



## INTO WALLACHIA

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A FEW DAYS LATER, we left the lands of the Habsburgs and entered the eastern half of the Continent.

The landscape changed immediately. Gone were the rust-and-gold leaves of autumn in the West. Here everything was darker. The mountains were black and threatening, the trees thin and skeletal, the roads muddy and boggy.

The language also changed: on the western side of Europe, the common language between foreigners was Latin, but in the East it was determinedly Greek. For over a thousand years, from their base in Constantinople, eastern Roman emperors had held Latin in contempt, a crude tongue that was not 'sacred' like Greek. This had not changed with the accession of the Moslem sultans.

As we approached the Black Sea, we passed through the land known to some as Romany and to others as Wallachia. It was a grim place inhabited by gypsies and peasants who all

bore the haunted looks of the permanently oppressed. Their villages are hardly even worthy of the title 'village'. A Romany hamlet is little more than a collection of hovels flanking a central boggy track.

'Did you know, Bessie,' Elsie whispered to me one night as we lay in our covered wagon by the side of one such track, 'that a hundred years ago the ruler of Wallachia was a madman named Vlad the Third. His unspeakable acts of torture and murder defy belief: his preferred method of execution was impalement on a stake. The victim would be impaled up through the anus and out through the mouth—all while still alive—and then be left to slide down the stake and die slowly.'

'How horrid . . .' I said.

'According to the local stories, this Vlad would have whole villages impaled. So murderous was his reign that rumours began to circulate that he drank the blood of the dead at his table. He became known as Vlad the Impaler. Apparently, he was a devoted Catholic—'

'Elsie,' Mr Ascham said sternly, poking his head inside our wagon. 'Stop scaring Bess with your silly campfire tales.'

Even so, the next day, as we passed through another hamlet he rode a little closer to my wagon than usual.

Sullen-looking gypsies watched us as our caravan went by. On some occasions, the gypsies would follow us beyond the borders of their hamlets, trailing us at a distance. One time, a group of them shadowed us for three whole days and nights.

During that time, Mr Ascham posted an extra guard to keep watch over the wagon in which I slept.

On one of those nights I asked, ‘Sir, is it true that gypsies kidnap children? Is that why you’ve allocated an extra man to watch over me?’

Mr Ascham looked out at the moonlit landscape. A jagged ridgeline of pine trees stabbed the sky, framing the valley.

‘Unfortunately, young Bess, the frightening bedtime stories we tell about gypsies back in England do indeed have some basis in fact,’ he said, not taking his eyes off the hills.

In the distance, a wolf howled. At least, I thought it was a wolf. It might have been a human.

‘And what exactly do these gypsies do with the children they take in the night?’ I asked. In the stories back home, one never actually found out what happened to children who were so kidnapped.

Ascham turned to look at me. He said seriously, ‘That is something I do not wish to burden your young mind with at this stage of your development.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Surely it couldn’t be worse than impalement?’

‘Yes, it could,’ he said, and he would speak no more on the matter.

Mr Giles continued to play chess when he could, but there were fewer large villages in Wallachia and so fewer opportunities. When he did play in a small tavern one evening, I noticed an

odd-looking fellow watching the match closely from the back of the room. He was a small man with a dark Persian complexion and a long rat-like nose.

I started. I had seen this man before: at the last tavern, two days previously. I mentioned it to Mr Ascham.

‘Well spotted, Bess. That gentleman has been following us for a week now,’ my teacher said calmly, not turning to look at the rat-faced man. ‘He always lurks at the back of the room and he watches Mr Giles’s matches very closely. No, Bess. Don’t turn around.’

‘Who is he?’ I asked in a hushed whisper.

‘My guess is that he is an agent of the Sultan’s, sent to observe and report on Mr Giles. Perhaps to gauge his ability before his arrival at the tournament. Perhaps to see who travels with him. We are in Ottoman lands now, Bess, and it should come as no surprise that the Sultan’s eyes watch over us.’

On another occasion in Wallachia, we stayed at a large and very rowdy tavern.

