

*Angel of Aleppo* first chapter one ... second chapter - Morgenthau speaks - and the inciting incident from third chapter

*'...who remembers today the extermination of the Armenians?'*

**Adolf Hitler**, August 22, 1939

*Prologue*

*War Memorial, North Terrace*

*Adelaide, South Australia*

*April 24, 1965*

Faith is a short word; one syllable, a tiny droplet that speaks a mighty sermon about spirit and character, courage and forbearance, belief transcending defeat. Faith is a sense of one's destiny. It lives at the core of being, an underpinning definition of spirituality, a fundamental power. Faith is optimistic, kind, patient, forgiving, tolerant—a healing balm. When the soul is bloodied with pain and tainted by anger, faith washes it clean.

Faith clears the troubled mind. It raises up the wounded heart. It is the cornerstone of the grounded, the compass that steers those in peril safely home, a window open to hope, a bottomless wellspring for love. Where there is faith and hope, there is love. What hardened heart denies love?

Faith's light can lift the darkest soul. Faith's fire can warm the coldest heart. Faith, it is said, can move mountains.



*Is fifty years of maintaining faith long enough?*

As Adelaide opens for business, I am an unremarkable face in a crowd, a little white-haired woman in black, crossing North Terrace at King William Street. The people about me fall away as I turn and head past the statue of the mounted soldier, then Government House towards the South Australian War Memorial.

As I have for the past twelve years on this day, I approach the grey-white marble memorial to soldiers who fell in fields bloodied by artillery, bombs, machine-guns, and desperate hand-to-hand combat. I gaze up at the Spirit of Duty angel. This celestial sergeant-major, frozen in stone, beckons three innocents to set down their tools and do their duty, to take up arms and kill the enemies who threaten everything sacred to the men in suits who talk each day with the supreme commanding officer above.

It has been a half century since the Anzac landing on the beaches of Gallipoli, a milestone for the people in this land. For me, it is a half century of a life disrupted, an ancient homeland denied. Sorrow wells again, and with it, questions.

*Does God send his angels to gather armies to kill each other?*

*Does God take sides in war?*

The 1915 invasion of Turkey gave the governing Young Turks a smokescreen to hide behind as they started to murder the entire Armenian race.

*Did God think it a normal act of war when Talaat Pasha ordered the eviction of more than a million Armenians from their homes in Anatolia?*

*Did no one see the signpost for Hitler's Holocaust?*

Here, in the balmy peace of this southern city of Adelaide, not many remember the stories about *Tseghaspanutzyun* in Australian newspapers after the Great War - the mass slaughter of Armenians in Anatolia and the Mesopotamian desert. The mass slaughter the Turks will not talk about.

Reverend Cresswell's words about faith on my wedding day nearly four decades ago ring in my head again, like the bells of St Peter's Cathedral.

*But is faith, alone, enough?*

I glance down the names of the fallen on the Memorial's campaign plaques and sink to one knee. Gazing upward, I make the sign of the cross, place a single white rose below the celestial sergeant-major, and bow my head.

'Thomas... even your name is not here,' I whisper. 'There is no memory of you.' I place my right hand over my heart. 'Only here.'

I rise, not so easily as in my younger days, and regard the Spirit of Duty.

*Does God speak through this angel?*

No divine light shines from the blank stone eyes. I scan the emptiness beyond the stone angel, seeking hope's open window.

*Inchu, Astwats?*

An elderly man crosses North Terrace through a break in the traffic, and approaches. He wears a faded charcoal pin-striped jacket with matching trousers, a white shirt with a black tie, and black shoes.

He stops and regards me, his lined face registering something between surprise and curiosity.

'Oh. I speak...' I glance upward.

The man nods in acknowledgement. 'Ah. Understand.' His words in English are like mine—flat, clipped, and as my friend Pam might have said, with a rhythm as old as time.

He nods again. 'Your eyes... so blue. Like the ocean.'

Other men would say that to me, in another life. 'Yes, like the ocean.'

'Beautiful memorial,' he says. His features bend into something like a smile. 'I come to see. Men tell me. Sacred place.'

'Yes. For Australians, sacred.'

'Australians... brave soldiers.'

'Yes, brave.'

'You know Australian soldiers?'

'My husband.' I cross myself. 'I come here every year on this day.'

'Oh... He pass away in war?'

'No... I did not know him till after war.'

The man's dark brown eyes go somewhere else. He nods. 'He fight... Gallipoli?'

'Yes. And France. And Egypt.'

The man nods again. Darkness clouds his eyes. 'You come here each year, this day? The day before Anzac Day?'

‘Yes.’

‘Australian soldier at Gallipoli very brave.’

‘You were there?’

‘No. I hear stories... later.’

‘Oh. My husband did not like to talk of war. Many times, he woke up at night.’

The old man exhales. ‘I was soldier. You see... many bad things. Not for... woman.’

‘I wanted him to tell me. I wanted him to tell me the bad things.’

‘Soldiers not... like to do that... must keep bad memories inside.’

‘Why?’ Sudden passion flares in me. ‘It was... like a sickness in my husband. I begged him, ‘Please, talk to me... maybe help your pain.’ But he would not.’

‘War is pain,’ the old man says. It sits behind his eyes. ‘No good comes from this pain. War is not for woman. Is for soldier.’

A bus thunders past, spewing black exhaust smoke.

I remember how my Thomas would always hold the pain inside as well. ‘You, soldier,’ I say.

‘I have seen many bad things, also. I wanted to share my pain with my husband... maybe help him. Women also suffer in war. Women see many bad things in war!’

‘But women not in fighting.’ He nods, as if that is it.

I meet his gaze. ‘My husband was a good man, but he had no peace inside. I had no peace. I wanted him to tell me so he could release it, so he could be free. I begged him but he would not, and... then he passed away.’

‘Soldier cannot tell woman, not even wife, about war. It is too much.’

‘You have wife?’

‘No.’

‘Man without wife big expert on women.’

He has the grace to offer a thin smile. ‘War is not for woman,’ he repeats.

Something makes me speak again. 'Australia has women who work with men.'

The old man stands motionless, regarding the Spirit of Duty, his jaw working. 'Your husband let you work, after babies?'

My insides stab at me. 'No babies.'

'So sorry. You seem healthy woman, sure to have many fine sons.'

I look down. 'You do not know me.'

'That is bad for your husband.'

'Is worse for me!'

'So sorry. Of course, bad for you too.'

I sniff. 'Like most men, think about man first.'

The man's face colours. He produces a bus timetable from his battered bag. 'I must catch bus to Outer Harbour,' he says. 'Past Port Adelaide. My ship sails tonight. SS Marra. Only calling in port to get supplies.'

'You are a sailor,' I suggest, 'to sail away from pain?'

He hesitates, eyes elsewhere. 'You not... know me.'

'You can tell me,' I insist. 'I want to talk about pain. My pain is terrible, like my husband's. Maybe more terrible.'

'You are not soldier!'

I clench both fists and raise my voice. 'At least you can fight. You have a chance.'

'You do not know when a bullet will find you!'

'There is worse, when you see the gun and you have no gun.'

He sighs. 'There is loud noise. On and on, I remember. 1914. 1915. Ardahan, Sarikamish, big guns. *Boom! Boom!* They go on inside you, long after.'

'My husband had that.'

'You see your friends all around. They die. Somehow you live. Nothing worse.'

I challenge him. 'What if you are a daughter and you see your mother shot?'

'Orders. Soldiers have orders!'

'Soldiers have orders to kill women?'

'Bad things happen in war. Very bad. Bad orders. Bad things.'

I pace around like a strutting general, then point a finger of accusation. 'Talaat's soldiers made war on women and children! And Kemal's soldiers!'

'There were bad orders,' he insists, sweating. 'I say that now.'

I turn back on him. 'You were a soldier of Kemal?'

The old man takes a deep breath. 'I was soldier of Talaat... of Kemal.'

'Murderers!' I spit on the footpath. 'Criminals!' I look up at the angel again. *'Inchu, Astwats?'*

His eyes cloud over. 'You speak to your God, but does he answer you?'

