have arrived.

You know their stories, these elite of the elite that have shattered Christendom's armies again and again. In recent memory alone, at Kossovo Pol, and at Varna. As they swagger down the hill, beneath their tall white felt hats, their bronzed shields, their drawn scimitars, their breastplates dazzle with reflected sunlight.

They turn to face you, joining the whole of our army in an unbroken line from sea to sparkling sea. Again a silence comes. But not for long this time. They are waiting, as you are. Waiting for him.

He comes. Even among so many he is hard to miss, the tall young man on the huge white horse. Yet if you did not recognise him, you will by what follows him. Two poles. What hangs from one is so old, its green has turned black

with the years. It looks to you what it is – a tattered piece of cloth.

It is the banner that was carried before the Prophet himself, peace be unto him. You know this, because when it is driven into the ground, a moan goes through the army. And then the second pole is placed and the moan blends with the chime of a thousand tiny bells. The breeze also lifts the horsetails that dangle from its height.

Nine horsetails. As befits a sultan's tug.

Mehmet. Lord of lords of this world. King of believers and unbelievers. Emperor of East and West. Sultan of Rum. He has many titles more yet he craves only one. He would be 'Fatih'.

The Conqueror.

He turns and regards all those he has gathered to this spot to do his and Allah's will. Then his eyes turn to you. To the tower where you stand. He raises a hand, lets it fall. The janissaries part and reveal what you'd almost forgotten – that square of dug earth right opposite you, a medium bowshot away. It was empty when last you looked. But you were distracted by innumerable men. Now it is full.

Remember I told you we were bringing something different? Not only this vast army. Something new? Here it is.

A cannon. No, not a cannon. That is like calling paradise 'a place'. This cannon is monstrous. And as befits it, it has a monster's name. The Basilisk. It is the biggest gun that has ever been made. Five tall janissaries could lie along its length. The largest of them could not circle its bronze mouth in his arms.

Breathe, Greek! You have time. It will be days before the monster is ready to fire its ball bigger than a wine barrel. Yet once it begins, it will keep firing until . . . until that tower you stand on is rubble.

When it is, I will come.

For I am the Turk. I come on the bare feet of the farmer, the armoured boot of the Anatolian. In the mad dash of the *serdengecti* who craves death and in the measured tread of the janissary who knows a hundred ways to deal it. I clutch

scimitar, scythe and spear, my fingers pull back bowstring and trigger, I have a glowing match to lower into a monster's belly and make it spit out hell.

I am the Turk. There are a hundred thousand of me. And I am here to take your city.

— PART ONE —

Alpha

— ONE —

Prophecy

Edirne, capital of the Ottoman Empire

April 1452: one year earlier

The house looked little different from any other that faced the river. A merchant's dwelling, its front wall was punctured by two large square openings either side of an oaken door. These had grilles to keep out intruders, while admitting the water-cooled breezes that would temper the summer heat.

Yet this was early April, the openings were shuttered and Hamza shivered. Though it was not truly the chill that caused his skin to stand up in bumps. It was the midnight hour. It was their reason for standing there. It was this house, especially.

'Is this the place, lo—' He cut himself off. Even though the two men were obviously quite alone, they were not to speak their titles aloud. 'Erol' his younger companion wished to be called, a name that told of courage and strength. Hamza had submitted to 'Margrub'. He knew it meant 'desirable'. The young man had insisted on it with a smile because he did not find Hamza desirable in the least.

Undesired but useful. It was why he had insisted that only Hamza accompany him to the notorious docks of Edirne, where merchants built their houses into forts and men of sense travelled in large, well-armed groups. He hadn't been brought for his bodyguard skills, though he was as adept as most with the blade he concealed beneath his robes. It was his mind the younger man needed.

'Come,' he'd said. 'Allah is our bodyguard. *Inshallah*.'

Now, at their destination, the reply to Hamza's query was a

gesture. He lifted the lamp he carried, opened the gate on it, held it high. His companion peered up beside the door. 'Yes, this is the one. See!'

