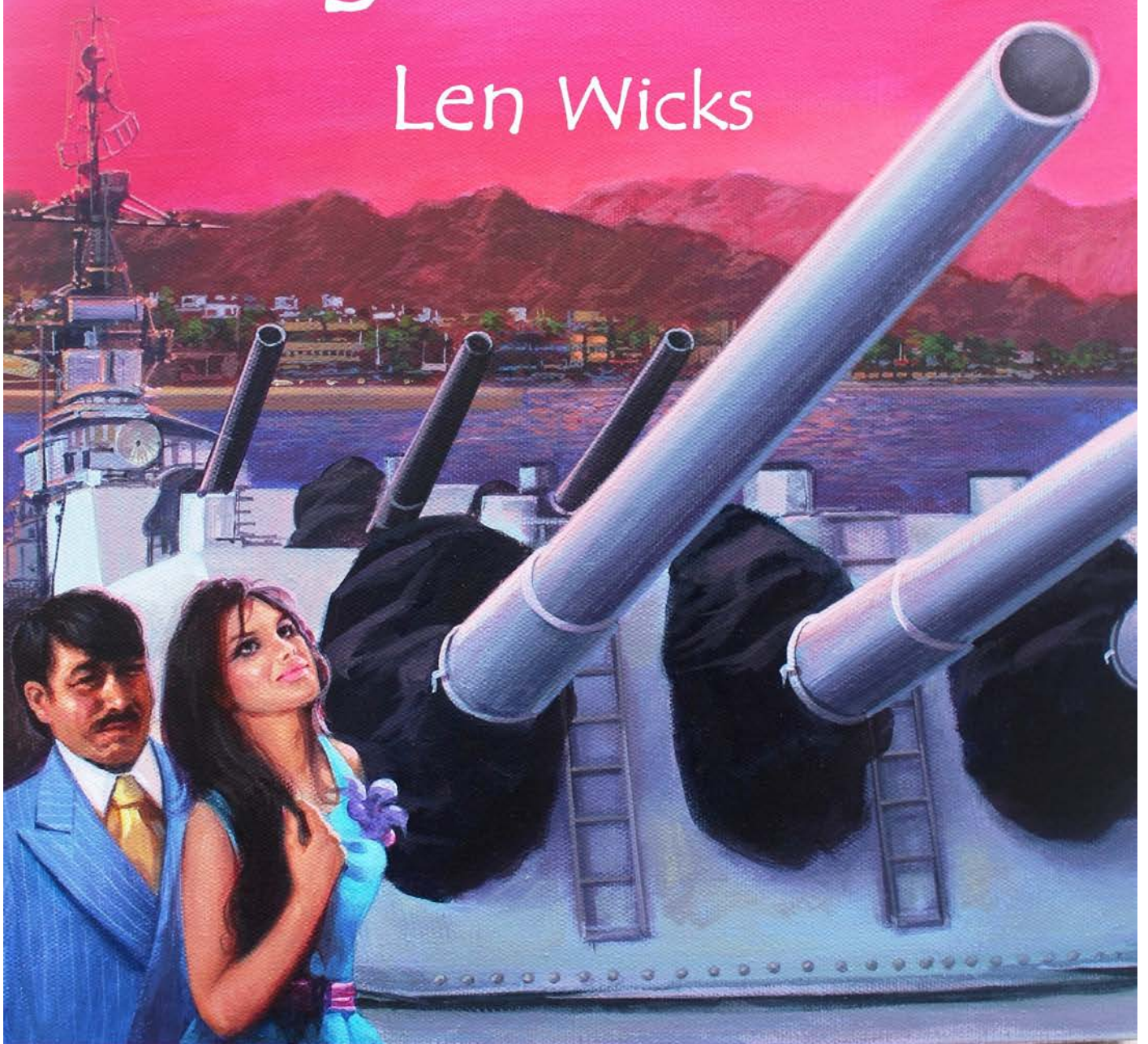


# Origins: Discovery

Len Wicks



An epic novel of love, culture & discovery  
of who we are as humans  
set during the greatest conflicts in history

Paperback Version



Origins: Discovery

Ծագումը: Բացահայտում

*A story of human courage and our beginnings*

Part One: The Axis Rises

Dedicated to Jill, Armine, and Kimberley

Three ladies that believed in me

Նվիրվում է Ջիլին, Արմինեին և Կիմբերլիին

Երեք կանայք, որ հավատացել են ինձ

Humanity: who are we?

Imagine a world where your foes are ultimately your friends

When a single decision changes everything that we know

Where small nations are the saviour of large nations

A world embroiled in conflict

A world that illuminates the humanity we all have inside

Մարդկություն՝ ո՞վ ենք մենք

Պատկերացրեք մի աշխարհ, որտեղ թշնամին, ի վերջո, դառնում է բարեկամ,

Երբ ընդամենը մեկ որոշումը փոխում է մեր իմացած աշխարհը,

Որտեղ փոքր ազգերը մեծ ազգերի փրկիչն են.

Աշխարհ՝ մխրճված հակամարտության մեջ,

Աշխարհ, որ լուսավորում է մեր մեջ եղած մարդկայինը:

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## FOREWORD

*Origins: Discovery* is an epic story set during the greatest conflict in history. The book is written in three Parts, including Part 1: *The Axis Rises*, Part 2: *Defending the Free World*, and Part 3: *Discovering Humanity*.

The story starts in 1930 during Soviet Communist times, exploring the challenges of life in the Armenian village of Arpa, which is renamed Areni in later years. One of the villagers doesn't know that she has a secret within her of monumental significance. In 1937, a single decision changes the past that we know today – an alternative history.

The image below shows the Arpa villagers in front of one of Noravank Monastery's buildings to assist an appreciation of what they looked like in 1930 (however, readers should be aware that the Monastery was largely in ruins at the time, before it was later rebuilt).

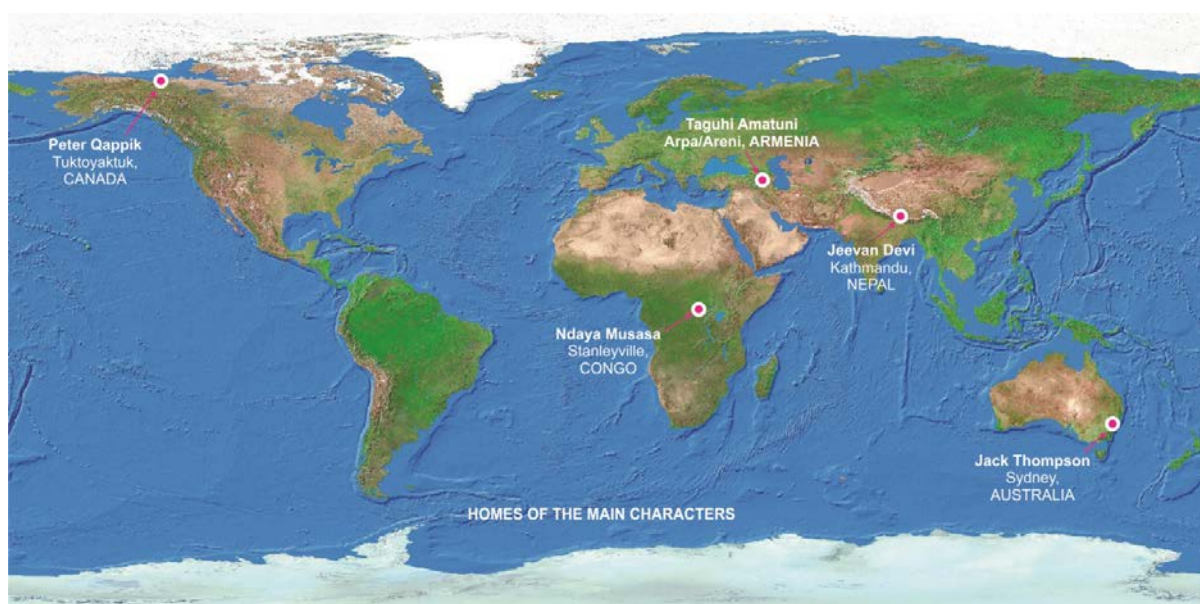


*Noravank Monastery and the Arpa villagers (from the left): vintner Rudik Hakobyan, Lilit Amatuni and her daughter Taguhi, Narine and her husband Yura Avakyan, Yura's mother Eva Avakyan, village teacher Armine Ghukasyan and her husband Dmitri, village elder Razmik papi, and assistant priest Gaspar Haroutyunyan.*

The conflict described creates a common bond among people who would otherwise be foes. Peoples of different ethnicities resist occupation, and unlikely coalitions are formed. Small nations ironically provide sanctuary for the leaders of more powerful countries.

Five individuals, from small or remote nations, each play a key part in bringing the tale to its conclusion, although one pays the ultimate sacrifice. The heroes are ordinary people, not gun-toting musclemen (images of the characters are at <http://originsdiscovery.com/>). An Appendix at the end of the novel lists all the characters. The story highlights the role of scientists that make such a difference in our everyday lives, yet no one seems to honour them.