Fire burns me inside. 'Your Kemal wanted to finish my people, after your Enver, your Talaat with their murderers started the job. You were with them?'

'You are woman, not understand war.'

'I understand war against women and children very well.'

'That was not war. There were troubles for us.'

'Oh? What about 1919? Or you do not remember, Mister Soldier-who-must-obey-orders? War is finished. Turkish soldiers still make war on women and children. Still raping, stealing, selling young girls, children, babies—in Aleppo.'

'You were in Aleppo?'

'Yes, in 1916. I was a nurse, worked with many sick people. Also, Deir-es-Zor. Many people sick because of your Talaat, your Enver. Many dead because your people pushed them from their homes.'

The old man goes pale beneath his tan. 'But you are still alive.'

‘Yes, but they took my—everything.’ A tear slides down my cheek. Then another.

‘Everything? What else could they take?’

‘Everything! And when they are not taking everything, they rape and kill!’

‘Not all Ottoman soldiers rape and kill!’

I pace again. Memories of strutting officers crowd my mind. The hateful face of a long-gone tormentor comes. I shake it off. ‘You were in some different Ottoman army, maybe?’ My words hang in the air. ‘Ottoman army where soldiers are polite, kind, ask permission before they rape and kill?’

‘Many troubles for us. War not finished. Problem with British. Problem with French.’

I throw my arms in the air. ‘Problem is your soldier memory is not so good, maybe. You lost the war, 1918.’

‘Kemal kept our land, our people together after that.’

‘Kemal kept you in war on women and children!’

‘No!’

‘Then why spend fifty years running away? Why are you here in Adelaide, from dirty tramp steamer, instead of smoking sheesha in a nice Istanbul cafe?’

‘All right. Please. It was long ago. You are upset.’

‘I am upset for fifty years!’

‘You want peace? You must give up anger.’

‘Easy for you to say!’ I shout at him. ‘How can I give up anger when so much bad has happened? How can I give up anger when I cannot forget?’

‘With anger there is no peace.’

My next words feel like hot coals spitting forth like lava from a volcano. ‘When I was in Aleppo, I met dying woman from Sivas. She told me Sivas had three hundred thousand people before war. Now just a couple thousand. No children. Where did they go? Hm? Where

did one hundred thousand children of Sivas go? All in summer holiday camp maybe?

Nothing to do with brave *Mussulman* soldiers letting them die in desert with no water, or sell young girls into harems?’

‘I did not see this. I did not do this.’

‘You say order is order, make country great again, Kemal great man. I say to you, YOU are killer. YOU kill women. YOU kill children...’

‘No!’ The old man stares at me, his eyes pleading.

‘I curse you!’

‘No, please.’

I draw myself up and stretch out my pointing finger again. ‘I curse you! BABY KILLER!’

‘No,’ he weeps. ‘I did not do that.’

‘You cannot hide from my curse.’

We stand face to face. A magpie in a nearby tree warbles. A bus thunders past, spewing black exhaust. People on North Terrace walk by.

The Spirit of Duty still beckons to the three youngsters. *Do Your Duty*.

The old man retreats behind the Memorial. I sink to my knees on the pavement.

Salt stings my eyes as I speak the words out loud. ‘I am cursed... since Marash.’

*Anoush*

*Marash, Anatolia*

*May 1915*

I am sixteen, an innocent.

In Marash, we do not yet know of the April 24 slaughter in Istanbul, ordered by Talaat *Pasha*—the mass murder of Armenian priests, writers, teachers, and business leaders. The shadow spreads, but its darkness is yet to swallow us.

Yet, there is an edginess abroad. Elders sit in shady groves and mutter to each other. Men cluster in tight groups. Government forces attack Armenian families to the north and east, they have heard. Government representatives take money and property and the most beautiful daughters for harems of the wealthy.

Such words are not meant for my ears, but I hear them. I know nothing about twenty years before, of Sultan Hamid's orders and his *Hamidye* thugs galloping into the villages to kill Armenians. Mama and Papa were lucky. The *Hamidye* did not come their way.

*Hoviv* instructs the local schoolmaster to protect the innocent. The teacher tells us nothing about the killings. I outshine all the boys each year in reading, writing, and numbers, but I do not know our history; not the recent history that matters. None of us know it, but we find out for ourselves soon enough.

Some of the men start burying their gold. Surely it is safe in our ancestral ground.

In Marash, the countryside blooms. It is a beautiful spring, but the elders still frown. Mothers keep their children close.

My many suitors press Papa constantly. They write poems and sing songs about my face, my golden-blond hair, my breasts, the sunlight of my smile, the music of my laugh, the ocean-blue of my eyes. At festivals, I dance the *Terendez* in the centre of the line with the other girls on either side of me. The old women cry tears of pleasure and the suitors' hearts pump faster—so they say. Papa stays close. Mama is closer.

Green fields, gardens, family, friends... surely nothing can change. Neat, log-beamed houses, cooking, weaving, sewing, river-rambling with friends, picking flowers, gossiping over weddings, where the home might be, how many children we will have. Faith, love, honesty, wisdom, good hearts, praising God.

Life is a dream.



Papa farms the land and raises his sons to do the same. By the wood-fire stone pit and central hearth, in her simple white blouse and embroidered apron, with her gold crucifix, Mama loves and feeds us, her *lavash* the best in the village. I stretch the dough for *lavash* ever since I am little.

Still, the shadow spreads east from the capital. Surely the sun will not stay behind the clouds.

Up and down Marash *Sandjak*, the local *bey* Ibrahim casts his own shadow. Ibrahim takes what he wants from the land and villages. When I first see him, he looks so handsome. I do not know his cold-blooded reputation.

As girls, when not pulling my hair or teasing me, my older sister Anahid would fill my ears with talk of palaces and princes, and how one day she planned to wed a great man and rule over vast tracts of land.

Then one day, Anahid goes to the river and does not return.

‘I think she has run away,’ I whisper to friends. ‘She defies Papa and refuses to marry *Hoviv*’s son. She is lazy and will not do as Mama says. She will come back. She will return and beg forgiveness.’ But I dare not speak those thoughts out loud in front of Mama or Papa.



It is a cool, clear spring morning.

The town square market is full of Armenian merchants. They promise the best produce fresh from the soil and boast the finest lace, the smoothest wooden tools, and spices for every dish. As always, the women crowd around, looking, listening, touching, tasting, chattering. I am shopping for spices, smelling and tasting them. God help me if I bring home poor quality, or the wrong ones. Anahid never gets them right and Mama never lets her forget it. Anahid often tells me that when she is a great queen, she does not plan to cook. If I am lucky, I can visit.

Ibrahim *bey* and his men come thundering into the square, their horses snorting and snuffling, the polished steel of their blades and gun barrels glinting in the sun. They barge through the stalls, bowling people over. They demand meat, fruit, cheese, and sweets. They take and they do not pay. But we Armenians are used to that.

Then I look up and Ibrahim is staring at me. He smiles and it lights his face, but not his black eyes. The racket, the colours, the aromas are swept away by the sudden fear in my heart. Ibrahim’s closest companion looks down at me. He is a Kurd, a tall warrior with shaved head and cruel mouth, his arms tattooed in Arabic script.

‘Servan!’ the *bey* calls. Ibrahim’s tunic is of the most fabulous colours. I gaze at it as he and Servan clatter away. If only I could have a dress even half so beautiful.

Hasmik, the old woman selling eggplant, capsicum, and zucchini, smiles at me and remarks, ‘He has all his grandmother’s dresses made into tunics, like that one.’

‘Why, *Tati* Hasmik?’ I ask her.

‘Well,’ she begins, happy to retell an old tale, ‘young Ibrahim truly did love his grandmother, old Ayse. When she died, Ibrahim was somewhere near your age. He was beside himself with grief. You know why?’

‘Why?’

Hasmik rubs her red raw hands and takes a deep breath. ‘Poison.’

‘What? Really?’

‘*Ayo*, and you can never guess who did it.’

‘Who?’

‘Meryem, Ibrahim's own mother.’