Our rooms were upstairs while at ground level there was a beer hall filled with dirty locals who played cards, smoked pipes and drank a potent foul-smelling local brew. Naturally, Mrs Ponsonby was appalled and fanned herself vigorously and ostentatiously, as if to fan away the very vice in the air. At a table in the corner, two men were playing chess for money.

I should mention that on every occasion he played chess on our journey, Mr Giles had played it solely for the sake of playing. On some occasions, local players wanted to play him

for money, but Mr Giles always demurred. He would play, but for enjoyment only.

At first I thought this odd as he stood a good chance of beating them. One day I asked him why.

‘When one travels in foreign lands, Miss Bess,’ he said, ‘one is essentially a guest in someone’s home. And it is not polite to take your host’s coin. Beat them, sure, but do not play for money. No-one likes an outsider who arrives in their house, wins and then walks jauntily away with their host’s hard-earned silver. If you do that, you are liable to be chased out of town, thrown out of town, or worst of all carried out of town to a pauper’s grave after someone has stabbed you in the back.’

‘Goodness.’

In that tavern in Wallachia, however, the local chess champion would *only* play for coin.

And since it was his board, one could not play him without taking his wager. Mr Giles resolved not to play that night, but of course when word got around the establishment that one of the recently arrived guests was on his way to Constantinople to play in the chess tournament, the local champion loudly and coarsely challenged Mr Giles to a game.

And so Mr Giles played him and the whole tavern gathered round the corner table to watch.

As the game began, I surreptitiously scanned the room and sure enough, there he was in the far corner: our rat-faced shadower. His eyes were fixed on Mr Giles.

It turned out to be a gripping game. While the local champion might have been boorish and crude, he was a fine player and the game lasted far longer than any of the others Mr Giles had played on our journey.

For the duration of the game, I sat with Mr Ascham, watching intently. Elsie, thrilled to be at a place that in some way resembled civilisation, flitted excitedly from one spot to another: she variously sat with us and watched the game, flirted with the younger men at the bar who had no interest in chess, or disappeared to our rooms to emerge a short while later wearing a different dress that flattered her breasts more.

At one stage, I went to the nearby bar to get a drink for Mr Ascham and myself. (My teacher said, 'It will be good for you to actually pay for something at least once in your life. Perhaps you should go and ask Mr Giles if he would like something to drink as well.') Aghast at the prospect of me doing something so unroyal as ordering some drinks, both Mr and Mrs Ponsonby accompanied me.

At the bar, I (quite proudly) ordered our drinks: my teacher wanted to try the local ale while Mr Giles and Mrs Ponsonby—in an effort to choose something a little less potent—ordered perry. Mr Ponsonby asked for watered-down spice wine and I had milk.

The tavern's owner had an enormous belly and unshaven jowls but he was a friendly fellow who could speak Greek. 'Heading to Constantinople for the chess tournament, eh?' he said as he opened a bottle of ale. Behind him, his boy prepared the other drinks.

‘Yes.’

‘Keep an eye out for the representative of Wallachia, a very strong player from Brasov named Dragan,’ the owner said.

‘His name is Dragan?’ I said. ‘As in *dragon*, the mythical creature?’

‘Yes, and he breathes a unique fire of his own. Trust me, if you meet Dragan of Brasov, you will most certainly remember the encounter!’

‘Thank you. I shall keep that in mind,’ I said.

‘One other thing, little one,’ the owner said more softly. ‘Watch yourself in Byzantium. Stay close to your companions. There be strange tales coming out of that city of late. Word is, there’s a fiend on the loose there, the Devil’s spawn, they say. Prowls the slums outside the palace late at night, kills men, women *and* children, stabbing them hundreds of times. Then he tears the skin off the bottom half of their faces before he vanishes into the night.’

‘He tears the skin off their faces?’ I said.

‘Around the mouth and jawbone. Flays ’em like a hunter skinning a wolf, exposing the flesh and bone undernea—’

‘I say, that’s enough, sir,’ Mrs Ponsonby interjected. ‘You’ve no right to scare a child so.’

But I was enthralled; a little terrified, but enthralled nonetheless. ‘Why would anyone do such a thing?’

‘Who knows?’ the tavern owner said. ‘Who *can* know what drives the mind of a madman?’

‘How many people has this fiend killed?’