As the main characters come from different nations around the world, Part 1 naturally moves from one geographical location to another before they start to meet each-other later in the novel. The different locations are intended to convey the message that people from all nations need to work together to achieve the best outcomes for the world, and it provides an insight into many interesting cultures. The illustration below shows the homes of the main characters.



The conflict is only a background to one of the most important discoveries in human history. Two threads in the story intertwine. One thread involves the conflict itself and the development of increasingly advanced technology. The second thread involves the *Origins* project, which reveals a great secret about human beings. This provides a mirror to human consciousness that ultimately has a crucial role in ending the conflict. The world has changed forever; as has the way in which people understand their humanity.



Note for historians: as an alternative history, the novel attempts to portray historical events as closely as possible, even after the ‘moment of change’ in July 1937. However as a work of fiction with partial basis in historical fact, certain events and characters have been subtly altered to fit the storyline.

Note for Turkish readers: this novel mentions the turbulent period in Turkey’s history during World War I, which has been debated through the lens of different political views for a century. While the novel describes a time of sorrow when there was much unnecessary suffering that should never be forgotten or understated, it is important to read the novel in its entirety to understand the ultimate portrayal of ‘modern’ Turkish leadership at the end of the novel in 1952 as courageous, visionary and peace-loving.

Areni-1 Cave: the novel describes the excavation of the Areni Cave archaeological site in the 1930s and 1940s. In reality, the Areni site was discovered by Boris Gasparyan, Head of the Expedition, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, National Institute of Sciences of Armenia in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Maps: Chart and map illustrations were kindly provided by Beryl Pimblott.

Acknowledgement: Daniel Wicks and Matt Johnston kindly assisted with checking.

Cover illustration: the image on the cover depicts a scene from Chapter 34, in Aqaba, Jordan with Taguhi and Peter on the USS *Canberra*.

Links and videos: all hyperlinks and videos are not guaranteed, as they are mainly from public sources. The author expresses his sincere appreciation to all the originators and hopes that the extra exposure from the novel will provide enhanced interest in the work.

## **PART 1: THE AXIS RISES**



## CHAPTER 1: NORAVANK

The sound of beautiful prayer rippled around the ancient Armenian monastery of Noravank. The soulful singing relaxed some of the anxiety of worshippers that had come to celebrate Easter in this clandestine way, away from prying eyes. A pleasant waxy smell of slowly burning candles mingled with the slightly musty odour.

*From the centuries that'd passed in this special place,* thought Taguhi Amatuni.

Taguhi, a 17 year old green eyed Armenian girl, noticed the large bronze candle holders standing on either side of the altar. They seemed to complement the myriad of thin candles flickering in the tray at the rear, which people had lit when entering this holy place.

*These items must have been hidden here somewhere,* she thought.

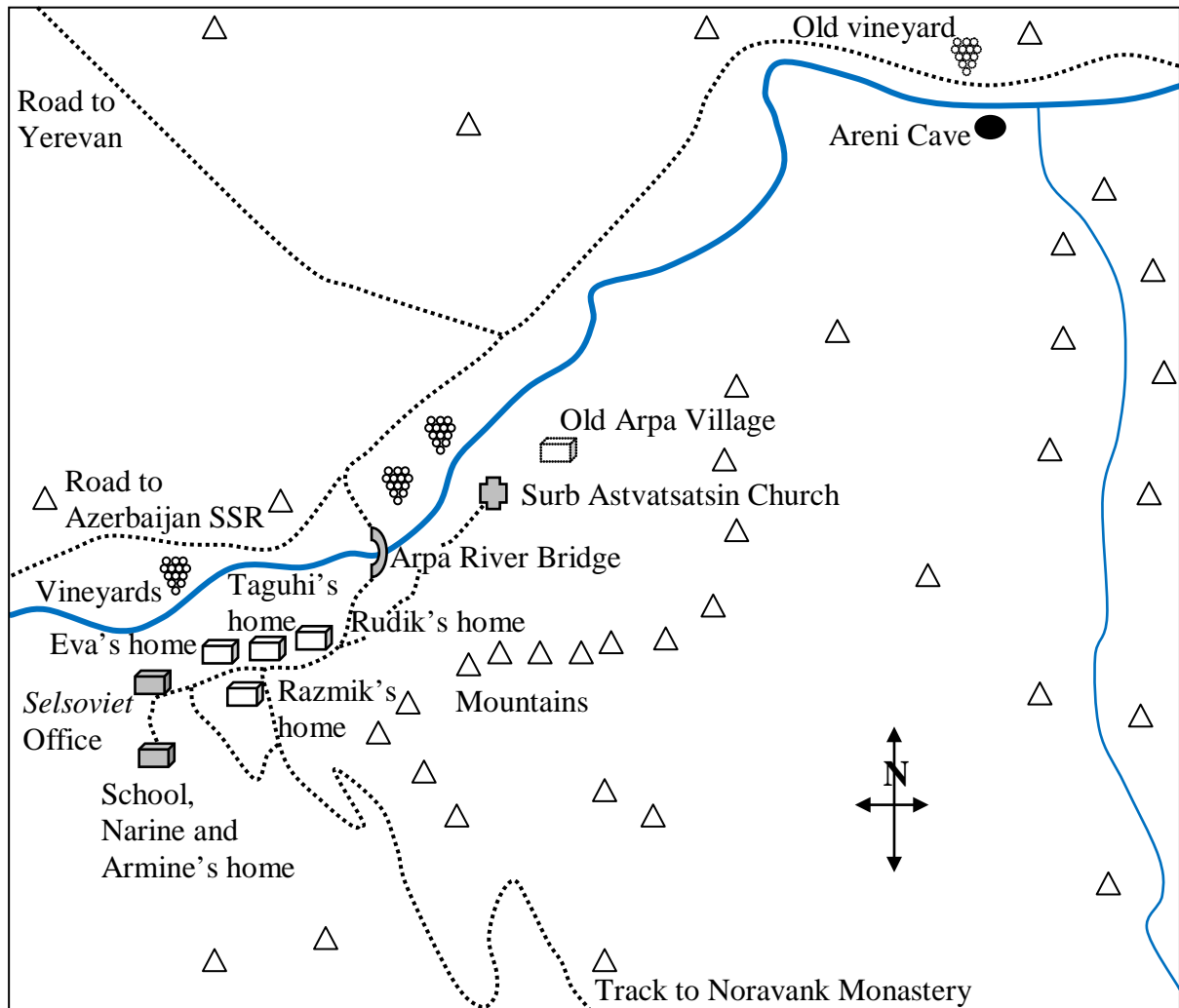
She hadn't seen them being carried by the group on their journey to the normally deserted Noravank Monastery.

Eva Avakian had complained most of the way from Arpa. The village was only seven kilometres down the valley, but Taguhi's neighbour was a rather plump woman who had wheezed from the first step of the 90 minute journey. She had short black hair that sat on her shoulders and seemed to have a constant scowl on her face, perhaps because she had lost her husband Grigor back in 1918 at the end of the World War. Like most villagers, she'd endured a hard agrarian life. Despite Eva's seemingly constant attention on everyone else's lives and sharp comments, Taguhi admired her. She thought that Eva had a lot of courage coming this far for her faith, despite her obvious discomfort.

The mountains: the glorious mountains of Armenia. Not as jagged and tall as some of the world's highest peaks, but green and protecting near Arpa, providing a sanctuary for generations of Armenians. Watching the golden eagle soaring imperiously overhead in a vivid blue sky – one of the symbols of Armenia, and smelling fresh green grass was a delight to Taguhi as she had strolled to Noravank, barely noticing the time it had taken or the gradual uphill gradient. She was definitely an outdoors sort of person.

In 1930, fear was the unspoken force that dominated everyday lives here. It was hard to describe the feeling of obsequious helplessness that no one talked about. After being part of Armenian culture for nearly two thousand years, in the early 1920s Communism had forced people to practice their Christian faith under a veil of secrecy.





*Arpa/Areni and surroundings*

The shadow of Soviet suspicion could be seen on people's faces, and truth was often concealed within everyday speech. Taguhi had learnt early as a child to be careful with her words from her mother Lilit's reaction when she'd innocently said something adverse to the expectations of Communism. Everyone wondered if their neighbour might report a misdeed, like attending a church service. It was an existence of hidden stress, but it was their norm.

Even the two dozen villagers from Arpa were worried, despite Noravank being remote. Not Eva though. Ironically even though she was known as the village gossip, she would never allow that trait to threaten her faith. So she joined the others who'd decided to come for Easter, under the pretence of preparing a field for crops collectively on the way to Noravank.

Taguhi's mother Lilit was standing next to her left. Lilit was quite petite, compared to her daughter's statuesque figure. An oval, kind face revealed her personality. She wore a family heirloom – a silver chain and locket around her neck, and a dark blue scarf with gold embroidery that covered her black, medium-length hair. The scarf accented her plain, dark ankle-length dress.

