

Let There Be Bread

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Authors Note:

This story is based on true events. There were several battles during WW1, many well documented, others not so well. One of those often forgotten was the "war of famine," the harb al-muja'a, which took place in the mountains of Lebanon, where it is estimated as much as fifty percent of the population died of hunger. Two of those were relatives of the author.

*"For these past days -- how many? -- it has felt as though the hunger were a hand inside him, thrusting around in the cavity of his chest, reaching up to his shoulder blades, then down into his pelvis. Scraping at his bones."*

*-- Anthony Doerr, "All the Light We Cannot see"*

Arabic and Turkish terms:

inshallah: God willing

harb al-muja'a: war of famine

seferberlik [Turkish]: mobilization (for military service)

muja'a: famine

dakheelak: please

jau'an: I'm hungry

tunjra: cooking pot

Sayida; lady, Mrs.

sherwal: baggy pants

labbadeh: a traditional headdress, often in the form of a cylindrical or conical cap

keffiyeh: a scarf, often worn as a headdress

Abouna: Honorific title for a priest, as in Father Joseph

saj bread: a traditional Lebanese flat bread

khouriye: a priest's wife

musellems: cavalry soldiers in the Ottoman military

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,  
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed.  
T.S. Eliot's East Coker*

This is an unpublished work.

Mount Lebanon, Winter, 1916, the War of Famine is in its second year.

*Pulses of light outside a window flutter in the dark despite the daylight hour. Just enough to glimpse ripples of shuddering wings. Inside, three young faces watch their small garden of vegetables disappear from the onslaught. Michael, pensive, grim faced, jaw taut, listens to the diminishing hum with silent anticipation, white knuckled fingers gripping the window frame. With folded arms Matile grips her torso. Tears roll undisturbed to her neck. The hulking, taller, thick limbed Milhem stands well behind them with averted eyes and furled brow, hands clasping his ears. Soon only the gnawing reminder of incessant hunger will remain.*

### **1. No Food Tonight**

There was a time when twelve-year-old Michael Mansour looked forward to growing into adolescence. Before war came to the mountain. Before the famine. When papa let him drive the wagon filled with quarried limestone bricks for the walls of their house. And climb onto the roof to help him set the red tiles, fresh from the kiln in Bikfaya.

It was in the same way he watched for the sun to slip below the swollen lip of the mountain and darken the deep gorge in the valley below their house. Because it signaled his father's return from the market intoning a solemn chant and swinging bags of food like the priest at the monastery swung the thurible's chained incense. Mama said he was being sacrilegious. But he did it because it made Milhem laugh. Before the boys from the cemetery. Before the locusts. Hope for such a thing was possible then.

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“They’re gone.” Michael lowers the curtain on the bubbled glass window his father installed before the war. Lingering gasps of fire peek through a small iron door sprinkled with flakes of rust. Mariam feeds her baby under blanketed breasts. She looks up with eyes hollowed in the glare of a lonely electric light bulb and surveys the hopeful faces of her oldest son, fifteen-year-old Milhem and nine-year-old daughter, Matile. “See, God answered our prayers,” she says. “They won’t return, inshallah.”

Michael turns away from the window. “Mama, there’s nothing out there left for them to eat.”

She looks over with a faint smile. “The Pasha rewards those who collect twenty kilos of their eggs,” she says and shifts the baby to her other breast to try again. The eyes of Michael's older brother and younger sister dance in the glow of the fire in the Franklin stove’s dark belly. In Michael's eyes, a different dance. The ebb in the fire’s embers and the tilt of Mariam’s head toward the baby in her arms appears to shorten her narrow nose and leave a shadow in her sunken cheeks. The flesh under the pale skin of her face has melted to bone and makes her jaw and chin seem sharp and brittle. *Why don’t they see the darkness under mama’s eyes and how sad she is?*

Milhem senses Michael's thoughts, as he often does, and leans his head on his mother’s slumped shoulder. Not yet fifteen he has a dark stubble too short for him to shave. Matile, still nine, flushes soft pinks and yellows from the fire’s glow, her milky skin undisturbed by the puberty which

Michael knows has begun to ravage his own. Milhem takes comfort from mama, when he needs to give it, Michael concludes. And Matile is too young to know the difference.

“Mama, will nighttime bring them back?” Milhem asks. He retreats to a windowless corner, his usual place when dusk deepens the valley floor below their house.

Michael says, “Doesn’t matter, you’ll hear them first.” Milhem repeats, “Hear them first.”

“Yes, before,” Matile says. “Against the window.” She folds her arms over her chest again for warmth and protection. In the same way, Michael recalls, she clutched her body when their drumbeats on the window's glass reached a fever pitch.

For Michael, the only reward from the Pasha and his European war is more hunger. “Mama, the locusts have taken their eggs with them. Let him pay us instead to collect the dead ones to eat. And save what's left of the olives in the hills.”

“And while you complain, we'll lose our fire soon,” Mariam says. “It’s time for the mattresses. Milhem, go with your brother.” Michael and Milhem go into the house's single bedroom for the four stacked mattresses. They pull two into the living area, where their mother and the baby Wadih sleep with Matile. “Come on Milhem,” Michael urges, “grab the other side.” Milhem takes no notice of the condescension in his younger brother's order. It is the way it is. They lay out the others in the bedroom and prepare the blankets.

During the winter months the receding sun and the barren wisteria's spidery tentacles framing the outside of it draw strange shadows on the room's opposite wall. During such times Milhem places his mattress in the center, away from the wall and back from the window. Across the valley, homes still bask in sunlight and Michael reminds him, "See how happy those houses are." Milhem does not look past the bedroom window, bloodied by the locusts, and only narrows his eyes, "Can houses be happy?" But the tinged yellow haze often invites him into sleep before deepening shadows overcome the tallest pines and engulf the valley floor.

Michael has not thought much about the movement of the sun across the valley. Except when it rises above Mt. Sanine, to proclaim its authority over the mountain villages. And at the end of the day when it retreats behind his house to drape the Chreen in shadow. It reminds him of the clothes his mother sews for him. When he first puts them on and when he takes them off. It is in the time between those two events when he doesn't think about them. Even when they keep him warm, or when the sweat they hold makes him cold. *Like Milhem, how I know he is there when he wakes up and when he goes to sleep, but during the day not thinking he is there at all, shy, fearful, and driven to silence by the winter gloom. And the cemetery boys.*

Matile steps into the bedroom, tightens a blanket around her shoulders, and turns her eyes from the window. Her fading facial freckles lost in the growing shadows, her deep green eyes plead, "Michael don't let them return. Please." He pulls her tight against him. "Go sit close to the fire, with mama." *Before the war, she teased me all the time. I laughed at her clever tricks. Milhem*

*was too serious for them. Now she depends on me more than Milhem. Mama didn't depend on papa before he left, or anyone else. Will she grow up to be like mama? Will I?*

He isn't ready to sleep and turns to Milhem, "Come outside with me." Milhem moves back toward the bedroom, "Nnn no. No." Michael has already stepped outside to survey the perimeter of their house. Red clay tiles stacked nearby, some turned upside down, cradle dead locusts in puddles of rainwater. And sometimes lost memories. *The walks with papa into Bikfaya to check the kiln hardening the clay. And the time when papa drove the wagon sagging from the tiles and prodded the haunches of our bay mare along the way. Before a soldier, who liked the horse's black legs, mane and tail, took it away. The mare whose colt was to be mine. Papa promised. But it took too long to be born. And we needed the money to finish the house.*

Michael remembers. *Papa built it with a fine door from the trunk of a cedar. It's smaller than the houses in Brumana or Bikfaya, but it has stones chipped from the mountain, two windows of glass from Beirut, two electric light bulbs, and a roof of heavy tiles. It will hold back the locusts. And I will help papa add more rooms because I'm older now.* When he returns, he tells himself.

He recalls, too, his questions during the home's construction. And his wish for a door in the back wall of the bedroom where he and his brother sleep, so they can leave without being seen. A door near where a water pipe spigot over the outdoor stone sink waits to be plumbed into the house. *But Milhem doesn't want the door there. He's afraid someone will enter through it, someone from the ravine below.*

“This is the bedroom, for the mattresses and sleeping, so you'll not need a door,” his father had told him. “The big room is for the table and chairs, and for us to sit by the fire. The pipe from the fire’s iron belly will draw smoke to the opening in the wall. See it? Below the overhang of the roof. And no, Michael, the birds will not be able to enter into it.” His father promised, “We'll add more rooms to the house with the money you'll earn when you're older.” *Then the house’s two rooms were finished, and papa left us.*

His is the last of the ten houses in the Chreen, a village connected by a single electric wire wrapped in cotton drooping between wood poles from Bikfaya, the nearest town to have stores and factories. The single unpaved, rock-strewn road like a tether holds the houses back from a sharp drop into the pine-filled ravine. The ravine itself, a wild gorge of heavy foliage and pines, separates the mountain into two outstretched legs from the snow-draped spine of Mount Sanine.

Michael is not ready to go inside so he pulls his keffiyeh tighter around his neck, walks to the back side of the house, and looks up the narrow valley. During the day, Mount Sanine's aloof white peaks are a stark contrast against the cloudless sky. They provide isolation from the turmoil and disease in the Bekaa, and further east, toward Damascus and Aleppo. Now near dusk, Mount Sanine is a dark clot brooding over its hungry villages.

Far below the house where the hillside falls away, Michael once liked to play among the pines and ancient cedars. *But not Milhem, anymore.* There the pines rest in darkness, except when the

sun reaches its apex of the day. It is from where he and his brother brought young pines their father cut and shaped for the house floor. And where Milhem had his worst encounter with the older boys from Bikfaya, the ones who once played in the cemetery. "You left him there alone," his father had scolded, "without Benjamin. Someday you'll help Milhem fight them." Michael dreaded that day. Then the mobilization for the war, the seferberlik, took them away.

The cemetery separates the homes of the Chreen from Bikfaya. When he runs past it on his way to work, he holds his breath. The older boys who played there are gone now, but the stench from untended bodies reminds him of the jackals who often hide between the headstones.

*Locusts.* While still outside, he collects the dead ones near the base of the house and places them by the door. *They're still fresh and will add to our breakfast. Mama still has olive oil and salt to make them tasty. Too bad there's not enough to sell.*

*Saj bread, too. We will need more soon.* The thought draws him into ideas of how he might earn a few khurush to buy flour. *Then I can help mama make Saj bread and the pita, too, on the wood-fired tunjra, like I did before the baby was born.*

*Wood.* Firewood from the cedars and olive trees I could collect to sell. Michael remembers the cedar closest to their home, the one he climbed as a child. The soldier who noticed his tear glistened face gave him the small piece of its trunk which bore his initials. "Boy, the cedars won't survive this war," he had murmured.

From behind the house, he stops a short way down the steep terrain, well above a small ridge, and counts the remaining trees visible in the moonlight. *The pines above the ridge are too young to take. Someday, they'll be large Aleppo's, but by then I'll be too old to climb them. I like the twisting trunks of the cedars, anyway.* The ridge is nearly emptied of the firewood his father stored there each winter. Except for the shadow of a figure which catches his attention when it moves to stand up. For larger pieces of firewood, he would have to climb to that ridge alone since Milhem refuses to go anymore. Michael back pedals toward the house, as he watches the dark figure pace the ridge until it is submerged in darkness.

With the coal taken by the army, the villages of Mount Lebanon rely on trees, especially the cedars, for firewood. Even the olive trees are reduced to withered stumps. The thought of mama's cured olives reminds him of the climbs across the narrow valley floor to the other side with his father and Milhem to collect, cure, and sell the wild green olives. The best olives come from the far side of the mountain, he remembers. *If the soldiers have not cut them down. People would pay a high price for olives from those trees today. But I would have to walk there alone.*

To feed their fire, Michael returns to the house with almost two dozen dead locusts, some severed olive twigs left behind by the soldiers, and three hacked cedar branches. But no olives. *Matile and Milhem will be happy with what I've collected. So will mama.* He knows they need the warmth from the fire to draw them into an early sleep, since there will be little food for them to eat. And somehow, he knows he will dream of that dark figure on the ridge.

## 2. Brumana and the Soup Kitchen

Michael's premature beard and muscular upper body give him an older appearance. His neck and shoulders betray muscles he often uses to haul bales of tobacco leaves around the factory where he works. He no longer stretches to squint through his bedroom window into the sun breaking above the mountain. Or peer into the shadows of the canyon to catch sight of the owls, hawks, and vultures diving for their afternoon meals. This new morning, near the stacked mattresses, he buttons the wool vest up to his neck and pulls a jacket from the wardrobe against the back wall.

“Come, eat, Michael. You must leave after the morning chill.” Already at the table, Milhem and Matile sit with their arms outstretched and resting on either side of their empty plates. Matile appears indifferent, but Milhem follows his brother's movement to the table as if his eyes were an anchor holding them together. Mariam breaks the last of the pita bread and distributes the remaining cured olives she hoarded for them to eat at breakfast. Three empty tin containers rest on the table by Michael's seat. From glass jars, she spoons out in careful measures some pine nuts. For the four of them, she then divides two diamond-shaped frittatas, made from a baked mix of chicken eggs, small-leafed herbs, and chopped grasses. “This is the last of them. We have no more eggs. We will save your locusts for tonight,” she says. “In case you're unsuccessful in Brumana.”

Under the stares of his brother and sister, Michael eats in silence. He glares at Milhem. *He could come with me if mama wasn't so afraid for him.* “Why can't he go?” he says. “Maybe he'll see Ben there.”

“We don’t need to talk about that again,” Mariam says.

“Bring Ben back with you, Michael,” Milhem says. “In case you see them ...”

Michael shakes his head. “They’re all in the army now.”

Milhem mumbles a soft protest. “They’ll have guns. Instead of sticks.” Finally, Mariam nods in Michael’s direction. “You should leave now if you’re to return by the afternoon. And stay away from the soldiers. They’ll think you’re old enough for the mobilization.”

Matile jumps up to hug him, her head flush against his chest. Milhem rubs tears from his cheeks. Michael pulls a wool hat over his ears and turns to his brother, “I’ll return before the sun leaves us. I promise.” *He still doesn't believe me.*

Milhem fumbles through his coat until he finds the gloves Benjamin had given him, some of its fingers worn through. Michael says, “No, they’re yours. I’ll keep my hands in my pockets.”

“If you see Ben—,” Milhem starts. His mother intercedes, “You know you’re forbidden.”

“I know,” Michael says. He tightens his coat around himself, grabs the three tin containers, and steps into the bite of the Mount Lebanon winter. The chill puffs his cheeks. He billows them

further to exhale. The vapor escapes from his lips like his father let the water-filtered smoke of the nargile slip from his mouth.

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No one will miss him at the tobacco barn. Little work remains, he is sure. The tobacco leaves saved from the locusts are likely already taken from their drying hooks, stripped of their stems and fibers, and readied for Beirut. He has not been paid in over a month, and his loss of the only job in the family will not change their circumstances. Anyway, he has no choice but to walk to Brumana. His family's need is not the few coins, the Ottoman's khurush, he might earn at work. They would buy little to eat.

As he passes the cemetery, he thumps the empty containers against his thighs in rhythm with the gate of his stride. The dull thuds, like drumbeats, draw a hum from his lips and pull his steps higher, into an exaggerated march. Behind him, he imagines a broad and deep line of Ottoman soldiers in khaki uniforms, thousands he tells himself, who march in unison. With the long cloth wraps of their kabalak helmets flapping in the breeze, they click bayonets into their rifles, ready to silence the jackals haunting the gravestones. With his tongue plating the roof of his mouth, Michael makes the clicking sounds for the soldiers. Soldiers who vanish when he passes the cemetery, then the school, and enters the still vacant streets of Bikfaya. *I'm safe now.*

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After a three-hour walk, he stands in the line of old men and women who wait for food outside a limestone walled home and ornate iron gate. It is fronted by a mix of small pines, ancient olive trees stripped by the locusts, and a barren fig orchard. Just inside the open gate, several tables are arranged around a makeshift grill filled with a furious, wood-fueled fire.

He recognizes two others in line from the Chreen. One is the mother of Benyamin. With stooped shoulders and arms wrapped around her body as if cradling a newborn, she walks by with her allotment of food. "Hello," Michael says. Milhem is my brother."

She stops and looks up. "Ben often said he missed him." Her voice breaks. "Before he died. From the grippe."

Michael recalls him coughing blood the last time he played with Milhem. He looks away, embarrassed. "Oh," he says.

*Ben was shorter than the other, older boys in the Chreen. But he defended Milhem anyway. Then mama asked Ben to stop coming. "The Ottomans are suspicious of the Jews because of their loyalty to the French. It's not good for us, Michael," she had said. "The Maronite bishop was hanged for his French loyalty. And there will be more hangings if the French are forced to leave Beirut." The other boys in the Chreen also were forbidden to play with Ben, especially the ones*

now in the service of the Pasha. *That's when they went after Milhem.* He looks away from Ben's mother. "I miss Ben too," he mumbles. *Why did I say that? Milhem misses him. He was Milhem's friend, not mine.* She turns away before Michael can find any more words to say.

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The afternoon sun struggles behind dense clouds. *There will be no moon tonight. I need to start my return.* His anxiety grows with the slow pace of the line. The servers reach deep with their spoons into four cauldrons brooding over fires in the grill. When they pour, he recognizes a watery mix of cabbage with peppers and barley from two of the pots. From the other two pots come a mix of fava beans and lentils, thickened with rice from one and a mix of okra, potatoes, and mutton from the other. *They have pita bread and saj bread, some pasted with zaatar herbs and seeds, but I have nothing to carry them in. I'll ask for only the fava soup and the okra stew.*

The old woman in front of him frowns at his three large metal containers. He shifts his feet back and forth, despite the woman's stare. *It has turned cold. I have to keep moving. They must not run out.* "I've walked from the Chreen. I hope there'll be enough for five of us?" he says.

"God will provide," the old woman sighs. "You can step in front of me." She nods in the direction of a woman serving from one of the large soup pots. "The woman serving there is an Amerkaneeyee, a Mrs. Kurtaas." He steps forward when they reach Mrs. Kurtaas, who wipes the moisture from her brow and deep creases in her neck. Her eyes linger with satisfaction on each

of those who walks away with the containers she has filled. She wears a white bonnet with a red cross embossed on it and eyes Michael's outstretched containers, "For how many children?" she says. Michael ignores the woman's frown, "Mrs. Kurtaas, it's for my brother and sister, and for my mama, who must feed the baby."

"I see. And I suppose you will take none for yourself," she smiles. The old woman, now in line behind him, steps closer, "I remember him. His father went to Amerka before the war came." Mrs. Cortas nods and fills Michael's containers.

"God bless you," he says and turns to the old woman. "He will come back for us. He promised." As Michael walks away, another server calls out, "Almost finished. We have nothing for tomorrow. Please don't return before the new month."

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The containers clink together with Michael's sway on the narrow mountain path away from Brumana. He listens to the slosh of the liquid in them as he maneuvers around rocks and ruts in the cold hardened soil. *Mama will be happy with the three full containers. Maybe the old woman knows my papa. I should have told her he wants to earn enough to come for us. Papa would break the blockade to return. If he decided to.* And as he picks up his stride, his thoughts drift to before his father went to America. "You will take my place in the tobacco factory, but do not do the cutting," his father had said. "You must keep the job until I send for you. And

your sister will weave silk with your mama. The French love our silk." *For a time after papa left, I earned enough to buy the food we no longer had time to grow. But now, the traders take all the food, and the money buys half as much as it did before.*

Michael's thoughts move through the time since his father left them. The start of the war, the sequestration of all the wheat and coal by the Pasha's troops, even the wheat from Aleppo and Damascus, then the blockade in the sea, and finally the locusts. *There's no bread in the Metn to buy, even with the fourteen khurush a week I earn.* Head down, Michael walks along a narrow portion of the weedy path. *The war in Europe has come to us now. Mama calls it the harb al-muja'a. The war of famine.*

Michael knows the names of some of the warring nations but not the reasons for the fighting. And the names of faraway battles between the English and French with the Germans and now the Ottomans. He knows of the blockade of Lebanon. Because it prevents them from trading their silk for food, his sister and mother can no longer work. *Will the blockade prevent papa from coming for us?*

The footpath into Bikfaya widens. Mist-filled dusk hides the few homes dotting the hill on the far side of the valley. It reminds him of the darkness created by the locusts. *If papa knew of the locusts, or of the harb al-muja'a, he would have tried to return to us.*

He reaches Bikfaya. Solitude hallows out the walkway. Each building along it has shuttered windows, behind which a family lives unto itself, fearful of the grippe, and with the knowledge they will sleep with hunger this night.

*But I'll bring food home. Matile and mama will hug me. Milhem will be relieved to see me. He'll be sad about Ben. And he will not believe me, even when I tell him the war and the mobilization will keep those boys away.*

A mix of fear and anger forces him to turn away while he walks by the homes of the older boys who tormented his brother. *Maybe the war has killed them off already.* He continues to avert his face from their darkened homes. *I don't like going through Bikfaya this late in the day. The sounds will start soon.*

Michael knows them well, the sounds of hunger which draw the saliva from his mouth. They come from the hoarse moans of the old, too weak to scream, and from the infants, whose cries turn to whimpers as the evening deepens. They started first in the Chreen months ago. Now the sounds fill the rutted, broken road through Bikfaya.

He watches for the wolves who often hunt this time of day. *These containers are heavy. If I'm forced to scare them away, I will use the containers to hit them. But I can't spill the food.*

Shuttered limestone houses, mixed with lonely shops under vacant balconies, crowd both sides of Bikfaya's main street. He reaches the school, sullen and fallow since overtaken by the grippe, and then the church and its cemetery. *It is here where the jackals will attack. But we will make these containers last for a week, and tomorrow I will return to my job if it's still there for me.* He swings the containers in a wide arc as he walks. Once past the cemetery, he enters the short but desolate path which borders the houses of the Chreen. Their bleached limestones, with roughhewn bricks remind him of the job he once sought at the quarry. *The stones of our house come from mama's family, but I haven't seen them in a long time. They own the limestone quarry, but no one builds homes today, so they have no work and no food to share.*

The first of the homes appears empty. More than one family lives there, he knows. *The Saliba's are always nice to me, but they must be too weak to leave it.* Their children have grown. Not long ago he saw two of them in Ottoman uniforms. *Maybe, they died already. Their grandparents live there also. Unless they were moved to the school in Bikfaya with the others who coughed blood.*

Despite cloud-filled dusk, the moon struggles to draw shadows like black tongues from each home. It reminds him of the gravestone shadows in the cemetery and of the jackals mingling among them. And of the shadow which often paces on the ridge below their house. As he passes the other houses in the Chreen, villagers stare at him with envy. Some are old men and women too weak to make the journey to Brumana. The grandparents of the Saliba and Kfourri families, and the Aboud clan. He pretends not to hear their voices, strained by hunger and hopelessness, "Dakheelak, jau'an, jau'an." Younger ones watch him with glassy eyes and bony limbs. Some

with mobilized older siblings he once played with before the war and before his work at the tobacco factory filled his daylight hours. He stays near the middle of the road to avoid them, even when it means he is closer to the sticky mix of mud and dung from the horses. And where mothers, some of them Mariam's friends, Sayida Saliba and Sayida Haddad, line the roadside with their babies squeezing empty breasts, he turns his face to the far mountain.

At last, he approaches the tenth and last house in the Chreen, the one his father and cousins rose stone by stone from the limestone encrusted earth. Through the front window, flickers of light from a fire consumes their diminishing supply of firewood. *I'll place these on the table and ask them to sit in the chairs papa made from the cedar. Mama will take her chair and balance Wadih on her lap. Only my chair is too small for me now. I will take your chair, papa. Until you return.*

### 3. Bikfaya and the Man with the Knife

The men at the tobacco barn call it another morning of survival in this winter of the muja'a. For Matile, this means living through another day of hunger, and for the older Milhem, it means a gnawing ache he fears because he does not understand it. It means much worse for Michael, a broader communal craving driven by famine. Famine he cannot turn away from, because it is on every face in the Chreen, in every sallow, sunken cheek under dark-rimmed eyes, every wandering body on the mountain trails. Famine which forces them to pass the cemetery only when the morning cold holds back the sickly-sweet smell of those waiting to be buried.

This morning he and his mother walk the solitary path to Bikfaya. The chill leaves them with the bitter taste of coming snow. "It will be worse this winter," his mother says. Michael nods. "How will anyone grow food, mama?" he asks. Mariam does not answer. Her thoughts are of the baby she has left with Matile and Milhem. But this is her time, the morning when she might find food in the village if food is to be found at all. "I will go with you first, to the barn," she says. "After we pass by the silk factory."

