

*The French Sultana*



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## Chapter 1

Following a short period of drunken and confused deliberation about how to best eliminate the new favorite, Nuket Seza the emotionally unstable Baskadine (mother of the heir), settled upon the plan she always chose. Her attempts to focus on the exact number of women and babies she had poisoned in the last eight years always left her irritable. *Was it ten boys and three girls or three girls and ten boys?* Holding figures in her head made it ache and it did not matter anyway because she was going to poison the little blonde whore's food. Her personal Kutuchu Usta (herbalist) reminded her that serbets were the easiest food to alter since they were not cooked. One simply added the poison to the drink before it was served. Nuket remembered using a poison serbet in her attempt to rid herself of the Sultan's annoying nephew, Selim, and would have succeeded had his mother's meddling Kutuchu Usta not administered an antidote so quickly. She smiled to herself and thought, *the new li'l whore has no Kutuchu Usta to interfere, does she?*

"Poison her in the hamam," she told her herbalist.

As the woman left to do her bidding, Nuket Seza congratulated herself, confident that her problem would be solved and the new girl would soon be dead. But shortly before the noon meal, her spies reported that Nakshidil, the new favorite, had not returned to the baths.

"She bathes privately," one woman said.

"With the Circassian Kadine," added another who cowered away from her reach lest she strike.

"Old Kadine," she growled. "Meddling whore."

She tried to digest the new information carefully. If the girl couldn't be poisoned in the baths, she would have to die during one of the meals.

Nuket lolled in her private pool, trying to decide at which meal she should eliminate the girl, when another of her spies burst in with even more disturbing news. Nakshidil had been summoned to visit the Sultan for a second time.

"Second visit?" she exclaimed. The sultan had not summoned any girl for a second visit in many years. Her mind began to spin wildly out of control. She hauled her substantial girth out of the water and stomped angrily back and forth along the pool's edge. "Arak!" she screamed.

Within minutes a servant arrived bearing a bottle and a small crystal glass. Without interrupting her frantic pacing, Nuket knocked the glass from the servant's hand and grabbed the bottle, tipping it to her lips to drink deeply. "Must kill the li'l whore fast," she muttered aloud.

Swallowing another gulp, she made her decision. Since serbets were not served at breakfast, the first opportunity would be the following day's noon meal. She summoned her Kutuchu Usta, and instructed her to poison Nakshidil's first serbet on the following day. Feeling pleased with her own cleverness, she flopped down onto a divan and finished off the remaining Arak then passed out, to her servants' great relief.

Had she known Nakshidil would leave the harem for her own apartments, she would certainly have poisoned her morning yogurt instead. But the newcomer's promotion had occurred so quickly that by the time Nuket rose from her inebriated slumber the following morning, the new favorite was already gone.

The Baskadine fumed. It would now be much harder to slip poison into *anything* she ate because her food would come from her private kitchen, served by her own servants. It was going

to cost her a small fortune to bribe the people she needed to do the job now.

Her blood pressure rose quickly along with her anger, as her face turned crimson and her head began to throb. The foiling of her plans was bringing on one of her horrendous headaches, and she shrieked in response, sweeping all of her glass unguent bottles from their shelves with one huge arm, sending them smashing onto the floor.

Upon hearing the breaking glass, eight-year-old Mustapha immediately ran to his special hiding place – the one he used to protect himself from his mother’s worst rages. His mother searched frantically. When she could not find her son, she flogged one of her servants instead, and as her emotional state spiraled out of control, forced her to drink the poison intended for Nakshidil. Within minutes, the servant’s contorted body writhed on the floor in agonizing pain. Watching the woman’s painful death seemed to be the only thing that finally enabled the Baskadine to calm down. When the death throes ceased, she summoned her eunuchs to remove the body.

The suspicious eunuchs asked politely how the woman had died.

Nuket Seza casually shrugged and replied “Must have eat something bad.”

No one in her service who knew the truth would ever dare to tell lest a similar fate be visited upon them.