A few older women sidle closer. ‘Be careful of what you fill the girl’s ears with, Hasmik,’ warns *Tati* Arshalous, one of the old women in black. ‘It is wrong to speak ill of the dead.’ Arshalous used to come and go from Ayse’s house, to launder the most beautiful dresses. They were made in the finest silk and cotton that anyone in Marash had seen.

I realise that Arshalous is referring to a scandal from before the 1909 purges in nearby Adana. A little girl then, I still recall how all the grownups would stand together in tight groups and speak in low voices, to stop the children from hearing stories of evil and wrongdoing.

‘Poor Meryem!’ Hasmik says. She grins, a conspiratorial glint in her eyes, and includes all of us. ‘Meryem was Ibrahim’s mother. You know the story better than most, Arshalous.’

The group of women closes in.

‘I do not know this one,’ says a nearby young mother, feeding her baby. ‘Tell us.’

Arshalous scowls the way old women do when they are about to tell a juicy story, pretending that they do it only to pass on some timeless wisdom. She begins and soon warms to it, as Hasmik knew she would.

‘When Ibrahim was a little boy, his father, Mustafa, Ayse’s son, doted on him. Mustafa looked upon Meryem with favour, because she was the only one of his wives to give him a son. Ayse was jealous of Meryem. She hungered for her son’s attention that Meryem took from her. Ibrahim's grandfather, Ayse’s late husband, was known as a looter of Armenian villages in the eighteen-seventies and a *Hamidye* warrior in the nineties. With his son, Mustafa, they were hunters and killers of Armenians for sport. Mustafa would take Ibrahim riding and even hunting from the time he was a little boy.

‘Then came the tragedy. Meryem distracted Mustafa with some woman’s foolishness, and he neglected to check the saddle girths on his mount. They became loose and he fell when jumping a fence. Ayse blamed Meryem for her son's death.

‘After that, Ayse became the absolute ruler of the household. Ibrahim was the centre of her world. Nothing was denied the boy. She took over Ibrahim’s life completely and shut Meryem out. One-time first wife Meryem was hardly better than a servant. She grew angry and bitter.’

As Arshalous speaks, there is a young woman standing near me; Srбуhi, heavy with child. Her empty right eye socket and scarred face tell their own story. ‘Hasmik remembers well how Arshalous lost her husband,’ Srбуhi whispers. ‘A *Hamidye* sword sliced his head from his shoulders, before her, twenty-one years ago.’ My eyes meet her good one and I blush, foolishly gaping at her ruined face.

The story continues, with Arshalous narrating: ‘Ibrahim’s grandfather and father were heroes, hunters of Christian *giavur*. Ayse filled young Ibrahim’s head with their tales of

murder and mayhem. She commanded Servan and Rubar to be Ibrahim's bodyguards and trainers, in riding, shooting, and swordsmanship. By the time Ibrahim was fifteen, Ayse had turned him against his mother, Meryem.'

Mama is not there to hush me, so I blurt out, 'How did Meryem poison Ayse?'

Arshalous looks down her long nose at me, the girl who dares raise unseemly topics. 'Arsenic,' Hasmik says, and rubs her hands as if preparing to do it herself. 'Prepared by Fatma.'

'Fatma was once first wife to Ibrahim's grandfather, before Ayse gave him the first son and pushed her out of the harem altogether. As the years passed, Fatma became so bitter that she learned how to prepare arsenic powder taken from underground water. Fatma prepared a vial of poison and Meryem put a dose into Ayse's pomegranate wine.

'With Ayse dead, Ibrahim's heart hardened. He turned on his mother and banished her, but Meryem foiled him. She had saved a dose for herself.

'Ibrahim was furious. He had wanted to control his mother's suffering for the rest of her life. He sent his men to bring him Fatma, but she had taken the arsenic as well.'

'Now Ibrahim is a controlling monster over all women in his harem,' Srбуhi says. 'I can tell you stories from his harem. He likes to have women whipped in front of him. He loves to hear women beg. All women must address him as *Effendi*. He has maimed some of his women far worse than me. Now his mother's body rots in the open, not buried in the sanctified ancestral ground. And other bodies rot with Meryem's. Ibrahim has them murdered. He uses fear of violence and believes he can master any woman. He lives for it.'

'That is quite enough, Srбуhi,' Arshalous says.

'I can tell you a tale of Servan cutting my face and taking my eye, when I am with child, by any of six men. Do not tell me to be quiet.'

Arshalous glares at her. 'Do not forget to be a proper Armenian woman. Do they take that from you, too?' The women murmur and shake their heads. Srбуhi takes a deep breath and flushes. She moves closer still and whispers in my ear again. 'Keep away from Ibrahim. I think he has your sister.'

'Ibrahim always did worship Ayse like no other,' Hasmik says, wanting the final word. 'She is his ideal woman. He is still the adoring little boy for her. But he has her same cruel, dominating personality. He wears her clothes. He makes himself the absolute combination of Ayse and his *Hamidye* grandfather.'

I hurry home and find my little sister, Covinar, outside with one of the sheepdog's puppies in her arms. 'Come inside,' I say, and take her hand.

I am too afraid to ask Mama or Papa about Anahid. Mama has one daughter less. She must not endure the misery of losing another.



But I do not know what is coming. No one in Marash that day can imagine the misery in Anatolia, from Adana, Zeitoun, and Hadjin to the east and to the north, as vast caravans of old men and women, mothers and children, ripped from their homes, begin inching in long lines along ancient highways towards the desert.

On Wednesday morning, the village wakes to a morning of rare beauty. The men bring oxen in from the emerald-green pasture and harness them to wagons, which they begin loading with the barley harvest. The women bustle about the farmhouses, sweeping, dusting, hand-washing, and kneading dough.

The recent night raids and thefts of village livestock and produce by Kurdish nomads have been more brazen than normal, but nothing else is particularly unusual.

'You will only encourage them,' *Hoviv* warns the young men calling for revenge. He disappears the next day, along with his son, Armen, Anahid's erstwhile suitor.

Papa is tense and distant. Mama fusses even more over trivial things. They are not speaking. Mama will not say why. I return from walking Covinar to the village schoolhouse and find Mama in tears. She wipes her eyes, sniffs, and shrugs off my questions.

‘We carry on as usual,’ she says. ‘Did you wash your hair yet?’

‘Not yet, Mama.’

‘Why did you not do that already? You must be more responsible, girl. I need you to help me later with the *lavash*. Go, do it now.’

‘Yes, Mama.’ *Go. Do it now. Tidy this. Finish that. Maybe Anahid really did run away.*

‘David?’ Mama calls my eldest brother. Dwarfing us, heavily bearded, with the all-season tread of a farmer, David approaches and stops several paces away, his face flushed.

‘Please go with Anoush to the river pool.’

‘You do not need to watch out for me,’ I say.

David flushes. ‘Papa needs me to help with the oxen.’

‘Go to your Papa, then.’ Mama speaks more sharply than normal. David sighs in relief and retreats. Mama is suddenly close to tears.

‘Mama, I am only going to my place by the river.’

‘Yes, but you cannot be too careful. You do not know who is out there.’

‘Do not worry, Mama. Please, do not treat me like a child.’

‘*Voch*, girl.’ Mama throws her hands in the air. ‘What do you know?’

I scoop up my handmade soap and wooden comb, my clean linen tunic of red and gold, and handwoven towel, and skip outside. ‘I will be back before you know it.’

‘Come straight home,’ Mama calls after me. ‘Do not dawdle. We have things to do.’

Not long afterwards, I cast off my smock and slide into the small rock pool that fills up with the overflow of rushing mountain spring water. The shock of the cold water eases and I sink into it. The breeze whispers in the long grass edging the pool. I close my eyes and feel

the sun warm my eyelids as I luxuriate in the sensuous backwater and amuse myself by identifying the calls of ducks, lapwings, kingfisher, laughing thrush, and the piercing cry of a soaring hawk.

I do not notice the hoof beats of the rider and his mount. The birds are suddenly silent. Then a shadow passes over my eyelid.

‘Who is there?’

A dark face appears above. ‘Are these yours?’ The man’s hook-nosed, sun-browed face and guttural tones mark his Kurdish origin. He holds up my smock and towel. I sink into the water up to eye level and say nothing.

