

The Moghul Saint of Insanity

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By

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For Mustafa, my computer genius.

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FOREWORD

This historical, biographical account of Aurangzeb's life is the last in the series of the Moghuls, depicting the Fall of the Moghul Empire. Aurangzeb stands out as the Master of Distortion, defacing the Face of Islam in conformity with his own sense of perception and interpretation. Blind to his own sins and acts of violence, he plunges deep into the ocean of ruin and devastation. His ancestors—the architects of beauty and tolerance—are forgotten by him in his mad zeal to conquer and subjugate all who do not fit the vision of his Islam. The victim of his own spiritual leprosy, he fails to see his acts of cruelty and injustice as stark contradictions to the precepts of Islam. More faces emerge in this war of *ambition* and *hypocrisy*; those of foreign traders, lurking in ambush to possess the jewels of the emperors and the empire at the first golden opportunity. And Aurangzeb becomes the first one from the progeny of the Moghuls to throw open the gates of this Golden Cage for plunder and invasion, leaving behind one legacy, of a golden rule: tolerance leads to peace and prosperity, and intolerance to doom and destruction. The Fall of the Moghul Empire attests to the validity of this legacy.

CHAPTER ONE

PEACOCK THRONE

*Words do not the saint or sinner make
Action alone is written in the book of fate
As we sow, so shall we reap
—Nanak*

The Puritan Emperor, seated at his desk, was bathed in light from the reflections of the jewels on the marble pillars, and from the swath of diamonds in his gold turban. This man of forty-eight warring seasons was none other than Aurangzeb, the sixth Moghul Emperor of Hindustan. The Shah Burj balcony at the Agra palace was holding him prisoner, as he had held his father prisoner, usurping his throne and murdering all his brothers to crown his ambition with the wealth of deceit and bigotry. He was no prisoner though! The master of a glorious empire and yet a prisoner to his zeal and guilt! To grant his own self a few moments of rare solitude, he had chosen the Shah Burj balcony to read the letters of his antagonists before facing weighty decisions in the Audience Hall. This blessed day was garnished with the festivities of the seventh anniversary of his accession to the throne. The glorious Taj Mahal was in full view, and the golden waves of the Jamna were dancing under the sun. But Aurangzeb's senses were blunted by the knives of his zeal and tyranny, making him deaf and sightless to the bounties of awe and wonder. If the Taj Mahal slipped under his very nose, with all its glory and perfection, he would have sniffed it away, and if nature was to sing to him hymns of joy and love, he would have brushed them away with an imperious wave of his arm.

Seated thus, Aurangzeb seemed invulnerable, but the daggers of love had carved deep trenches inside his heart, making him vulnerable like a babe exposed to the mercy of the world by the power of the one and only, his own beautiful beloved. Her name was Udaipuri, his fourth wife, corrupting his heart with the flagons of her sinful passion, since she was addicted, rather wedded, to wine and drunkenness. Her flowerlike face with dark, laughing eyes was a shuddering reflection in his mind's eye,

along with the throbbing wound of a recollection very terrible and distasteful to the rungs of his pride and passion. Udaipuri was a slave girl from Georgia, the concubine of his late brother, Prince Dara Shikoh. Aurangzeb had fallen in love with her the very first time he had seen her. He had guarded the violence of his passion inside him most patiently, and had succeeded in marrying her after murdering his brother, Prince Dara Shikoh.

Udaipuri was the most precious of his gifts from the war of succession, and he knew he would not ever relinquish her, even if it cost him his life and empire. With the power of this thought alone, Aurangzeb's surface calm was shattering, the tongues of shame and remorse waging their own war of succession within him. A subtle flush was pervading his angular features, as if escaping the turbulent pools of his mute contemplations. His aquiline nose too was gilded with a glow against the quivering of his features, where zeal and passion throbbed naked and unashamed. The lapping of emotions inside him seemed caught in the eyes of the round, smooth pearls around his neck down to his waist as he scooped a part of the string up in a fist, his other hand smoothing the gold embroidery on his satin vest. All of a sudden, his eyes lit up with fever and implacability. His hand reached out to the unsealed letter which he had postponed reading while writing edicts and epistles to his viziers and grandees. Now he snatched it from his rosewood desk, his look savage and piercing. The words were dancing before his eyes like the demons of lies and flattery, and he knitted his brows in an effort to absorb all, swiftly and punctiliously. This letter was from the lord of the rebels, the living idol of the Hindus – Shivaji. He had written this letter after he had been installed into imperial favor, sending his son Shambhuji to the imperial court as a token of his gratitude.

Your Majesty, this sinner and offender, hereafter, will remain firmly engaged in performing the emperor's work as a reparation for his past life and an amendment of his uselessly spent days. He will never deviate from the position of rendering service, risking his life and carrying out imperial mandates. He hopes that out of the store-house of Your Majesty's grace, life to this slave may be granted, and an imperial Farman may be issued pardoning his offences, granting security to his house and family, and bestowing life on him.

Aurangzeb's gaze returned to the heap of letters, piled high, with a burning intensity, as if he could reduce all lies and flatteries to cinders by the mere command of his gaze. But his thoughts were summoning the canker of his unwise, which he could neither cease to regret, nor forget.

The words penned by his hasty decision were poised before him like little troopers, slashing their expressions with blows wild and merciless.

I, out of my characteristic noble habit of shutting my eyes to faults and granting the pardon of lives, do forgive your past sins and deeds and grant all your prayers—

Aurangzeb's thoughts closed the shutters of his missive, the soot of regret inside him one billowing cloud of rage and hatred.

The emperor leapt to his feet as if stung, yet darted a baleful look at the pile of the letters on his desk and snatched another, more to abate the fever of unrest in his thoughts than to fathom the dark trails of Shivaji's evil genius. The letter poised before him, Aurangzeb's very thoughts devoured Shivaji's words with the gluttony of pride and gloating. The script itself was coming alive before his gaze with the rhythm of ecstasy and illusion—dancing like a whirling dervish, awesome and mocking.

