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THE STORY OF MEHFUZ

Part of the story-kit
'Atelier to Zenana'
A to Z of Mughal Social Life

A historical fiction story
written & Illustrated by
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*For my dearest sister,
Mansi*



Mehfuz

The story of Mehfuz is an outcome of ✨ *The MUGHAL HISTORY Project* ✨, part of the design thesis titled 'An Understanding of Indian History: Mughal India', undertaken by Ameya Narvankar, under the guidance of Prof. Mandar Rane at IDC, IIT BOMBAY.

The following story explores the A to Z of Mughal Social Life, right from the Atelier to the Zenana; sharing nuggets of information on the larger-than-life personality of the Emperor and his wives, their grand and opulent lifestyles, the court politics and not to forget the indelible mark they left on Indian art & architecture, which is reflected in the Miniature Painting style approach of the design.

Mehfuz (origin: Persian, محفوظ)
adj. to be safe, sound & secure



It was the month of September 1572, the prophecy had been fulfilled. The city of Fatehpur Sikri was celebrating the birth of Prince Daniyal, the third son of the Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great. The red sandstone walls of the city lay festooned with fresh flowers and colourful flags, and celebrations were in full swing. The people were dancing and singing merrily out on the streets, and joy echoed throughout the Mughal kingdom.

Four years ago, in this very city, Akbar had first visited Shaikh Salim Chisti to seek his blessings. The Sufi saint had predicted that three heirs will be born and soon after, the first prince was born. The elated Emperor ever so grateful had not only named his first born - Salim after him, but had also built Fatehpur Sikri, the city of Victory to honour the saint.



Mir Sayyid Ali was exhausted. The festivities celebrating the birth of the third prince had lasted for almost a week. It was about time he had returned to work.

The Persian master of the atelier took his daily stroll around the workshop observing his apprentices as they worked on paintings commissioned by the Emperor.

He was a mere court painter when Emperor Humayun had recognised his talent and brought him to Hindustan, all the way from Persia. Under the patronage of his son, Akbar, he had continued the tradition of recording the Emperor's reign through the miniature paintings.

With his eyesight now weakening with age, the wiry old man spent his time training and managing the young painters in His Majesty's service.

In one corner of the workshop sat Salamat Khan carefully adding the final touches to a scene depicting the emperor's last hunting trip. Besides him sat Meh-fuz, Salamat's twelve year old son, the youngest and possibly the most talented artist in his workshop, painting his newest masterpiece. With every perfected brush stroke, the boy brought the portrait of Emperor Akbar & Prince Daniyal to life.

Ya Allah, so much talent within a young child, he thought, as he smiled encouragingly at Meh-fuz.

'Marvellous, Meh-fuz *baba*!'

Meh-fuz glanced at him with a nervous smile and continued to work on the miniature painting adding in the finer details on the Emperor's golden embroidered *qaba*.

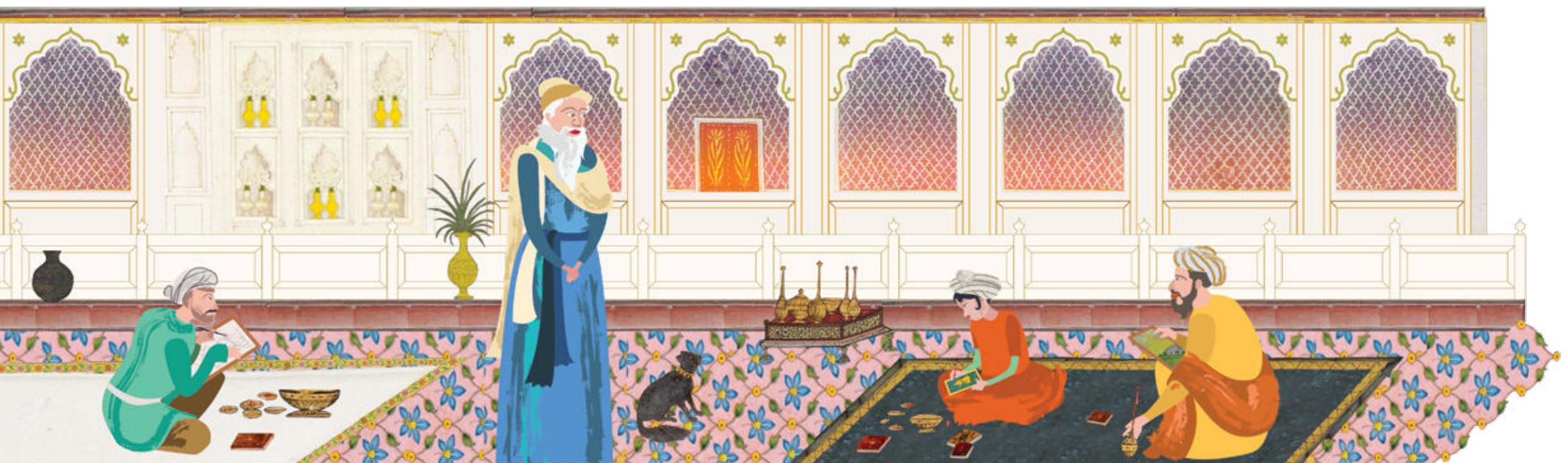
There was something peculiar about the boy. Awfully quiet for his age, this one! His own grandsons, Shahbaz and Tahir were almost the same age and it would take him a miracle to get them to be so quiet and well-behaved.

Almost three months ago, Salamat had approached him to let Meh-fuz help in the *shahi tasvirkhana*. Initially, he was apprehensive but had relented when he saw the wonders the young boy could perform with the paintbrush. Meh-fuz's skill was unmatched.

Dusk had fallen and soon a servant arrived at the *tasvirkhana* to signal that their shift for the day was over.

'I hope to see everyone here tomorrow. Abu'l Fazl says that the Emperor will be paying us a visit to discuss something important. Let us do our best to serve him,' he announced.

Mir Sayyid Ali bade goodbye to all the painters and retired to his quarters in the imperial complex.



Salamat and MehfuZ walked in silence on their way back home. Fatehpur Sikri was bustling with activity as the vendors in the local bazaar prepared for their last sale for the day.

Salamat bore a worried expression on his face. What would happen if the Emperor discovered the truth about MehfuZ? He and his family would stand to lose everything they had gained so far. The new-found wealth and respect. The new house. And what about his eldest daughter Sairah. The new fortunes had helped him find a groom from a respectable family for her. Would the *Mir Bakawal's* son still marry her if they lost everything?

Suddenly, the aroma of fresh *jalebis* wafted through the bazaar as they walked down the narrow streets. Salamat was so occupied with his thoughts, he did not realise MehfuZ was not by his side.

'*Abu! Abu!*' shouted MehfuZ. 'I am here!'

Salamat turned back to see MehfuZ calling him, eagerly pointing at the glistening golden-brown sweets the vendor was frying. The *jalebis* were still dripping with ghee when Salamat paid him a gold *mohur* for it. The vendor handed the delicacies to little MehfuZ who continued to smile broadly. For a minute all of Salamat's worries seemed to disappear.

