

The
Architect's
Apprentice

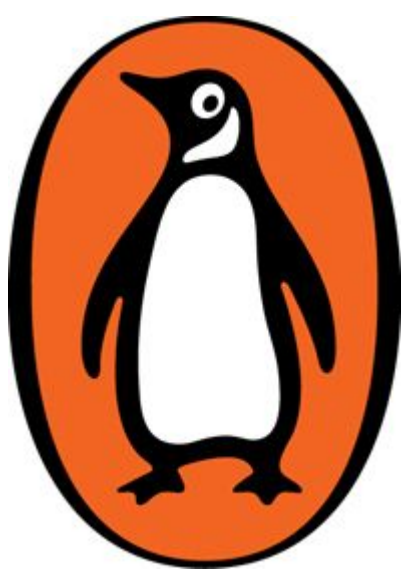


ELIF SHAFAK

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Elif Shafak

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*For apprentices everywhere – no one told us that love was the hardest craft
to master*

At one glance I loved you with a thousand hearts
... Let the zealots think loving is sinful
Never mind,
Let me burn in the hellfire of that sin.

– Mihri Hatun, sixteenth-century Ottoman poetess

I have searched the world and found nothing worthy of love,
hence I am a stranger amid my kinfolk
and an exile from their company.

– Mirabai, sixteenth-century Hindu poetess



Of all the people God created and Sheitan led astray, only a few have discovered the Centre of the Universe – where there is no good and no evil, no past and no future, no ‘I’ and no ‘thou’, no war and no reason for war, just an endless sea of calm. What they found there was so beautiful that they lost their ability to speak.

The angels, taking pity on them, offered two choices. If they wished to regain their voices, they would have to forget everything they had seen, albeit a feeling of absence would remain deep in their hearts. If they preferred to remember the beauty, however, their minds would become so befuddled that they would not be able to distinguish the truth from the mirage. So the handful who stumbled upon that secret location, unmarked on any map, returned either with a sense of longing for something, they knew not what, or with myriads of questions to ask. Those who yearned for completeness would be called ‘the lovers’, and those who aspired to knowledge ‘the learners’.

That is what Master Sinan used to tell the four of us, his apprentices. He would regard us closely, his head cocked to one side, as if trying to see through our souls. I knew I was being vain, and vanity was unfit for a simple boy such as I, but every time my master would relate this story I believed he intended his words for me rather than for the others. His stare would linger for a moment too long on my face, as if there were something he expected from me. I would avert my gaze, afraid of disappointing him, afraid of the thing I could not give him – though what that was I never figured out. I wonder what he saw in my eyes. Had he predicted that I would be second to none with respect to learning, but that I, in my clumsiness, would fail miserably in love?

I wish I could look back and say that I have learned to love as much as I loved to learn. But if I lie, there could be a cauldron boiling for me in hell

tomorrow, and who can assure me tomorrow is not already on my doorstep, now that I am as old as an oak tree, and still not consigned to the grave?

There were six of us: the master, the apprentices and the white elephant. We built everything together. Mosques, bridges, madrasas, caravanserais, alms houses, aqueducts ... It was so long ago that my mind softens even the sharpest features, melting memories into liquid pain. The shapes that float into my head whenever I hark back to those days could well have been drawn later on, to ease the guilt of having forgotten their faces. Yet I remember the promises we made, and then failed to keep, every single one of them. It's odd how faces, solid and visible as they are, evaporate, while words, made of breath, stay.

They have slipped away. One by one. Why it is that they perished and I survived to this feeble age only God and God alone knows. I think about Istanbul every day. People must be walking now across the courtyards of the mosques, not knowing, not seeing. They would rather assume that the buildings around them had been there since the time of Noah. They were not. We raised them: Muslims and Christians, craftsmen and galley slaves, humans and animals, day upon day. But Istanbul is a city of easy forgettings. Things are written in water over there, except the works of my master, which are written in stone.

Beneath one stone, I buried a secret. Much time has gone by, but it must still be there, waiting to be discovered. I wonder if anyone will ever find it. If they do, will they understand? This nobody knows, but at the bottom of one of the hundreds of buildings that my master built rests hidden the centre of the universe.