The meanest of life-devoting slaves, who wears the ring of servitude in his ear and the carpet of obedience on his shoulder like an atom, acknowledges the good news of his eternal happiness, namely favors from the emperor. This sinner and evil-doer did not deserve that his offences should be forgiven, or his faults covered up. But the grace and favor of the emperor have conferred on him a new life and unimaginable honor.

Aurangzeb's ego was swelling to the size of a mountain as he tossed the letter back onto his rosewood desk. Then he stood smiling to himself, the fever of unrest within him no more, and he alone the master of his fate. Much like the pillar of inevitability he was, short of stature, yet lifted high by the bellows of piety and disdain. His gaze was reaching out and lingering over the marble purity of the Taj Mahal. Yet, he could neither catch its ethereal beauty, nor admire its contours sublime, missing even the passionate serenade of the Jamna waves, kissing the marble monument in holy abandon. His heart was silent, the icy sparkle in his soul cracking open a wound of a kiss, where Udaipuri lay naked on her royal bed of sins and charms. Much like an eternal beloved, Udaipuri had invaded his soul to the very fabric of its torments, and he was destined to love her despite her wedlock to wine and oblivion. Rather, accursed in love, one impudent thought flew loose from the quiver of his doubts this precise moment. *Yes, accursed in love, to endure the stabbing thorns, just for the privilege of sleeping on a bed of roses?* Suddenly, his heart was overwhelmed by tides upon tides of pain and longing. As if whipped by a hurricane he stumbled towards the narrow staircase with the intention of paying homage to his

wives, before facing his nemesis in the guise of the Qazis, viziers and the courtiers.

The harem walls, in conformity with the seventh anniversary of the emperor's accession, were decked with fresh ivy and clusters of tuberose. Aurangzeb, gliding through the lofty halls into the inner sanctuary of his harem, inhaled the scent of peace and prosperity, if not of the roses, white and fragrant. Donning a mask of goodwill and serendipity, he could be seen approaching the palatial chamber where his royal household was assembled as customary, hoping for the privilege of an intimate parance before the emperor was lost to the world of royal duties. Of late, this privilege was woven into the tapestry of inquisition by the begums, who were intent on advising the emperor, and more so on fraying his armor of piety and justice with comments both bold and troubling. Accustomed to such a weight of knowledge, branded by the fire of his love for Udaipuri, Aurangzeb's pace dwindled to a leisurely stroll, keeping at bay the chamber of female intrigue and rebellion.

Intrigue and rebellion were the mirror images of jewels in the eyes of the ladies and on their royal persons as Aurangzeb stepped into this chamber of ivory and damask. A stab of disappointment cut through his heart, causing rivulets of pain, at not finding his beloved amongst the bevy of begums and princesses; his step became heavy and ponderous. But, the master of pride and ceremony without fail, he greeted all with gracious smiles, in turn being greeted with a profusion of curtsies and exclamations. Abandoning himself to his gilt chair, he was quick to weave each knot of parance into one smooth pattern inside the book of his memory. His gaze was absorbing all, reading the lovely facial expressions and diving deep into the hearts and souls of all present. He could boast of having been keen and perceptive since early adulthood, facing no difficulty in gleaning motives, noble or corrupt, despite the façade of smiles and words, and was still sure of his aplomb and perspicacity. But these faculties of his perception were marred by the soot of his zeal and ambition, and he himself was unaware of the tragic marshland within the borders of his psyche and intellect. He had killed the kernels of his clarity and intuition with the bullets of his tyranny and intolerance, oblivious to the ruins of his deeds and greeds, and still believed himself to be the king of clairvoyance. Crowned with the laurels of his piety and righteousness, he had neglected to discover the precious losses within the reach of his succor and introspection. The gifts of perception and prediction were lost to him, and he was happily ignorant of this loss. Seated thus in the bliss of his powers, great and infallible, he was sadly mistaken in distinguishing pearls from the pebbles within the hearts of his kin and kindred. Reality was standing

before him like a mirror, bright and self-revealing, yet what his senses sifted through were castles on sand dunes and delusions in word and reflection.

Aurangzeb's gaze was glossed with memories, shifting from one to the other with a profound intensity, though he sat conversing with as much light-hearted gaiety as permitted to him by his puritanical self. Dilras Begum, the first wife of his youth, though buried under the shroud of peace a decade hence, he could see in the sweet issues of sons and a daughter. Princess Zebunisa, already on the rungs of twenty-eight springs, is the queen of poetry and intrigue, he thought. Prince Azam, only eleven years old, is lean and lanky, and unpredictable in his moods and studies. The ten-year-old Prince Akbar, shy and precocious, was invading his thoughts, but his attention was already turning to his chief wife, Nawab Bai Begum. She rules the harem with a rod of discipline and decorum, Aurangzeb's thoughts were murmuring, shifting to the blessed fruits of his sons and another daughter from this lovely bloom of a wife. Prince Muazzam, heedless of his thirteen years of royal discipline, was laughing with a wild abandon. He was teasing his sister, Princess Zabdatunisa, his eyes shining with mischief. This pair of laughing doves as his blessed progeny reminded Aurangzeb of Prince Muhammed Sultan! Prince Muhammed Sultan, the brother of these free birds, was imprisoned inside the fort of Salimgarh for his acts of rebellion. Aurangzeb's heart sank at the abrupt recollection of this tragic memory.

