

A
PERFECT
ARMENIAN

A Novel

❧ *Keri Topouzian* ❧

HYEVAN
PUBLISHING

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A PERFECT ARMENIAN

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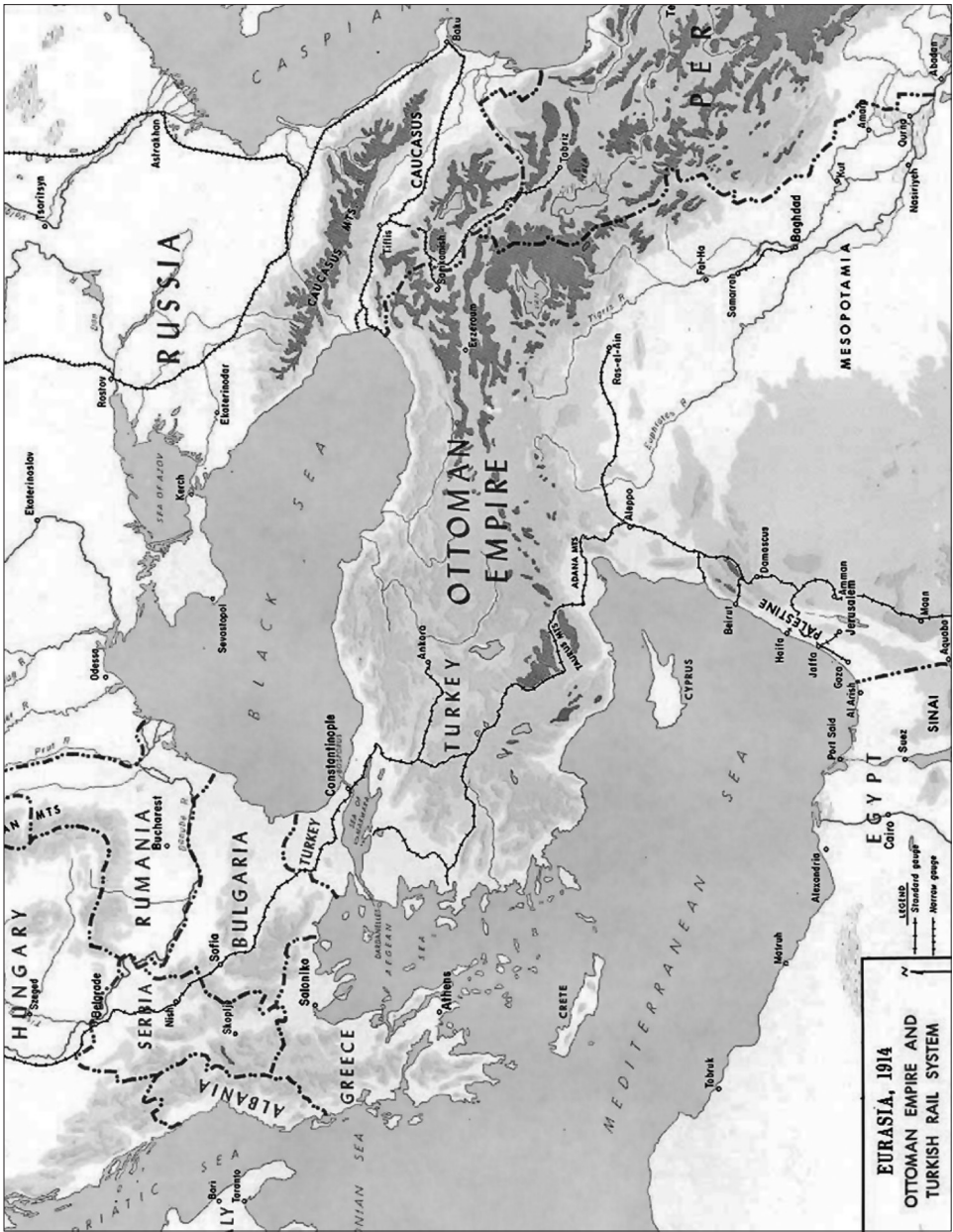
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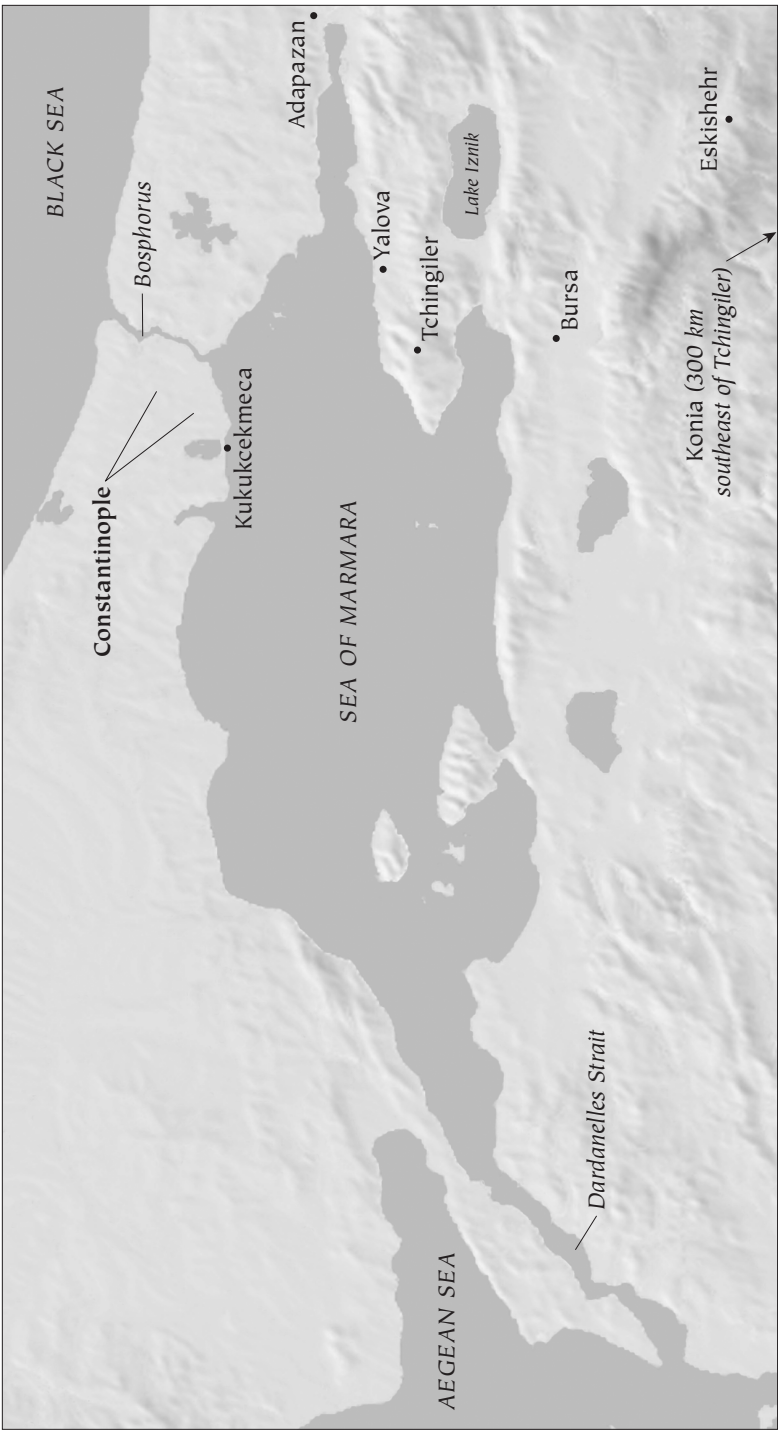
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*I dedicate this book to my mother,
Veronica Norma Topouzian, whom if alive would
have been my biggest critic and staunchest fan.*