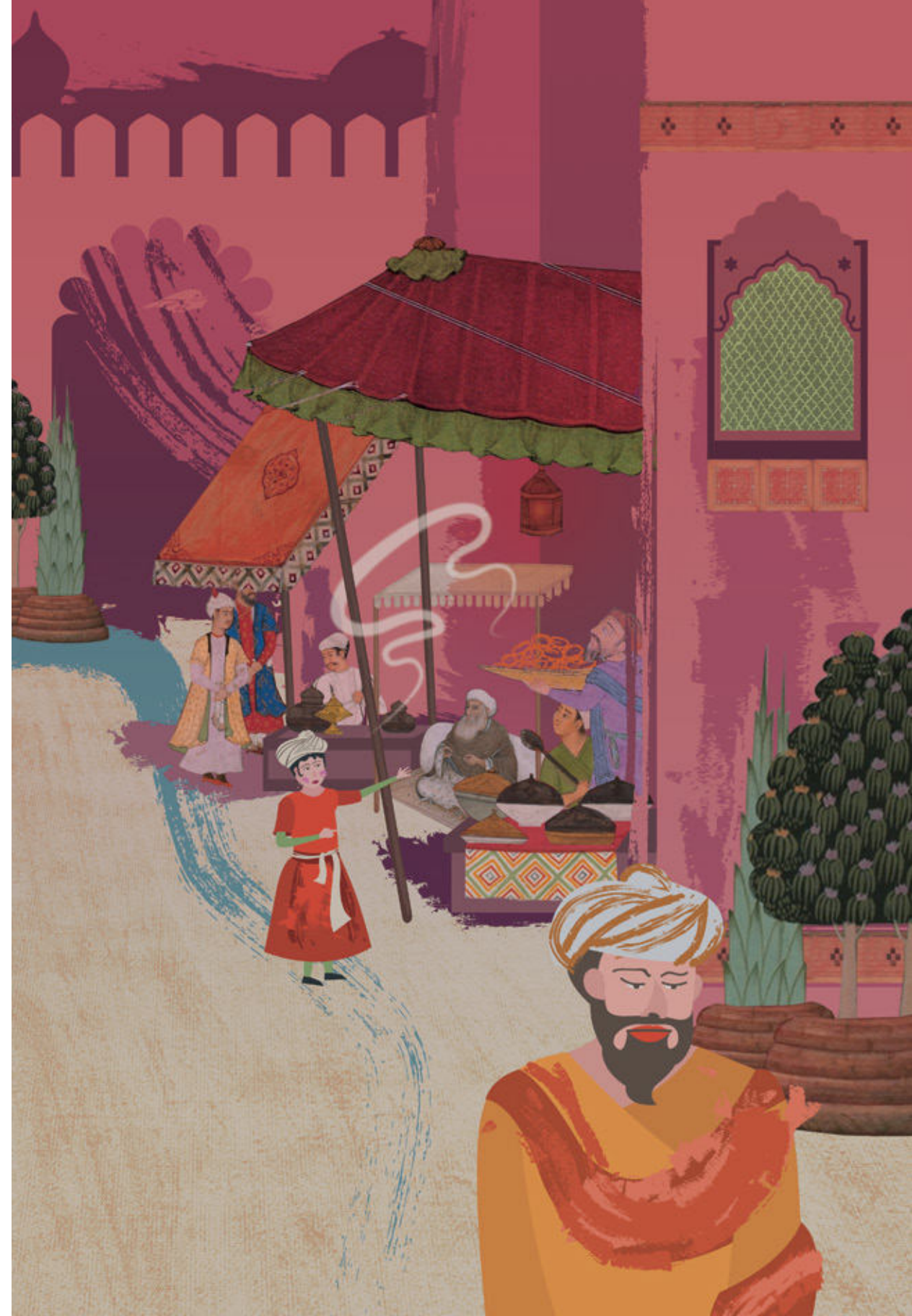
Once upon a time he was struggling to make enough money to feed his wife and four children. And now thanks to his prodigal son, they were able to afford such small luxuries. *Allah* had been kind. MehfuZ was being heralded as the next master painter. Mir Sayyid Ali himself was showering the child with the highest praise, and had even rewarded them generously with a sack of gold *mohurs* for the last completed painting.

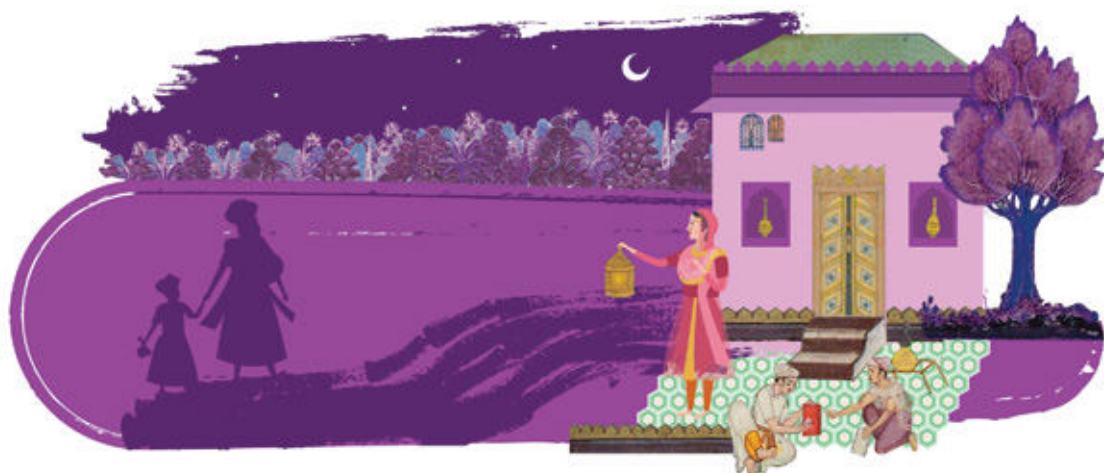
But sooner or later the truth would be out and all would be in vain.

'Don't worry, Abu, the Emperor will never find out. I shall be extra careful tomorrow!' uttered MehfuZ, almost reading Salamat's expression.

'I am sorry, *beta*, I should not have made you do this...'

The child wrapped Salamat in a warm embrace. 'Don't worry, we won't get caught. Come on, let's hurry. Otherwise, the *jalebis* will be cold by the time we reach home.'





It had been a long and tiring day for Nasiha. She had spent the entire morning painting bird cages for one of the Emperor's favourite wives, Salima only to be told that the order had been canceled. Salima had a change of heart and wished to free all the birds of the harem. Oh the whims of these spoiled women!

Later in the afternoon the Mir-bakawal's wife had paid her a visit and subtly hinted on increasing Sairah's dowry, further adding to her woes.

She was sitting in the veranda of their new home when she saw her husband and Mehruz approaching. Her twin sons Husain and Ali who were playing with wooden toys in the twilight, promptly hugged their father on arrival.

'What took you so long? The children have been waiting, it is way past dinnertime...' she said irritably, as she held a lamp to light their way.

'We brought jalebis, *ammi!*' said Mehruz handing them over to Nasiha.

She looked at the jalebis with her temper continuing to rise, 'There was no need to bring this. Besides, I am sure it has been brought with your tainted gold'.

'Nasiha!' shouted Salamat, 'Do not talk to Mehruz like that'.

'Drop the act, already. You are home now! HER NAME IS MEHFI.'

'Lower your voice, Nasiha, the neighbours will hear us. Let us all go inside and have dinner in peace'.

On hearing mother's outburst, Mehfi ran inside the house with silent tears running down her face. Nasiha followed her inside still deeply angry.

Nasiha was only nineteen when she had given birth to their second child. The *hakim* had said that the child would not survive the night. By *Allah's* grace, she did. He had named her Mehruz. One who is safe and sound.

She was his lucky charm. A struggling painter, he had found employment at the imperial atelier right after her birth. He fondly called her Mehfi and so did everyone else after. She was like her father in more ways than one and had a way with the brush. So gifted was the child, she even surpassed her father in her talent.

She would say to him, 'Abu, I will work with you in the *shahi tasvirkhana* one day'. How absurd he thought her fantasies were back then.

But now...her dreams had become a reality.

Salamat wondered how long they could keep up the act. Emperor Akbar is a witty man, he would catch on for sure...



Mehfi entered the room she shared with her elder sister Sairah and began to undress. Sairah kept her book aside to help Mehfi untie her turban.

The headpiece now undone revealed her long, jet-black hair. She gazed in the mirror tucking in a stray lock of hair behind her ears. If only she was born a boy. Life would have been so much easier.

She could still hear her parents arguing in the kitchen next door as they laid down dinner for the family.

'This is wrong, you have to put a stop to this at once,' said her mother.

'I cannot keep having the same fight with you over and over again, Nasiha,' her father protested.

'She should be at home, helping her mother and sister.' Nasiha hit back 'Not out there pretending to be some boy. What if the neighbours find out? What would they say? Would they marry their sons to a girl who spends so much time in the company of strange men? Answer me, Salamat.'



'Enough! Salamat roared. Nasiha knew better than to speak in such a tone with her husband. It would be no use arguing with him. She fell silent and sulked away to serve dinner.

Her mother was right. She had voiced a concern that they had dared not to think about. After Sairah's marriage, Mehfi knew she would be next in line. But did she aspire for the same life as Sairah. She did not know how to cook. She did not know how to take care of the house. All she knew was how to capture moments in time with her colours and paintbrush.

Mehfi and Sairah left their room to join the rest of the family for dinner. She sat down on the floor beside her father. He passed on the water bowl to her as they cleansed their hands before beginning the meal. Sairah followed suit.

Nasiha settled down and began to serve the food in earthen plates. Today, she had prepared a mildly spiced lamb *korma* and fragrant rice. A bowl of fresh juicy figs accompanied the delightful spread!

Salamat recollected how during their harder times, Nasiha would water down the lamb curry. She would add a handful of potatoes to it so everyone could eat contently. His wife was always so resourceful and willing to adjust. But why could she not support his cause now.

He turned to his meal and took *Bismillah's* name, and began to eat.

They continued eating in silence with Nasiha giving a menacing glance to those who met her gaze. Husain and Ali kept their heads bowed down not wanting to get caught in the crossfire.

Sairah finally spoke up breaking the tension. 'Abu, *maaji* visited home today. She gifted me these beautiful earrings' she said, beaming proudly.

'They are indeed beautiful, beta,' admired Salamat.

'That was not the only reason she was here,' said Nasiha shaking her head sadly, 'Their family is looking for more dowry'.

'More dowry?' asked Salamat looking up at her.