An accomplished seamstress, Lilit had been able to make the attire she and Taguhi wore. It helped to save their scant resources. Taguhi was dressed in her favourite white frock that she had changed into from the farming clothes she'd travelled in. The dress was a simple garment carefully crafted by her expert mother that came past her knees, with ruffled shoulders and beautiful red embroidery.

Taguhi and her mother both shared the classical, attractive looks of Armenian women: dark hair, full lips, prominent noses and a lightly tanned Mediterranean complexion. It was a result of the mixing of peoples that had crossed these ancient lands over millennia. They had come from the Persian Empire in modern-day Iran, the Greeks that followed Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great, Turkic people that spread across the central Asian mountains and steppes, and more recently, Russians from the north.

In the monastery were people from Arpa that Taguhi had known well all her life – everyone, that was, except for the priest's assistant and the priest, the *Qahana*. The assistant was also young; *in his mid-twenties*, she thought. She couldn't help noticing that the clean-shaven priest's assistant was quite tall – at least 15cm taller than her, and handsome with expressive eyes. He had the unmistakable look of an Armenian man, with thick bushy dark hair and eyebrows. The young man had an angular face with a large hook nose, as if a boxer had broken it in a fight one day – not a likely scenario for someone aspiring to be a priest!

The object of Taguhi's attention was assisting the stout, white-bearded and bald *Qahana*, who had organised the special Easter service for those bold enough to defy the authorities. Taguhi didn't know the *Qahana's* name, as he'd come from the capital Yerevan recently to escape persecution. The mountains meant freedom in many ways. He wore a long black robe and a cross on a heavy chain, and it bobbed about as he beckoned everyone to their places.

The interior of Noravank's partly destroyed Surb Karapet Church was really quite small. As she looked around, Taguhi noticed the old etchings in the solid stone walls. The light was streaming through the shattered cupola above. Dust everywhere! The song of prayer from the singers at the entrance that had echoed around the church slowly subsided into the background.

Noravank was known as one of the most beautiful monasteries in Armenia, even broken. Its stone walls had been hewn from the mountains that surrounded it, with a classic Armenian Orthodox cupola of conical design, topped by a prominent cross. It was *only* 800 years old, compared to the 6,000 year old archaeological site Taguhi had been studying – a cave about two kilometres upstream from the Arpa village. She knew that people of Arpa had been growing wine for a long time, and was determined to uncover ancient secrets there.

As a child, Taguhi loved to read about mysteries and even kept a few secrets to herself; not easy with everyone watching in such a small village. But underneath, she felt something else – an overpowering feeling she might find the answer to an ancient riddle, or why she saw herself finding a golden treasure in her dreams. Archaeology was full of such adventures, which was why the study of human history through artefacts had always intrigued her.

Standing just in front of Taguhi was her childhood friend Narine. Everyone called her Sheko – ‘blonde haired’ in Armenian. Taguhi knew her friend as fastidious and hardworking. She was of medium height and slender build, and had a wide-eyed face with pretty blue eyes that made men look at the sixteen year old without realising they were staring. Taguhi really liked Narine as she had a shy and loving character, but she felt a little unsure what would become of their friendship, now things had changed after her friend’s marriage. Taguhi reached out with her right hand and squeezed her friend’s right hand. She could feel Narine’s long sandy, almost ash-blonde hair as it tumbled past her waist.

The Avakian family always seemed to have some drama going on, and the last recent days were no exception. Although Eva’s son Yura was the same age as Narine, the young couple had already got married two months ago. Such marriages were not abnormal these days, so it only caused a minor stir.

Yura had always been a boisterous, cheeky, young man who wasn’t shy about expressing himself, so the village was used to disagreements in the Avakian household. No one was really surprised when Yura had boldly asked Narine for her hand. The villagers talked more about their difference in size. Yura’s diminutive frame and short brown hair had led to his nickname of ‘Chut’, or ‘baby bird’.

Narine was doing her best to bend a knee unseen next to Yura, so as to not look too much taller than her young husband. This wasn’t too hard as she was wearing a traditional red *sarafan*, a long pinafore dress commonly worn in rural Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union. It had shoulder straps, and was worn over her long-sleeved white blouse. Yura hadn’t brought a change in clothes, so he was wearing his grey work trousers with a long-sleeved dark blue shirt that flapped over his trousers, and a leather belt. His favourite flat ‘newsboy’ style cap gave him a little extra height. It was like those featured in the 1925 American movie *The Great Gatsby*. He wanted to be a farmer, just like his deceased father.

As a young budding archaeologist, Taguhi yearned to be outdoors on such a beautiful day. She knew that she should concentrate on the ceremony, but her mind was elsewhere. She sat twirling her long black hair through her fingers, a little bored and anxious to explore the world outside Arpa.

The assistant swung the *boorvar* incense container vigorously back and forth like a metronome so the attached rattles created a jingling sound, while it dispensed fragrant, sweet-smelling smoke that drifted through the standing congregation. Though it was made of silver, the *boorvar* was tarnished and in poor condition as it had been buried to hide it from the authorities. The sound of birds could still be heard outside, now the prayer music had stopped for a moment. Taguhi smiled at the Qahana's assistant.

*Such brave men, defying the authorities,* she thought.

The assistant looked at the green-eyed young woman as she peered out from beneath the red scarf that covered her long hair, and briefly grinned back.

*She's pretty, but I can't be distracted. This is a chance to show the Qahana my dedication.*

At that moment, the *boorvar's* incense container dislodged from its partially broken chain and clattered to the dusty floor with a noisy metallic sound.

*Clunk, clunk, clunk...*

*Astvats im!* which meant 'Oh my God', a thought the assistant couldn't express out loud.

The container scattered smoke and ash along the aisle between the surprised standing villagers as it rolled towards Taguhi's feet. She glanced at the Qahana, trying to hide the laughter welling up inside her by holding her hand to her mouth.

The assistant looked mortified. He felt completely embarrassed, and paralysed to the spot. Taguhi lowered her head and knelt to pick the vessel up. She felt a gentle hand on her arm. The Qahana himself was standing next to her, smiling with a broad grin. Everyone was looking at her, and trying not to look at the assistant.

"It's OK my daughter, I'm sorry to startle you! It'll be hot anyway."

The Qahana gingerly picked up the *boorvar* with the hem of his robes and resumed the service, after returning it to his now red-faced assistant. Everyone else thought it was amusing, except for Eva, who she could feel staring at her out of the corner of her eye.

The Sunday ceremony lasted less than an hour, but for villagers like Lilit who had been through a lot in their lives it was a powerful message and comfort. Here in the mountains above Arpa, Noravank was isolated enough to conduct an occasional religious service, far from the eyes of the *Selsoviet* Office in the village. These people, who could be villagers, might report religious gatherings, inconsistent as they were with Communist Party doctrines.

Taguhi leant over to whisper in Lilit's ear.

"Mama, can I leave quietly?"

"No, my dear. Please be patient, you'll have the rest of the day to enjoy digging – after you find some potatoes for dinner," her mother replied with a smile.



Lilit Amatuni would celebrate her thirty-eighth birthday this year. She was an attractive lady, but her complexion was lined by years of hard work and worry. She knew her daughter was focused on a love of all things ancient. However in the Soviet Union, the symbolism of maintaining even a vestige of religious faith was precious, so she wanted Taguhi to appreciate being here in Noravank.

No sooner had Taguhi focussed back on the Qahana's sermon; she felt a tickle in her nose. *Probably from the boorvar ash*, she thought.

Despite reaching up and trying to suppress the inevitable, she sneezed so loud that the Qahana stopped for a second, before resuming. Eva turned slightly and stared with the penetrating look she was known for, as if to motion Taguhi to be quiet.

*Oh no*, Taguhi worried. *She's going to tell Mama how she wasn't impressed by something I did; talking in church, even the look at the assistant... or the sneeze.*

Arpa was such a small village, everything was everyone's business.

Taguhi loved Arpa, even though it was hard being away from the big city. She was keen to meet more people – a problem for a young teenager with so few young men around. Yerevan was about a hundred kilometres northwest of Arpa, but she knew the quietness and tranquillity of the village brought its own rewards.

The small stone, wood-framed houses of Arpa sat close together on the flat land between the surrounding steep, heavily eroded hills to the south and the Arpa River, providing life-giving waters for crops. About 500 metres upstream from the village, a steel framed bridge about 10 metres long spanned the river, providing access to the vineyards on the northern side of the river. Nature's tears had created an oasis of green following the river, a pleasant place amidst the arid, brown landscape in that area. Only 20 kilometres away as the road climbed eastwards, the mountains of Armenia turned green again.

Also known by the locals as Arpa Church, the small 600 year old Surb Astvatsatsin stood like a sentinel above the village on a nearby hill overlooking the valley. The Qahana had taken up residence in an old abandoned cottage not far down the hill from Surb Astvatsatsin. He tried to tend to the church as much as he could, without being noticed by those in the two-storey *Selsoviet* Office, which was located near the centre of Arpa village.