Map courtesy of Department of History, United States Military Academy



A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

READER NOTES:

“Chapter of Remembrance” after the Epilogue is in commemoration of April 24th, Armenian Martyrs Day.

My hope is that the maps found in the front of the book will be of interest to those of you who appreciate details.

To expand awareness of Armenian culture, food, language and more, I have compiled a glossary and a character list located in the back of the book.

For more background on the novel, visit our website at www.aperfectarmenian.com.

Thank you.

– Keri Topouzian

INTRODUCTION

MY GRANDFATHER DIED THE DAY before I was born.

I was born on June 25th at 12:12 AM and my grandfather was pronounced dead at 11:11 PM June 24th after suffering lethal wounds from a motor vehicle accident. He was driving to the hospital after hearing that his first grandchild was to be born.

Some tell me that this was a very sad time for my mother because she knew how much her father was looking forward to seeing his first grandchild. But I tell you the truth, I remember my grandfather better than I remember a lot of other people. For when I was in the womb and coming into this world, I saw him as he was passing through to the other side. He was so happy, full of love and gratefulness that he had died on this day because he was able to see and know me and at the same time place his mark on me. I will never be able to forget him or his soul; his consciousness will always be within mine.

My mother believes me but that's about it. Others smirk or say, *awww that's so sweet*, when I tell this story.

But I know what I saw. It's not a dream. It's as real to me as anything else in this world. And I am looking forward to seeing him again when I die. But in the meantime, let me tell you what else has happened to bring this book into being.

My grandfather died almost a year to the day after my grandmother had passed. My parents were in charge of sifting through all of his belongings, discarding what was deemed to be of no use and salvaging what was in some cases to be cherished. This coincidentally included several weapons including handguns, blackjacks and some knives.

But let's go back further to when my grandmother died. During the requiem dinner after the funeral there was a reading of her last requests. One of these was that my grandfather promised to give my mother an old manuscript of his past writings. A project my grandfather had nearly forgotten and which was infrequently discussed. Weeks later, my grandfather fulfilled this wish and brought to my parents' house a large and somewhat filthy cardboard box filled with manuscript-like documents all in my grandfather's handwriting. Hundreds of pages.

"Do what you will with this, but it is from the past and I feel it should stay there where it belongs," my grandfather stated. "Obviously my wife disagrees. Thinks it would be a good project for you...as if you don't have enough to do, eh? I hope you enjoy the journey. I know I have."

Over the years, my mother had slowly sifted through the writings, all of which were handwritten in Armenian. Initially with some help from her father, she compiled the papers and began translating them into English. During this initial year when my grandfather was still alive, there was confusion as to where this story really came from. Was it my grandfather's memoirs or was it fictitious? When asked, my grandfather always said, "It's a story. Some of it is true and some of it...well, you decide."

But the names were of no one my mother had known, yet the places, dates and events she had recalled from the past. Had he changed the names for some reason? And if so, why? Years later we concluded that he was either playing a joke or was concerned that if these writings got into the wrong hands some of his old friends or their relatives could be put in harm's way. My grandfather was always very careful. Some say he was just plain paranoid. I say he was *thorough*.

