

“History is nothing but the lies that are no longer disputed.” —Napoleon Bonaparte

PROLOGUE

**Topkapi Palace, Istanbul
September 1682**

The sultan wasn't sure what woke him up.

A ruffle of air, a barely detectable flutter of movement, a disturbance at the edge of his consciousness. Whatever it was, it was enough to cause him to stir within the lush expanse of his bedding and crack open his eyes, slightly at first as they adjusted to the faint light of the glowing embers in the fireplace, then jolting wide once they fell into enough focus to reveal the tall figure standing by the side of his bed.

“Salamu alaykum, padishah,” the man said, his voice calm and low.

The sultan bolted off his pillow, his pulse rocketing with fear as he tried to process what he was seeing: an intruder—an assassin?—here, in his sumptuous chamber, deep in the palace, past an army of guards and eunuchs.

Not just an intruder: the man was, the sultan now realised, naked.

“What the—who are y—”

“Shhh,” the man ordered him, bending down with lightning speed to press one hand firmly against the sultan's mouth while raising his own index finger to his lips. *“Be calm and stay quiet, your sublimity. I'm not here to cause you any harm.”*

Confusion now flooded in alongside the fear. The sultan struggled to contain his breathing and fought to regain some kind of control over his senses, but the barrage of inexplicable stimuli wasn't giving him any respite, for now that his eyes were fully awake, he could also see that the man's chest was covered with strange markings. Tattoos of words and numbers and drawings and diagrams, all over his torso.

“I need you to listen,” the man said.

He wasn't speaking Ottoman Turkish, the official language of the empire since its inception. It wasn't Persian either, a language the educated upper echelon of society could speak and read, mostly useful for literature and poetry. No, the man was using an unusual dialect of Arabic, a language the sultan only used when reading and discussing religious verse.

“But before you do,” he continued, *“I need you to believe.”*

The man held his gaze, then dropped his chin and shut his eyes. He mumbled some words the sultan couldn't make out. Then he vanished.

He simply disappeared.

The sultan's head snapped left, right, scanning the vast room in utter panic. What kind of magic was this?—then, a few seconds later, the man reappeared again, without any warning, standing at the far side of the vast chamber, by the two-tiered marble fountain.

“I'm here to help you, your eminence” the man told the sultan. *“But in order for that to happen, I need you to believe what I say.”*

Another mumble, then he disappeared again.

The sultan was now sitting up, rigid with paralysis. His breathing was frantic, his heart galloping furiously inside his chest. He thought of calling out for his guards. One scream and a dozen of his most trusted Janissaries would come charging through the door, sabres drawn. But he hesitated. In part, he was too shocked, too terrified to react. He also thought they might take him for a fool if the intruder wasn't there.

Before he could ponder things too much, the man was back, where he'd first appeared, right by the sultan's bed, mere inches from him. Only this time, the intruder reached down to the floor and raised a *yataghan*, a short sabre with a curved blade that was so sharp it could lop off a man's head with a single flick. The sultan recognised it as one he kept in a display cabinet by the divan, only it wasn't there anymore. It was now pressed against his neck.

"If I wanted to kill you, you would have already died a thousand deaths," the man said. "But as I said, I'm here to be of service. More importantly, I'm here to save you and Kara Mustafa Pasha from a catastrophic defeat."

Then he disappeared again, and the dagger fell to the ground and clattered against the marble flooring.

Almost instantly, the man appeared again, at the foot of the bed.

The sultan lurched back and slammed against the bed's gilded head board. His breath was coming short and fast, and he was overcome with violent shivers.

What the hell was this creature, and how did it know about his plans?

He studied the intruder. "Who are you?" he asked. "What are you? Are you—" he hesitated, then asked, "a *djinn*?"

The stranger's face cracked under the hint of a smile.

Unlike his father, Mehmed wasn't mentally unstable nor degenerate. He was a quiet and melancholy man, but he had one obsession: the legacy of his conquering ancestors. He was steeply immersed in the mystique of the dynasty to which he belonged, and hungered to mimic their exploits. Lately, he had thrown himself into research to prepare for the coming summer's offensive, carefully studying the chronicles of past military campaigns that lined the shelves of the imperial archives. But Mehmed was also a pious man, and as such, was very familiar with the *djinn*, the supernatural creatures of Islamic mythology romanticized as "genies." They enjoyed free will and could be agents of good and evil.

The intruder watched him in unflinching silence. "I am a friend who wants to help you achieve success beyond anything you've dreamt of," he finally told him. "And if you heed my words and allow me to assist you, I can promise you that the Golden Apple will only be the beginning of your great and most glorious legacy."

His words caught the sultan's breath.

How could this intruder know what they were planning?

Two months earlier, the sultan's gardeners had planted the imperial *tug* outside the palace gates—out in the open, for all to see. The meaning of the ancient war banners—tall, elaborately carved crimson poles topped by a flurry of horses' tails—was well known, as it was a ritual that dated back to the days of the sultan's steppe warrior ancestors: the Commander of the Faithful would be going to war.

The objective of the campaign, however, was a closely guarded secret.

"Oh, yes, your eminence. I know all about your meeting with Kara Mustafa last week," the tattooed man continued, referring to the sultan's grand vizier. "I know that once the winter snows melt, your army will be marching west. I also know its target won't be the piddling fortified towns that pepper the lands west of Belgrade. No, your army will be marching on Vienna itself and on Leopold, the usurper who dares call himself Holy Roman Emperor."

Leopold. The mere mention of the man's name made Mehmed's blood boil.

The sultan nursed a severe hatred for Leopold I, far more than for his other enemies in Russia or Poland. Mehmed, as the occupier of the old imperial Byzantine throne in Constantinople, considered himself to be the rightful *Kaysar-i-Rum*—the Caesar of the Roman empire. To him, the Habsburg monarch was a false claimant to the throne, one who ruled from a distant city that had no historical significance to the old empire. Stripping him of his capital and converting his people to the one true faith would be a most fitting end to his brazen delusions.

“Listen to me,” the intruder continued, “and you’ll fly the flag of Islam over the Golden Apple and turn its great cathedral into a mosque. And that’ll only be the beginning. Listen to me, and you won’t be known as *avci* any more. Even *fatih* won’t be enough to describe you. They’ll need a stronger word to describe your conquests.”

Avci. Oh, how he hated that word.

The stranger clearly knew everything about him.

