



*Belshazzar's
Daughter*

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**“Intriguing, exotic,
exciting and original”**

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Chapter One

A ROOM. FOUR FLAT, tar- and nicotine-stained walls. A window: filthy, caked with viscous, black dust. Not that it matters. Some windows don't have views. Some windows just reflect, like mirrors.

Chairs and a table. Rough-hewn, this stuff, like the poor sticks country peasants might have in their hot little sun-baked hovels. But this is not the country. The air is thick—almost solid. The city chokes upon its love affair with the internal combustion engine. Not a sound, save the roar of the traffic. The shrieking silence of the inner city.

There's a bed too. A small, narrow cot. It has an iron headboard, a series of hard, cold tubes. Functional, it recalls hospital wards, prisons, institutions for the sad, the bad, the less than whole.

Recently there was fierce activity; the bedclothes are rumpled like old skin. One stained pillow lies burst open on the floor. Its guts flutter about on the tiny floor-level breeze. Small grey and white feathers, curled forever into short, permanent waves.

And yet there is not the smell of sex here, that faintly sweet odour, the one that not even bathing can erase.

Turning away from the bed it is possible to look at what lies upon it via the reflection in the mirror that hangs on the opposite wall. A sharp movement causes the flies that lie across

the bed like a rug to stir and take flight. There's a lot of blood. That which hasn't oozed into the mattress drips lazily down an arm, along one outstretched finger on to the floor. In the wide, pinned-back eyes lies the still, silent reflection of the open doorway. A reflection within a reflection—the fascination of the infinite.

An empty bottle rolls over the exhausted carpet underneath the table and encounters an empty cigarette packet. The door creaks very gently on its ancient, rusted hinges and a sickness, unexpected, rises rapidly. Too rapidly to be controlled.

The door swings open a little wider and light footsteps sprint almost soundlessly down and out into the street below.

The door remains open and after a while the flies regroup. They cannot be seduced away for very long. The sound of the feet is not even a memory before the insects get back to the business of feeding. The thing on the bed has spread its goodness far beyond its own cracked shell. The flies make a large, mobile pattern on the wall, slipping and sliding with the movement of the thick liquid. They must be quick. The hot sun will dry it soon and then it will be useless. The flies know this and bloat themselves.



The final class of the afternoon, eight wealthy, spoilt and sulky boys between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, had been difficult. It had been a pure grammar session too. Probably not a good idea for a hot afternoon in August, but what choice did he have? The tests were coming up in just over a week and none of the students were ready, not even the painfully devout headscarf brigade, the girls from Bursa. And who could blame them? Few of them possessed even the most elementary grasp of the English language, and to be shut up in a stuffy room for hours on end during the hottest month of the year...He didn't want to be there himself! But he didn't really have a choice. He never did.

But now he was going home. The best part of the day had finally arrived. Though still breathlessly hot, there was that

slight feeling of relief in the air which comes as afternoon slips imperceptibly over into early evening: the promise of night and a slight drop in temperature becoming a reality. It wasn't an unpleasant walk either, his route to the bus stop. Unless of course one had to live in this run-down and commercially defunct quarter of the city.

Balat. He tramped its filthy streets, its winding labyrinthine alleys, six days a week, but it never bored him. Dickensian charm was what this district possessed. David Copperfield, Pip, Mr. Jingle, Fagin: none of them would have been out of place within Balat's ambience of poverty, petty crime and picturesque filth. Fagin, especially, would have fitted in perfectly. Jews, old Jews, were the one and only commodity that Balat could boast of having in anything approaching abundance.

Not that they were obvious, these ancient, winter-clad, shy little Jews, muttering gently in some language they kept exclusive, secret, like themselves. If others had not told him of their existence it is doubtful whether he would even have known they were there. They blended. Suspicious of strangers and a perceived outside world that largely hated them, they would turn their faces to the wall as he approached and disappear into the brickwork, the concrete, the stone. For centuries the Ottoman Empire, now the Turkish Republic, had provided a safe haven for Jews. It was famed for its humane attitude towards the Hebrews. But old, suspicious habits, learnt in the hard schools of Western Europe, die hard. It wasn't personal.

Of course, at its root it was all economic. In 'better' parts of the city there were thousands of middle-class and wealthy Jews who lived lives identical in almost every way to the Turkish majority. But in Balat things were different. When money and comfort are absent, other more fundamental aspects take on greater importance. Traditions, rules, taboos.

Robert turned the corner into the nameless, snakelike back street that ultimately gave on to the main road and the bus stop beyond. It was exceptionally sultry. Even putting one foot in front of the other was an effort. He stopped and delved deep into

his shirt pocket for his cigarettes and lighter. It was, for him, one of the luxuries of living in a city like Istanbul, this freedom to smoke in the street without attracting reproving glances. How different it all was from London. In so many ways. He lit a cigarette and took a long, deep, luxurious drag.