They walk past the shuttered silk factory. *Why go by the silk factory? It was abandoned long ago. And she knows the locusts ate all the olive and tobacco leaves.* As if reading what is in his mind, she says, "We must have hope, Michael. Maybe they've found more leaves to dry and fold. Or they've hidden wheat there from the traders."

Taller than most of the buildings in Bikfaya, the barn's weathered sidings of knotty pine sag under the weight of its tile roof. And their mix of washed grey colors contrast with the limestone buildings nearby. A smell of aged tobacco leaves around its front door provides no doubt of the barn's purpose.

As soon as they enter, Michael recognizes there will be no work for him. Several older men huddle near cans of burning waste, a toxic mixture of enticing warmth and pungent smoke. Only two men appear to be working. One slips a long knife through a stack of leaves. The other ties two seasoned stacks into bales. Despite two missing fingers on his left hand, with deft turns of his remaining fingers, he manages to tie the knots. The man with the knife, looks up at Mariam, "Has your husband returned yet?"

"There is nothing for Michael," the other man says.

"Ha," the man with the knife says. With even strokes of his tobacco darkened thumb and forefinger, he pinches the length of his dark mustache and the bristles on his chin. He furrows his brow and narrows his bushy eyebrows until they come together above his thick nose. "And what business would you have in this place, madam, unless you have a nargile at home to smoke. Your husband told me before he left, he was going to buy one for you."

"Let's go, Michael. We will take our business elsewhere." Mariam turns her back to the man and pulls Michael out the door. Behind her, another laughs and says, "She told you, fool."

“Mama, someday there will be tobacco leaves again.” Mariam smiles, “Yes, you’re right son. There will be better days.”

“Besides, mama, he is angry because he receives no letters from his brother in Amerka.”

“Yes, his anger shows. I’m sure your father’s letters will come when we have mail again from Beirut. Your father must earn money for five of us now.”

“He knows about Wadih now, doesn’t he?”

Mariam sighed. “We didn’t know.”

“He will send for us, mama,” A communal affirmation. As they walk, he pulls her to the far edge of the road to lessen a strong odor. On the other side, an old man pushes a wheelbarrow filled with horse dung. “What will he do with it?” Michael whispers.

“He will clean it to find the seeds left by the horses,” his mother says. “From the seeds, he will make flour for bread.” As if he has heard Mariam’s comment, a young boy nearby jeers at the old man, “When you make your horseshit bread, sell it to the soldiers.”

Inside the Bikfaya bakery, Michael searches for the smell of bread. Mariam reaches for a pocket in her skirt, but the baker waves his hand. “No, Mariam. The Ottomans have taken it. Every qintar in the mountains, from the Metn to the Shouf. It’s gone to the soldiers in Chtoura. Our mill is empty. We have not one shred of grain, not a liter of wheat. What the Pasha hasn’t taken for his army, the locusts finished off. Even Aleppo is starving.”

Mariam and Michael turn to leave. Behind the counter, a younger voice chirps, “Your father has all he can eat in Amerka.” Outside, Michael has a silent plea on his face. *Mama, tell me he will not forget us.*

They turn toward the Chreen and leave Bikfaya behind them. “He will come, won’t he, Mama?” Mariam turns away and continues to walk in silence. “The blockade is only by sea. If he cannot come, he will send for us,” she says. But he hears the break in her voice. *Mama turns her face to the far mountain when she doesn’t like my questions.*

In the short expanse between Bikfaya and the Chreen, several emaciated bodies lay unburied, skulls with anguished faces and boney limbs. “They weren’t there this morning, mama.”

“Death is everywhere, Michael. They should have taken them to the cemetery.”

“Do you remember the skull I found,” Michael says. “We were going to play with it, but papa made us bury it and pray over it.”

“Don’t talk of such things.”

“It was near the mosque cemetery, mama. I told him it might not be a Christian head.”

Mariam smiled. “And do you remember what he said?”

“He told us the head, even just the head, needs God’s blessing.”

After Michael grows impatient with his mother’s silence, he says, “Are you mad at papa for not being with us?” Mariam turns her face away again.

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Cold sunlight follows them into the house. Matile reaches out to Mariam with Wadih, who only whimpers. Milhem pushes some twigs into the fire, then grabs some plates and places them on the table. Mariam has already started to breastfeed. “There’s no more bread, and we should save the rest of our tins until morning,” Michael says.

“No Michael, we will have some of the soup for tonight. They are hungry. Please bring them out.” Matile rushes to a corner of the room and pulls away a pile of blankets. The doors of a small wood cabinet swing open revealing a tin-lined shelf devoid of ice. The drip pan underneath it is dry.

She pushes it aside to expose a small hole in the cold earth and pulls out two containers of soup. She puts back the full one next to the two tins of milk and brings out the half full one. She acknowledges her mother's look of approval, pours the soup into a blackened steel pot, and places it on top of the stove. Mariam nods to Michael, "We need more wood. Before it gets dark."

"It's already too dark, mama," Milhem says. "Don't let him go."

"Michael, please," Mariam insists. The ridge below their house is still in full sunlight. No one is there. If he moves quickly, he can collect some of the remaining firewood and return to the house. Michael slips down the hill, pushing the loose rock with shorter strides as the terrain steepens. Until he reaches the small, flat ridge above the ravine of already darkened pines. *Where Papa has stacked wood to use during the winter months. "Better to leave the wood there, hidden from above and from below, until we need it", he told us. "Instead of near the house, where it might be stolen."*

He tiptoes onto the ridge and peers just below it, to where he waited for the dusk to settle over the valley and hide his return home to tell papa about the cemetery boys in the ravine with Milhem.

*When I recognized the voice but could not see the face. "Why are you waiting? Go. Get help for your brother," the voice said. "My friends will find him. You don't have much time." The voice of the one who defended Benjamin. But not Milhem. Did he not know I feared even his shadow? Even when I heard the echoes from the valley floor of the thuds against his body and his screams.*

He pulls pieces from the stacked wood to carry back, glancing below before resuming his climb. Still trembling from the memory, he approaches the brim of the hill with his armful of branches.

Matile's screams fill the growing dusk, this time real ones, screams not dulled by time. He drops the wood, climbs over the top, and dashes into the house.

A man looks up and lowers the steel pot from his mouth. Huddled near the stove, Mariam clutches the baby, her other arm pulled around Matile's shoulders.

"Ah, Michael, sit down here where I can see you. Be mindful of my knife," the man says. Milhem sits in a far corner, rocking, his knees in the grasp of his arms, pulled to his chest.

Despite the dim firelight, Michael recognizes his drooping mustache and bushy brows. The man from the tobacco factory. The long knife he uses there lays beside him. "Sit down," he says. The fire captures a gleam of sweat on his face. His short beard bristles over cadaverous cheeks.

The man doesn't wait for Michael to move, "Sit down, I said." Michael sits, and the man takes the knife and sticks it upright between his legs. "Just so you know, I'm very fast with it."

"You're taking our food," Michael says.

Mariam raises a hand, "Michael, no."

The man takes another drink of the soup and grabs the handle of the knife. “Yes, and I will take more if I wish. Your father has deserted you.”

“Deserted us,” Milhem says, rocking more now, still curled in a corner of the room. The man sneers at Milhem. “So, he’s the crazy one?” He waves the knife in Milhem’s direction. Mariam, her eyes brimming, pulls the baby closer. The man’s eyes leer into the sparse corners of the house. “This is the last house before the mountain climbs again. It is convenient for us,” he says.

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“The food is ours. Please leave us,” Mariam says. She draws herself upright. The man’s hand leaves the knife handle and grabs her arm. The arm holding the baby.

"No," Matile screams. The man still held the handle of the pot. “Stop that,” he shouts and pulls hard. Mariam tumbles to the ground. “You will have the night with me.”

Matile whirls back toward Milhem. "Milhem," she yells. The man tries to reach for her.

Michael grabs the knife, but the man’s fingers lock around his wrist.

Mariam hollers, "No, Michael, no." Milhem repeats, "No, Michael, no."

Michael pulls hard to free himself, splashing the hot soup into the man’s face.

“Arrrgh,” he growls, and drops the pot.

“Oh God,” Mariam shouts. “No, Michael.”

Michael and the man struggle for the knife. The man stares into Michael’s eyes and forces the knife’s blade toward his neck. Mariam, still holding the baby, reaches for the pot, but the man kicks it away, closer to Milhem. "Milhem," Michael yells.

Anger surges through Milhem's legs. The empty pot, a weapon. He steps forward, grabs the pot and slashes it toward the man's head. The man grabs for the pot, misses. He pushes Milhem. Too heavy to move away, he trips and falls. Into Michael, then freezes, loosens his grip on Michael's wrist, and collapses to the floor.

Michael still holds the knife, its blade crimson. The man struggles to sit up, then grips the scarlet blotches spreading from the laceration in his shirt. His eyelids flutter, and he rolls his shoulders and head to the floor. They watch the blood spread over the man’s stomach, ruby red in the firelight.

It did not take long for the man’s body to shudder and become still. Milhem’s whimper breaks the silence. “Is he d-d-d-dead?” Michael drops the knife. Its clatter on the stone surround of the stove startles Matile. “You stabbed him,” she says.”

“Did I kill him, Mama?” The man opens his eyes and grabs Michael’s pant leg to rise partway. “Oh,” Matile cries. Then he again falls onto his back and into unconsciousness. His breath grows shallow, then stops. “Oh, oh, oh,” Milhem says and retreats to the bedroom.

“Pull him outside, Michael, please,” Mariam says. She places the baby into the box crib. “He would have killed us,” she says. “Drag him to the back of the house and push him over.”

“Help me Milhem,” Michael says. Milhem lurches back. “Y, y, y, you want me to?”

“Come on,” They drag the body through the front door and to the back of the house, then push it over the hill into the darkness. Milhem stares into the abyss before stepping back from it. Michael says, “You helped me save mama. You did a good thing.”

“I did a good thing,” Milhem says and runs back into the house.

Michael lingers outside for some time. *I will go to hell for this. If I make my confession ... will the priest tell the Ottomans?* When he returns to the house, his eyes rise to the icon of the Holy Virgin on the wall above the table. “Have mercy on me, Holy Mother,” he whispers. Mariam pushes a moist rag toward his chest. “Here,” she says. “Help me clean.” Together they scrub the bloodied floor, while Milhem and Matile watch from the bedroom.

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Sometimes Michael will layer several blankets to soften the hard springs in his mattress. That night he uses them all to cover himself. The warmth of the fire in the other room eludes him. From his bed, he cannot see the flames through the open door, only the ebb and flow of its light on the wall and ceiling above him. He watches the flickering light dwindle into darkness and thinks of the cold clumps of damp ash he will find in the morning.

Beside him, Milhem seems indifferent to the cold. *There is no sin to drain the warmth from him. He swung the pot without fear to save me. Mama and Matile have their mattresses close together to keep them warm. Will it save them from dreams of this night, when death came into our house? Will I ever be warm again?*

Between folds in the curtain, the moon lingers in the window, exposing Michael's thoughts. *I have killed a man. I am no longer a boy. Will they take me in the seferberlik and make me a soldier of the Ottomans?*

*What about the man who ate his own children? But they had already died of hunger. The church protected him. Will the church understand I faced an intruder? A threat to my family, my mama? His mind continues to wander. As he slips into reverie, he supposes the dead man will not be found until spring. By then his head will be a boney skull like the one Papa and I found.*

*No one will recognize him or how he died. And so many have died already.* He closes his eyes and rolls away from the window.

#### 4. The Monastery

Michael awakes to the baby's cries and enters the room where Mariam struggles with the feeding. "My breasts have no more milk," she says. "The food from the soup kitchen will last, maybe five more days. Then you must go to Brumana again."

"They will not reopen there until next month," Michael said. *Mama is afraid*. There is little bread and just two last tins of milk buried deep in their cold storage hole below the cabinet.

He walked alone to Brumana. His father will be proud of his success there. And he returned at dusk when the wolves search for food. Since he has grown several inches in the past year, he does not fear the wolves as much as the jackals, who hunt in packs. "Mama, I can go to Zahle today," he says.

"There will be no more food there, Michael. The best chance is in Chtoura. The Pasha's army is there, so the food will be there also." Michael has ridden to Zahle once with his father, but never to Chtoura. "I don't know the way there," he says.

"Don't know the way," Milhem repeats. Mariam grips his hand, "You will stay here with us, Milhem."

“You did a good thing last night,” Michael said. Milhem nods, his eyes turned to the floor. Mariam says, "We were all afraid. It's OK to be afraid of a man like that."

Mariam adjusts Michael's keffiyeh. “Take the path east from the cemetery, the direction of the sun. There will be no villages until you reach the monastery on the hill. We took you to its church before the war.” Milhem says again, “the monastery on the hill.”

“That must be your first stop to rest,” Mariam says. “There may be food there, and you’ll not have to go to Chtoura. Buy what you can. If you must continue, sleep at the monastery first, so you can start for Chtoura tomorrow morning. I’ll prepare some things for you to take.” She opens a small pouch retrieved from behind the stove and pours some coins onto the table.

Michael retreats to the bedroom and comes back wearing his father’s heavy wool sherwal. The baggy pants reach to his ankles and drape over the laces on his cracked leather shoes. He buttons the grey jacket to the top of his collarless shirt and tilts the red tarboosh on his head.

Mariam smiles. “No, Michael, your father’s tarboosh will make you look too old. Take Milhem’s labbadeh and a heavier keffiyeh for your neck and ears. They will keep you warm. Milhem, he’ll return your labbadeh. Won’t you, Michael?” Michael nods and Milhem goes into the bedroom.

Milhem returns with his labbadeh, a conical cap of felted camel’s hair. Michael places it on his head and wraps a black kaffiyeh around his neck and ears, then ties it over the cap. "You look so

much like papa," Matile says. He steps to the looking glass. He purses his lips, the determination in his reflection softens to a smile, as Milhem watches from the bedroom entrance. "I'll bring it back with me," he says and turns from the mirror to Milhem. "I promise to come back. I promise."

"Take the soup and coins here," Mariam says. "I've saved over 100 khurush. And four liras as well." Michael nods. *She grows weaker each day. She looks older, too.*

She separates a handful of coins and three of the liras. "Have some of the soup before you leave." He watches her make a measured pour of the soup from the tin container. "If you steal food, Michael, they will kill you. Three were hanged in Beirut last week. Or worse. They will take you into the army. The mobilization decree is still in force."

"No, mama, they were hanged for selling stolen food." After he eats some of the soup, Michael takes the money and the long knife of the dead man. Mariam gives him a shoulder pack filled with two blankets, a hardened piece of pita, some pine nuts, dried chickpeas, and a tin of milk. "There is also a small tin of the soup," she says.

"No, I will not take the milk, Mama." He pulls the bottle from the pack and gives it to Matile for safekeeping. Milhem grabs him and holds him close for a long time. "OK, let me go now. I have to go."

Matile holds him still longer, tears filling her eyes. "Please don't die, Michael," she says. "Come back."

"You promised," Milhem says. Michael turns to his brother and clasps his shoulders. Milhem turns his eyes away. "You saved mama from that man, Milhem."

"I saved mama," Milhem says.

"You saved all of us. You can do it again," Michael says. He opens the door and steps into the swirling snowflakes.

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After three hours, his pace slows, and his breathing deepens with the climb and elevation. Scattered, undisturbed snowflakes bleach the dirt and rocks. No one has walked the path for some time. He stops to listen. The silence heightens his solitude but highlights the mountain's beauty. *If food is at the monastery, I would see people along the way. I know of Chtoura only as a place where the army is stationed. On the Beirut to Damascus Road, so people will know the direction. It will take much longer, if I have to go there.*

He knows before nightfall, probably by late afternoon, he will reach the monastery and church, where his father took them on special Sundays. *Of course, we had a horse and a carriage then.*

*Before the war and the requisitions by the soldiers.* And the thoughts bring him the desire to turn and go back.

It is late in the afternoon. He curls his toes several times to reduce their tingling. "I should have worn a second pair of socks," he says to a squirrel skipping over to another tree. "How did you escape mama's table?" He still resents the loss of the family's rifle after his father left and his mother sold it for food. He pulled the trigger on it once when it was too heavy to hold without the solid grip of his father. "It would not be too heavy now, and I would wear your fur on my hands," he tells the squirrel. *But we have no weapon against the harb al-muja'a.*

The path breaches a final turn along the ridge, bringing the monastery into view. Hewn from its surroundings, it hangs like a fugitive on a sheer limestone outcrop, the color of its stone façade an effective camouflage to all invaders. A slow climb takes him to a knoll, where several outcrops of ancient limestone bricks support narrow stairs leading to a narrow stone path interspersed with more stairs. The path takes several sharp turns past arched porticos and vaulted ceilings through short tunnels ending at closed doors. By instinct or memory, he's not sure which, Michael takes a tunnel which opens to a wide patio. It's adjacent to a receding hillside which peels back to reveal several buildings.

The monastery appears deserted. He walks the grounds, past a building he remembers, where the black robed monks live. The dormitory, his father told him. He reaches a gathering place near an abandoned fire pit. *Where we took lunches before the war.* Prepared for the summer visits of the

Bishop, and once for the Patriarch, the luncheons bring many families in the mountain villages to the special services. Now, if there is food, there will be a line of people waiting for it. *Where are the monks and priests?*

Beyond the fire pit, a woman stands before a door of a building his mother told him was an abbey for the nuns. *Maybe she will know where I can find food.* But when he turns in her direction, she enters the building and closes the door.

Back at the dormitory, he finds an unlocked door, and inside, several bed frames. A stack of musty mattresses and a mound of folded blankets fills a far corner. *This will do. No one has slept here in some time.* He pulls down a mattress and grabs two of the blankets. He is too tired to find a place to heat his soup, so he breaks up the congealed fat with his knife and shakes the tin to loosen and mix it with the broth. He eats it cold and is soon asleep on his makeshift bed.

## 5. Milhem

I'm not scared. He told me I was. Michael. So did Papa. But I stayed there under the bushes, and Michael ran away He never returned. And Papa didn't come either.

I don't like to go to Bikfaya. Only two ways to go there. Past the cemetery. I don't like to do that. I'm not scared of it. It's only a bunch of cement and stones and grass. But papa told me I was afraid of dead people, but dead people can't hurt you. I held that skull Michael found. A human's head. It didn't hurt. It can't. It's dead! The other way to Bikfaya is down there, at the bottom of the hill. But down there is where they found me, so I don't like to go there anymore.

Them. Michael calls them the cemetery boys because they play in the cemetery. They used to, anyway. He says they're not there anymore. I don't believe him. He said they were taken in the seferberlik. Mama calls it the mobilization. A big word. So now they have guns. But they still play down there. I can hear their guns. At the bottom, below where papa stores the wood. But Michael says those are people shooting animals. I don't believe him. What if they shoot me?

Mama looks so tired. She holds Wadih all the time. To feed him. One time she even let me hold him. Wadih is not heavy for me. Michael told me once that I was scared to hold him. But I'm not scared. He says I might drop Wadih. Mama says that, too. Sometimes. But I'm

not scared. I want to hold Wadih, but mostly they won't let me. They're the ones who are scared, not me.

I'm older than Michael. By three years. And I'm taller. We measured once and I was taller by more than 15 centimeters. It might be less than that now. But Papa told Michael to take care of mama and Matile while he was gone. To Amerika. He didn't ask me. He thinks I'm afraid. So does Michael. They didn't say that. I'm not scared. Anyway, I don't believe them.

He won't come back. He told mama he would come back for us. Papa, I mean. I don't believe him. Michael says he can't because of the war, but there is no war here. A lot of soldiers but no war. So, I don't believe him. Just like he never came when I was hiding at the bottom of the hill. He told mama I was afraid to walk to Bikfaya. But I'm not afraid. I told him I wasn't scared, but he didn't believe me. I'm the oldest, but he still didn't believe me. Maybe that's why I'm not getting taller, and Michael is.

To find food, Michael walked all the way to Brumana. Before, he walked to Bikfaya to work in the tobacco place. Past the cemetery. Where they played. I won't go past it. Too many places there for them to hide. I hid down there, at the bottom, but they found me anyway. After Michael left. Matile is afraid of them, but I'm not. I'm six years older than her, and sometimes mama takes her to Bikfaya to buy bread. I won't go. I would have to walk past the cemetery.

I walked to the other side of the valley once to pick olives. I went with papa, but he's not here anymore. I won't go alone, and Michael doesn't like to go there. We cured the olives and after the war came, we sold some to buy bread. Mama and Michael took the jars to Bikfaya and brought back three loaves of bread. The olive trees are too far away, too far for mama to walk there, and I would have to walk across the bottom of the valley. The cemetery boys might be waiting for me. I'm not scared. I just don't want to go.

When the locusts came, Matile cried. We watched our garden disappear. It was good that Michael found some dead ones to roast with olive oil. The locusts. They're crispy. I like crunching on their legs. Even though they still have hairs on them. Matile doesn't like them, but I do. Michael will go down past the wood pile to get them, but I won't. I don't like to go down there, but I'm not scared. It's just that most of the time it gets dark down there. I don't like it when it gets dark in the valley. I can't see what's down there when it's all in shadow. The locusts came up from the valley. The locusts and the cemetery boys. That's why I don't like to go there.

Then the man came. He had a long knife. The cemetery boys had long sticks, but he had a long knife. Like the ones they use to cut tobacco leaves. He pulled mama down, so I hit him. Michael killed him, but I hit him first. I wasn't afraid. Michael said it was a good thing I did.

And now Michael is gone. To find food again. Mama asked him, but not me. I could go. Not by the cemetery, though. Maybe he will find some food at the monastery where we went to church. Or he will have to go to Chtoura. It's so far away, I've never even been there. I gave him my labbadeh. It's a nice hat. It will keep him warm. It will remind him he promised to come back. He promised, but I don't believe him. Why should I? Maybe because I have to, or I will die. Or we will all die. That wouldn't be fair to Wadih. He's too young. Sometimes babies die, though. I see them on the road. Their mamas still hold them, but they look dead to me.

I remember the church at the monastery. I am an altar boy there. Or at least I was, but since papa left, we don't go there. I think mama is scared to go there, but I'm not scared. I won't go, though, without mama. It's a nice church. Sometimes we stay there for lunch when the bishop visits. I love to watch them make the saj bread for the lunch. It's difficult to spin the dough because sometimes the dough is dropped on the ground. I could spin it. I would not be afraid to spin it.

My head hurts, sometimes. When it does, I have to sit down, or I'll fall. Mama tells me to stop repeating what people say, but I have to, or I'll forget. My head hurts but I'm not scared.

## 6. The Chandelier

When Michael steps outside the dormitory he pulls down the labbadeh to warm his ears from the morning chill. The grounds are still deserted. His father knew seminarians at the monastery who sometimes invited his family for the special church services. *Maybe they're in the church.* And he walks further along, past the fire pit, toward the highest knoll. He stops at the abbey. From a window above the door, a nun watches him. He knocks on the door and waits, but no one comes. *I can call out and say I'm not a soldier, but she can see I wear no uniform.* So he walks on.

As he approaches the church, he recalls its inner beauty. It captivated him as a child, the mosaic icons of the saints, and the ornate sanctuary, from where the priest called out, "The doors, the doors, let us attend." Some families would leave, before those who stayed closed the church's front doors and recited the Nicene Creed. "The creed is only for those of our faith, his father explained." He recalls his simple reply, "But Jesus loved everybody, papa."

The church doors of cedar, carved and oiled with gold paint finishes, are gone. *Stolen, or used for firewood, or food for the hungry.* From the opening, Michael can see the lonely iconostasis at the far end fronting the altar. The morning breeze has strengthened, so drifting flakes of snow follow him inside. The air tastes of stale incense. A mix of dust and frost blankets several wooden benches. *Sometimes, they stand for the services as we do in Bikfaya.*

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Some of the walls are stripped of their paintings and mosaic Icons. "Who would do this to the Holy Mother's face?" he whispers. With some of the mosaics taken off below her eyes, it appears as though she is crying.

He walks to the front of the sanctuary, aware of the intermittent silence between his steps on the stone floor. *Holy, Holy, Holy.* Words of the choir from a childhood service. Smoke from the candles and incense have darkened the stones but do not muffle his steps on their uneven surface.