‘At last count, eleven. The peasants of Constantinople are living in fear. You watch yourself.’

‘I most certainly will.’

I returned to our table with Mr Ponsonby and handed a drink to my teacher, while Mrs Ponsonby took a mug of perry over to Mr Giles at the playing table.

I asked my teacher hesitantly: ‘Sir, have you heard about some murderous fiend at work in Constantinople?’

‘I’ve heard rumours, yes.’

‘Do they concern you?’ They very much concerned me.

‘Until I verify them with someone who actually lives in Constantinople, no. Till then, they are just ghost stories, like the one Elsie told you about the blood-drinking Wallachian tyrant, designed to frighten the young and impressionable.’

Mrs Ponsonby rejoined us then, sipping daintily from her own mug of the local pear cider.

We continued to watch the game. At one point, Mr Ascham nodded at Mr Giles’s opponent. ‘You know, Bess, I was just observing something.’

‘What?’

‘Whether they gather in a king’s court or a tavern in Wallachia, everyone wants to be somebody.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Exactly what I said.’ He gave me a look. ‘Some things, Bess, I cannot teach you. Some things you must learn for yourself.’

I frowned, nonplussed. I didn’t like those lessons.



At that moment, Mrs Ponsonby coughed uncomfortably. She touched her stomach and winced.

‘Are you all right, Mrs Ponsonby?’ I asked.

‘I suddenly feel . . . quite unwell,’ she said. She was going pale before my eyes. ‘If you will excuse me a moment . . .’

She darted up the stairs to our rooms, chased by her concerned husband. Mr Ascham jerked his chin, indicating that I should go, too, so I dashed up the stairs and arrived in our rooms to find her on her knees, bent over a chamber pot, retching most violently, her husband standing helplessly over her.

‘It must have been . . . the perry . . .’ she groaned. ‘Bad cider . . .’

Insufferable as she was, I ended up helping her, holding her hair away from her face as she vomited up the contents of her stomach. Then, with Mr Ponsonby, I helped her into her nightgown and put her to bed. She was asleep within minutes, her effete but loving husband mopping the perspiration on her brow.

I returned to Mr Ascham’s side downstairs, delightfully unchaperoned. The game was still going. I looked around and saw that Elsie had disappeared once again.

Relieved for once of the presence of my moral guardians, I decided to go in search of Elsie. I knew she wasn’t up in our rooms, so I checked the road out in front of the tavern. She wasn’t there. I inspected the outhouse in the rear yard, but did not find her there either.

Returning to the tavern, I heard a noise coming from around the corner of the building.

It was a peculiar grunting, followed by a strange feminine gasping.

I peered around the corner—  
—and threw my hand to my mouth.

There, just around the corner of the building, in a small alley between it and the next house, were Elsie and two male youths.

Elsie stood bent forward over a barrel with her dress hitched up around her waist, while one of the men, a thin boy of perhaps seventeen, stood behind her with his breeches around his ankles, thrusting his manhood into her with vigorous energy.

I could see Elsie's face. She was clearly enjoying herself, making a short gasping squeal of delight every time the young fellow thrust himself into her. For his part, the young man grunted each time he pumped her.

I watched, shocked beyond measure but also entranced and curious.

Of course, I had heard about this. The other girls of Elsie's age talked incessantly about the act of consummation, copulation, or being 'occupied' by a man, especially as they approached marriageable age. When they spoke to me about it, they put on airs of experience and worldliness but when I overheard them talking amongst themselves, they spoke of it with considerable trepidation. It was a Great Unknown. And

possessing skill at it was something they viewed as critical to keeping a husband happy. Elsie was an active participant in those conversations.

I stared with wide eyes as Elsie experienced something akin to ecstasy, jolting with the young fellow's every thrust, her squeals becoming faster.

Then, after a time, the young man reached some sort of climax himself, for he shouted as he gave one final thrust. He then pulled himself away from Elsie. (I confess at this point I tried to glimpse his manhood—I was more curious than anything else—but he pulled up his breeches too quickly for me to get a look at it.)