Taguhi knew that the Qahana's assistant came from a family of shepherds, who had been living in the Arpa area as long as anyone could remember. Lilit had pointed out his house on the way back from Noravank, a small stone cottage with a thatched roof, about a kilometre from the Monastery. He'd gone to school in Arpa in his younger years – before Taguhi went to school herself, so she didn't really know him very well.

In the evening, the soulful sound of the traditional *tavigh* harp and oboe-like *duduk* could be heard throughout the village – soft, mournful notes. A few minutes later, the light beat of the *dhol* drums chimed in. The villagers liked to relax in each other’s company to create a happier mood than might be expected within the regimented Communist regime, after working hard in the fields each day.

The smell of fresh *lavash* unleavened bread which Lilit had baked in the stone *tonir* oven wafted from the kitchen. It was just a circular hole in the floor a metre wide with a fire at the bottom of the pit about 1.5 metres deep, but the *tonir* had provided metre-long *lavash* that baked in seconds on the hot *tonir* walls for the family for decades.

Taguhi loved the sweet smell of the *lavash*, and fortunately the smoke from the fire was efficiently released from a hole in the roof. She walked across the compressed mud and straw roof that was interspersed with tree bark to close the roof opening. The wind blew her long hair as she scrambled back down the wooden ladder. Inside the home, Lilit put the meal on the table, strategically placed next to the warmth of the *tonir*.

Taguhi chortled. “Remember the time when that rooster fell into the *tonir* Mama?”

“Oh yes, poor thing. He was crowing away after coming inside the house. I was rolling out the dough for the *lavash* as the *tonir* was heating up.”

“It must have been nearly ready. The heat cooked the unfortunate bird in seconds.”

“I felt sorry for the rooster, but he was always a bit silly, flapping around as if he owned the place ...”

Over a meal of potatoes that Taguhi had brought, *lavash*, lamb, and vine leaf *dolma*, Lilit recounted stories from the past to her daughter. Lilit had an introspective nature, so she liked to reflect on her life. As a young woman, Lilit had met an Armenian man named Artur Amatuni in her home city of Van, Western Armenia – now in Turkey. After a short romance, they had married.

“Mama, please tell me about Hayrik growing up in Jerusalem. I know he was only...”

Taguhi stopped for a moment after lowering her head to remember Hayrik – the Armenian equivalent of ‘Papa’, before continuing.

“I know Hayrik was only with us for a few years, but I like to hear stories about him...”

Lilit gently lifted Taguhi’s chin upward to kiss her softly on the cheek.

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Tavigh video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2bwtY7ZRTA> (link and video not guaranteed)

Duduk video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2lJisqnn0E> (link and video not guaranteed)

Lilit was full of emotions herself but she had to keep her daughter positive, even talking about this family tragedy. She knew it was hard for her mother, as she had heard her sobbing in private late at night. But the young archaeologist had an insatiable curiosity about history, especially when it was related to the Amatuni family's past. Jerusalem was significant for the family and her love of ancient history. Lilit didn't really mind the questions, as it kept her husband's memory alive.

"You know, dear, losing Hayrik was the lowest point in my life, but when I look at you, and listen to how much you want to know about his world, I know he lives on in you."

"Mama, tell me again about you meeting!"

Lilit put some *khashlama* – lamb that had been cooked with onion, capsicum and the potatoes – into the *lavash* she was holding. The mildly spicy, tasty flavour of the sweet lamb was one of Taguhi's favourite foods.

"We were both going to the island of Akhtamar in Lake Van..., to the church there. There were lots of other young Armenians from Van on the little ferry boat. But I noticed him straight away."

Lilit smiled in remembrance. Artur wasn't tall but his big brown doe-eyes and long eyelashes had mesmerised her as he cast his gaze towards her group getting off the small ferry boat.

"So Akhtamar was a special place for you then?"

"Oh yes, we went there often; it was so nice with its apricot trees. We'd pick the fruit in summer and the monks would tell us off... in a gentle way of course. Artur was a pretty good tree climber!"

"It sounds like fun, Mama. Can you tell me more about how his family came to Van from the Holy Lands?"

"Dear, you studied how father's ancestors founded Jerusalem's Armenian Quarter?"

"The teachers said it was about 1,600 years ago."

"Even before that, Armenians had been living in the Holy Lands for centuries before Christ."

"I know Armenians have always had a close relationship with Jerusalem... I really wanted to hear how he felt, living there."

"He often mentioned how he felt the spiritualism of the place, rambling over the rocks near old Jerusalem. Hayrik used to talk about many secrets he dreamed about there. He said it was special, where people from all places came to worship."

Taguhi listened intently. She tried to imagine the boy who would become her Papa, climbing over the famous Temple Mount, walking the narrow streets of the Armenian Quarter, and watching the world go by from the Mount of Olives. A city infused with different influences from the peoples that had come there over eons, like an exotic Middle Eastern recipe. Sacred to Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths, it was an archaeologist's dream. She felt intrigued and fascinated by every minute detail Lilit could remember.

"Moving from the Holy Lands to the city of Van was not your father's idea. He loved it in Jerusalem. The drought when he was about ten meant the whole family had to go to Van, but he *never* forgot Jerusalem."

Taguhi knew that the Armenian link with Jerusalem was to prove strong from her own study of historical literature. The teachings of Christianity had been secretly protected in places like Armenia within the Roman Empire, and Armenia became the first Christian nation in 301<sup>AD</sup>. Without the embryonic religion being nurtured like a vulnerable baby by people such as Armenian missionaries, it may not have survived, let alone grow to eventually become the largest faith on Earth.

"Dear, you were only two years old when the violence started in Van. The Turks wanted to conscript Armenians into the Ottoman army, but Armenians feared their men would be massacred, so they resisted. Hayrik was one of only a thousand men defending Van from an attack by the Turkish governor. The Turks started large scale deportations of Armenians from the capital Constantinople on 24 April 1915 and across the Ottoman Empire as well."

"That was during the World War, right?"

Lilit nodded in response.

"There was a lot of anger and fear in those times. The Turks rounded up Armenians living across the Ottoman Empire and..."

Lilit took a breath and fell silent for a moment of contemplation.

"*Why* did they do it, Mama?"

"It's hard to say dear. Armenians have been living together with Turks for hundreds of years. You must first remember that in conflict, there is often wrong on *both* sides, so try not to be too judgemental – especially as you've only been exposed to one view. Isn't that the case now with what you get taught about the Soviet Union at school?"

"I know Mama."

"I'm sure that young people of your age living in Turkey would be just as horrified as you of what happened if they knew – it *isn't* their fault. One generation shouldn't be judged by the sins of those that went before, and they probably don't know the full truth anyway."



“At school we read about the Turkish view – there was wartime suffering in many communities, including Muslims, so the Armenian catastrophe should not be considered to be a separate tragedy.”

“Dear, everyone knows that there were many victims of war and plague during the World War, but it was the Armenian, Greek and Assyrian civilians that were being forcibly deported at gunpoint by the government, not the Muslim community.”

Lilit felt herself going from one emotion to another, as she tried to keep a balance between the hurt she had inside and the knowledge that everyone had their own view. She continued in a steady, deliberately slow pace so her daughter would understand her.

“There isn’t any doubt that *all* civilian communities suffered terribly from the ravages of war and plague at that time... but I don’t think that should be allowed to mask the extra horror of a government taking *deliberate* action against certain religious minorities, do you?”

“Not really Mama. Did the Turkish soldiers force everyone at gunpoint?”

“I’ll never forget them... prodding people forward with their rifles, sneering at us as if we were subhuman. They left the weak and dying behind in the dust, as they forced us to march through the desert. And that was not all they did...”

“It sounds awful Mama.” Taguhi felt ill imagining the scenes of desperation.

“The forced marches resulted in a completely disproportional Christian death rate, compared to the Muslim communities left behind.”

“...but I heard people arguing about how many died Mama.”

“I know. I don’t think it is kind to the souls of the departed to argue about how many lost their lives, as if that makes any difference. We just know that there were millions of Greeks, Assyrians and Armenians that died unnecessarily.”

Lilit was usually very calm and measured, but she naturally felt very strongly about anyone trying to whitewash the actions that she viewed as leading to her husband and so many innocent civilians dying.

“Dear the numbers shouldn’t affect how we as human beings view what happened and what we should call it – the action of the Ottomans caused human suffering on the most appalling scale and was indefensible, no matter what the toll.”

“Mama... Are you OK?” Lilit looked very sad. She was fondly playing with the silver locket around her neck.

“Can I see again Mama?”

“Of course dear – here, it opens like this.”

The smooth silver heart shaped heirloom felt warm in her hands as she carefully handled it, a family treasure that kept her father's memory alive with an image of him inside.

"Hayrik looks so handsome and strong, even in this small picture."

