

Chapter 7  
THE WHISPERING  
WALLS

I have been here for three weeks now and I do not know if I am a guest or a prisoner. I have a room fit for a prince overlooking the terrace. A narrow gully of fresh water runs past my door and, each evening there is a smell of roses in my bed. Yet I cannot leave and a guard stands outside my door.

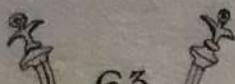


Sometimes at night, I hear voices in my room. They seem to be inside the very walls themselves. I wonder about spies, and if secret eyes are watching me. I never even feel for the diamond stitched to the base of my head, in case I give my secret away.

Prince Murad comes to see me almost daily. We rough and tumble, chase each other and play games. The translator comes too. I ask him when I can leave. I am desperate to sell the pendant and rescue my father. But he just shrugs and says, "You can go when the prince allows it."

"Which prince? Prince Murad? He likes me. He would let me go, I'm sure of it."

The old man shrugs and looks cautious, and then I know, I am really a prisoner of Prince Aurangzeb. But why? Does Signor Khan know I'm here?





There are many hours each day when I'm bored and I fiddle with things. I wish Carlo could see how everything is encrusted with precious stones. I've seen rubies and emeralds the size of hens' eggs. He would be amazed. I have examined every object in my room, picked up every vase and ornament, and looked behind every screen and awning.

Fiddling absent-mindedly with the carved knob on an ebony screen, a door opens behind it, in the panelled wall. I can escape. Without waiting to wonder whether I am being watched, I let myself out and begin running down the dark tunnel. I think I have remembered the way I have gone: first straight, then left up some steep steps, then right and along and up some more steps. I am sure I know how to get back, but when I try I am totally lost.

There is no light. I begin to panic. My whimpers echo in my ears and my breath comes out in gasps.

I hear voices. They seep out of the wall. I press my ear to the cold stone, and I hear as clearly as if I am in the same room as them. Immediately, I recognize Signor Khan and the Grand Vizier. The other is a boy's voice. I recognize its harsh arrogant tones. Prince Aurangzeb!

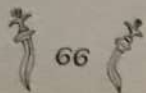
Though I don't understand their language, I hear my name and "*The Ocean of the Moon*". I am transfixed; afraid and unsure which way to go.

I hear more voices. They are on my side of the wall; whispered, urgent, cruel voices. Footsteps advance; I run. I run and run, bumping into the curves of the wall as they twist and turn; stumbling up and down stone steps and on again – but still the voices keep coming. They are after me. I see

an alcove of light. I rush towards it – and nearly plunge thirty feet down, over the edge of a low balcony. Just in time, I clutch the balustrade and fall to my knees. The footsteps race up behind. I cannot move. I feel a hand on my neck; see a glint of metal. A voice screams from below, "Filippo!"

The hand releases me, and the footsteps flee. Below me is Prince Murad waving frantically. I find myself staring almost blankly down into the most sumptuous chamber I could ever have imagined. Silks and brocades are draped over divans and chairs, rich carpets are strewn across the marble floor and the ceiling is hung with chandeliers of crystal and Venetian glass. The tables and chairs are of ebony and teak, encrusted with jewels, and the pillars and railings look solid gold.

A grand person reclines upon a carved couch. He is a handsome man with deep-set eyes,

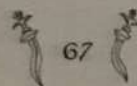


a straight narrow nose and a long full beard. Behind him, lavishly uniformed servants fan him with peacocks' tails, and bejewelled handmaidens sit at his feet. This must be the Great Mogul himself, Shah Jehan.

Two older boys, richly dressed, leap from their divan with hands on swords ready to draw. I realize these must be Prince Murad's two oldest brothers; the eldest, Prince Dara aged about sixteen and the younger, Prince Sultan Sujah aged fourteen.

There is a commotion of guards and servants, as Prince Aurangzeb rushes in followed by an agitated Grand Vizier, whose slippers flap under his heels as he follows. I try to duck away, but the Grand Vizier has seen me, and there is murder in his eyes.

Everyone is looking up at me. Two bodyguards are suddenly at my side. I am hauled away, my feet dragging and bumping painfully down the





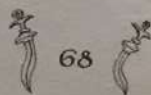
passageways and steps. The next minute I am flung face down before the Great Emperor himself.

I feel tears falling from my eyes. I face death. I'm sure of it. I call Carlo, and my mother, I beg my father to forgive me for having failed.