He holds out a hand as if to draw me to him. ‘Come here, girl.’

I paddle away and fold my arms against my breasts. My heart pounds.

*Is this how it goes? Am I to be Ibrahim’s whore that night?*

*Will everything I know and value become like an autumn leaf that falls from the branch, withers and dies?*

I withdraw from his extended hand. I feel the bed of stone against my back and the tufts of grass that cling to the soil in the narrow strip above the river’s steep bank. Behind him I hear the grunt and snuffle of his grazing mount.

‘Come here. I mean you no harm.’

‘Who are you?’

He grins, gap-toothed. ‘I am called Rubar. I am a river. Maybe that is why Ibrahim *bey* sends me to find you here.’

‘Why does the *bey* send for me?’

‘Questions, questions.’ Rubar’s face hardens. ‘You are a woman. Do you not know to obey? The *bey* sends for you. Come now.’

‘I obey my father. When I marry, I will obey my husband.’

‘That is good. You will have a husband sooner than you think.’

‘How do you know which man my father chooses for me?’

Rubar laughs, an ugly yapping. ‘Your father is told whom he chooses. Now, come.’

‘My mother expects me.’ I lift my chin and glare at him.

‘Do as I tell you,’ Rubar demands. His hand plays over the long knife that hangs from his belt. ‘Do not make me come after you.’

My hands find the tufts of grass above me and I swing myself out of the water. Now I hang above the torrent. My hands begin to cramp with the strain in seconds. There is a splash and the sound of cursing. ‘The *bey* will not be pleased if you are marked.’ The splashing gets closer. I cannot hold on any longer.

Rubar's face appears above me. Everything happens in a rush. He takes a big handful of my hair and grabs my left wrist. His knife is between his teeth. As he drags me upwards, I twist my body and somehow roll on top of him. I swing my free right hand down hard on his nose and bite the hand holding my hair. He flinches and I am able to roll off him and kick his ribs. He grunts, but reaches for me and I kick again, my heel hitting him square on the nose. Rubar loses his balance, trips over the narrow ledge and falls backward. The rushing river waters mask his tumble down the slope.

There is a sharp crack.

I dare to look. Below, Rubar sprawls at an unnatural angle on a large, jagged rock, a wound in his head pumping blood. The relentless river pulls at his twitching body and carries it away downstream.

The breeze whispers through the grass. The reeds sway one way, then the other. The hawk's whistle pierces the sky. A cloud obscures the sun. I pick up my towel, pull on my smock, slap the rump of Rubar's horse to send it on its way, and hurry back to the Armenian Quarter, combing my hair out as I walk.

No matter how fast I walk and how hard I yank at my hair, I cannot stop trembling or replaying in my mind how I made Rubar fall to his death, even though his untimely end was an accident. My teeth are chattering. I beg God out loud to forgive me my sin, but I do not feel Him consoling me.

No one knows what I have done. I will say nothing, but light candles for Rubar. Despite him being a *Mussulman*, I will pray each day for redemption.

I live up to this promise to myself as soon as I arrive home.

A little later, Mama finds me clean, dressed, and stretching dough for *lavash*. She looks at me in the same way old Arshalous did, down her nose.



Later that day, on the edge of the town square, as I am bringing fresh water to the men sitting in the shade after the day's work is done, a stranger on horseback gallops into the village and pulls up in a cloud of dust. 'The army lays siege on a town below a mountain to the southwest,' he bellows.

'What mountain?' my brother David asks.

'It is the mountain named for Moses, Musa Ler.'

'Is it far from here?'

'Four days, riding hard. Near Iskenderun. Our people will defend themselves to the end, rather than surrender.'

'Will the army come here?' David asks. 'Will they come for us?'

'Defend yourselves!' the stranger warns. 'They will come.' He accepts a drink, then urges his mount forward and pounds back onto the road to spread the word.

In gardens and groves that normally buzz contentedly amid aromas of hot black coffee, cinnamon, and flowers, knots of elders whisper urgently. Hooded eyes dart towards the children at play in the late afternoon sunshine.

Marash farmers are not soldiers. Our only firearms are ancient single shot weapons for hunting.

The air in Marash crackles with uncertainty.

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In the evening, relatives come to the hearth with a visiting friend named Bedros, a mature man with no wife. He carries a rifle and a soldier's pack. His lean body appears wound up tightly, ready to spring into action at any moment. He has hard grey eyes, like granite, that soften a little as he glances in my direction.

In the firelight, I see my three brothers sitting with grim faces, ardent for action. My uncle stands and repeats the warning about troop movement in the west, and Bedros nods: *this is true*. The men shift in their seats and glance at him with the deference of farmers to a soldier.

Covinar buries herself in Mama's skirt. Her puppies squeeze in tighter, whining in sympathy. Her little voice floats above the murmurs. 'Where is Anahid?'

*Perhaps in the bazaar at Zeitoun, with the new golden bracelets?*

*Head covered in cloth and riding behind Ibrahim bey on a white stallion?*

*You would know those blue eyes anywhere. Stunning, like...*

Eyes steal to me.

'Where is she?' Covinar addresses Mama, but it carries throughout the lodge.

'Ssss, *hogis*,' Mama strokes Covinar's hair. 'Ssss.'

Mama sits wide-eyed but not seeing. Two tears roll down her cheeks. She wipes them away with a swift, practised motion; but I see her do it.

I am only beginning to see Mama's pain. For an instant, in her eyes I see God's pain, too. It is surely the pain God must feel when his children turn their backs on his

commandments and let wickedness rule their ways. Mama's love and care is there, every day, right up until this last day of our old lives in our old world.

*Do this, tidy that. Wash yourself. Do your best. Listen to your Papa. Watch your sister.*

*Do not let her out of your sight. Families stick together.*

Mama loves us, I remind myself. She teaches us love. Like *Hayr Garegin*.

Like Jesus.

I see it, in that instant: to take her child away is to take a piece of her heart. In a blink of the eye, I feel her pain and know that Anahid is gone from our lives. I realise that I am a woman now, and I must behave as one.

I find myself holding Mama as a child. 'We must stay together,' I murmur in her ear. She weeps without sound.

Now Covinar clings to the maroon folds of her floor-length skirt. The hearth fire hisses. A dog howls in the distance. Covinar's puppies squeeze in closer still. Her little voice floats in the silence, as she strokes and pats both pets. 'Where is *Hoviv*?'

Papa speaks gently. 'He has gone to see the *bey*.'

I turn to Papa. 'He has never gone this long before.'

Papa finds it hard to meet my eyes. 'The *bey* tours his lands.'

'But *Hoviv* always comes here,' Covinar says.

'He is very busy now,' Papa says, his face working to mask feeling.

The eyes of the elders glitter.

Mama's pain stabs at me and it makes me angry. I direct it at Papa. 'Why?'

'You ask too many questions, *axchiks*,' Papa says. His eyes say much more.

I feel the warmth of Mama's silent tears wetting the sleeves of my blouse. *This is my home.*

*Love is always here. Now there is fear.*

In the firelight, the faces flush deeper in shame and Covinar's little voice pipes up, 'Why is everyone frightened?'

No one has an answer. 'It will be worse,' Bedros says. A few branches pop and splutter in the fire, as if to add emphasis to his words. 'For twenty years, I have fought against the persecution of my people, between Urfa and Adana, against Turks who stole our daughters, livestock, and crops. We resist, but the oppression continues.'

'When did you become a soldier?' my brother David asks.

'When I was fifteen.' David shifts awkwardly under the stranger's intense gaze.

'So young,' Mama's friend Gohar says from across the open fire.

'I was an orphaned boy,' Bedros says, 'in an empty village near Urfa. I had no choice. My inheritance was stolen from the ground where it was buried. I had nothing. I found the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, who fed and trained me. I swore loyalty to the *Dashnaks*. I had nothing to lose. I swore to fight the *Hamidyeh* who murdered my family and everyone in my village.'

'Were you at Adana?' my uncle asks.

'No. We were to the east when they slaughtered our people at Adana six years ago. There was no resistance. Back then, some people felt that Talaat and Enver might not think, like the Sultan, that killing Armenians will fix all the Empire's problems.' At that there was much murmuring.