Hamza looked. There, nailed to the frame beside the door, was a wooden tube, smaller than his little finger. He knew what it was, what it contained. He lowered the lamp, closed the gate, returning them to near darkness and river mist. 'You did not tell me she was a Jewess.'

He could not see it but he could hear the smile in the reply. 'All the best ones are. Knock!'

His knuckle had barely struck a second time before a small gate in the doorway was opened. They were studied, the small door closed, the larger one unbolted. They were admitted by someone who remained hidden in the darkness behind the door. 'Straight ahead . . . friends,' ordered a soft male voice, and they obeyed, moved into the roofless courtyard beyond, blinking against its sudden light, for reed torches burned in brackets, flame-light spilling onto a garden, four beds of earth around a central fountain.

The younger man gave a little sigh, halting. Hamza knew that one of the greatest of his companion's passions was the growing of plants and flowers; that the trade he practised against the Day of Disaster, as all must practise one, was gardening. 'See the wonder I told you of . . . Margrub,' he murmured. 'When I came here in the summer, she told me this was her work – and see! She has contrived to keep herbs alive through our winter that should not survive here. Do you savour them?' He bent, inhaled deeply. 'I would question the Jewess on this.'

Hamza knew he wouldn't. The young man was there with questions, certainly. They did not concern the cultivation of plants.

The man who'd admitted them had vanished. Now an inner door opened, a rectangle of reddened light spilling out. They crossed to it, entered, just as another door beyond shut softly. The room was lit by a single lamp, flame moving behind red

glass. Dividing the room in half was a near-ceiling-high screen made of dark reeds, the weave large enough to allow gaps the width of a fingertip. From beyond it came the sounds of wood crackling in a clay stove. This accounted for the warmth of the room . . . and perhaps also for some of the scents within it. Some were pleasant, and Hamza detected sandalwood and myrrh. Some were not. One was sweet and sickly at the same time, and it made the top of his neck ache. Another was sulphurous, a savour of rot that the incense was failing to disguise, accentuating it rather. Hamza had smelled such things before, at the houses of friends who experimented with metals and certain volatile spirits. It made him frown. Sorcery was usually a very different science to alchemy.

Removing their shoes, they sat, cross-legged. The cushions, and the Izmiri kilims that lay between them, were of the finest, the patterns intricate. The merchant who owned the house – and alchemist too, perhaps? – was not poor.

They waited in silence; but his companion could never stay silent for long. There was too much to plan, too many details to be refined, if he was to achieve his destiny – this destiny, he hoped, to be confirmed there that night.

They talked of various things, as ever. But one subject had been his obsession of the day and he returned to it now. ‘What do your spies tell you?’ he asked, his voice low but excited. ‘Have my enemies rediscovered their “Greek Fire” or no?’

It was usually better to reassure the younger man. Yet reassurance now was no substitute for a serious disappointment later. ‘I am told that they have not. They experiment – but they seem to have lost the recipe.’

‘A secret recipe. Whispered in the ear of the founder of their city, was it not?’

‘That is the story.’

‘Then we are safe, are we not?’ He shuddered. ‘Too many of my ancestors died in flames before those accursed walls.’

‘I hope we are, ma— Erol. Yet I fear.’

‘What?’

Hamza shifted. 'Only today, a spy reported rumours. Of a man of science who has also heard that whisper. The Greeks hunt everywhere for him. A German, it is said. Johannes Grant.'

'Johannes Grant.' The vowels sounded strangely in their tongue, Osmanlica. 'We hunt too, I trust?'

'We do.'

'Good.' The younger man stretched out his legs. 'Find him.'

'He is found. The pirates of Omis hold him.'

'Omis? Those sea rats? I thought Venice had burned their nest and scattered them.'

'They did. But they still steal when they can. Kidnap. A gang holds this German on some island in the Adriatic. Korcula, I think.'