At this stage, Elsie nodded to the second youth, who quickly yanked down his own breeches, stepped up behind her, and assuming the place of the first lad, penetrated her with his engorged organ (which I saw clearly this time; it was stiff and long like a baton and surrounded by dense black hair; not small, hairless and shrivelled like my half-brother's willy-winky).

And so it began again.

The thrusting was more vigorous this time, Elsie's panting more intense, more obviously pleasurable. After a short period of this rutting, she extricated herself from him, turned herself around and sat on top of the barrel so that she was facing him. Then she pulled her cassock over her head, throwing it off completely, so that she sat there in the night-time air, naked as the day she was born. She spread her legs wide, inviting the youth to enter her again, which he did without hesitation.

His penetrations were faster now and as he gripped Elsie's waist, he seemed to enrapture her. In between panting gasps, she started to say, 'Harder, man . . . harder . . .'

He pumped her with even greater energy, desperate to please. Her breasts jiggled with his every shunt and her eyes closed in sheer delight.

Then the second youth yelped as he reached his own climax. Elsie moaned sensually, her entire body relaxing as she leaned back on the barrel.

The youth then hurriedly yanked up his pants and the two young men disappeared down the alleyway, whispering animatedly, clearly happy with the event.

As for Elsie, I watched her sigh with tremendous satisfaction before she retrieved her cassock and casually put it back on. It was at this point that I hurried back inside so as not to be seen by her—much shocked, definitely titillated, but most of all, fascinated by the actions of my older friend.

Contrary to those discussions with the girls back home, Elsie had not shown any trepidation at all. Nor had the scene I had just witnessed had anything to do with pleasing the two men involved, let alone marrying them. What I had just seen Elsie do had been done, it seemed, for one reason and one reason only: the pursuit *by Elsie* of her own pleasure. I didn't know what to think of my friend. I was very confused.

I re-entered the tavern just as Mr Giles checkmated the local champion and reluctantly took the man's silver coins.



## THE OTTOMAN CAPITAL

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EMERGING FROM THE GRIM darkness of Wallachia, we entered the homelands of the Ottoman Turks. The landscape became drier, more dusty, and the odd clump of snow could be found by the side of the road. Winter was not far away.

I travelled in the first wagon, seated beside Elsie, while Mrs Ponsonby now travelled in the second, lying covered in a blanket, her husband gripping her hand. Her condition had not improved in the two days since we had left that tavern in Wallachia. She had a terrible fever that caused her to perspire greatly and shiver uncontrollably. Neither Elsie, I, nor any of our guardsmen dared give voice to the thought we all shared: that Mrs Ponsonby's malady could be plague.

'What do you think about Mrs Ponsonby?' I asked Mr Ascham. 'Is it . . . ?'

'It is not plague,' he said simply.

'She thought it might have been bad perry,' I said.

‘It was not bad perry. Apply logic, Bess. If the perry had been off, wouldn’t Mr Giles also be ill? He drank the same drink.’

I frowned. This was true.

‘But what if,’ my teacher said, ‘there was something *else* that was wrong with that perry?’

‘I don’t understand,’ I said.

‘The poor woman drank the wrong cider,’ Mr Ascham said, staring resolutely forward. ‘Back at that tavern, both she and Giles ordered perry. But she must have inadvertently switched her mug of cider for that of Giles. It was laced with something, a poison of some sort, something that was intended to make *him* fall ill, not her. Do not forget the Sultan’s man who has been following us—it would have been easy for him to pay the barkeep’s boy to add something to Giles’s drink.’

I spun where I sat, glancing from Mrs Ponsonby’s shuddering body to Mr Giles on his horse nearby. ‘But . . . why? Why invite Mr Giles to play in the tournament and then poison him on the way?’

‘Ah, the Sultan did not invite Giles. He invited our king to send a player. The Sultan did not know who Henry would send. But evidently the Sultan’s man has been watching and evaluating Mr Giles’s play and has found Giles to be a threat worthy of hobbling.’ Mr Ascham shook his head grimly. ‘I have not even met this Sultan yet and already I do not like the rules by which he plays.’

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The lands of the Ottoman Turks were, I must admit, far more impressive than I had anticipated.