The emperor tried his best to slough off the impudence and invasion of his dark thoughts as he sat talking and listening. But his thoughts were defiant and impertinent, returning to his eldest son—twenty-six years old, none other than Prince Muhammed Sultan, a rebel and a victim. He could see him inside the great fortress of the prison, strong-willed and impenitent, though awaiting pardon and a miracle from the very hands of the fates. The fates were inching closer to the emperor's troubled heart, carrying the fort of Salimgarh on their shoulders and releasing the spirits of his kin and foe who were rendered powerless to tell the tales of murder and humiliation. Sadness, followed by a hurricane of loneliness, threatened Aurangzeb's calm. No waters of shame and penance were there to check the impending violence of the storm and devastation. Udaipuri was his only anchor of comfort and salvation, and now his heart was pleading with her, the familiar ache and longing within, savage and inviolate. He could summon her here at the dictates of his will and mood, but pride and propriety shut the doors of his supreme agony. Instead, his gaze and thoughts found diversion in the bower of his other wife, Aurangabadi Mahal Begum. The begum's daughter, Princess Mihrunisa, was the cynosure of her attention, and Aurangzeb's own heart was aching with the

recollection that this tender bloom of eleven summers was his love and joy too.

In spite of the trickling of such aches and tendernesses, Aurangzeb was becoming the master of his thoughts by the sheer discipline of his wit and will. His wit, he knew, had grown brittle at the whim and caprice of time, though retaining its quality of steel when forged to fashion the weapons of offence and defense. He held his will under scrutiny for one flash of a moment, finding it solid and indestructible. His thoughts, like swift currents, hastened to meet the psychic and ethereal planes with the ease of gymnasts. He could talk, think and listen, not simultaneously, but concurrently. This ability allowed him to knead his thoughts into a ball of dough, soft and pliable. Later, he could bake this ball under the fire of his will and decision, and mould it into parchments for future perusal. That was what he was doing right now, attentive and contemplative, drifting through the labyrinths of conversations with perfect ease, leaving room for his thoughts to seethe and breathe. His eldest sister, Princess Jahanara, and his youngest sister, Princess Gauhara, the former in her fifties and the latter almost thirty-five seemed, to be in league in peeking through the gates of state affairs, tossing around fervent opinions and judgments. Princess Roshanara, another of the emperor's sisters, only a year older than him, usually profuse and impetuous, was courting silence this particular afternoon. Aurangzeb's attention was shifting to Prince Muazzam, more to escape the missiles of his sisters than to test the intelligence of his capricious son.

"Come here, my heedless prince! You are under the emperor's inquisition, or rather favored by his indulgence to test your memory, since you were sent to Deccan to chastise Shivaji! Weren't you, under the command of Jaswant Singh?" Aurangzeb demurred and commanded both. "And Jaswant Singh, though dutiful, was quite unsuccessful in meeting his obligations. Giving you free rein to indulge in the idle pleasures of hunting and feasting, isn't that correct? Considering all the discrepancies, do you remember what Shivaji said when Jai Singh and Dilir Khan confronted him?" His look was warm and piercing.

"Your Majesty." Prince Muazzam jumped to his feet, offering a gallant bow with one sweep of his arm. "Your devoted generals, Your Majesty, didn't tell me much about Shivaji. But they did show me his letters. I read them all, but remember only a couplet he had scribbled at the end of one.

*The wise should beware of this river of blood
From which no man has borne away his boat."*

He stood there flushed, feeling discomfited.

“Poetry is the work of the devil, my prince! Shun it completely.” Aurangzeb breathed reproof and disdain. “Strange, that you remember this figment of deviltry, but not his evil boasts? *The strong forts and sky-kissing hills are going to shield me from the might of the Moghuls*, didn’t he say that?”

*“When from my cheek I lift my veil
The roses turn with envy pale.”*

Princess Zebunisa flaunted her genius, defiance and challenge shining in her eyes.

Actually, she had been reciting her couplets for quite a while now, a sort of entertainment for her younger sisters, and deriving much pleasure from their rapt, awed expressions. But she had kept her voice low and endearing. Catching the drift of the emperor’s reproof, her tender heart was moved to tears, lending voice to the poetic justice within her, which had no name but a will of its own. Princess Mihrunisa and Princess Zabdatunisa, at this breach of etiquette from their older sister, could barely contain their laughter, giggling and whispering most besottedly. Aurangzeb’s eyes were flashing fire and brimstone, aimed directly over the beautiful head of Princess Zebunisa, but no words escaped his lips. Prince Muazzam was slipping away, glad to be cut loose from the chords of inquisition. Nawab Bai Begum’s eyes were fixed on the emperor in mute appeal, her heart thundering, and one bullet of a comment shot forth from her lips to divert the emperor’s attention from the young princess, lest she be consumed by his anger.

“Your Majesty, Shivaji should not be permitted to come to the open court today! I still insist. My heart is troubled.” Nawab Bai Begum’s eyes were sparkling with fear. “How could you, Your Majesty, after you learned about his acts of deceit and cruelty? How awful, the way he murdered your vizier Afzal Khan with tiger claws hidden in his hand and a scorpion dagger under his sleeve? And to think, Afzal Khan was not even suspecting any foul play, meeting him unarmed, carrying only the promise of a peace treaty! Not knowing that he was embracing death.” Her voice was choked, the diamonds in her ears and around her neck throbbing and glittering.

“*That mountain rat*, my love! Do you think that the emperor would entertain any fear on account of him?” Aurangzeb’s rage shifted from Princess Zebunisa to Shivaji. “That son of a dog! He is to be searched thoroughly before he gains the emperor’s audience. Have I not employed Shambhuji in my court? Yes, Shambhuji, that infernal son of the infidel Shivaji, just to quell the fears of my loving wives? Shambhuji now stands

as a pawn in the chess game of the Moghul court, and he would be torn limb from limb most brutally if Shivaji were to make but one false move!" Aurangzeb hissed, his eyes glowing with the fire of hatred.

"Your ban on building new temples, Your Majesty, that's the cause of all the troubles, making you unpopular, if I dare protest." Princess Jahanara, in turn, was inviting the emperor's anger to fall on her head, instead of over the heads of his sweet wives.

"That edict was written in haste, my wise sister!" A conflagration of a reproach escaped Aurangzeb's eyes to scorch the very air if it challenged his authority. "Now that edict is to be ratified. All the old temples are to be demolished, that's my new edict and command. Especially the ones which the despicable infidels have begun to repair! It is proper for all Muslims to do their utmost to assert the rules of the Prophet's religion." His gaze was unfolding the prayer-rug of piety and self-righteousness.