'Yes,' she nodded 'The Mir-bakawal's wife hinted how their son has no horse of his own. She kept on going on about him having to travel two *kos* on foot each day to the imperial kitchen to help his father. How is he supposed to find time to spend with his wife then...she says'.

Worry lines patterned on his forehead again. 'What are we to do but agree to their request,' sighed Salamat.

'But where will we arrange coins for the horse in such a short time' Nasiha looked at him questioningly.

'Emperor Akbar is visiting the atelier tomorrow. If Mehfi can win his favour, he will reward her well,' said Salamat. Nasiha looked alarmed. Deep down she knew that her husband's answer would involve Mehfi but to kick dust in the eyes of the Emperor himself, that was quite risky.

She was silent for some time, and then rose slowly. She entered the kitchen and brought in the jalebis. She served them to the children and Salamat as a sign of quiet approval.

Her children were her only weakness. She loved them dearly. All four of them. 'I do not condone this falsehood, Salamat. But for the sake of our children I hope you are able to pull this off,' she spoke under her breath.

After dinner, the family retired to bed, praying that tomorrow will be an answer to all their woes.





The next day, the imperial atelier was abuzz with activity preparing for Emperor Akbar's big visit. Every nook and corner of the workshop was cleaned. All the rugs were dusted, carpets were washed and floors were waxed till they showed no stains of stray paint. Akbar's favourite roses were freshly picked from the *Chauhar-bagh* and decorated in ornate brass vases, instantly enveloping the room with their scent. The best of the miniature paintings were framed on the walls for the Emperor to peruse.

Finally Akbar arrived with ☸ Abu'l Fazl, the court historian and his close friend. He trailed behind the Emperor along with the royal attendants.

Mir Sayyid Ali straightened his *qaba* as he bowed down before the Emperor. The apprentices watched on as the Master of the Atelier welcomed them and began to give them a tour of the gallery.

Mehfi had never seen Akbar up close in person. As the Emperor of the Mughal Empire, he was always busy attending to other important matters of the State. He did not have time to pose for every painting. Whenever she had to draw or paint him, she would look at older depictions. He was a remarkable looking man. Broad chested, medium built, and a face with the kindest eyes. Mehfi took an instant liking to him.

Akbar looked at each of the paintings closely stopping to admire a select few which took his breath away. A miniature painting of his court musician Tansen caught his eye. It depicted the singer performing for the Emperor in the *Diwan-i-Khas*, the private court on his birthday. 'Wah!' he exclaimed, 'The artist has captured the essence of ☸ Tansen's *raga*, the painting sings to me. Wonderful, who is this talented artist?'. The Mir read the artist's name signed on the painting and called Mansur ahead. The Emperor rewarded him with ten gold mohurs. Salamat and Mehfi looked on in anticipation hoping their paintings caught his attention too.

The Emperor walked ahead and stopped at Salamat's painting of him on his hunting trip. 'Abu'l,' he said 'We should include this painting in my memoirs'. 'Indeed, *Jahanpanah*, I will make a note of this,' replied Fazl.

'This brings me to the matter I wished to discuss with you, Mir Sayyid,' said Akbar. You must be familiar with my grandfather Babur's written account of his life and reign - the *Baburnama*, The Book of Babur.' The Mir nodded.

'Abu'l Fazl shall be penning my biography in a similar manner. He shall require paintings from the atelier, both old and new. Of events, that have happened or will happen in the near future. It will tell the world where we came from, how we conquered Hindustan and how we ruled. It will be the

greatest gift I can hand over to my future successors’.

‘Splendid idea, Your Majesty,’ said the Mir eagerly, ‘I would do my best to assist Abu’l Fazl with the paintings’.

They walked on ahead to observe the other paintings. Salamat’s face fell when he saw no reward was forthcoming. They still had another opportunity. Akbar had not seen Mehfi’s painting yet.

Suddenly, a royal servant arrived at the atelier searching for Abu’l Fazl. He handed a scroll to him saying it was urgent. Fazl opened the message and read it with a grave look on his face.

‘What is it, Abu’l?’ a curious Akbar asked, ‘Is everything fine?’

‘It is my elder brother, ✧ Faizi, Your Majesty. He has taken ill. I am afraid I have to leave immediately to attend to him.’ Faizi was a brilliant poet and had charmed Akbar with his writings on philosophy and religion. It would be a great loss to his Navratnas, the nine most learned men of his court, if anything were to happen to him. ‘Yes, leave at once. Borrow one of my horses if you require. May Allah help him recover soon,’ said Akbar expressing his concern.

‘Thank you, Your Majesty.’ Abu’l Fazl bowed to the Emperor and left the atelier for the stables.

Akbar turned his attention back to the Mir and the paintings. ‘Yes, where were we?’ ‘Your life account, *Jahanpanah*’ said the Mir. ‘As I was saying, assist Fazl in every way possible in the making of this great work. However, before we begin work on my biography, it is my wish that my father Humayun’s name be immortalised. Due to his untimely death, he was never able to write about his great life’. The Mir shook his head remembering his days serving the late Emperor. A sad fall from the staircase had ended his reign, just a year after recapturing his kingdom from Ibrahim Lodi.

‘I have requested my aunt Gulbadan Begum to write the *Humayun-nama* and she has agreed. Fazl believes it is a wonderful idea and would definitely help him in writing my account as well,’ said Akbar, as he astutely marveled at a painting of an elephant fight.

‘It would be a difficult task to put it together, Your Majesty. Your father spent most of his reign in exile and fighting his enemies. Many of the paintings have been lost or destroyed.’

‘Indeed, that is true. That is why I feel you would be the perfect person to

help my aunt with the making of the Book of Humayun. But there is one huge problem, she cannot leave the *zenana* and you are forbidden from entering it,’ Akbar said.

‘Quite a conundrum,’ the Mir commented scratching his beard.

‘Wise ✧ Birbal seems to have found the answer. He suggested that you shift your entire studio to the *Diwan-i-khas*. My aunt can then communicate with you from behind the lattice screens,’ said Akbar with a hearty laugh.

‘It would be a long and laborious task to make even one painting then. I will be one hundred years old when the *Humayun-nama* is completed’. Both of them chuckled at the thought.

‘We shall figure something out,’ replied the Emperor.

They moved on to see the last few paintings which had been displayed. Mehfi’s refined portrait of Akbar holding the new-born prince Daniyal, stood out amongst the rest. ‘*Masha’allah*’ exclaimed a speechless Akbar.

He stood still as he gleamed over the fine details of the miniature portrait. Mir Sayyid Ali smiled in Mehfi’s direction. ‘The attention to the face and eyes, the delicate floral motifs in the border and even the artist’s name illuminated in gold, it is all so perfect’ the Emperor spoke, beckoning the Mir to read out the name of the artist.

‘Ah,’ said the Mir recalling the fact that the Emperor was unable to read. He focused his weakening vision to read the name on the miniature painting. It read - **Mehfi**. Mehfi? He was puzzled for a moment and then a look of horror coiled on his face.



It could not be possible. Could it be? Mehfi was Salamat's daughter. Salamat always said that he had one daughter but his wife Parvin had insisted that she had met two of his daughters - Sairah and Mehfi at the *Mina Bazaar* last year. How could he not have figured it out yet? Anger flashed in his eyes as he glanced at the father-daughter duo.

'Who is this great artist, Mir Sayyid? Tell me'.

'Meh...Mehfuz, Your Majesty,' he answered hesitantly.

'Bring him forward. He deserves a big reward for this masterpiece.' He could not let the Emperor know the truth. He would be furious if he found out that this trickery happened under his watch.

Salamat's eyes met the Mir's cold gaze. He could sense that something was wrong. Had he figured out the truth? Would he tell the Emperor? He had to do something to stop him.



Taking control of the situation, Salamat pulled Mehfi away from the onlooking group of painters and approached the Emperor. 'This is my son, Mehfuz, Your Majesty. He is the one who painted your portrait,' he spoke with caution hoping the gamble would pay off. The Mir had as much to lose as he did if they faced the Emperor's wrath.

'*Masha'allah!*' said Akbar, 'You are quite talented, little one!' The Mir remained silent his gaze fixed upon Mehfi.

'A hundred gold mohurs for you,' declared the Emperor with a broad smile on his face, as the attendants handed Salamat the bag of coins. It was enough to buy not one but four horses. Mehfi's eyes glimmered with happiness as she hugged the Emperor's legs in an embrace. An amused Akbar looked on as Salamat apologised to him again and again as

he pulled her away. Mir Sayyid Ali shook his head in disapproval.

'Train him well, I see a bright future ahead for the boy,' said Akbar turning to the Mir, 'I shall take your leave now, I have to pay a visit to Todar Mal at the Treasury as well.' The Mir bowed again as the Emperor made his exit from the imperial atelier.