Under previous sultans, the Ottomans had reached the gates of Vienna twice. Both times, they had failed to take the city. And although the empire’s territorial expansion in Africa and Europe during Mehmed’s reign had reached its peak, he couldn’t really claim credit for these triumphs. Those conquests were the work of his grand viziers. Mehmed himself was more renowned for his abilities at hunting down stags and bears in the forests around his palace at Edirne—a far cry from the exploits of his legendary uncle, the sultan Murad IV, who had taken Erivan and Baghdad, and his namesake and illustrious ancestor Mehmed II, who had conquered Constantinople and toppled the Byzantine empire at the ripe old age of twenty-one. Both sultans had fully earned their epithets of *fatih*—the conqueror. Mehmed IV, however, had to content himself with *avci*—the hunter.

Taking Vienna would change all that.

A barrage of questions assaulted the sultan’s mind. He was scared, beyond any fear he’d ever known. But he was also intrigued.

He calmed his breathing, and, after one final internal debate, nodded.

“Tell me more.”

* * *

One year later almost to the day, in early September of 1683, the army of Christendom was finally within striking distance of Vienna and the Ottoman army that had laid siege to it since the beginning of summer.

Sixty thousand warriors were now gathered here, on open ground outside the small town of Tulln, lined up in front of its wooden defensive palisade for the grand ceremonial review that would precede their heroic march into battle.

The beleaguered capital was only fifteen miles away.

Facing them from outside the large ceremonial tent were their leaders, the princes and dukes that Pope Innocent XI had summoned and financed, all of them illustrious and battle hardened professional soldiers of the highest order. They were all here to halt the advance of the largest army ever seen in Europe, a Muslim army that threatened not just Vienna, but their own states.

At the center of this preeminent line-up was the most senior of them all, the army of liberation’s main commander: Jon III Sobieski, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania.

Sobieski—an ox of a man and a formidable military leader—had ridden in a week earlier at the head of an army of fifteen thousand horsemen. His force included two thousand *husaria*, the fierce “winged” hussars; with their sixteen-foot lances, spear-like swords and plumed helmets, they were the most fearsome heavy cavalry of their time.

It had been a long, hard march, and the Polish king was exhausted. Still, as he surveyed his troops, he felt a surge of pride and anticipation. He knew that the hopes of a deeply worried Europe rested most heavily on his shoulders, and he would not disappoint them. He couldn’t. God had tasked him with saving the Christian states from the heathens. It was, he was certain, his destiny. His eternal place by the side of Saint Peter was assured.

He stood in muted appreciation as the troops, musketeers, dragoons and cuirassiers, their cannon and mortars proudly on display, were paraded before him and the rest of the commanders. As

the final regiment took up its position, he turned and glanced at the man to his right, Charles, the Duke of Lorraine.

He didn't need to say anything.

His look of utter confidence said it all.

It was a look Lorraine knew well. The duke, who still walked with a limp from a broken leg sustained in battle seven years earlier, was the brother-in-law of the Habsburg emperor. Leopold had appointed him field commander of his forces earlier that year. An affable, unpretentious man, the duke was, like Sobieski, a fierce, courageous soldier who bore his battle scars proudly and commanded great respect and trust from his men.

His presence by Sobieski's side only heightened the Polish king's confidence.

With all the troops now in place, the king and the duke led the rest of the commanders in kneeling before their men while the Archbishop of Gran prepared to celebrate mass and bless the valiant soldiers of Christ. The emperor himself was not there. The cowardly Leopold and his court had fled the capital one week before the arrival of the Ottoman army earlier that summer, and he had no intention to join the men who were here to save it. He wasn't alone; more than fifty thousand Viennese had followed their monarch in abandoning the city for safer ground farther west. Their places were taken over by an equal number of country folk who fled the neighbouring villages and sought refuge behind the city's fortified walls—a refuge that was on the verge of collapse.

Sobieski knew how desperate things were. For weeks, the Ottomans had rained cannon fire on the besieged city. At the same time, Ottoman sappers had dug tunnels under its defensive walls and exploded mines to wreck them. The Viennese defenders had so far managed to repel each assault, but they were bloodied, starved and exhausted. From messages sneaked out of the city by intrepid couriers, Sobieski knew it would only take one final well-placed charge to cleave an opening through the fortifications and allow the Turks to stream into the city. He also knew that when that happened, no one would be spared.

The sultan had already sent two missives to Leopold in which he'd laid out his intentions in startlingly clear terms. Ottoman rules of engagement prescribed that any city that did not accede to the sultan's demand of surrender and open its gates, and whose people did not forsake their religion and convert to Islam, would not be spared. Flayed skins and sacks of severed heads would be gifted to the victorious pasha, and those who were not put under the blade would be enslaved.

Sobieski and the rest of the gathered commanders had also heard first-hand reports of how Kara Mustafa Pasha, the grand vizier at the head of the sultan's army, had demonstrated that his master would be taken at this word: en route to Vienna, a few miles outside the city, Kara Mustafa had his men slaughter all four thousand citizens of the small town Perchtoldsdorf—after its garrison had surrendered. They also burned down its church, which was packed with women and children. The people of Vienna had taken note. Kara Mustafa's bloodthirst ensured that they would fight to the death.

As far away as England and Spain, terrified prayers were given in churches asking for salvation from the heathen invasion.

It would all hinge on the men gathered here, at Tulln.

With the court choristers in mid-hymn, something caught Sobieski's eye. It came from the far right of the plain, at the very edge of the gathered force: a cloud of dust, topped by several fluttering flags.

The profound solemnity of the moment made the disturbance all the more egregious.

Even from this great distance, he immediately realized what he was looking at: intricately woven silk flags carrying Koranic verses, ones that served to remind soldiers of their faith while invoking a sense of divinely protected victory.

Ottoman flags.

Sobieski stiffened and he glanced at Lorraine. The duke's face mirrored his own angry scowl. Lorraine had evidently also recognized the sultan's banners.

The procession caused a ripple of commotion across the gathered troops as it advanced slowly, unhindered. The hot, still air was choked with portent and malice, and yet, the small convoy was allowed to progress. As it drew nearer, Sobieski could now make out three horsemen, each of them carrying a banner and trailing a camel.

They made their way across the grounds until they were within fifty yards of the ceremonial tent. A wall of guards moved to block their advance, swords raised. The lead horseman calmly raised his arm and brought the convoy to a halt just before them. Then the three riders dismounted, took a few steps towards the guards and the royal enclosure, and, with the edges of the guards' swords hovering a hair's breadth from their necks, bowed.