When my mother became pregnant with me, the translation of the writings was put on the back burner. Then came my birth and my grandfather's death, and the manuscript sat untouched for years. Like an old Tavloo¹ board that had lost one of its masters.

On one of my grandfather's birthdays, she decided to finally reawaken her work and again started to piece together the story. There were times when you could hear her swearing in Turkish while going over the writings. My father would ask her what was wrong. She would always say, "I think it's all true but I'm just not sure. I should have made him tell me! I hate not knowing!"

¹ Armenian: backgammon.

Smudged carbon handwritings, water damage, and poor penmanship made this journey for her long and frustrating. And unfortunately, my mother never completed the translation of my grandfather's writings; I inherited this responsibility after she passed away.

It took me seven years to get through half of the papers and have them translated. What I am telling you is this is only half of the story.

Tavid Kaloustian, the main character of this book, was born in 1893. Funny thing. So was my grandfather.

*Being an Armenian is a merciless task and a heroic enterprise.
It is a commandment, a mission, and a destiny that history
has imposed on us from the depths of centuries. We are the
shock troops of the struggle between light and darkness....
And we are charged with an awesome responsibility.*

– GOSTAN ZARIAN (1885-1969)

“Do not go as a lamb into a den of wolves. That is for the prophets and the martyrs to endure. The same holds true if strolling into a Turkish village dressed as an Armenian peasant. You might as well just throw yourself off a cliff.”

– Yervant Yacoubian

CHAPTER 1

Do You Know Me?

September 7, 1914, Constantinople, Turkey. 0930 Hours

AN ORNAMENTAL DOOR OPENED WITH a whine, as if directed toward its present patron. In walked a tall, white-bearded Kurdish Tribesman wearing a colored palto¹ and fez. From his dress he was a man of stature, at least within his clan. He had walked into a fine goods shop in the northwest sector of Constantinople where silks and fine fabrics were sold, bartered, and in some cases given away to protect the shop's owner.

“May Allah bless this fine shop,” the Kurd slowly said, in a raspy voice.

“And may you be blessed with long life and many wives,” the shop owner replied from behind a display counter of silks near the back end of the shop.

The Kurd shook the dust off his clothes and shoes from his ride through the city and began perusing the shop. He then purposely inhaled to catch the scents that permeated from the walls lined with merchandise, almost erotic in aroma. However, something else had caught his attention. There were two other men in the shop sitting at a carved stone table adjacent to the front display window, drinking amber liquor from a local yet discreet distillery and playing Tavloo.² Both were dressed as Europeans but it was

¹ Turkish: robe or a long wool overcoat.

² Armenian: backgammon.

apparent to the Kurd that they were Turkish gendarmes. At first, they scrutinized the Kurd when he walked in, then continued with their drink and game.

Gendarmes are here in this shop?, the newcomer thought to himself, and then spoke. "Still it is early morning and you two are drinking already! Ahhh, if only I had the time to join you, but I have important business today," exclaimed the Kurd. The two gendarmes tried to ignore him.

"What is the occasion?" the shop owner asked. "A grandson coming of age? A birthday? Marriage of one of your children?"

The Kurd looked at the owner and slowly walked over to the table where they were playing Tavloo. "No, my friends, I am to take another wife! And it is by no means the first. This will be my ninth bride and the youngest of all!"

The gendarmes looked up; half sneered and again tried to ignore the old-looking Kurd.

"That is why I am here today. I am in need of many things, many beautiful things to please my future bride."

The eyes of the uglier of the two gendarmes glistened; he looked up at the old Kurd. "Nothing left underneath that palto to please her, eh?" Both gendarmes laughed and toasted to his wit.

The Kurd just smiled. "Ahhh, but it is not easy being an elder, my half-toothless friend. I have many responsibilities, including producing many offspring. It is a difficult task at my age so I have chosen a younger bride to help me with my duties." Looking at the shop owner he said, "I would first like to look at some of your softest feather pillows."

"On the left by the door," pointed the owner. As the Kurd walked over to the merchandise, the gendarmes went back to their game.

No one noticed that as the Kurd was testing the softness and texture of the fine pillows, he had discreetly reached under his palto, brought out a metallic object and placed it under a pillow. He folded the pillow around his left hand, quickly looked out of the windowed door and walked towards the gendarmes while talking to the shop owner. "This is what I am looking for. How many colors does this fine pillow come in?"

Poofb! Poofb!

Before the owner could answer, there were two quick pops and a flurry of feathers flew into the air. One of the gendarmes fell to the floor. The other just stared at his comrade as he fell. Then his face whirled around to look at the Kurd.

Poofb!

Another muffled pop followed by more feathers. They were both dead.

"Aldo!" The elderly-appearing Kurd grumbled to the shop owner. "Call in the third one that is across at the distillery. Tell him one of his friends is not feeling well and needs another drink."

In reality, this was not a Kurd at all who had entered this fine goods shop but an Armenian by the name of Tavid Kaloustian, disguised to evade detection. Underneath the disguise was a powerfully-built young man barely in his twenties. His face was covered by a dyed white beard and mustache, but without the disguise Tavid could easily have been mistaken for any of the dark-complected races: Southern European, Greek, Arab, even a Turk.

Again Tavid inhaled, this time to take in the smell of gunpowder and blood as they eclipsed the now weaker scents of the shop's merchandise.

Aldo smiled at Tavid. "A pity that the last thing these Turks had to see was your ugly face. And look what you have done to my pillow and the silks! And the Tavloo board!"