He stops. The silence returns. He gazes at the still intact, vaulted roof, crisscrossed with beams of cedar. Suspended from one of the beams like a guardian angel, is the chandelier. It awed him as a child. How, on a Sunday morning long ago, its size and sprays of light from each of its candles filled the sanctuary.

Crafted of heavy cast bronze with a gilt, ormolu finish, the frame is embellished with a decoration of gold leaf and a floral finial. Arms unfurl like those of an octopus. There was a time when he feared those arms might reach out and kidnap him. As he grew older, he prayed those arms might embrace and protect him from the evil one.

Michael circles the chandelier. Its unlit candles above him rise from brass holders at the end of each arm. Dust and the screened light from the color-stained windows mellow the glow of its bronze and gold leaf. And the rubies, his father told him. "Rare stones," he said. As a child he

imagined the rubies, embedded in the candle holders, were eyes watching his every fidget during the long service. *Now they follow me, as I circle the chandelier and study its every angle.*

“Where is your family?” The sharp retort from a vested man he had not noticed kneeling at a prayer railing in front of one of the icons. Startled, Michael hesitates then says, “In the Chreen.” The priest studies him but remains on both knees. “Ah, the houses near Bikfaya?” His black frock and dark hair blend in with the stone floor along the front of the sanctuary.

He walks up to where the priest kneels. Michael reasons him to be young, not yet with a beard to hide his sculptured jaw and chiseled cheekbones. “Yes. I want to find food.” He fingers the hard coins in the pouch at the bottom of his jacket pocket. “I will pay.”

The priest nods, understanding this is the way of the world of Mt. Lebanon. “Yes, I know. Soon we will have money to buy food. Kneel and pray with me,” he says. “Pray with me and ask of Him anything.” The deep glower in his dark eyes seems to draw Michael toward him.

“Will He tell me why?” Michael says and drops to his knees. The priest narrows his eyes. He has not seen this boy before, but he is new to the church. “He will tell you what to do,” he says.

They kneel in silence for some time, much of which Michael spends in sideways glimpses, trying to make out the priest's whispered prayers.

Finally, Michael closes his eyes. He cannot stop thinking about the chandelier and its grip upon him as a child during the services. He imagines his childhood fear of the chandelier, especially on those sunny Sunday mornings when its ruby eyes sprayed moving shafts of light around the walls of the church. "It's because the sun is moving, Michael," his father told him. He doesn't have to look behind him for the shafts of sunlight today. He knows there will be little, not on this bleak, frigid, and cloudy morning.

*Then why didn't I notice the chandelier's arms when I first walked into the church? This thought brings him back to the man with the knife. It's because I killed him. Would such arms embrace a murderer? The thought leaves him shaking. He opens his eyes, embarrassed, but the priest has slipped out of the church. I want to ask him about the food, where I might find some today. What does he mean by 'soon' for him to purchase food?*

He stands up, steps outside and walks the deserted spaces around the dormitory and abby. It does not feel the same without the families who filled the monastery grounds for the summer luncheons after the services. One difference now are the snowflakes, growing in size and number. *We will have snow on the mountain tonight.* The only place left to sit is in the church, so he returns to it.

He moves under the chandelier where its spider-like arms encircle him. Its rubies capture narrow rays of sunshine which escape through the clouds and windows into the church. The radiance in their optic prisms, like eyes, betray fleeting images, a carousel of dreams in motion around him.

One image is of a standing lady in robes holding in one hand a torch high above her head, while the other holds a large book. *Like what papa wrote us about in his letter.* Other images bring Michael memories of happy things and remorseful things. The horse he rode, snug in his father's embrace, before the soldiers took it away, the gun his father taught him to shoot before his mother sold it for food. And the tiles he carried to the roof of their home before his father left them.

Then the images become one swirling montage. Stacks of bread in front of open doors in the Chreen, until then each forsaken house, and within each entrance images of celebration, where the boys from the cemetery hoist Michael with joy. Even as the reverie fades, the voice of Milhem rises above the others. You returned.

He finds a bench from where he can face all the ruby eyes. *In this place, I cannot hide from you.* But as he studies the chandelier, a new thought takes hold of him. A bold thought. One which might have scared him yesterday, before he killed a man. *I will not hide from you, chandelier, but I will release you, break you loose. No, free you to help me.* "Will you help me with your freedom?" he says.

Michael looks around the interior of the church in case someone might hear him talking to himself. Then he takes off his heavy jacket and shoulder pack, unties his kaffiyeh, and places both it and his camel hair labbadah into a small pocket on the inside of his jacket. He walks to the mosaic of the Holy Mother, where he lays them on the floor. *Each foot, each step will be a sacrilege.* "Will you forgive me?" he says aloud. *Your broken heart will bring me milk and bread.*

Free of the extra weight of his jacket, his pack and hat, he climbs the wall, each step a toehold into the narrow wedge of a missing mosaic, each finger a pinch along the sharp edges of the remaining pieces.

He reaches the crossbeam which suspends the chandelier, fifteen feet above the stone floor. He licks his cracked nails. His fingers bleed from the climb, but he smiles at the chandelier. *Now, I have fingers colored like your rubies.* The elevation reminds him of the ridge where he often sat, above the ravine. *I have looked down farther than this.* And he crawls across the beam from the wall to where the large nails hold the chandelier in place.

From above the chandelier, he sees the bobeches, the small dishes filled with wax under each candle. *You look different from here. Not so pretty. What good are you guarding an empty church?* “You must become milk and bread, food for us,” he says. *These nails are strong, but my weight is stronger. I will be like the monkey from the zoo in Beirut.* Holding the bronze chains, he climbs down the stalk of the chandelier. Each gold leaf becomes an easy grasp and foothold until his feet reach two of its arms.

With his legs and body, he swings the chandelier. Pushing it higher into its arc, the nails groan. “I am stronger,” he tells the chandelier. He swings again, but his hands are sweaty. *I must not slip off.* He pulls his legs within the chandelier’s arms and wraps them around its stalk to free his arms. Then he swings from his legs. The nails squeal. *You are honorable, chandelier, in your desire to stay here. But I must free you for something more important.*

Finally, the nails scream as they loosen from their wood cocoons. “You must not fall with me like this.” He pulls his body up and back inside the arms, then re-grips the stalk as he swings the chandelier into a still wider arc. “It’s your time now, chandelier,” he says. And as if in response, it crashes to the ground. The long, narrow colored glass windows shudder, and the sharp bang of metal against stone echoes through the church.

The arms, like the long branches of a tree, break his fall. He stumbles away from the dust and circles the chandelier to ease the hurt in his joints. He limps to the doorway. *Will the noise bring the priest back?* The grounds are still empty. The damp, cold morning has muffled the sound of the chandelier’s downfall. He returns to his catch and collects the candles, which have fallen out of their bobeches. He admires his work. *Not a single broken branch, not a ruby lost. You have only lost this battle, chandelier, but you must help me win my battle. My harb al-muja’a.*

The mix of dust and chalk from the ceiling settles around the chandelier. He raises his head but still cannot see the top of the tilted baluster. He pulls on two of the arms. “You are too heavy for me to carry,” he says. “How will I move you across the mountain?”

He limps around the church until he finds a rug stashed in a closet behind the altar. He spreads it out and drags the chandelier onto it, then buttons up his jacket again. He grabs his pack, heavier now with the chandelier’s candles, and swings it over his shoulders. He finds a towel and long leather straps in the same closet. *Maybe it’s a horse’s carriage harness.* He wraps the towel around

the part of the strap to go across his chest. Then he ties the harness to the ends of the rug, ducks his head underneath the towed part of it and fits it to his chest. “Now you are my prisoner, chandelier,” he said. “And you will come with me.”

He pulls the rug across the floor of the church to the doorless opening. It does not slide easily until he reaches the outside mix of snowflakes and dirt. The cold bites at his ears, so he puts his hat back on and again ties it securely to his head with the kaffieh. It is already early afternoon. *Mama will not be happy I'm leaving so late for Chtoura.*

Flecks of snow on the ground grow thick enough to latch on to one another. They make each of Michael's steps slippery, but they make the rug easier to pull. *It is a strong rug, and the snow will keep it from shredding on the rocks.* So, he pulls. At first it seems easy because the downward slope away from the monastery offsets the chandelier's weight. But soon the rug grows heavy with melted snow. Each upward change in elevation draws sweat from Michael's face and neck.

After several hours, the fog thickens. It will not allow him to stay on the trail after dark, so he looks for a sheltered place to spend the night. After several switchbacks of the path, he pulls the chandelier near a pine thick with snowflake covered green needles and hidden from the road by a canopy of bushes. It is already dusk. He let his legs fold as he backs against the deeply wrinkled trunk of the pine and slips to the ground, into the frigid embrace of dense fog and snow flurries.

Michael takes the rest of the soup cold, but saves the tin, filling it with snow. “For water tomorrow,” he says. He wraps himself in the blankets and curls under one of the bushes near the chandelier.

Even in the dark, he can touch those arms of the chandelier which reach out from the edges of the rug. Somehow the cold but smooth arms reassure him. He caresses its curves. “You are a fine chandelier,” he said. *But you are heavy. I have freed you to help me and now you must be good to me.* He slips into a body weary reverie, asking himself which parts of the chandelier are heavy and which parts he can leave behind to make his journey easier. *No, you are much too valuable as you are, chandelier. But maybe those heavy chains ....*

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Patters crunch into the snow and break the stillness. And his sleep. For a moment, he stares into the grey-washed dawn masking the eastern mountain like a thief. Then closer, much closer, into eight green eyes now moving in half circles around him.

Wolves. Lean, grey ones with tongues hanging below their teeth. Michael jumps first to his knees, then to his feet, breaking the snow, which has formed drifts around him. Startled, the wolves pull back. Michael grabs the knife from his pack and swirls it high above his head. The wolves circle closer. He stretches one of the bronze chains from the chandelier’s baluster and swings it around him. It hits one of the wolves, who groans and jumps away. The others scatter from the stings of

the flying chain, but they do not stray far. Several green eyes linger between a nest of nearby pines and cedars.

The shroud of grey lifts in silent anticipation of the dawn. “You have helped me again, chandelier,” he says. *But I can't sleep anymore. It's almost light. We must begin our journey again. I will keep your chains.*

## 7. Discovery

The same deep stillness cloaks the monastery, as it waits for dawn to awaken hidden memories. Heavy clouds recede from the rocky cliffs. An empty horse-drawn carriage rests near the dormitory. Its presence draws a smile from the face of Abouna Yousef Arbeeni. The morning promises to be sunny. At least, this thought enters the mind of the priest as he strolls the monastery grounds and enters the church narthex. The bankers from Beirut have come earlier than expected and would be walking the grounds to inspect the outbuildings. Maybe they are already waiting at the church entrance, anxious to loan their money.

“What is this?” Abouna's eyes moved across the nave to the sanctuary. The entire inside appears larger, the exposed ceiling joists higher. At first, he imagines it filled with his flock on a high holy day when the bishop would be visiting. But this morning it seems more desolate, empty, and abandoned. The few forlorn benches are covered in flakes of windblown snow under ... nothing. "My chandelier?" He scans the corners of the nave, where only yellow leaves have accumulated from the last gasps of autumn.

Except for two men in formal business attire who have entered the nave from the other end of the vestibule. The taller of the two men walks down the middle aisle and looks up. “Yes, that is exactly what I was going to say," he says. "It appears our effort to reach here before dawn with the papers has been for nothing. Your letter told us of the missing doors but not of the missing chandelier. The pictures you sent show a chandelier.”

The second man shakes his head. He does not want to offend a holy man, so he addresses the priest with the common honorific title for Father, "Abouna," he says, "I'm sorry. Such a nice chandelier it appeared to be. But without the chandelier, we are unable to issue the mortgage."

The priest furrows his brow. "No. I'm sorry. The chandelier was here yesterday. No one else has been here, except for..."

"There can be no mortgage or transfer of the lira without the chandelier. We could replace the doors, but..."

"The money is to buy food. We have over two hundred families who depend upon the church and the monastery, and many more. All are hungry."

"Abouna," the taller man says, "there are hungry churches throughout the Metn. Except for those who have taken our mortgages." He smiles. "You should seek out one of them for help."

"Do you want to see inside the other buildings?" The priest hopes the structural integrity of his other outbuildings will be better appreciated under closer inspection.

"Buildings. We've walked their perimeters. There is no need to see more." Then he turns to his shorter accomplice. "We must return to Beirut now."

Looking for words to break his pursed lips, Abouna walks with the men to their carriage. “I have prepared some provisions for you to eat before you leave. You should rest.”

“No,” the shorter man says, “we must descend the mountain before the bandits awake. Apparently, you have some of those scoundrels active here as well.”

Abouna watches the carriage drive off. Two monks join him. One of them, Boulos, a stout, thick fingered monk, rubs the full beard hiding his bulging neck. He says, “They're not staying? I prepared a breakfast.”

“The chandelier in the church is gone,” the other monk says as he reaches them from the direction of the church. Tall with wire glasses, Elias has no beard to mask his dour face and compliment the dark robe which hangs from his shoulders like a heavy drape. He is the accountant and keeper of the financial records. “Would the Ottomans do this?”

“The Pasha will punish all looters, even his soldiers,” Abouna says. “No, the soldiers will not enter these holy grounds. They avoid even our cemeteries.”

“There will be no mortgage?” the accountant says.

“The boy,” the priest grumbles. “He’s the only one.” The monks shoot quizzical looks to each other but do not question Abouna while his face is twisted in anger. They follow him to the church and walk around the inside. Broken nails litter the area where the chandelier hit the floor.

Abouna follows the scratches across the soot-darkened tiles until they stop. “But the chandelier is larger than he is,” he mumbles. “Unless, unless...” He searches the closets and discovers the absence of the rug and a horse’s harness. “Ahhh, you’re a clever one, aren’t you?”

"A young boy?" the accountant says.

"Yes. And a valuable rug from the closet."

Boulos shakes his head. "What would a boy do with such a large chandelier?"

"Sell it in the only place where thieves may sell such things," the accountant says.

Abouna runs his fingers through his thick black hair and tightens his jaw. Outwitted by a child. He has been slow to secure a replacement for the missing door. *The church should be a refuge for the needy. I made it an opportunity for thieves.* “Men have been hung for less,” he says. He follows the lines the rug has cut through the dust, right up to the side door. The two monks follow him outside, to smeared tracks despite the new snow. Abouna drops to his knees to feel them, the

deep ones for the chandelier and shallow ones for the boy's shoes. "His youth will not protect him. Especially in Chtoura."

They study the tracks. Boulos tries to draw the priest's eyes and says, "Abouna, it will be dangerous for you there."

"Indeed," the accountant says. "She will draw you close like a flame draws its innocents." He does not want to use the metaphor of the moth, but Abouna knows what he means and frowns. The accountant has stirred trouble for him with the other monks because of "that woman from Chtoura," who has visited the monastery several times in the past.

"The army is there to enforce the law. I'll take the carriage," he tells them. "When did you last feed the horses?" Boulos replies, "Yesterday, Abouna. But one is sick, and the other is too weak for such a trip." They walk together to the dormitory. "Please bring the carriage," the priest says and walks into the building. "Maybe the donkey," the accountant says. The priest nods, "Ah, the mule is strong. Bring it." The priest stalks away.

"The Patriarch has placed too much responsibility with such a young priest," the accountant says. "He's already transgressed his vows with that woman, and he'll yet dishonor the church."

"You don't know that. Not for sure. At least not after his ordination. There's a reason why the Patriarch favors him," Boulos says. "We just haven't discovered it yet. I must go for the carriage."

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Alone in his small office at the rear of the dormitory, Abouna opens a box buried in crumpled clothes under his desk. He pulls out a knife and a small pouch whose weight reminds him he has far fewer coins now than before the war. He steps outside to wait for the monks to bring the donkey and its carriage. He plays out scenarios in his mind of how he will retrieve the chandelier if the boy has already sold it.

There is only one man there who would buy such an item. "I have not prepared enough," he says and returns to a bureau behind his office desk. From the bottom drawer he takes out a handgun, his father's Browning Model 1903 semi-automatic pistol. Before he learned to read, his father had shown him how to load and fire it and told him about the engraving on its top slide, the Ottoman Sultan's crest and Arabic number. *Will I remember how to use it?* He lifts out his father's small box of shells and with both the gun and its shells, places them under his cloak, then faces the looking glass attached to the top of the bureau. His eyes linger on the reflection of the tarnished brass cross around his neck, the cross he brought with him on his circuitous journey to the monastery. And on his own face, not the one of the beardless twenty-three-year-old priest, but the face of the young boy who came to the monastery as a student. *My robes will not protect me there, but God will protect my mission.* The accountant's response remains in his head: *She will draw you close like a flame draws its innocents.* I must face God's retribution, he concedes. Or retrieve the chandelier and make my penance. "I am ready."

## 8. Yousef Arbeeni

### Summer, 1909

Towering in front of him, young Yousef Arbeeni studies the broad back of a holy man of the Antiochian Orthodox Patriarchate. It is covered by a stiff robe with jagged lines of embroidered gold and silver threads, pieced together somehow to create a budded cross. The man it adorns prays before an icon in the Church of the Virgin in Damascus. Yousef also listens to the whispers of his father, “I want you to have a good education, one I cannot give you in Arbeen. “I don't want to go away, papa,” the sixteen-year-old Yusef says. “Shhhh, the schools in Damascus are too expensive for us,” his father says. “Your uncle has agreed to have you trained at the Monastery of St. Elias. For that you must take your education in the school at Abou-Mizane in Mount Lebanon.” The high pointed back of the Patriarch’s robe hides the back of his neck and head but not the scented incense of myrrh and rose weaving around and above him. “He wishes to talk to you,” his father says, “You must address him as Saedna, not uncle. Just Saedna Gregory.”

The Patriarch turns and lowers his head toward Yousef, who loses his focus in the crinkled black mustache and salt and pepper beard covering the holy man’s chin, neck, and chest. “Saedna, this is my son, Yousef. For your church.”

Yousef blurts out, “Saedna Gregory, how will I get there?” The Patriarch smiles, “This boy knows my name, and he asks an important question. Son, your father has taught you well how to address a Patriarch of the church.” He bends his knees to peer into Yousef’s eyes. “You will travel by

train to Beirut, then by carriage to the monastery in Shwayya. From there, they will take you to Abou-Mizane. You will like the school there.”

“But where will I live?” The Patriarch glances at Yousef’s father as if to say, you have not told him? “We have arranged for you to live with a family who farms some lands of the church near Bikfaya.”

Not long after that meeting, young Yousef walks off a train at the depot in Beirut, where he finds a man in the robe of a monk holding a sign with his name scratched onto it. The carriage takes him along a mix of paved and dirt roads through lush hills of pine and cedar into the Metn and the village of Bikfaya. Such large trees remind him of how far he has come from the parched villages around Damascus. And the homes are large, much larger than those in Arbeen.

“My name is Hanan. Are all your friends in Damascus as short as you?” Yousef’s faces flushes. He remembers his friends in Arbeen being shorter, but he never thought about it. He was told the girl in the family was only one year older, but she is almost a foot taller.

“*That* is not so nice to say, Hanan,” her father says. “He’s our house guest while he attends the school. Now come to dinner both of you.” Hanan’s older brother scoffs, “Stupid, the Patriarch himself sent him here.” Yousef follows Hanan into the dining area.

Yousef remembers walking to school, always behind Hanan and her brother. Then after some time, side by side with them. Until the year when Hanan's brother no longer attends the school, and Yousef walks hand-in-hand with Hanan as they reach the grassy patch of a small knoll overlooking a tilled plot of land and sit down together. "My father is taking me to see the school in Beirut. Will you come with us?" Hanan says. Lower in the sky, the sun flames red and orange creating a halo behind her head. Yousef grimaces, "What's the point? My family obligated me to the monastery." But Hanan is adamant, "Just tell him you want to pursue something else."

"We don't have the money. If I want to continue my studies, it'll have to be at the monastery," Yousef says. Hanan turns reflective and looks away. Yousef stands. "I wish I could go with you. No, my father would be humiliated," he says.

Hanan persists, "If you don't meet me in Bikfaya when I have time off, I will come to the monastery."

"And I will come to you wherever you are, Hanan," Yousef says.

## 9. The Old Man with One Hand

A thin layer of new snow spreads out before Michael and masks the pathway ruts carved by earlier rains. It makes the chandelier easier to pull, but the narrow path more difficult to follow. *How will I know if this is the right way?* “Chandelier, will you tell me?”

He does not feel the morning cold. *I’ve been pulling you since dawn. So how can I be cold?* Michael looks up to the sun, which has broken free of fleeting clouds. “Do you like the sky?” he says. “You’ve spent your life inside a church listening to people praying to God. Now, you can see where God lives. Up there. Higher than you can see.”

By the early afternoon, he has emptied the tin of its melted snow, but it does not lessen his thirst or the weight and drag of the chandelier. To reduce the chafing from the strap, he lifts it from around his chest to drape over his shoulders, but the dull aches around his neck and back only add to numbness in his torso. *I must rest before the path climbs again.*

He reaches a solitary stone dwelling behind a jumble of brush and unkempt hedges just off the pathway. Fearful of losing his cargo to bandits, he stands some way back from its entrance. Its façade reminds him of his home in the Chreen, except for a small, covered porch at the front on which languishes a large roughly hewn chair with worn pillows. Thick shrubs and grasses hide the base of the house. A leafless, grapevine sprawls freely along its uneven stone walls. An old man steps onto the porch. He shades his eyes with one arm while he buries the other deep into his

left pocket. With the breeze wisps of grey hair dance above him. A thick white beard and mustache, with specks of grey and black, seem to clip short his long face and sunken cheeks, “Where are you going, boy?”

“Is this the main road to Chtoura?” Michael says.

“It will take you there, but it’s not the main road. This way is longer, and it is not well marked. You must have a cargo worth keeping away from the main road.”

“You are not a bandit, are you?”

The old man volunteers a curt laugh. “I could ask you the same question. If I were, I would be young enough to carry off your cargo. And the rug as well. What will you do with them?”

“I’ve made a bargain with my cargo,” Michael says. “It will find a church again, once I exchange it for food for my family and the baby.”

“Ah. A good bargain,” the old man says. “And food for a baby, too. My grapevine is empty this time of year. But come again in the summer.”

“Then show me how I can stay on the right path, old man.”

“I can do it only if I travel with you, and I’m too old to travel such a distance.”

“But how will I know the way?”

“My name is Jacob. You have a name?”

“Michael. Michael Mansour.”

“Ah, a Christian. Like Mikail, Allah’s Angel, the one the Book tells us nourishes the body and the soul. Let me see your cargo.”

Michael looks down the icy path. *From here I see turns ahead. He looks too weak to harm me and I’m taller.* The dark folds in the old man’s skin around his face, neck, and arms tell Michael of many hours in the sun. *A farmer, maybe.* “O.K., I’ll show you.” He unties the rug.

“Ah, a fine specimen,” the old man says. He studies the chandelier for several minutes. “It must have adorned a great building.”

“Now you must keep your promise.”

“Ha, I made no promise, but I'll tell you how to find your way.” The old man walks around the chandelier, studying it. “Enough arms for every two hours of the day. Very unusual. Yes, your chandelier can show you,” he says.

“The chandelier?”

“Yes, the chandelier and the sun. Have you followed the movement of the sun before?”

Michael shakes his head, unsure of what the old man means.

“Then I'll explain it to you,” he says. “You're fortunate we have sun today. First, turn the chandelier so its stalk stands straight up.” Michael rotates the arms of the chandelier. When he has steadied it into a vertical position, the post makes a long shadow on the rug. “Now mark the end of the shadow at its longest point.” Michael takes a twig and places it at the end of the shadow. The old man pulls from his pocket a piece of bread. “Now we wait ten minutes. This Saj bread was given to me so I will share it with you. I cannot make such bread anymore.” He breaks off a piece and gives it to Michael, and they both chew the bread, hardened with age. After ten minutes has passed, the old man marks the shadow's new location with another twig.

“Now draw a straight line between the two twigs,” he says. With a sharp twig, Michael etches a furrow through the rug. “There,” the old man says, “is the east to west direction of the sun.” He makes a perpendicular crease in the rug with his finger, which runs north to south. He pulls his

arm from his left pocket, where he has kept it buried. Blunted to a stump at the wrist, he stretches it, in the north to south direction. "Now turn the chandelier until I tell you when to stop."

Michael slides the chandelier around on the rug. With his right hand, the old man takes a small knife from his pocket. He marks one of the arms of the chandelier with a small scratch, one which splits the north-south and east-west directions. "Keep that in between the path of the sun."