Sobieski and Lorraine exchanged a confused look. They didn't know what to make of this. Envoys of the Ottoman host, clearly—but for what reason? Within days, if not hours, they would be engaged in a fight to the death. What did this signify? They could see that the riders were dressed in ceremonial costume and didn't seem to be armed. More intriguing were the camels, which were huge, adorned with exquisitely embroidered fabrics and precious metal trimmings, and carried large carved-leather packs hung across their backs.

Sobieski studied the lead horseman, who now straightened and slowly pulled his coat wide open, as did his consorts, to show that they were unarmed. Indeed, no muskets, pistols or sabres were strapped across their chests. The lead Ottoman turned to show the guards as much, then turned back to face the king and made a gesture asking for permission to approach the enclosure.

The Polish king was a hard and naturally suspicious man, but he was also a pragmatist. If this was another formal demand for surrender, he would have two of the envoys executed before the third, who would be allowed to return to his master to relay its rejection. But a summons for surrender didn't require three loaded camels. Was there something else on the sultan's mind? A call to negotiate a truce, perhaps? Something that might spare the inevitable deaths that were to come, even with victory?

The commander of the guards looked to Sobieski for instructions. The king motioned for the riders to be let through.

Shadowed very closely by the guards whose swords were still drawn and ready, the three men moved as one, advancing in triangular formation with measured pace until they were standing no more than fifteen feet from the gathered commanders. There, they bowed again.

The leader said, "I carry greetings from his eminence my lord padishah Mehmed the fourth, the sultan of sultans, khan of khans, commander of the faithful and ruler of the black and white seas and of Rumeli, and from his most valiant serasker in this holiest of campaigns, the grand vizier Kara Mustafa Pasha."

Sobieski studied the Ottoman as an interpreter translated his words. The envoy, a tall man who was not out of his twenties, was sweating profusely, but the king saw no fear in his eyes. It was clearly more from the long ride under the harsh summer sun while dressed in full ceremonial regalia: baggy salvar trousers, long boots, turban, and a flowing red coat.

"My greetings to your eminent master, soldier. And what is the purpose of your venture?"

The envoy bowed again. The two men with him did the same. Then he straightened and looked the king straight in the eye.

"I have been sent to convey a message from my master."

Sobieski frowned. "And what would that be?"

The man didn't react at first. Then a wry, curiously serene smile seeped across his face and he said, "He wishes you a peaceful journey," before adding, "Allahu akbar."

And with that, he slipped his hands in his pockets, and before the king, the guards or any of the commanders could even react, he blew up.

As did the two other envoys and the camels—a massive explosion that ripped through the royal enclosure and reduced it and everything around it to flaming debris.

Confusion and panic streaked across the gathered troops as they watched their leaders disappear in a raging fireball. The real horror, however, was yet to descend on them, the one that was now being heralded by the piercing war cries and the deep, ominous thuds of Ottoman kettledrums echoing out from behind the nearby hills.

In that instant, in a blink of an eye, everything changed.

History changed.

Sobieski wouldn't lead his winged Hussars to a crushing defeat of the Ottoman army in the fields outside Vienna. He wouldn't save the city, nor would he stand before the grand vizier's ravaged camp in victory and proclaim "Venimus, vidimus, deus vicit"—"We came, We saw, God conquered." The grand vizier wouldn't flee to Belgrade where, on the sultan's orders, three months later—on Christmas Day, as church bells were ringing across Europe—he would be strangled, decapitated, have his head skinned and stuffed and presented to the sultan at his hunting palace in Edirne. Three years later, the Duke of Lorraine wouldn't retake Buda from the weakened Ottomans. Max Emmanuel wouldn't liberate Belgrade two years after that. Prince Eugene of Savoy wouldn't deal a crushing blow to the sultan at Senta in 1697.

There would be no miraculous victories, no "Age of Heroes." They were all dead, blown to bits in the meadow outside Tulln, with no one to fill their illustrious boots.

Nothing like this had ever been done before.

The Ottoman envoy had used explosives that were twenty times more powerful than gunpowder. In fact, up until that day, the sticks strapped under his coat and stowed in the camel's pouches had never been seen. And they wouldn't have, not for another two hundred years. Not until 1867, in fact, when Alfred Nobel, the Swedish chemist, would invent his Extradynamit blasting powder.

The sheer audacity of the method of attack was also unheard of. Until that day, the concept of a suicide bomber had not existed. It would only rear its ugly head for the first time even later, in Russia in the late 1800s, when Nobel's invention would become the method of choice for suicidal revolutionary assassins.

Which is how it all should have been.

But wasn't.

And all because of a man who stumbled onto a great secret in an underground crypt in Palmyra.

1

PARIS

Present day

Shawwal 1438 AH¹ (July 2017 AD)

The dizzy, light-headed feeling was vaguely familiar.

¹ AH: *Anno Hegirae* ("in the year of the Hijra"), referring to the lunar-based Islamic calendar, which begins its count from the Islamic New Year in 622 AD, the time of the Hijra, the migration of the prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina to escape an assassination plot. The Islamic calendar was used across the Ottoman Empire for religious matters alongside the Rumi calendar ("the Roman calendar"), which was based on the Julian calendar but also adjusted to begin in 622 AD.

Although Ayman Rasheed had done it before, the last time had been years ago. And the sensation was so bizarre, so intense, so overwhelming, that after each trip, he'd wondered if anyone ever got used to it. Not that he imagined many others knew about it to have experienced it. There had to be some others, though, surely—after all, it had been out there for centuries, millennia even—but if so, where were they?

Or, rather, *when*?

He had no way of knowing, and he'd long since learned to avoid speculating about it. It only led down a bottomless rabbit-hole of questions and infinite possibilities.

This time, though, the sensations were far more intense for the simple reason that Ayman Rasheed wasn't in good shape. In fact, he knew he was barely clinging to life, which was why he'd had to make the jump as quickly as possible.

As his eyes struggled to adjust to the faint light of the street lamps on the bridge looming over him, he felt the dizziness return. He muttered a curse and spat out some blood before huddling down and scanning his surroundings, alert to any potential threat, the cool air floating up from the river cutting a bone-deep chill into his naked body.

For that was how he always arrived after a jump: bare-skinned, stripped of any clothing or possessions.

