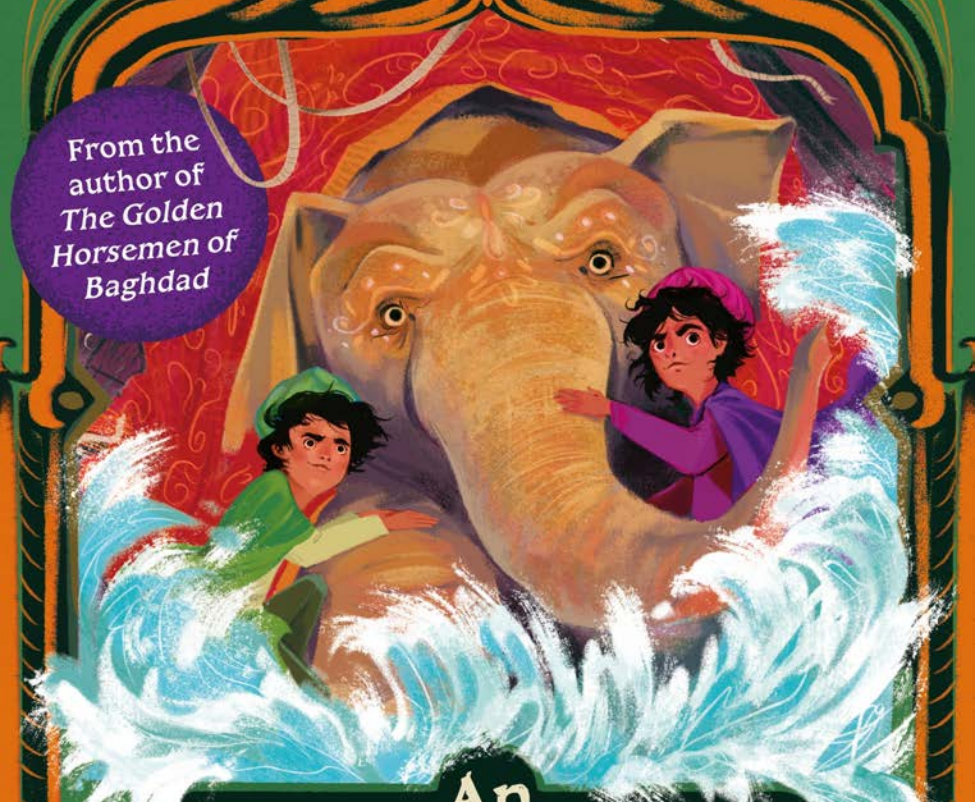
SAVIOUR PIROTTA

From the author of *The Golden Horsemen of Baghdad*



An ELEPHANT for the EMPEROR

BLOOMSBURY



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For my father,
The real Master Antonio

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Prologue

India, 782 CE

The sun had almost set by the time the herd reached the river. It was still hot despite the hour and the elephants were eager to cool themselves. The sky was a ruby red and the sounds of the daytime animals were giving way to the eerie chorus of the night-time creatures. Another herd was already bathing in the muddy water. The elephants greeted each other with loud trumpeting sounds and slapping of trunks.

One of the calves rushed up to an older female knee-deep in the water. She was an ‘aunt’, one of the many elephants that helped the mothers

look after their young. Seeing him, she gently reached out with her trunk to guide him deeper into the river.

His trunk wrapped around hers, the calf heard a splash and noticed a ripple in the water. A crocodile was coming towards them. The calf let go of the aunt's trunk and trumpeted a panicked warning. The aunt leapt out of the way just in time. The crocodile's jaws snapped on empty air.

The rest of the adult elephants charged into the river as one, driving the crocodile away. Back on the riverbank, they surrounded the aunt, comforting her with soothing noises.

The leader of the herd congratulated the calf for spotting the danger in time. The older elephants trumpteted their praise. The young ones slapped him playfully with their trunks. The encounter with the crocodile had dampened the herd's enthusiasm for a refreshing swim. Instead, the elephants moved away from the river. They came to a thicket where they feasted on sugar cane, then clustered around their leader and went to sleep.

A silvery moon shone through the forest canopy. Despite the sugar cane, the calf who had saved the aunt was still hungry. He lifted his trunk and sniffed the air. The faint smell of ripe banana teased his nostrils.

Emboldened by the herd's praise for his bravery, the calf got to his feet and slipped away from the herd. He followed the smell deeper into the forest.

At last he spotted an enormous bunch of bananas hanging low from the branches of a tree. Squealing with anticipation, he quickened his pace, trampling over a mass of dried branches lying on the ground.

Without warning, he found himself plunging down into a pit and landing with a painful bump on a bed of dried grass. He let out a frightened whelp followed by an angry squeak. He had fallen into a trap. Getting to his feet, he tried scrambling out but it was no use.

The poor calf trumpeted for his mother but he'd wandered too far away from the herd. Instead of a friendly elephant, two human faces peered down at him.