Mir Sayyid Ali heaved a sigh of relief as he lay back against the silk cushions in his quarters. A servant fetched him a glass of iced rose *sherbet* which he gulped down quickly. The Emperor had not uncovered the truth. All those years in exile, Akbar had never learned to read and write as a child. But it had not stopped him from becoming the greatest Emperor of the Mughal Empire.

He was thankful for Akbar's inability to read and Fazl's timely exit. They all had narrowly escaped with their life. Emperor Akbar is just and kind-hearted but he has no place in his heart for such falsehood and deceit. Salamat was defying God by parading his daughter amongst all the men. So shameful...He would have died a thousand deaths before his wife and daughter were subject to the same. He had to know what had possessed Salamat to build this farce. He summoned him to his quarters.

'Why, Salamat?' he asked him in a disappointed tone.

'I am sorry. It was not my intention to make you a part in this charade. I did not lie to you when I had begged you to let Mehfi work here. My family needed the money.'

'But she is a woman. She should not be working here.'

'I could not let her talents go to waste. She loves painting. You have seen it with your own eyes. She has a passion for it like no other. Why stop her from doing what God intended her to do...'

The Mir shook his head sadly. 'Such blasphemous thoughts...May he guide you on to the right path.'

'Mehfi will stop working here from tomorrow onwards if you wish'.

'Are you mad?', the old man replied quickly, 'Mehfuz has the Emperor's attention now. If she suddenly goes missing, he will be suspicious and the truth will be out.' He paused for a moment considering his next step. 'Your secret is safe. For now. Now leave me be,' he said dismissing Salamat.



The rest of the day went about its normal business in the atelier. Salamat noticed suspicious glances and muted conversation amongst the other apprentices of the workshop. They were bound to get jealous of all the praise and rewards Mehfi received. But after parleying with the Mir, he felt confident. He hoped that the Master of the Atelier would do everything to protect Mehfi lest anyone else stumbled upon the truth.

After the day was over, Mehfi and Salamat left for home carrying their new fortunes along. They had done it. All was good. Sairah will be able to marry now.

They dropped by at the local market to scout for a good horse for Sairah's fiancée. The bazaar horse-trader sold Salamat a beautiful, strong, chestnut haired Arabian steed. It can run ten *kos* without any rest. He would be the envy of all neighbors, the trader had boasted.

Riding the new horse, they arrived home. Nasiha was not waiting for them in the courtyard like every other day. How odd!

Salamat walked inside the house to find it eerily quiet. The kitchen fire was unlit as well. The boys were sitting in a corner snacking on leftover food from the day before. Nasiha must not have cooked dinner, he thought.

Sensing something was amiss, he rushed to his chambers. A nervous Mehfi followed him inside. They saw Sairah lying down on the carpet, her head resting on Nasiha's lap. Both of them were weeping silently.

Ya Allah, what ill had occurred...

'Nasiha, what has happened? Answer me!' Salamat demanded.

'The wedding is off,' she said holding on to her sobbing daughter. 'Mir Bakawal has broken the engagement. My poor Sairah...'

Salamat's world came crashing down upon hearing the news. He fell to his knees and tears coursed down his face.

She told him the whole story about how Mir Bakawal had a dream. A dream which warned him that it would disastrous for both the families if their children were to marry each other. He believed it to be the voice of God and decided it is best to call it off.

Salamat's face twisted into a frown. His troubles did not seem to find any end. What was Mir Bakawal up to? He did not believe the dream excuse for one minute to be true. He cannot toy with his daughter's life like that. He was even



more certain that it had something to do with exhorting more money from his family in the name of dowry.

Mehfi who had been listening all this while moved closer to comfort her sister. Seeing her approach, anger flashed in Nasiha's eyes. 'You,' she screamed, 'It's all your fault, you wretched child,' she pointed at Mehfi. Mehfi stood frozen, her mother's words tearing at her heart.

'You invited God's wrath upon this house with your lies and falsehood. And now he has punished us. My Sairah. She had done no wrong to deserve this.'

'Nasiha please, I beg you to stop...' Salamat's voice trailed off as he rose from the floor and wrapped his arms around the child who stood motionless, her eyes becoming glassy with tears.

'I shall go and speak to Mir Bakawal. I am sure we can fix this. The Emperor rewarded Mehfi with enough gold to buy the horse they wanted. If they want more dowry, we will give them more dowry.'

'It is that tainted wealth which has brought this ill upon us, Salamat. I had warned you from the beginning,' she cried.

'Tainted wealth!' shouted Salamat, 'The same tainted wealth has brought us this roof to stay under, the same tainted wealth has put food in our plates, the same tainted wealth is the reason our eldest daughter was to marry that nobleman's son in the first place. Do you not care at all?'

'I only say it because I care. Mehfi is not our only child. We have three other children to think about. But all you care about is Mehfi...'

Hot tears flushed down Mehfi's face as her mother went on about blaming her for Sairah's broken engagement. Perhaps she was right. Maybe *Allah* was punishing her sister for her deeds. 'I'm sorry, Ammi,' she said slowly unwrapping the turban covering her hair. She could not bear to disappoint her mother again and again. 'I will not do this anymore. I shall stop going to the atelier. I shall stop painting if I have to. But please forgive me,' she begged Nasiha.

'Would you really do as you say?' Nasiha beckoned Mehfi to come closer ignoring Salamat's silent protests in the background. Mehfi nodded her head.

Taking her younger daughter's face in her hand, she said '*Allah* is merciful, beta. He has shown you the error of your ways. Everything will be alright now.' She leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. Mehfi hugged her mother with silent tears running down her face. She had to sacrifice her own happiness

for the sake of her family's well being. She had decided, she would no longer visit the imperial atelier.



Salamat sighed and looked on in defeat. There was nothing he could do to convince Mehfi to reconsider her decision. It was her happiness which mattered to him, and if this was what she wished for he would not stand in its way.

Mir Sayyid Ali had expressed his fear of the Emperor finding out if she stopped visiting the atelier suddenly but it had to happen. He will have to speak to the Master in the morning. He would know what to do.

Salamat rose from the floor and left the room. He returned with Ali and Hasan carrying some fruits, stale bread and hot spiced chai. 'Come, let us eat something,' he said. Together, the family dined quietly and went into a restless sleep. From the day onwards, he was to work in the atelier alone.



A look of worry flashed across Mir Sayyid Ali's face as he patiently heard Salamat's dilemma. He was afraid that by remaining quiet on the matter he had become an accomplice to the falsehood. But he could not send Salamat away. Not now when he had promised to keep the secret of Mehfi safe. They strolled through the palace gardens as they discussed the next course of action.

'If anyone asks about Mehfi, we can tell them he ran away from home with the gold,' he suggested. 'Eventually, everyone will tire out and stop asking and we can go back to leading our normal lives.'

'Sounds like a good plan. But what about the Emperor?' quizzed Salamat.

'I don't think it will be a problem. I hear that the Emperor is already preparing to march south towards Gujarat to deal with the rebellious Mirzas. These distant cousins of his at Surat have grown on to be quite a nuisance. The military campaign against them will keep him occupied for the time being. He would have forgotten all about Mehruz once he returns.'

'Let us hope that holds true,' replied Salamat.



Six weeks had passed by when Akbar returned from his conquest of Surat and the surrounding towns. He had successfully crushed the rebellion and had even established contact with the Portuguese sea merchants settled in the region. In fact, the Emperor saw the sea for the first time and also rode in a Portuguese boat.

Akbar did not trust these *frangis*. They were previously aligned with the Mirzas but upon seeing the strength of the Mughal empire they had quite easily switched sides. Nevertheless, he welcomed the Portuguese to his court with open arms. After all, they controlled the sea routes and it was in the best interest of the Empire to engage them in diplomacy.



His siege of the Surat fort too had been nothing short of a heroic moment. Along with his trusted general 🌀 Raja Maan Singh and a small army of 200 soldiers, they had managed to capture the fort from the Mirzas, who outnumbered them ten to one. Upon his return to Fatehpur Sikri, he ordered that this historic moment be recorded by his most talented artist. 'Bring Mehruz to me!' he ordered much to the chagrin of Mir Sayyid Ali.

Upon hearing the news of Mehruz's disappearance, the Emperor was disappointed. He summoned Salamat to the Mughal Court and reassured him that Mehruz would be found. A reward of hundred gold mohurs was announced by the Emperor to the person who brought him any news on the child prodigy.

Mir Sayyid Ali and Salamat were sent into an immediate panic. They prayed to *Allah* that nobody came forward.

Back home, Nasiha had become increasingly tolerant towards Mehfi after she had stopped going to the atelier. She also did not seem to mind when Mehfi and Sairah attended the boys' study lessons with the *ulema* in the courtyard. As long as you cover your heads with the veil you may listen to what he is teaching, she would tell them.