Then I hear Prince Murad's voice. He runs across the room and climbs onto the emperor's lap as only a child can. I raise my head to see him clasp his arms round his father's neck and whisper in his ear. A guard uses his foot to force my head back down.

What a babble of voices. Murad's brothers protest mightily. I hear the Grand Vizier joining in. What are they saying? I can't understand, I can't understand.

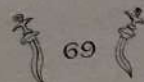
Just when I am in my deepest despair, I hear a voice that gives me hope. It is the old translator. They have summoned him.



On a command, a warrior hauls me to my feet, though still forces my head down so that I do not gaze into the emperor's face, but I hear his voice, and it has softened. The guard releases his hold on me, and I stand alone. The old translator comes to me.

"His Esteemed Royal Highness, the Great Emperor, King of the World, hears that you claim to be the son of Geronimo Veronese, who has been captured and held for ransom," he says slowly.

Oh how good to hear my own native tongue. "Yes, yes!" I cry, "and please will you tell His Majesty that I have the most wondrous jewel in the world – *The Ocean of the Moon* – a pendant my father made, which is his masterpiece. No other eyes have seen this except my father and my eldest brother, but I am instructed by my family to offer this wondrous object to His Esteemed Majesty,

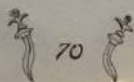


in all humbleness, and if it so pleases him, to sell it to him so that I can release my father from his prison."

The old interpreter translates. On the emperor's instruction he says, "Where is this pendant? His Majesty will look at it."

I explain that it is broken up into several pieces with the diamond stitched to my scalp under my cap, and that I require a barber to cut it free. Could I be helped in this matter and request space in a workshop to reassemble the piece so that it is worthy enough for the emperor's eyes?

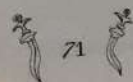
A movement up in one of the high balconies catches my eye. Aurangzeb looks up. I see what he sees. My Musulman. I catch the glance they exchange between them, then I look away quickly. There is something between them, I'm sure of it; something more than a business transaction.



I remember the voices I heard on the other side of the wall. Perhaps there is a conspiracy between Signor Khan, the Grand Vizier and Prince Aurangzeb. Didn't the Dutchman warn me about such things?

I am taken to a side room and there await the royal barber. I hope he is not in the pay of Prince Aurangzeb. Nervously, I watch him lay out his instruments. He takes up a very sharp razor and covers my shoulders with a cloth. I bend my head as if for execution.

Two armed guards watch, while skilfully, he shaves away my hair, whistling between his teeth as he does. Until he comes to the pouch, like a large lump, embedded in my hair and fixed to the base of my skull. The whistling stops. His hand pauses – briefly, no one breathes. Then with just a few snips, the pouch comes away with a flood



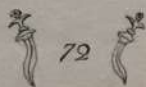


of bleeding. His young apprentice attends to me immediately; mops me up from a bowl of water and binds my head with a clean bandage lined with pungent-smelling herbal leaves.

With the pouch clutched tightly in my hand, the guards escort me out of the palace to the workshop of the Chief Jeweller. All the while I am guarded by two warriors with hands on swords, but this time, I am grateful.

I strip down to my inner garments and extricate the other jewels, then sit at the workbench, beneath the critical gaze of the Chief Jeweller and begin to assemble *The Ocean of the Moon*.

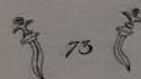
I take the great diamond, over which so much of my blood has poured and, using the tools and glue provided, I fix it into centre of the nephrite jade setting. Piece by piece I take each pearl, diamond, crystal and moonstone and set them round the



queen of all jewels, the fabulous diamond *The Ocean of the Moon*. All the time hearing Carlo's voice in my head instructing me.

At last I stand up. My head swims; everything blurs; I feel faint with the effort, but I have done it! Carlo would be proud. I hold my father's masterpiece in the palm of my hand, touching it, seeing it in reality for the first time. Was there anything on earth as beautiful as this? My eyes fill with tears. A great rush of homesickness overwhelms me. Suddenly, I don't want to part with it. This is part of my life, my home; it is proof of my father's genius. What if my father is dead already? Giving this up would be like surrendering the family birthright. If only Carlo were here.

I have no time to hesitate as I am marched back again to the emperor's audience hall. To my dismay, the Grand Vizier is still present.





The emperor clicks his fingers. The translator leads me forwards. With lowered eyes, I approach the Great Mogul and hand him *The Ocean of the Moon*.

The whole chamber falls silent. They stare at it, astonished. He holds it aloft, dangling from its silver chain. Flames and shadows, reflections and shimmering lights enter the stones and make them dance. The diamond flares like the sun, the pearls and moonstones gleam with the purity of angels. The whole cosmos is trapped inside the stones.