'Can there be peace?' *Hayr Aram* asks.

'Peace is unlikely. After Adana, *Dashnak* hearts were hardened against the enemy as their hearts are hard against us. In 1914, my comrades and I followed our Commander Vartan into the Imperial Russian Army. We became Ararat Regiment, Armenians fighting for our homes and an end to being second-class citizens. We destroyed the Third Ottoman Army at the Battle of Sarikamish. We sent Enver and his men packing, but we have not seen the last

of them. I fear for the peace of villages like this one. I see no way to defend yourselves from attack.'

Old folks' tales would wash over me when I was a child. Past families decimated by the *Hamidyé* were just names whispered across long-dead hearths.

'When will the attack come?' David asks.

'It is impossible to say. I have had a short furlough since my comrades and I helped defend Van against the enemy. The Ottoman Third Army withdrew, but now it regroups. Men say now that Enver and Talaat will be harsher still on Armenians, since we fought against them on Ottoman soil.'

The name of Sultan Abdul Hamid inspires dread in the elders, but the children of Marash do not know the implications of being outsiders. We are to learn in the most painful way.

The ancient, cracked tones of *Paron* Hovhannes break the silence, as his rheumy eyes seem to look out beyond the flames over great distances. 'We are the *infidel*.'

'Strangers,' Papa says. 'Hundreds of years later, we are still strangers.'

'We are worse than that,' Bedros says. 'We are like unwanted guests.'

Hovhannes dips his head in acknowledgement and begins to tell the story about a great bull he once owned that was to go to pasture with the cows for many seasons. 'He was the biggest beast I ever raised, the pride of the village, worth more than money. The old *bey*, Mustafa, came to me in that first season.'

I speak out loud. 'Mustafa?' Mama glances up at me, shocked at my impudence. There are murmurs in the direction of the girl who speaks when the men are speaking. 'Who was married to Ayse?'

'The same.' The old man clears his throat. 'He accused me of not paying my taxes. He commanded me to fetch the bull from the meadow.'

The snap and fizz of burning wood bounce from walls as he gathers his thoughts. The older folk know the tale, but it has not been repeated for many years and the youngsters are listening now. All about the large single room dwelling, older people shift in their seats. A child murmurs. The firelight dances over the wooden *khachkar* hanging near the entrance. Candles on either side illuminate the wooden Jesus on the cross. Women wrap children in blankets.

Gohar lifts the large pot of boiling water for tea from its place on the edge of the large hearth. Our neighbour, the widow Knarr, appears in the firelight with handfuls of dried mint, thyme, and chamomile from her garden. Together, Knarr and Gohar blend the herbs and prepare to fill numerous hand-made, fired clay cups. Hovhannes accepts the first cup, sips from it, clears his ancient throat, and his words tumble creakily into the rapt silence about the fire.

The bey ordered him to slaughter the beast. His men, about fifteen of them, were hungry. Hovhannes suggested they slaughter a calf. Mustafa struck Hovhannes full in the face, and as he lay in the dirt, kicked him hard several times about the body. The calf was an insult. The men had nothing to show for their hunting. The bull might feed a hundred, but the men were hungry. The *bey* ordered Hovhannes to have the feast ready by sundown the next day.

The fire crackles and a burning brand sinks into the coals. Two men lay more dried branches on the red glowing mass. Fresh flames leap towards the smoke-hole. People settle on their wooden benches, chairs, and neatly embroidered cushions. Babies are put to the breast.

Hovhannes gazes over time and space. His calm reflects how peaceful farmers suffer harassment, extortion, livestock and crops being stolen, daughters taken to add to the harems of the wealthy. The elders know well how it goes. Grief and rage are buried deep inside.

I glance at Mama and see the effort she makes, holding it in. The younger men fume against a helplessness that most understand much more completely than their letters and numbers. I see it on the faces of my brothers. I glance at the *khachkar*.

*Is Jesus in that little carving of the Saviour on the cross? Is he with us in our lodge to remind us of his lessons? For what young man there that night can be like Jesus and turn the other cheek? And what man there does not fear the dread that comes with every traveller?*

I want to ask Jesus to reveal what is coming, but I do not feel his presence. I look for him in my Mama's eyes, but there is no light there now.

Hovhannes speaks again, in a hoary whisper that somehow rises above the hiss and crack of the fire. 'I went to my bull that night with a sharp knife, cut his throat, and watched as the great beast's lifeblood flowed away. My own life savings... seeping into the soil. My brothers came to help hang the carcass. We worked until dawn to clean the beast inside and strip the skin. Everyone muttered about the waste, but there was no time to complain. We built the spit and made a great fire. The whole village helped. The women made lavash, dug up the gardens for greens, and fetched five big cheeses from the dairy. By sundown, the carcass was spitted, and the greens, cheeses, and bread were on the long table. The *bey* and his men rode over the hill and into the valley.'

'Why does God allow them to take from us without payment?' David interrupts, fuming.

Papa's brother speaks from the other side of the fire: 'Why throw all the responsibility upon God, David? Did he arm the Kurd so he can slaughter us, drag our daughters from our arms and carry them off? Has he made us the weak excuses for men we are? God does not concern Himself. He gives us each a brain. He lets us make choices.'

'Thou shalt not kill,' *Hayr* Aram intones. 'Remember God's commandment.'

‘But they beat us,’ David says. ‘They take our women, our daughters, our goods, our property. We watch as they do it! We give them extra to carry off. And like oxen, we must work for our lazy enemies while we give thanks to God that they do not kill us.’

Men’s faces burn with the shame of helplessness.

Hovhannes speaks again. ‘It was this time of year. We had already moved the sheep and goats to higher pasture. It was spring, but already hot like summer. Unlucky.’

‘Why?’ Eyes turn to me again, the young woman who speaks over men. Papa squirms in his seat, more agitated than ever. He seems to be choking down words. He meets my gaze briefly, then his eyes flick back to the fire.

‘The *bey* and his men feasted,’ Hovhannes concludes, ‘until they could not manage another bite. The *bey* ordered the rest of the meat and cheese loaded onto a wagon with donkeys to draw it, and some sheep to take as well. I tried to explain about the early heat and mountain pasture, but they beat me until I could not stand and ordered me to produce a small flock by morning.’

The fire crackles and pops, and small children murmur sleepily.

Outside there is the sound of approaching horsemen. All talk ceases as two of the men step outside to investigate. They return in a moment with a stranger, who speaks one word: ‘Bedros.’

Bedros is on his feet. ‘I am ready.’ He turns to Papa. ‘Thank you for your fire and your hospitality. God be with you.’

‘You are welcome,’ Papa says. ‘Be safe, and goodnight to you.’

‘Goodnight, all.’ Bedros departs with his comrade.

‘So, it is to be *giavur*, Armenian in the land of the Turk,’ the priest observes after the hoof beats recede into the silence of the night.

‘Armenians farm the land and raise the livestock,’ says David. ‘We run the shops and the markets. We make the money.’

‘David,’ Papa says. ‘We know whose work makes the empire prosperous.’

‘Our land should be called Armenia,’ David insists. I see the fear mixed with determination in his eyes. He is no soldier. ‘We are the ones who work it.’

‘With pride comes disgrace,’ Aram says. ‘Be not puffed up with pride, but humble. The Sultan forbids the name ‘Armenia’ being spoken aloud. In his hubris he denies us, but we remain humble before God. With humility comes wisdom.’

‘How will being humble save us?’ David demands.

‘We will be saved,’ the priest says. ‘The first will be last and the last will be first. Have faith, David, in Jesus our Saviour.’

‘Amen,’ the elders chorus.

‘It is written,’ Aram continues, ‘if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and heal their land.’

God does not acknowledge my prayers or my candles for the soul of Rubar. Mama looks at me again in that new way, as one woman to another who guards a secret.

The fire hisses and more branches crack and pop.

‘Did you go to the mountain pasture for the sheep?’ I ask Hovhannes.

‘*Ayo*. The bey left with food and most of our flock. But we were alive, praise God.’

‘Praise God,’ the priest says. The holy man begins to chant a prayer. The group intones the responses, then a shuffle of families prepares for the night’s rest. It is the last perfect peace we know.

