

ROBERTA RICH

# The Harem Midwife

'A lavishly  
detailed  
historical  
novel'  
*Elle*



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## About the Book

*Safiye had more to worry about than simply birthing this child. Her only son might not live to hear the call for morning prayers. If there ever was a time when the Empire required a male heir it was now.*

In the opulent royal palace of Murat III, on the shores of Constantinople, midwife Hannah Levi is charged with ensuring the Sultan's harem provides him with a male heir.

If she fails, the entire Ottoman Empire will collapse. But the slave girl who has been stolen away to be the Sultan's latest concubine is not all she seems...

## About the Author

ROBERTA RICH divides her time between Vancouver and Colima, Mexico. She is a former family law lawyer and the author of *The Midwife of Venice*.

Visit Roberta at [robertarich.com](http://robertarich.com)

Also by Roberta Rich:

*The Midwife of Venice*

Praise for *The Midwife of Venice*:

'A lavishly detailed historical novel' *Elle*

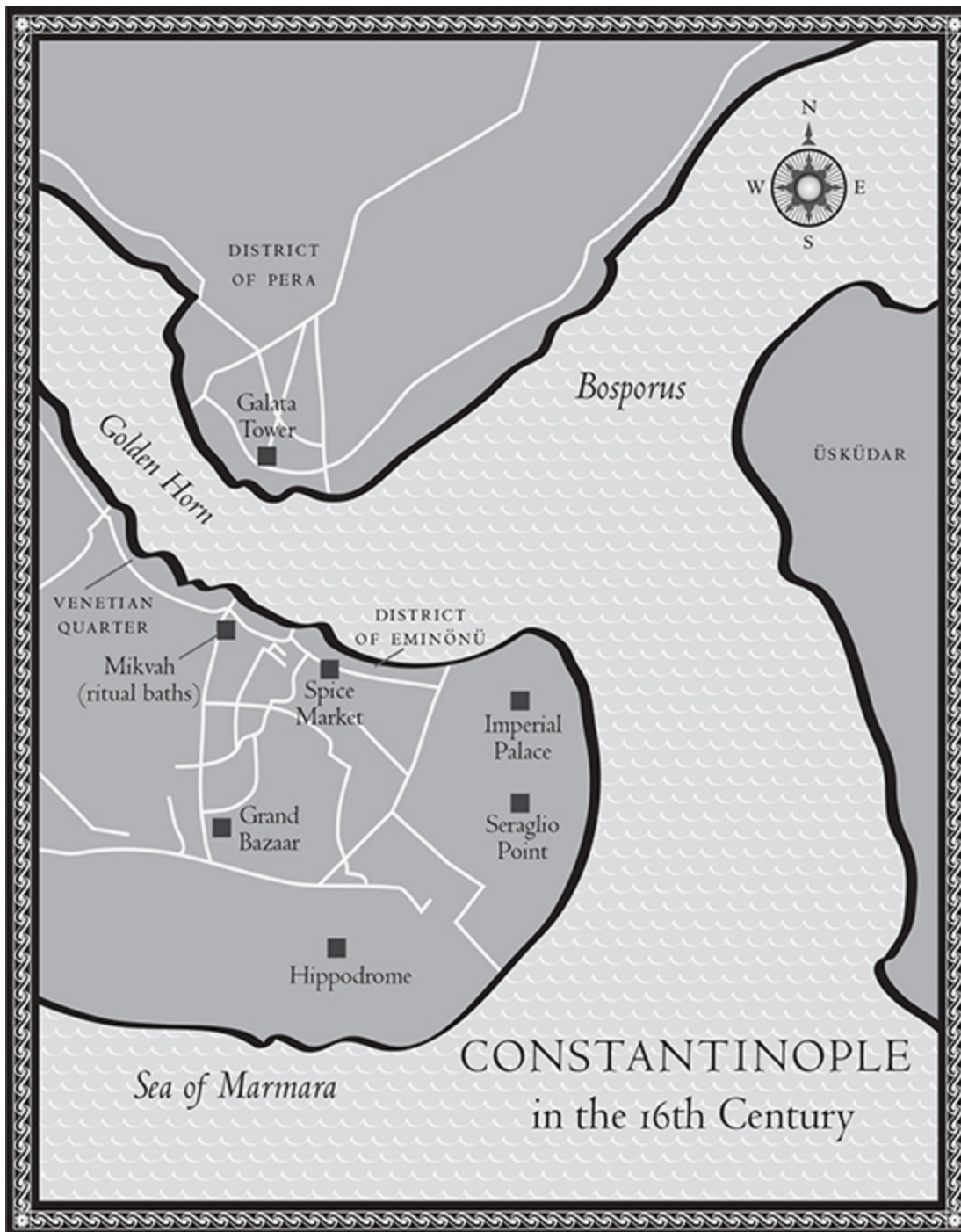
'Roberta Rich plunges into the stench, intrigue and skulduggery of 16th-century plague-ridden Venice... Rich revels in the details of light, smell, sound, and larger-than-life characters' *More*