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Had Sultan Abdul Hamid been more like his predecessors, he would have had his gardeners strangle Nuket Seza and Mustapha long ago. That was the preferred method used by Sultans for hundreds of years to rid themselves of treasonous officials, unpleasant wives, and relatives who might one day pose a threat to the throne. But Abdul Hamid thought the practice barbaric, and had never employed it himself. He disliked murder almost as much as the *Kafes* [cage] in which he had resided for fifteen years before assuming the sultancy.

The Cage had originally been designed as a way to protect heirs from the traditional practices of fratricide and infanticide. It was a tall, narrow, three-story brick building, void of windows on the ground floor. Once incarcerated within its walls, all contact with the outside world was forbidden. Deaf mutes served as guards, cooks and servants. If an heir came of age while residing there, a few odalisques were admitted—and remained imprisoned. No education, culture or entertainment was allowed and the heir was kept ignorant of political and current events. No human contact or nurturing was provided. As a result, a boy might be incarcerated at the age of seven and released at the age of forty to assume the sultanship—most often, as a deranged lunatic. Ottoman history was filled with the horrifying deeds of such men.

When Abdul Hamid was incarcerated, he was fortunate to have been thirty-five-years old, well educated, and quite cultured. Still, fifteen years of deprivation left its mark, mostly in that it prevented him from imprisoning Mustapha. However, had he known of Nuket Seza’s intentions to kill Nakshidil, he would surely have made an exception for her, as well as her son.

Ignorant of the brewing storm, the Sultan happily installed his new favorite in the third largest apartment in the palace, conveniently connected to his own by a secret passageway directly behind his massive bed. He ordered the Kizlar Agasi to oversee the furnishing of her new quarters and notified the Chief Treasurer, to begin paying her a generous monthly stipend. The Kizlar Agasi would advise the new favorite on how to best invest her fortune. He would also manage her properties and those of any children she might bear. Through the coming years, Nakshidil would amass a large fortune in her own right.

After the Sultan finished giving the orders regarding Nakshidil, he notified his chamberlain of his intention to ride out to the Hagia Sophia mosque that evening. It was an old established custom for the Sultan to pray in one of the city's public mosques on Fridays. Abdul Hamid had not done so for six months.

On such an occasion, a large retinue of ministers, important women of the harem, and the Grand Vizier accompanied him. The Sultan's horse was covered in jewel-encrusted cloths for all to see, unlike other public appearances when the tall-feathered turbans of the eunuch guards blocked him from view. Quite often, as many as ten thousand citizens and foreign visitors crowded into the First Court to watch the procession.

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Given their first opportunity to leave the harem in six months, the women rushed to prepare themselves. They primped and preened, bathed and scrubbed, hennaed and coiffed, then donned their finest clothes and jewels, despite the fact that they would be completely covered.

Nakshidil and the Circassian Kadine did not attend the march to prayer, preferring instead to organize the new apartments. However, Nuket Seza took advantage of the occasion to be "seen" in the Sultan's presence. Everyone knew that the woman who walked in the most honored place, directly behind the Sultan's horse, was the Baskadine, mother of the first heir. Consequently, she spent the entire day in preparation, devoted two full hours to the choice of her ensemble, and finally settled on her gaudiest purple ferace. The unfortunate result was startling.

"She looks like a giant shiny eggplant," one of her servants whispered to another as she departed.

As the procession passed through the Gate of Felicity towards the mosque, Nuket Seza followed closely behind the Sultan's horse to insure her vaulted position. Out of breath, and trotting to keep up, she strained her neck in a futile attempt to see over the horse's rump. She huffed and puffed, grateful when the Sultan's horse stopped a few yards from the steps of the mosque. Bracing her hands on her chubby knees, she bent forward to catch her breath, as the stallion lifted his tail to drop a steaming pile of dung at her feet.

Immediately understanding what had occurred, the Sultan maintained his composure, smiled broadly and nodded at the gathered crowd.