Michael ponders that instruction

"You still have much daylight left, but wait a moment longer," the old man says and enters his house. He returns with two sheets of flatbread, a small container of cooked rice and lentils, and a bag of pistachio nuts. "Many have no yeast to raise the bread," he says. Yeast or no yeast, the flatbread looks like plates of gold to Michael.

"May God give you peace," Michael responds. "How do you have these in such a place? You must travel far to find them." The old man smiles and raises his stubbed arm, "I have my ways, son, but I have paid a heavy price for my food." He turns and climbs back to the porch.

Michael is no more than a hundred yards out of sight from the old man's house, when he stops, pulls out the old man's food, drops to his knees, and devours the rice and lentils. "You found a good place for me to stop, chandelier," he says. "Now you must show me the way." And with the snow almost all melted and little more than the sun guiding him on the obscured trail, he continues to pull the rug and its reluctant cargo.

## 10. Pursuit

The priest watches Boulos lead a reluctant mule, weathered and unbrushed, to the four wheeled, open backed carriage resting at the front of the dormitory. "The donkey?" he says with a deep frown.

"The horse is sick and will not survive the day, Abouna. The mule has eaten our last scraps. It's ready." While the monk moves the mule into place and tightens the harness and breeching strap, the priest soothes the mule's neck, then adds heavier load straps and provisions he has brought out of the dormitory into the drawer underneath the carriage seat.

"This is not the carriage for speedy travel to Chtoura. Take the smaller one, Abouna," the monk says. But the resolution in the priest's face gives Boulos no encouragement for further suggestions.

The priest says, "I know. This carriage should take two animals. But never mind. We'll bring back the chandelier with the mule. Send a message to Beirut and tell them to prepare for their return in two weeks with the mortgage papers." The priest climbs into the carriage and prods the mule.

The accountant joins Boulos, and the two monks watch the young priest drive the mule into a fast trot with the empty carriage, as it leaves the monastery grounds. "Can he rescue the chandelier?"

the accountant says. "If he does, it will be the second time," Boulos replies, "and it will ensure his elevation. Maybe even to become abbot."

"A second time? I thought it was donated by his holiness in St. Petersburg."

"It was. And Abouna was charged by his uncle to pick it up from the port in Beirut. Almost three years ago, now."

"The Patriarch put that responsibility on the head of such a young priest?"

"There is much resentment from others here toward this favorite of the hierarchs in Damascus. As you know." The accountant ignores the undisguised jibe from Boulos, who continues, "The Patriarch wanted his nephew to prove himself in the eyes of his elders in the monastery. Transporting safely such a large gift to the monastery."

The accountant gives a knowing smirk. "Not a difficult task, I suspect."

Boulos is not deterred. He is familiar with the accountant's dour expression whenever the priest's status in the monastery is discussed. "But when it arrived at the port in Beirut, the chandelier was stolen. Held by traders for wealthy buyers in the black market."

"Oh, he was able to retrieve it then. How --"

"Never mind, he will not talk about it," Boulos says as he walks away. "But the woman from Chtoura was living there at the time, studying there we think, and she had something to do with it."

Boulos returns to the church and peers into the open entry. He counts the remaining benches. A nun joins him, and they both enter. The nave appears larger without the chandelier and the missing wooden benches. "We need more firewood at the abbey," she says. "And the smaller trees are gone."

"Help me with one of these, sister," the monk says. They each lift an end of one of the benches. "After we take it to the abbey, I will go for the axe."

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After several hours, Abouna pulls his carriage to a stop near a group of houses, where a cistern holds water. Glittering with sweat his mule lowers its head to drink. A woman steps from the house nearest the cistern. She massages and dries the mule's neck with her apron. "Abouna, you're far from our parish, and you've driven this animal without mercy." She peers into the empty back of the carriage. "Have you brought no food?"

He recognizes one of the members of his church. "I'm looking for a boy pulling a rug."

“A rug?”

“Yes, with a cargo on top of it. Probably taking it to Chtoura.”

“If he's a bandit, he'll not travel this road. The Pasha's army guards the food coming on the Damascus Road through Chtoura. He'll take the longer, northern road instead.”

The priest nods goodbye and prods the mule. The carriage jerks into a smooth slide on the icy path, leaving drifts of leaves and snowflakes in its wake. *Without the snow, he'll be unable to pull it, even with the rug. On the northern road, Chtoura will be southeast, so he'll have to keep the sun below his right shoulder.* “He's too young to know such things, so you'll have plenty of time to recuperate,” he tells the mule. He drives the stick hard into its backside. “If he does not get lost, you and I will meet the boy in Chtoura.” His face is grim as he reflects on the woman where he had stopped without any food to offer her. “Along with the Pasha's army.” He glances under his seat to where the box with the pistol lies on a blanket.

## 11. A Cargo of Two Minds

Melted snow and slush linger into the afternoon and make it difficult for Michael to manage the uphill elevations. Protruding rocks between the slush grab at the rug, sometimes shredding the stitches. It seems like the narrow path and the growing shadows work together for the brush to snag his pants and tear at his socks. By late in the day his shoulders ach and his chest, when he checks, have turned red, chafed raw from the strap which pulls his cargo.

In the icy stillness, he finds himself talking more and more to the chandelier. *If the cemetery boys were here, they would call me crazy.* “They do not know, chandelier, of the important mission we are taking together. But the Holy Virgin knows, and she will protect us.”

With the help of gravity, the downhill stretches relieve some of the numbing pain in his chest, before the painful climbs begin again. But those weaving downhills also are more treacherous. The first time he makes a quick stop on a steep downward slope, the chandelier slides into his back. Only the rug saves him from the sharp, bronze candle holders filled with wax. “I must be more careful with my movements,” he tells the chandelier. *You take every chance to remind me I’m taking you where you don’t want to go.*

The rug snags on a tree root, and the chandelier dislodges from it. Michael is frustrated. “You’re angry, and you think you are so important,” he tells the chandelier. *You’ve been suspended in*

*your church, above all those who admired your beauty. Now you don't like being my prisoner, dragged on an old rug over these rocks.*

But the chandelier fights back. When the path takes a sharp, narrow drop the chandelier cannot maneuver, it stalls on a stone outcrop and jerks Michael's strap hard against his chest, pulling him backward and off his feet. He slides on the loose rocks under him, and scrapes both elbows, leaving them with a sticky mix of dirt and blood under his torn jacket.

Even in his pain, he admires the chandelier's stubborn resistance. *How can you know of the good you will achieve? Someday, you'll know the reason for my struggle with you, and those who admire your beauty will respect what you did for me. Your nobility will rise in the eyes of everyone to higher than they were in the church. You will see and you'll thank me.* "For now, don't make this more difficult for me," but his growl does not silence the pain in his arms and back.

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The sun slips below the mountain when he comes to another fork. Without the sun the chandelier cannot tell him which route to take. The shadows melt into dusk. *I hope there will be a bright moon tonight.* Above him, a soft, blurry speckle of stars mix with thin tendrils of clouds. He realizes the wolves will find him, when his warm breath turns to cold vapor under the moonlight and betrays his location. *I have to find a safe place to sleep.* He pulls his cargo against an ancient cedar. It guards the path like a sentinel, and its spiral branches block the prying eyes of the moon.

The old tree has no lower branches, but the wide trunk at its base protects him from behind. With thick bark wrinkled by time, it rises into the darkness. *Maybe it will hide me to the animals.* He stretches his neck to find the moon, but the branches above him hide it from view. “Ahh, such a tree,” he says. Its branches spread out among the stars remind him of the arms of the chandelier. “Like how they spread the light of the candles in the church.”

When the moon slips free of streaky clouds, his mind turns to the animals watching him. He glimpses some who linger behind the pines. *They're too small and thin for wolves. Large ears, too. Like jackals. They're hungry like me. I wish I had papa's rifle.*

As he sits with arched head staring into the branches of the cedar, a new idea comes to him. “You will not always have the benefit of a gun,” his father told him. “In those times you will have to use this,” and he rapped on Michael’s head with his knuckles. He studies his cargo. *The branches of the cedar are too high to protect me, but not the arms of the chandelier.* “You'll protect me tonight,” he tells the chandelier. He slips through an open edge of the rug and under the arms of the chandelier. Into the middle of it, guarded by the candle holders.

During the night, pale, ghost-like slivers of moonlight slip between the tied edges of the carpet to find the ruby eyes. From where incandescent images again surround Michael. But with each cloud induced flutter of moonlight, the ruby eyes blink into the contorted face of the man with the knife. Spilling light onto the steel blade which violates the sacred arteries of his heart. Into the broken

face of Milhem smeared with tears and blood. And into the wasted face of Benyamin, in the deadly embrace of the grippe. Until other eyes with irises like pins stare at him, hungry eyes outside the chandelier, where jackals circle and watch.

*I look through these arms, these branches of the chandelier, like the bars of a prison. For a night I'm a prisoner of the chandelier. Yet I dare not leave it because I'm safe from the wolves and jackals here.*

He is not ready to sleep. His mind takes him to strange places. *In this place the Holy Mother is protecting me. Or is she guarding me? Tonight, in this prison, she reminds me of the great sin I have committed.* And his thoughts drift back again to the dead man at the base of the mountain below his home. *Will they discover his body with the spring thaw? Now the Holy Mother is in a great battle for my soul with this chandelier. Who will take me first?* And with the baying jackals and this haunting question, he drifts into an uneasy sleep.

## 12. The Girl in the Hijab

The rug, wet and cold, jolts Michael awake. He raises his head too far, slamming it into the base of the chandelier's stem. The sharp thud shakes the chandelier. Only the fur hat, Milhem's labbadeh, prevents a bloody gash. "You're too impatient," he tells the chandelier, "like mama when I want to sleep longer."

The night before, he was too tired and cramped under the chandelier to eat. Now the cold and stiffness in his body succumbs to the hunger awakened within him. He crawls out from under his cargo, opens his pack, and pulls out the remaining food. He admires the old man's sheet of unleavened bread, his favorite saj bread, and the bitter olives, pine nuts, and hardened chickpeas. Michael tastes oil and garlic in the roasted pine nuts. *Where did the old man get such delicacies?*

The morning clouds have not burned away, so the chandelier cannot show him which fork to take. But the sun always was above his right shoulder the previous day. *There is no shadow, but it is lighter to my right, so I will take the right fork.*

His pace picks up with the downward sloping elevation, relieving for a time the soreness in his shoulders. Below him, where the path takes a steep and sharp turn, it widens toward several houses. He pulls the chandelier into heavy brush to hide it from the path, then walks into the village.

From a higher vantage point, he reaches a group of small stone dwellings draped on both sides of a narrow dirt road. Among the houses there is little activity. *This is not Chtoura. I haven't come down enough from the mountain. I'll have to be more careful when I reach Chtoura.*

He draws closer but stops short of the first house, where three horses wait. The Pasha's soldiers sit on two of the horses, one holding the reins of the third horse. Michael slips behind the house, to where he can watch from one corner. Screams break the talk of the two waiting riders, who watch the third rider drag a young girl from the house. She pushes against him with her feet and hits his arms, but his hold of her hijab is tight and his pull on her abaya strong.

Michael notices the back door of the house ajar. He peers into the empty room. Bread, nuts, several jars of beans, and cured beets lie near a small prayer rug. He is reminded of his great sin. *I have murdered. Will I now steal?* He slips inside and gathers a few items of the food, then peers from the window. The soldier throws the woman over the back of his horse, but as he mounts, she slips off the other side and runs toward the house.

Michael reaches for the handle of the back door, then stops as she enters. *She will hear me if I open the door.* She locks the front door and places her ear hard against it to listen. *I have my chance, while the woman has her back to me.* But instead of slipping away, he turns to face her.

“What?” she says. “Foolish boy. They will violate me, but they will kill you.” Michael places the food in his arms back on the prayer rug. Hard raps shake dust from the door and echo into the house with the voice of the soldier, “Come out now. Don’t make me wait for you.”

“Maybe he will go away,” she whispers. She watches through the window. Another soldier walks toward the back of the house. “You are trapped,” she laments. Michael locks the back door. Her eyes narrow. The rap on the front door deepens from something harder than a fist. A rifle perhaps.

“I’ll break this door and more if you don’t come out,” the soldier says. She puts her lips closer to the door. She says to the soldier, “First, go back to your horse.”

“What?” The voice comes back. “Back away,’ she repeats, “and I will come to you.” Michael watches through the window. The soldier pedals back from the door and waits. The woman’s body heaves and with her eyes on Michael, she puts one finger to her lips.

Then she opens the door and walks out, locking it behind her. When she reaches the soldier, he grabs her by both shoulders and slaps her face, buckling her legs.

The soldier at the back door pulls at the handle, but it doesn't open. He peers into the back window. The food on the prayer rug sends him to the door again. Michael remains in the shadow of the back wall between the door and the window. The soldier rattles the door handle until a shout from

the front calls him back. Michael peers out the front window. With the woman already in one of the saddles, the three soldiers jostle their horses into a fast trot.

Michael waits, listening. Hoofbeats dissolve. A deep chill soaks through his clothes, turning his sweat cold. *For a thief, she gave herself to the soldiers.* Then from the back door, still trembling, he climbs to his still hidden cargo without any of the food from the house.

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“I will find no comfort in hell, even if I return you,” he tells the Chandelier. *But I cannot. No, I will not.* And despite claws of hunger which scrape at his insides, he pulls his cargo along a small path that bypasses the village. *Mama, I'm sorry I haven't reached Chtoura yet. But you don't know about the heavy cargo I must pull. It will buy more food, much more than the lira you gave me. Food for you, mama, and for Milhem. For Matile and Wadih. And for the other houses of the Chreen.*

### 13. Chtoura

When the path steepens again, Michael senses this might signal his final descent into Chtoura. He cannot see the town, but the green expanse of pine, fir, cypress, and juniper appears to thin toward a wide, brown plain below him. *Mama talked of the arid valley of the Bekaa and of Chtoura as the entrance to it.*

The path itself remains strewn with wet, slippery rocks. It makes the chandelier at times easier to pull, and at other times, on the steep switchbacks, more willing to push him. *The chandelier has a mind of its own now, pushing me faster to my destination.* Another turn in the road enables him to scan a still wider view of the valley and Chtoura. First a sprinkling of white limestone box-shaped homes with red-tiled roofs. Then larger buildings toward the center, growing sparse toward the east, deeper into the Bekaa. Beyond the valley a broad range of mountains forms a natural barrier from Damascus, Aleppo, and the rest of Greater Syria. Between the houses near the center, railroad tracks. *The train which brings food from the east. The station. That's where I will find a buyer for you.*

A looming shadow creeps up behind him and turns to grey the yellow-tinged snow on the far mountains in the east. *I must reach there before dark.* He quickens his pace, often stumbling on the loose rocks. Again, the rug snags on a protruded tree root. The chandelier slips out and catches Michael's foot, tripping him. He slides down the steep grade, bounced by the uneven drop, and his head slams several times against the ground. "Arghh," he moans.

The uncontrolled slide of the chandelier plummets near him and makes a hard landing among stones which had washed to the downward edge of the road. The fall bends several of its arms and one of the candle holders. Two of the ruby eyes are knocked out. Tears brim in his eyes and run streaks through his dirt encrusted cheeks. “Why do you want to hurt me?” he scolds the chandelier. *Like what they did to Milhem.*

He finds one of the lost rubies, then uses his knife to pry out the other ones, placing them in the pouch which holds the candles. “I’ll not lose any more of them,” he says, “and I’ll not let you see Chtoura. Not until I find the trader.” He retrieves his hat, which had jarred loose of his kaffieh, and reties it firmly to his head. *I’m not going to lose your hat, Milhem, I promise.*

The slope steepens again. Erosion from the winter’s rainfall exposes more rocks, forcing him to shorten his steps and make sure he can hold back the chandelier’s impatience.

He reaches one of the outlying houses of Chtoura where, from his vantage, he views both the red tiles of its roof and the main road it fronts. *Now I must find a trader. One who will not just take the chandelier and kill me.* Before approaching, he leaves his cargo in a small clearing below several bushes, where it cannot be seen from above or below.

#### **14. Milk to Share**

Through the window, the interior of the house appears dark. *No light from candles or a fire.* Michael walks to the door and knocks. He notices a flicker of light brighten a window. A candle comes to life. He knocks again. The window brightens further. A second candle.

He again tries the door. It sways inward. A mix of shadows fill a single room, drawn longer by the candles. He calls out, "I'm here for directions. I have something to trade for food." A soft woman's voice. "You may come in, but I have a gun beside me." Michael pushes the door open. A young woman sits between the two candles with a blanket covering her body and one of her arms. With the other arm, she adjusts her hijab to better cover her head. "Do not come any closer," she says. "I'm feeding the baby, but my gun is by my hand."

"I am from the mountain, near Bikfaya. I've come to trade for food." His throat tightens, words tremble. She studies Michael. His jacket, scraped open at the elbows, reveals dried blood and cracked stains through his woolen undershirt. The soiled keffiyeh around his neck is pulled up over his ears and tied onto the top of his head, squishing the labbadeh hat in place. The baggy pants, his sherwal, is torn in several places below the knees. "Many come to Chtoura for food, but not from so far," she says. "Sit down. Not near the prayer rug. Stay close to the door."

Michael kneels on the floor. "I must know where the trading is done."

“You are so young,” she said. “You should not deal with the traders.”

“Please, I need to know.”

“There is only one man who has food to trade.” Before Michael could ask for his name and say thank you, another woman enters the house. In one hand she carries a silver menorah and with the other, she pulls a rifle from her shoulder. “I saw him enter, Azizah. Are you O.K.?” she says.

“Um Bayda, yes, the boy is harmless.”

“Then I’ll take the baby now.”

“She’s almost finished. Five more minutes.” Both women watch the baby finish her feeding. Michael remains still and waits. “Azizah, this for the many months,” Um Bayda says. She places a Menorah on the prayer rug. “It is all I have, but its silver will bring you food.”

“No, I cannot take it. I wish nothing but for the girl’s health,” Azizah says. She stands with stretched arms still holding the baby. “She is quite content now.”

Um Bayda adjusts the rifle over her shoulder and takes the baby while watching Michael. “My husband will listen for you, if you need anything.”

“Yes, I know,” and Azizah picks up her pistol. “You are so kind. Please take your gift with you,” she says, but Um Bayda nods no, her eyes still on Michael, then steps outside and closes the door.

“You gave her your baby?”

Azizah smiles. “My baby is in his crib.” She peers into it, “He’s asleep. Um Bayda has no milk and my breasts are full.”

“She brought you a gift? Michael says.

“Yes, and when she was sick with child, I read to her from my Koran. I see the cross around your neck; you are a Christian, so you must take the wisdom from your book as I take the wisdom from mine.”

Michael slips the cross back down his shirt. “The man who has food to trade. You haven’t told me his name.”

“Ibrahim Dalool. Ask for him without whatever you want to trade. For your safety, you must keep it hidden.”

“Thank you. My name is Michael.” He stands up to leave.

“Names tell us little, Michael. As for Dalool, use this knowledge wisely. May your trade prove successful, inshallah.”

Michael slips the door open and peers down the road. Its deep ruts separated by mounds of mud tell him it is well-traveled. But for now, it is empty. “Salaam,” he says and closes the door behind him. When he returns to his cargo, he decides it is not hidden enough, so he moves it to a safer location. Then he sits down, places his forehead into his palms, and rocks on his knees before the chandelier. “You have not fared well in our journey,” he says. Shards of thread hang from different parts of the rug. Many of the chandelier’s arms are scratched and bent. “How will you help me if you are blind?” he asks, and he shakes the pouch to listen for the rubies.

*Maybe the trader wants only this bag. Stones papa called rubies should be valuable enough by themselves. Should I abandon the chandelier? He had run away when the boys from the cemetery appeared in the gorge below their house as dusk slipped up the canyon floor. When Ben wasn't there because he was too sick. You left your brother alone with them. That's what papa meant to say. And see what happened.* With a deep sigh, he pulls himself up by one of the bent chandelier arms, “No, I will not abandon you, chandelier.”

## **15. The Harb al-Muja'a**

Until he finds the trader Azizah identified, Michael determines to remain as inconspicuous as possible. With the chandelier well hidden, he walks a narrow path parallel to the main road. The path's raised shoulder and hedgerow hide the rail tracks he follows without being seen. Before the tracks rise above the brush at the bottom of the embankment, he reaches Chtoura's transport depot, a worn brick building with several wide, doorless openings. It is surrounded by a staging area littered with wheelless trucks and several empty lorries ready to accommodate supplies. Soldiers parade the perimeter on horses draped with military saddles and holstered rifles. The railroad tracks bordering one end continue past the depot. Even from the far side of the tracks, a pungent mix of petroleum and horse dung makes him cringe.

With the dusk growing deeper, the soldiers light oil lamps. Michael creeps closer to the lights, close enough to hear their conversation. Most of the talk is about the lira they will share. Before he can identify where to go next, several soldiers stop a truck with a canvas canopy which enters the staging area. After several shouts, the soldiers force the driver out of the truck. The driver calls out, "It's for Beirut."

A soldier opens the truck door and jostles the driver. "Fool! The Pasha himself ordered transport of these men to Damascus." Other soldiers pull back the canvas at the truck's rear to reveal stacks of large crates. They slip a ramp onto the back bumper. Two soldiers unload the larger crates. Other soldiers slide the smaller ones down the ramp, but one falls off the ramp's edge and its wood frame breaks apart. Bags fall out of the broken crate and split allowing wheat and barley to pour

out. Another bag tears and beans spill from it. Several women in the waiting area of the depot push closer. "Food," one of them shouts. "Food for Chtoura." Some soldiers rush to keep them back. One fires his pistol into the air. This attracts more women and some young children, who crowd closer to the growing stacks of crates.

Emptied of its crates of food, a queue of waiting soldiers climb the ramp and into the emptied truck. When no more can squeeze in, a soldier waves the driver to turn around and drive away.

Michael moves closer and watches the soldiers still in the depot back away from the women and children, who run to the food from the broken crate. *This is my chance. I must take what I can.* He slips from behind a lorry and into the converging crowd.

He grabs only two bags of wheat before a lieutenant turns him around with the stem of his rifle. "You ran here from the path on the other side. Boy, the seferberlik is still in force. You must know the Pasha has decreed grave penalties for avoidance of the mobilization." The lieutenant stretches his rifle in front of Michael, while the women and children grab food from the broken crate. "Do not run or you'll be shot."

The lieutenant turns his attention to a burly, mustachioed man with a thick crop of wavy black hair. With white knuckled grips on the reins, the man steers his wagon to the pile of unopened crates. The horses comply with unusual docility. They know the ugly consequences if they do not, as do the two men with rifles who sit in the back of the wagon. The two riders eye Michael

with furrowed brows. Michael looks away. *There are few such men these days not wearing the uniforms of the Ottomans.* The lieutenant lowers his rifle and calls to one of the other soldiers. "Take the boy to the other side."

From the other side of the road, Michael watches. The lieutenant walks over to the man driving the wagon. "You waste no time, but you already lost one," he shouts. "The price is still the same."

The driver ignores the offer to negotiate a lower price. He is all business, throws the soldier a small package, and nods to his men, who jump off the wagon and load the unopened crates. One last, unopened crate remains. One of the men hesitates beside it. Several of the women and children wait some twenty feet away. "No, Osman, load it on the wagon," the driver's voice booms. Osman does not respond. The driver stands, muscles rippling with poisonous intent. The other man from the back of the wagon jumps back down, "Come on Osman, help me lift it on." Wary of the driver, he mumbles, "You fool." Together, they lift the last crate onto the wagon.

The driver nudges his horses, who jerk with the surprising increase in weight, then pull the wagon away with its cargo. The lieutenant returns to Michael. "Tell me where you've come from and why you're not wearing a uniform." He pushes the gun barrel against Michael's labbadeh, still lashed tightly on his head. "Take it off," he says. "I want to see your face." With the rifle barrel, the lieutenant raises the chain from Michael's neck to reveal the cross. Then with his rifle barrel he knocks the two bags of food out of Michael's hands. Michael unties his kaffieh and takes the

hat off, then places the kaffiyeh within his hat. Again, the lieutenant taps his rifle against Michael's hand and knocks the hat to the ground.

"I'm from the mountain, and I'm here to trade for food," Michael says. The lieutenant places under his shirt the packet he received from the driver of the wagon. "No food will reach the mountain while our soldiers fight," he says.