Aldo was Tavid's older Romanian liaison to Constantinople's black market. Dwarfed in stature next to Tavid, his features were remarkably similar but faded as if bleached by the sun.

The Tavloo board was covered with blood as were the silks hanging on the wall behind where the gendarmes had been sitting. Tavid had picked one of the largest pillows to muffle the shots of the revolver as he shot both gendarmes in the head.

"My apologies. The board I will clean up. Can you wash blood out of the fabrics?"

"Never mind!" Aldo ripped. "I will be right back with their comrade."

"Make sure you are not standing next to him when he walks in the door. I do not want the bullet to go through him and hit you as well," Tavid remarked.

"Yes, yes. You are always thinking of me. God bless you, Tavid. Could you not have been thinking of me when you ruined those silks?"

Tavid shook his head.

"Hurry, Aldo! We have much to do, today you must die."

Aldo gave Tavid a questioning look and left for the third gendarme. Tavid grabbed a sheet and wrapped it like a blanket around the gendarmes' bodies. Then took two small linens and placed them on their head wounds to catch the escaping blood.

Their hearts are still alive, he thought to himself. Then, quickly he retreated to the opposite corner, out of sight. As the third gendarme opened the door and walked in, he froze at the site of his two comrades on the floor.

Come...walk in a little further, Tavid thought. Aldo, who walked in behind the Turk, seeing that he had stopped in the doorway lunged forward, pushing him into the room where he lost balance and fell in front of his fallen comrades.

Poofb! Poofb! The gendarme jerked and groaned, his eyes locked onto his dead comrades. Then his head slowly dropped, his eyes closed, and they were a threesome once more.

“Lock the door and let us get to work,” Tavid commanded.

Aldo obeyed and closed the shade on the door and front curtains.

“It is a good thing you came on a Friday morning when business is slow. Someone could have easily seen you with all these windows open. And that costume you have on!” Aldo exclaimed. “I have to admit when I saw you walk in I almost thought you were a Kurd. A very ugly one at that. Come now and take it off.”

“How did you know it was me?” Tavid asked, disgusted.

“Your eyes, of course. Your black eyes. Besides, I have known you and your grandfather Yervant Yacoubian for years. And I could have been blind and known it was you walking in by your scent. I can smell the opium, you know. Even through the *chemen*³ and garlic, I can smell the opium. Now then, you mentioned something about killing me as well?”

³ Turkish: a thick and pungent mixture of hot spices used to cure meats.

“Aldo was a rare find. One of my few contacts that I could trust. He was open to new ideas, trustworthy and a good friend. I even taught him how to speak Armenian over the years.”

– Yervant Yacoubian

CHAPTER 2

Informer

“THEY KNEW, ALDO! HOW DID they know I was coming here?” Tavid questioned, but continued before Aldo could answer. “Now, I know you did not tell them. Unless they tortured you. But you do not look like you have been tortured; just short and irritable as usual.”

Aldo shook his head.

“I did tell them, but they already knew. Let me tell you what happened.”

Aldo proceeded to tell the tentative young Armenian, still dressed in his Kurdish outfit, what had transpired over the past three weeks.

“For months now the Turkish port commander on the Northern Bosphorus has been trying to find the sources of the opium exports. Not to stop the flow of opium mind you, but to profit from it. He does not have the manpower to search every ship and cargo, and he suspects some of his gendarmes are taking bribes. So he has changed his strategy to find the growers and their delivery routes. Tavid, he knew you were coming. He has a source from your village or at least someone that is familiar with your village.”

“How did you know this?” Tavid asked, disgusted.

"I have a relationship with one of the port commander's lieutenants. He was given orders to find the drop off point for the opium in the city. They knew that the contact in Constantinople was Romani.¹"

"What shit is this you say?" Tavid retorted. "I can tell when you are making up a fairy tale!" he added, hoping to be right.

Aldo ignored Tavid and continued. "The lieutenant came to me that night to let me know what had happened. He knew I would pay him well for the information, which I did. But I also told him to come back to the shop the next day with three gendarmes and question me about the opium. Threaten to burn my shop down or, better yet, I told him to suggest that if I did not tell him what he wanted to know that he would have the gendarmes strip me down and hold me while he had his way with me. I told him to put on a good show, just do not break anything in the shop and do not even think about actually taking off my clothes."

"I am listening," Tavid snapped.

Aldo continued. "The next morning he came with three gendarmes. The two of us put on a good act and afterwards he ordered his men to watch the shop, two inside and one outside. The lieutenant reported his actions back to the commander, and we have been awaiting your arrival."

"So what did you tell them about me?" Tavid pressed.

"That the delivery was due in about two weeks and you were coming from Tchingiler.² But they already knew that. I just confirmed their information. They did not ask me who you were or what your name was. They already knew."

Tavid thought about what he had just been told and whether Aldo, one of his closest contacts in Constantinople, was lying.

"God damn you! Why did you not try and warn me then?"

Aldo laughed, then paused. "I was not worried about you, you untrusting Ermeni.³ I was sure you would sneak around before coming into the shop to make sure it was safe," Aldo said with confidence.

"Well, what if I had not this one time, Aldo? What if I assumed that I have known you long enough and I did not have to make sure it was safe? What if I just walked into your shop?"

"Who are you kidding? You would never do that. Never! I know you too well. But just as insurance, I had two of my cousins on the roof across the

¹ Turkish: Romanian.

² Pronounced "Cheen-geh-lehr." Tavid's home village just southeast of the Sea of Marmara.