'What if we used their own fire against them?' A whistle came. 'Buy him, as we have bought the others like . . . that gunner, the Hungarian, what is his name? The one who is building the great gun for us?'

'Urban, lord.' Hamza bit back the title, but the other man didn't flinch. 'But I believe your last order was to offer steel and not gold to any who would aid the Greeks.'

'Was it? I was perhaps in my rash humour when I ordered so. And yet . . .' The man scratched at his red beard. 'Well, perhaps it is for the best. Dead, I am certain of him. Alive, he will always be a threat.'

Hamza knew that the younger man's logic usually led him to that conclusion. When his father had died the year before, he had concluded the same – and concluded his baby half-brother's life, having him drowned in a bath while he distracted the boy's mother with sherbets in his *saray*. He had denied any order later, executed the assassin, cried genuine tears for days. But he had slept easier at night.

Hamza shivered, certainly not from the cold now. He had been this man's father's cupbearer. Sometimes his lover – though not in recent years, when Murad had been more enamoured of the contents of the cup than the one who bore it. Still, Hamza was associated with the old regime. And to get

ahead in the new, to maintain the favour he seemed to have attained, he knew he would have to obey – and shiver away any doubts.

He was about to speak, to reassure . . . when he heard the inner door open and close again. Someone had come through. They heard that person settle on cushions the other side of the screen.

‘Are you come?’ the young man whispered, leaning forward.

She’d been there the whole time. It was useful to be unobserved and hear those who thought themselves unheard. Though Leilah was confident in her powers, it was hard to sift through all her visions. To know a subject’s desires and fears allowed her to focus on them. To caution. To entice. To . . . prophesy. She was paid for results. She would not have the reputation she did, nor be visited by such men as those before her now, if she did not satisfy. If she had inherited from her mother the ability to see what others could not, it was her father who had grounded her in the visible. In knowledge. ‘Know the man,’ he’d said.

She had known many. She had even loved a few, loved them passionately, even after she’d seen their death written upon their faces as clearly as words in the books she treasured. Loved them and watched them die, sent them to their inevitable fate, content in knowing that she and they could do no other.

She had never known a man like the one before her now. When he’d come the previous summer, she had been almost overwhelmed by his force – for he had brought nothing less than destiny with him. All he had sought then was how to establish himself, how to secure what was fragile. She’d helped. She’d foreseen . . . consolidation based on a little blood, a lot of smiling. Now he was back and it was clear that the time for consolidation was past. It was time for adventure. His whole being surged with it. His only desire was to remake the world.

She would help him with that. It was what she did.

When she’d heard enough, she’d risen on bare feet, moved

silently to the door, opened it, closed it, and returned less quietly to her place. 'Yes,' she replied to his question, 'Leilah is here. And honoured by your return.'

Hamza was surprised at the voice. It was youthful, deep, while all the soothsayers he'd attended in his own youth had been shrill-toned old harpies who he'd been happy to pay swiftly for a love philtre or a horoscope and escape from. But more than its tone, the accent perplexed him. It wasn't like any Jew's he'd ever heard. More like . . . a gypsy.

Most seers are, he thought, and shrugged. He could do without them all. Now he was near thirty, he sought wisdom only in the Qur'an and his own intellect. Others, like the man beside him, were as devout yet saw no gap between what the Prophet had spoken, what their instincts taught them – and what such women vouchsafed. 'Erol' would act on his judgement. But he liked it to be confirmed, even preceded, by a starred intimation of success.

The younger man pushed his face close to the screen. 'And what can you tell me, Leilah? What have you seen?'

A silence, and then her breath came on a whisper. 'I have seen your sandals raise the dust in the palace of the Caesars. If . . . if . . . ' Her voice trailed off.

'If what?' he asked, also in a whisper.

She replied, more firmly, 'There. Beside you. Open it.'

The young man reached eagerly into a cedarwood box. He pulled out a scroll, tied with a scrap of silk. Slipping that off, he unrolled the paper, and Hamza saw the lines and symbols of a horoscope. 'What do you see here?' he breathed.