'[A] moving melodrama of steadfast love against all odds... Rich's fascinating historical details and her warm empathy for her protagonists will capture historical fiction fans' *Library Journal*

'A lively tale involving love, blackmail, family, murder, plague, intercultural compassion, dramatic last-minute rescues and some very creative disguises' *The Globe and Mail*

'A suspenseful tale... The book is obviously well researched, and its descriptions of Venice and Malta are both fascinating and realistic' *Vancouver Sun*

'Rich skillfully incorporates a wealth of historical detail into her riveting tale of a heroine who won't give up on her marriage' *Chicago Tribune*





THE  
HAREM  
MIDWIFE



ROBERTA RICH



EBURY  
PRESS

*To Ken—my north, my south, my east, my west*



## CHAPTER 1



### *Circassian Mountains Ottoman Empire* *1578*

ONE SPRING MORNING as the sun dappled the rocks with golden light, drying the dew from the night before, making the world look as scrubbed and as fleecy as a cloud, Leah made a blunder that was to lead to her death. It was a small thing—a matter of no consequence. She failed to hear the terrified bleat of her favourite black lamb and the answering cry of its mother. A lamb in distress is always a sign of danger, but Leah was squatting on the hillside, singing an old lullaby in Judeo-Tat, the language of the mountain Jews.

As she sang, she stroked the milky blue quartz that dangled from a lanyard around her neck. The pendant, her *nazar boncuğu*, offered protection for both Jews and Muslims against the Evil Eye. Because she believed she was alone on the mountain, she sang with gusto.

There were wolves in the hills. Higher up, beyond the point where even scrubby pines grew, were the goat-hair tents of the Yürüks, so dark in the distance they looked like raptors, the tent poles like talons ready to swoop down on prey. The Yürüks were nomads; their ancestors had invaded the plains of Anatolia centuries earlier, thundering down the steppes of Mongolia on their heavy-rumped stallions,

leaving in their wake destruction and death. Leah had never ventured high into the mountains to the tents of the Yürüks, nor did she want to. Her world was her mother, father, brothers, grandmother, and, of course, Eliezer, the handsome boy to whom she was betrothed. Kaş, her village, huddled at the base of the Circassian Mountains, was no more than a handful of crude houses clinging to the side of the scorched hill, a half-day's hard ride from the Yürük tents.

Herding was her older brother's job, but he was ill with fever, so the chore of driving the sheep to the summer pastures now fell to Leah. It was not a task for a girl. Look what had happened to her older sister, a girl so beautiful that their father used to joke that a path of wild roses sprang up behind her as she walked. Rivka must have shouted for help. But there had been only rocks and wind-bent trees to hear her. But Leah, with her *nazar*, a gift from her grandmother, felt she had nothing to fear.

Kagali, the family's herding dog, had wandered off to rest in the shade of the pines, and was tonguing his yellow fur as the flies buzzed around him. Two vultures, limp as shrouds, glided on a current of air. Leah's flock had long ago cropped the meadows bare of the wild sage and garlic. Now just patches of grass remained.

Leah bent down, picked up a pebble, blew off the dirt, and tucked it inside her cheek. The stone would keep her from feeling parched. Her goat's bladder hung empty at her side, long since drained of water. There was no well nearby, only in Kaş. A brook lined with flat rocks ran through Kaş. It was where the women washed clothes. Tonight when she returned, Leah would be greeted by the smell of her mother's stew and the sound of her father teaching her brothers to read.