³ Turkish: Armenian.

way, with rifles.” Aldo pointed out the window. “They were instructed to kill the gendarmes, only the gendarmes mind you. And even if something went wrong, your eerie luck would have saved you. Just like your grandfather, Yervant. I have never seen such luck within a family.”

Tavid peered up to the flat roofs with their colorful façades.

“Ohf! Romani gunmen on the roof? That is a relief! They cannot see straight let alone shoot straight. Always drunk.” He continued to think of any flaw in Aldo’s story. He smirked, “Why did the Turks not try to take me in Tchingiler?”

Aldo smiled, showing surprisingly white teeth though partially camouflaged by his mustache. “This is a good question, my young partner. Apparently the port commander was told the village of Tchingiler is off limits.”

“What? By whom?”

“Well, by a Turkish commander in Bursa.⁴ I believe his name is Kalkim Bey.⁵”

“Bahbahm!⁶ Again you are speaking with shit in your mouth,” Tavid muttered.

“Oh yes! Apparently Kalkim Bey told the commander that you were off limits in his territories. You were a spy working for him and if he entered Bursa’s jurisdiction against his authority, the Bey would have the port commander removed from his post. Well, that did not sit well at all. He ignored the threat and sent half a dozen disguised gendarmes to retrieve you. However, they never made it to Tchingiler. They are all dead.”

“Oh? A Turkish commander had a band of Turks killed to save an Ermeni? Not even in Jehennem⁷ and you know it!” Tavid exclaimed.

“No. You are right; he did not have them killed. We killed them as soon as they reached the outskirts of Constantinople. My men and I. Buried the bodies, took the horses and guns, sold them at market three weeks ago. But the commander thinks Kalkim Bey had them killed and now he wants retribution,” Aldo said beaming with satisfaction.

Tavid wanted to reach out and grab his Romanian partner by the neck, but forced himself to subdue his rage and contemplate Aldo’s words.

⁴ A large city in western Turkey not far from Tchingiler.

⁵ Turkish: “Bey” is used at ends of names to signify a provincial governor or officer of high ranking.

⁶ Turkish/Armenian slang: “my father!” Used in the same way as “oh my God!”

⁷ Turkish: hell.

"So it seems I am going to have to kill the port commander too," Tavid finally resolved.

"That would be a good idea. Especially if you are working for the Bey."

"Ahmahn!⁸ Do not even try! You and I both know that the Turk knows as long as I am alive, he will keep getting his share."

Aldo smiled, "Can I not play with your head like you do with mine? Can I not have some fun with you on occasion as you do with me, Tavid?"

Tavid could not hold back a smile.

"Now I have a question for you, my young friend. How did they know to look for a Romani?" Aldo asked.

"I do not know. The informer told them this?" Tavid asked.

"Yes."

"Hmmm. I will have to give that some thought. Maybe this will be of help to me in finding him. Or her."

Tavid then looked down at the floor where puddles of blood had formed. It seemed to relax him. As Aldo viewed the chaos, his anger began to erupt.

"What a damn mess you have made! Why could you not have just strangled them or bashed them on the head with a piece of iron?"

Tavid ignored Aldo and knelt down beside the three dead gendarmes, deftly taking their concealed revolvers and ammunition belts, rifling through their pockets for anything worth keeping or selling. He found some tobacco, a few paper lire, some coins, but best of all identification papers.

"Dead men have no honor with you, do they? How many guns do you need, Tavid?"

Tavid looked up at Aldo, "You never know when they will be needed. Many Ermenis will buy guns and bury them for safekeeping. Besides, why let all this go to waste? I can always sell them if I don't need them. Here, help me take off their uniforms."

"What? I will not! What are you going to do, sell their uniforms too?"

"No, no. Not sell them, keep them, and maybe wear one, if I need a disguise to get out of the city. Why do you think I shot them in the head?"

Aldo shook his head. Even though he outwardly disapproved, he accepted the Armenian's resourcefulness.

"Let's take care of business, Aldo. Then we can talk about what to do with you and your shop."

⁸ Translates as "oh" or "oh my."

“I remember the first time I made Tavid dress in a disguise.
We had to travel through a predominantly Turkish sector of
Constantinople. Gendarmes stopped us not once but twice.
Afterwards, his mischievous grin revealed that he now understood
the necessity to be invisible. And now you cannot get him to stop!”
– Yervant Yacoubian

CHAPTER 3

Resin

“ARE YOU GOING TO TAKE off that Kurdish costume now?” Aldo asked again.

“Not yet. I will soon.” Tavid walked around to behind the glass counter. He removed two three-inch leathered wooden blocks from the bottom of his boots.

“Handcrafted! Made me over six feet tall.”

“A giant for an Ermeni,” Aldo laughed.

“Look who is talking!”

Tavid then took off a sheepskin inner cloak. On the inside of the cloak were dozens of small glass vials, about twelve centimeters in length and nearly two in diameter. Each vial was in its own little pocket sewn into the inside of the cloak and lined with sheep’s wool for protection.

“Like babies in their womb,” Aldo said. “It was a good harvest this year?”

“Of course! Plentiful and stout. Here, look at the color, the consistency.” Tavid pulled out one of the vials from its pocket. Thick auburn-tinted liquid filled the vial. It was resin that had been extracted and purified from opium plants. He turned the vial on its side, then upside down to show Aldo the consistency of the liquid. It barely moved. Turning it upright, he unscrewed the cap.

“Smell how strong it is.”