When Salamat told her about the Emperor's reward, she went back to treating Mehfi with contempt again. But this time, it was accompanied with a motherly concern.

Nasiha would not allow Mehfi to be by herself for even a moment. Mehfi was not allowed to talk to anyone unless Nasiha told her to. She was not even allowed to remove her veil in front of female visitors. She feared that the slightest slip would give away her secret.

Mehfi did not object. She had promised her mother that she would not disappoint her again and she was going to make true of that. But sometimes she missed going to the atelier. She missed painting. She missed her brushes, the rhythmic movement of the brush as it touched the parchment, the colours which brought life to her paintings. How she yearned to do it all again.

That opportunity arrived soon in the form of *Khushbroz*, days of joy. Every month the Emperor held a five day long fair at the royal palaces exclusively for the ladies of the harem. The Mina Bazaar, it was called. Since the harem ladies went unveiled to the bazaar, traders and merchants sent in their wives and daughters to sell their wares. Apart from the Emperor, no man was allowed to enter. Women participated in large numbers at the bazaar and had a gala time shopping and bargaining for an assortment of wares.

Nasiha was planning to sell the bird cages she had made for Salima Sultana Begum at the Mina Bazaar. Much to Mehfi's delight, she asked her to paint the rest of the cages in decorative colours. Mehfi painted the cages with as much care as she would with a miniature painting. And the result was a sight to behold! She had worked her magic with the brush once again to transform the dull bronze into pieces of art, each unlike the other. With shades of emerald, amethyst and silver, they would make excellent gilded homes for the royal pigeons.

Nasiha was quite pleased on seeing the painted cages. 'They are beautiful, beta. These would be a sure hit with the ladies of the harem,' she exclaimed. Mehfi smiled back. Her daughter had not smiled in such a long time, Nasiha thought. She indeed loved her painting. Had she done the right thing by perhaps having her sacrifice her only source of joy?

'Why don't you come along with me to the Mina Bazaar?' said Nasiha trying to raise her daughter's spirit up. 'I could use another set of hands to help me sell these cages'. It had been a while since Mehfi had stepped outside of the house. She instantly jumped up saying yes and hugged her mother.



Ruqaiya Sultan Begum walked hastily, the long skirts of her emerald *ghagara* dragging across the sandstone floors of the palace courtyard. She was late for the Mina Bazaar. Her husband, the Emperor was waiting for her arrival. Phul Malik had told her Akbar was going to introduce her to his new *firangi* lady friends. She wanted to spend some quality time with him after his return from Surat and was not keen on sharing him with the *firangi* women.

Being the chief wife of the Emperor was a position of privilege. Not only did she have the Emperor's ear but also had exclusive control and influence in the imperial harem. Nothing that happened within and outside the harem walls slipped her notice. Her spies had reported that two Portuguese sisters had arrived a day ago and were staying in the *zenana*. She did not feel threatened by them but it worried her. Akbar had been distrustful of the *firangis* from the beginning. Strange, how he had let them so easily into their home!

She soon arrived at the *Chauhar-bagh* where the Mina Bazaar was in full swing. Stalls were lined up along the four quadrants of the *bagh*, decorated with coloured flags and flowers. It was a breezy winter afternoon, a pleasant hour to spend some time in the gardens. Joy and laughter echoed through the makeshift bazaar as the women enjoyed themselves, free from the walls of the harem, only if for a short time.

The women traders sold everything: fresh flowers, fruits and vegetables, aromatic spices, exotic pets and birds, the softest silks and satins, colourful beads and jewelry and so on. Rumours and gossip too found their way around in the bazaar. Ruqaiya rolled her eyes when she overheard two concubines discussing how Akbar planned to marry one of the Portuguese women.

She glanced sideways and noticed Salima, another one of the Emperor's wives, haggling with a bird seller. She wanted to buy her entire flock of pigeons and release them. 'Sahiba, my father is a pigeon trainer at the royal court. He will be furious with me if you let all of them go. He had spent years training them,' the vendor protested. Salima was not ready to oblige. 'You don't worry about him. Take these mohurs and give me all the birds. If I ask the Emperor to abolish *Ishq-bazi*, they shall eventually be free.'

Ishq-bazi. Ah. The Emperor's favourite past-time of pigeon-flying. He loved watching the birds fly and perform aerial tricks in the royal court. Over the years he had collected over a thousand pigeons amongst which a hundred were his *khaas*. Ruqaiya threw her head back in laughter as Salima finally had her way with the relenting vendor and set the pigeons free. She was after all one of the Emperor's *khaas*.





Finally she spotted the Emperor and Gulbadan *phufi* chatting gaily with the Portuguese ladies over a hot cup of *elaichi chai*. ‘Ruqaiya, there you are. I would like you to meet our esteemed guests Lady Maria and her sister Juliana. They have traveled all the way from Surat to come and spend time with us.’

The two women bowed down gracefully before her. Both the sisters were quite beautiful. They towered over the Emperor, their golden brown hair tied up neatly in a bun. Their fair complexion reminded her of the peaches of Kashmir. She noticed that it had turned a shade darker after spending considerable time at the coastal town in Gujarat. She supposed that a visit to Fatehpur Sikri was a pleasant change for them.

‘Welcome to Fatehpur Sikri. What business brings you to our zenana?’ asked Ruqaiya coldly as she measured the two women who had grabbed the Emperor’s attention. They would not last a week here in the harem, she thought.

‘We are new to your lands and its ways, my Lady. It was His Majesty’s idea to have us spend some time here. He feels it shall help our people get to know each other better,’ Maria spoke in a sing-song voice smiling towards Akbar. Ruqaiya wondered if that was all of Akbar’s intention in bringing her here.

‘The Emperor was just telling us how Princess Gulbadan here is writing a biography of her brother Humayun. Maria offered her services as an artist immediately upon finding out,’ added Juliana.

‘Ah, you are a painter?’

Gulbadan Begum answered for her. ‘A famous painter in all of Europe, beta. She can work alongside me from within the harem. And there would be no qualms with her visiting the atelier either. It is a splendid idea,’ she said joining her hands with glee.

‘Ah, I see!’ replied Ruqaiya with a bitter tone. ‘You are welcome to come and meet me in my apartment any time of the day, Lady Maria’.

‘I look forward to it, Your Highness,’ said Maria quickly as the sisters excused themselves to explore the rest of the bazaar. Gulbadan too joined them and went in search for some spices and dried fruit she needed for her famous *biryani*.

She was not the one to get jealous. Akbar had several wives and he spent time with all of them. But he always came back to her. They may have commanded his time and attention but she commanded his thoughts. She was his confidante, his best friend. And no outsider could replace her. She asked him why had he not consulted her on this matter.

'It was Birbal's suggestion, my queen. Maria is the Portuguese envoy Lord Clearwater's wife-to-be. And she also happens to be a gifted painter.' Raja Birbal. Always making the best out of every situation, she thought as she tried to wrap her head around the arrangement.

'Besides we know nothing about the Portuguese. After spending some time with them in the *zenana*, we will have a fair idea about their intentions in Hindustan,' Akbar continued. 'My religious counsel at the court ✧ Faqir Aziaodin believes that they are here to spread their Christian faith. They wish for the Badshah of Hindustan to adopt their religion,' he guffawed.

'How delusional!' she replied. But her doubts were not completely erased. She was still uneasy having the outsiders involved in their personal matters. How could a *frangi* be able to do justice to painting their ancestors and the Mughal era gone by.

Akbar wrapped his arm around Ruqaiya. 'See, there is nothing to worry about,' he said as they walked through the bazaar browsing the wares of the vendors. They spotted Salima again, this time engaged in a heated argument with a bird cage vendor. Akbar and Ruqaiya walked towards the stall selling the beautiful, hand-painted cages. It was run by a feisty woman not much younger than Ruqaiya who was giving it back to Salima. A small child stood on the woman's side of the stall, perhaps her daughter, who stared on in amusement.

The three women bowed before the Emperor to greet him as they reached the scene. 'Oh, Salima, not this again!' said Akbar, with a grin on his face. 'You already released the birds at the other vendor's stall. I would have to listen to her father's complaints at the *Diwan-i-aam* tomorrow.'

Meanwhile, Ruqaiya had noticed an uneasy restlessness within the child on seeing Akbar. She watched on as the child avoided his gaze by pretending to clean a cage with a feathered duster, promptly covering her face as she did so. 'Little girl, come here!' she called out to her. 'What is your name?'

The little girl glanced nervously at the Emperor who was busy settling the dispute between her mother and Salima. 'Mehfi,' she replied softly.

'Ah, such a beautiful name for a beautiful girl,' she commented. 'Now why do you bear such a pained expression on that beautiful face of yours, my child? Tell me, what is worrying you?'

'Nothing, Your Majesty!' replied Mehfi swiftly as she forced a smile. 'It is my Ammi. I hope she does not get into trouble with the Emperor for arguing with *sahiba*.'