The voice came softer, causing both men to lean forward. 'You were born under the Ram, and Mars, Ruler of War, is your planet. He sits too in your ninth house, the place of journeys. It is the chart of a warrior, for you will ever be at war.'

Hamza grunted. The youth's expression showed he would brook no doubting. But what the woman had said about his ambitious companion, he could have heard on any street corner in Edirne.

Leilah heard the grunt, the doubt in it. This other who accompanied the seeker, he was a little older, less excitable, a thinker. Another time she would have liked to engage him in debate, to probe the extent of his knowledge and his beliefs. Before, after or during, she'd also have liked to take him to her bed. Knowledge of men could be gained in all sorts of ways. And maybe she would consider him, since she was shortly to be losing her current protector.

No, she thought, sighing out. For if the younger man achieves the destiny foreseen, he will achieve mine as well. He will open the door to unimaginable riches. And with those, I will never need a man to protect me again.

She began to pant. Great heaves of breath, sucking in air, expelling it on a moan. And her voice when it came was even deeper. It sounded like a man's, and both the men drew back from the screen and sought the comfort of a dagger against their palms. 'Know this, Chosen One. If you would do what you must do, you must do it within the year, or the heavens will turn against you. On this very day, but one year from now, at the eleventh hour of the day, let the dragon breathe fire, let the archer shoot true with his first shot. It will take time, and Allah will hold the scales and weigh your actions. Then, when the moon hides half her face, call me and I will come – to see for you again.'

The young man's face had blanched when the voice changed. Now, on the words, red flooded back, deeper even than the red of beard and brow. 'I will,' he whispered.

Leilah sat back. It was time to act for herself. When she was younger, scarce fourteen, and had lived with a janissary, Abdulkarim had brought her into the mysteries of the Bektashi school of Islam, taught her some of the mysticism of the Sufi. Yet since Bektashi drank wine guiltlessly, and soldiers when drunk talked of little but martial glory, she had learned something about siegecraft. Gossip in the barracks she still visited had developed her knowledge. All the talk now was of the city known as the Red Apple. It had dangled above Muslim heads

for a thousand years. Barracks wisdom had it that the first step to bringing it down would be to cut it off. To cut its throat. It would be wisdom in the palace too. And she had learned that wisdom, supported by prophecy, led not only to confirmation of her skills, but to action.

‘Mark,’ she intoned softly. ‘I see a knife, like the one you now grasp, reaching up to a stem. Cut it. Slit it like you’d slit a throat.’

Even Hamza gasped at that. It had been the secret talk for months now. If the Red Apple was to fall, the first step would be to starve it. Cut it off from its supplies. Plans had been discussed. This prophecy spoke to them.

‘Yes!’ His companion had been hard at work, developing those very plans.

Now she was ready. There was something other than gold that this man of destiny must give her this night. Deliverance. ‘But beware! Return to your *saray* but do not speak to any except your companion. If any recognise you, greet you by name, your plans will shrivel, like dates in a sandstorm. Unless . . . unless you slit the throat of the one who sees you.’

‘What . . . what do you mean?’

Her voice dropped low again. ‘This is all you need know, for now. This is enough – until we meet again.’

She rose. Though they could not see her, they rose too as if they sensed it. But legs that had been cramped too long wobbled. Hamza lurched – and the man beside him stumbled, tried to catch himself on the screen . . . which fell inwards.

Leilah leapt back, just avoiding the crashing wicker. Righting himself, the young man stood straight and stared.

As before he could not help the grunt, now Hamza could not contain the whistle. His youthful dealings with withered crones had led him to expect another, despite the voice. But this woman was young. Her body was beautiful – and revealed, for she was scarcely dressed in a few silks – at face, at breast, at hip – while her black hair was unbound, in the way of some Bektashi women he had known.