*I cannot let my family die.* The lieutenant points the rifle at his head, and its barrel follows Michael's eyes as he bends toward the food. "If you pick up the food, you'll be shot."

From one bent knee, Michael hovers over the two bags of wheat, then picks up his hat and kicks the bags of wheat toward a child standing behind a guard rail. The sacks split. The child and a woman rush to scrape the grains from the dirt.

"I have shot lesser fools than you," the lieutenant says. He pulls his rifle back, releases the safety, and slips an extra bullet into its chamber. Another soldier, who has seen Michael's chain and cross, approaches the lieutenant and tugs at his shoulder, "He must be the one."

"What?" the lieutenant is surprised. "The one from the monastery, sir," the soldier says. Michael stuffs the hat inside his jacket.

## 16. The Pasha and the Priest

The lieutenant orders a soldier to tie together Michael's wrists. "You'll come with us," he says. Michael winces when the soldier tightens the straps. *I have done a stupid thing again. Why didn't he shoot me?*

The cemetery boys had paraded around in their new uniforms. When Ben defended Milhem, they backed away. *But that was the school playground, and they did not have loaded guns. Not then, anyway. I could have been shot for kicking the food away.* Fear surges through his body like that of a wounded animal and leaves him shaking. "Where are you taking me?"

The soldier smiles. "To a hotel for such as you." He escorts Michael to a building in the center of Chtoura, fronted by a covered porch with three arched doorways. In the street directly below the porch are several large wood scaffolds resting on top of raised platforms. Overlooking them, a balcony protects five gothic-shaped windows. A worn sign above the middle archway reads Hotel Victoria. Groups of armed soldiers chat near rain-soaked bed frames and mattresses stacked against the walls. Wires reach out from a window toward a pole. From there, another wire stretches toward the truck depot. *A telegraph? A hotel or a building of the government? For the war.*

The building takes Michael to another time and place, to buildings his father told him were those of Beirut's cinema opera and the Petit Serail of the Governor General. The scaffolding

draws a remembrance or premonition, he cannot discern. Of bodies in white linen thawbs hanging from gallows, with stretched necks held firm like spring-time decorations. Bodies eerily like his own. Bodies floating above the oddly familiar, unsmiling face of a mustached man, whose head is covered by a maroon velvet fez. Could this place be like Beirut's Sahat al-Burj where the mustached man was the General Gemal Pasha painted on the wall overlooking the grassy plaza?

Military vehicles on either side of the hotel guard its contents. They enter a hallway. On one side, an open-door reveals several office desks. On one desk a soldier taps on a telegraph machine. *Such machines are scarce in the mountains. I know of only one, in Beirut, and of papa's message from it: I will send money. STOP. Stay away from the grippe. STOP. Many cough blood here. STOP.*

The soldiers shove Michael into a small room with no furniture. With only one window close to the ceiling, it is a convenient jail cell. They lock the door and leave.

He sits against the wall below the window studying his bound wrists, already rubbed raw by the leather strap. The single pink streak of missing skin takes him to another time in Beirut with his father. Where a thief drops close to his feet in the public square, with his bared neck streaked red by the rope. *Could I buy my freedom with the chandelier? No, no, no, I promised it a noble mission for food. A holy mission for the mountain, I promised it. But the pouch of ruby eyes.*

*Hidden. Of great value and easy to trade. No, the chandelier will not see without its eyes. And I promised. Maybe the trader Dalool will free me if he knows I brought the chandelier to trade.*

A clanky insertion and turn of the key shakes Michael from his reverie. Two soldiers enter. The older one, double-chinned and muscular, approaches, grabs him by the arm and yanks him to his feet. "Rise thief," he orders. "You will face the General."

Stiffened by his wait, Michael braces his back against the cold cement of the wall. The younger of the two soldiers, beardless and not much older than Michael, remains quiet, closer to the door. Both soldiers stiffen when a short, stocky figure strides into the room. He wears a uniform festooned with medals and a sword-filled scabbard of gilded brass held to his side by a wide leather waistband. His black mustache, twisted upward at the ends, and his closely clipped beard resemble a photograph in the Bikfaya government office the large walled pictures he recalls overlooking the Sahat al-Burj square he visited with his father years before.

The icy dampness of the cement wall sends a shudder through his body and his face grows pale. *Is he the Gemal Pasha who is Governor of Syria, the General of the Ottomans? The one they call al-Saffah? The blood shedder? The butcher? What does he want of me?*

"How old are you, boy?" the Pasha asks. But he doesn't wait for an answer. "He's not subject to the seferberlik."

“Not the mobilization, sir, but thievery,” says the older soldier. The Pasha nods. “Ah. Yes, yes, it is time for the other one.”

“Yes sir,” the older soldier says and calls out to the boy by the door, “Send him in.” The young soldier opens the door and nods. A robed man emerges. Even in the shadows, Michael recognizes the chain and cross around his neck. “Abouna, is this the boy?” The Pasha says.

## 17. A Hand for Bread

Michael does not remember him to be so tall, but then he had seen him only kneeling before the Holy Virgin. *He still dresses in his robe, but he is in the service of the Pasha.* “He is the one,” the priest says.

“But there has been no such thing in his possession,” the older soldier says.

The priest answers, “It will be too large for him to carry. He has hidden it, or he has left it somewhere or with someone. Where have you —“

“Why should he tell you where the evidence is to hang him?” the Pasha says. “Anyway,” he smiles, “he is too young to hang.” Michael lowers his head. The Pasha steps closer. His face only inches away softens enough for only Michael to notice, and he pinches his thick eyebrows. “But you will pay a price for all to see and to know of the penalty for such acts, even for the young.”

“When, General?” the older soldier asks.

“Tomorrow, after the Friday prayers. Prepare the confession paper for the morning. The left hand only.”

“You will take his hand, Pasha?” the priest says. “Let me have him. He will take me to my chandelier.”

“After,” the Pasha replies. “After, he will be of no more use to me. Before I leave, the people in Chtoura will know the penalty for theft during wartime.” The priest’s head turns to the floor and Michael's eyes close with despair. He will get no help from the priest.

“Your soldiers stole food and sold it for profit,” Michael's voice barely a whisper. “Where they stop the trucks.”

“Let me take him back to the mountain with me, General,” the priest pleads.

“You accuse soldiers under my command of theft, boy?” The Pasha’s eyes narrow. “Do you want to lose your life, too?” He lets the terror of those words bleed into the souls of his soldiers and the priest. Then the General signals to the two soldiers, who with a shove and firm grasps on the priest’s shoulders guide him out of the room. The Pasha lingers to study Michael for a moment longer, then leaves. A turn of the key tells Michael the door is locked, and he is alone.

The Pasha retreats to a private office. The young soldier lingers with the priest on the porch overlooking the scaffolds outside the building. “We have not taken a hand here since we arrested a rabbi. Before the hanging of the Bishop,” he says, “the last time the General was in Chtoura.”

The priest says, "You're young. What's your name?" The boy says, "Mustafa. I'm from the mountain, not far from your church."

The priest nods and crosses himself as he walks past the scaffolds to his carriage.

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Alone, Michael falls back against the wall. *Abandon the chandelier? No. No. No. Mama, I must find the trader Dalool ... so I will be like the one-handed old man who helped me ... Ben was not there to help Milhem ... papa, where are you now?* His chest heaves and he rolls his head back against the cold concrete.

After several hours, the young soldier, Mustafa, who had escorted the priest out of the building, returns with a bowl of lentils and rice, a piece of pita bread, and a container of water. "You will eat tonight better than those on the mountain," he says. Michael does not look up or reply. Another soldier by the door walks up to Michael and, with the stock of his rifle, punches him, dropping his body to the floor. "Ungrateful fool," he growls.

Michael covers his face, but the soldier, instead of kicking him, turns and leaves the room. His face on the ground, he waits for Mustafa to hit him. Instead, they both follow a locust struggle up the wall to the small window near the ceiling and disappear into a warped opening in the rotted wood of the window frame.

"Locusts. They're everywhere," Mustapha says. For several minutes, he watches Michael struggle to eat the food with his two hands still bound at the wrists, so he loosens the leather ties. Michael studies the boy's face. "I know you," he tells the soldier. "You're from Bikfaya."

Mustapha backs away. Michael says, "You played in the cemetery there with Benyamin. My brother was his friend. You must know my brother, Milhem."

"No, no," Mustafa says, then turns and leaves the room, locking the door behind him.

Michael stumbles to the door and calls out, "Thank you. For being there that day, I mean. I know it was you." There is no answer, but he senses Mustapha is near the door and heard him.

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Michael loosens the leather straps further and slips his hands out of them. Again, fear wells up inside him. With his shirt sleeve, he smears the dirt on his face, wet from tears. Stars break through the dark of the room's single window. He raises his hands to the moon, which has risen into view and leaves distinct shadows against the far wall. With the left hand and the moonlight, he creates animals and grotesque figures on the wall. Sometimes the shadows make him cry. Other times they make him laugh.

Whispers of clouds wander past the moon outside his window and take him to another time, another place. The time, before the war. The place, at the valley floor below his home, where he and Milhem, laughing, chase a lizard. Until nearby shouts and taunts stop them. They squeeze under a tangle of brush hugging the twisted trunk of a cedar. Sticks slam the trees and branches around them. The thuds and whacks grow louder. Milhem covers his ears. “They’re all around,” he whispers. Michael puts a single finger to his lips. A shout nearby, “You’re surrounded, dear Milhem.” Another shout from a different side, “Your Jew friend can’t help you now, Milhem.”

Michael, his back hard against the wall of his prison, does not sense the cold sweat embracing his neck. Instead, in his reverie he steps out from under the brush and pulls himself onto a branch of the cedar. He again puts a finger to his lips for Milhem. He climbs a few low branches, to where he can get a better view of the surroundings. They are still unseen by the cemetery boys. Part way up the hillside to their house is the flat ridge with its stacked wood for their home. He lowers himself. “I’m going for papa. Stay here.”

“Why can’t I go, too?” Milhem’s voice trembles. “You’ll be safer hiding here. Papa will bring his gun,” Michael whispers. “Wait here for us to come back. Crawl underneath where they can’t see you.” Milhem slips further under the brush. “No one can see you from out here.”

He climbs until he reaches the bottom of the ridge and crouches there. But his route up the slope to his house is blocked. One of the cemetery boys sits on the firewood partly hidden in shadow. Frozen just below the ridge, he waits, but the shadowy figure does not move. Dusk envelopes the

valley. The moon, in its apex early, and the stars leave him no unseen route. Until the shadow speaks, "Why are you waiting? Go. Get help," the voice says. "My friends will find him. You don't have much time."

*He will catch me if I go.* But the figure on the ridge does not move. Finally, he crawls sideways away from the ridge. Slowly, over bristles and stones. Staying between thick brush which hides him. Far enough from the ridge, he scrambles up the hillside and runs back to his house.

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Michael rolls away from the prison wall onto his side, his eyes wide, staring along the dark floor.

*We searched for you, Milhem. We tried to find you, honest.*

No one is on the ridge, no one in the ravine on the valley bottom. Milhem's hiding spot under the brush is empty. Until his father's guttural calls resonate with echoes drawing out Milhem's audible moans and whimpers to signal his location. Whimpers which come and go then recede with his coma several days later.

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The moon has slipped away, draining its cold, grey light out of the prison window. Head nearly flat against the floor, his arm a pillow. His eyes pick up something crawling, something black,

darker than the darkness in his prison. It is crawling toward him, a locust maybe, but why so black? He reaches his free arm toward it, an arm which ends at the wrist. At a well-worn stub. Like Jacob's. A sliver of moonlight catches the crawler: A disembodied hand moves toward his arm with soft touches of its fingers on the cement, like those doing a pianissimo. Each touch a barely heard, high pitched ping which grows louder as it deepens in tone, becomes the harsh growl of his father, "why did you leave him?"

Michael's eyes widen. He lifts his head away from his other arm as the crawler reaches his stubbed wrist and grabs it. Grabs it hard. He sits up with a fearful shout, awake now, and pulls back his arms to clasp his hands together. He shakes his head awake and curls his fingers to lessen the stiffness of his left hand, making fists of it several times. He counts the creases in its palm. His mother had made playful predictions from studying them. Matile believed the stories of the creases even when he did not. They were always of happy things, even when he could see his mother was sad. And it was always his left palm she gripped, then held tight to her bosom, as if she knew what its gruesome fate would be.

*The man of missing fingers learned to tie the bales of tobacco. But how will I do that with only one hand? I wonder where they will bury my hand. Maybe I can keep it to bury near the skull I found.* With a curt laugh, he throws his head back against the wall. Then he wipes his nose with the back of his hand, buttons his jacket, pulls out his labbadah for a pillow and drops onto it.

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The early morning calls to prayer shake Michael awake. He sits up waiting for the soldiers to arrive. No one comes. *The services at the mosque must have already started.* No growls of the diesel trucks or hollow clops from the hoofs of horses break through the quiet of the street outside his window. *Where are the soldiers?*

Then a uniformed arm forces open the door. Mustafa enters with the priest. "You must come with me," the priest says.

Mustafa uses the bayonet of his rifle to break out the small window's glass above them and pry apart the warped wood frame around it. The frame easily falls away, enlarging the small window's opening. "You escaped through this window," he says. Then he follows the priest and Michael out the door.

"You will become a deserter if you come with us," The priest says.

"Yes, I know. They will not harm me. I'll be at prayers during this time."

"Thank you," Michael says. With a nod of his head, Mustafa says, "Tell your brother." And he slips away.

Abouna and Michael turn into the hillside behind the hotel and climb for some time without speaking. There is more than one opportunity when Michael thinks of breaking away. He is sure he can outrun the priest, hide, then wait for the chance to find the trader. The priest has taken significant risk to free him, Michael realizes, but the priest must know, too, that he would have no interest in returning the chandelier once he had lost his hand.

*If I give him the chandelier, will he have me rearrested? But maybe he can help me secure a fair trade and share the food with me to help my family?* With this unanswered question Michael resolves not to give up the chandelier and continues to follow the priest.

The longer they walk together, the more hopeful the priest becomes that he can retrieve the chandelier. When they reach heavily wooded terrain, the priest stops. "I did not wait for you to lose your hand," he says. "Now, you must trust me."

"The chandelier is in a safe place," Michael says. "I want to trade it for food, enough for the Chreen. Especially the eyes of the chandelier."

"Do you think it will bring you enough food to compensate me for its loss in my church? And atone for your sin of thievery?"

*What is it to steal if I'm already a murderer? And I steal for a good purpose. It will not feed anyone if it remains in the church.* “No. I promised the chandelier a holy mission,” Michael says, surprising himself with his response. *The chandelier has strengthened me against this holy man.*

His face grim, the priest remains silent for some time. Finally, he says, “Only the trader Dalool will pay. Others will be afraid. He will take the chandelier and kill you.”

*He has heard of Dalool. How can I trust him?* “Why would Dalool risk more with murder?

I will ask him only for food. The chandelier will accept no less than that.” Michael turns and walks away, hoping his tentative steps will not betray the firmness of his words. *But the priest might be my best chance to find the trader.*

The priest concedes there is only one way to secure food the boy wants and still save the chandelier. It will require him to meet Dalool himself. “Then I will take you to him,” the priest calls out, and the accountant's words come to him again: *She will draw you close like a flame draws its innocents.*

“I want a fair trade,” Michael says. “The food will pay for it.”

“Michael, you must trust me about Dalool. There is someone in his household who honors the church. Without me, you will end up with nothing. Come.” *The priest must know the trader. Such a meeting could be a trap.* Still, he follows the priest, who takes him to some heavy brush near

an unused dirt road. The spot gives them a broad view of Chtoura. “I stop at this place whenever I come to Chtoura,” the priest says. “It is wide enough for my carriage, and I first look over what is going on there before I enter. Once I did not enter at all when I saw a man in a black robe hanging from a tree. I returned to the monastery.”

“A priest?”

“No, a bishop. Even a bishop is not safe from the Pasha, Michael. The church is friendly with the French, and the Ottomans will not tolerate less than complete loyalty. And it was Dalool who betrayed the bishop.”

They stood looking into Chtoura for some time. Finally, Michael says, “When will you return?”

“I will have clothes for you, and I will bring my carriage. You must bring the chandelier to this spot. If I have not returned at dusk, go to the building on the other side of Chtoura, there to the east,” the priest points. “Do you see it? If I do not come, you must go there.”

“Is it a church?”

“It is a house, the meeting place of the Jews. Tell the rabbi your Abouna sent you.”

After the priest left, Michael climbs a short tree to get a better view of Chtoura. Located on the main road between Beirut and Damascus, it has the look of a busy border town. Even at this distance, the only men he can pick out are soldiers of the Pasha. *Much food moves in and out of the depot, since the Ottomans entered the war. Gemal Pasha must rest there often in his travels. His soldiers will be looking for me. If the priest does not betray me, surely Dalool will as he did the bishop. If I don't run away.*

Then he thinks of Milhem.

## 18. The Trader's Wife

It does not take long for the priest to make the inquiries necessary. He has a plan, but it depends upon a someone who can also cause his murder. *It is the only way I will retrieve my chandelier.* He is directed to a compound of several buildings protected by a wall of imposing, chiseled limestone bricks and a heavy iron gate. Several men with rifles walk the grounds inside. One of the men from the wagon at the depot approaches the entrance and peers through the iron bars.

"I'm here to see Hanan Dalool," the priest says from his carriage. The man nods. "Tell her, the priest from the monastery of St. Elias, on the mountain. Near Bikfaya."

"I remember," the man says.

"Tell her, Abouna Yousef."

"Every priest is Abouna. What is your full name?"

"You called me Abouna."

"I need a proper name."

"And I called you, Osman," the priest says. "At the monastery. I remember, too."

Osman walks outside the gate and inspects the carriage, then places his rifle over his shoulder.

“Come inside,” he says.

Soon a woman walks to the gate, with Osman a few steps behind. The priest waits by the carriage. She wears an abaya but does not lift the head covering until she reaches him, revealing her shoulder-length hair. *She has grown more beautiful with age. In the church the glow of my chandelier's candles encircled her like a soft halo.* He can almost see it again now. Desire to take her away from all this surges through him. He remembers the words of the accountant.

“Yusef,” she says. She corrects herself, “Abouna Yusef.” Despite her effort, the grim toughness which tightens the lines of her face melt into a smile.

“It has been some time since you made confessions in my church.”

“Yes, I have made many confessions since then.” She waves Osman away, but he remains uncomfortably close. The priest searches for the words. Her smile stirs memories of the times they shared in Bikfaya and at the monastery. And a faint desire they may return again.

“Have you found happiness here?” He needs to remain in the present. The past cannot be repeated, however much they both may want it.

"Does it matter to you? You chose not to see me again. Now here you are."

"The choice was made for me when I entered the monastery. You know that, Hanan."

"Yes, I know."

"And you told me of the man your family arranged for marriage."

"An arrangement they were forced to make, and one you could have changed," she says.

"Your family would have paid a heavy price for such a change. You told me that."

"I told you many things then," she glances toward the two-story residence at the rear of the compound. "What do you want of me now, Abouna?"

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From outside a front window on the second floor of the compound residence, the reflection of a solemn face looms. One soured by a drooping mustache and a sharply chiseled jaw covered with black bristled whiskers. Inside, his cheekbones like anvils hard and angled, the trader Dalool's stretched arms grip both sides of the window's frame, his forearm muscles so taut he could pull them apart. The window overlooks the main gate where Hannan and the priest are in intimate

conversation. "He wears the robes of a priest. No, a monk. He is the one from the monastery, I'm sure of it."

A man standing near him shifts the long-barreled rifle strap to his other shoulder. "Only Osman would know that Brahim. She traveled only with Osman."

"If she were not with child, I would make her tell me more," Dalool says.

"She will bring you another boy, inshallah." A grumble and look of disdain from Dalool, "Do not try to humor me, Towfik."

Towfik says, "The supplies from the soldiers filled our storeroom."

"Prepare the list so I can set the prices," Dalool says.

Towfik tries another tactic, "She'll come to realize what your wealth will give her."

Dalool nods. He watches Hanan and the priest end their meeting. Osman escorts the priest out of the gate. Dalool broods and follows Hanan's trek back to the house. He turns to Towfik, "Last month the food we sold did not match our list of supplies." Outside the priest is gone but Osman is mounted on a horse and exiting the still open gate.

## 19. Osman

A lanky woman in her fifties scrapes at the frigid earth with a rusted hoe. Her straggled hair already sprinkled grey, dribbles with sweat along rivulets in both sides of her face. She pulls seeds like gold from a small pouch in her tight grip and drops them near her feet. Despite her effort, the birds forage for the seeds in the rows of broken soil. The sagging skin in her face and arms, the drooped eyelids, and the hallowed cheeks age her appearance beyond her 55 years.

A hefty man, rifle slung on his shoulder, guides a horse nearby. Two bulging saddlebags straddle the horse's backside. "I thought you would be here," he says. "I told you not to do this. It will be too cold to harvest anything."

"Osman, my Osman," she sighs. "You have brought me food?"

"You will have enough for this month, mother, if you do not share with your neighbors" He reaches out his hand. "Let's go home."

She looks over her work, the tilled soil, so small, so forsaken. Only the hope she has planted sustains it. She looks up to the man in shadow, the hard rays of the sun behind him. "I will not ride anymore," she says.

Osman dismounts, holds the horse's reins, and walks with his mother past single room wood bungalows. "Does he share it with you?" she says. "Please do not steal."

Osman says, "These houses look empty. Have they all fled to Beirut?"

"They have no Osman in their family, so they go where there is food. Have you --"

"No questions, mother," he says.

"You know what I will say. What I have said before. Does he give it to you, or must you steal it?"

"It's something you must not be concerned with," he says.

"I have heard of his treachery, Osman. I am fearful for your life if you steal from him."

Osman and his mother reach a house with clapboard sidings of thin pine separated by dark wood framed windows of bubbled glass. The roof of loose wood boards does not appear like it would repel a heavy rain.

"Has he returned?" Osman says.

"No. I don't think I will see your father again. Will you come in?"

Osman's eyes turn away, "I cannot this time, but I will come back with more food next month. I wish I could do more."

"Maybe his wife needs more help with the boy. Even in his barn I will work." she says.

Osman is impassive. This is no time for feeling, for empathy. "I wish. But I will ask again. I have to wait for the right time."

She has heard this answer before, but it is a dialogue she must repeat as a mother of hope. Osman honors that part of his mother's character, even as he realizes he will not risk asking the trader again. They both know this is the way of the world in the harb al-mujaa.

Osman takes the saddle bags into the house and unloads the food on the single table in a corner of the room. The small sacks of grains and two containers of milk, flanked by a handful of potatoes and carrots, fill the table. His mother watches from the door. "Vegetables," she raises her eyebrows and her hand to her lips.

She knows he will now leave, and when he steps toward the door, she reaches around his waist with both arms and presses her head against his chest. "There are others like me, Osman. You can make a difference for them, too."

He returns the hug. Just like his mother, he reflects. Always thinking about the others. He walks to his horse, his face grim. He can do no more.

## 20. A New Hosanna

Michael returns to the chandelier and sits beside it. The quiet of the afternoon deepens his loneliness and turns his thoughts to Milhem and the family. *Would they have found some food in Bikfaya? Without the chandelier I could have returned sooner. But how much food could mama's liras buy me?*

From the gleaming arms, the faces of mama, Milhem, Matile, even the face of the baby Wadih peer between the folds of the rug. Then several locusts crawl out from those same folds. His jaw tightens and his face flushes with anger. He brushes away the locusts. "I'm coming back, Milhem," he says, and he pulls down the rug to reveal the chandelier in all its nakedness. More locusts flee from the safety of the candle holders.

When the flutter of the locusts has gone, deep quiet settles over Michael and the chandelier. "You didn't want to make this journey with me," he says. "I cannot fault you for hating me. I took you away from your home, from where people admired your beauty. You lost your candles, and I took out your eyes. Yes, I did it to protect you. Because you saved me from the wolves and showed me the way to Chtoura. Now I must make you ready to do what I said you must do."

Michael takes the keffiyeh from inside his jacket pocket and rubs the arms of the chandelier with it until the shine comes back to each one. Ignoring the cold biting at his neck, he takes the pouch from underneath the stem of the chandelier. He pours out the ruby eyes, and with his shirt cleans each one of them. "I will let you see again," he says.