Leah paused her singing to take a breath and at last she heard the black lamb's pleas. She hiked up her kaftan, tying it around her waist to free her legs. She took up her

brother's crook, which lay beside her. As she stood and listened, the lamb's bleating grew weaker.

Leah raced up the ancient path, which had been beaten like a welt in the ground by centuries of footsteps. There had been no rain for three winters. The earth had split into fissures, each one an open mouth, greedy for water. The lamb's bleating seemed to be coming from a crevice at the top of the hillside.

When her chest began to heave from the upward climb, she spit out the pebble, afraid she would choke. She thrust two fingers into her mouth and gave a long, piercing whistle. She waited for Kagali to dash into sight. He was as big as a ram and so savage he was kept chained at home when small children were nearby. His collar, embedded with sharp iron spikes, was crusted with the blood of wolves foolhardy enough to attack the flock.

Leah reached the crevice and crouched at the edge, peering down and listening, the ewe beside her. She knew the lamb's shrill, tremulous cry, so like that of a newborn infant. She had pulled this winter lamb by his tiny hooves out of his mother's belly many days ago when the moon was still full. It was her favourite—a black lamb with one blue eye and one black. Squinting into the crevice, she saw that he was struggling to free a hind leg that was jammed between two rocks. The ewe stood helpless beside Leah, her front hooves working the stony ground, sending a shower of pebbles down onto her lamb's withers.

Suddenly, the dry perimeter gave way, causing the ewe to lose her balance. She twisted as she fell into the gully, and landed with a thud on top of a boulder. Even from above, Leah could see thistles had torn a ragged slash on the poor ewe's udder, scoring her from belly to teat. When Leah returned home that evening with the flock, her mother would pack the wound with flowers from yellow coltsfoot and dress it with mosses. She would heal it by reciting a

passage from the Torah, blowing forty-one times over the gash.

Each year after spring thaw, Leah's father daubed the ram's chest with a mixture of fat and soot from the cooking pots. In this way, he could tell which of the ewes the ram had serviced. The ram's sooty mark was still on this ewe's back, a black smudge where he had mounted her.

Leah fell to all fours and peered down at the ewe and her lamb, heedless of the rocks cutting into her knees and palms. If she lost both ewe and lamb, her father would scold her. And rightly so. She should not have been singing songs. She should have been paying attention to the flock.

She inched her way down into the gully using her hands to brace herself along the sides, unleashing an avalanche of rocks. The heat in the crevice intensified the smell of the lamb, still milky from its mother's teat. The dust and the buzz of insects in the narrow space made Leah dizzy. Her face was sweaty and coated with a dusting of grit. Eventually, she reached the bottom.

Stuck between the two boulders, the lamb was unable to move. It was only then that Leah noticed his foreleg, the bone protruding, white as an ivory backgammon tile. As she was reaching for the lamb, she heard the sound of cascading pebbles and looked up. She expected to see Kagali's yellow eyes peering over the edge of the crevice. But she saw only the vultures circling high in the air.

Leah shoved and pushed at the boulders until the lamb's leg was free. The ewe was crying frantically. She straddled the lamb and grasped her delicate foreleg. Quickly, she manoeuvred the bone back into place. She tore off the hem of her kaftan and used this strap of material to bind the lamb's leg. Then, with the bleating lamb tucked under one arm, she began her awkward ascent. As she reached the top, the lamb struggled and twisted out of her arms as she toppled him over the edge. Leah hauled herself out of the

crevice after it. She paused to catch her breath. Now she would have to return for the ewe.

She glanced around. Where was the rest of the flock? And then, a few paces away she noticed a heap of yellow fur—Kagali, splayed under a clump of wild grass. His tongue hung from his mouth; his eyes were open and fixed. His flews had fallen away from his teeth, which made him look as though he were snarling. The dog seemed to be staring at something just beyond her shoulder. “Kagali?” Leah drew closer to him. Why didn’t he spring up to greet her? She put her hand on his snout. As she leaned forward, she noticed that the dog’s throat had been slit cleanly and with such force it had nearly severed his head.