"Your father carried you so far. Many died like him trying to get to Armenia from the terrible conditions. At least he got to Arpa before he was too weak to go on."

A tear emerged from the corner of Lilit's eye and rolled down her cheek as she saw an image of Artur lying ashen-faced and emaciated on a hastily-made bed of hay inside a barn.

"It's so sad Mama."

Taguhi imagined the scene of bedraggled men, women and children walking slowly across the Syrian deserts. Hollow eyed children cradled by women with nothing left to give. No food, precious little water, falling to the dusty ground. Many were fainting and left lying where they fell, or were beaten by the Turkish guards. Some were even set upon by the Kurdish and Muslim residents of villages they passed through. As the Turks entered Armenian villages, inhabitants tried to flee. Some drowned in wells that they threw themselves down to the darkness after looking to their church and crossing themselves, or tried to hide under piles of dead bodies. It was an indefensible, horrifying massacre, beyond description by mere words. Her eyes misted at the thought of the suffering they must have gone through. It was too much to bear, even for someone who was too young to remember.

"I know. We lost Hayrik like thousands of others. They say that one Armenian in two died, during three years of horror. Thank God you're here, so we'll always remember him."

Taguhi loved to hear about such faraway lands like British Palestine in the Holy Lands, and longed to visit them. But this was not possible with tensions between Armenia and Turkey remaining high, and the Soviet Union's borders were effectively closed.

So it remained a dream; to follow the footsteps of her father and see the ancient places of the Holy Lands. Arpa would have to pique her interest for a while, at least.

## CHAPTER 2: EMPIRES

Armine Ghukasyan greeted her student avidly: “Taguhi! *Bari Luys*.”

“*Bari Luys, Enkerh* Armine.”

Even outside school, students were expected to address teachers with the title *Enkerh*, meaning ‘comrade’. Taguhi’s 34 year old geography and history educator was her favourite teacher, and the admiration was mutual. Armine’s best student lived and breathed the subjects she taught.

Armine was not as tall as Taguhi. She had medium length brown hair that framed her high-cheeked oval face, which always seemed to have a constant smile. Taguhi found her teacher to be strict but kind, a person who preferred her students to be on-time and prepared. Her dress was as smart as her character: a crisp long-sleeved red jacket buttoned to her neck that sat neatly over a white blouse and red skirt, which was edged with gold coloured embroidery. It was traditional attire from Southern Russia, where her husband’s family had come from.

School had been a challenge for Taguhi. Not because she couldn’t keep up; quite the opposite, she excelled. Taguhi wanted to learn more, more than what was offered in the regimented lessons at school. Taguhi yearned to find out about the outside world. She wanted to see for herself if the text books were correct – that people outside the Communist world were badly off compared to Soviet citizens.

The school sat high above the village on a steep slope. It was large enough for more than a hundred students, and several teachers that lived on-site. The school building’s stone walls were almost a metre thick, with gaps filled by a mixture of hay and clay. Taguhi knew from her studies that this was a technique known as the ‘wattle and daub’ construction method, typical in Arpa. A final layer of white clay was used for the internal walls, and the roof was supported by beams made from large trees that grew near the Arpa River.

“It’s nice here near the river... What are you dreaming about, Taguhi?” asked Armine. Taguhi was enjoying the sun, dressed in a knee-length simple brown dress as she sat on the grass. The fresh smell of spring and the sounds of the river splashing by were relaxing.

“I was thinking about the Armenian Empire of Tigranes the Great.”

“Tigranes was certainly great.”

“Yes, he must have been special to reign over a great state next to the Roman Republic.”

“Taguhi, your passion for history is wonderful. I wish my other students would study like you. I’ve asked my husband to support your entry to Yerevan State University next year....”

Taguhi felt shocked and proud in the same instant. Her eyes were wide with surprise. She was shaking with excitement, but didn’t even realise it. Armine had talked about Taguhi’s future study possibilities, but there had been nothing concrete until now.

“Don’t you want to go to Yerevan, Taguhi?”

“...I know Mama will be alone and I’ve seen how hard it’s been for you being separated from your husband *Enkerh* Armine.”

She knew that Armine’s husband was a Professor of History, of part Russian and part Armenian extraction. She recalled he was surprisingly capricious for a professor, someone that lived life to the full – as far as possible within the constraints of Communism.

Taguhi had visited the Ghukasyan home at the school frequently, as Armine was Narine’s mother. Sheko’s blonde hair, uncommon in these parts, had come from her father’s Russian side. Sheko had told Taguhi that her parents met while studying at Lomonosov Moscow State University. The family had been going through a difficult time after Dmitry was sent to teach at Yerevan State University the previous year. Narine’s recent engagement and marriage was a welcome distraction that had brought the family together, albeit temporarily.

“Dear Taguhi, you should talk to your mother about this. I believe that you should seek your potential my dear. From my experience in life, be encouraged that those that do achieve their ultimate goals can change the world.”

“Yes I can see that with people like Tigranes, and Alexander the Great.”

“As for me, I have permission to transfer to Yerevan at the end of the year. Now that Narine’s married I don’t need to be in Arpa for her.”

“That’s such good news about your transfer!”

Taguhi instinctively jumped to her feet and hugged Armine, and then realised she’d been a little informal.

“Oh I’m sorry, *Enkerh* Armine.” Her teacher simply smiled and held her hands gently.

“Taguhi, I sense in you something special, a precious quality. I’ll no longer be your teacher when I leave, so I hope you’ll consider me to be your friend from now on. Can I ask a personal question?”

“Of course, *Enkerh* Armine.”

“You see Narine more than me these days. I was a bit worried that her mother-in-law might dominate her a little. Does she seem happy to you Taguhi?”

“Yes I know; Eva can be a little overwhelming. Sheko has a quiet personality, but I noticed that Chut stands up to his mother, so I think they’re doing fine.”

“That’s good, thanks Taguhi... I’m just a typical concerned mother. Now what were you saying about Tigranes?”

“I was thinking about how the Armenian Kingdom of Tigranes ruled over large parts of Turkey, Syria and Lebanon as we know today, and that was more than a thousand years before the Seljuq Turks migrated to Asia Minor from Central Asia.”

“It’s amazing that it took the power of the Roman Republic to quell King Tigranes.”

“That was near the end of his rule in old age, right?”

“Apparently Roman Consul Pompey had such respect for Tigranes the Great that he allowed him to continue ruling Armenia as an ally of the Republic until his death.”

Taguhi had always been intrigued to learn that no one knew for certain where the name ‘Armenia’ – Armine’s namesake – had originated. Her teacher had taught the class that the Persian Achaemenid Empire of Darius I had recognised a kingdom called ‘Armina’. Some said the name had Aramaic connections, but others disagreed. The answer had been lost in the mists of time. As for the Armenian tongue, its exact origins as an Indo-European language had been lost too, but Armine stressed it had drawn on ancient Iranian and Greek linguistic influences. Interestingly, Armenians called their nation ‘Hayastan’ in Armenian, a name which had supposedly originated from the mythical ancestor of all Armenians, Hayk.



*Armenia and surrounding nations*

Teacher and student talked about the history of the area, and how the mountains had protected Armenian society from the threats and ravages of war over many centuries. Taguhi imagined the clean-shaven King Tigranes in his late forties pushing back the Parthian Empire to the east; ruling for decades over Armenian Kingdom lands that stretched from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea.

*What would these lands be like if the Armenian Kingdom had lasted the ages?*

Armenia remained a land wedged between Empires over the centuries, a pawn for its fertile lands and highly skilled crafts people. It was a land strategically positioned between Turkey and Iran, and south of the Caucasus, which rose more than five thousand metres to Europe's highest peak, Mount Elbrus.

The clean air brought the smells of summer, of fresh produce and fruit. A gentle breeze pushed little white 'fair weather' cumulus clouds across the sky at an almost indiscernible pace, but it occasionally fluttered the leaves of the many grape vines that lined the river flats. The Arpa bubbled its way over rocks and through a cleft in the mountains on its way to the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, as if the gods had cleaved the way with Tigranes' axe.

Taguhi looked up to see her friend Rudik Hakobyan waving in greeting as he walked towards them from his nearby home on the way to the bridge. A man of 36 with a strong physique despite his average height, Rudik wore a dark hat similar to a British bowler and dark blue overalls that were splotted with wine stains. He had brown hair to match his eyes and a small moustache short-cropped like his hair, so it was only as wide as his nose.

Rudik was responsible for the management of the communal village vineyards, and lived only a couple of houses away from Taguhi's family. The Hakobyans had been involved in viticulture in this area for as long as anyone could remember, but today he was carrying a fishing rod. It was the sort of lonely pursuit that suited Rudik. He was a quiet, almost shy man – not the sort of person that enjoyed events like village weddings where he had to be gregarious. Taguhi liked Rudik. His gentle mannerisms belied his inner strength, and he knew a lot about Armenia's recent history. Taguhi's inquisitive nature had led her to have a close relationship with him since she had been a young girl.