Their roads, some of them dating back to Roman times, were paved and clean and kept in excellent condition with few ruts or potholes. Their houses were sturdy and well built, and the Turkish people—unlike their surly Wallachian neighbours—were bathed and clean, wore brightly coloured clothing and were friendly. Many smiled at us as we passed by on our way to their capital.

‘I had expected the lands of the Ottomans to be, well, more backward,’ I said to my teacher.

Mr Ascham said, ‘Every nation thinks their own culture is the pinnacle of civilisation and that all other cultures are primitive and barbarous. It is a sad but natural prejudice of the human mind. This is why one must travel as much as one can. Travel is the finest form of education.’

Soon after arriving in those lands, I beheld for the first time a Moslem place of worship: the peculiar style of domed church that the Moslems call a mosque. I would see many more and they all followed the same basic architecture: each had a slender tower rising from it called a minaret and at prayer times, a male singer would mount this tower and from its summit call the faithful to prayer with a most unsettling elongated wail.

I was now truly in a foreign land.

Although I would never have admitted it to my teacher, I must confess that he was right: travel *was* the finest form of education and I was experiencing a tremendous thrill from

our journey. Travelling abroad, and so very far from England, had shown me how cloistered my life back home was. Later in my life, a life during which I would encounter many kings and dignitaries, I often wondered if the difference between great rulers and poor ones was the amount of travel they had done before their coronation.

And then one morning, after four weeks of overland travel, we crested a rise and my breath caught in my throat. I was looking at the great city of Constantinople.

It was a stunning metropolis—a rolling sea of cream-coloured buildings and white-painted mosques, all interspersed with high trees and the odd taller Roman structure. Bathed in the dusty light of the Turkish sun and framed by the glittering golden waters of the Bosphorus Strait, the pale buildings of the city took on an almost heavenly appearance. My first glimpse of Constantinople was literally a breathtaking experience.

The core of the city was nestled on a sharp peninsula that lanced eastward into the Sea of Marmara—into which the Bosphorus flowed—and it was protected by a massive eighty-foot-high defensive wall that had been built by the Roman Emperor Theodosius a thousand years before.

The mighty wall—it looked like one wall, but it was, in fact, actually two walls—ran from north to south, cutting the peninsula off from the mainland. At each extremity, the great barrier extended all the way to the water's edge. There



were several fortified gates spaced at regular intervals along the wall, but the primary one was an immense portal known as the Golden Gate even though its thick studded doors were made of bronze (the original golden ones were long lost to history).

In the far distance, obscured by the hazy air peculiar to the lands of the East, I observed a great hulk of a building that made Theodosius's wall look puny: it had a colossal dome and a towering minaret that soared into the sky and was easily the largest structure in the city.

We left our guardsmen at the Golden Gate: foreign troops were forbidden to enter the city. Once inside, as distinguished guests, we would be escorted by the Sultan's crimson-robed palace guards.

But the city's guards stopped short at the sight of Primrose Ponsonby.

Concerned that she might be bringing plague into their city, they refused outright to admit her. No argument or exhortation could sway them. In the end, Mr Ascham decided that Mrs Ponsonby would lodge with our soldiers at an inn in the ramshackle market village that had attached itself to the outer side of the massive gate. Her doting husband, clearly distraught, would remain with her until she recovered.

Yet even in her feverish state, Mrs Ponsonby found the energy to ask Mr Ascham: 'But who will watch over Miss Elizabeth?'

'I will,' Mr Ascham said.

THE TOURNAMENT

I had to turn away so that none of them could see the smile that had arisen unbidden on my face.

Inside the walls of Byzantium, my teacher would be my chaperone.



## PAWN

IN CHESS, QUEENS, KNIGHTS, rooks and bishops can make powerful sweeping moves, but the humble pawn cannot.

This is because the pawn represents the ordinary infantryman. Lacking a horse or any other source of power, he can only move a single square at a time (except for his opening move) and then only forward or diagonally. Even the emasculated king can move backwards.