'Fear not, my child. Salima may be stubborn but she has the best intentions in her heart. I am certain she will understand your mother's plight,' said Ruqaiya reassuringly. 'Let me see what I can do.'

She turned away from Mehfi and joined the others. Nasiha was telling Akbar her side of the story.

'Forgive me, Your Highness. But we come from a small family, we are no kings or noblemen. My daughter and I had painted these cages for Salima *sahiba* a few months ago. But she had a change of mind overnight, so our efforts lay wasted,' she lamented. 'Today we came to the Mina Bazaar hoping to sell them here. But to our ill fortune, *sahiba* chose to release all the birds at Rukhsana's stall. Now, no one is willing to buy our cages. What am I supposed to do with them?'

'I have an idea, Your Majesty,' Ruqaiya interrupted, as she marveled at the painted cages. 'Listen to me, Salima. We do not have to keep birds in these cages, they are so beautiful on their own. Why don't we hang them as lamps in the *zenana*. They shall look even more beautiful when illuminated, don't you think?' suggested the Chief Queen. Years of experience in the harem solving the everyday squabbles and petty fights of the inmates of the harem had made her sharp and resourceful.

'Excellent idea, Begum!' exclaimed Akbar, 'We shall buy all the cages!' Salima too thought it was a fair idea and agreed with Ruqaiya's proposal. Nasiha was elated and thanked the Chief Queen profusely.

'Would Your Majesty like to hand-pick one for your royal apartments?' Nasiha asked Akbar with a broad smile on her face.



He nodded as he bent down to observe the cages more closely. They were indeed beautiful. The vendor and her daughter had spent a great deal of time and effort painting them to perfection. A turquoise painted cage with golden bars caught his eye. The base of the cage was painted with delicate floral borders.

It reminded him of something. Perhaps something he had seen in the imperial atelier before.

He lifted the cage to closely examine it for further signs of recognition.

Aha, there it was.

On the bottom of the cage, it bore the name of the maker. It was the same mark he had seen in the atelier, the sign of the runaway child artist MehfuZ. He could not read what was written but he swore it was the same mark. He showed it to Ruqaiya and asked her to read it out for him.

‘Mehfi,’ she said pointing towards the young girl who looked on in fear as the Emperor’s expression changed. Nasiha’s smile vanished as soon as she realised what was happening.

Mehfi? But this is the work of Salamat’s son MehfuZ, he was quite certain.

Minutes passed on as the Emperor stood still staring at Mehfi. He tried to recall his meeting with MehfuZ at the atelier. Something had seemed peculiar about him back then. The scared expression on her and her mother’s face aided his suspicion. Suddenly, it dawned upon him. *Ya Allah*, what trickery was this?

‘What is your husband’s name?’ he asked angrily.

‘Salamat Khan’ said Nasiha, the words barely escaping her mouth.

The Emperor’s face flushed red. It all seemed crystal clear to him now. No one had come forward with information on MehfuZ because they were searching for the wrong person. MehfuZ had been Mehfi all this while. They were the one and the same person. What kind of game was Salamat playing with him.

In a fit of anger, he smashed the cage on the ground with such force that its gilded door cracked open. Nasiha and Mehfi cowered back in fear. The Emperor had finally chanced upon their secret. Ruqaiya looked alarmed at this departure from his usually pleasant demeanor. ‘What seems to be the matter, Your Majesty?’ she asked him.

‘They have been fooling us all this while,’ roared the Emperor. ‘This small girl is none other than MehfuZ. The missing painter from the atelier.’ All the ladies at the fair who had now gathered around them let out a collective gasp. The news of the missing prodigy had not escaped the harem. Ruqaiya had heard about MehfuZ’s talent first-hand from the Emperor. She recalled how disappointed he had been when he heard the artist had gone missing.



‘Phul Malik’ shouted out the Emperor. A tall eunuch appeared from the crowd before him. ‘Bring the Master of the Atelier and Salamat Khan to our Court immediately’. He nodded his head and went on his way. Mehfi and Nasiha stood in shock, their hearts pounding heavily as they saw him leave. What was the Emperor going to do with them?

The Emperor fumed as he considered the far reaching effects of Mehfi’s act once the orthodox clerics in his court find out. They were already against painting in general owing to their belief that it amounted

to the imitation of the Creator. If they discovered that a woman had taken up painting, that too alongside men, they would have the atelier shut down.

‘Everyone, go back to your stalls. The show is over,’ announced Akbar still pulsating with anger as he prepared to leave. He stormed off from the bazaar, the crowd of ladies paving a way for him, leaving the mother and daughter alone with Ruqaiya. Nasiha got on her knees and begged the Queen to save her husband from the Emperor’s wrath.

Ruqaiya had not seen the Emperor so livid. He was a benevolent man but there was no room in his heart for lies. But the child had won her heart. Not only with her talent but by seeing her devotion to her parents. How she longed for a child who would do the same for her. She looked on thoughtfully pondering a way to plead Mehfi’s case with Akbar.

She lifted the grieving woman from the ground clasping her hands, ‘Take Mehfi and go home. Trust me, I shall speak with the Emperor,’ she told her. Nasiha nodded, holding back her tears and left the Queen. It would take a miracle to save Mehfi and her family now. Almighty *Allah*, show me a way. Her prayers were answered as Lady Maria and her sister came into view and a thought occurred to her. Yes, that was it. She had to find Gulbadan immediately.



Evening had crept in and Salamat had not returned yet. Nasiha felt helplessness overcome her as another hour passed by. The Padshah begum had told her that she would speak to the Emperor. But what if he refused to listen to her. The Emperor will have him sent to the dungeons or worse, execute him. The thought of losing her husband terrified her.

I was right all along, Salamat, she said to herself. They had given too much liberty to their daughter. Look what it had all led him in to. She should have never taken Mehfi along to the Mina Bazaar. And what possessed her to let her paint again. *Ya Allah*, find place in your heart to forgive us for our mistakes. She prayed that her husband returned home safely.

Suddenly there was a loud knock on the door. Nasiha jolted towards the door hoping her husband had been sent back. But alas it was not him. She peered outside to see a shadowy figure pacing the courtyard. 'Who is it?' she asked. The figure came closer and she stood facing the same eunuch from the Mina Bazaar. It was Phul Malik. The one Emperor had commanded to bring her husband.

'Mehfi has been summoned to the Palace,' the eunuch barked. 'She must leave with me immediately.'

Phul Malik was an intimidating yet important man under His Majesty's command. She had heard tales about him at the Bazaar from the harem women. He was the merciless administrator of the *zenana* and would punish the concubines and slaves for even the slightest mistakes. She could not let him take away her daughter too. She had to take a stand.

'No, you cannot take her away,' she cried defiantly, blocking his entry to the house.

'Foolish woman! Ruqaiya has ordered her to come this moment. Move out of my way if you wish to see your husband again,' he threatened.

On hearing the Chief Queen's name she was puzzled. The Emperor had not sent him. 'Ruqaiya? Is she going to help save my husband?' she quizzed the eunuch. 'I do not know. She has commanded me to bring her to the *zenana* at this instance. It would not be wise for you to agitate another member of the imperial family on the same day. Let her come with me!' he sniggered.

Nasiha's shoulders sank and she moved aside. 'Mehfi,' she called out to the girl. Mehfi came running outside to the courtyard with Sairah and her brothers. Their eyes had become red and dry from crying out for their father. 'Go along with him. You have been summoned to the Palace.' Her siblings protested as

Nasiha convinced her that she had to go with him to save her father. With tears streaming down her face, Nasiha hugged her daughter tightly. 'Be safe, my child. I have and will always love you, no matter what.'

'Come along, now, let us not waste any more time,' said the eunuch. Phul Malik was remarkably tall and had a rather handsome face, she noticed. But one look in his cruel eyes made her understand how he managed to strike fear into everyone.

He took Mehfi's hand and led her to a palanquin waiting for her outside the courtyard. She had never sat in a palanquin before. It was only reserved for the important women in the imperial harem. This one perhaps belonged to the Chief Queen. Phul Malik closed the curtain after she sat inside and they were on their way. He rode on a horse as the palanquin lifted by two slaves followed behind, swaying gently as they navigated through the narrow streets of Fatehpur Sikri in the dead of the night.



‘Halt!’ a voice shouted out. Mehfi heard a chatter of angry voices as the bearers rested the palanquin on the ground. She lifted the curtain and peered outside to see that they had been stopped by the guards outside the Royal Palace. ‘How dare you stop the *Padshah Begum* from entering the *Mahal*!’ the eunuch thundered. ‘She shall have your head if she wakes up from her sleep. It has been a long journey.’ The guard glanced at the palanquin and in fear of incurring the Chief Queen’s wrath allowed them to pass.