The Paris he'd arrived in was very different, of course. Beyond what he could see, it was smelly, the air thick with pollutants, a stench that felt more disagreeable, even poisonous, compared to the stink from the lack of modern sewage that he'd grown accustomed to over the last couple of decades. It was noisy, too—that was the one thing that always hit hardest, even at this time of night, when the city was mostly asleep. An ambient buzz, a thrum, distant gears and pistons from cars, buses, generators and all kinds of mechanical contraptions burrowing almost surreptitiously into one's consciousness from everywhere and nowhere.

He'd forgotten how noisy that world was.

He coughed up more blood and felt a renewed onslaught of dizziness and nausea. This wasn't good. He needed his strength and all of his guile if he was going to pull this off and save himself. He shut his eyes for a moment, concentrating on calming his racing heartbeat, willing his senses to fall into step and guard him from any potential threat. He just needed to get to the hospital. Just that. The rest would take care of itself. Any other outcome was inconceivable to him. After everything he'd been through, after everything he'd achieved, he couldn't allow it all to come to a pathetic end, here, alone and anonymous, a naked, tattooed corpse curled up in a dark corner on the banks of the Seine.

He slinked back to the dark cover of a stairwell that led down from the bridge and waited. He knew exactly where he was, of course. He'd been careful to arrive in a place that would minimise the risk of discovery and, worse, the risk of obliteration. Appearing in the middle of a busy road and getting hit by a moving car, for example. Or in a crowded building, and causing a stir. Or somewhere that was now occupied by something solid, like a concrete wall. Even a parked car would be fatal. Parks were a good option. Open spaces, sparsely populated, although there was always the risk that, over time, they would be developed, or that trees with thick trunks would have grown there in the intervening years. Another option was to choose a historic monument. An ancient, classic building, one that was most likely to be protected and maintained in its original form, one that stood a good chance of surviving the vagaries of time with little change.

Rasheed's first trip to this new world had been the most dangerous. He'd been curious to see the result of his work, but he'd be travelling blind. He'd never been to Paris in his time—before this had all begun, before he had ever done a time jump—and he hadn't thought of researching it either, back then. Going for extreme caution on that first jump, he'd decided to use the river as his port of arrival, thinking that in all of Paris, it was the one thing he was reasonably certain would remain unchanged over time. It had been a hot summer's day in the middle of August, so he assumed the water

temperature would be bearable. And he wouldn't have clothes to weigh him down. The only thing he had to worry about was being run over by one of the many commercial barges plying its waters, but on a Friday and close to the river bank, it was a reasonable risk.

It had worked out fine. And preferring not to get soaked on future visits, he'd sought out other safe landing spots. He was presently at one of those: a cobblestone quay on the right bank of the Seine, tucked away from the glare of the city's surveillance cameras, under the old Pont Royal bridge, facing the side of the Palais des Tuileries, at the westernmost end of the Louvre courtyard.

He had no way of knowing that the palace itself should not have been there. It had been burned down by the Paris Commune in 1871. Only in the Paris he had just arrived in, there had been no Paris Commune. There had been no French Revolution either. Only an Ottoman conquest that had—as he had seen first-hand on his previous visits—survived and thrived for more than three hundred years.

Thanks to him.

Only this was no curiosity trip, it was not a victory tour. It was a matter of life and death.

His own.

He scanned his surroundings and saw no one. It was Friday, the holy day of rest and congregation. The busy docks that lined the river banks would be shut. People would rise late, have breakfast with their families, then shortly before noon, they would head off to the mosques for the big *Salaat el Jumu'ah* prayers. But that was later. It was still barely dawn. The city had yet to awaken, and the quays were quiet.

After a quiet spell, Rasheed sensed something off to his far left. Some movement. He crept deeper into the shadows, hugging the wall, and his chest tightened as he stifled a cough.

He waited, then peered out, slowly, cautiously.

A figure was approaching. A man, out on a walk, smoking a cigarette.

There was no one else around.

Rasheed risked another look and sized him up. Height, broad size—he would do.

He slid back against the wall and tensed up, waiting. From deep inside him, another geyser of blood threatened to explode, but he suppressed it, causing a burn to tear through his lungs. He tried to still his breathing, which was rising alarmingly, not out of fear, but out of involuntary cardiac exertion. He would have rather waited a bit longer before striking, to allow the after-effects of his trip to settle, but the opportunity was here, now, and to wait longer was to invite more risk.

A charge of adrenaline fought back his dizziness as the man's footfalls drew closer. When he judged them to mean the man was within striking distance, he emerged, fast, blocking his target's path.

The man froze in place, thrown by the sight of a powerful nude man covered in markings standing before him. And before he could react, before his brain had even processed the strange sight, Rasheed dredged up the force to lash out. A quick side-kick hit to the groin causing the man to falter back, his face crumpled from debilitating pain. Rasheed moved in instantly and followed his first strike with a savage haymaker to the man's left ear that almost made him lose consciousness. His legs buckled and by the time he fell to his knees, Rasheed was already behind him, hooking one arm around the man's neck, his other pressing against the back of his head.

Then he squeezed.

The man struggled to free himself, but Rasheed held him in place despite the burning sensation searing through his biceps and his forearm. He could smell the stink of tobacco, which mixed badly with the dizziness that suddenly roared back into his skull. He dredged up all the strength he could muster to keep the man in his grip. Seconds dragged into torturous minutes until the lack of oxygen caused the man's resistance to wane and his body went slack.

Rasheed stayed clamped around the man's neck. He wasn't after unconsciousness. He needed something more permanent.

Moments later, he achieved his goal. He dropped the limp corpse to the ground just as the feeling of choking on his own blood surged within him, making him cough out violently. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and steadied himself against the wall, struggling to stay upright from the dizziness. He couldn't let it overcome him again. He had to move fast.

He pulled the man's clothes off—robe, shirt, sash, baggy trousers, and the loose turban that had already fallen off his head during the scuffle—then slipped them on. In a small pocket in the man's pants, he found an ID card, a couple of bank notes, and a set of keys. He studied the card. The address meant nothing to him, but he memorised the name on it. He didn't intend to use it, but details were important, and he knew it could come in handy.

His head still throbbing, he dragged the man's naked body to the edge of the water. He was about to roll him in when a scream shattered the peaceful night air.

"Stop! What are you doing? Somebody stop him," a woman cried out.

He froze and glanced across the river. A man and a woman were at the base of the stairs down from the bridge directly across from him. The man was now edging closer to the water, pointing at him and shouting too.