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As I lie awake in the dark, my heart feels heavy with doubt and fear that *Hayr* Aram's homilies will be a dying light against the nameless shadow that steals across our land. His prayers call for a simple faith in God that goes before all other concerns of the body and mind, including the need for food, water, and shelter.

*Can faith alone sustain us?*

Innocence is gone. Home for me beyond this day is a dream. I am a blade of grass, pulled from my meadow. I can never go back.

No longer will I dance the *Terendez*.

I will never lie in the ground of my ancestors.

***Morgenthau***

***Washington D.C.***

***1920***

I believe I did my best, but in the end, my work in Istanbul and back in Washington wasn't enough.

The self-appointed role of peacemaker cost President Wilson almost everything. His ambition to shepherd the Armenian dream of an independent homeland to fruition died on the vine. The Allies' attempts to break up the Turkish Empire played into Mustafa Kemal's hands. Turkish nationalism did the rest.

I pushed hard to make a difference in the lives of innocent people whose worlds were shattered, but in the end, the demands of dictators and demagogues won over decency. The selfish interests and deals of Congress made sure that the dispossessed survivors of a great atrocity would find neither solace nor recompense.

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Every day of my three years as US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, I entered my office, crossed the thick Persian rug to the window, and took in the majestic Istanbul skyline with its splendid mosques and public buildings, and the busy waters below where the steamers were just as packed as those in New York. I admired again the vibrant maroon in the rug before sinking into the black leather chair at my desk, which was a work of art in polished wood. I would ask myself: *how can such beauty exist in a land of such cruelty?*

Interior Minister Talaat Pasha ignored my objections and appeals for civility. My German-Jewish parents had raised me to be courteous and tolerant. The daily crimes against

Christians from 1913 appalled me. First Secretary Phillip, who had been there for quite a while before my arrival, became familiar with my outrage.

The president appointed me consul because of my Jewish heritage, it seemed. Being Jewish was supposedly a bridge between Christianity and Islam. My Jewish sensitivity to persecution gave me no choice but to speak out.

‘These men are not of the Mohammedan faith, Phillip,’ I fumed. ‘They are atheists. They have no respect for human life. They oppress Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian folk across the entire Ottoman Empire.’

‘I warned you, sir,’ Phillip replied. ‘The Turks have their own methods.’

‘I comprehend their methods, Phillip. I do not comprehend their motivations. To be addressed as *Pasha* is an honorific that accords respect, you advised me. But I see nothing to respect in how Talaat behaves towards the Empire’s Christian minorities.’

The Empire was in poor shape after the First Balkan War, and the ironically titled Committee for Union and Progress rose to prominence. The iron-fisted *Pasha* triumvirate of Talaat, Enver, and Djemal had come to power as leaders of the Ittihadist party a few years earlier and reduced the caliph to the status of a puppet.

I began to comprehend what they called *sevkiyat*. Originally, it was an innocuous term for removal of refuse, or shipment of goods from one place in the Empire to another. When incorporated into Talaat Pasha’s war-time Displacement Law, which he had recently rushed through the Ottoman Cabinet, the movement was not of goods, nor of rubbish, unless you thought of Armenians and their fellow Christians in that way. In all my years of public service, I never felt so helpless, nor so appalled, as I did in the face of the Ittihadists’ cruelty and moral bankruptcy.

My desk groaned under never-ending despatches from our people all over the Empire and missives from our many American missionaries. I remember feeling ill as the unholy

travesty unfolded before me. Oscar Heizer in Trebizond told of drownings in the Black Sea, where boats full of men were despatched offshore, then sunk with everyone on board. Leslie Davis in Kharpert had witnessed mass executions. Jesse Jackson in Aleppo sent a constant stream of evidence that hundreds of Armenian people were being murdered daily.

The murders and evictions from villages only started en masse in the month after the April 25 invasion of the Dardanelles. The Ittihadists used their defence against the Allied Gallipoli offensive to divert attention from their crimes.

From eyewitness reports, it became clear to me that a campaign of race extermination was in progress under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion. This so-called rebellion was largely stamped out in the *vilayets* of Erzerum, Kharpert, Bitlis, Diyarbakir and Sivas after all the men were removed.

Suddenly, Armenian farmers and their families who had lived in Anatolia for countless generations seemed to threaten the Empire's purity by worshipping the wrong God. Ordering all the old men, women, and children onto the road towards the Mesopotamian desert with no food or water was Talaat's way of executing *sevkiyat*. They were to be *resettled*, as he put it, under the war-time Displacement Program. Likewise, the Assyrians, and the Greeks along the Black Sea. Families evicted from their ancestral homes were marched to a near-certain death in the Mesopotamian desert.

Minister Talaat behaved as if he had executed a masterstroke, by making care for the so-called *sevkiyat* optional. By denying deportees food and water, the Empire would save resources. It was nothing less than legalised destruction of body and soul. It was nothing other than the murder of a whole race of people.

'As the enemy could be anyone, then everyone is suspect.' Talaat said this to me in all seriousness before the Armenian resistance in Van, when the incoming governor of Van *vilayet* tried to call up able-bodied Armenian men to reduce the number of potential

defenders. 'Bad things happen in war. If Dashnak insurgents had not rebelled in Van, in the east, battle casualties could have been avoided.'

It became clear that none of Talaat's deportation policies were born of hasty decisions, but of careful and prolonged deliberation on the matter of crushing the Armenians. They had already disposed of three quarters of them, as he put it.

Phillip, ever the diplomat, advised me to look at it historically from the Turkish point of view. The Dashnaks were a force to be reckoned with. They were formed in 1890 because of an Armenian Nationalist movement that evolved thirty years earlier. Their avowed aim was the establishment of an Armenian home state in the east of the Ottoman Empire, in the areas already populated mostly by ethnic Armenians, to find security for those who had been persecuted and treated as second-class citizens. From Talaat's point of view, they were arguably traitors to the Empire, a thorn in the Committee's side, all preventative measures becoming mandatory.

Groups of Armenians in the east armed themselves to defend cities like Van. If they held Van, the Ottomans were vulnerable to a Russian military offensive. I could see the strategic importance of Van in the east, in both the war against Russia and as a potential centre for an Armenian state. But the bloody-mindedness burnt me.

Why not cede a small part of the Empire for an Armenian state? And while it might be fair to say that the Ottomans never defined themselves as such, why not be seen as peaceful and conciliatory? But to throw troops at a pointless bloodbath in Van - and to murder civilians in its aftermath - are not the acts of a ruler who wishes to make best use of his resources. Hanging the *Dashnak* leaders in Sultan Bayazid Square in June of 1915 was not the act of a civilised leader.

Talaat told me in one of our later meetings that traitors were still abroad, and that General Andranik was recruiting again in Tiflis.

‘Suppose a few Armenians did betray you,’ I put to him. ‘Is that a reason for destroying a whole race?’

He just gave me that blank look; I had come to know it well. Later, he told a reporter from Berlin that the innocent of today might be the guilty of tomorrow. By then, Aleppo was bursting at the seams with refugees from the road, walking scarecrows not yet dead. Consul Jackson’s reports still came in, but the local authorities intercepted our mail. Our main source of intelligence was gone.

Those Armenians were a hardy lot. There were incredible stories passed to us of resilience and courage, as survivors clung to life. Some of them – apocryphal, maybe – mentioned the heroism of a young nurse in Aleppo dubbed The Angel, but no one could tell me what became of her after Talaat ordered that city scourged of all Armenians.



Talaat alleged he wanted to transform Turkey into a modern, progressive nation.

The nerve of the man staggered me. He wanted us to give money raised privately for Armenian relief to the Turkish government. In my view, the criminal acts of its leadership and its denial of wrongdoing would ensure Turkey remained among the most backward and reactionary places in the world.

‘Technically,’ Phillip reminded me, ‘We have no right to interfere all.’

True, the treatment of its subjects by the Ottoman government was purely a domestic affair. Our hands were tied. I can’t tell you how much our impotence upset me.