His companion began stuttering apologies, bending to right the screen . . . then freezing when he beheld what it had hidden. His voice, when it came, was huskier too. 'I am sorry. And yet not so. For I never cease to admire beauty. And you are . . . beautiful.'

She said nothing, just stared back above her mask from eyes that seemed to Hamza to be huge caverns of darkness. 'Leilah', he remembered now, meant 'rapture'. The woman had been well named.

His companion stepped forward. 'And now I have seen you, and you have seen me, why should we be parted again?' He raised a hand towards her. 'If you were to join me in my *saray* . . . you would have a place of honour there. I could visit you . . . often. And I would not have to come to the Edirne docks for my prophecies.'

Leilah smiled. To be the lover of such a man meant power . . . for a time. Until another caught his fancy – woman, boy, man, it was rumoured his tastes ran to all. Then she would be trapped, as she had been once before, a slave to the man who had caused her parents to be killed, subject to his . . . every whim, from the age of ten till his sudden death two years later, after eating some figs she had specially prepared.

She would never be a slave again. In a *saray*, she would be. Outside it, her prophecies gave her power. Unlike nearly every woman in Edirne, in the world, they also gave her a choice. And if her prophecies came true for this man, he was just another she would not need.

She stepped closer, moving in the way she knew men liked her to move. Into red lamp-spill, directly above her now, that revealed the darkness at her large nipples, at her groin, beneath the silks. 'Master,' she breathed, 'you honour me with your desire. And were I to choose to give up my treasure, there is no one alive whom I would rather . . . took it.' She emphasised the taking, saw him shudder, dropped her voice to a whisper. 'But there are many others who can offer you that. While

few can offer you the gift I have. A gift I will lose, should you *take . . .*’ again, the slightest of inflections, ‘what I yearn to give you.’ She stepped away. ‘So which would you have, master? Me, or my prophecies?’

Hamza watched, fascinated. His companion was young and was used to having anything – anyone – he wanted.

Yet there was something he wanted that was beyond such desire. The young man knew it, and looked away. ‘I need your . . .’ he sighed, ‘prophecies.’ He looked back, his voice hardening. ‘But when they are fulfilled, come to me and I will give you anything you want.’

She smiled. ‘Then I will come to you, on the eve of destiny. I will ask a boon of you. I will give you something in return.’ She gestured towards the door. ‘Now leave, master, remembering this – if anyone recognises you tonight, your dreams will crumble. Unless he does not live to tell of it.’

Hamza was puzzled. It was the second time she’d mentioned that. But he had no time to think. His companion gestured the pouch of gold coin from his belt and Hamza dropped it onto the floor. Then his arm was taken and they moved together through the courtyard and out the house’s door, opened for them by a shadow within a shadow, barred silently behind them.

In the room, Leilah bent and threw a cushion over the gold, then stood silently till she heard the outer door close. Only then did she call out, ‘Come.’

The inner door to the house opened. Isaac bustled in. ‘Well,’ he demanded, roughly seizing her, ‘did you do it? Did you ask him?’

‘Yes,’ she replied, almost relishing the pain in her right arm since she knew it was the last time this man would hurt her. ‘I did as you commanded. Refused his gold, exchanged it for his promise – that when the city fell, I would have free access to the library you spoke of.’

‘You?’ he barked, shaking her. ‘It is I who need Geber’s book, not you, you stupid whore.’

He raised a hand above her and she cowered back, as he liked her to do. 'I did name you. Blessed you as my guardian. Perhaps . . .' she chewed at her lower lip, 'perhaps if you were to approach him, tell him what I failed to, even now . . .' She trailed off.

He looked out to the courtyard. 'You named me? He would know me then, favourably, if I spoke to him?'

She nodded. 'Oh yes. But he is . . . occupied with many things. Perhaps he will forget even me.' She looked up. 'Go after him. Speak.'

The man moved to the door. 'He can't have gone far. I will catch him.'

He was halfway across the courtyard when she called, 'Remember, Isaac. Greet him with all his honours. Name him as he is.'