Rasheed ignored them.

He just flipped the body into the river, turned and made for the stairs, dredging up another gob of blood as he stumbled off into the darkness.

2

By noon, the heavy sun had the city firmly in its grip, an oppressive presence over an auspicious Friday at the overcrowded Mehmediyye mosque.

Across Paris, the unrelenting heat wave was suffocating. In the shade of a coffee house by the banks of the Seine, it might have been slightly more tolerable, but under the towering dome of the prayer hall, with the midday sun at its most potent and the massive hall filled to capacity, it felt like being in a hammam. Or perhaps Kamal Arslan Agha of the counter-terrorism directorate of the sultan's *Tashkeelat-i Hafiyeh*—the secret police—was feeling it more acutely than any of the other supplicants around him. He was in full uniform, which didn't help. He was also a key player in the events that were scheduled to follow today's noon prayer. A lot of eyes would be on him.

With the last *rak'at* finished, the horde of men rose to their feet and moved to collect their footwear. All around him, the hall reverberated with portent, the shuffling noise amplified by the heat. Kamal caught the eye of his partner, Taymoor Erkun Agha, who had arrived earlier and had been a few rows closer to the pulpit. By the time the slow wave of worshippers reached the main doors, Taymoor had caught up with Kamal.

"That was painful," Taymoor said. "This new imam—the man's a human sleeping pill."

"Another late night?" Kamal asked, instantly regretting it.

Taymoor recoiled slightly with mock indignation. "Not here, brother. Where's your respect?"

Kamal gave him a slight roll of the eyes. "Spare me."

"All I can say is, thank God for text messaging. How did our parents ever manage to hook up with anyone without it?"

"I'm pretty sure they didn't," Kamal replied.

"That's just sad."

"But thanks for the inspiring imagery."

Taymoor's boasts about his nocturnal pursuits had become tiresome to Kamal. He'd suffered them ever since the beginning of their partnership within the Hafiyeh, a partnership that began three years ago, when they were both fresh out of the military academy. But now, with the two young agents'

newly growing notoriety within the service, the boasts had got worse. Both men had never married, despite being thirty years old, naturally blessed with handsome physiques that had been further enhanced by years of hard training and, as officers of the state, highly eligible—a fact that Taymoor was certainly exploiting to the fullest, oblivious to the more conservative, repressive tide that the new sultan had ushered in. Kamal couldn't conceive of him ever entering into a marriage contract, which was probably a blessing for the aspiring brides of the city. As for Kamal, marriage was something he did aspire to, but it wasn't likely to happen anytime soon.

The one woman he wanted above all others was one he could never have.

Taymoor gave him a slap on the shoulder as he ushered him out. "Come on. Our legions of admirers are waiting."

In the large vestibule, the two agents retrieved their boots and their börk head gear— tall tubes of white felt that rose at the front before folding back like a sleeve to below the neck. Even though it was the day of communal prayer and rest, the formal proceedings that were to follow the prayer meant Kamal and his partner had to be in uniform: baggy shalvar trousers, a long-sleeved tunic, and a short-sleeved kaftan with elaborate frogging all the way up the chest, all of it in ominous blacks and greys. On the right collar of the kaftan was the emblem of the Hafiye: three interlocked crescents, each with a small, five-pointed star cradled between its sharp tips. The left collar displayed rank—in Kamal and Taymoor's case, chaouch komiser, or sergeant inspector—which was confirmed in tattoos on the right arm and leg of each agent, a tradition that dated back several centuries, to the earliest days of the Janissaries, when it was both a symbol of brotherhood as well as an aide to identifying corpses after battle. The two men weren't likely to be caught up in an open battle field anytime soon, but the war they were engaged in, a war of suicide bombers and car bombs, did carry a real risk of putting their tattoos to use.

They also wore wide belts that held holsters for their standard-issue Galip automatic handguns and loops that housed their *khanjar* daggers.

The two men followed the crowd out to the vast rectangular courtyard fronting the mosque. Two floors of semi-circular vaulted arcades lined all four sides of the monumental space, which had managed to retain its original name of cour d'honneur in common parlance, even though Ottoman Turkish had, after three hundred years of foreign rule, long since replaced French as the city's main language.

The vast compound's original name, *Les Invalides*, was of course long gone. Its renaming had posed a dilemma for Mehmed IV, the sultan whose army had conquered the French capital in the summer of 1101². Besides the magnificent domed chapel at Les Invalides, Paris also boasted the sublime cathedral of Notre-Dame. Mehmed couldn't put his name to both. In his infinite wisdom, he decided to bestow his name on the former, which became the Mehmediyye—as had St Peter's Basilica in Rome after the Papal states had fallen and the pope beheaded, but that was acceptable given that they were in different cities. Notre-Dame, on the other hand, would have to settle for basking in the splendour of the sultan's nickname—the conqueror. Shorn of its stained glass windows and other Christian iconography, dressed in domes and flanked by minarets, it had become the Fatih Mosque.

The sun, close to its zenith, wasn't sparing any corner of the courtyard from its merciless pounding. Its ferocity blasted Kamal and Taymoor the instant they stepped outside. Their uniforms, though of the linen and cotton summer variant, were still way too heavy for the conditions. With sweat running down the length of his spine, Kamal would have much preferred to be in his lighter, off-duty attire, but today, he wasn't there as a civilian. He and Taymoor were being fêted. Which didn't sit all that comfortably with Kamal. They'd worked hard, to be sure. They'd put in the hours and the legwork. They'd been focused. But they'd also had a lucky break. A break that, admittedly, had saved many lives.

² 1101 in the Islamic Hijri calendar, or 1689 AD

Of that, Kamal was very proud.

The courtyard was heaving with people. Kamal took in the scene, one he'd witnessed many times before. It was an impressive setting. The viewing areas were laid out on either side of the length of the courtyard. Along the east arcade were eight public grandstands, stepped but devoid of any seating. Facing them along the opposite side were two official tribunes. Those did have seating and rose more steeply, which was useful given the more substantial turbans and head gear most of those seated there would be wearing. As guests of honour, Kamal and Taymoor would watch from there, along with their superiors from the Hafiye and a number of state officials. At the far end of the courtyard, facing the Seine, two of the mosque complex's six minarets rose proudly, the tallest landmarks in the sprawling city.