Her bejeweled kid slippers now splattered with manure, Nuket summoned her eunuchs with one shrill command. They quickly surrounded her, shielding her from the snickering crowds, and made their way back to the seraglio. She fumed silently as she walked, her mind spewing vengeful thoughts and curses. *He gonna pay for this. His baby gonna die.*

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The news of Nuket Seza's public humiliation quickly reached the Circassian Kadine who immediately mobilized her loyal harem spies. She could imagine how infuriated Nuket would be by Nakshidil's new position. Certainly, there would be other women resentful of a girl who had captured the Sultan's heart in just five days, when they had spent years being overlooked. Nuket Seza might easily enlist these disgruntled women to support her in some act of jealous retribution. To safeguard against this, the Kadine instructed Nakshidil's new eunuch guards, and chose a trustworthy Kutuchu Usta to serve her personally.

The Kadine then summoned a small army of palace artisans—upholsterers, furniture makers,

glass blowers, carpet sellers, and drapers—to Nakshidil’s new apartment. The men were led through the harem blindfolded, and received by the women who were completely covered. Eunuchs, outnumbering the craftsmen three to one, stood guard as the new occupant chose suitable furnishings.

At one point, Nakshidil entered into a discussion with a furniture maker who did not seem to understand her request.

“A chair,” she repeated for the third time.

Turning to the Circassian Kadine for help, she asked, “How do I say ‘chair’ in Turkish?”

“There is no word for chair because we do not have such a thing. Of course we had chairs in Circassia.” She stopped to think for a moment. “Perhaps we might draw a picture of one to illustrate.”

Together they drew a chair resembling the Rococo style that had been fashionable in Paris during Aimée’s visit. It was square, with a high backrest ornately carved and gilded in gold leaf, with a plump, down-cushioned seat. She wished it to be upholstered in deep magenta velvet.

The furniture maker looked at the sketch and asked, “And the purpose of this piece is?”

“To sit upon,” Nakshidil replied.

Mystified, the man simply agreed. It was not his place to question the Sultan’s women, and he had fashioned stranger objects for other odalisques. He would be well paid whether or not the things he made were useful or comfortable.

“I would like two chairs,” Nakshidil said to the artisan.

“So that you may sit with me when you come to visit,” she added to the Kadine.

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That evening the Kadine instructed Nakshidil in the protocol and attire required for her visit to the Hall of the Divan on the following day. She must wear a plain black ferace and yasmak so as not to be visible through the pierced wall. The Kizlar Agasi would escort Nakshidil and secrete her within the “Eye of the Sultan,” before leaving her to join the council. In order that her presence remain unknown, she would enter through the private door used only by the Sultan and his chamberlain, prior to the council’s arrival.

Due to her early admittance, she would not observe the elaborate processional entrance made by the Divan members and the Sultan. Therefore, the Kadine described the procedure that had been followed for three hundred years. Just after daybreak, the council members of the Sublime Porte, as the government was called, gathered in the First Court with their retinues of clerks and guards. According to Ottoman law, each man was attired in the robe, turban and boots specified by his rank. Uniforms comprised a rainbow of colors, with feathers, furs, turbans, conical hats and a wide variety of swords, knives and weaponry. Group by group, the members slowly marched five hundred yards across the courtyard to the Gate of Salutation. When the entire group had assembled at the gate, they proceeded into the Second Court, where as many as ten thousand Janissaries, gardeners and gatekeepers stood to watch them pass. Passing into the Second Court, the officials formed two long lines, making a pathway for the Grand Vizier and the Sultan into the Hall of the Divan. As a sign of reverence, the men stood with their arms crossed over their chests and downcast eyes that never looked directly upon their sovereign.

Once inside the Hall of the Divan, visitors were always overwhelmed by the opulent splendor—the intended purpose. The floor and walls were gilded in pure gold, and set with hundreds of precious jewels that glittered and sparkled in the sunlight that poured through the

glass-domed roof.