"Prophet's religion, Your Majesty!" Princess Jahanara's eyes were smoldering with disbelief. *"There should be no compulsion in religion. Surely, right has become distinct from wrong, so whosoever refuses to be led by those who transgress and believes in Allah, has surely grasped a strong handle which knows no breaking. And Allah is All Hearing, All Knowing.* In this one verse of the Quran is contained the entire religion of Islam, Your Majesty, if I may say so?" Her thoughts were reduced to cinders against the blaze of fire in the emperor's eyes.

"So, my sister is going to teach the emperor the precepts of Islam?" A murmur of thunder was suspended in Aurangzeb's tone. "I make my edicts known beforehand, not for the benefit of opposition by the dear ladies of my harem, but to test my patience in doing right against all odds. My next step to make Islam the shield and scepter of Hind is to impose *jizya* on non-Muslims! Hoping that heathens will see the light of the One and only God, Allah!" His eyes were lit up with the stars of fanaticism.

"Just think, Your Majesty, that all the lands of Hind are like a vast ocean!" Princess Jahanara pleaded, her eyes gathering the stars of profundity. "And all the members of our royal household are like ships, navigating its waters and ploughing through its waves. And think, Your Majesty, if *jizya* was lowered into that ocean, wouldn't it stir up a storm, endangering the peace and prosperity of the royal family first and foremost?"

"Isn't it mentioned in the Quran, Your Majesty, that the rights of the non-Muslims are equal with those of the Muslims?" Aurangabadi Mahal Begum couldn't fight the temptation of challenging her emperor-husband. "So much so, that Muslims are required to defend non-Muslims! So why

impose that hated tax, *jizya*, which your great-grandfather Akbar abolished?"

"Their property is like our property and their blood is like our blood. And the property of the non-Muslims living under the protection of a Muslim is not lawful for Muslims." Princess Roshanara quoted this verse from the Quran before the emperor could pour the flagon of his rage over the head of his dear wife.

"Think you that I would walk in the footsteps of my great-grandfather? Or even my grandfather, Jahangir, who spent most of his time indulging in wine and sports?" Aurangzeb's eyes were shooting daggers at his wife, condoning entirely the Quranic injunction recited by Princess Roshanara. "It would never be like that with me! All my thoughts are turned towards the welfare and development of my kingdom, and towards the propagation of the religion of the great Muhammed." He averted his gaze, his heart tearing open the wound of loneliness all of a sudden, longing for the nearness of Udaipuri.

"The religion of great Muhammed, as we all profess, Your Majesty, is love, mercy and justice," Princess Jahanara could not help expound, noticing the emperor's gaze sweeping over the royal brood of younger princes and princesses.

"The emperor gets only javelins of opposition for the good of Islam, and no credit for revoking the edict for royal princesses *not to marry*?" Aurangzeb murmured to himself. "Come here, Prince Azam. The emperor needs to seal your fate with Princess Jani. We are in need of festivity, a royal wedding, and you are of age. Do you like her?" he commanded, rather than asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Prince Azam blushed like a girl, his ears tingling.

"Then it's all settled. Soon, Agra Palace will be—" Aurangzeb's thoughts were swallowed into the stormy oceans of his heart by the sudden appearance of his beloved, her approach so swift and theatrical.

Udaipuri Begum's abrupt appearance on this scene of royal parlance was all magic and illusion, it seemed. Her porcelain-like figure, draped in shimmering silks, was swaying. She was creating ripples of light and sparkle, from the sequined décolletage on her dress down to her velvety slippers, studded with jewels. Clusters upon clusters of rubies and diamonds in her hair and around her neck were radiating their aura of fire and blaze. Her small, white face, flushed with wine, was kindling stars of mirth in her dark, flashing eyes. She pirouetted on her toes, caught under the spell of her mirth and wild abandon. In one hand, she was holding a rose and in the other, a rock crystal cup, its gold cover encrusted with

rubies, emeralds and diamonds. All those present were suspended mute, breathing the pulse of spellbound silence and watching Udaipuri skip and dance. This chamber of ivory and damask had become Udaipuri's stage, the palpitating hush echoing the love song she was singing. The lamps of awe and shock were lit bright in Aurangzeb's gaze as he sat there, rapt and speechless. He had never seen her under this spell of inebriation, at least not outside the confines of his bedroom, and now his heart and mind were drumming disbelief. He could neither move, nor speak, his look glazed and piercing. And before he could cut open the glacier of his shock into splintering words, Udaipuri's voice soared high and rapturous.

*"We all
Sit in His orchestra
Some play their
Fiddles
Some wield their
Clubs
Tonight is worthy of music
Let's get loose
With
Compassion
Let's drown in the delicious
Ambience of
Love."*

Udaipuri's poppy-red lips were savoring the nectar of the poetry by Hafiz.

"You have been drinking, Udaipuri?" Aurangzeb heaved himself up to his feet, as if jolted out of his shock. Aches and tenderness inside him were flooding through his eyes like the rivers of agony. "Have you no shame or sense of propriety?" he murmured under his breath, unable to take another step. "Where did you find that cup of rock crystal?"

"In your library, Your Majesty." Udaipuri Begum bowed her head in a mock curtsy, laughter trilling from her lips in drunken glee. "It was filled with sweet nectar for the gods, and I was tempted to quench my thirst."

"It was filled with water, my love's curse, not with the sweet poison which God has forbidden!" Aurangzeb drifted toward her as if sleepwalking. "How can the emperor lead his subjects to the path of righteousness, when his own wife is intent on inviting hell fire into the palace of Islam?" There was a tempest in his eyes, softened by the desperate appeal in his voice.

"The righteous shall surely dwell in bliss. Reclining upon soft couches they will gaze around. And in their faces you shall mark the glow of joy."