For a moment she froze, refusing to believe what she saw. Kagali’s fur was matted with blood from the red, gaping wound in his neck. Had it not been for Leah’s hesitation, this moment of stunned paralysis as she worked out the obvious—that no wolf could have inflicted such a wound—she might have escaped.

When she looked up, she saw a man in dun-coloured hides—a man with legs as thick as the ridgepole of her father’s house. A man so big he blotted out the sun. By his high cheekbones and his flat black eyes, which stared at her expressionless as stones, she knew he was a Yürük. The bones of a large animal strung around his neck rattled in time to his panting. Leah would not think of her sister. Her mouth opened to scream.

“Be quiet, or I’ll slit your throat too.”

He towered over her, his knife hanging at his side still wet from Kagali’s blood. A man without a proper headdress, just a filthy cloth tied around his head. Broken sandals on feet so black Leah could barely see where his sandals ended and his feet began. A man covered in scars. A man who reeked of goat cheese and yogourt. Whose beard glistened with grease. Who looked as though he had been smothered in

mud and dirt, stung by insects, ripped by thorns, scarred by the hooves of trampling horses, and had survived it all.

“Who are you?” he demanded in a voice that seemed to come from the low clouds above her head. He spoke a coarse dialect she could barely comprehend.

“Do not kill me,” Leah said.

“Who are you!” he roared.

“Leah, daughter of Avram, the shepherd.”

“Louder!”

She repeated her words.

“Where do you live?”

“Kaş.” Too far away for her father or brothers to hear her screams. “I am only a child.” It was a lie. She was fourteen, but skinny for her age. He seized her by the chin, looking into her eyes. “Your father cares nothing for you or he would not send you into the mountains alone.”

Leah avoided his gaze, looking instead at his camel-hide tunic, which moved of its own accord. It took her a moment to realize that waves of lice made it seem alive. A few paces away, the man’s horse nickered. Nothing was real—not the man nor the horse. All was a dream, like seeing the world through the wings of a moth.

“My brother tends the flock, but he is with fever.”

The man grunted. His fingers clamped harder on her. A reckless anger took hold of her. Knowing the words were foolish before they were out of her mouth, she said, “You killed Kagali. You should not have done that.”

“Brave, for a girl.”

The man grabbed her by the waist and turned her upside down, shaking her as though emptying a sack. The heel of yesterday’s bread fell out of her kaftan and bounced on the rocks. Kagali’s corpse was so close to her face she could smell his blood.

He tossed her to the ground. She lay there, the air knocked out of her. Several paces away, she heard the bleat of the black lamb. She watched the man pick up the bread



from the ground and cram it into his mouth, gnawing and sucking it. Leah fumbled her *nazar* from under her kaftan, rubbing it back and forth between her fingers, trying to calm herself with the smoothness of the stone and the tracery of veins in its depths.

When the man hunkered down hunting for bread crumbs, she tucked the *nazar* under her kaftan and scrambled to her feet, thankful she had worn her old sandals and not the new ones her father had made for her that flopped because the straps were too long. If only the earth would open up and conceal her. If only she could crawl back into the crevice and disappear. She steadied herself against a large rock and took a gulp of air. She used to be the best runner in her village, faster even than the boys.

Leah bolted.

Behind her, she heard the Yürük run to his horse and heave himself into the saddle. She raced downhill toward Kaş. Her father, uncles and brothers would sever this savage's head from his shoulders just as he had severed Kagali's.

A hundred paces into her sprint, a stone gave way under her foot and she lurched and fell and skidded, grit filling her nostrils and mouth.

The Yürük was off his horse and on her in a flash, seizing her by the waist. He drew his fist back and struck her above her ear. Her head jerked sideways from the force of the blow. The sun exploded in her head. Grabbing her hair, he forced her head back, exposing her throat. She thrashed and bit his hand, grinding it between her teeth, but it was no use. As he heaved her over his shoulder, the matted fur of his hides cut off her air. He clambered over the dry rocks toward his horse, carrying her with little effort as she tried to kick the part of him where his legs joined. He growled something in his guttural tongue that she could not make out.