Strange. Why did Phul Malik lie to the guard, she wondered. The bearers lifted the palanquin with a heavy sigh and resumed their journey. She could not hear the sound of the Phul Malik’s horse anymore. Hoping he had left their company, she peeped through the curtain and instead saw him on foot. They had crossed the imperial gardens and were entering the palace now.

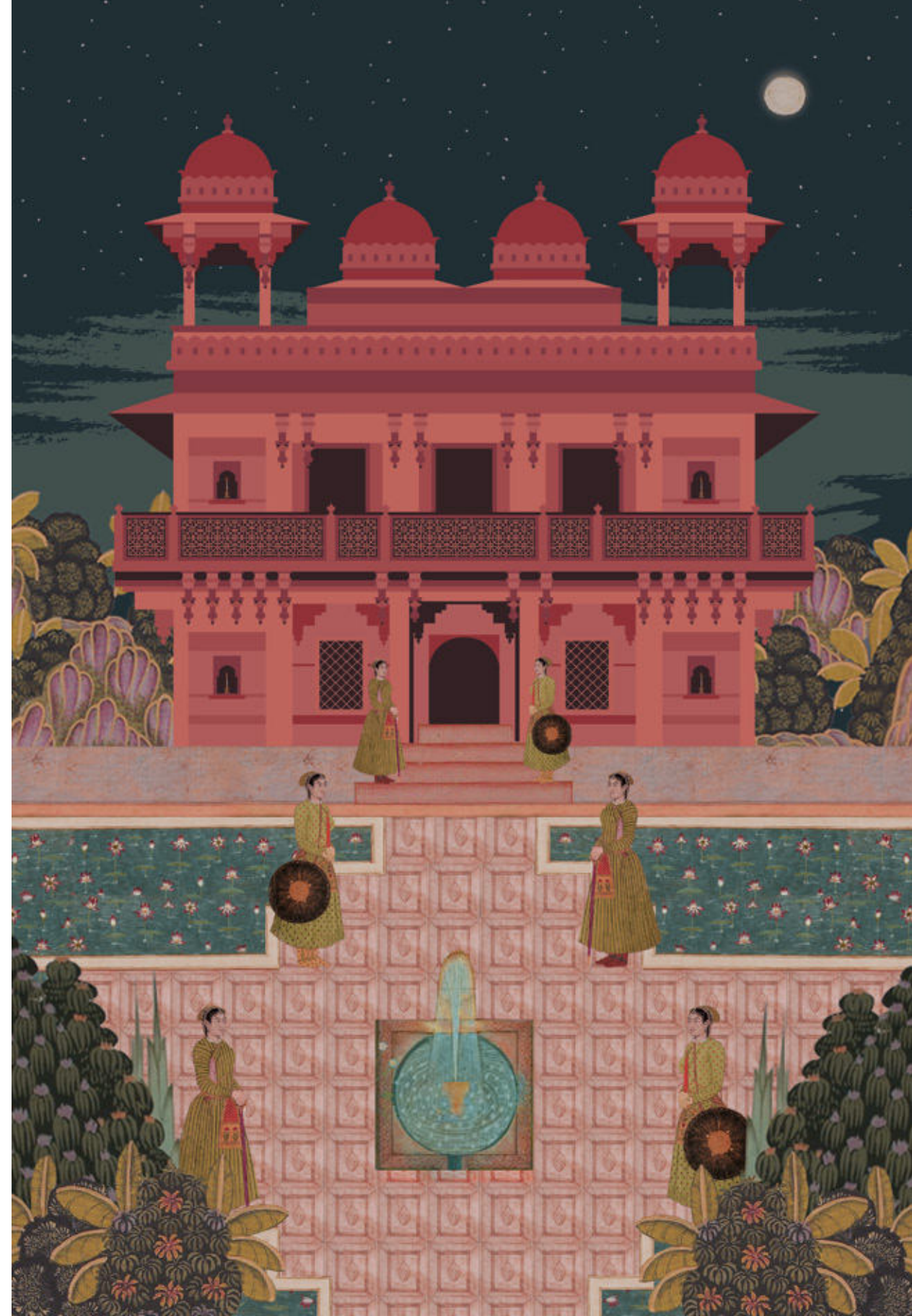
The *Mahal* looked surreal in the dark of the night, the pale moonlight reflecting off the sandstone floors of the walkway. When she worked in the atelier, the guards would not let anyone linger on till nightfall. It was the first time she was seeing the palace at night. They had to navigate through a series of long winding passages to reach their destination - the *zenana*.

Her mother had told her all about the *zenana*. It was the imperial harem of the Emperor where all of his wives and children resided, along with their female servants, slaves, cooks and attendants. No man was allowed to enter this forbidden place except the Emperor.

She recalled how she had once lost her way in the Mahal and had somehow arrived at the harem gates. An *Uzbeki* guardswoman had spotted her in the garb of Mehfi and shooed her away. She had always been curious to see it from within since then.

Phul Malik pulled the curtain open on arrival and helped her alight from the palanquin. The guardswomen stood vigilant even at this hour. The mighty, heavy-set women who hailed from Uzbekistan looked deadlier in the dark, wielding their sharp scimitars. She shuddered and for a second, was glad she had company even if it was Phul Malik.

They crossed the guardswomen and entered the inner courtyard of the harem. It was as grand and magnificent as she had imagined. The red-stone entryway flanked by beautiful gardens and pools on each side led them to an intersection where a large, carved, sandstone fountain stood tall, its waters gleaming in the night. The surrounding walls were covered in arabesque inlaid with precious rubies, emeralds and pearls; the candelabras placed in the central cartouches gave them a fiery glow. It was a sight to behold. They continued towards Ruqaiya’s apartment as Phul Malik directed her through a series of turns and passages.



Ruqaiya was lounging on the terrace of her apartment gazing into the distance when a servant announced the arrival of Mehfi and Phul Malik. On seeing Ruqaiya, Mehfi left the eunuch's side and rushed towards her.

'Well done! No one shall hear about this, I hope,' she said thanking the eunuch with a bag of coins. 'It shall not reach the Emperor if that is what you are trying to imply,' he replied bowing briefly as he left.

'Where is my father, *Rani sahiba*?' asked Mehfi timidly.

'Fear not, my child, he is safe. The Emperor had other pressing matters to attend to so he just locked him up in the dungeons for the time-being. His fate shall be decided tomorrow morning,' she replied calmly. She was grateful that the eunuch was a part of her network of spies. His foster brother ✧ Mirza Aziz Koka, the newly appointed Governor of Gujarat had arrived bearing news of rebellion in Surat again. The counsel had kept him occupied the rest of the day.

'Come my child, you should eat something, you look famished,' Ruqaiya said as she sat cross-legged on the pavilion and ordered the servant to fetch food for her guest. She motioned to Mehfi to sit besides her as the servant came in bearing a small meal which was nothing short of a lavish feast. An assortment of *rotis* accompanied two thick meat gravies that was served in a jade plate while a serving of cucumber *raita* rested in another jade container. A servant brought in a glass of sherbet which she happily gulped down. Her meal was completed with a silver bowl of creamy *kheer* which had been generously topped with slivered almonds and *kishmish*.

Her hunger satisfied, she remembered why she was here. Wiping her face with the sleeve of her tunic she turned to the Chief Queen. 'Please save him'. The anguish in her voice moved her.

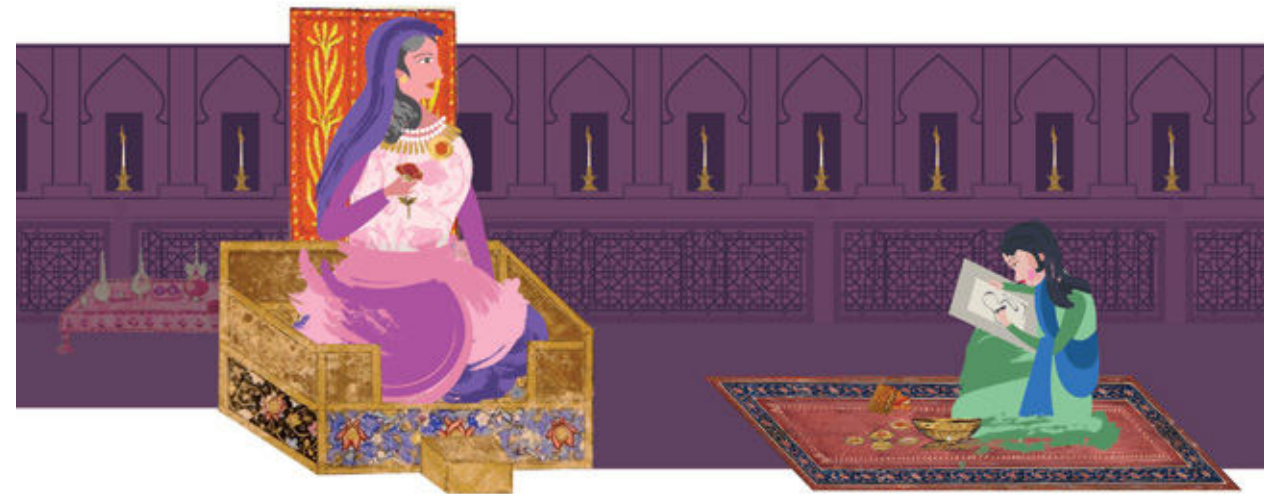
'We shall save him together. Come along with me, I want you to paint something for me,' Ruqaiya got up and walked inside to her chambers. Mehfi seemed confused. The Chief Queen cannot truly expect her to paint at this rather ungodly hour especially not when her father was in peril. She reluctantly followed her inside to see another woman resting on the divan.

