

Anoush

Anatolia

May – August, 1915

Angel extract – inciting incident

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 herdsman 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 herdsman 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.

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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 ...’ It is the last time I ever see his face. I turn and run.

I fly into Mama's arms and we cling to each other, with Covinar between us, her puppies squirming.

‘They must not take you as well,’ Mama cries. Terrified women gather children to them.

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

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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 the 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 gentle sloping hill, towards the place on the other side of the small valley where they would dig pits to bury refuse.

'Out. Everybody out.' Gunshots reverberate deafeningly. 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

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non-uniform pants laughs cruelly as he wipes gouts of 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 led 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 little ball at my feet, her hands over her eyes.

Ibrahim indicates with a brief nod to the lean 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 the bullets 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.

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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 falls limply back 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.’

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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. He remains, motionless, white-faced, looking like he is ready to puke.

‘You heard the *Effendi*,’ he growls. 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. He 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 no longer there.

It is gone, along the road heading north.

The young soldier turns back to me, close to panic.

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The sun's rays again light the crucifix, still looped about my index finger. The young man lowers his rifle, snatches the crucifix from me and bolts. The gold will be worth something.

Covinar stirs and sits up, whimpering like a whipped puppy. 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 bed-sheet, 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 bed-sheet, 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 and we blend into the rear of the column.

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