They shall drink of a pure wine, securely sealed; whose very dregs are musk. A wine, tempered with the waters of Tasnim, a spring at which the favored will refresh themselves!" Wws Udaipuri's giddy response, snatched right out of the poetic verse from the Quran.

"Is the emperor ignorant of what the Quran says? He knows too well that it sanctions not levity and blasphemy!" Aurangzeb snatched the cup from her hand and dashed it to the floor. "What madness is goading you to expose yourself to ridicule?" he demanded.

"Only the joy of carrying the seed of your love in my womb, Your Majesty! Now that Anagaji has confirmed it!" Udaipuri stood smelling the rose, as if lost in her own world of joy and oblivion.

"All the more reason not to pollute your soul with the hemlock brewed by devils during these auspicious months of—" Aurangzeb's thoughts were flying back to the one-year-old princess from this wedlock of *love* and *blasphemy*. "I hope you are not nursing princess Satiunisa, while wallowing in the rivers of wine?" He snatched the rose from her hand, the soft touch of her fingers coursing through him like a fever.

Aurangzeb stood there, gazing into the eyes of his beloved Udaipuri like one possessed. His soul was famished for the wine of love which was forbidden to him by the mere light of mirth and giddiness in the beautiful cups of her eyes. He was smitten to the very core of his heart by the naked charm of her beauty and sweetness, almost blinded by the glow of purity and incandescence in her flower-like face. Swinging back with a sudden violence, he stalked out of this chamber, the rivers of agony inside him the ebb and flow of love and rage.

The gold railing on the terrace was gilded to a pewter gleam as Aurangzeb stumbled out into the sunshine. Standing there stock still, he seemed to be stricken numb to the very depths of his pious soul. His fingers were crushing the rose as if intent on squeezing wine out of the poppy-red lips of his beloved, to quench the thirst of his agony and desire. His mood was one of rage and passion, his heart thundering, savage and uncontrollable. Amidst the onslaught of many of his moods, this one was rare, since he had erected a tomb of ice over his heart, shutting out all the light and warmth of love and beauty. But Udaipuri was an exception, who had the power to split open that tomb of ice, and to make his heart dance the dance of pain and exhilaration. The true light of love was missing in his heart, though, replaced by zeal and ambition. And if it was there somewhere, embedded deep in chilling neglect, it was obscured by this astonishing globe of haze and bewilderment, along with the need and implacability to transform Hind into a jewel of Islam, where the mosques could be seen soaring up to the heavens and the temples buried under the

mounds of earth. In his head was etched a grand vision where he was the architect of Islam, employed by God to efface the claim of all other gods, till the name of Allah could be seen throbbing with the pulse of reverence in the ether of the entire cosmos. Believing himself to be the servant of Allah, as is true in the case of all madmen, no one could convince him that he was tarnishing the name of Islam with the rust of hatred and bigotry. The swords of his zeal and ambition were hacking off the limbs of love, tolerance and brotherhood in Islam. Aurangzeb was aware of all such charges behind his back, but the noose of piety was around his neck, and he would permit no impious hands to loosen even one knot.

The rose lay crushed and neglected in Aurangzeb's fist, and his gaze swept over the succession of carpets, their floral designs gleaming under the sun from the palace gates to the steps of the Audience Hall. He did not see the designs, only felt their color and opulence, the violence of rage inside him abating, and the agony of love smoldering with the ache of despair and loneliness. The pomp and glory of the festivities in honor of his coronation were unfolding before his eyes in shades rude and turbulent. The tides upon tides of canopies in gold and crimson had been erected artfully over the Persian carpets, boasting floral motifs in rosette and medallion. A great city of silk sprawled far and wide over the palace grounds, decked with silk friezes and pennants.

Aurangzeb was sketched alive on the terrace, only his gaze roaming free, now lured by the dancers, their jewels vying with the sparkle and gurgle of the fountains bathed in sunlight. His gaze undressed the dancers, their erotic limbs in shimmering chiffons exposed to his intense absorption; even their kohl-rimmed eyes and henna-dyed hands didn't escape his scrutiny. Something inside him was constricting and crackling—the sense of disgust and revulsion! The gloss of his puritanic armor was in danger of attracting the dust of evil and corruption, and his heart was as heavy as lead. A coterie of viziers, always vigilant of royal protocol, had signaled the orchestra to commence their welcoming tunes, becoming aware of the emperor on the terrace. The great procession of courtiers and grandees was also in motion to follow the emperor towards the Audience Hall. A din of tambourines with trumpets blaring, accompanied by the beating of kettledrums, was reaching the emperor's agonized heart, and jolting him out of his chilled awareness. He stirred mechanically, almost colliding with Danishmand Khan, his vizier, who had prostrated himself at the gleaming steps, subservient to the commands of his duty to escort the emperor toward the Audience Hall.

"Didn't you read my edict, my bold vizier, that the emperor has forbidden all kind of prostration before him?" Aurangzeb snapped with a

sudden flaring of anger. "Only God is worthy of such reverence! Neither a saint, nor a king, nor man, indeed, deserves to be deified, unless one is willing to carry the burden of sin on one's shoulders." His very eyes were commanding him to rise and hold his head high.

"Pardon me, Your Majesty." Danishmand Khan was quick to bounce back to his feet. "I was not sure which saber you would wear while presiding over the court, so I fetched a variety of your favorite ones. I did read your edict, Your Majesty, and didn't forget it either, but out of habit, this negligence. Besides, the sabers were heavy, and my arms needed rest." He scooped the neglected bundle into his arms, and spread them out for selection.

"Let me see." Aurangzeb's eyes were lit up with interest. "Here's *Lightning! Alamgir*, my favorite one! But *Kafir Kush*, meaning infidel-slayer! Yes, I will wear Kafir Kush today, since Shivaji is presenting himself at court." He claimed Kafir Kush, his eyes worshipping the very steel, which could shed rivers of blood.