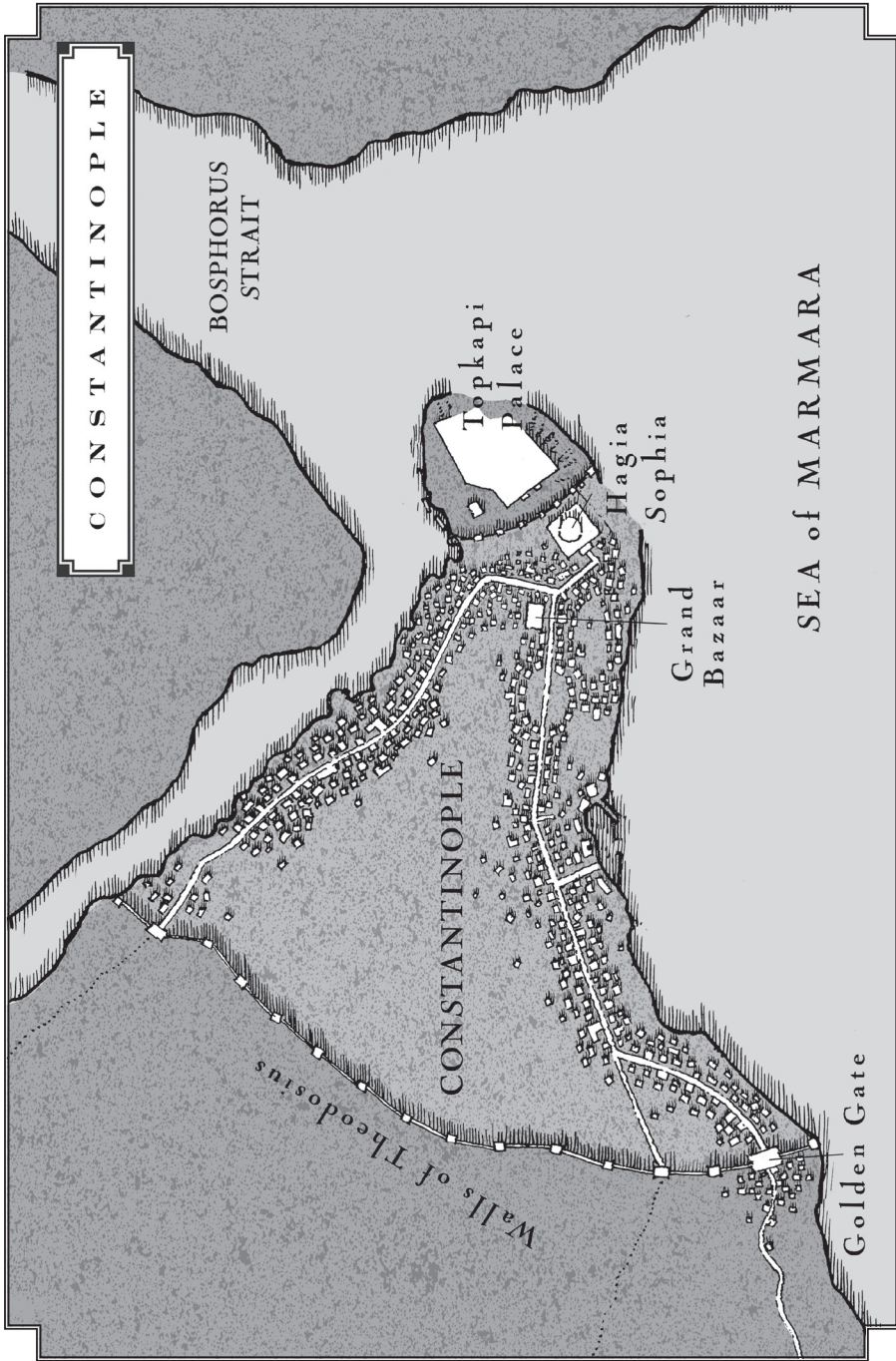
Pawns are weak. They are small. They are often exchanged for little or no tactical gain.