I didn’t think Talaat could do any more to shock me in our final meeting, but he did. He told me he had authorised Governor Renda to remove to the desert every family with a husband or father, required them as railway workers, and banned all photographs of *sevkiyat* in transit. Road workers and their families had already been moved on. Then, he ranted again against *Dashnaks* in Van rebelling against lawful Ottoman rule and the cost in men and

materials to resettle the insurgents. Putting down rebellions in the Empire could be expensive, he told me, but *Sharia* law permitted the extermination of the malignant. The rebels would be better off moved from their native highlands in the East to the Mesopotamian desert. Gifting them food and water would be a waste of valuable resources.

Talaat had no issue with half a million men being executed, or for the Committee to censure – for want of a more accurate term - the elderly, nursing mothers, children, toddlers, and babes in arms with disruptive political and religious views.

He reminded me that Armenian insurance policy holders unable to collect from their New York underwriters would default unpaid life insurance to the Empire, then actually asked me to get the American life insurance companies to send him a complete list of their Armenian policy holders. He went on to discourage me from objecting to the president about the numbers of Armenians he had – to use his word – deported. I am afraid I lost my temper.

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One of the last times I met in an official capacity with President Woodrow Wilson, he wasn't well. I was shown into the Oval Office and when he stood to greet me, his movements were stiff and the strain on his face was palpable. He stood by his desk and swallowed an aspirin with a glass of water. Ever since his stroke the previous year, he didn't need me or anyone else to tell him that his grip on Congress and the nation's affairs had been slipping.

'Are you keeping all right, Mr President?' I asked, shaking his hand. 'There are rumblings abroad, you know.'

'Yes, I know.' Wilson grimaced. 'They refer to my apparent inability to discharge the powers and duties of the presidency. Edith doesn't let me read the papers, but I know.'

'It's pretty hard to keep it out of the press, now the cat is out of the bag.'

'Quite.' He indicated the chair before his desk. 'Please.'

Wilson eased himself back into his chair. ‘You would think, Henry, that our people might be able to set aside their petty differences after fighting a war to end all wars.’

‘After the affront to humanity I saw in the Ottoman Empire, nothing pertaining to religious and racial conflict will surprise me any longer. It’ll sadden me, but not surprise me. I think you have more heart for the fight than I do.’

‘Henry, the ticker gave out just as it was all coming to a head. Twenty-nine cities by train, all to convince the American people that the League of Nations was the way we could ensure lasting peace. Then... strikes, violence, the Spanish flu pandemic... and the race riots.’

‘We’re all equal in the eyes of God, Mr President.’

President Wilson’s imperfect past record on race relations, given his Southern upbringing, still dogged him, while my time as Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and my Jewish heritage gave me a head start on racial disharmony. He shot me a knowing look.

‘You know well, Henry, that I wished with all my heart that Congress and the country could assent to our assuming trusteeship for Armenia. You and Caleb Gates got us so close last year to endorsement for the military and relief missions in the Caucasus.’

‘But the Republicans blocked us in the Senate, just as they blocked the League of Nations last March.

‘And now we’ve pulled out of Anatolia,’ I lamented, ‘along with the British and the French. We hoped that sanity might prevail in relation to Armenia, but we didn’t know that the British would hand over jurisdiction of Cilicia to the French, and that the French would cave into Kemal in Marash. After Versailles, the French High Commissioner in Syria and Mustafa Kemal held the meeting, in secret of course. The French Army withdrew from Cilicia at the end of 1919. Now we have Sèvres, a treaty not worth the paper it was written on.

‘The Ottoman Empire will not disband. It will become reborn and rebadged under Kemal. Last February, a few of our people distributing aid to the survivors witnessed Kemal’s men murdering ten thousand Armenians in Marash, as if they were somehow a threat to the new regime. Another ten thousand were slaughtered in Hadjen, and many more at Killis, Aintab, Adana.’

‘What is wrong with these people?’ Wilson murmured, suddenly looking very old and frail.

‘It beggars belief, Mr President. They called these disasters inevitable consequences of war and military actions to quell uprisings—same lines as in the war years. After all those poor Armenians have been through, now there’s no guarantee for them at all. Our mandate is dead. Now they’re all on their own... and, if there were no Kemal, if the Turks had capitulated completely, they might have been forced to accept terms, the borders could have been rearranged, and the republic of Armenia might have some hope.’

‘It will remain one of my regrets,’ Wilson said, ‘that we couldn’t do more for the Armenian people.’

‘When I was in Poland last year, I attended the service for Jewish victims of the Pinsk massacre. You know, Mr President, that was the first time I saw for myself what the collective grief of a persecuted people looks like.’ I had to pause and take a sip of water. It still tore me apart inside.

‘Your report on mistreatment of Jews in Poland made compelling reading, and that is what I wanted to talk to you about. Our Near East initiatives may have failed, but we have learned something to take with us for the future.’

‘Fighting for peace.’ I allowed myself a restrained smile. ‘Historically, the Poles have treated their Jewish citizens badly, and they are aligned to a man with our own Anti-Zionists.’

‘My friend, I don’t think I have a lot of time left.’

‘Oh, come now, Tom.’

‘Let me finish,’ the president insisted, with a faint grin at his half-forgotten given name. ‘You said it yourself. Rumbblings abroad, and so on. I think your work is not done. We need the Poles onside. Who knows what’s coming from Soviet Russia?’

‘As my report said, the excesses stemmed from a widespread Polish anti-Semitic prejudice, aggravated by the belief that Jewish inhabitants were politically hostile to the Polish State.’

‘Your vision and leadership will help contain excesses against Jews,’ Wilson affirmed. ‘Your advocacy for Armenians led to our plan for universal national and religious self-determination. I’m counting on you to go on fighting the good fight.’

‘Mr President, I’ll do my best. Hopefully the Jewish race will not have to suffer in the future as the Armenians have done.’

### *Anoush*

### *Anatolia*

### *May – August 1915*

The horsemen thunder into the village at dawn and torch the outbuildings with their burning brands. The storm is in Marash. Smoke and flames smudge the sky. Men run in all directions. Bellowing oxen spill outside. Kurdish herdsman drive them clear with whips.

Papa is first outside our house, running to his herd. ‘You men! They are my animals. This was not part of the agreement.’

Two herdsmen turn. ‘Agreements change, *giavur*,’ one barks. An ugly grin splits the other's leathery face.

More Kurds materialise between Papa and our livelihood. My brothers try to get to him. He shouts their names: ‘David! Harut! Rafik!’

Two herdsmen throw Papa to the ground. A boot stamps down on his face. David hurls himself at the man whose boot is on Papa's face, but strong hands trap and pin his arms. A rifle butt slams into his head. He thrashes about like a young bull tangled in barbed wire. Harut is clubbed to the ground and Rafik freezes as a soldier in an Ottoman uniform points a gun at him.

In a few heartbeats, our lovingly crafted peace is shattered. There is nothing now but beaten men, burning buildings, black smoke, wailing women, crying children.

Two Kurds haul Papa to his feet and shove him towards a ragged line-up. A column of the village's young and middle-aged men forms in ten minutes under the whips and clubs of the hired thugs. Fear reduces the men to silence.

‘Leave us alone!’ I know Mama's voice anywhere. ‘Leave us alone!’

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Papa and David find themselves lined up next to one another, with Harut and Rafik nearby. Guards stand before them with rifles poised. Behind me, the women and children of the village continue to wail dismally.

I lock eyes with the officer on his mount. The white Arab stallion prances and paws the ground as if anxious to be on with the deathly business in hand. At first, the absence of the multi-coloured tunic confuses me.

‘What did you do with my man?’ he inquires, almost as if flirting. ‘Where is Rubar?’

I lift my chin and stand, hands on hips, my heart hammering. ‘Why are you doing this, Ibrahim bey?’

He smiles, showing perfect white teeth. His eyes remain black, enigmatic. ‘Answer my question. Where is my man? What happened to Rubar?’

‘You answer my question,’ I demand, glancing here and there at the hell around me and trembling uncontrollably. ‘Why are you doing this? And where is my sister, Anahid?’

Ibrahim looks down his nose at Papa. ‘Did you not teach this daughter of yours manners, *giavur*?’