The emperor stood and thrust this exquisitely carved saber into his jeweled belt. The haze of zeal was in his eyes and the fire of loneliness inside his heart, both making him forget the rose in his clenched fist. And now as his saber demanded the assistance of his other hand, the rose petals fell to his feet like fresh wounds, all scarlet and mangled. A shadow of pain crossed over the Lucifer-charm in his eyes, and his gaze went scudding down the terrace steps, where fresh roses bloomed with all their glory, drunk on the serenade of the fountains down below.

"I thought, Your Majesty, you would choose *Alamgir*—the Conqueror of the Universe?" Danishmand Khan murmured while waiting.

"Each and every rose bush in the imperial garden is to be plucked out by its very root! That's the emperor's *Farman*, Danishmand." An abrupt command bristled forth on Aurangzeb's lips, as if he had not even heard his vizier's comment. "The emperor forbids planting any kind of roses in the palaces at Agra and Delhi." He began dismounting the steps, his look bright and smoldering.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Danishmand Khan murmured in response.

"Music, singing and dancing, all are banned after the festivities of my coronation! A *Farman* to this effect is to be issued soon," Aurangzeb commanded over his shoulder. He was floating towards the Audience Hall to claim his Peacock Throne as the very emblem of Islam, stunned viziers following him under the sway of the orchestral splash and splendor.

The Peacock Throne, ablaze with precious jewels, cradled the puritanical emperor in its arms of wealth and opulence. His own jewels were no less radiant and sparkling, but no match to this wondrous work of

art of a throne, designed by his late father, Emperor Shah Jahan. Enameled with pure gold and encrusted with rubies, emeralds, diamonds and sapphires, the Peacock Throne seemed to be illumined by its fire of tragedy and *legend*. The jeweled peacocks, in an ecstatic dance of sparkle under the pearl-fringed canopy, could be seen lowering their beams of defiance at Aurangzeb, though he seemed unaware of this incongruity, receiving embassies and smiling graciously. Behind him and on either side of his throne were glimmering files of nobles and grandees. The colorful tides of viziers and ambassadors were there too, along with the pious Qazis and the avaricious merchants, waiting to be addressed by the emperor. The gifts of gold coins and jewels were a glittering shower, bestowed upon the nobles and the courtiers. A group of generals, holding the treasures of valor and victory in their eyes, were rewarded with the robes of honor.

Aurangzeb sat on his Peacock Throne, drunk with zeal and pride, inhaling the scent of musk and ambergris from the gold censers. From the palace mosque, an invocation in the name of the emperor was proclaiming him the sixth Moghul Emperor of Hind. The voice of the muezzin was more like a chant, sonorous and intoxicating. A sea of courtiers in colorful turbans had begun to cheer and applaud, *Long Live the Caliph of Age!* This panegyric applause pumped Aurangzeb's ego to the size of a mountain, reaching out to kiss the lofty skies. He lifted his arms up, jewels blazing on his fingers, and the jewel lamps in his eyes commanding silence. The court was in session. The music and applause were no more. Muhara Khan announced the name of Marhamat Khan, who would be the first one to present his petition to the emperor. But Aurangzeb's eyes flashed disapproval at the very sight of this vizier, who had dared wear a long robe that touched his feet. This was a blatant violation of court etiquette, since Aurangzeb had set the so-called Islamic standard that men's robes had to be of a certain length so as to reveal the knees.

"The emperor is not going to accept the petition of Marhamat Khan, my bold vizier." Aurangzeb turned his attention to Muhara Khan, knitting his eyebrows with displeasure. "Fetch the scissors and clip the robe of Marhamat Khan two inches shorter before he is allowed to voice his petition." He waved dismissal.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Muhara Khan obeyed, all flushed and flustered. He was quick to beat a hasty retreat, along with the mortified Marhamat Khan.

Accustomed to the emperor's moods of caprice and reprisal, no one dared blink in offence, and a string of petitioners and ambassadors edged closer to gain audience. Foremost among them: Malik Salih! He was the

emperor's former tutor and preceptor. Bold and confident, he stepped forward unescorted, seeking the emperor's attention without being announced.

"Your Majesty, pardon my audacity, but I am taking the liberty of asking a favor. Your generosity, if you will? If you would grant me a piece of land?" Malik Salih bowed twice. "I want to end my days in teaching and sharing knowledge, without the need of seeking compensation from my pupils, or worrying about the income for sustenance."

"The emperor should be weeping with shame in remembrance of those days, when he in his tender age fell into your hands, my unworthy mentor!" Aurangzeb exclaimed with the sudden implacability of Nietzschean outrage. "Was it not incumbent upon my preceptor to make me acquainted with the distinguishing features of every nation on this earth? Of their resources and strengths, their modes of warfare, their manners, religions, forms of government, and wherein their interests principally consist? And, through a regular course of historical reading, to render me familiar with the origins of states, their progress and decline, the events, accidents or errors owing to which such great changes and mighty revelations have been affected? A familiarity with the language surrounding the nations may have been indispensable!" His heart was swollen with loathing for this man, his thoughts waving brands of fire. "But you would teach me to read and write Arabic! Doubtless, conceiving that you placed me under an everlasting obligation for sacrificing so large a portion of time to the study of a language wherein no one can hope to become proficient without ten or twelve years of close application? Forgetting how many important subjects ought to be embraced in the education of a prince? You acted as if it was chiefly necessary that I should possess great skill in grammar, and such knowledge as belongs to a Doctor of Law. And thus did you waste the precious hours of my youth in the dry, unprofitable and never-ending task of learning words." Swept by his torrent of rage, he was feeling powerless against the onslaught of his own thoughts. "Ought not you to have instructed me on one point at least, so essential to be known by a king, namely the reciprocal duties of the sovereign and his subjects? Ought you not also to have foreseen that I might at some future time be compelled to contend with my brothers, sword in hand, for the crown, and for my own existence? Such, as you must well know, has been the fate of the children of almost every king of Hindustan. Did you ever instruct me in the art of war? How to besiege a town, or draw up an army in battle array? Happy for me that I consulted wiser heads than yours on these subjects! Go! Withdraw to your village. Henceforth, let no person know either who you

are, or what became of you.” He dismissed him with an imperious wave of his arm.