Just as a wolf drags fresh kill to the lair for its pups, he would carry her in fetid hides to other tribesmen. They would use her, and when they had taken turns they would kill her with no more thought than she would give to wringing a chicken's neck. Crying, she bounced upside-down against his back, her head thumping against his goatskin bag. In front of her appeared the legs of his stallion, strips of dried meat hanging from the saddle. As the Yürük heaved her from his shoulder and over the pommel onto his horse, her lanyard broke and her *nazar* fell and caught in one of the strips. Leah reached down and grabbed the stone before it shattered under the horse's hooves. The man threw his leg over the saddle, picked up his reins, and spun the horse around in the direction of Kaş.

With each stride, the pommel dug deep into Leah's tender belly. Blood rushed to her head, banging in rhythm to the horse's gallop. She grew dizzy. And then the light dimmed and faded. When she regained consciousness, she was flat on the ground, stones poking her back, her kaftan rucked up around her waist. Above her spread the sky and clouds. The sun was setting. She did not know how long she had been lying on the ground. Her ear throbbed. She put a hand to her head and felt a knob the size of a winter apple.

The Yürük stood, his feet planted on either side of her, a grin exposing toothless gums. She kicked and twisted. In his rage, he seized a rock next to her. He raised it over his head, about to smash it into her face. Leah began to pray. *God, if it pleases you, let this savage kill me quickly. Better to die than to be dishonoured.*

Leah thought of her family. If she was murdered, who would tend the sheep when her brother was ill? Who would spoon mutton soup into her grandmother's mouth? Who would help her mother bake bread? Who would play backgammon with her father? And what would become of her betrothed? Who would bear his sons? Did not the Torah say that destiny favours those who are resourceful and

brave? She pivoted to one side, squirming out from between the Yürük's feet. She scrambled on all fours and then regained her balance and ran, stumbling, as fast as she could. The sun was over her right shoulder, so Kaş must be straight downhill. She raced to an outcrop of rock where she should be able to see her village in the valley. She stared down, thinking she was in the wrong spot. These blackened houses below, with smoke rising from crossbeams, could not be Kaş. But there were the familiar houses arranged in a semicircle around a well, her family's house nearest to the stand of pines with the donkey tethered in front. The door hung by one hinge; the roof was on fire. Among the ruins, Yürüks rummaged, heaping booty into a mound—carpets, rounds of hard cheese, *kilims*, quilts, sheepskins, and cooking pots. Women and children ran in all directions. In the midst of the chaos was her grandmother standing stock still next to their house, as though in a daze.

Leah ran faster than she had ever run before, falling and getting up, again and again, all too aware of the Yürük who had mounted his horse and was pounding behind her. As she approached her village, she saw her grandmother carrying Leah's baby brother in her arms. She had nearly reached them when there was a sharp *crack*, like the snap of a bullwhip. Her grandmother was too hard of hearing to look up. A burning timber from a neighbour's house crashed upon her and the baby, crushing them so swiftly they had no time to cry out.

Leah wanted to drag the timber off them, kiss her grandmother's lined face, take her baby brother in her arms and bury him in the hills in a grave with a pyramid of stones on top, but there was no time. She had to find her father. Where was he? He had always protected them. Why had he allowed this to happen? Leah heard shouting and yelling. She turned in the direction it was coming from. In the field beyond the houses, a mob of horses and Yürük horsemen charged after something, bending double in their saddles to

seize an object on the mud-packed ground. A rider snatched up the object and hoisted it level to his horse's withers. As he was about to heave it over his saddle, the rider next to him wrestled it from him and sped away.

The nomads were amusing themselves with *buzkashi*, a game played with the headless carcass of a goat. They had revelled in this sport for as long as anyone could remember. But something was not right. Leah tried to identify the oddly familiar object the men were fighting over. She strained to see. Dear God. She refused to believe what her eyes told her. It was the body of a man, the legs cut off. Wound around his neck was a scarf of blue wool that Leah had knitted.

It was her father's body, bruised and lifeless, covered in mud and horse excrement. One horseman gained possession of his limbless body, dragging it to a pile of stones on the side of the field, and with a triumphant cheer that seemed to tear a hole in the sky, he claimed victory. The game was won.