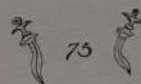
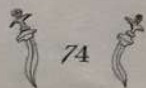
"*Subhan Allah! Kya Kehne, la jawab! Yeh toh bilkul kamal ki bath hey*. Unbelievable!" murmurs the emperor with awe. "Yes, yes!" He shows it off to his sons, still talking enthusiastically.

The translator murmurs to me. "His Illustrious Majesty is well pleased. He will buy it from you for a good price and declares it will be a perfect

gift for his beloved wife when she gives birth to his fourteenth child. Allah be praised."

The princes gather round admiringly, all except Prince Aurangzeb. I wonder why. A silent fury distorts his face, and I feel certain that somehow he has been promised it by Signor Khan and the Grand Vizier; that he has some power over them. I wonder if the emperor sees the fury. In any case, he turns to his eldest son, Prince Dara and with a fond embrace, entrusts the precious jewel to him. "Guard this until the baby is born. Only the queen's beauty compares with the beauty of this creation, and only she must have it."

He beckons the Grand Vizier to him. They confer with each other. Via the translator, I am told that I will be paid ten thousand gold coins stamped with the emperor's head. Five thousand of these coins will be sealed in a casket which I





will take to Afghanistan to gain the release of my father, the other five thousand will be kept here in the charge of the Royal Cashier. My father and I can claim it on our return.

I am to be escorted by an armed guard of twelve men and accompanied all the way by a trusted courtier of the Grand Vizier, Signor Amir Iqbal Khan. As if on cue, there is my Musulman, smiling as he did that first day he arrived in Venice.



## Chapter 8 TREACHERY

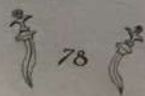
We set off in a convoy of three carts, each drawn by four massive horned bullocks and each with a contingent of four armed guards. Alongside too, on horseback, was a further convoy of armed soldiers. I sat in the lead cart with the Musulman. His smile had gone; he looked nervous, yelling at the drivers all the time to get



moving, and looking ill at ease. The money for the ransom was in the middle cart, covered with a carpet and surrounded by guards, while the end cart contained our provisions and a further four armed men who were also cooks.

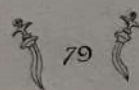
It is four days since we left court, but it all feels wrong. I hate being without *The Ocean of the Moon*. In my guts I feel sure we shouldn't have sold it; yet in what other way could the ransom have been paid? I still feel embroiled in some kind of conspiracy which I can't fathom, but which I am sure involves Prince Aurangzeb and the Grand Vizier.

I hope the guards are trustworthy. My life depends on them being loyal to the emperor, not his enemies. How easy it would be for them to cut my throat, and escape with the money.



Before we left, Prince Murad had presented me with gifts. One was a silver dagger with a jewel-encrusted handle which I already had sheathed at my waist, and the other was a ruby ring. It fitted my little finger. He cried when I left, and begged me to return. I was often to see him in my mind's eye, a little prince, all a-glitter in his fine clothes; the sun flaring in the sequins and pearls of his wafting silk jacket, his turquoise pyjamas billowing in the hot wind that blew across the river plains.

The lengthy bumping ride by bullock cart from Agra to Delhi gave me a taste of things to come. There were the appalling tracks we lurched along, full of holes and ruts; the sweltering nights, sleeping in tents, fearful of wild animals and snakes and scorpions, being bitten half to death with mosquitoes. I felt sure that, even if I





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wasn't eaten by wild beasts, murdered by Signor Khan, or kidnapped by bandits, I would die of fever, for I did get a fever. But Signor Khan insisted we carry on, even though I had a raging temperature and thought I would die. Yet though he attended to me and probably saved my life with his care, Signor Khan was like a man driven by some other purpose, forcing us onwards day by day by day.

From Delhi we travel another fifteen days on the road heading for Lahore, from where we will make the ascent into Kashmir. The Musulman tells me that from there, we will climb up to the Khyber Pass and into Afghanistan. My father is a prisoner in an isolated fort near the borders of Kafirstan.

We reach the foothills and feel the first chill of the mountains.

One morning,  
and the carts gone  
Signor Khan says  
further. Only our  
mountain ponies  
panniers bulging

Although the  
are hardy and  
mountain trails  
streams and

rivers, which  
sources. I am  
brown ponies  
now strapped  
in tow with

It is cold  
mountain  
me and