Agra, India, 1632



Istanbul, 22 December 1574

It was past midnight when he heard a fierce growl from the depths of the dark. He recognized it immediately: it came from the largest cat in the Sultan's palace, a Caspian tiger with amber eyes and golden fur. His heart missed a beat as he wondered what – or who – could have disturbed the beast. They should all be sound asleep at so late an hour – the humans, the animals, the *djinn*. In the city of seven hills, other than the watchmen on the streets making their rounds, only two kinds of people would be awake now: those who were praying and those who were sinning.

Jahan, too, was up and about – working.

'Working is prayer for the likes of us,' his master often said. 'It's the way we commune with God.'

'Then how does He respond to us?' Jahan had once asked, way back when he was younger.

'By giving us more work, of course.'

If that were to be believed, he must be forging a rather close relationship with the Almighty, Jahan had thought to himself, since he toiled twice as hard to ply two trades, instead of one. He was a mahout and a draughtsman. Dual crafts he pursued, yet he had a single teacher whom he respected, admired and secretly wished to surpass. His master was Sinan, the Chief Royal Architect.

Sinan had hundreds of students, thousands of labourers and many more adherents and acolytes. For all that, he had only four apprentices. Jahan was proud to be among them, proud but, inwardly, also confused. The master had chosen him – a simple servant, a lowly elephant-tamer – when he had plenty of gifted novices at the palace school. The knowledge of this, instead

of swelling his self-esteem, filled him with apprehension. It preyed on his mind, almost despite himself, that he might disappoint the only person in life who believed in him.

His latest assignment was to design a *hamam*. The master's specifications were clear: a raised marble basin, which would be heated from below; ducts inside the walls to allow the smoke to exit; a dome resting on squinches; two doors opening on to two opposite streets so as to prevent men and women from seeing one another. On that ominous night, this was what Jahan was working on, seated at a rough-hewn table in his shed in the Sultan's menagerie.

Leaning back, frowning, he inspected his design. He found it coarse, devoid of grace and harmony. As usual, drawing the ground plan had been easier than drawing the dome. Though he was past forty – the age when Mohammed had become Prophet – and skilled in his craft, he still would rather dig foundations with his bare hands than have to deal with vaults and ceilings. He wished there could be a way to avoid them altogether – if only humans could live exposed to the skies, open and unafraid, watching the stars and being watched by them, with nothing to hide.

Frustrated, he was about to start a new sketch – having pilfered paper from the palace scribes – when he again heard the tiger. His back stiffened, his chin rose as he stood transfixed, listening. It was a sound of warning, bold and bloodcurdling, to an enemy not to draw any closer.

Quietly, Jahan opened the door and stared into the surrounding gloom. Another snarl rose, not as loud as the first but just as menacing. All at once, the animals broke into a clamour: the parrot screeched in the dark; the rhinoceros bellowed; the bear grunted in angry response. Nearby the lion let out a roar, which was met with a hiss from the leopard. Somewhere in the background was the constant, frantic thumping that the rabbits made with their hind legs whenever they were terrified. Though only five in number, the monkeys raised the racket of a battalion – screaming, bawling. The horses, too, began to whinny and shuffle about in their stables. Amid the frenzy Jahan recognized the elephant's rumble, brief and listless, reluctant to join the tumult. Something was frightening the creatures. Throwing a

cloak on to his shoulders, Jahan grabbed the oil lamp and slipped into the courtyard.

The air was crisp, tinged with a heady perfume of winter flowers and wild herbs. No sooner had he taken a couple of steps than he noticed some of the tamers huddled together under a tree, whispering. When they saw him coming, they glanced up expectantly. But Jahan did not have information, only questions.

‘What is happening?’

‘The beasts are nervous,’ said Dara the giraffe-tamer, sounding nervous himself.

‘It might be a wolf,’ Jahan suggested.

It had happened before. Two years ago. One bitter winter eve, wolves had descended on the city, prowling the neighbourhoods of Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. A few had crept in through the gates, God knew how, and attacked the Sultan’s ducks, swans and peacocks, creating mayhem. For days on end they had had to clear bloody feathers from under the bushes and brambles. Yet now the city was neither covered in snow nor was it exceptionally cold. Whatever it was that was agitating the animals, it came from inside the palace.

‘Check every corner,’ said Olev the lion-tamer – a hulk of a man with flaming hair and a curling moustache in the same shade. Not a single decision was taken around here without his knowledge. Mettlesome and muscular, he was held in high regard by all the servants. A mortal who could command a lion was someone even the Sultan could admire a little.