In one corner, Kamal spotted the state television crew filming the proceedings. Armed ceremonial guards stood by the pillars around the arcade. As with all public spaces within the empire, the grandstands and the tribunes had separate male and female sections. All those attending, on either side of the huge courtyard, would be doing so from their segregated areas.

They made their way to their designated area through a stream of congratulations and pats of the back from several officers of the Hafiye.

"Tebrikler, mulasim komiser," one of the officers congratulated Kamal. "The youngest in the department, eh? Just don't let the expectations become too much of a burden on you." He squeezed his shoulder a bit too tightly.

Kamal responded to the back-handed praise with a curt nod and moved on. He had already heard the murmurs: promotions to lieutenant inspector for both partners were in the offing. Still, Kamal couldn't find the peace of mind to savour the moment. He kept glancing across the courtyard, scanning the faces in the women's public stands, looking for her.

It was almost impossible to distinguish individual faces, of course—the headscarves and the veils, some less opaque than others, were specifically intended to block that kind of scrutiny. Still, once or twice, his eyes fell on a figure that, for the briefest of instants, he thought might be her. But then something about the body language, the height, an almost imperceptible detail, told him he was mistaken.

It didn't relieve his discomfort.

As he caught up with Taymoor, he glanced up at the upper level arcade and saw Mumtaz Sikander Pasha, the beylerbey of the Paris eyalet, a province that included not just the great metropolis itself, but the entire ancient kingdom of France. Dressed in his ceremonial robe, his head wrapped in a bulbous turban that was only dwarfed by the girth of his waist, the governor was making his way to his box, which was already crowded with senior officials including, Kamal now saw, the overall commander of the Paris division of the Hafiye, Huseyin Celaleddin Pasha.

Celaleddin was tall and, given his position in Ottoman society, he was unusually slim. His jutting chin, which was always tilted slightly upward, and his sloped-back brow made it hard to tell what was going on behind the discerning eyes that now caught sight of Kamal. The commander surprised Kamal by acknowledging him with a subtle congratulatory nod. Kamal responded with a slight bow before his superior turned away to greet the beylerbey.

Taymoor led him to their seats. After pausing to bask in the attention a bit longer, he took his seat and, with beaming satisfaction, patted the one next to him. "Front row, brother. It's our day."

"*Mashallah*," Kamal replied half-heartedly as he did another quick scan of the female tribune before sitting down.

His distant attitude wasn't lost on Taymoor. "Why the sour face?" he asked, then his face cracked with a bawdy grin. "You got somewhere else you'd rather be?"

Kamal shrugged. "Of course not."

Taymoor let out a small snort, then studied him for a moment. “You know something? We’re partners. We face danger, death maybe, on a daily basis—together. We’re supposed to share. I tell you everything—”

“Yeah, too much maybe,” Kamal protested.

“Protest all you want, I know you love it.” He dropped his voice. “You’re as much of a depraved *luti* as I am. You just don’t like talking about it. So go on, tell me, who is she? Who’s turning your balls blue?”

Kamal had to play the game. He knew they were both lying to each other, but it suited him fine. He didn’t want Taymoor to know what strings were tugging at his heart. It was enough of a burden to keep it locked away deep inside of him; he’d never live it down if his licentious partner ever found out.

So he chose to keep up the act and not answer while an ominous silence descended on the courtyard. All attention turned to its far end, where five men appeared from a portal in the arcade. They were all dressed in ceremonial uniforms. The middle man, though, stood out because of his black robes and turban and his hulking, heavysset frame. Even under the robes, it was clearly more muscle than fat.

He was also striking because of the long sword he carried.

Kamal and Taymoor watched as the procession made its way solemnly to the center of the courtyard.

“To be continued,” Taymoor warned jokingly, wagging a finger at his partner. “You know better than to mess with my bloodhound nose, right, brother?”

Kamal forced an enigmatic smile—the fact was, Taymoor did have great investigative instincts. In terms of their work, this was an undeniable asset. But in terms of Kamal’s personal life, he could have done without it.

He turned his attention to the center of the far portal, where four officers now appeared, two on either side of a fifth man who was dressed in a simple white robe. He was blindfolded and his hands were tied behind his back.

The arena went quiet as the officers escorted the man to the center of the courtyard and handed him over to the first group, before marching back the way they came.

The large man with the sword stepped forward and, facing the prisoner, he took hold of the man’s shoulder and guided him down to the ground until he was kneeling. Then he stepped back, took a sheet of paper from one of his assistants, and began to read out the execution order in a loud voice that echoed across the stillness of the enclosed space.

Kamal had heard those same charges read out many times before—“enemy of the state,” “high treason”—as well as the verdict. He had heard them most recently a week earlier, in that same spot, proclaimed by the same executioner, the state’s executioner corps being a small, exclusive club. But this time, the words carried far more resonance for him. This time, the condemned man kneeling on the parched cobblestones of the cour d’honneur was put there by Kamal and Taymoor.

It should have been an untainted day of great pride for him. When it came to terrorists, to barbarians who were plotting to murder innocent citizens, he never questioned whether the punishment fitted the crime. Case in point: the condemned man presently before them in the courtyard, an Algerian extremist who, along with his brother and a few others, had made his way to Paris with the intention of attacking the festival celebrating the impending marriage of the beylerbey’s youngest daughter to one of the Sultan’s favorite sons. A lot of dignitaries would have been in attendance, including the bey himself. A major catastrophe had been averted, and Kamal and Taymoor had become heroes overnight.

The executioner finished reading out the order, then started to recite some verses from the Koran. Kamal’s scowl was fixated on the condemned man, who remained impassive and wasn’t pulling against his restraints or pleading for his life. Kamal knew that by the time the day of execution arrived,

any strength the man had left would have been sapped away by the terror of what awaited him. He also knew that the rumors about sedatives being slipped into the final meals of the condemned were true.

The executioner finished his recitation, then he straightened up and looked to the governor's box.

Kamal, and everyone else in the courtyard, followed his gaze.

The beylerbey stared down in silence, then gave him a small, impassive nod.

The executioner bowed his head in acknowledgement, then he turned to the condemned man. He bent down and used his free hand to adjust the position of the man's head, exposing his bare neck more fully. Then he bent down further and spoke some words to him, instructing the man to recite the shahada, the declaration of absolute faith.

The executioner then took a step back, planted his feet firmly, and, holding the sword in both hands, he swung it around slowly to the prisoner's neck, which he nicked with its blade. The prisoner, surprised, flinched instinctively, tensing up and straightening his neck— 29 exactly what his executioner wanted; he had already raised the sword high above his head and in a fluid, lightning-quick move, he brought it down full force.