As he stood smoking, looking towards the thick distant traffic of his destination, a door creaked open behind him. He turned to look. There was nothing there save the blankness of a very shut, very old apartment building. Shut, that is, with the exception of a small wooden door on the ground floor that swung and creaked rustily upon its ornate iron hinges. There was nobody about. Like a ghost-town scene from an old Western movie, late-afternoon Balat was silent and, on the face of it, uninhabited. But Robert knew that it was only an illusion. Thousands of people lived in Balat. As soon as the outsider was gone, hundreds of old Jews would disengage themselves from the walls, pass from stone into flesh, from silence into rapid unintelligible chatter. At six-foot-three, with hair the colour of varnished pine, Robert knew what they thought. Knew what type of foreigner they would, quite naturally, assume him to be.

He turned back again, but, as he did, a movement just on the periphery of his field of vision caught his attention. He did a double-take and found himself face-to-face with what looked remarkably like a small gnome or elf framed in the doorway, its hand upon one rusty hinge. It was a woman, tiny, dressed all in black, her eyes momentarily caught in his, filled with fear and distrust. Then she dropped her gaze, her eyes sinking to the floor beneath her feet as she moved slowly backwards, dissolving into the deep shadows of the tenement that was, with her shyness, her prison. A sharp needle of pity pierced his consciousness as he watched her go. There was no way he could make her understand that he was safe, that he meant her no harm. Few of these people could speak Turkish, much less English, and for all he knew she might be one of the real unfortunates, the ones with numbers tattooed on their wrists, forearms or buttocks. Some Jews from Eastern Europe and Germany had settled in

the comparative safety of Turkey just after the War; the names Belsen, Auschwitz and Ravensbrück still rang in their ears forty-seven years on. She disappeared.

Robert finished his cigarette and ground the smoking butt beneath his heel, pushing it deep down into the thick dust of the road surface. He felt better for his short rest and was just about to continue on his way home when a second figure appeared, this time in the doorway of the apartment block directly in front of him. At first, although the figure was familiar, he was so surprised that he almost ignored it. But the face, if not the tattered black jeans and unfashionable baggy shirt, was unmistakable, wasn't it? He moved his head forward a little, the better to see it. Could it be, possibly? Natalia? In Balat? The figure moved. It looked once up the street and then, sweeping its gaze down towards him, froze.

It all happened very quickly. He smiled and went to raise his hand to wave in greeting. She flinched, dropped her gaze and then, like the natives of the quarter, turned her back as if trying to blend herself with the wall. Robert took one pace forward and was just opening his mouth to speak when, visibly trembling, she sprang to one side and started running down the street in the direction of the main road.

Without really thinking about what he was doing, Robert followed. Now oblivious to everything else around him, he ran. Before him, running more swiftly on almost silent feet, was Natalia, slim, raven-haired, exquisite. Running away, frightened. Of him? If he had time he would have felt hurt, affronted even. But there wasn't and she was fast, faster than he had imagined.

Just before Natalia reached the bottom of the winding back street, she turned off sharply to the left. Robert was nearly upon her now. As she veered to the side he briefly, just for a moment, caught her. Long strong fingers grabbed at, but could not grasp, one bony shoulder blade. His arm recoiled as if burnt. It was thin, that shoulder blade, through the cheap cotton. Not round and luxurious and sexy like he remembered. Could he be wrong? Could this be someone else? She gasped,

panicking under his touch, and increased the speed and thrust of her legs. Robert stopped.

He was in a courtyard, windows and squat green doors on all sides. As usual, not a soul in sight. Before him, so narrow it was more like a tunnel than a street, stretched an alleyway down which Natalia had disappeared. As he stood panting heavily, hands braced against his knees for support, he looked down into the depths of the warren-like thoroughfare. All he saw was the absence of things. Light, movement, colour, Natalia's fleeing figure...

For a few seconds he gathered himself thus, then he stood straight. She had gone. Not so much as a breath disturbed the pollution-coated afternoon air. Dazed, he made his way out of the courtyard and stopped in the street beyond. He looked up and down three or four times, but to no avail. The street, like the courtyard from which he had just emerged, was silent save for the roar of the traffic booming from the main road at its now nearby northern end. He moved towards the comforting sound of people and machines in motion, his mind a dark pit full of anxiety and a nagging distrust of what his eyes and his hands had just revealed to him. Perhaps he'd just had too much sun. Maybe the heat had fuddled his senses. And yet it had been her face! There could be no doubt with a face like that, surely! So fine and yet so sensual, well-bred and yet somehow wild. Christ, he had to get home! If he started thinking about her now and moved in the direction of that shop...