He lays the stones on the rug. Twelve candle holders, three stones for each one, except for the one lost. Thirty-five stones. He lays them in a square of six-by-six, less one. Their reflection in the afternoon sun makes him shade his eyes. *How can each stone have such beauty? From you, we will have a winter of food. But I will not tell the chandelier. Not yet anyway. Not until I'm ready to say goodbye.*

He uses the knife he had left hidden with the chandelier to insert the red stones and press them into place. This takes some time. Once the knife slips and cuts his left hand. Blood splatters on the arms of the chandelier. "Now we are one," he says. And with the shirt, he wipes the blood away. Then he tears off a piece of his undergarment and wraps his cut hand with it.

When he finishes, he looks up to the waning sun. Much time has passed. He grows worried the priest might return and not find him at their meeting place. He re-ties the rug around the chandelier and with the leather strap of the harness pulls it toward the pathway. *The chandelier feels heavier. I'm tired. And it must know the time is near.*

Still pulling the chandelier, he reaches the path overlooking Chtoura. From a distance, the priest sits by his carriage. He pushes his cargo behind some large boulders and walks over to him. The priest jumps up to greet him. "You have made the right decision," he says.

"I'm here," Michael says. "Follow me." When they reach the chandelier, the priest walks around the rug. "It appears you have protected it well. I'm afraid not so much for the rug."

"The rug did what it was supposed to do," Michael says.

"You cut your hand. Let me tie it better." The priest takes out a wrapping from a drawer under the carriage seat and ties it around Michael's cut hand. From the same drawer, he takes out the gun and slips it through the belt of his robe and into a deep pocket.

"Here are clothes for you to wear." The priest unwraps a sheet filled with clothes. "The white abaya will hide your body, and you can slip it over your jacket. You must wrap the tunic around your neck. It will obscure your face until we reach the house of the trader."

Michael secures his hat inside his jacket. "I will not lose my hat," he says, as he exchanges his dirty linens for the more traditional clothes of Chtoura. "Do you want to examine the chandelier?"

"No, we have little time before dark." Together, they lift the chandelier onto the carriage.

“I can walk alongside the carriage and guide the mule down,” Michael says.

“It will be difficult to walk the steep grade. You will not be strong enough if he panics. I will do it. Have you steered a carriage before?”

“Yes, all the way to Beirut with my father.”

“O.K. Sit in the carriage and pull tight on the straps, while I walk with it,” the priest says. “Now let’s cover the rug with the sheet and tie it down. The evening breeze will start soon.”

The priest’s clench of the bridle forces the mule to test each step along the steep path. Its hooves slide on the rocks, often under trembling ankles, despite the sure hand of the priest. In its descent the hooves sometimes activate small rockslides, and the loose rocks make the priest stumble. They reach the main street into Chtoura, the priest guiding the mule by foot. Several along the road stop to watch this young man, in the robes of a monk, walk alongside the mule and carriage, with its rider and bulky cargo draped in white linens. The priest ignores them, thinking only of the trader's wife.

## **Ch. 21 Hanan**

Hanan sits on the side of her bed listening. Outside her room, the uneven floors creak under the weight of his steps. Will he enter? Still in her abaya, she slips under the covers and closes her eyes. He knows she takes an afternoon rest.

He believes her story. The fear, she tells him, of losing the baby because of her delicate health. The baby he so dearly wants. The son he would know could only be his. No, he would not wake her. But is he brooding about something else? Has he seen or heard of her brief meeting with the priest by the front gate of the compound?

While she waits, eyes closed, memories wash over her. Memories of Abouna Yusef – Father Yusef. Yes, of Joseph Arbeeni from Arbeen, a Damascus suburb she imagines must be a farming village not so different from the one where she grew up.

And of the time before he completed his studies at the monastery. When she talked with such exuberance of going on to an education in Beirut. Where they agreed someday to meet, elope, and emigrate to America. But he had obligations to the church. The Patriarchate in Damascus which paid for his studies as a favor to his parents, who made promises for their son's future in the church. Not just as a priest, but as a Bishop. Marriage before ordination, he explained to her, was acceptable in the Orthodox Church only for a priest, but not for a Bishop. And this was the same Patriarchate which owned the land near Bikfaya which her sharecropping family, like those

of the Malouf, Kfoury and Saliba families, farmed and needed to survive. Still, she would gladly pull Yusef away from obligations to a family far away she didn't know. And she would entrust her own family's meager livelihood to the hands of her older brother. But Ibrahim Dalool, too, stood in the way.

### **Summer, 1912**

Eighteen-year-old Hanan Asfour sits on the clapboard of a carriage loaded with sacks of grain. Beside her an older man, Salim, face haggard and shoulders hunched, guides the two horses. "Papa, how much longer?" she pleads.

"We must pass through Chtoura. Be patient. The buyer is on the other side, past the train station."

"Leave me at the Byblos Restaurant, and I can rest until you pick me up."

"No, I want you with me. Besides he is very rich, and you are old enough to meet him."

"But how old is he?" Hanan moans.

"Never mind," Salim says. "You will have a better life than that of a khouriye."

"Why do you think I want to be the wife of a priest?" she says.

"It is why you visit the monastery school so often, is it not?"

Chagrined, Hanan sulks, and soon the carriage stops at the gate of a large compound. Behind the gate, a man with a rifle slung over his shoulder nods and pulls the gate open. He guides the horses along a rising graveled path to an imposing house of whitewashed limestones and windows of bubbled glass framed by faded red shutters. A long, covered porch borders the front, divided by a portico cocooning large double doors. In its second-floor window, a burly, mustached man watches them approach. Hanan sees him. He smiles. She looks away.

Osman unloads the carriage. Salim helps his daughter disembark, and Osman offers her his arm. "Please," he says. His gentle demeanor and smile ease the tension in her face. He guides them up the stairs to the porch's front door, which opens as they approach. "This is my daughter, Brahim," Salim says. "Hanan, meet Ibrahim Dalool." Hanan's body chills under the cool stare of the trader. He must be twenty years older, she suspects, and turns toward her father with disbelief. Dalool ignores the awkward moment, "Let me take you both around to show you what I have built in Chtoura.

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Early that fall, Hanan's mother Leila waits by the window of her home in Bikfaya. She brushes back strands of greying hair from her face when Hanan enters. "Did you go to the monastery?" she says.

Hanan hesitates, "I won't go there again." Her mother is surprised, "You'll not see him anymore?"

"He has been ordained, mama."

"Did you tell him?"

"What for? He is now a priest. He will be forced to claim he's not the father."

"Maybe you're wrong about --"

"No, mama. I've had no blood now for three months." She runs to another room, closing the door behind her.

The next day Salim returns from Chtoura with a carriage emptied of its supplies. Smiling, he calls Leila onto their house porch. "Is Hanan back from Beirut?" he asks. Leila glances back into the house and Hanan steps out to greet her father.

"The trader will be here tomorrow to inspect our crops. Hanan, I want you here with me for his visit."

"No, papa, I --" Annoyed, Salim cuts her off. "I'm happy you're home this time. You have managed to be somewhere else the last two times he's visited. You must sit here with me."

"But he comes for the crops..." Leila pleads.

"And for more," Salim fires back. "Hanan, go inside," Leila says. But Hanan sobs as she runs down the path away from the house. Salim is somber, "She no longer has a choice, Leila."

The next day, Hanan sits with her mother. They are both stiff with apprehension facing Salim and Dalool, who speaks in measured tones with words he has carefully researched. "These farms no longer provide funds the Patriarch in Damascus needs for his church. Instead, they have become more dependent on the monastery," he tells them. "The coming war of the Ottomans will not treat the villages kindly. But you will have the money to buy your farm from the church, and I'll give her the comfort of wealth and status in Chtoura."

The expression on her mother's face tells Hanan there is little hope to deter the outcome she has tried so hard to prevent. For Hanan's father the decision is difficult. For Hanan and her mother, the decision is easier: Yusef Arbeeni chose ordination.

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The sound of Dalool's heavy footsteps outside her bedroom stops. Hanan wipes her wet cheeks with her hands, and in soft steps, she pads over to the door to secure it with a slow turn and click of the key in the lock.

## 22. The Trader

Inside the iron gate of the compound, the priest climbs onto the carriage alongside Michael. Holding the reins of the mule, Osman walks them through the courtyard. "Where is Hanan?" the priest says, but Osman ignores him. The priest, his face slick with perspiration, feels for the gun he has hidden under the carriage seat. It would be useless here in the trader's compound, he concludes, but its presence provides some level of reassurance.

Would Hanan follow through with his plan or leave him to the devices of her husband? During her visits to the monastery, she made references to Dalool's suspicious and violent nature. But that was before she capitulated to her family's wishes and married the trader. It would be a marriage of necessity he rationalized at the time. If she felt driven into an unhappy marriage, she would surely resent him for it.

He would like to meet her young son, but it would be too risky to do so while in the compound itself. She has avoided his question about the boy's age. Could the boy possibly be his? These thoughts flash through the priest's mind. *Why have I allowed the boy to bring the chandelier here, where the trader will control our fate?* Because you still love her, you fool, he told himself.

They reach a large house opposite a building which has no windows. A warehouse perhaps. Osman glances toward a second level window of the house, where Michael catches sight of a figure moving through it. A moment later Hanan steps onto the house porch. The hijab wrapped

tight only serves to highlight the perfect symmetry of her head and the delicate features of her face. Michael is drawn first to the silky skin and the darkness of her eyes, wells into which he fears he might leap as he jumps off the carriage

She watches Michael and the priest uncover the cargo and untie the rug, then drag the chandelier to the ground. The priest searches for any fleeting smile in her face, but she remains expressionless under the shadow of the porch.

The chandelier's arms, dull and cold, captures little of the light left in the growing dusk. "Let me do this," Michael says. He takes out the candles from his pouch and places them in each of the arm's holders.

A smile finally softens Hanan's face, "Osman, light the candles." Osman pulls his rifle over a shoulder and lights the candles. The arms of the chandelier shimmer from the constellation of flames and highlight Osman's face. I saw this man at the truck depot, Michael realizes. But he says nothing.

A dark haired, mustached man emerges from the house and approaches them. Michael surmises this must be the trader. His head almost touches the porch ceiling and rests on a neck more like a broad pillar. His chiseled features give him a handsome but stern look. One hardened, Michael concludes, by the incessant give and take of fierce negotiation. He does not leave the porch, preferring to stand well above all of them.

“Osman, is this the priest from the monastery where you took Hanan?” Dalool barks. Osman stiffens. “Yes, Brahim.”

Michael leans toward the priest and whispers, “He’s the one from the truck depot.” *The one the young woman told me of. Will the priest bargain with such a man?*

Ibrahim Dalool steps off the porch and shuffles around the chandelier, inspecting it, and glancing at Hanan while he does so. Finally, he stands between Hanan and the chandelier and faces her with a dour smile. “The priest from the monastery,” he affirms. She remains silent. Then he turns to the priest. “Why have you troubled me with such a damaged piece of garbage?” Michael’s shoulders slump.

“The boy wishes to take food for it, which is much needed on the mountain,” the priest says.

“From where have you taken such a chandelier, boy?” Dalool barks.

The priest is quick to respond, “His family needs food for the Chreen, near Bikfaya.”

Dalool nods disparagingly. “There are many such villages without food on the mountain. If this is not stolen, why not take it to Beirut?”

“There are bandits on the roads, sir,” Michael says. “And many have long admired the stones in the chandelier.”

“Yes, I see one is missing,” Dalool says. “And all the arms are scratched. See here, some are dented. There is not much value in the chandelier, but the rug...”

“The ruby stones are of great value,” Michael pleads. “They are the eyes of the chandelier.”

“Rubies? Ha,” Dalool laughs. “They are only colored glass. By themselves, they are worth nothing.”

Michael looks at the priest, who remains quiet. *Why doesn't he speak up? He knows of its beauty in the church, yet he doesn't speak. Only the ruby eyes can help me now.*

Firmly in control now, Dalool lets the silence embrace them. His eyes glance toward Hanan, then shift to the priest. “For Hanan’s benefit, not for you or even the boy, I will give two liters of milk,” he says. “With 1,000 grams of wheat, and 1,000 grams each of beans, chickpeas, fava, and pine nuts. And I will give you both your lives in the bargain.”

“No, Hanan says. “You will triple it,”. Hanan's reply betrays the leverage her pregnancy holds over Dalool and emboldens the priest. “It is barely enough for two families,” the priest says. “It is not enough.”

“What does a woman know about business?” Dalool growls. Osman, take her away from here. But Hanan stands firm, and Osman does not move. “And you will give them 25 liters of milk, for the children,” she adds. “Packed in ice. You will not deny the wishes of a woman with child.”

Dalool frowns, “You must include the rug,” he says. And only my first offer stands, not the one from my wife.

“So little food for such great value in the chandelier,” says the priest. “How many liras for such a small amount of food?”

“With the price of food in Chtoura, it is more than twenty lire.”

“How much more?” says the priest.

“Twenty-five at the least,” Hanan says with knowing satisfaction. “It is more than the value of your chandelier and your rug.”

"Yes," Dalool said, "at the least."

The priest catches the eye of Hanan and turns again to face the trader. “Then I will give you twenty-five liras for the food, and I will keep the chandelier.”

Dalool frowns with disdain. "I know you cannot have such money".

"Not with me. No. But I have a commitment of mortgage from the bankers in Beirut for my church and the monastery in the Metn. And I will give you fifteen percent interest with the payment until I have sent you the liras. Here is an advance payment of interest. Enough for one month." The priest pulls the pouch from under his garment and gives it to Osman, who takes a brief peek into it. "

And I will add to it," Michael says. "Three lira." Dalool ignores Michael's outstretched hand.

"A fair trade," Hanan says. You will not deny a holy man a fair trade."

"Fair for whom?" Dalool shouts. With a gruff voice he says, "Priest, you have tricked me. Why should I let you leave here with it?"

"The Pasha is still in Chtoura and knows of my search for this chandelier," the priest says. Dalool saunters around the chandelier but says nothing.

*What is this percent Abouna offered? Interest, he called it. It must be valuable, and I must learn about it. But Michael does not want to ask at such a delicate time.*

Dalool nods to his men to open the door to the warehouse. “You may leave us, Hanan,” Dalool says again, but she has already reached the warehouse door and opened one side of it. The men hesitate until Dalool nods to Osman to help them gather the food. Hanan goes inside the warehouse with him.

Dalool grumbles and takes the liras from the priest and Michael. They wait while Hanan selects the food to be loaded onto the carriage. “You know,” Abouna, “it is only Hanan who is with child, who allows you take this worthless chandelier. Was it in your church when she made her last visit there?” The priest moves closer to the carriage but does not respond.

“Was it there before the war and the locusts,” Dalool continues. “And before my marriage.” The priest says nothing. Finally, Hanan orders Osman, still inside the storage room, to stop and tie the food beneath the chandelier. She has pushed Dalool far enough. “Hanan, you have loaded food worth much more than my offer.”

Michael's excitement does not allow him to keep track of the amount of food Osman has moved underneath the chandelier. Its flames shimmer through Michael's moist eyes. *The candles glow and the arms shine. More than in the church. The chandelier is happy with the food placed underneath it. An amount decided by the trader's wife.*

Hanan folds her arms. “Have your way woman,” Dalool says. And grumbling, he walks away. After Osman finishes tying down the food, he leaves to find Dalool.

“Thank you, Hanan,” the priest says. “I will pray for your good fortune with the new child.”

“Pray for my first born also, Abouna. Someday you will know him, but not now.”

“In God’s timing, Hanan, inshallah,” the priest says, his face flush with emotion. “May I see him before we leave?”

Hanan moves closer. “A blessing, Abouna,” she says. “Osman protects me here as he has before.” He takes out his cross to bless her. “Even now, he plots against you,” she whispers. “Do not travel tonight and tomorrow stay off the main road. His men will be looking for you both.”

The priest waves the cross over her, and she kisses it. She watches him place a lingered kiss on the cross and push it deep into his pocket. She turns to walk away, hesitates, then turns her head to face the priest. She knows Dalool will be watching her from somewhere inside the house. “If you take the carriage around the back side of the house on the way out, you will see him,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “But do not stop.”

Michael and the priest re-secure and cover the chandelier. Osman and the rest of Dalool’s men watch them water the mule from the trough below the front porch and board the carriage. The priest takes the reins and steers it along the deserted back side of the house. Except for a young dark-haired boy, perhaps three years old, alone with his nanny. The boy waves a stick like a sword

and gawks at the mule. The priest lets the mule follow the path in a lazy walk to the gate. "Are you crying, Abouna?" Michael asks, but the priest only turns his head away.

### 23. In the Holy of Holies

With the moon behind thick clouds, Michael shivers and the priest's fingers tingle from the numbing cold. After they are out of sight from the walls of Dalool's compound, the carriage turns onto a different path and soon reaches the rabbi's house of worship.

The rabbi smiles when the boy appears with the priest. "Abouna, you have made God's choice," he says.

"Thank you for praying with me last night," the priest says. "We must hide until the morning. The trader's men will be looking for us tonight."

"As will the Pasha, if they tell him the boy is with you," the rabbi says. Everyone knows of his escape."

The trader will want the chandelier for himself. He will not say anything to the Ottomans," the priest says.

"Take the carriage to the back of the building, and I'll show you where to hide it. You'll sleep tonight in our holiest of places. Dalool's men will not bother you there if they come to search."

The rabbi takes them into a large room. Opposite the entrance, a loose veil hides the front section of it. “This is my simple home. I've turned it into a place of worship,” he says. “You'll sleep on the other side of the curtain. A difficult journey awaits tomorrow, so don't sleep until you've prayed for your deliverance.”

The priest hesitates. “You will let us sleep there?”

“In times like these, yes,” the rabbi says. The soldiers will respect the holy places, under orders of the Pasha. But please remove your shoes.”

Michael and the priest carry their shoes as they slip behind the curtain. On a small table rests a menorah, a bowl of incense, and a large empty plate. “I've seen these candles before,” Michael says, “but the chandelier has more of them.” “I'm sorry,” the rabbi says, “I have no bread. But here you may make your repentance before God.”

The rabbi gives them each a blanket and pillow. “Rest below the light of the candles,” and he leaves them. Michael settles under his blanket. The priest peers through the curtain. The outer room is empty. “Rest now, Michael,” he says and lies down under the menorah.

Stress drains from Michael's body, his eyelids droop, and the fluttering flames of the menorah become the flames of the chandelier, a ring of fires encircling him. Sonorous voices in the fires intone chants like those of the monks in the monastery, beckoning him to repent.

In his reverie he sees himself telling the priest and the rabbi about his murder of the man with the knife, and how he caused a young girl to give herself to a soldier to save him. Before they respond he jerks awake to the dark spreading across the ceiling as the candle wicks drown. From those shadows in the fractured plaster, he imagines the voice of the priest, “God will forgive you, Michael, but only if you are truly sorry, sorry for Milhem.” And from the grim, broken face of Milhem, hidden in the swirling white plaster between the ceiling’s wood beams, no voice comes. Only his brother's thought. *You promised.* In his sleep Abouna turns away, as if he had said those words and wanted them to linger in the solitude of the night.

The curtain parts and the Rabbi enters. He replaces the candles and sits beside Michael, but he does not say anything for some time. Finally, Michael shifts his body away so he can avoid the Rabbi’s face and murmurs, “I killed a man and stole this chandelier from Abouna’s church. Yet I’m here in this holy place. Will God punish me for this?”

“You murdered a man?”

“I didn’t mean to do it.”

“Then you killed him. It’s only murder if you intended to do it.”

“I didn’t want to do it.”

“God understands,” the Rabbi whispers. “Abouna told me your mother had given you money to buy food for your family?”

“The chandelier has brought us more, much more food,” Michael says under his breath, glancing at the sleeping priest.

“Yes, and who else do you expect to feed with all the food?”

“My village. It is a small village with mostly old people now.”

“Do you know them?”

“No, not so much, except for their children. The cemetery boys.”

“Cemetery boys?”

“Yes, the ones who played in the cemetery, before the mobilization took them away. The ones who beat up my brother.”

“And why did they do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I see.”

“Maybe they will be nice to us if I bring them food. Food for the village.”

“But you said they are soldiers now.”

“Yes.”

“What will your brother think about feeding them?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do know, Michael. Because of the food you share with their families, he will be happy those boys will not bother him anymore.”

“I guess.”

“How long have you been gone from home?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a week. No, not yet a week.”

“And your mother is waiting for this food?”

“Yes. That’s why I must return now.”

“Michael, are you sorry you let the chandelier temp you?”

“Temp me?”

“Yes. To bring more food than you could buy on your own.”

“No. It has taken a little longer, that’s all.”

“I see.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Sometimes, Michael, it is difficult for us to understand God’s plan for us. But you must always stay open to that understanding.”

Still asleep, Abouna grows restless and adjusts his position. The Rabbi rises. “I’ll leave you now Michael. Make your repentance before you leave this place.” Like a spirit, the Rabbi disappears

between the curtains. Michael and the priest remain below the menorah through the night. The soldiers never come. Neither does Dalool.

## 24. The Northern Road

Before dawn, the priest steers his carriage away from the rabbi's house. It rolls down a narrow side street before reaching the steep path from which they had first descended into Chtoura.

Again, the priest walks with the mule to prevent its stumble on the rocks. From the carriage, Michael watches him save the animal several times. *He is a strong holy man. He risked his life to free me from the Pasha. I was right to trust him.* “Will Dalool come to the monastery?”

“Dalool will not disobey the Ottoman decree about the holy places. No, we will be safe there,” the priest says. “We will stay on this path. The first part will be difficult, but safer. Dalool and some of his men will take the southern road west toward Beirut. Others will take the road east to Zahle. We will take a path parallel to the Touaiti road north until we reach the Zahle road.”

“We are going to Zahle?”

“No, we will turn to the west once we pass Touaiti. There we should be safe enough to rest the mule. After we reach the monastery, you will have your food, Michael. More than you hoped. And I will have my chandelier.”

“You paid twenty-five lire for your own chandelier.”

“Yes, but it is worth more to me inside the church, so the bankers will lend money for the entire monastery. And I will feed my people around the mountain with the money from the mortgage.”

Michael does not understand this mortgage the bankers value so highly but does not ask the priest. “The chandelier will be happy in your church again.” *The chandelier has suffered much, but it has not been taken by the trader. And it may yet provide enough food for many families in the Chreen. Such is the nobility of this chandelier. I will dream of it and return to see it when I am old, older than the old man with one hand.*

The morning sun breaks above Mount Sanine, sending cold charged beams of light into the valleys and terraces of the mountains. Another day has passed. Michael thinks of his family, his sister Matile, and baby Wadih. But mostly of Milhem. *The sun will brighten the valley floor below my house. The time when Milhem will not be afraid. I have lost many days since I left the Chreen.* He counts the number of times he has awoken since he left the Chreen by recounting the places where he slept. *Once at the monastery. Two with the wolves and jackals, before the snow melted. Once in the prison, and once in the place of worship of the rabbi. Five days. Mama said I must be away no more than one week.* He remembers the rabbi’s words, “you let the chandelier tempt you.” And he grows anxious with the thought he might arrive later.

The mule and its heavy cargo continue their slow stumble along a hillside path scarred by jagged ruts filled with lingering ice. Before long, Michael recognizes several of the landmarks. “I brought

the chandelier on this path. There will be a solitary house not much further ahead, Abouna. I could not have reached Chtoura without the help of the old man who lives there.”

Sheen spreads across the mule's neck. The priest recognizes its shortened stride and slower pace. “We’ll rest the mule there,” he says.

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Osman opens the door to a room of guarded shadows. Only one window filters rays of the afternoon sun. Dalool sits on a blanket surrounded by several pillows. He sucks on the hose of a nargile while fingering some beads queued together with a single string, pushing them from one end to the other. Towfik sits on a hard stool in a nearby corner caressing a rifle on his lap with a soiled rag.

“Sit down with me Osman,” Dalool says.

Eyes on Towfik, Osman sets down his rifle and lowers himself onto a pillow. “You must be happy with the take from the depot. Twelve crates,” he says.

“But I’m unhappy about the trade, with this priest and the boy.” Osman remains quiet. Towfik says, “We can retrieve the chandelier, Brahim. I have sent our men --”

"Please, Towfik," Dalool growls. I care nothing for the chandelier. Or the food." His eyes bore deep into Osman's soul. "Unless it is taken without permission from our storage."

He takes a long pull on the nargile and lets the smoke drift away from his nostrils and around the sides of his face. "Let me ask you, Osman, how many times did you take Hanan to the mountain, to this priest's church?"