He handed the vial to Aldo whose fixated eyes mimicked that of a child being given candy. Aldo smelled the opium resin and almost choked, then smiled.

“God’s perfume. Stronger than any liquor. Tavid, can you imagine the state of the church if Christ were born in Armenia two millennia ago and you were one of his disciples? Ha! When He gave thanks, broke bread with you and the rest of his disciples, then dipped the bread in your resin instead of wine, what a wonderful place the world would be, eh? The Turks would be lining up to be baptized!”

Tavid took the vial from Aldo who was too busy laughing at his own wit to pay attention to the open vial.

“Careful! You are talking stupid! Have you been selling all of the resin or keeping some of it for yourself?”

Aldo shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

“I have twenty-eight vials. Each with fifty milliliters of resin. Can you pay me in the usual way?” Tavid asked.

“Of course. Do you want it split up in equal amounts?”

“No. I will need more gold lire this time,” Tavid replied.

Aldo opened one of the glass doors on the display counter and fumbled through the fine silks to find a piece of carbon and some old paper.

“Alright now. Fifty times twenty-eight...3,200 Swiss francs...forty-six gold lire and sixteen diamonds, one carat each. Agreed?”

Tavid thought for a moment and nodded. “Tell me, what’s your price? Who are your buyers? Do you dilute, like many resin sellers these days?”

Aldo did not answer.

“It’s better that I do not know these things. Right, Aldo, my friend?”

Aldo nodded. “Help me move this over. And pick it up so there are no slide marks on the floor.”

The two picked up and moved a heavy display cabinet. Then Aldo reached into his pocket and pulled out a small knife, knelt down on his knees and began prying out two of the wood floor planks. Underneath the planks were the stone foundation blocks of the building. One of the blocks had a barely discernable opening.

Aldo reached into the display cabinet, and pulled out a long key-like metal tool. He placed the key into the small opening, turned and pulled the block out and placed it onto the shop floor.

“Layers to protect layers,” Aldo remarked.

Under the block was payment for the opium, or at least part of it—the gold lire and diamonds. Aldo counted out lire and sixteen dusty diamonds, placed them in a purple silk cloth and handed it to Tavid, who in turn stashed them in a small leather pouch. Aldo quickly took the remaining valuables, placed them in a small bag which he placed in a vest pocket under his coat, and buttoned it closed. There was also a small dusty envelope in the hole. Aldo paused before retrieving it and slipped it in his vest pocket. Methodically, he resealed the enclosure and they moved the display cabinet back.

“Love letter, Aldo? Must be very important if you hide it with your wealth.”

Aldo gave half a smile. “Yes, a dear letter from a friend. Now, we can stop at Bank Switzeria before we go to the eastern port. Costel has been there now for almost a month. He has been waiting for me.”

Tavid nodded.

“And now, what do you want to do with these bodies? And for that matter, my shop?” Aldo asked.

Tavid looked around the shop. “If we leave everything as is, the Turks will turn the city upside down until they find us. They will search every ship going out the Bosphorus especially any Romanian vessel. We have to make them think we are dead. And then we have to kill the port commander. This could be enjoyable,” Tavid said matter of factly.

“Enjoyable for you perhaps. What is your brilliant plan?” Aldo was displeased.

“Do you have explosives?” Tavid asked.

“Explosives? What are you thinking? No, not the shop!”

“Listen! We need to make it look like you were shot and then we will need a diversion. Now, how much, and how many detonators? I will need the plunger and enough wire to be about two shops away,” Tavid explained.

Aldo mumbled about his poor shop and led Tavid into the darkness of the back storage room. Aldo again knelt to the floor and pulled out his knife to reveal a second concealed chamber under the shop, this one larger than the first. Aldo pulled out a large filthy wool blanket and placed it with a *clunk* on top of an old marble table. Opening the blanket, Tavid saw all he had requested and more.

“Eleven sticks left. Only five detonators though. Here is the plunger and wire. I paid a fortune for these, you know!” Aldo hissed.

"Are you giving me these as well?" Tavid asked, pointing to two revolvers and a box of ammunition.

"No! I need those to protect myself from you." Taking the revolvers and ammo from the blanket he placed them on one of the shelves, then took an elongated item out of the blanket which was wrapped in its own thick cloth.

"Here. This was your grandfather's. He asked me to give it to you when I thought you were ready."

Tavid looked at Aldo, and grabbed the bundle. Inside were parts to a rifle: stock, firing mechanism, three clips, barrel, scope and three large boxes of ammunition.

"Careful! Do not drop it. Let me show you how to put it together. I had to take it apart so it would fit under the flooring," Aldo explained.

Tavid nodded, still staring at the rifle. As he watched Aldo assemble it he stood, remembering his grandfather Yervant. How much he missed him. It had been months since Yervant Yacoubian was killed in Bursa by two Turkish lieutenants greedy for more than what his grandfather was bribing them.

God damn them, he thought. He remembered finding his grandfather's body. Tavid hated the Turks. They had taken away his grandfather, his mentor, his companion.

Aldo softened his gaze. "I miss him too."

Tavid nodded. "At least the Turks who killed him got their just reward when their commander found out that my grandfather was dead. No more bribes, no gold, no opium for the commander. I wonder how long it took before the two of them died in Adapazari prison? For treason, yes? Treason." Tavid smiled to himself.

Aldo looked up at Tavid while reconfiguring the rifle.

"Yervant is...was one of a kind. A trustworthy brother, a wonderful kindhearted man and a son of a bitch all at the same time."