Rudik had previously told her about the World War from his own experiences of the bloody period from 1915 until 1918, when the Ottoman Turks had joined Germany as part of the 'Central Powers'. Taguhi was only four at the time of the Russian Revolution, so she had known no other world. Rudik was also able to explain what happened during the tumultuous time after the World War, until the country was subsumed within the Soviet Union.

*"Bari Luys Rudik,"* said Armine in greeting.

“*Bari Luys*, Armine and Taguhi, what are you sitting here for? Enjoying the nice weather?”

“Yes of course, and you’re going fishing?” asked Armine.

“The Arpa River looks full of fish today!”

“Rudik, we were just talking about history, and I wanted to learn a little bit more about your experiences during the World War, if you don’t mind,” asked Taguhi. “Do you have time? It’ll help me understand better, as the text books don’t cover some things.”

“...or they’re omitted deliberately,” added Armine.

Taguhi felt a surge of annoyance. *How could the authorities not tell the truth, no matter what the truth held?* It simply went against her character – always questing for facts.

“My memories of Western Armenia are a bit tragic, but it’s a story that must be told because it shaped this country and our people. I first got involved in the conflict after volunteering in 1915 when I was 21, but I was one of many young Armenians. Some were not even old enough to fight. I met a fresh-faced boy named Ivan Baghramyan who was only 17. Everyone called him ‘Vanya’. He finally managed to join the Imperial Russian Army as a volunteer. I remember him saying: ‘My place is at the front’. We were all idealistic in those days... we were unaware of the *horror* of war.”

“After the Russian soldiers withdrew following the Russian Revolution of 1917, it left Armenia without an army to defend against the Ottoman Turks. I remember the trepidation of the people.”

Taguhi felt a chill. It wasn’t hard to imagine how people might have feared for the worst, after being left defenceless when the Russian troops left.

Rudik looked down and sat beside Taguhi and Armine on the riverbank. He stared at Surb Astvatsatsin on the hill. The small building was not easy to see, as it had been deliberately designed to blend in with its surroundings in case of an enemy attack. Thousands of years of history were represented by such icons.

“We were looking at the destruction of Armenia and our culture by the Turks...”

“That was only two years after the death marches from Turkey started, right? I was asking Mama about this and she became a little bit emotional,” said Taguhi.

“I’m not surprised, given what she’s been through. You know, Armenians and other Christians had been living peacefully in Turkey for centuries. Armenians, like other minorities, were persecuted by the Ottomans... there were times those communities rose up to defend themselves, which any human might do in the circumstances.”

“What’s really hard to understand is why there wasn’t more resistance to the forced deportations,” questioned Taguhi.

“I know. If anything, they went quietly to their deaths.”

“But I can’t comprehend why they were deported if they’d lived in Anatolia for years.”

“I suppose the deeply rooted fear that Armenians might rise up to support the Russian invasion could’ve had a something to do with it. I can understand this, as many Armenians living outside Anatolia openly supported and encouraged Russia, and joined the Russian Army,” Rudik said in a serious voice that reflected the difficulty of the time. “Then again, don’t forget that Armenians fought in both the Ottoman and Russian armies for years. Do you know what I think the critical point was?”

“No, please tell me Rudik,” asked Armine, curious to know.

“I’m sure it probably came after the Ottoman Armenians refused to turn against Eastern Armenians, as demanded by the Ottoman government at the 1914 Armenian Congress in Erzurum. They paid for that decision with their lives.”

“But Rudik, that doesn’t explain why Greeks and Assyrians were also slaughtered in their hundreds of thousands...,” said Armine.

“You know, in my experience war is about power,” emphasised Rudik. “It might be that the Turks were worried about other Christians revolting against them. Then again the property left behind by more than a quarter of the population might’ve been a motivation as well. If it weren’t, that property would’ve been returned to the rightful owners after the World War, the descendants of the victims.”

“Rudik, what happened after the deportations?” enquired Taguhi.

“I suppose if there was any proof needed about the intent to exterminate Armenians from the human race, it was then. The Ottoman Army invaded Eastern Armenia, in an attempt to obliterate us from the map. We were facing trained soldiers with better weapons, and they outnumbered us many times... mainly just a rag-tag bunch of farmers and engineers; anyone that could hold a rifle.”

Taguhi could imagine the desperation from the anxiety in Rudik’s voice.

“Can you tell us what you saw, or is it upsetting?” asked Armine.

“I lost a lot of friends and fellow Armenians that May, 1918. The Turks were sure they would crush us. I saw many courageous acts during the Battle of Sardarapat. I heard that Vanya was a cavalryman there... you remember, the boy I mentioned?” Taguhi nodded.

“We defeated them, *despite* being outgunned. Do you know where Sardarapat is?”

“It’s about 40 kilometres west of Yerevan!”



“Right; and there were other battles not far from there. During the Battle of Bash Abaran... that’s where Eva’s husband Grigor died.” Rudik looked a little saddened and then continued. “Several thousand riflemen, most with old flintlocks, and the rest armed just with swords against a much bigger regiment... men like Grigor who fought with such bravery that they even *counter-attacked* the enemy.”

Armine described what a Turkish commander said after being defeated by the Armenians in several battles at that time.

“The literature states that General Wehib Pasha advised his headquarters:

*It is clear that the Armenians will fight to the last man, and the battle is not worth continuing.*

“As an academic, I believe that was the moment the nation of Armenia was saved, at least for the moment.”

Taguhi looked a little puzzled. “I always get confused between which Pasha it was that started the deportation of Western Armenian civilians in 1915. Was it Wehib or Enver?”

“It was Enver Pasha that took power in 1913 as one of the Ottoman Turk leaders with a goal of relocating the *dhimmi* from the Ottoman Empire... that means non-Muslims like you and me,” recalled Armine.

“I heard an Ottoman Armenian soldier named Hovannes saved Enver Pasha during a battle against the Russians, by carrying him on his back, months before he started the Armenian deportations,” said Rudik.

“So despite being saved by an Armenian he still sent Armenians and Greeks on a death march. That’s *insane*,” stressed Taguhi.

A wave of emotion came over Taguhi as she thought about her father and the other people that had lost their lives for nothing.

*Ter Astvats, it’s been an unspeakable grief since Hayrik was taken.*

“What happened after they stopped the Turk advance in 1918 Rudik? I know that you also fought in Azerbaijan,” asked Armine. She knew she had to change the subject, after noticing Taguhi’s sentiment.

Rudik played with his narrow moustache as he recollected the events of the time. “When they sent us to fight the Turks and their Muslim allies Azerbaijan in the Battle of Baku, I met soldiers called ANZACs... I think it meant Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. I’d never really heard much about Australia and New Zealand before. I also met a dark-skinned person for the first time.”

“*Really?*” remarked Taguhi, curious.

“He wasn’t the only one, the British Empire forces had a few of these fearsome looking soldiers called Māoris, but the one that stuck out was called Captain George Tahiwī. He was a few years older than me at 23, a sports champion, mad keen on a game called rugby that I’d never heard of before. With the Soviet soldiers translating, I wish I hadn’t asked about the game, as he taught me a thing or two.”

“What did he look like Rudik? I’ve never seen a dark-skinned person before,” asked Taguhi. She knew Rudik enjoyed recounting his colourful past, despite preferring to be quiet on social occasions.

“He wasn’t tall, but had a muscular chest and arms. He didn’t have a beard, just short-cropped, curly black hair that was parted in the middle. He had brown eyes and a flat, wide nose. Not like ours, that’s for sure,” Rudik joked in a self-effacing manner. “What really struck me though was how much the New Zealanders preferred informality, unlike their starchy British commanders.”

“That’s interesting,” Armine noted.

“When Captain Tahiwī invited me and a few of the Soviet soldiers to join the ANZACs for a game of rugby I thought why not? It was like the sport of wrestling that we all love; only it was fighting for possession of an oval shaped ball. I got hold of it once and came off second best when Captain Tahiwī *wrenched* the ball from my grasp – it was like I had a cake of soap. He was that strong.”

“It sounds like fun, we should play it here,” Taguhi said, as she stood up, brushing the grass from her dress.

Over the years, Lilit was able to make Taguhi’s clothes as she did for many of the village’s children, but there wasn’t much money to spare. At least in the Communist world Taguhi knew, no one seemed to go hungry.

“After the match, all the soldiers sat exhausted on the muddy ground. Though we had some difficulty communicating, Captain Tahiwī described that he’d first fought the Ottoman Turks at a place not far from Constantinople called Gallipoli. I only realised at that moment that Australians and New Zealanders had been fighting our common enemy for three years.”

“I hadn’t heard about the ANZACs either, but I suppose Armenians were too focussed on survival,” Taguhi said, with a serious note to her voice.

“Taguhi, at the same moment as the Armenian expulsion started in April 1915, these ANZACs and other British Empire troops were attacking the Ottoman Empire. The Captain told me that the British First Lord of the Admiralty... someone called Winston Churchill... devised a plan to capture the Dardanelles.”