It was a large chamber, much grander and opulent than all the rooms of the Mahal she had seen before. Purple and gold embroidered tapestries hung from the long walls enveloping the room in warmth. The dimly lit lamps complemented the patterned Persian carpets giving it a soothing ambiance. Hints of gold, crystal and jade adorned across the room. The woman resting on the divan was surrounded by silk and satin cushions embedded with precious stones. But they paled in comparison to the jewelery the woman was wearing.

She must be someone very important thought Mehfi. 'Ah, is this the child?' asked the woman looking at her with curiosity. Ruqaiya nodded. 'Mehfi, I want you to meet Gulbadan Begum. You shall be painting her portrait.' She clumsily bowed down before the elderly princess. Gulbadan Begum was the Emperor's aunt and he respected her a great deal. 'Now?' she asked gingerly.

'Yes. This moment. You only have time till dawn.' The daughter of Humayun replied with an air of practiced royal arrogance.

She looked at Ruqaiya pleadingly. Was this a part of her plan to save her father. She did not understand. 'Trust me, child' muttered Ruqaiya. She pointed Mehfi to the painting materials left for her in the corner of the room. 'Go on, we do not have much time.'



Mehfi quickly grabbed a sheet of vellum and charcoal as Gulbadan sat upright on the divan striking a pose with her namesake rose in her hand. Mehfi observed Gulbadan as she roughly sketched out the outlines for the painting. The princess was a beautiful woman and had aged quite gracefully. The drawing of the figure completed, she moved on to painting. She glanced at the lattice window and saw pitch darkness outside. How was she to paint in the dimly lit room before sun dawn. She struggled her eyes as she mixed the colours to paint the lights and shadows of the miniature painting.

'Done,' she announced as the first ray of light hit the window. Ruqaiya who was resting in the corner of the room woke up suddenly and took the painting from Mehfi's hand. The result was stunning. Gulbadan looked ethereal in the nightlight. With a content look across her face, Ruqaiya showed the painting to Gulbadan who replied with a smile, 'You have got yourself a deal, beta. I shall be there.'



The royal guard announced the arrival of the Emperor as he took his place on the throne for the morning session of the *Diwan-i-khas*. Several of his courtiers were in attendance at the Private Hall including his stepson ◻ Rahim. Salamat Khan and Mir Sayyid Ali were presented before them, their fate awaiting Akbar's verdict. They bowed down before him their heads hanging low.

'Salamat Khan, you have committed a grave sin by cheating the Crown,' accused the Emperor explaining his crimes to the courtiers. 'And Mir Sayyid Ali was an accomplice to this ruse. On discovering the truth he chose to keep quiet and continued to kick dust in our eyes. What would be a fitting punishment for them?' he asked turning to them.

Rahim shook his head at the orthodox members of the court who unanimously called for their death. His mother Salima had told him about the event that had transpired at the Mina Bazaar yesterday. He sympathized with Mehfi but there was nothing he could do. He stood in the minority who opposed the punishment.

'I have made my decision,' said the Emperor on hearing his counsel and walked towards Mir Sayyid Ali, 'For turning a blind eye to the falsehood, his punishment should fit the deed. He shall be blinded,' he replied coldly. As for Salamat, he is guilty of a greater sin. He has not only fooled the Crown, he has also sinned against the Almighty God. And it is beyond me to forgive you. I hereby sentence you to death.'

'Wait, Your Majesty!' a voice came from the *zenana* balcony above the hall. Everyone gasped as they heard Ruqaiya Sultana Begum interrupt the Emperor. Nobody else would have dared to do so. 'The punishment is too severe for their crimes, Jalal,' said Gulbadan Begum appearing at the other balcony window.' Akbar was visibly annoyed by the intervention but when two of the women closest to him spoke up he had no choice but to listen. 'What do you propose I do? I cannot forgive them.'

'Salamat has wronged the Crown, no doubt. And he shall be punished. But he did not act alone,' continued Ruqaiya as she brought a small figure into view. Through the *jaali* screen, Akbar could make out the figure to be Mehfi. 'Abu,' she cried out to her father on seeing him. 'You see, it is fair that you met out the same punishment to her,' spoke Ruqaiya knowing that Akbar would never harm the child.

The court gasped in unison. Salamat began sobbing helplessly as the guards restrained him from going towards her. 'What is the meaning of all this? Why have you brought the child here?' asked the Emperor curiously.

'She is in my service, Jalal. She is helping me with the *Humayun-nama*, your father's biography,' Gulbadan answered her nephew. The Emperor bore a puzzled look. 'What about Lady Maria?' he asked. 'I cannot trust an outsider, Mehfi is my choice. I have seen her paint with my own eyes. She is far more talented than the firangi,' replied Gulbadan turning her nose. When had this transpired? Akbar could clearly see it had all been orchestrated by Ruqaiya.

‘She has pledged her eternal service to the harem. Her father shall never get to see her again. Isn’t that punishment enough?’ said Ruqaiya playing her final card. ‘No,’ cried out Salamat ‘*Jahanpana*, take my head. I am guilty.’ The Court broke out into discussion again in lieu of the new developments. ‘Silence,’ roared the Emperor as he assessed the situation.

‘Ruqaiya, you shall not speak for the child,’ Akbar said. ‘I can clearly see your intentions. You schemed all this behind my back to get rid of the *frangis*. I shall not forget that.’ Ruqaiya’s nose twitched at the accusation. It was true that perhaps she had used the opportunity in her self-interest but her willingness to help Mehfi was sincere. The emperor continued, ‘However, you do make a fair argument. Never being able to meet each other shall be punishment enough for the family.’

‘I shall leave it up to the child now to choose her fate. Her eternal servitude to the harem in exchange for her father’s life.’ All eyes turned to the balcony to hear the child’s decision.

What had Ruqaiya done? Was this her plan all along? If she said no to Ruqaiya’s arrangement, her father’s death was imminent. But if she agreed to become a part of the *zenana*, she will never see her family again. Her freedom was a small price to pay for her Abu’s life, she decided. Raising her head with tearful eyes she uttered a single yes. Salamat’s world submerged into darkness as he began to weep.

With a heavy heart, the Emperor announced the punishment. Mehfi shall be exiled to the harem for eternity. Salamat would never see his daughter again. That was their punishment. As for the elderly Master of the Atelier, Akbar pardoned him and sent him on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Ruqaiya smiled as the Emperor dismissed the court, it had been a victory for her albeit a bittersweet one. She did not have any children of her own but the image of the helpless father wailing for his child tore at her heart.

Mehfi shed silent tears as she stood still in the balcony window watching her father break down. Salamat kept on shouting for Mehfi as the guards arrived to drag him away. *Forgive me Allah, and watch over her*, he mouthed as she disappeared from his view.

He hoped that the walls of the harem would do for her what he had failed to do as her father. Keep her safe. Keep her *Mehfuz*.





A NOTE FOR READERS

The story of Mehfuz is a piece of historical fiction that attempts to construct an intriguing yet educational narrative of the Mughal Culture and way of life. Throughout the story you shall find bits and pieces of history which one can note down and revisit in the accompanying Journey Book and other contents of the story kit. Uncover more secrets and guess what happens to Mehfi next in the imperial *zenana*, as you continue on your journey of the magnificent Mughal world.

CREDITS

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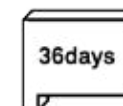
✧ *The MUGHAL HISTORY Project* ✧

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36 Days of Type

[www.36daysof\\$type.com](http://www.36daysof$type.com)

An Instagram event I participated in on typography that gave way to the Miniature style approach of the illustrations.



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Mehfuz

Part of the story-kit
'Atelier to Zenana'
A to Z of Mughal Social Life



The story of Mehfuz offers glimpses of the Mughal Culture and way of life during the reign of Emperor Akbar; and is an engaging read for both young readers and history buffs. Part history, part fiction; the story is set against the backdrop of important events like the Emperor's first contact with the Portuguese and his campaign in Gujarat province, that altered the course of Indian History. Complemented with colour illustrations that are reminiscent of miniature paintings, the book is sure to transport you to the Mughal era gone-by.



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