‘There is an agreement,’ Papa cries. His voice falters as Ibrahim’s men begin herding his oxen and livestock away, along with those of other village men.

I turn to Papa with my unspoken question, my most outrageous suspicion, too terrible to say aloud.

‘Go to your Mama, *axchiks*. Go, now...’ I turn and run. It is the last time I ever see his face.

I fly into Mama's arms. We cling to each other with Covinar between us, her puppies squirming. ‘They must not take you as well,’ Mama cries as terrified women gather children to them.

Up and down village pathways, further anguish erupts. Voices bawl: ‘Everyone outside!’

Kurds and other irregular conscripts in imperfect Ottoman uniform appear between the houses, shouting, waving rifles with bayonets, ordering women and children from their homes, stealing bread from tables and stuffing their mouths.

A burning brand lands on the thatched roof of the house across the dirt road. The flames catch at once. The family’s *tati* hobbles outside, leaning on her stick. Embers land on her black dress.

Mama seems paralysed. I rush to the old woman and throw dirt on her head, burning my hands beating down the flames. She lies still.

‘You!’ A veteran with a knife-scarred face looms before me as I rub my hands in the dirt to dull the pain. ‘You come with me.’

‘Leave us alone!’ Mama shrieks. ‘Leave us alone.’

I leap to my feet, but the scar-face catches me about the waist. He howls as I sink my teeth into his hand. He drops me, and I sprawl in the dirt.

‘Take that one later,’ the large man with a shaved head orders him, pointing at me. I recognise Ibrahim’s right-hand man, Servan. ‘For the *Effendi*. But get the rest of the women and brats lined up to go first.’ The scar-face scowls but obeys. I tremble at the memory of my only previous encounter with Servan.

There is no waking up from this nightmare. Mama cradles Covinar at the door to our house and weeps hysterically. The village’s men are being marched away at gunpoint, up the hill towards the place on the other side of the small valley where they will dig pits to bury refuse.

‘Out. Everybody out.’ Gunshots reverberate. The sound is deafening. The column of men snakes away, up the hill.

‘Anoush!’ On her knees, Mama clings to Covinar, whose puppies lie dead, blood from their slit throats seeping into the dirt. A whippet-lean soldier in an Ottoman tunic and ragged non-uniform pants laughs cruelly as he wipes blood from the blade of his knife. Later, I learn that many of the *zaptiehs* are murderers, rapists, and thieves, released from prison to do Talaat’s dirty work.

I dash back to Mama and throw my arms about her. She trembles violently.

Gathering by the road that leads south, women and children mill in confusion, clutching hastily snatched up blankets and clothes.

Another *zaptieh* turns to our family home. 'There are some still here,' he shouts.

Now Ibrahim advances on his mount, attended by the big Kurd, the scar-face, and a younger soldier. 'Get in line with the others,' he commands Mama.

Mama lifts her tear-streaked face to Ibrahim. 'Leave us alone,' she begs him. 'Leave us alone.'

'Move,' he barks, indicating the crowd of women and children already being prodded southwards, away from the place their hearts will forever mourn.

Mama stands, suddenly defiant. 'Leave us alone.' She plants herself between Ibrahim and me. My little sister curls into a tiny ball at my feet, her hands over her eyes.

Ibrahim indicates with a brief nod to the scar-face. He begins to cock his rifle, then pauses and grins, a crease of his face far more disconcerting than a mere knife scar. He thrusts forward the younger man, little more than a boy.

'Shoot her,' Ibrahim barks, a direct order to the young *zaptieh*. 'Shoot that woman who will not get in line.'

'Mama!' I shout, tugging at her shoulders.

'Anoush!' Mama cries. 'Stand back!' She raises her arms as if she could stop bullets from hitting us, and stares at Ibrahim. 'Leave us alone. We have done nothing!'

The young *zaptieh* hesitates. Ibrahim glances at him, irritated. He gestures impatiently, a flick of his wrist. The young man raises his rifle.

He squeezes the trigger. My world caves in.

'MAMA!'

Mama steps forward as the gunshot reverberates. The bullet strikes her between the eyes. Her skull disintegrates. She collapses into my arms, blood and grey matter spilling over me.

‘Take the blonde virgin,’ Ibrahim orders the young soldier. ‘Put her in the wagon that goes back to my house. Tie her up if you must.’ He waves in the direction of a large wagon with four farm horses hitched to it, loaded high with the village’s stored barley, straw, cheeses, vegetables, sides of meat, and chickens in wooden crates. Spurring his horse, Ibrahim makes his way down the lane, barking further orders as the village’s women and children begin to form a ragged marching order.

The scar-face darts inside our family home and emerges a moment later, mouth full of smoke-cured sausage. He begins stuffing *lavash*, more sausages, dried fruit, cheese, and greens fresh from the garden into a battered canvas bag. The younger soldier remains, sweating, his rifle at the ready. I continue holding Mama. Blood surges from her shattered skull and soaks my blouse.

‘You heard him,’ the older man barks, his mouth still full. ‘Leave her!’

Trembling violently, I lay Mama down and the sun catches her gold crucifix. Fumbling over two irregular links near the catch, I loosen the crucifix from her neck. My fingers curl around Mama’s crucifix and I clasp the gold miniature of Jesus on the cross to my blood-soaked breast.

Covinar's screams descend to a misery of hiccupping and shuddering. I sweep her into a tight embrace as if to shut out the madness.

A shadow looms over me. ‘Get in that wagon.’

A little way off, the scar-face finishes shoving looted food into the bag. He glances at the next house, straining to go. One of his companions runs inside. Another emerges, grinning, showing three silver coins. He pockets them and darts into the next house, which is not yet on fire. The scar-face seethes as his comrades loot more food and goods. He slaps me hard, and through the shock of sudden smarting pain I feel him grab my left wrist and loop a cord about it, pulling it tight.

Jarred into action, I struggle madly, screaming, kicking, and biting as he grips and twists my right wrist, forcing it forward, adjacent to my left. He loops the cord around it and secures both wrists. The Kurd holds me tightly by the hair at the nape of my neck and gestures to the young man who obeyed the order to shoot my Mama. The boy remains motionless, white-faced, looking like he is ready to puke.

‘You heard the *Effendi*. Put her in the bey’s wagon.’

Covinar wails in fear. The man cuffs the back of her head, a solid blow that knocks my little sister off her feet. She falls and lies still.

Whips cracking, the rabble of nomads, misfits, and convicted criminal *zaptiehs* begin herding the women and children of Marash down the road. The scar-face darts off after his subordinates as they loot house after house, filling their rough bags with fresh food from the tables of innocent families.

The young man aims his rifle at me and cocks it. A round clunks into the chamber.

‘Put the girl in the wagon!’ the Kurd bellows from two houses away, his mouth full of fresh bread as he disappears around a corner.

‘Get up,’ says the young man, staring wide-eyed. He jerks the rifle in the direction of the wagon. I look about and see that the wagon is gone, along the road heading north.

The young soldier turns back to me, close to panic. The sun’s rays light the crucifix still looped about my index finger. He lowers his rifle, snatches the crucifix from me and bolts. The gold will be worth something.

Covinar stirs and sits up, whimpering. I collapse across Mama's still-warm body and rock back and forth.

Whips crack. *Zaptiehs* bellow orders.

After a moment or two, I look up. No one is watching us. Scrambling upright, I beckon Covinar to follow me. We slip inside the house and find Papa’s carving knife. Awkwardly,

Covinar grips it and cuts through the cords binding my wrists while casting frantic glances through the open window.

‘Anoush? They are all going. Anoush?’ Through my tears, I see she is right. I pick up a large bedsheet, my blanket, Mama’s shawl, my towel and wooden comb, and those of Covinar as well. Together we go outside again, wrap Mama's body tightly inside the bedsheet, push it into a partly dug hole for bones behind the house and cover it with soil. I throw our blankets and towels over my shoulder, tuck my comb inside my waistband and look to the heavens.

‘Please, God,’ I weep, as the horror of the morning envelopes me. ‘Please look out for Mama’s soul. And Papa... and my brothers...’

I take Covinar's hand. We blend into the rear of the column.