“It’s the strait that joins the Mediterranean to the Black Sea,” said Taguhi knowingly.

Taguhi listened to Rudik intently, trying to imagine what it must have been like for these brave men from half way around the world to come to a foreign land and fight, many of whom had never even been on a ship before. She knew precious little about Australia and New Zealand, but tried to visualise the young men fighting the same Empire that her father Artur had fought against in Van. She knew that it must have been bewildering to be so far from home, but felt thankful to these men she hadn’t known for their sacrifices.

“The British thought that the Turkish defences would be overwhelmed by their naval forces. The Turks had mined the narrow strait, and British minesweepers apparently had difficulty clearing them. After some initial early success attacking the forts on the Gallipoli Peninsula, the resistance was greater than the British anticipated.”

Rudik stopped for a moment to recall the details of the story told to him more than a decade ago, but which he could never really forget.

“Captain Tahiwı told how he and his fellow soldiers landed on a narrow beach. I think he described it as a natural cove. They had to climb steep cliffs in the face of Turkish machine gunfire. He described harrowing scenes, with the idyllic beach quickly turning into a bloodstained nightmare. It was a disaster. About half the 500,000 Allied soldiers were left where they fell, but at least the Turks lost just as many.”

“It must have been awful,” Taguhi said with empathy.

“Later in 1918, the British Empire and Soviet soldiers fought all the way with us to the Azeri capital Baku. But we didn’t have sufficient numbers to defeat the Ottoman ‘Army of Islam’ as they called it; even though we killed ten of their soldiers for every one of ours lost.” Again Rudik recollected.

“The saddest memory for me wasn’t the battle outcome, but hearing the stories of civilian massacres on both sides that took place in 1918. I was told about ten thousand civilians were killed from each of the Azerbaijani and Armenian Baku communities.”

Armine could imagine the horror of civilians venting merciless rage on their neighbours for no other reason than having different beliefs.

*What have humans learnt if they act like this?*

She placed her hand on Rudik’s shoulder to comfort him. “None of the bloodshed seems necessary, but at least you survived to return to Arpa Rudik.”

“In May 1920, I met Vanya again. Like many, he had been upset with the poverty he saw in Armenia at the time. It was a difficult time for everyone.”

“I know that Armenia was struggling to stand alone at the time. No help came from the Western nations and the League of Nations formed after the World War, and we had conflicts again with Turkey,” reflected Armine.

“Vanya was an idealist, a socialist, so he took part in a failed Bolshevik rebellion against the Dashnak Armenian government and was jailed. After that Vanya was forced to work on farms, but finally he was allowed to rejoin the military.”

“But didn’t the Soviet Red Army invade then?” asked Taguhi.

“Yes, it was a great irony. After all that fighting to defend Armenia against the Turks, only a few years later the Soviets marched into Yerevan and took over our lands. We were not to know at the time that we were trading one difficulty – the hunger of our people – for another in the form of Communism.”

“It’s not what they make us teach at school Rudik, but I think you’re right,” said Armine.

Rudik continued. “Worse still, our leader Josef Stalin decided to redraw the internal boundaries of the Soviet Union in Azerbaijan’s favour. I’ve always thought that it was to placate the Azeris, as their lands were also colonised as part of the Soviet Empire.”

The Soviet Union had been all its people had known for a generation. The net result of the World War and its aftermath was that Armenia had once again lost its independence after a few short years of freedom. Though Stalin was Georgian – a son of the Caucasus, this didn’t result in a kindness towards people of the Caucasus Mountains. Many thousands were sent to places like Siberia for their contrary views.

“Thanks Rudik for helping me understand. They don’t really tell us this at university you know.”

“Then be careful Armine, some people don’t like the truth... OK I’m off... the fish are waiting. *Hajogh*.”

“*Hajogh* Rudik,” Taguhi and Armine responded, as they waved him goodbye.

The older men of the village sat playing chess and *nardi*, also known as backgammon, not far from the river near the *Selsoviet* Office. Tall, cone shaped piles of cattle dung were piled up to four metres high to dry as a combustible material for fires. The sound of the dice rattling across lovingly handmade wooden boards and the noisy reactions of the players to the game was a regular occurrence in the afternoon. Taguhi had been a precocious child, keen to learn and challenge the unknown. She fondly remembered her younger days when she was about eight years old, asking the men in the village if she could play *nardi* with them. To their great surprise, Taguhi even won some games at that tender age.

It was Razmik, a village elder with a great white beard, who had first described the truly ancient history of Arpa to Taguhi. Walking along the path, she waved as she saw Razmik sitting in his usual spot playing *nardi*, and he waved back in return. Naturally, he was wearing the French-style black beret hat and dark jacket that he always wore. Razmik was the oldest person in the village, or at least it seemed that way to Taguhi.

“*Bari Luys Razmik-papi*,” Taguhi said, using the Armenian word for grandfather in respect, even though he was not her grandfather.

“*Bari Luys* Taguhi. What were you talking to Rudik about so intently?”

“We were talking about what the Turks did.”

Razmik stopped playing *nardi*, and with a groan and the assistance of his cane, stood up.

“Walk me home Taguhi, and I’ll explain some important things from my perspective.”

Taguhi was thrilled, as Razmik was probably the wisest person she knew. She knew his care for the village, and particularly her family after the loss of her father Artur. Razmik’s descriptions of the area’s history intrigued her, especially the tales of great Emperors that had ruled this land, and the legends of the cave a couple of kilometres from the village.

“Dear Taguhi, you’re so curious about the world, but you must be careful. There are people... even in the village... who are watching and listening.”

“I know Razmik-*papi*, but I want to know the truth.” Razmik smiled at the paragon of virtue in front of him. She was not to be dissuaded.

*Courage comes in all forms*, he thought.

“Taguhi, it takes courage to make change... and you’re surely not lacking valour. So judge not a person’s true intent by written and spoken words, but by their deeds.”

“That’s so true.” Razmik seemed hesitant as they approached Razmik’s old stone and clay cottage, only about 100 metres from the *Selsoviet* Office. It had a row of Russian sunflowers outside, which seemed taller than the doorway he stooped to enter.

“Just a minute Taguhi... welcome inside for a moment. Tea?”

“Yes please Razmik-*papi*.”

Razmik beckoned Taguhi to sit at his simple wooden table. He lit the fire to boil water.

“I need to be careful saying this. As I said, people can be listening... but some people might not like talk about the Turkish massacres of Armenians. Stalin has been persecuting anyone stirring up internal political trouble.

“Even if it was about Turkey?”

“Anything to reduce tension on the Soviet Union’s southern border... Stalin has enough to contend with on the western border, after what the Germans did during the World War.”

“I understand the need to be careful Razmik-*papi*, thanks. But tell me please, what do you think about the Turks saying that there was no *intent* to annihilate Armenians?”

“Consider this – it was said that there were no specific written orders to kill Armenians. But what do your eyes tell you about their actions?”

Her scientific mind liked to focus on the facts. “They *forcibly* deported men, women and children for hundreds of kilometres with little or no food and water through harsh terrain.”

“Right... and the deportation required planning, which meant it went on for years. It was not an ad hoc wartime activity. The Turks were not blind. They *knew* about the reports detailing the suffering of millions of Greeks, Assyrians and Armenians, and did nothing to stop it. Neither did the international community.”

“Razmik-*papi*, Rudik told me that deportees were not protected from attack by some of the local Muslim and Kurdish communities. He reminded me that even after the deportation the Ottoman army invaded Eastern Armenia, with the objective of completely destroying our last surviving communities.”

“The only logical conclusion of any *sane* human being could be that the deportations were an intentional campaign to harm as a planned, targeted, and executed plan conducted over several years. Call it what you want, but *no* human with a conscience can defend it.”

Razmik poured some tea for Taguhi, which she drank with relish. But she was still troubled.

“Why don’t they say sorry Razmik-*papi*? It’s what anyone should do if there is wrong. I think it’d be very brave if they did, and might help to bring peace between our nations.”

“I suppose there’s a natural inclination to defend the honour of the country, but...” Razmik paused to reflect on what Taguhi had been saying.

“...there is no honour in denying injustice for the sake of pride and patriotism. True respect comes when we recognise the truth and our mistakes of the past; then we are honoured by all, not just our own communities.”

“Razmik-*papi* that is so wise. I will always remember what you’ve said.”

“Taguhi there’s something else I must speak to you about.”

“Razmik-*papi*?”

“You’re aware that many people in Arpa are unhappy under the yoke of Communism?”

“Of course... I see that people work hard each day to provide food that’s taken away to Yerevan for little reward.”

“Taguhi there’s talk in the village... secret talk about a rebellion against the Communists. I know that you’re passionate about the truth but I advise you not to ask questions about this.”

“What do you mean Razmik-*papi*?”