Leah had no time to fall to the ground and be sick. No time to bury her head in her hands and weep for the father who had fed her *plov* and *borekas de handrajo* from his plate, and had given her his blanket on winter nights when the wind whistled through the chinks of their dwelling.

*Hear me, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.  
She'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*

A shadow fell over her. The Yürük had caught up. He seized her, pinning her arms to her sides. If she did not manage to wriggle free, he would hurl her to the ground. When he was through, his seed still trickling down her thighs, another man would take his place and another and another.

*Have mercy on your daughter, Leah. Steady me in your arms to keep me upright. Send the wind to my back so that I may run swiftly. Pour your strength into me, so that I do not*

*falter. If you shield me from these savages, my voice will grow hoarse so loudly will I praise your Name.*

## CHAPTER 2



### *District of Eminönü Constantinople*

WHEN HANNAH HEARD the clatter of wheels on the cobblestones and the tinkle of harness bells outside her window, unaccustomed sounds in this neighbourhood of people on foot or on horseback, she peered through the shutters. To her astonishment, there was a carriage in front of her house. Throwing the window wide open, she leaned out.

It was not the Imperial Harem's best carriage, nor its worst. Yes, the Sultan Murat III's *tughra*, the intricate calligraphy of his name, was painted on the carriage door in gold. Yes, the bay mare wore ostrich plumes on her head. Yes, her martingale, the chain draping the beast from breastplate to noseband to prevent her from tossing up her head, was finely crafted, but it was made of silver not gold and the mare was past her prime, spavined, and a single animal, not one of a matched pair. No liveried driver sat up top in the narrow seat of the landau, just grizzly old Suat, a slave from Circassia, his mouth as usual pressed into a scowl, his lips a slit of disapproval. His turban was askew and finger-marked from the constant readjustments required while lumbering through uneven streets. He slumped in his seat, reins slack on the horse's rump. Many times, in her still clumsy Osmanlica, the language of the Empire that she

had learned from her neighbours, Hannah had tried without success to coax a smile from Suat's toothless mouth.

Even with the carriage at a standstill, the bells jingled in rhythm with the mare's heaving sides. They were intended to warn everyone on the street that an Imperial carriage approached and all within hearing distance must scuttle away lest they glimpse a woman from the harem. But who except midwives like Hannah or women of the worst sort would be foolhardy enough to venture into the streets after dark? What on earth could be so important as to warrant coming to Hannah's door so late? Not a birth at the Imperial Harem, that much was certain.



Two years ago, shortly after Hannah and Isaac had arrived in Constantinople from Venice, the very same carriage had come to her door to take her to the Imperial Harem for the confinement of Safiye, the Sultan's beloved wife with whom he had been besotted since he had first set eyes on her many years ago. Some said she had bewitched him. How astonished Hannah had been that night to hear the carriage come to a halt in front of their house, a dwelling far grander than anything they could have afforded in Venice. In Venice, they had lived in a cramped one-room flat hidden behind the heavy wooden gates of the ghetto.

Her Constantinople neighbours had peered curiously from behind their latticed balconies as Hannah rattled off in the carriage that night.

She had not been prepared for the sight of the Imperial Harem—the black eunuchs, the vast rooms, the brilliant blue and white Iznik tiles, the swooping roofs of the pavilions, the delicate sherbet made with snow packed in burlap and then transported by cart from Mount Olympus, several hundred kilometres away.

Only the blood and the screams of the birthing mother had been familiar. Poor Safiye had laboured valiantly but her travail ended in disappointment. How had Hannah—a Jewess, a foreigner, a newcomer to the city, a fugitive from Venice—come to the attention of the palace? She had her friend, Ezster Mandali, to thank. Ezster, a Sephardic Jew, a pedlar to the harem and confidante to the Valide, had recommended Hannah's skills to the Sultan's revered mother. Someday, may God be listening, the palace would buy silk tents from her husband Isaac's workshop. Naturally, the palace had several midwives already—capable country women with placid smiles who steadied mothers on the birthing stool and allowed Allah's hand to do the rest. This was not Hannah's way. Hannah relied on herbs, used different instruments, and asked questions of those with more experience than she possessed. She gave courage to the faint of heart, poured strength into the weak, and gave hope to the discouraged.