The blade went right through the prisoner's neck in one clean cut. One single, brutally efficient, fatal blow. The man's head didn't just drop: it sprang off, hit the ground and rolled through a full turn before coming to a stop. The executioner took a swift step back to avoid getting his robes soiled as blood instantly squirted out of the headless body, which remained immobile in its kneeling position.

Across the courtyard, shouts of "*Allahu akbar*"—God is the greatest—rang out. Taymoor hissed it too as he pumped the air with his fist before glancing over at Kamal with a fierce glow in his eyes and clenched teeth.

"That'll teach those sons of whores," he rasped.

Kamal nodded, even though he knew it wouldn't. Death, after all, was no deterrent to those fanatics. If anything, it was the opposite.

As the blood flow slowed, the executioner surveyed his handiwork with no visible emotion. One of his assistants handed him a small bottle of water and a cloth, which he casually took without looking away from this victim. He poured water over his blade and wiped it with the cloth, which he then discarded onto the rigid corpse.

A four-man crew of attendants pulling a steel cart appeared from a far alcove. Moving with well-practiced efficiency, they unfurled a white, plastic sheet and placed it on the ground next to the lifeless, headless body. Three of them rolled the corpse onto it and lifted it onto the cart while the fourth retrieved the head and placed it in a bag made of the same white plastic. Moments later, they were wheeling it all away.

The courtyard could now welcome its next victim.

Today's ceremony would feature seven beheadings. The next three, co-conspirators of the Algerian, didn't trouble Kamal. After all, it was he and Taymoor who had uncovered the plot, identified the terrorists and led the team that had tracked them down and brought them in after an intense, frantic manhunt.

The final two didn't bother him either. He had played no part in their arrest, but they were tried and convicted murderers who, while high on khat, had killed an elderly couple while robbing their mansion in St Germain.

The fifth prisoner, however, did.

His name was Halil Azmi, and he was a muderis—a teacher, in this case a university law professor. Agents from the Hafiye's Z Directorate, the ever-expanding internal security force tasked with protecting the imperial order, had arrested him along with two others, a prominent journalist and a lawyer. The three men were accused of belonging to the White Rose, an underground subversive

organisation that the Z agents had recently uncovered, and a closed court had deemed them to be “colluding to instigate revolt.”

He was also her friend.

Which was why Kamal was now scouring the female grandstands again, looking for Nisreen, his brother’s wife, hoping she wouldn’t be there as the professor was paraded in to a chorus of suppressed gasps from the public stands.

Part of him begrudged Nisreen the unease that was needling him. He felt irritated by her ill-judged friendship, one that was spoiling his moment of glory. At the same time, he couldn’t help but empathize with what she must be feeling, knowing her friend would soon lose his life. He hoped she wouldn’t witness what was about to come, hoped it wouldn’t cement even more of an indelible link between him, an agent of the Hafiye, and Azmi’s fate.

His heart seized as his eyes snagged something, a pair of eyes that were looking his way, and for a second, he felt her there, watching him, loathing him from across the courtyard, the last vestiges of a friendship that had started when they were children about to be obliterated forever under the scorching sun. For a moment, he froze—then the woman turned, and despite her light headscarf that also veiled the lower half of her face, he knew it wasn’t her.

He looked away. And with the high sun pummeling the courtyard, Azmi was positioned so that, like the others before him, he was kneeling no more than twenty kadems from Kamal.

The professor wasn’t cowering. He held his head high, and seemed oblivious to everyone in the crowd. Instead, he was staring stoically at the official tribune.

Kamal couldn’t help but meet his gaze, couldn’t tear himself away from the man’s eyes, which seemed to have zeroed in on him, a silent, accusing glare that triggered a pounding inside the agent’s ears that drowned out the executioner’s voice along with the sound of his blade as it cleaved the air before slicing through the professor’s neck.

Which was when Kamal’s mobile phone buzzed in his pocket.

As did Taymoor’s.

3

For Sayyid Ramazan Hekim, being summoned away from the family that Friday wasn’t hugely unwelcome. The week that had just ended had been a dark one, and he knew it would only get worse once Nisreen heard the inevitable confirmation that the execution of her friend Halil Azmi had been carried out.

He would have liked to be with her at that moment. But at the same time, he knew there was nothing he could do to comfort her. They’d already said all that needed to be said. Better to leave her with the kids to distract her more fully than if he were there too.

Ramazan wasn’t as strongly affected by Azmi’s fate as his wife was. He hadn’t even met the man. He didn’t know many of his wife’s law colleagues, and more recently, he’d purposely avoided them. But Nisreen had on several occasions related their dissenting views regarding what the state had become, and he knew they would attract trouble, trouble he was fully determined to steer clear of. He and Nisreen had argued about that, of course. It was one thing to disagree with what the sultan and his cronies were doing; it was quite another to be publicly vocal about it. Ramazan felt his primary duty was to his wife, his children, and the patients under his care. Sometimes, late at night, he would wonder if that meant he was reasonable and cautious, or a coward. He stoically pushed back against the latter and prided himself on the former. It would all eventually pass—such periods of political strife always did. And when they did, he would have kept his family safe.

Under normal circumstances, this would have been the end of another week of routine, and the next day would have ushered in a new one. Ramazan knew routine all too well. He liked routine. Routine was order. Routine promoted peace of mind. It was the life he'd chosen. After all, being an anaesthesiologist wasn't particularly exciting. It wasn't particularly glamorous either. In fact, it was quite the opposite: an invisible career. For even though he held his patients' lives in his hands when they were in the operating room, even though they voluntarily relinquished all control of their bodies and their minds to him, he'd long-since got used to the fact that, afterwards, they always remembered the names of their surgeon, never their anaesthesiologist.

In the current climate, being anonymous was probably a good thing.

Today, however, as he walked down the halls of the cardiothoracic wing at the hospital that was part of the Hurrem Sultan külliye on the Île de la Cité, Ramazan sensed something far from routine was brewing.

"You say he walked in early this morning, alone, in bad shape and coughing blood— but we don't know anything about him?" he asked, moving briskly alongside Moshe Fonseca, a surgeon he'd worked with frequently.

"Nothing beyond the fact that he needs surgery rather urgently," Fonseca replied.