"I don't remember." Silence deepens the gulf between them. "Not since you've been married, Brahim." Osman shifts the pillows around him.

"And there were times she stayed overnight there, isn't that right?"

"Yes, Brahim, at the abbey with the nuns." Osman's eyes turn toward the window. "When the return was not possible because of the darkness. Sometimes the priest told us to take the northern road toward Touaiti when we were afraid of the bandits."

"Ahh. The Touaiti road," Dalool smiles. "You, afraid of bandits, Osman? A man such as you. Maybe I do not know you as well as I thought. Towfik, you have sent the others in both directions of the southern road, isn't that right?" Towfik nods.

"They will catch them, Brahim," Osman says.

"No, Osman, we will catch them. You and I. Prepare the horses."

## **25. Let There Be Bread**

The carriage passes through a forest of cedar stumps, their trunks sheared off near the ground and taken away. Only small, weathered branches and brittle twigs remain, strewn about like wounded soldiers left by a fast-moving army. The priest's eyes water, "In war nothing is sacred, even these ancient cedars."

Ahead of them, the path steepens again and weaves through several switchbacks along a ridgeline, with rising hills on their left and a deep gorge filled with foliage on their right. They have reached the home of the old man with one hand. A watering trough by the front porch appears to have water from the recent snow. "We will rest here," the priest says.

"We are not far from your church, Abouna."

"Yes," the priest says, "Only a few more hours."

Michael steps off the carriage. "O.K., his name is Jacob." He bounds to the door and knocks while the priest waits by the carriage. He knocks again, waits, then pushes open the door. The priest takes out his gun from under the carriage seat and slips it into his robe pocket.

Jacob sits on a short-legged chair behind a bare table, “Why have you returned? There is nothing more I can give you.” His one hand grips a walking stick, and with the stump of his other arm he pushes off rumpled blankets from his lap. He appears more gaunt than when Michael had seen him only days before.

“I’m sorry you see me this way, but I’m too weak to go to my pump for water, and I have little food to give you.”

The priest enters as the old man rises to balance on his wobbly legs. “Hello old man, there is no one else here to help you?”

With difficulty, Jacob straightens his back, and with one hand on a cane, he steadies himself on the table with the stump of his other arm. “This is my home, and I wish to die in it.” He peers through the window toward the back of the carriage. “Is it food?”

“Food and the chandelier,” Michael says.

“Then you have made a good trade, Michael.” He studies the priest walking to the back door, “There is a pump by the well on the side of the house. God will grant you peace for some water.”

“You know that of God, do you?” the priest says. Jacob raises the stump of his arm. “He has a piece of me now, so I know,” he says. “I know. Just some water.”

“Water. Of course, and we will leave you with some food, as well. But you must have some means to get more,” the priest says as he surveys the room.

“I have my ways,” Jacob replies.

“We can give him some of our wheat, Abouna,” Michael says.

The priest gestures toward the fireplace, “I see you have a hand mill for the wheat.”

The old man smiles. “You will leave me with wheat I cannot turn to bread with one hand.”

Michael scans the doorless shelves near the fireplace, walks over to them, and pulls off the hand mill, a flat board, and a pot, and places them on the table. “I will grind it for you.”

The priest walks over to the open door. “No. I don’t believe Dalool’s men will come this far. But just in case, Michael, we must leave after I water and rest the mule. We’ll be safe on the grounds of the monastery. And in the morning, my carriage will take you to the Chreen. We can return for you also, Jacob.”

Jacob concedes, “You’ll not return.”

Michael says, "I'll stay long enough to grind your wheat."

"Not wise, Michael. If you're captured here, Dalool will ensure the soldiers who work with him show you no mercy," the priest says.

"Without the chandelier, it will be only a few hours walk to the monastery. I'll reach it before the sun descends below the mountain."

The priest walks to the back of the house and pushes open a door. Michael follows him outside.

"Old man, do you have a place for the boy to hide? Ah, I see a goat here. You have chickens, also?"

"No. No more chickens." A solitary goat is tied near the water pump and well. Further behind the well, a narrow but abandoned cage is tucked up against the hillside. It appears to have been mangled. "The cage where I kept the chickens. Beneath it is deep enough," the old man says. Animals had bored a shallow tunnel underneath the cage to get to the chickens.

"Not a good idea, Michael," the priest says, and walks back inside.

Michael lingers, walks around to the front of the house and across the road, past the carriage. He looks down the hillside. Through the scrub brush, about thirty feet below, is a ridge, an outcrop of rock, shielded by overgrowth. A shadowed figure looms up from the outcrop. *Mustapha?* But

as soon as the thought enters his mind the vision disappears. He walks back to the house, through the stillness of the mountain, except for the moans of Milhem.

“Well?” the priest says as Michael enters. Michael says, “No, I will stay.”

The priest shakes his head and turns to the old man, “Jacob, how do you feed the goat?”

“From the locusts I killed with my broom. They came down the hillside well fed. Now I store some for the goat.”

The priest goes to the carriage and returns with some wheat, along with a bag of beans. “Michael, when you reach the monastery, I will have food for you to take to the Chreen. Not a lot, but enough until the mortgage money comes.”

“Go with him, Michael,” Jacob says.

“No, I will grind the wheat for you. If I’m not there by nighttime, Abouna, take the food tomorrow to the Chreen. The road will take you to the last house before the forest. My mama will share whatever you give us.”

“Here, keep this with you,” the priest hands Michael his gun and a small pouch of extra bullets. “It’s heavy,” Michael says. He had not lifted a gun since his father left. *But it is much lighter than papa’s rifle. I have grown stronger. I will be able to hide it inside my coat.*

“Jacob, the boy should not linger,” the priest says. Michael helps him re-secure the cargo. Then the priest boards the carriage and prods the mule. The carriage jerks forward. Michael waits for the carriage to disappear behind the shoulder of the hill. *The eyes of the chandelier will be surprised to see the church again.* He is saddened to think he might not be there in time to see its joy.

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Jacob feeds more branches into the fire and gestures toward a small closet door, “You’ll find what more you need there.” From the closet, Michael pulls out a large wood pallet, and places it on the table. “I will not leave until we finish,” he says.

“Then don’t forget the olive oil and salt. They’re in the back.” Michael stoops into the back of the closet to avoid the downward sloping ceiling and retrieves the other items. “I will make Saj bread,” he says.

“You know how to make the dough?”

Michael pulls a round, thin pillow from the closet and lays it on the pallet. “After we have enough soft and fluffy balls, I will spin each one over my arms until it’s thin enough to cover your pillow. Mama showed me.”

He brings the hand mill closer and pours grains of wheat into it. Jacob watches the boy turn the grinder until all the grains of wheat become flour. Jacob adds the olive oil and salt. “Where did you get these?” Michael asks. “I have my ways,” Jacob says. “Now, go draw some water from the well in the back.”

Behind the house, Michael finds the pump and draws water into an empty container then pumps some water into a dry trough for the goat.

He re-enters the house to find an older woman with Jacob. She wears an abaya and hijab darkened with sweat. “I’ve brought these for you,” she tells Jacob and drops a leather pouch on the table.

“Thank you, Amira,” Jacob says. “This is Michael. He's on his way to the monastery near Bikfaya.” Amira acknowledges Michael but does not say anything. She helps Jacob empty the pouch of its olives, one tomato, a bag of dried beans, and a small container of cooked squash.

“Will you stay and eat,” the old man says.

“No, I must reach home before dark, but I brought you the book you asked of me.” She pulls from her purse a small black book and places it on the table. "I must go now."

“Shalom,” Jacob says, and the woman leaves with an acknowledging nod to Michael.

“Despite a journey of several hours, she brings me food when she is able. You have brought me luck today. She has not been here for two months now.”

“And she has brought you a book as well.”

“Yes, a Torah.” And he places the book near his bed.

"She is Jewish?"

"No," Jacob says. "She is a follower of the Prophet Mohammed. But she knows my holy book was stolen so she brought me one. There is wisdom to share in all of the holy books."

"I have read only from the Bible," Michael concedes. Jacob says, "Yes, great wisdom there as well. When knowledge divides us, we must rely on wisdom. Opinions grow like weeds from knowledge but not from wisdom. There are few sources of knowledge not spoiled by opinions, Michael."

Michael does not quite understand this difference between knowledge and wisdom, so he proceeds to add water to knead the dough and break it into small pieces. “Your mother has taught you well,” the old man says. He places a curved iron plate in the shape of a half dome onto the grill over the fire.

Michael rolls the pieces of dough into balls, then flattens each one with his hands and fingers. The old man watches. “Very good,” he says. “Now let’s see if you have mastered the spinning.”

Michael smiles and takes a flattened ball of dough and spins it around both arms. It thins but falls to the table before it is completely flattened. “Ah, place it here,” the old man says with an outstretched arm, the one with no hand. Michael slips the stretched dough over the handless arm of the old man, who swings it from one arm to the other. The dough thins further as it stretches into a full moon shape, before he flings it over the pillow. He proceeds to stretch the edges of the dough until it is draped over the round pillow. “Now it will go onto the fire,” the old man says. He flips the pillow over so the bread falls onto the hot iron plate. “See, I do not need two hands, only two arms. Now I will do another one slowly, then you will try it.”

Michael and the old man make the bread, fifteen pieces of the Saj bread. Flat and round, with different textures and crispiness, depending on the length of time each piece remains on the fire. When they finish, Michael lays out the food the priest has left and counts the beans. Michael says, “And the goat will give you milk.”

“My bones are too brittle for the milk. You must take the goat for your baby brother.”

“No. You’ll trade the goat for more food,” Michael says. But the old man would not relent. Michael helps him to the chair on the porch outside the front of the house and goes to the back to pump more water for the goat. Before he can untie it, the sharp clatter of hoofs at the front of the house and the shouts of a rider freeze him. "Dalool," he whispers.

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Michael runs to the chicken cage and slips into the hole beneath it. A pungent stench and strange sounds come from the cool dirt. He pushes further inside. Against Jacob’s supply of dead locusts. Some fall against the bare skin of his neck. Others, more brittle, crack and snap under the weight of his limbs.

Another voice mixes with the crackle of the locusts. Not the trader. It is Osman. “The old man still lives here. Hello, Jacob,” Osman calls. Osman pulls his rifle off the horse and slings it over his shoulder as he dismounts.

A sharp retort from Dalool, “Have you seen two travelers in a carriage, old man? I see fresh wagon tracks outside your house.”

From his porch, Jacob responds in a feeble voice, "I have been asleep all afternoon."

Dalool says, "Yet, I smell freshly baked bread. You make bread with one hand, old man?"

Dalool dismounts, walks past Jacob, and into the house as he orders, "Osman, check the back of the house." From underneath the chicken cage, Michael watches for shoes on the floor outside the back door. Osman's leather boots approach, then linger for the longest time beside the cage and tunnel underneath. A knee bends closer to the tunnel opening.

Michael presses hard against the dirt. *Do not take a breath. Hold. Hold. Hold.* His face flushes pink. Near his chin, a locust falls off his neck, and knocked awake, crawls into the open and toward Osman's outstretched face, where the boot of the startled trader crushes it.

The voice of Dalool fills the back yard area and startles the goat, "Osman, come inside." Osman returns to the house and together they inspect the inside, then walk onto the porch. "Old man, I will take these three loaves of the bread. My payment for your lies," Dalool says. "Come on, Osman." They step away from the porch, slip onto their horses, and fling their rifles onto their backs to continue along the switchbacks toward the monastery.

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"Thank you, Jacob," Michael says when he returns to the porch. "I'll be safe now."

“But the priest will not, Michael. I know this man, Dalool. He did not go south toward Chtoura. He rode north, and he will catch the carriage. The priest will lose his cargo and maybe his life.”

“How can I warn him, Jacob?”

“You will not reach him in time if you follow the road. The only way is straight up the mountain, behind the house. Avoid all the switchbacks on the road, and you will get ahead of them, but you must go now. It will be steep, and you must make a steady climb.”

Jacob reaches behind the pile of wood by the fireplace. “The priest’s pistol will do you no good. You must take my rifle.”

“A rifle? You have one?”

“It is of no use to me anymore. Leave me the pistol. It is better for an old man with one hand.” Jacob pulls out the rifle and lays it on the table before Michael. “It is a Mauser, from the Germans, a favorite of the Ottoman soldiers. This lever is the bolt you pull to insert the bullets. And this is the sight you must raise to make your aim. The gun is heavy but well balanced and has a range of five hundred meters.”

Michael takes the rifle in both hands. “I hunted the wolves on the mountain with my father once, but mama sold our rifle for food. It was not like this one at all.”

Jacob takes the rifle and shows Michael how to pull back the bolt action to insert the bullets and discharge the spent ones. He raises the sight and explains which way to turn the safety to disengage it. Then he hands him the rifle again, along with a pouch of extra bullets. “Stay off the road,” he says. “The rocks and brush of the mountain will slow Dalool, but they will hide you.”

“I cannot shoot them, Jacob. I have killed once already.”

“You will know when to use it. Leave now.” Michael pulls the rifle over his shoulder and returns to the back of the house where the steep hill rises before him. “Now I must be like you,” he says to the goat. His eyes catch sight of the locust, crushed under the boot of Osman. He turns, grabs a rock jutting out from the hillside and pulls himself into the climb.

## 26. Trapped

Michael climbs in a pathless direction through brambles, hedges, and along the pines, firs, and cypress which parallel the road. Without the chandelier, he moves fast despite the unforgiving incline. Sometimes he strays too far and spends time retracing his path to relocate the road. But he stays a safe distance from it to avoid being seen.

After a steep climb, he reaches a knoll overlooking the road's several switchbacks below and above him. He stops. Five switchbacks ahead the carriage and its cargo pull against the mule's plodding steps. With a firm grip on the bridle, the priest prods the mule, which stumbles through the ruts and loose rock. *Abouna must have stopped again to rest the mule or to re-secure the chandelier.* Ahead of the priest, the road makes an even steeper rise toward the monastery. "He'll be safe soon," Michael says. The priest stands in the carriage. *Oh no. He shouldn't walk with the mule.*

From a switchback less than one hundred yards behind the carriage, Dalool and Osman come into Michael's view. Their arms like windmills, they whip their horses to lengthen their strides against the steep terrain. Michael gasps. "I'm too late." He pulls the rifle off his shoulder and works a bullet into the chamber.

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The mule pulls hard against the weight of the carriage and its cargo as the road steepens. Its mouth frothy, hair glistening, the priest knows it is underfed and weak. He gently flicks the reins seeking more effort. When the wheels slide into a deep rut, the carriage is almost at a standstill. He pulls out a long rod but decides not to use it. "Come on," he begs, "Give me two more hours. This is the worst part." He drops the bridle and stands in the carriage to let the mule rest. "I'll walk with you for a while." He drops off the carriage, pats the mule's neck, slick with sweat, and pulls gently on the reins. The mule balks at first, then pushes against the loose rocks, hoofs stumbling.

A loud crack from a gun resounds through the canyon. He flinches and looks to where the sound appeared to come from, but he sees no one in the far hills below him. He climbs onto the carriage, grabs his rod and whips the mule, but its movement is slow and labored. Hoofbeats drum against the path behind him. "Dalool," he tells himself. *It must be him.*

Osman and Dalool pull their horses beside him, and Dalool grabs the mule's bridle to stop it. "Ah, the priest with my chandelier," he says. "Osman, take his gun." Osman dismounts and searches the priest, then the drawer under the carriage seat.

"I have no gun, Dalool."

"Osman, find his gun." Osman searches the cargo. "There is nothing, Brahim," he says.

Dalool's face contorts with rage. "Osman, you fool. I heard a gunshot not five minutes ago." Dalool dismounts and walks around the perimeter of the pathway, peers up the hill and climbs several feet down the hillside. "Look over the hill ahead," he tells Osman. When Osman moves away from the carriage, the priest slips off it and reaches for the rifle in Dalool's saddle. Dalool sees him and fires at the priest with his handgun. The bullet shreds only his robe. The priest arches his back but does not drop. He stumbles to the hill side of the path and falls behind a large rock. "I know where you are, priest. Come back to the carriage," Dalool demands. "Osman, go get him." Osman hesitates. But Dalool growls, "You said he has no gun."

Dalool ties his horse behind the carriage then climbs onto the carriage seat. "I'm taking this back. Make sure no one can find him and meet me at the old man's house." Osman takes the rifle from his horse, slips a bullet into its chamber and walks toward the priest, still crouched behind an outcrop of rocks. Dalool turns the carriage around and prods the horse.

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Michael is forced to lose sight of the carriage as he climbs again, angling closer to the road. A second gunshot bellows through the canyon. *The priest has no gun. Oh God, the trader has used his weapon.* Michael moves faster now, his back bent over and almost parallel with the sheer elevation. Loose rocks make him stumble and sharp bushes tear at his ankles. *I have to reach*

*them.* Muscles pulsing, thighs burning, he pushes his legs with more force to overcome the loose rocks giving way under his weight.

When the carriage next appears, it is turned around, Dalool whipping the mule from the carriage bench, his riderless horse tied behind. Michael stops to watch. *“Where’s Abouna? Where’s Osman?”* The path below the carriage takes tight turns. *The mule will be cautious.* No one is visible in the slices of road not hidden by the switchbacks. *Dalool will stop at Jacob’s house to rest the mule. It will be my chance.*

Gravity widens Michael's stride down, forcing his pace faster. He jumps from one narrow ridge to another. If he tries to stop, he will tumble forward. He stumbles off the hill and runs to where he can peer across the front of Jacob's house. The old man still sits alone on the front porch and sees him. “What? Have you given up the chase?” Michael's blushed face and labored breaths limit his words, “Dalool. Dalool.”

"Slowly, Michael. Dry your face with the towel behind the door.”

"Dalool is coming back with the carriage and the chandelier.”

Jacob pushes himself off his chair and limps into the house, balancing his steps with a cane. “I heard two shots in the canyon,” he says. “Make sure you have a bullet loaded in the chamber?”

Michael readies a bullet. Inside the house, Jacob opens the two front windows, and Michael locks the back door.

“And the priest?”

“I don’t know,” Michael says.

“Michael, let me see you pull the bolt back on the rifle.” Michael locks it into place with a smooth push and sets the safety.

“Good, good,” Jacob says. “Dalool must arrive soon.” He drops the cane onto the ground and totters to the table. With the stump of his wrist, he presses on the edge of the Saj bread and with his other hand tears off two pieces of it. “Take, eat,” he says. “We will wait and listen.”

Michael takes the bread and eats. The dryness in his mouth makes the bread difficult to chew.

“I’m not hungry,” he says. “My stomach is sick.”

“That’s why I gave you the bread.” Jacob chews his piece of bread like a gum, but before he finishes, the grind of wheels over the stones and fractures in the road tells them the carriage has arrived. Just behind it, a horseman reaches the clearing in front of the house. It is Osman, who waves to Dalool. “It is finished.”

Dalool calls out, “And what about the boy?”

“Nothing,” Osman says. “But you have the chandelier.”

“Yes, and we’ll rest the horses here,” Dalool says. “I want the old man out from the house.”

Osman dismounts, lowers the rifle from his shoulder, and enters the partly opened door. Jacob sits in a dark corner of the house, holding the pistol. “Jacob. Ah, Jacob, now you have stolen a handgun. If the Pasha cuts off your other hand, you’ll have to train your feet how to eat and shoot.” From outside, Dalool shouts, “I want to see him, Osman.”

“Come on, Jacob, I’m not going to hurt you,” Osman says. From behind the door, Michael pushes the Mauser barrel into Osman’s back.

“Wha--?” Osman yelps but does not turn around. Jacob says, “Step back. Toward the door. Drop your rifle and go outside. The boy knows how to shoot.”

Osman carries his rifle above his head and walks out the door. “Stay inside, Michael,” Jacob warns. Osman moves beyond the shadow of the house, then runs toward Dalool, who has slid behind the carriage.

From inside the open window, Jacob aims high and fires the handgun. “So you know we have the bullets,” he yells.

“The boy is with him,” Osman pants. “Jacob,” Dalool calls out, “we will take the carriage back to Chtoura. But if you don’t bring out the boy, we will send the soldiers.”

“Yes, the soldiers who sell you stolen food for profit. I remember them, well,” Jacob says. “The carriage belongs to the priest, Dalool, and the chandelier is from his church.”

“The priest will not need them anymore,” Dalool yells. “Osman, I will go around to the back. Keep them pinned below the windows.” He slips down the slope behind the carriage, then circles along the far side of the road before he climbs the hill at the rear of the house.

“He’ll kill us,” Michael says, his head below the open window and his throat choking out each word. A sharp crack and the loud thud of a bullet against the fireplace sends splinters of brick flying and makes him wince.

“Michael, look at me. Pull back the bolt on the rifle,” Jacob gestures with his handless arm. “Check the shell in the chamber, close it again.” Michael struggles with the rifle until his arm becomes accustomed to its weight and the resistance of the bolt’s action.

“Listen to me, Michael,” Jacob says. “Leave me, go by the back door, before it’s too late. Climb the hill and you’ll be safe.”

“No, Jacob. I won’t leave you.” Michael is adamant.

“It is too quiet,” Jacob responds. “They only want you. Go now. Hurry.”

“I will not leave you,” Michael repeats. The back door shudders with the blast of Dalool’s gun. Its bullet savages the lock. A boot splits the door, and one side of it crashes to the floor missing Jacob, who turns with the pistol. But Dalool is upon him, lunges for the gun barrel, and pulls the gun away. Michael whirls to face Dalool with the rifle, but the safety is still engaged and cannot fire. Dalool knocks the rifle away. It is all too easy for the trader. He pulls Jacob and Michael to their feet, grabs their guns, and pushes them onto the porch.

Jacob swings his walking stick at Dalool, who slaps the old man’s face with his rifle, knocking him off the porch and onto the ground. “Dalool,” Osman calls as he emerges from behind the carriage, “the old man is harmless.”

Dalool pushes Michael off the porch. “Tie down the boy in the back of the carriage, underneath the chandelier. And cover it again. We will take him back for the Pasha.” He jerks Jacob to his feet and pushes him into the house. “And put their guns under the carriage seat.”

Osman throws the guns into the carriage drawer, ties Michael's wrists to the floorboards underneath the arms of the chandelier, then reseals the sheet covering it. Then he walks back toward the house. "Come on, Jacob," he says and pulls the old man to his feet.

From underneath the sheet, Michael listens hears the door of the house bangs shut. *I'm a prisoner of the chandelier again.* He gropes for more freedom between the arms of the chandelier. Only the folded rug lies beside him.

No sounds come from the house. From under the sheet, a shadow breaks the glow of the afternoon sun. *Dalool? He will take me back to the Pasha.* A hand reaches in and startles him. "Open the drawer under the carriage seat. It slides backwards as well." Michael recognizes the voice of the priest. "Pull out the knife there."

"My hand is not loose enough to reach into it," Michael whispers. "Stretch. You must stretch," the priest pleads. From under the chandelier, Michael pulls at the straps, reaches into the drawer, feels the cold iron barrels of the guns. "The rifle and pistol are here," he says.

"The knife, Michael. Get the knife," the priest whispers. Michael fingers out the knife. With his wrists still tied together he pulls the knife closer to him, cradles it in his fingers and works it against the strap on one of his wrists. Then he works the other wrist. "Hurry, Michael, I hear horses, many of them.," the priest says and slips back down the hillside. "

## 27. The Musellems

Hoofbeats spray shrapnel-like stones and sparks. The ground shudders and rattles Jacob's front door. It draws Dalool and Osman to the window, where they appear still holding loaves of the Saj bread. Musellems of the Ottoman Calvary, a dozen armed horsemen, stop in front of the carriage.

"Dalool might be here, Colonel," a soldier calls out.

The priest emerges from the hillside below the carriage, his robe soaked in blood, and with difficulty climbs onto its seat. "The trader ...inside," he moans. The mule ignores his weak jerk of the reins, but Dalool sees the priest. "Damn you, Osman," he screams.

A soldier turns his lead horse toward the window and calls out, "Ibrahim Dalool? I am Colonel Mehmet al-Turki. Come out with your hands raised." Osman runs out of the house toward the soldiers with his arms and rifle over his head. "Fool," Dalool shouts.

"Drop your weapon," a Musellem hollers. Osman drops his rifle. The soldiers scatter to safer positions when Dalool's rifle appears from the window. Bullets from Dalool's gun spray the carriage and ping the chandelier. Random shots from the soldiers thump the wall of the house. A bullet tears through Osman's torso, and he stumbles forward before crumbling to the ground, blood pooling around him. The priest grabs his side, folds over, then rolls off and stumbles behind

the carriage. "Stay there," the Colonel shouts above the sharp cracks of rifles. "Are you the holy man of the monastery?"