Tavid looked at Aldo, hesitated then grinned.

"You mean a shrewd businessman."

"Yes, but son of a bitch sounds better."

Aldo finished assembling the rifle.

"Here it is. German made. Uses these 7.9 millimeter shells." Aldo held one in his hand. "Take good care of it. Your grandfather paid a small fortune for this rifle."

As Tavid picked it up, he checked the weight then tried looking through the range scope.

"Never used a scope. What is the range of accuracy? How much of a kick does it have? Is the ammunition fresh? How loud is..."

"Wait! Just wait a minute; I do not know. I have never fired it. However, from your grandfather's bragging it sounds like it was accurate up to eight hundred meters. Besides that, I only know the name of the rifle and how to put it back together. I am sure you will have a chance to play with it later."

Tavid examined the lettering on the rifle.

"Ahhh! A Mauser like my own. But it's more modern, and called a Karabiner.¹ That must be its name. Almost sounds Ermeni."

Aldo smirked, "Yes, of course. Armenians are always trying to take credit for everything."

Tavid ignored him. He took the rifle's strap and swung it over his right shoulder. He then took the ammunition and placed it in pockets on the inside of his overcoat. Next the explosives. He took out three sticks, blasting caps, the wire and the plunger from the blanket, and rolled the rest back up and tied it tightly.

"Alright, here is my plan," Tavid proceeded. "First, we cover you with blood from those three on the floor. I fire a few shots; you stumble out of the front door wounded in the head and the chest yelling for help. Make sure you are at least two shops away on the other side of the street. I will be two shops down on the opposite side watching for you. Then I will blow up the shop."

"No, not my shop!" Aldo sighed. "My poor shop. This is your fault!"

"It is no one's fault, Aldo! Now, you will have to put on a good show. And what about your two cousins on the roof? We need to let them know what is going to happen."

"Yes, yes, I will call them down, but you will help me load up my goods into the wagon out back. I am not going to let you destroy everything."

Aldo walked to the window at the front door and signaled to his two comrades to come down. He went to the back door of the shop, unlocked it and watched for them. When they arrived, Aldo explained the plan and instructed them to stand guard while he and Tavid loaded the wagon.

¹ The Karabiner was a German rifle introduced into general service in 1898. It was manufactured by the Mauser armory in huge quantities until it became obsolete after WWII.

Twenty minutes later Aldo's goods were wrapped and loaded on the wagon. Aldo also took out a change of clothes and placed it behind the wagon seat. He found his gunbelt, put it on under his coat and retrieved the two revolvers he had placed on the shelf previously. Tavid rigged the explosives, connecting the wires and passing them through the back door. He ran them forty meters down the alleyway into an abandoned shop. Satisfied with his view of the shop, he ran back.

Once back inside, Tavid walked over to the three dead men and retrieved the blood-soaked linens. "Squeeze this one by your heart and then I will squeeze the other one on the back of your head."

Tavid made Aldo open his shirt and shoved the bloody towel inside.

"Ugh! Disgusting! Even their blood smells like it has not bathed in weeks." Tavid grinned and twisted the other towel so the blood ran out onto the back of Aldo's head with most of it running down his back.

"Uuuuhhhh!" Aldo started to shiver. "It is going down too far!"

"What?"

"It is going down into my pants, God damn it!"

Tavid froze then exploded with laughter.

"Well if anyone asks, tell them I shot you in the ass!"

"Sikishmek² Ermeni!" Aldo cursed.

Tavid tried to stop laughing. "Alright, it is time now. Tell your cousins to get back into position and signal when they are ready."

Ten minutes went by and Aldo, standing in the middle of his shop, bent down so he could see the top of the roof across the street where his cousins would signal. After seeing them pop their heads up, he signaled to Tavid.

"They are ready. Let us get this over so we can have breakfast."

Aldo did not notice through the half-curtained window that his cousins did not wave; instead, they were pushing their hands forward and shaking their heads. Aldo only saw that they were in place. He did not notice their warning.

Tavid picked up the plunger, pulled out a revolver, held it in the air and erratically fired six shots.

"Go!" Tavid yelled as he ran out the back door of the shop. Aldo walked to the front door clutching his chest, dropped his head, and staggered out of the shop and started to cross the street.

² Turkish profanity.

"Help! Help me! I am shot!" He yelled in Turkish. As he was halfway across the hard-packed dirt street he heard his cousins on the roof yelling at him, but before he could discern what they were saying he heard a group of horses. He looked to his left just enough to see about half a dozen Turkish gendarmes riding toward him. Aldo tried to keep walking to the other side of the street but the gendarmes were yelling at him to stop. He was about three meters from a storefront on the other side of his shop when he stopped abruptly, pretending to fall dead. When the gendarmes got to him, one jumped off his horse and crouched down to see if he was still alive, turning him over onto his back. Dust and dirt covered Aldo's face and overcoat. He lifted his head, pointing to his shop and repeating in a raspy voice, "I shot him. He is in the shop. He still has the gold."

The Turks turned to the shop, then looked at each other. One of the Turks looked at Aldo. "Is the Ermeni dead?"

Aldo did not answer.

"Is he dead?" the Turk yelled.

Aldo kept his eyes closed and nodded.

"Shot. Him. In. The. Head. Shot. Him. In. The. Head."

Smiling, the Turks left Aldo and slowly started toward the shop.

Aldo had collapsed in front of a carpentry shop owned by two elderly Romanians. Seeing Aldo bloodied in the street, they rushed out and knelt down beside him. One of the men started to weep at the sight of Aldo lying in the street.