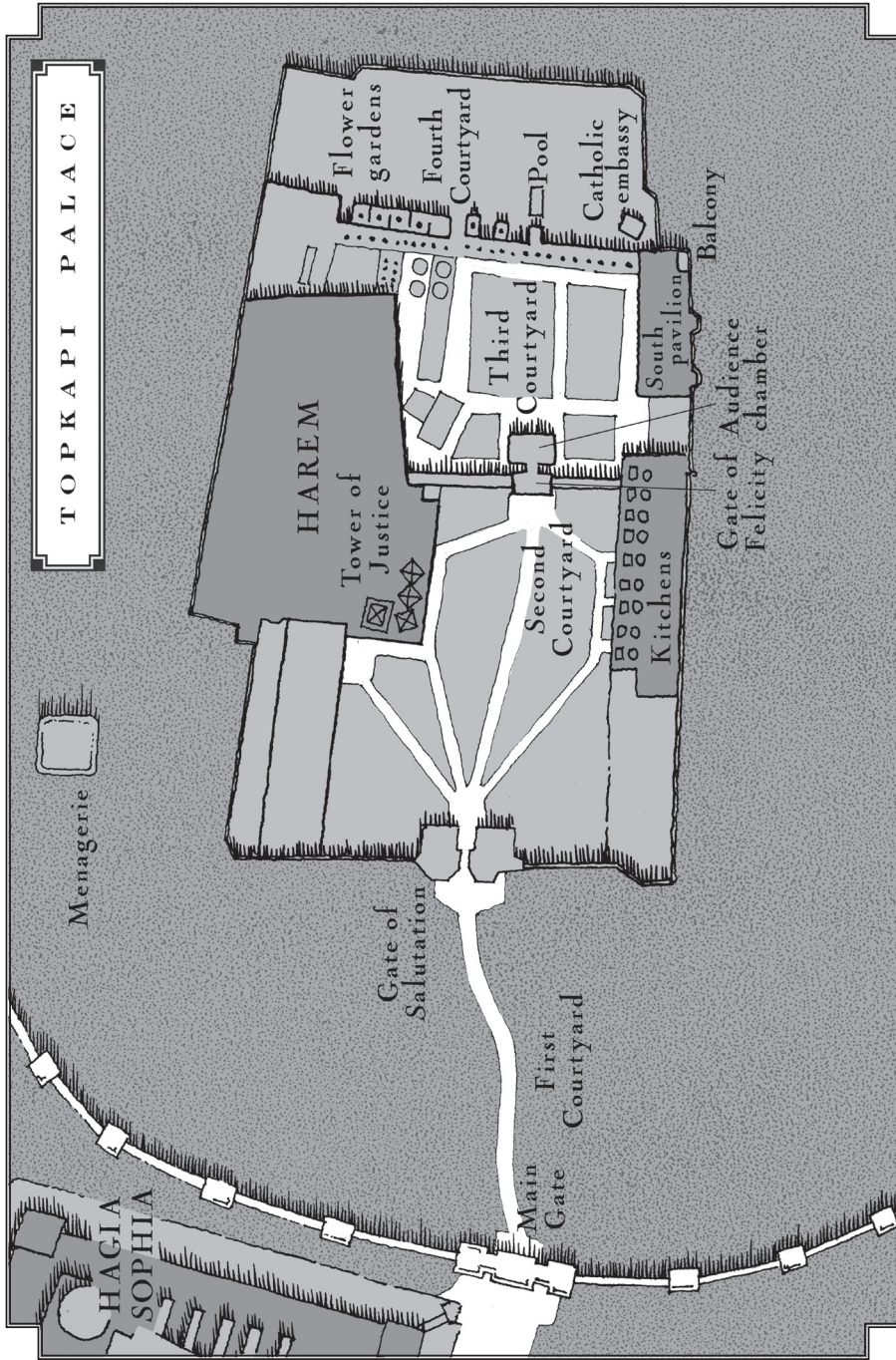
But we love them. We love their nerveless obstinacy in the face of attack, their modest aspirations in life and their unswerving loyalty to their king.

Is it not passing strange how often, in the latter stages of a game, the king finds himself abandoned by his queen, his religious advisors, his castles and his mounted lords, yet defended by a few loyal pawns?

Forgotten, mistreated and regularly sacrificed in pursuit of strategies of which they may not have even been aware, pawns somehow always manage to be there at the end.