When Hannah had alighted from the carriage the night of Safiye's confinement at the Imperial Palace, a fleet-footed slave girl from Aleppo grabbed her hand at the entrance to the harem and together they raced through the gardens, past the Valide's private hamam, the steam baths, until they reached the Sultana's birthing kiosk, specially prepared for the event. It was draped with panels of embroidered silk set with rubies, emeralds and pearls, depicting harmonious scenes of the heavenly gardens of paradise. The quilts and bedcovers were red. Suspended over the divan hung an embroidered bag which Hannah knew contained the Qur'an. At the foot of the divan was an onion stuffed with garlic and impaled on a gold skewer. This was to ward off the Evil Eye. The gold washing bowls, porcelain ewers, and other utensils rested on low lacquered tables. A variety of sweetmeats and sherbets were arranged on thin grey-green celadon dishes. Hannah later learned the Sultan and his family all ate from



such dishes as a precaution. The glaze of the tableware turned black upon contact with poison.

Hannah should have felt awed by the splendour of the pavilion, the ceiling supported by marble colonnades, the floors of cedar and sandalwood giving off the most delicious fragrance, the gossamer textiles, the richly dressed attendants, slaves and concubines, but all she could think was how grateful she was to have her birthing spoons, the silver forceps that had helped her liberate many an obstinate baby from its mother's womb.

Several women surrounded the Sultan's wife, Safiye, as she laboured on her birthing stool, all of them trying their best to relax her by rubbing her back and her hands, by holding golden beakers of lemon water to her lips. But the space at Safiye's right was empty. Her mother-in-law, the Valide, was conspicuous in her absence. It was a known fact that the two women had no affection for each other. Idle tongues speculated on the reasons why.

Hannah went to the basin of hot water in the corner and washed her hands. She wrung out the cloth the slave girl handed her, moved through the other women surrounding the Sultana, and took the open space to Safiye's right. She wiped the woman's forehead. The Sultana grasped the arms of the horseshoe-shaped birthing stool while the usual palace midwife, a stout woman from Amasia, cried out three times without conviction, "*Allah Akbar*"—God is most great.

Hannah nodded to the midwife, who took her cue and retreated to a corner of the kiosk.

Safiye was mad with pain, her eyes rolled back in her head. A young odalisque stood by helplessly, patting her hand. Hannah noted with approval that the birthing stool was fashioned of walnut, the sturdiest and luckiest of woods. The odalisque caught Hannah's eye and gave a small shake of her head. It told Hannah what she needed to know: the Sultana's travail had been long and unproductive.

In Constantinople, birthing was always a social occasion. All the women of the harem, from the most beautiful concubines to the lowest slave girls, were present in the room. Surrounding them were storytellers, eunuch dwarfs, jesters, jugglers and musicians. That night an astrologer sat off to the side, studying his chart. To Hannah's annoyance, he muttered, "Not an auspicious time to be born."

Crouched on a rush mat in the corner was an old woman performing a lead pouring. As the molten lead sizzled in her pot, the crone gave a toothless grimace and shrugged, indicating that the lead had hardened not into bright, clean shapes, which would have been a good portent, but into misshapen, twisted forms. Hannah was grateful that Safiye was in the midst of a birth pang and not aware of the ill omens surrounding her.

A dwarf dressed in a red turban and green kaftan approached Hannah and pulled a silver coin from behind her ear.

"Please," said Hannah, "let us all stand back and give Her Excellency some air." She turned to an old woman with a long nose like those from the town of Sinope on the Black Sea. Hannah knew she had been the Sultan's wet-nurse years ago, and asked, "How far apart are the pangs?"

"Since the last call to prayer, two minutes apart. We have tried everything. The child has no way to come out. The *djinns* have sewn her womb closed." *Djinns* were the tiny demons that tormented and interfered in every event, causing endless misfortune.

"Shush," said Hannah, hoping the wet-nurse was mistaken. "A mother's mind is easily discouraged by the words overheard during her travail." She felt a surge of protective affection for Safiye. If this crowd of onlookers could not be optimistic, could they not depart and allow Hannah to get on with the task of saving this stubborn baby?