"Pick me up and take me inside," Aldo whispered. The weeping stopped as the two men just stared at him. "Now! Quickly!" he said through gritted teeth.

At that, the two older men dragged Aldo with difficulty into their shop.

The gendarmes were too busy watching the other side of the street to notice Aldo anymore. All of them had dismounted their horses and moved slowly to Aldo's storefront. One of the Turks appeared to be giving orders to the others, pointing to the shop. Revolvers and rifles were pulled, cocked and ready as two of the gendarmes entered the shop.

“I thank Jesus that I was not present for some of the fiascos that occurred after my death. Yet through these events, my grandson severely matured. He has surpassed even my expectations. But on the other hand with a teardrop from my eye, I also regret not being there to see these things come to pass.”
– Yervant Yacoubian

CHAPTER 4

Detonation

THE BLAST ROARED THROUGH THE streets like a lightning strike. It was deafening. Taking the path of least resistance fragments of glass, wood and other debris flew out of Aldo's storefront windows with a concomitant shockwave that instantly killed all of the gendarmes and their horses. The buildings directly across from the blast took the worst hit, blowing out windows and sending debris into the shops. After the blast, Aldo's shop imploded, collapsing onto itself followed by a huge ball of dust and smoke mushrooming into the air. Then there was silence.

“Der Voghormiah!”¹ *Maybe I should have used just one stick*, Tavid pondered. He saw Aldo poke his head out of a blown-out window and felt relieved to see him emerge and approach the carriage and horses.

“Son of a bitch! Stupid sikishmek Ermeni!” Aldo muttered to himself. He quickly looked around outside, looking up and down the street to make sure there were no more gendarmes coming to surprise him. He hustled out the back door of the carpenter's shop, neglecting to thank the two puzzled old men for pulling him to safety. Five minutes later he met up with his two cousins and Tavid. Aldo spoke with his cousins in Romanian, slipped them a few lire, and sent them quickly on their way.

¹ Armenian: “Lord have mercy.”

"If they are your cousins why do you have to pay them?" Tavid asked.

"Never mind! You almost killed me and half of the sector. Get in the carriage and let us be off!"

Both slung themselves onto the old wooden carriage. After retrieving Tavid's horse the two headed northeast toward the port, the vast waterfront district of Constantinople.

Constantinople's port area was like a city within itself, with numerous ships entering and exiting through the Bosphorus² importing or exporting goods to other countries. Passenger boats and a few smaller military vessels were also anchored close to shore. With the coolness of autumn, the stale odors of over-ripened cargos from overdue voyages rose into the air.

Aldo's brother was a captain of a smaller merchant ship that flew a Romanian flag. He had been in Constantinople for a month, waiting for Aldo. His brother was the last cargo. All other purchases, deals and transactions had been completed; they were headed back to Romania where the goods would be sold. To elude suspicion from the local authorities, the ship was docked in one of the least bustling and desirable areas of the waterfront district.

Aldo's adrenalin began to subside. "Well, I bet you're sorry right now. Not because you almost killed me, but because you blew up all those precious uniforms that you could have had! Ha!"

"You are right. It makes me sick. Well, the day is young. I still have to take care of the port commander."

"Ahhh, I have news for you, my lucky Ermeni. You just killed him!" Aldo remarked.

"What?"

"He was the one in front of the shop giving orders before you blew it up! That was him. A little surprise visit I assume he was going to give us."

Tavid paused. "You are right. That was convenient. It could have easily gone the wrong way. Maybe we need to be more careful."

"Well I am not that worried anymore, Tavid. Everyone who was informed about us is dead. I doubt that they would have told anyone else, the selfish pigs. Now then, I need to change and bathe before this Turkish

² An ancient strait connecting the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara and separating Turkey in Asia from Turkey from Europe; 32 kilometers long and ranging from one to two and a half kilometers wide.

blood starts to seep through my skin. Then we can go see my dear patient brother, drop the goods off then go to the bank.”

“Aldo, we will go to Bank Switzeria first before we see your brother.”

Aldo was annoyed.

“I do not know if I should smile or be angry that you trust no one including me. Your parents should have named you after your grandfather Yervant.”

“And after we see your brother we will go out to breakfast? I am starving. Maybe your brother will come join us.”

“Are you buying breakfast?” Aldo asked.

“Absolutely! We can go to Eftendelians. I can taste the food already! Fresh warm bread, choreg,³ farm cheese, thick butter, large brown eggs, fresh cream, basterma,⁴ bourma⁵ for dessert and...”

“Ahhh?” Aldo interrupted. “The place we went to last spring? Yes, I remember. Was there something else you wanted that was not on the menu? Perhaps I should say you liked someone more than the food?” Aldo’s smile grew wider.

“What? No! We’re just friends. They have been friends of the family for years. They are almost relatives. I love seeing them all.”

“I thought only Turks intermarried,” Aldo muttered.

“Aldo! I am not getting married! She is only sixteen.”

“What do you want to marry, an old lady?” Aldo remarked.

“I. Am. Not. Getting. Married!”

“Alright, my friend. Say, I have a better idea. I know of another place we could go to for breakfast that has just as magnificent food but the women are a bit old and wrinkled.”

Tavid smiled. “Shut up. We are going to Eftendelians.”

³ Armenian: a delicious braided bread made with eggs, sesame seeds and spices.

⁴ Turkish: a type of cured spicy meat.

⁵ Armenian: a lighter adaptation of baklava that is rolled.