Niccolao Manucci, the Italian adventurer, was the chosen of the day to present the next embassy. He was hoping that the emperor would not satisfy the greed of the Abyssinian ambassador whom he was reluctant to announce. Siddi Kamil was the name of this ambassador, representing the King of Abyssinia, a Christian monarch. This wise monarch had chosen a Muslim ambassador to seek fortunes, with the pretense of building mosques in his Christendom of churches and monasteries. Aurangzeb kept Siddi Kamil waiting with a slight gesture of his arm, resting his head against the cushioned throne in a manner of quiet contemplation. In fact, the emperor’s attention was arrested by a dialogue between a pundit and a French physician by the name of Francois Brenier, and he wanted to catch the drift of their conversation.

“You bow before the statues! Can’t you see the absurdity of such a reverence?” Francois Brenier’s tone was brimming with arrogance and amusement.

“We do not believe that these statues themselves are gods and goddesses, but merely their images and representations,” the pundit explained with utmost calm. “We show them deference only for the sake of the deity whom they represent. And when we pray, it is not to the statue, but to the deity. Images are admitted in our temples, because we conceive that prayers are offered up with more devotion where there is something before the eyes that fixes the mind. But, in fact, we acknowledge that God alone is absolute; He only is the omnipotent Lord.”

“As one Dutch trader by the name of Francis Palsaret told me once, almost all heathens follow the sect and teaching of Pythagoras! Not that I hold Hinduism under that category, mind you.” Francois Brenier’s tone was patronizing. “But tell me, do you think our religion is false, and is your law and religion of universal application?”

“We pretend not that our law and religion are of universal application, which God intended only for us, and this is the reason we cannot receive a foreigner into our religion,” was the pundit’s patient response, on the verge of annoyance! “We do not even say that yours is a false religion. It may be adapted to your wants and circumstances. God having no doubt appointed many different ways of going to heaven—”

Aurangzeb’s thoughts were tearing themselves away from this talk of heathenish wisdom. Besides, the dictates of court decorum did not permit him to postpone this embassy for too long. So he returned his attention to the *statue of wait*, attempting a smile, but succeeding only in eliciting a grin replete with mockery.

“Is your king a devout Christian?” Aurangzeb contemplated aloud, then asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Siddi Kalim repeated his curtsy with a great sweep of his arm, touching his heart. “Our king is not only a devout Christian, Your Majesty, but a patron of Muslim missionaries too.” The fervent stars in his eyes were kindling more lamps of devotion. “Recently, a mosque was ruined by the raids of the Portuguese, Your Majesty, and our king was grieved and outraged. We are a poor country, Your Majesty, and don’t have means to repair the mosques. That’s why the king has sent me, asking whether Your Majesty’s generosity would lend us the funds to repair the mosques?”

“Marhamat Khan!” The flickering of zeal and anger in Aurangzeb’s eyes shifted to his vizier, leaving the ambassador standing there in mute anticipation. “Grant this Abyssinian envoy the gift of twelve thousand rupees, and make sure it is spent on the repair of the mosques. The Portuguese are breeding here like locusts; send orders that they be banished from our empire.” His eyes were lit up as if unfolding some glorious vision. “The name of Joao Carvalho is coming to my mind, a Portuguese philanderer! He is reported to be enjoying the hospitality of the pundits in a Hindu temple at Puri. He is to be arrested without delay.” The beacons of rage in his eyes were spilling their own commands.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Marhamat Khan bowed his head, hugging his snipped-short robe.

“Are contributions from our royal treasury being sent regularly to the Sharif of Mecca?” Aurangzeb held Marhamat Khan imprisoned inside the fire of his gaze. “For the benefit of the Sayyids and servitors of the mosques, to be precise, I hope, and for the maintenance of the shrines at Mecca and Medina?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” was Marhamat Khan’s quick response, with a sprinkling of pride. “That Chief of Islam writes that the heart of the entire Muslim world is turning to Allah in prayer five times a day. Even a Sayyid from Barbary, employed at the temple of Kaaba in Mecca, has sent a complimentary letter. He says that his heart is filled with gratitude for the generous contributions, and he thanks Your Majesty most humbly.”

“Thanks and gratitude belong to God,” Aurangzeb murmured piously, waving dismissal.

Marhamat Khan himself was the one to announce the next embassy, and he presented an ambassador from Tibet, standing next to him to receive the emblematic golden key of surrender. The emperor had been informed of this embassy beforehand, but one look at this stiff-looking

ambassador, and his heart was bloated with gall and bitterness all of a sudden.

“An ambassador from Tibet!” Aurangzeb feigned surprise. “Has your king Daddan Najmal read the emperor’s edicts and commands, and is he willing to accept our proposal of friendship?”

“Your Majesty, our king submits to all your commands most willingly,” the envoy from Tibet murmured in response, his look proud and haughty. “We would build mosques and the call to prayer would be heard from the minarets five times a day. As commanded by you, Your Majesty, the gold and silver coins would be minted in your name for trade and currency. Here’s a token of our friendship and submission.” He held out the gold key, claimed by Marhamat Khan most swiftly.

“A wise decision! Extend the emperor’s compliments to your king.” Aurangzeb’s attention was already shifting to Jai Singh, his arm signaling dismissal. “Something of utmost concern is throbbing in the very vein of your neck, my bold vizier? What turbulent news?” His sense of perspicacity itself was speaking, gleaning omens ill from the dark eyes of his vizier.

“Uprisings in Malwa, Your Majesty!” Jai Singh was quick to shoot the missile of his apprehension. “Chakra-sen has joined hands with another rebel by the name of Darjan Singh. The Raja of Jammu is plotting unrest too. The Mina tribe in Ajmer is on the verge of sedition. Bhubal Singh, along with his brother Muradas, is gathering forces to attack Bhilsa.”