Scattering hither and thither, they inspected the barns, stables, pens, pounds, coops and cages to make sure no animal had escaped. Every resident of the royal menagerie seemed to be in its place. Lions, monkeys, hyenas, flat-horned stags, foxes, ermines, lynxes, wild goats, wildcats, gazelles, giant turtles, roe deer, ostriches, geese, porcupines, lizards, rabbits, snakes, crocodiles, civets, the leopard, the zebra, the giraffe, the tiger and the elephant.

When he went to see Chota – a 35-year-old, six cubits tall and unusually white Asian male elephant – Jahan found him high-strung, unsettled,

holding out his ears like sails to the wind. He smiled at the creature whose habits he knew so well.

‘What is it? You smell danger?’ Patting the elephant’s side, Jahan offered him a handful of sweet almonds, which he always carried ready in his sash.

Never refusing a treat, Chota popped the nuts into his mouth with a swing of his trunk as he kept his gaze on the gate. Leaning forward, his massive weight on his front legs, his sensitive feet pasted to the ground, he froze, straining to catch a sound in the distance.

‘Calm down, it’s fine,’ intoned Jahan, though he did not believe in what he said and nor did the elephant.

On the way back, he saw that Olev was talking to the tamers, urging them to disperse. ‘We searched everywhere! There’s nothing!’

‘But the beasts –’ someone protested.

Olev interjected, pointing at Jahan. ‘The Indian is right. Must have been a wolf. Or a jackal, I’d say. Anyway, it’s gone. Get back to sleep.’

No one protested this time. Nodding, murmuring, they trudged to their pallets, which, though coarse and prickly and full of lice, were the one safe and warm place they knew. Only Jahan lingered behind.

‘You’re not coming, mahout?’ called Kato the crocodile-tamer.

‘In a moment,’ Jahan replied, glancing in the direction of the inner courtyard, where he had just heard a curious muffled sound.

Instead of turning left, towards his shed of lumber and stone, he turned right, towards the high walls separating the two yards. He walked warily, as if waiting for an excuse to change his mind and go back to his drawing. Upon reaching the lilac tree at the furthest end, he noticed a shadow. Dusky and unearthly, it so resembled an apparition that he would have dashed away had it not just then turned aside and showed its face – Taras the Siberian. Surviving every disease and disaster, he had been here longer than anyone else. He had seen sultans come, sultans go. He had seen the mighty humbled and the heads that used to carry the loftiest turbans rolled in mud. *Only two things are solid, the servants taunted: Taras the Siberian and the misery of love. Everything else perishes ...*

‘Is that you, Indian?’ Taras asked. ‘The animals woke you up, eh?’

‘Yeah,’ Jahan said. ‘Did you just hear a noise?’

The old man gave a grunt that could have been a yes or a no.

‘It came from over there,’ Jahan insisted, craning his neck. He stared at the wall stretching before him, a shapeless mass the colour of onyx, blending seamlessly into the dark. In that moment he had the impression that the midnight haze was full of spirits, moaning and mourning. The thought made him shudder.

A hollow crash reverberated across the yard, followed by a cascade of footsteps, as if a throng of people was scampering about. Deep from the bowels of the palace, a woman’s scream rose, too wild to be human, and almost at once was stifled into a sob. From a different corner another scream ripped through the night. Perhaps it was a lost echo of the first one. Then, as abruptly as it had started, everything fell into stillness. On impulse, Jahan made a motion towards the wall in front of him.

‘Where are you going?’ whispered Taras, his eyes glittering with fright. ‘It’s forbidden.’

‘I want to find out what’s going on,’ said Jahan.

‘Keep away,’ said the old man.

Jahan hesitated – albeit momentarily. ‘I’ll take a look and come back right away.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t do that, but you won’t listen,’ said Taras with a sigh. ‘Just make sure you don’t go further. Stay in the garden, your back close to the wall. D’you hear me?’

‘Don’t worry, I shall be quick – and careful.’

‘I’ll wait for you. Won’t sleep till you return.’

Jahan gave an impish smile. ‘I wish you wouldn’t do that, but you won’t listen.’

Recently Jahan had worked with his master in the repair of the royal kitchens. Together they had also expanded parts of the harem – a necessity, since its population had grown considerably over the last years. So as not to have to use the main gate, the labourers had made a shortcut, carving out an opening in the walls. When a consignment of tiles had been delayed, they had sealed it with unbaked bricks and clay.