He walked unsteadily towards the bus stop, the noises of people and vehicles growing around him with every step. Dreamlike, that had been the quality of the experience, and yet he knew he was awake. The world of Main Street, Istanbul was too loud and intrusive to leave him in any doubt. Eighteen months ago he would have put it down to the medication and that would have been that. But...

He looked behind him to the exit from which he had just come. From his angle of sight the buildings on either side of the tiny thoroughfare looked very close together now, as if they were sealing, closing for business. The temperature was over thirty degrees, but Robert Cornelius's blood felt cold.



'Fucking bastard!' she said out loud, holding a hand encrusted with paste jewels up to the rose-coloured swelling above her right eye. She couldn't believe it. Again! That was twice she had been beaten and denied her fee in as many days. What on earth made these men think they had the right? It was a service, like any other. Would they take bread from the bakery and then beat up the baker to avoid paying him? Of course not! But tarts? Tarts, especially of the old and very used variety, were another matter. She knew the risks, she'd always known them, but that still didn't answer the vexed question of why. Men wanted sex, tarts provided sex. So why wave a twenty-thousand lira note in her face and then give her a black eye? Why not just take and have done with it? Guilt? A sudden vision of the broken-down wife with her prolapsed womb and ten children back home? Memories of youth when sex was free and life not quite so cheap?

But knowledge didn't make it any better. Nothing except money assuaged the growling hunger pangs in her stomach and the urgent desire for a drink with more of a kick than tea.

'Twenty thousand fucking lira!' she announced to the silent, midnight streets of Balat. Thirty-one years on the streets, pandering to the basest of men's desires, had done no favours for Leah Delmonte. Prostitution was no soft option. Like the movies, all couches, high-class madams and sherbet, it was not. Of course, it had not been quite as hard when she was a girl as it was now. She had called herself Dolores in those days, and officially she had been employed as a dancer. 'Madame Lilli proudly presents, direct from Madrid, Spain, Dolores, wild and passionate gypsy flamenco dancer!' Just the memory of it made her want to cry. And they had known no different, all those soldiers, marines, young rich boys out for kicks, passing through her hands. Her ancestors had come from Seville, Toledo, some God-forsaken hole like that, and the Ladino language she had grown up speaking was supposed to be similar to Spanish. It was close enough for them. And she *had*

been Dolores: she was exotic, she was beautiful, and at that time, undoubtedly, she could dance. But no more. Turning forty had sounded the death knell for Dolores. That was five years back. Five years of being just Leah again. Plain Leah, good enough only for quick bunk-ups against walls.

And she was broke. She and Lilli, Madame Lilli as she had been in her youth, owed three months' back rent on their shabby one-room apartment. Leah at least tried to get work, but Lilli—six years older than Leah, fat, blotchy, and tortured by appalling varicose veins—Lilli was not enthusiastic about working the streets any more. She sat in most evenings, eating, smoking, and listening to morbid Arabesque songs on the radio.

Leah turned the corner and found herself facing the entrance to her run-down apartment block. What a place to end up! A dirty doss-house not five minutes' walk from the dirty doss-house where she had been born. Whatever had happened to all those dreams she had nursed so carefully as a child? Whatever had happened to her mother's great ambitions for her daughter? Mistress to the President of the Republic by the time she reached twenty! What crap!

Leah looked towards the window of the tiny ground-floor room she shared with her ex-madam. The light was on, and through the thin nicotine-stained curtains she could clearly see Lilli. Back already. If, that is, she had even been out. Leah's heart sank. She couldn't face it. Lilli and her endless moaning about money, the awful scenes whenever she looked in the mirror. What Leah needed was a drink. A stiff vodka would help, or raki, even just the one would do. But where the hell was she going to get money for alcohol? She forced herself on towards the dimly lit entrance hall, her eyes stinging with barely restrained tears. It was the boredom of it that was so bad. The hunger, the lack of nice things, the sordidness she could take; but the dullness! The never-changing, stupefying boredom...

And then she remembered. She stopped. Of course! Old Meyer, the Russian on the top floor. 'Shouting' Meyer. Lonely, anti-social, mad, some people said. But he always had booze, lots

of it. Odd really. Why someone with the economic power not only to pay the rent, but to smoke and buy at least one bottle of vodka a day, should choose to live in a filthy rat-hole like Balat was a mystery to her. But Leah was not one to question. She pushed those thoughts away from her and imagined the delicious taste of neat spirit on her tongue. Provided you kept quiet, tolerated his unintelligible raving, and could close your mind to the smell of his room, Meyer was a safe bet. His filthy bottle could be your filthy bottle, and there were always plenty of cigarettes in his place, scattered like sticks of chalk all across his floor and over his bed. It was a last resort, drinking with a lunatic, but she was desperate.