'Of course I will,' he replied, not looking back. 'Do you think I am a fool?'

She watched him fumbling at the bar. 'I do,' she whispered, and smiled. The Jew had been good for a while, easily satisfied in their bed, teaching her many things beyond it. Of the Kabbalah; and especially secrets of the alchemical art. She had become adept in the basics of both. But it was his greatest desire, confessed in cooling sweat after lovemaking, that had suddenly revealed her destiny.

'It is the original text,' he'd sighed. 'Annotated in Geber's own hand. Centuries old, yet with forgotten knowledge that, remembered now, would make me the greatest alchemist in the world.'

He'd sighed again, with greater lust than she'd ever brought forth, and she'd thought immediately, clearly: how valuable must this document be? This ancient scroll, collecting dust in a monastery in the city they call the Red Apple.

From that first mention of it, she was distracted. Less attentive to his needs. Plotting the way ahead. He had begun to strike her. The first time he did, he wrote his fate. Yet figs were not in season.

The door opened. He was gone.

She began to dress swiftly, in men's clothes. While she did, she wondered, where next? She had a year and a day at least. Or perhaps the question was, who next? She knew he was out there, waiting in the shadows. She had seen him too, in the stars. In dreams. Two men of destiny stalked them. The young man who'd just left, armed with her prophecy, was one. But who was this other?

Something her visitors had discussed came to mind. A man, a German, who understood Greek Fire. He was a danger to their cause. 'Johannes Grant,' she muttered, stumbling over the hard sounds as the man known as Erol had. Then she smiled. She would find this German. Kill this German. For as much as the man who'd just left wanted the Red Apple to fall, so did she. Besides, the German's death would bring a great deal of gold. She'd need that, now she was losing her protector.

She heard the first cry, her ex-lover's. Isaac was hailing the recent guest in his house. 'Farewell,' she said, and stooped for her bag.

They had stood before the door for a few moments, clearing the sulphur from their lungs with river mist, so had only taken a few steps when the door behind them opened again and a voice called. They turned to see a man striding swiftly towards them. 'Lord of lords of this world,' called the man – a Jew by his garb. 'Greetings, oh balm of the world. Oh bringer of light.' He knelt before them, arms spread wide. 'Oh most noble Sultan of Rum,' he cried.

Hamza felt almost sorry for the Jew. His master never liked to be recognised on his midnight outings. His anger could be swift and violent. Tonight, freighted with frustrated lust, and with prophecy, it wasn't an importuning subject on the ground before him. It was a threat to his very destiny.

'Cur!' screamed his companion, stepping forward, back-handing the man across the face, knocking him into the dust. 'Hold him, Hamza.'

There was no choice, and little conscience. The word of the man he served was final. He had learned that from the old sultan. And if it had been true of the even-tempered Murad, it was even more so of his fiery son, Mehmet.

As Hamza took his arms, Mehmet reached forward and pulled the man's head up by the hair. 'What is your name?' he shouted.

'I . . . I . . . Isaac, master.'

Mehmet laughed. 'Isaac?' He looked at Hamza. 'Son of Abraham, as we all are. But I see no ram in a bush nearby. So there is no need to seek elsewhere for a sacrifice.'

One of Mehmet's titles, that the Jew had left out, was 'possessor of men's necks'. And he made the slitting of this one look almost easy, though it never was. Hamza held the twitching body at arm's length, trying to keep the spraying blood off both his master and himself, only partly succeeding. Yet what he thought about as life left was how the sorceress's first prophecy had already come true. Then, as he lowered the body to the ground, he realised that was wrong.

She hadn't seen this. She'd ordered it.

I will watch out for this sorceress, he thought.

The other man leaned down, and wiped his blade on the dead man's cloak. 'A throat cut. A sacrifice made,' Mehmet said, smiling. 'Now, Hamza, let us go and cut the throat of a city. Let us go to Constantinople.'