The priest grimaces. "Yes, the church of the monastery on the mountain. The chandelier is in the carriage. Please. I'm wounded and in need of bandages."

"Colonel. Colonel," Dalool shrieks from below the window, "There is a boy in the carriage. Underneath the chandelier. He's the one who stole it."

"So, you helped the boy escape, Dalool, to get the chandelier," the Colonel says. One of the soldiers slips over to the carriage and pulls off the sheet to reveal crowded boxes of food, a folded rug, and some cut straps underneath it.

The Colonel's retort is sharp. "Dalool, do not burden us with any more of your stories. We arrested the soldiers who stole the food for you in Chtoura, and the Pasha will hear your confession before he returns to Beirut. You should make your confession to the priest as well."

"No, the boy must be near," Dalool hollers. The Colonel calls back toward the priest, "The thief. You know his location, priest?"

"I don't know where the boy is," the priest says. "But I must return the chandelier to my church."

The Colonel turns again to the house. "Come out now or we'll burn the house."

"I will kill the old man, first," Dalool shouts and raises his rifle from below the open window. Resonating blasts from the Musellem rifles pepper the house walls with bullets. Dalool drags Jacob to the broken back door. Outside only the chicken cage and goat are visible below the steep hillside. "You will climb the mountain with me old man," he says. Two loud retorts from a rifle crash into the smashed back door. He peeks into the back again, surveys the mountain above him, and a third bullet crashes into the door near his ear. Even with the old man as hostage, his escape is futile. "I'm surrounded, old man," he says. He crawls back to the open front window and throws out the rifle. "Don't shoot," he shouts and drags Jacob onto the porch with him.

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Dalool waits near a horse, wrists tied to a rope dangling from its saddle. Several soldiers carry a pack of medical supplies into the house. One of the Calvary men, a medic, cleans the wound of the priest. Two more soldiers bring Osman into the house and lay him on Jacob's bed.

The medic studies Osman's wounds and checks his pulse. He shakes his head and turns to Jacob, "Your face is in need of some help as well, old man."

Jacob's mouth and nose are bloodied, and his cheek swollen. "Don't try to talk now," the priest says. "I'll take you with me to the monastery."

“My rifle...,” Jacob slurs, along with some other words, only one of which is intelligible. “Bread.”

The medic checks the priest's wound. “The bullet looks to have gone clean through mostly muscle,” he says. “You should not need to travel to Beirut for surgery unless the wound becomes infected.” The priest does not respond. He is listening to Osman's erratic breathing, punctured by gasps for air.

Osman turns his head toward the priest and groans, “a blessing Abouna.” The priest prays over him. Osman opens his fist to reveal a small cross. The priest takes it, presses the cross onto Osman's lips, and whispers, “Like the thief on the cross, accept him into your kingdom.” Osman's eyes roll upward and widen. The medic steps over and closes them with the grim words, “His wound. The shell entered through his back. He held a cross, too.”

“My cross,” the priest says. “I gave it to him on the road. Near the monastery.”

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Soldiers water and rest their horses at the back of the house. Several of them admire the goat. One suggests it might be good meat to requisition and take with them. The Colonel declines, citing no papers for such an abduction. They then seat Dalool on a horse and tie Osman's body on the back of it for the return to Chtoura.

After the medic takes another turn with the priest's torso and Jacob's face, he joins the other soldiers waiting outside. Jacob grabs a clean shirt from his bedside chest and helps slip it over the priest's bandages. He does not resist the priest's entreaties to travel with them to the monastery. Together, they carry a bag of Jacob's supplies to the carriage, including the remaining food in the house. Pulled by a rope the goat follows Jacob. They pass around the Saj bread and a container of olives for the soldiers to eat, while Dalool waits, and the Colonel grows restless.

Dalool watches a soldier assist the priest, then Jacob and his goat into the carriage. "You will hear from me again, Abouna," he growls. A soldier slaps Dalool's horse who jerks forward, as the soldiers turn toward Chtoura.

"We cannot leave without Michael," Jacob says.

The priest turns the carriage around and prods the mule to start the climb up the mountain. "If he went up the mountain, he'll not be far," he says.

"I'm not sure of that," Jacob says. I heard shots from behind the house, but no soldiers were there. Besides, I'm sure Michael will not stray far from the Chandelier, even now." The priest opens the drawer below his carriage bench. Only his pistol is there. He reaches back and pulls up the sheet to reveal Michael, who has slipped back between the boxes of food under the chandelier. Jacob's rifle rests beside him.

## **28. Return**

With a tired mule, the weight of three persons, a goat, and the extra food, the journey to the monastery takes over four hours. Several monks greet the carriage when it breeches the monastery grounds. One loosens the mule's harness and disengages it from the carriage. Another helps Jacob climb off, while Boulos unloads the packages of food so they can more easily remove the chandelier. Still another monk steadies the ashen-faced priest and walks him to the dormitory before returning to help move the chandelier into the church. With some effort three monks transport the chandelier on a wheeled dolly. How did this young boy drag the chandelier to Chtoura? They want to ask but do not.

The priest convinces Jacob to stay at the monastery, at least through the winter months. His saj bread had been eaten by the soldiers, but not the food left for him by Amira. "You will take it for your village, Michael," Jacob says, so the priest includes it in the supplies Michael will take to the Chreen.

Dusk and heavy clouds produce a dark, hard frost, and the threat of rain or snow delays Michael's return until the next day. The priest assigns Boulos to take him with the rested mule at dawn. He promises Michael he will send the carriage with more food as soon as the mortgage loan is secured.

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Splintered and worn wood wheels bump and lurch along the single, rocky path through the Chreen. Children, alerted by the sound, scream the arrival of a buckboard carriage, whose belly sags from wood crates and boxes. The bearded Boulos, in the traditional robe of the monks from the St. Elias monastery, pulls the mule to a stop at the last house before the road ends at the pine forest.

“Here, here,” Michael says. His face betrays impatience with the thought Boulos could have spurred the mule faster. The goat beside him raises its head to find the screams, and Boulos lowers it to the ground. From their window, the goat's appearance sends Milhem and Matile outside before they notice the carriage occupants. “Michael, Michael,” Matile shouts. Michael jumps off the carriage into a big hug from Milhem.

Michael pulls from his jacket the labaddeh. “Your hat and much more.” Milhem fondles the hat, turning it over and over. “W-W-What have you brought us?”

“Where’s mama?” Michael says, between Matile’s hugs and tears. “You have a goat,” she says. Milhem ravages through the packages. “And food. Lots.”

“Help me take it into the house. Where’s mama?”

“In the house with Wadih,” Matile cries. “She won’t leave him.”

“What do you mean?” Michael says. Matile sobs, "Oh, Michael." He runs into the house. Milhem and Matile follow carrying some of the food. Mariam does not move from the shadowed corner with the baby's crib. “Mama," he says, "we have food, and more is coming. And milk for Wadih.”

“Michael, Michael. You’ve come home. We’ve been waiting. Wadih has been waiting.”

“I have a container of milk and a goat, mama. A live goat for more milk.”

“Oh, Michael. He is here.” Michael grabs a milk container from the packages and opens it. “Look, mama, I can do it. I can feed Wadih myself now.” Unable to talk, Mariam watches Michael lift Wadih’s head and tilt the container toward his mouth. Milk spills over the baby’s hollowed cheeks. “He’s not swallowing, mama. He’s not taking the milk.”

Mariam’s voice rasps into a whisper. She chokes back her tears, “No, Michael. He will not take food again.”

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During the next few weeks, Michael takes long walks, mostly along the ridge of high grasses leading to the cemetery. Sometimes he climbs down the steep hillside below his house until he

reaches the ridge below which he hid before seeking help for Milhem. Other times he climbs lower, to the forested base of the mountain where he and Milhem once played. Where a seasonal creek channels the melted, snowy runoff. The afternoon shadows suit him.

Sometimes he paces the area below his house but does not find the body of the man with the knife. He walks along the bottom of the ravine until dusk, before climbing to the cemetery carrying a smooth rock from the creek. *The chandelier made me do it. If I used mama's coins and returned sooner, maybe Wadih would be alive.* The food he brought with him is running out. When will the food promised by the priest arrive? But his anger toward the chandelier eases with each rock he carries to his baby brother's grave.

No formal gravestone marks the location of his baby brother. One at a time, Michael adds to the pyramid of rocks which marks the spot. At first the rocks are large and heavy, and he carries them in a sack strapped to his back. As the pyramid grows, the rocks he brings become smaller. The heart inside him remains heavier than the rocks he carries.

He does not ask his brother to go with him. Milhem does not venture below their home since he was carried out by their father, but sometimes he watches his brother slip down the hill toward the ravine, then return by the road from the cemetery. "Are you building that?" Matile asks when the family prays at Wadih's grave. "They are pretty rocks, Michael," Mariam says. "From the ravine?"

“Rocks from the stream bed,” Michael says. “It’s almost finished.” Once the mother of Benjamin, still grieving for her son in a black abaya and headscarf, appears among the headstones of the cemetery. Another time, the family of the cemetery boy Mustapha, who had helped him escape from the Pasha’s hotel prison in Chtoura. *Did he die fighting for the Ottomans?*

A few days later, Michael returns from work, goes to the side room, and pulls out his pack to carry the rocks. Milhem follows him. “I want to go with you,” he says. Michael hesitates, “Are you sure?” Milhem nods and says, “But you have to hold my hand on the way down.”

Milhem takes a pack, and they both search for the smooth rocks still wet from the early spring rains. They carry the rocks to the cemetery, and when they return home, Milhem says, “Thank you.” But he does not go below their home with Michael again.

On Michael’s last climb to the cemetery with rocks for the pyramid, stray beams of sunlight break through a light rain spilling its refreshment into the valley. It is still early afternoon. The sheen on the pyramid mirrors colors of the rainbow over the cemetery and deep into the valley. *The rocks are crying for Wadih because I did not return in time to save him. Wadih died for my selfishness.* And he cries too before he leaves the cemetery.

Hunger still follows his steps through the Chreen, on his way toward the last house before the pine forest. To his home and grieving mother. *Will the food from the monastery ever come?* Head down, he does not want to see the famished faces of the families he knows so well, those whose

children he played with and those who socialized with his parents before the war. *What food I eat, however little, is a betrayal to them.*

On the fortieth day after his return, Michael leaves the cemetery for home. Ravished by the harb al-muja'a, families of the Chreen line up outside their homes along the unpaved road. Some are shaking the mud from their shoes. Others notice him and wave. *Wait, the line goes to my house. Something has happened to mama. Or Milhem.* He increases his stride until he breaks into a run.

At the entrance to his house rests a large wagon stacked with wooden crates. The priest stands by it and makes a blessing with his bronze cross for each family who takes a large box of food. Sometimes two family members are required to carry it. Michael rushes up to him. "The gift of the chandelier, Michael," the priest says. And Michael's face breaks into a smile.

Each family accepts the food from the priest with tears and takes it home to protect and ration. Michael does not talk about his role in bringing the food to the Chreen in the winter of 1916 or the sacrifice of his baby brother in the time it took to do so. Neither does the priest. It has taken many weeks to secure the mortgage and the funds for the food. It is now early spring. But it is not yet time for congregating or celebrating. The families still fear the spreading headstones of the cemetery, which remind them of war and famine, of the locusts, and of the grippe with its coughing of blood.

And there is still the unspoken shock about the multiple hangings in Beirut, in the Sahat al-Burj, the ones in Michael's premonition at the hotel in Chtoura. At first, Michael resents this lack of appreciation. Until many months later when he returns home from the tobacco barn. Milhem waits for him with a large pouch filled with olives. "I picked these for you," he says.

## **Ch. 29 Four years later: Dalool**

The only remaining prisoner of Chtoura's Hotel Victoria paces between a sofa and the locked door. Nearby a table lamp sits next to his bed. Above the sofa is the room's only window, close to the ceiling, its wood frame repaired with loose nails and narrow wedges which hold the ill-fitted glass in place. Visible through the window are clouds and the dim light of the moon. The lamp's lightbulb flickers. He stops to watch it. The flickers stop, then start again. The prisoner picks up the lamp and raises it above his head, has second thoughts about throwing it and sets it back. No use waiting in darkness.

Finally, a turn of the key in the lock signals the arrival of his weekly visitor, eight hours late. A soldier opens the door for a slim man with wire rim glasses and a dour face. His silvery hair and whiskers complement the grey wool flannel jacket, dark vest, and black corduroy pants. All heavy material for the season, but important for a lawyer wanting to impress.

The prisoner is gruff, "It's about time, Nasir. What's the news?"

Nasir hesitates. "I've just returned from the Grand Kadri Hotel in Zahle. The French have secured their mandate over Syria, and they've declared the establishment of a Greater Lebanon, under a separate mandate. Faisal has been defeated near Damascus and has given up his claims for a kingdom."

"That's the political news. What about here in Chtoura?"

"The hotel will revert to private hands again. This morning all of the other prisoners have been transported to Beirut."

"You pompous fool. So why am I still here?"

"You will sign papers and be released tomorrow morning. You will be freed. That is the good news," Nasir says with a grim face."

"Well, what else?" The sullen reply from Dalool.

"You must leave Chtoura within twenty-four hours. If you return you will be rearrested."

"My properties, Nasir. Have you recovered title to my properties?"

"Your wife is very clever, Brahim. The French administrator deferred to General Gouraud, who recognized the legal title she transferred into her name."

"Where is she now?"

"She secured complete closure of the property and taken the children..."

"To where you fool? To where?" Dalool shouts.

Nasir backs to the door. "I'm sorry, Brahim. Maybe Towfik knows." He reaches the waiting soldier who opens the door for him to leave. The door closes before the lamp crashes against it.

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The next morning, looking back at the faded sign of the Hotel Victoria, Ibrahim Dalool, now a free man, moistens his lips with the memory of the saj bread he ate at the home of Jacob. Only Towfik is there to meet him.

Trading in stolen food during a famine made him wealthy. But not immune from prosecution by General Gemal Pasha. After his arrest at Jacob's home, he spent the remaining duration of the war in the makeshift prison at the hotel waiting for the return of the Pasha, who insisted on viewing his hanging in person. Towfik and his lawyer Nasir visited him more often than Hanan, who even refused to bring his children to the prison.

Dalool's other visitors, mainly military officers, his accountant and lawyer, and even a local judge who he lavished with hidden funds, kept him apprised of the war's progress. After the successful Gallipoli campaign, the Pasha lost his military campaigns in Egypt and Palestine and was summoned back to Constantinople.

Dalool is not surprised to see the scaffolds gone in front of the hotel. The simultaneous hangings in Damascus and Beirut of enemy sympathizers had taken place shortly after Dalool's arrest and added to the local outrage with General Pasha's actions. A wry smile parts Dalool's lips. Now the Ottomans are gone. They have lost not just the war but their empire.

"Where is she, Towfik?"

Towfik knows this is a sore topic and treads carefully. "It is rumored she lives in the mountains of the Shouf. But she secured sole title to the Chtoura compound and closed it."

"I know. Nasir told me. And the men?"

"Most left long ago, when they heard of your sentencing. Hanan sent the rest away before she closed it. Except for Osman's mother."

"Deserters," Dalool grumbles. "They will pay."

Towfik anticipates the next question. "The property is well guarded. French soldiers are everywhere. "

Dalool knows he must secure for himself the guns and ammunition he has hidden at the property.

"We will go there, Towfik. You and I, this very night, even if we have to kill them. Then we go to the church on the mountain. But first, I will visit my mother in Beirut."

"Your mother, Brahim--," Towfik starts.

"Yes, have you talked to her family there?" Towfik hesitates. "Well?"

"They were killed."

"What? They escaped with my father from Anatolia. All the Danelians. Nasir told me."

"In Beirut. They were killed before the French secured the city. The Pasha committed a genocide, Brahim. All of them. Even your father, for helping the Danelians."

"The Pasha. Gemal Pasha," Dalool whispers and sits, the news robbing the strength from his legs.

"How many?"

"Many families, too many," Towfik grimaces. "But there is a committee being formed from the Armenians. An assassination committee to kill the Pashas who made the genocide."

Then I will kill Gemal first, wherever he is."

### **Ch. 30 Four Years Later: At the Monastery**

With the bodies from the famine buried, jackals no longer congregate at the cemetery. But death still haunts the mountain. The coughing of blood from the grippe still grows worse and takes those weakened by the famine. Many complain the French brought it with them from Europe.

With the French, petroleum also returns to the mountain. Local residents take jobs to pave the main road through Bikfaya. Others complain about the noise and smoke from the growing number of automobiles, with drivers from Beirut seeking to escape the summer heat.

Water pipes now extend into the homes of the Chreen, along with sinks and indoor toilets. But few automobiles with their balloon tires dare travel past the cemetery onto the Chreen's unpaved road, which remains as quiet as it had been before the war.

Except this day, a Sunday, when a solitary carriage pulled by a sorrel mare sways and bounces past the cemetery, then turns away from Bikfaya and heads east.

Michael jostles the reins to the mare. The polished harness and white ribbons braided into the mane and tail of the horse suggest a special occasion. Next to him, Mariam grasps Matile close. Milhem rides in the back, his white knuckles gripping hard against the sideboards. Michael is

grateful for the carriage, borrowed from the tobacco factory where he had returned to work. He does not want to miss a special church service for the visit of the Bishop.

At the top of the knoll, the monastery looms from the road with washed limestone bricks sporting a renewed yellow color. "I have not been here since before the war," Mariam tells her children. "And Michael, you are too young to remember your first visit with your father and me. You loved the church, but you feared its large chandelier."

"I remember it, mother, the chandelier," Michael says. He has not related to her the events which led to the lifesaving food supply for his village during the war. And she has refrained from asking about a time which would only remind her of the last days of Wadih's life.

They hurry past the dormitory and through the monastery grounds. In the plaza parishioners are setting up a barbecue and tables for the luncheon. Closer to the arched porticos leading to the church nave, droning chants from the monks tell them the liturgy has begun. Inside, the icons and chandelier rushes memories into Michael's consciousness. Memories heightened by the smell of incense mingled with haze from a thurible the priest swings before the icons. *He has lost some of his hair and added a beard.* The monk Boulos who had taken him back to the Chreen has a deep, resonating voice suitable for the church, but does not appear to recognize him.

The bishop sits to the side of the sanctuary in a high-backed, ornate chair, wearing a heavy vestment and a large gold-encrusted hat. *Why would he travel with such a hat? With thieves still active on the main roads and so much poverty still in the villages?*

Michael greets the chandelier with a smile. It still has several scars from their journey to Chtoura and the battle with Dalool. The monks have shined it well and its arms glow from the light of the new oil lamps which replaced the candles. The missing ruby has been replaced. He counts the number of lights. The chandelier has grown in size, and brightness with another row of oil lamps soldered into it.

A young boy stands under the chandelier, transfixed with awe or fear by its stare. Radiance from the ruby eyes reaches out in different directions and touches every corner of the church and every member of its congregation. Michael traces the steep wave of the arms under which he had hidden several times. *You are a noble chandelier, and you are worthy to be in this place.*

The church itself has been transformed by the economic renewal following the war. The missing benches have been replaced, hewn from young Aleppo pines, survivors of the Ottoman requisitions. The missing and damaged mosaics have been repaired. The radiant colors of the icons gleam from candles placed below them with each prayerful supplication.

Many in the church admire the chandelier's beauty instead of praying. Many times the chandelier takes Michael's attention during the liturgy. *The Virgin will intercede for your distractions,*

*because of the time we spent together. Someday I will return from Amerka to share your story with the people of this church and the families in the Chreen.*

He decides he will ask about Jacob and thank the priest again when he greets him after the service. After all, the food from the monastery sustained the families of the Chreen for the balance of the winter and spring of 1916.

Before the end of the service, Michael glimpses a man near the front who rises from a bench and with some difficulty limps through a side door. *If it is Jacob, I must see him before he leaves the monastery.* He works his way to the back exit but does not see Jacob outside. *It might not be him, after all. Jacob is Jewish. Why would he attend the service?*

With the Bishop in attendance, the service promises to be a long one. Michael walks the grounds and retraces some of the steps he had taken during the war. By the dormitory, he watches several monks continue to arrange tables and chairs for the luncheon. Two monks stoke an open fire, while another sits with a large bowl kneading dough.

Ahh, Michael whispers. Jacob sits near them. With both arms and one flour encrusted hand he spins a flat ball of dough into a wider, thinner circle. When it is large and thin enough, he flips it onto one of several round pillows where other stretched pieces of dough wait for the fire. A young child sits nearby, mesmerized by the spinning dough. Next to Jacob the lady, Amira, who had

brought food to him during the war, works the dough into soft, flour sprinkled balls ready for the spinning.

Milhem is there also. Seated by the pillows, he stretches out his hands. Amira hands him a ball of dough, and in pantomime Jacob shows him how to spin it. *When did Milhem leave the church service? And now here he is swinging and thinning the dough into perfect circles.*

Michael stands behind other monks, where he can smell the fresh bread as it comes off the fire. He decides it isn't the time to interrupt their work. He will wait for a time during the luncheon to greet Jacob.

Michael reenters the church as the priest says his final prayers for the people. Mariam looks past him towards the vestibule with concern. "Milhem is helping with the saj bread," he whispers to assure her.

The service is over, and the parishioners stand and begin to form a line. "Before you come forward for the blessing, I have an important announcement which all of you may not be aware of," the priest says. "Yesterday in Zahle, the French General Gouraud signed a proclamation establishing the new borders of a Greater Lebanon, which will be separated from Syria. And in Damascus, Faisal has completed his abdication." Some of the parishioners cheer, hopeful for a benevolent French administration and peace for a time. Others feel betrayed because they will have to wait longer for independence from European control.

In line for the blessing, Michael reaches the priest, who looks up and raises the cross for Michael to kiss. "Ahh, Michael," he says. "I wish I had seen you during the service. We have such a large crowd today. I could have told everyone how you helped me save the chandelier." Michael introduces his mother and Matile and says, "The food you brought us during the war saved many in the Chreen, Abouna. Now, we have tickets to Amerka from our father. We will be leaving in two months."

Yes, thank you, Abouna," Mariam says. "The food saved many in the village."

"You will come back again, I believe, to visit us," the priest says. "I hope you do." They move on from the priest to pick up the holy bread.

Michael wants to speak with the priest again at the luncheon but cannot not find a private moment to do so. But Jacob is there and steps away from the barbecue to hug him with flour encrusted arms. "I visit for special occasions like this one to help with the bread," he says. "You are still with your family near Bikfaya?"

Michael nods, "Yes, but we will be leaving soon for Amerka." Jacob says, "Ahh, you will make the saj bread there."

"Yes, and I will work and make real American dollars to send to my friends, and to you, Jacob."

Jacob nods with a knowing smile, "And your children will grow up speaking only English, and they will be embarrassed for you to speak our language in front of their friends. It is inevitable."

"How do you know such things will happen?"

"I have my ways, Michael. But do not let them forget to make the saj bread. That you must promise me." Then he draws closer, turns his eyes away, and lowers his voice. "You should be aware, the French plan to return the Hotel Victoria in Chtoura to its private owners and release the wartime prisoners there. That will mean the trader Dalool as well."

"The Pasha did not hang him?" Jacob says, "No, Dalool used his wealth to make many friends among the soldiers."

"Does Dalool's wife still live in Chtoura?" Michael says.

"I don't know. But she takes a great risk twice a year to bring her children to the monastery to receive Abouna's blessing."

"Maybe I will see her again," Michael says. But he did not see Hanan that day.

Later, after the luncheon, Mariam, with Milhem and Matile, wait in the carriage at the front of the empty church, admiring the faces of the saints engraved in the fresh cedar door. Inside, Michael stands alone in the filtered afternoon sunlight of the colored windows. Alone in the lingering smell of incense, with the memories of his confrontation with Dalool. And alone under the branched glow of the chandelier, basking in the incandescence of its ruby eyes.

In one of the eyes, a family portrait, rather an image. A very formal one. He sees himself, much older, in a formal suit standing behind a seated Milhem, who wears a very much out of place hat. To his left, also seated, is his suited father, with a receding hairline. *A picture of them in America?* His mother looks older too and Matile standing behind Milhem's chair must be in her teens. *But the toddler seated below mama couldn't be the baby Wadih, could it?* A strange image, but the chandelier's ruby eyes tell him of many things, and he will miss them.

END