She crept past her own door on the ground floor, careful to avoid the all too numerous creaking floorboards, and ascended the stairs. Naturally, nosy Lilli would want in on the party if she knew, and Leah was determined that if any drink were going, she, and she alone, was going to have it. She, at least, had tried to find some work. Lilli didn't deserve a drink. Braving Meyer's shit-hole was Leah's treat. She licked her lips and moved forward.

It was heavy going for her unfit body, up three flights of stairs to the top floor. It was with great relief that she finally emerged on to the uppermost balcony and into the outside air again. She stood, hands on hips, panting for a few seconds. There were three doors giving off from this balcony. Cell-like hovels existed behind them. The first two were occupied by the Abrahams and their ever-increasing brood. The last one, at the far end, was Meyer's.

When she had composed herself a little, Leah turned her attention to her appearance. The old man was a complete crazy, but that gave her no excuse for turning up looking a mess. He was old, but he was still a man. And she was a woman, a professional woman. She still had a certain pride. A little powder on her sore and blackened eye, a dab of lipstick here, eye-shadow there...

She patted her elaborate hennaed wig with her hands, making sure it was firmly in position. A relic of happier, more solvent times, that wig. When she originally purchased it, she

hadn't actually needed it. Perhaps she'd had a vision of the future all those years ago. She replaced the make-up in her cheap mock-leopard-skin bag, drew herself up to her full height, and sashayed past the filth-encrusted doors of the Abrahams' quarters.

Meyer's door was open. This was not unusual; the old man rarely shut it during the summer months. His tiny cell caught the sun nearly all day and a source of ventilation was absolutely vital for both his comfort and his health. His light, however, was off. This did not augur well. It indicated that he had probably drunk all his liquor and was now sleeping it off. Leah didn't know what to do. She had been looking forward to this drink, and to be thwarted like this...

She turned the possibilities over in her mind. She could wake the old man and ask him for a drink, thus risking a justifiably angry outburst on his part. She could go away boozeless and depressed. Or...

Or, if Meyer were dead drunk, she could switch on his light, go in and scour his room for dregs in discarded bottles. There was unlikely to be much, but even a drop would do. It was doubtful that he would wake unless shaken, and she was desperate.

She pushed the door gently with her foot, letting just enough light into the room to discern the bottom of his bed. A smell of sour vomit—or was it rotten vegetables?—assaulted her nostrils. No. Burnt food—meat. Filthy old bastard! God, but she needed this drink! She knew that the light switch was on the wall just beside the door, but she couldn't see it. She searched. Her roving hand skittered noisily over the cheap plasterboard wall as her deep-red fingernails sought out the telltale protrusion. She found it. The switch clicked and suddenly the room was bathed in a jaundiced light from the single grimy bulb. For a second she didn't really know what she was looking at. At first, and to her confusion, it appeared that someone had thrown a heap of old clothes and a large lump of meat on to the bed. But then she saw the eyes, crusted with blood but open, forced apart by the action of rigor, staring right at her. From the mouth downwards, right to the tops of his legs, Meyer was just a mass

of blood and weeping organs. So ravaged was he that even some of the rib bones were exposed, white, stark, covered only by thin streamers of raw, shredded flesh. As she looked on, horribly fascinated, what was left of the liver detached itself and fell glutinously on to the blood-soaked bedclothes that surrounded the body. Leah felt a bitter sickness rise in her throat, but she couldn't stop looking. And the smell! Leah put her hand to her mouth and gagged. She had not eaten that day and the hot bile from her stomach, its only contents, seared her throat.

Her gaze travelled up his body once more, his entrails, his eyes, his hair, the wall behind the bed...the wall...

It was there. Drawn in what appeared to be blood. Huge, its hard edges feathered by dried drips and smears of red: a swastika.

Every brittle, Jewish bone in her body screamed in recognition. Sour yellow bile bubbled between the fingers clenched around her mouth and then she screamed. She didn't move. Even when Mr Abrahams from next door came in to see what was wrong, still she didn't move. She just screamed.

And twenty minutes later, when the first of the policemen and the doctor arrived, Leah, her legs wet with her own urine, was still screaming. She knew what the swastika meant all right.



'Inspector Ikmen?'

The little man half lying on the couch was holding the telephone to his left ear, but his eyes were closed. It was dark. Still obviously an unhallowed hour of the night. Not the sort of time to be talking on the telephone, not the time to be doing anything apart from sleeping.

'Suleyman?' he growled. 'What do you want?'

The voice at the other end of the line took one very deep breath and sighed. 'There's been an incident, sir. A very unpleasant business. In Balat.'



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