The sprawling complex, the largest *külliye* in Paris, had more humble origins as the Hôtel-Dieu hospital, which dated back to the seventh century. It had grown a lot since the Ottomans had taken over the city. Like all *külliyes*, it was funded by a voluntary charitable endowment, known as a *waqf*. Charity was highly encouraged by Islam, and large *waqf* complexes became a key part of the Ottomans' colonisation of foreign lands. These pious bequests by the imperial family and the ruling class ranged from hostels, mills, factories and caravanserais, to entire villages, and included all the revenue that these properties generated.

The Hurrem Sultan had been founded by the wife of a sultan, and it was named after her. Like the largest *külliyes*, it also housed a mosque, a school, a bathhouse, a hospice, an inn and a public soup kitchen. Its hospital was one of the most advanced in Paris, and Ramazan had a solid reputation as its star anaesthesiologist.

"We don't even know his name?" he asked.

"He hasn't said a word," the surgeon replied. "But that's hardly the most unusual thing about him."

"What then?"

Fonseca gave him a loaded sideways glance. "You'll see."

The surgeon's reply didn't just feed Ramazan's confusion—it worried him. "Has he been reported to the *Zaptiye*?"

Fonseca stopped. After a quick glance to make sure no one was within earshot, he dropped his voice and said, "There's no need for the police at this stage. Let's save the man's life first. He's going to be here for a while and he's going to be pretty helpless. Let's not make things worse for him before we know what his story is."

Ramazan held his gaze and considered his words, then he nodded. Neither he nor Fonseca were huge fans of the *Zaptiye*—the city's police force. Not nowadays.

They rounded a corner and entered the ward, where they made their way past several other patients to reach the man in question.

He was lying in a bed in a far corner, by a window, hooked up to several monitors that beeped softly. A nurse by the name of Anbara was checking the drips that snaked into the intravenous cannula attached to his right arm. When she saw the doctors, she bowed slightly and retreated away from the bed. The surgeon gave her a small nod back before turning to the patient.

Ramazan couldn't tell much about the man, given that he was covered by a bed sheet and had a transparent plastic oxygen mask strapped to his face. From what he could see, Ramazan thought the man might be in his late-sixties. He had a full head of grey, slickedback hair.

He couldn't see much else.

"My name is Moshe Fonseca, effendi," Fonseca told the man in his customary upbeat, confidence-inspiring tone. "I'm in charge of the hospital's cardiothoracic unit. How are you feeling today?"

The man's eyes narrowed as he seemed to study the surgeon for a brief moment. Then he replied with a slow, gentle nod, closing his eyes as he did.

"Good. Well, you'll be relieved to know your case doesn't present anything we can't fix," Fonseca continued. "Basically, you've got what we call mitral valve stenosis. We all have four valves in our heart, the mitral is one of them, and sometimes, for any number of reasons—age maybe, or you might have been born with it, or maybe you had a bad case of rheumatic fever at some point—this valve, it gets narrower, and it stops opening properly. Which means there's less blood flowing into your left ventricle, which is the main pumping chamber of your heart. I imagine you've been feeling very tired and short of breath lately, yes?"

The man nodded.

"All these symptoms—coughing blood, the heart arrhythmia, they're all because of this. Your lungs are severely congested, your heart has clearly been strained for quite some time. Frankly, I'm surprised you haven't had this treated until now. It can easily cause clots that lead to a transient ischemic attack, which is a kind of mini stroke, or even a full stroke and—well, that's not something we want, is it?"

Fonseca studied the man, but the patient said nothing.

After a moment, Fonseca just nodded and said, "The main thing, you're here now, and we're going to fix this. The way we do this is by replacing your valve with a bioprosthetic one that will do the job your valve hasn't been doing. That's going to be my job." He gestured at Ramazan. "And this here is Sayyid Ramazan Hekim, one of our finest anaesthesiologists. He'll be the one putting you to sleep. As your condition is rather urgent, I'd rather not wait any more than we have to before doing this, so we've scheduled you in this afternoon. I trust you have no problems with that?"

The man shook his head.

"Ramazan Hekim will answer any questions you might have," Fonseca continued, "and he also has some pre-op questions to ask you, although I'm not sure how fruitful that's going to be given your," he hesitated, "condition."

The man didn't react.

"Very well then," Fonseca said. "All you need to do now is relax. You're in good hands and you have nothing to worry about. I'll see you in the recovery room." He turned to Ramazan. "He's all yours."

Ramazan looked a question at him, still wondering about what the surgeon had meant by his earlier comment.

Fonseca gave Ramazan a small, telling look. "It might be a good idea for you to examine his breathing again. The fluid level in his lungs is quite high."

He lingered for a second with a telling look, as if to make sure his message had sunk in, then wandered off.

Ramazan stood there, confused. He glanced at Anbara, who didn't react, then he looked at the patient, wondering what Fonseca was talking about. Examine his breathing? The man was connected to monitors that gave far more information than anything he could glean from a simple stethoscope. Still, the surgeon had been noticeably pointed about it.

He reached into the tray unit by the bed, picked up a stethoscope, and moved in closer. "All right, let's see how your lungs are doing, shall we?"

The man's eyes tightened, visibly uncomfortable about this. Which Ramazan noticed as he folded down the sheet covering him, then pulled the man's hospital gown up to expose his chest.

And froze.

The man's chest was covered in tattoos. All of it, all the way down to his waist. Ramazan had never seen anything like it. He couldn't see them as clearly as he would have liked, as some of them were obscured under the man's chest hair, but from what he could see, they didn't seem ornamental, or symbolic. Rather, they were words and numbers written in the same Arabic-Persian alphabet that Ramazan used, only they were written the wrong way, from right to left. The letters were small, the technique intricate. He thought some looked like they might be names, and dates, but it was hard to tell. They were difficult to read, given that they were mirror images of normal writing.

There were also several drawings and diagrams, images that looked technical that Ramazan didn't recognize at all.

Still rigid with surprise, he glanced up at the patient. The man was watching him, his cold, impassive eyes clearly probing him. Ramazan felt a deep-seated unease—and, oddly, he felt scared. He wasn't sure why, but something about the man's unwavering gaze, coupled with the tattoos and the strong torso they covered, made him very uncomfortable.

He glanced furtively at the tattoos again, then forced his attention away from them and did his best to sound casual and seem unperturbed by what he'd seen.

"This might feel a bit cold," he said as he placed the stethoscope's resonator on the man's chest. "Take a deep breath, please."