"A fine specimen," said one, a man with a scar across both lips. "I knew we'd score in this part of the forest." He poked the elephant with the tip of his spear.

"It's got rather large ears, if you ask me," said the second one. "A big defect in my opinion. The rajah prefers his animals to be perfect, so to speak. But at least it's young and healthy. Put a jewelled *howdah* on its back and it'll look royal enough."

CHAPTER ONE

A Case of Misfortune

Baghdad, three years later...

Hudayn al-Asri was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open. He'd been working since dawn, stopping only for *salah* and a hurried bite to eat at noon. He'd been unlucky with food today. Normally one of the hospital cooks would give him leftovers from lunch, often nutritious chicken soup and sometimes even cake. But that cook had been off duty today and Hudayn had eaten only a piece of stale bread which he'd begged off one of Baghdad's many bakers during his lunch break.

Hudayn had gone hungry since and he felt drained of energy. Being a cleaner in a hospital, even if you were a healthy thirteen-year-old, was back-breaking work. You were disinfecting floors and carrying cartloads of hospital supplies all day.

Still, Hudayn felt he had nothing to complain about. He was an orphan. Only a year ago, he had arrived in glorious Baghdad jobless, penniless and homeless with only a *qalam*, a reed pen, to his name. He'd inherited this from his grandfather, a calligrapher of some note in his hometown, a small village on the banks of the Tigris. It was his most precious possession – his *only* possession except for the clothes on his back.

Hudayn's dream was to become a calligrapher like his grandfather. Every night, after his shift at the hospital, he practised his writing. He couldn't afford ink, so he used mud and a brush one of the doctors had thrown away. It had been used for medical purposes, but it also made a good painting brush.

Hudayn's canvas was the paved footpath behind the hospital. He often drew pictures too,

of animals and birds like those he saw in the scientific books when he was scrubbing the floor of the hospital library.

The street cleaners always washed away his work in the morning but he didn't mind. One day he would be able to afford proper paper, and then he would keep his work in a leather-bound satchel.

His shift over, Hudayn washed himself down and changed the hospital tunic for his own ragged one. Usually he slept in one of Baghdad's parks but tonight it was too hot to sleep despite his tiredness. Instead he would first try and find some food, then spend the night drawing.

He was almost out of the door when a doctor called out. "You, boy. Come here."

Hudayn turned. The doctor was a thin, gaunt man with sunken cheeks. Dr Paul of Kreta! As gentle as a lamb with patients, he was known to yell at hospital staff. Many of the young porters and cleaners were terrified of him.

"Come and help move a patient."

“I’m not an orderly, doctor,” said Hudayn. “But I can go and find one.”

“I haven’t got time,” snapped Dr Paul. “Come with me.”

He turned and stomped down the corridor without another word, expecting Hudayn to follow. Crossing a courtyard with a magnificent fountain, Dr Paul opened a curtain at an arched doorway. Hudayn hesitated.

“Are you afraid to go in?” Dr Paul said with a sneer. “Worried that you might catch something from the poor fellows on this ward?”

Hudayn had seen so much horror in his poverty-stricken village, he doubted anything in Baghdad could ever shock him, not even a hospital ward with very sick people.

“Forgive me, doctor. I’m coming.”

Like the rest of the hospital, the ward was immaculately clean, with whitewashed walls and a beautiful tiled floor. It smelt of citrus fruit, which Hudayn knew was put in the cleaning water to help stop people becoming ill.

The patients lay on pristine cots. Even though many were snoring loudly, Hudayn could still hear the tinkling of the fountain outside. It was a calming noise, designed to help the patients sleep.

Three orderlies in white robes stood near a cot in a far corner. Another two were holding either end of a stretcher.

As Hudayn got closer, he could see a man lying on the cot. He was covered from head to toe in bandages with only his face showing. The orderlies had stretched a thick canvas sheet under him.

"We're taking him upstairs," said one of the orderlies to Hudayn.

Hudayn knew this was good news. Moving from a special ward to the general one on the second floor meant the patient was on the mend.

"Careful, now," said the orderly in charge. "The gentleman is still in a lot of pain."

The patient watched, a slight panic in his eyes, as the three orderlies each gripped a corner of the canvas sheet, one indicating that Hudayn should take the fourth.

“You ready to go, sir?” said the orderly to the patient.

The man in the bandages blinked his eyes to show he was.

The orderly turned to the others. “Get a firm grip, everyone. We have to lift him all at the same time. *Wahid, ithnan, thalatha*... and up.”

Hudayn was unprepared for the weight of the patient. A jab of intense pain shot up his arm. His eyes blurred.

“You alright, *ya sahebi*?” said one of the orderlies.

Hudayn nodded, trying to tighten his grip on the sheet. He shook his head and his vision cleared.

“Now move him to the stretcher,” instructed Dr Paul. “Slowly, everyone.”

Hudayn thought his arm was going to break under the weight. Sweat popped on his brow. His hands felt clammy. He gasped in horror as the sheet slipped out of his grasp and the patient crashed to the floor.