From: *Chess in the Middle Ages*,  
Tel Jackson (W.M. Lawry & Co., London, 1992)







THE HAGIA SOPHIA



*I was one day present when she [Elizabeth] replied at the same time to three ambassadors, the Imperial, French, and Swedish, in three languages: Italian to one, French to the other, Latin to the third; easily, without hesitation, clearly, and without being confused.*

– ROGER ASCHAM



## INTO BYZANTIUM

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WE WERE CONVEYED THROUGH Constantinople in glorious gold-rimmed carriages reserved for visiting players and their companions.

While travelling across the Continent, I must confess to the sins of vanity and pride: despite my teacher's comment about the natural prejudices of all people, I felt I could honestly say that England surpassed the other lands of Europe in both complexity and cultural sophistication. But as we passed through the Golden Gate and rolled out onto the streets of Constantinople in our splendid carriages, I could not in good conscience come to the same conclusion about my homeland when compared to the Ottoman capital.

Put simply, Byzantium made England's greatest city, my beloved London, look like a Wallachian hamlet.

Grand boulevards swept past bustling bazaars and sleek marble buildings. Many-arched aqueducts shot across valleys,



bringing water to the million-strong population, while bath-houses still bearing Roman paint opened onto fountain-filled plazas. We passed some commercial docks on the southern side of the peninsula; they were packed with ships, loading and unloading cargo.

People went about their business on cobblestone streets, trading, shouting, conversing, smoking. Children played in alleys; men walked about in loose-fitting robes, obviously unarmed. Many women, however, wore cloaks that covered every inch of their bodies including their faces. They looked out at the world through gauze meshes and walked with their heads bowed subserviently a few paces behind their husbands.

Upon entering the city, Mr Ascham had suggested that Elsie and I don similar attire, scarves that covered our heads and cloaks that extended all the way to our wrists and ankles. I obeyed, but not before asking why this was necessary.

‘Some Moslem holy men believe that an unveiled woman will stir a man’s loins and provoke him to unseemly acts,’ he said. ‘So they demand women cover themselves in public.’

‘But that’s absurd! Why should the woman change her dress when it is the man’s urges that are at issue? Why not call upon the men of Islam to control themselves?’

Mr Ascham shrugged sadly. ‘I have found that it is rarely useful to question people on the practices of their faiths. What people do in the name of religion is not necessarily religious. It often has baser reasons behind it.’

At this point we rounded a bend and emerged on a wide square, and there before us sat the immense domed building I had glimpsed earlier through the haze.

It lorded over all before it like a king on his throne: the great cathedral to holy wisdom. Known to the Turks as the Ayasofya, in Latin as the Sancta Sophia, and to Europeans as the Hagia Sophia, it was Isidore of Miletus's masterpiece.

From a squat, square, fortress-like base, the stupendous building soared heavenward in a sequence of ever-rising domes buttressed by gargantuan pillars and supports, until it reached the largest hemisphere of them all, the breathtaking main dome that surmounted the structure.

This main dome—my teacher informed me with even more than his usual enthusiasm—was nothing less than the greatest feat of engineering in the whole world, all the more so for having been built in the sixth century. The dome itself was fully one hundred feet across, spanning the Hagia's vast nave in one giant leap, soaring an incredible two hundred feet above the basilica's floor.

'Until recently, no other cathedral in Christendom has come close to it in size and ingenuity of design,' Mr Ascham said. 'It is as if the knowledge that built it was lost for a millennium and has only recently been rediscovered. Originally it was built as a Christian church, but with the taking of Constantinople by the Moslems in 1453, it was converted to a mosque. Note the minaret alongside it is built with more modern bricks.' He indicated the slim red-brick spire constructed beside the

main structure. 'Having said that, despite its colossal size and ingenious construction, because of its Christian origins, many Moslems of this city feel indifferent toward the Hagia Sophia and refuse to worship in it.'

I did not feel indifferent toward it. I gazed up at it in absolute wonder, humbled by its history, majesty and immensity.

We pressed on, moving around the Hagia Sophia toward the Sultan's palace, which occupied the very tip of the peninsula.

I felt like I was walking into a fabulous and exotic world. England, with its grey skies, muddy streets, feuding dukes and disputed successions, seemed completely and wholly backward compared to this.

Upon seeing Constantinople, I could see why my teacher had brought me here.