“No dearth of soldiers to quell all these rebellions, Jai Singh.” Aurangzeb managed one thin smile, his heart atrophied of all reason and kindness. “Choose four valorous generals at the command of the mighty battalions, and instruct them to crush all sprigs of rebellion till there are no seeds of sedition left to nurture opposition!”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Jai Singh stepped back, leaving room for Shayista Khan to unleash his bulletin of insurrections.

“Your Majesty, the burden of disturbing news sits heavy on my shoulders. Rebellions are sprouting everywhere,” Shayista Khan began boldly, his shoulders revealing no such burden which he claimed to carry. “The Jats of Mathura are sedition bound, swelling in numbers. Especially after the demolition of their holy of holies, Ram Temple. The Satnamis are another recalcitrant tribe, Your Majesty, loaded with fervor and revolt to disrupt peace in the villages of Narnaul and Mewat. Bhagu, the leader of the Yusufzai tribe, is claiming to be the descendant of Sher Shah. He is plundering the districts of Attock, Hazara and Peshawar, and has sealed a pact of alliance with Gokal.”

“Do they know not the fate of Guru Tegh Bahadur, my valorous uncle?” Aurangzeb’s thoughts were holding the spears of disdain and indignation. “You must remind them, uncle, how the guru embraced the fires of hell as a reward for his rebellion, shunning forgiveness as a result of his pride and ignorance, since he refused to accept Islam as his shield and honor. No need to tell this to the infidel Gokal, just command Abdul Nali at the head of ten thousand men and horses to crush him and his horde of vermin, base and stinking. As for the Satnamis, their fate is already sealed. The emperor would deal with them personally, reducing that villainous race to dust.” The fires of self-righteous indignation were blinding his sight and thoughts.

“May I, Your Majesty, glorify Islam for the benefit of all the infidels?” Abdal Wahhab, the notoriously corrupt Qazi of the age, stumbled forward. He had no fear of breach of etiquette since he was the favorite of the emperor. “For the glorification of the true faith of Islam, Your Majesty, even if we throw dirt into the mouths of the infidels, they must without reluctance open their mouths wide to receive it. Qazi Mughisaddin told me this, and I agree with him completely.” His zeal was blossoming afresh after noticing the look of admiration in the emperor’s eyes. “The Prophet has commanded us to slay them, plunder them and take them captive—” His zeal was cut short by a sharp nudge from his son, who, having the privilege of a court Qazi, stepped closer towards him.

“May I, Your Majesty, quote a verse from the Quran?” was Sheikhul Aslam’s humble appeal. Reading consent in the emperor’s eyes, he continued swiftly. “*And when it is said to them: create not disorder. They say: we are only prompters of peace.*” His tone itself was a subtle appeal to wisdom over bigotry.

This appeal and wisdom were picked up by Nawaz Khan, the emperor’s father-in-law, and he edged closer to the throne.

“May I, Your Majesty, also have the privilege of reciting a verse from the Quran?” Nawaz Khan smiled winsomely.

“Yes, Nawaz Khan. It is the emperor’s privilege to learn from the wisdom of the Quran at all hours of the day or night,” Aurangzeb breathed in consent, concealing his impatience behind a sliver of a smile.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Nawaz Khan intoned suavely. “Our Prophet, Your Majesty, was kind, loving and forgiving. A humble servant of God! To impute harsh judgments on his part, or any unkind word from his blessed lips, is not only sinful, but an act of blatant heresy. This verse from the Quran, which I am going to recite, is proof that no ill-will escaped the lips of our Prophet, and that he had a great respect for all

religions. *It is not thy responsibility to make them follow the right path. But Allah guides whomsoever He pleases.*"

"Noble verse and noble thoughts, Nawaz Khan!" Aurangzeb applauded, with a sudden mingling of fervor and sincerity. "It is the repose and prosperity of my subjects that it behooves me to consult, to meet the demands of justice, the maintenance of royal authority and the security of the state. I was sent into this world by providence, to live and labor, not for myself, but for others. It is my duty not to think of my own happiness, except in so far as it is inseparably connected with the happiness of my people." He waved pontifically, signaling consent for the next embassy.

"Your Majesty." Tarbiyat offered one gallant curtsy. "A letter from Shah Abbas of Persia!" He held out the letter, his heart cringing at the sudden daggers of sunshine in the emperor's eyes.

"Ah, my good envoy! Finally, back from the purgatory of Persia!" Aurangzeb declared with a dint of humor. "Read the venerable words of the Shia heretic to the emperor," he commanded.

"Your Majesty!" was Tarbiyat Khan's flustered response! "The king, Your Majesty, instructed me to deliver this personally into your hands. Commanding, rather warning, that the contents of this letter are not to be disclosed to anyone. Owing to the delicacy of the subject, the king told me, these words are intended only for the ears of the emperor."

"You are back in the haven of the Moghul court, my fool of a vizier, not in the bazaar of Persian glitter, all false and inglorious," Aurangzeb chided impatiently. "Read this letter quickly! The emperor is getting wearied of the embassies," he commanded.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Tarbiyat Khan cracked open the seal, his hands trembling as he began to read. "After addressing Your Majesty with all reverence, Shah Abbas of Persia writes: *I learn that most of the landlords in Hindustan are in rebellion because their ruler is weak, incompetent and without resources. The chief of them is that infidel Shivaji, who long lived in such obscurity that none knew of his name. But now, taking advantage of your lack of means and the retreat of your troops, he has made himself visible like the peak of a mountain—seized many forts, slain or captured many of your soldiers, occupied much of the country. Plundered and wasted many of your ports, cities and villages, and finally wants to come to grips with you—*" His lips were sealed shut by the appalling tone of this letter, his expression aghast.

"Go on with this offal of ignorance from the lips of that Persian heretic, my fool! He is still stuck in the marshlands of the past, unable to feel the breeze of prosperity in our empire," Aurangzeb muttered. His face was livid with anger!