“I mean that the authorities are likely to react badly to any intransigence by villagers to submit to the Central Committee in Yerevan. I don’t want you to get involved. I advise you to maintain your silence and keep your thoughts to yourself. I don’t want you to be hurt.”

“I promise Razmik-*papi*...”

“Thank you Taguhi. *Hajogh*.”

“*Hajogh*.”

The next day, it was lightly raining with a passing shower. Curiously, Taguhi liked to walk in the rain, as long as it wasn’t too heavy. She had nearly reached her home when saw the assistant priest at the same time he saw her. She smiled, but he looked away, even as he approached her on the narrow path between the little stone houses. *He’s shy*, she thought.

The assistant priest had travelled from his home near Noravank to see a childhood friend; though he liked to keep to himself. The white shirt and trousers he was wearing – in fear of his other role being reported to the *Selsoviet* Office – were getting damper by the minute.

“*Bari Luys*, your name’s Gaspar Haroutyunyan, isn’t it? My name is Taguhi Amatuni.”

The assistant felt a pang of nervous embarrassment, and left his head down.

“Look, if you’re concerned what happened before with the *boorvar*, please don’t worry. I think you’re very brave to defy the authorities,” Taguhi said in a reassuring tone.

“I know who you are Taguhi,” Gaspar responded quietly. “Everyone talks about your passion for the history of this place... I really don’t feel brave to be honest. I feel my faith driving me. The villagers are the ones who’re brave, coming for *patarag* service all the way to Noravank. One word to the wrong person and we’re all in trouble.”

It stopped raining. The air had a magical, fresh smell that always came after a shower. Taguhi studied Gaspar’s hands, something she liked to do while investigating human development. His large and surprisingly lined hands for a young man told her that he had agrarian strength and purpose behind that quiet persona. Back to reality, Taguhi wondered what she would say next.

“I think I’m going to study at Yerevan State University next year,” she said as she blurted out her news.

“I’m probably going to travel back to Yerevan myself after I complete my first two years of training. I hope to study under the senior priest at Surb Zoravor Church there... Although, after my clumsiness I’m not so sure I’m cut out to be a priest,” he said with a limp smile.

“I sense that anything you want to do, you’ll succeed in, no matter what it is,” encouraged Taguhi.

“Thank you Taguhi.”

In the nearest house, made of roughly set stone with a wooden framework and roof, Taguhi thought she saw a movement. A figure was watching them through a small window. It was made of pieces of transparent crystalline rocks cemented together – used at a time when glass wasn’t commonly available for construction here. She didn’t need to see who it was. She knew it was Eva, a lady who was interested in all goings-on in the village.

“OK, but I have to go... to study the cave along the river.”

Taguhi knew that Eva would gossip about her talking to a young man for any length of time, but she also knew Eva would never talk about Gaspar’s secret role. Eva was old-fashioned and very religious. She knew that the moment anyone mentioned the services at Noravank that the village could be punished, and both Gaspar and the Qahana might be in dire peril.

Seeing Narine and Yura come out the front door of the Avakian house holding hands, Taguhi gave them a wave. Eva thought Taguhi was waving to her and meekly waved back, before disappearing from sight.

If Taguhi was honest with herself, she felt a little jealous of the couple, and she didn’t see Narine so much these days. Still, it was nice to see her best friend happy.

Gaspar said: “*Ast’tso orhnutyuner qez het zavakes*,” which meant ‘bless you daughter’, as he turned to leave.

“Sheko, Chut! *Bari Luys*. Are you walking? I’m going to the cave... did you want to join me?”

“Of course, it’ll be fun,” replied Narine.

“Are you sure you won’t get your clothes too dirty?” Narine was wearing the same red *sarafan* she wore at Noravank, while her young husband wore a white shirt with his favourite grey work trousers.

“Chut will definitely get something on his shirt!” she joked.

“Only if I have to carry you up that hill!” he retorted.

The cave entrance was about fifty metres above the road after the walk from the village, but it was an easy climb for the trio after crossing the Arpa River. From the dusty roadside that followed the river it looked roughly triangular in shape, rising about ten metres. The obvious overhang of the apex above the entrance provided shelter from the elements. The cave itself was at least 20 metres deep, with several partially collapsed shafts that Taguhi thought might lead to hidden chambers.



Taguhi heard the sound of rapidly beating wings above her like a humming noise. Craning her head upwards, she could see the swallows manoeuvring around nests they had constructed near the cave ceiling. There they were safe from predators, and the cave was as dry for the birds as it was for humans.

“How many people do you think this might have held?” asked Yura, his voice echoing from the cave walls. The cave seemed surprisingly large to him.

“I haven’t been able to excavate enough to prove it, but I estimate there could have been hundreds of people living here. I think it was probably also used as a lookout.”

“A lookout?” questioned Narine.

“The cave could have been used to monitor the many traders and soldiers that might have travelled this way down the river... look, can you see? From here you get a great view of the valley. They all came through here... the Persian, Roman, Mongol, Ottoman and Russian Empires. This was part of the Silk Road that connected China with Europe. The great caravans of traders came across the mountains and rested at Prince Orbelian's Caravanserai.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” exclaimed Yura.

“The Caravanserai was built in the fourteenth century at the Selim mountain pass, about 40 kilometres northeast of here. The traders passed Arpa on their way to the west.”



*Ancient archaeological cave site near Arpa (Areni), Armenia*

“That’s interesting. Can we help?” asked Narine.

“Of course, but *please* be careful where you walk. I need to draw everything.”

With her art book, Taguhi carefully continued the sketches that recorded the scene inside the cave. Once she was satisfied that she’d captured the details and described the exact position of the diggings, she took the rusty old trowel she’d borrowed from Rudik and slowly excavated the soil that covered the history below.

She was careful not to get her dress dirty, even if it was plain attire for wearing around the village. Rudik sometimes also helped Taguhi in her explorations of the cave when he wasn’t working in the village vineyard. Unlike Taguhi, he would often end up with marks on his favourite long trousers and waist coat. He didn’t mind, as he was close to the Amatuni family, after losing his wife a few years before in childbirth.

Even if her name meant ‘Queen’, Taguhi would get her hands dirty working for hours, painstakingly uncovering a vibrant, ancient community that had been there centuries ago. Lilit sometimes reminded Taguhi of her ‘royal’ status when she returned to the home in a grimy state, but that is what she loved. To discover secrets, and imagine what life must have been like then.

*I wonder what secrets lie hidden here?*

### CHAPTER 3: ROOF OF THE WORLD

In another small Asian nation to the east, gargantuan mountains in Nepal soared to more than twice the height of Armenia's peaks. The mighty Himalaya Mountains had been thrust upwards from the ocean when the Indian sub-continent collided with the rest of Asia millions of years ago, before mankind had even walked the planet. On the southern side of the great range was Nepal, rising from tropical rainforests to the snows of the highest mountains in the world. On the northern, drier side sheltered from monsoon rains was Tibet – a vast plateau averaging more than 4,500 metres above sea level, sometimes called the 'Roof of the World'.

It was too much for a resolute, headstrong 16 year old like Tenzing Norgay. His normally cheerful disposition and beaming smile expressed by prominent cheeks disappeared behind the lines of a frown. Tenzing's brown eyes had lost their normal twinkle as he pulled off a simple woollen cap he was wearing to reveal his short dark hair. The young Nepalese wore a burgundy coloured *chhuba*, a simple cloak made of thick home-spun wool that fell diagonally from his left shoulder and which was tied at the waist with a cloth sash called *kara*. It was warm enough for the mountains, but here in the subtropical environment near Nepal's capital Kathmandu it felt too hot. Perhaps it was just frustration. Even if the young Nepalese had been brought up in a strict Buddhist manner, he wanted to rebel and find his own path.



*Nepal and Tibet straddling the Himalayan Mountains*

Tenzing had been born number 11 in a large family, but underneath he had a strong will to stand out. As a Sherpa, he came from a mountain tribe that lived in Eastern Nepal under the shadow of the mountain they and Tibetans called *Chomolungma*, or 'Holy Mother' – the great pyramid-shaped massif the British had named Mt Everest.

Tenzing's father, a yak herder, wanted him to attend Tengboche Monastery in the village of the same name where the family lived. It brought great honour for Buddhist families to send their youngest sons to the monkhood, and the boys would be well cared for. Tenzing recalled looking at the three-storey high stone masonry building, impressively sited at a height of nearly 4,000 metres, and surrounded by dizzying mountains. The pink and red flowering rhododendrons that had covered the nearby slopes during spring were long gone. None of this beauty had swayed young Tenzing. He wanted to explore beyond Tengboche village and he wanted to climb mountains. But first he had decided to abscond from his father's presence, by running away to Kathmandu in central Nepal.

Steep, tortuous trails, gushing streams to ford, and loose boulders. It was a long journey by foot, but Tenzing had felt the urge to explore, to experience the world outside the village.

*What adventures lay ahead?*

The yard where Jeevan Devi sat watching children play noisily doubled as a school playground for the small Nepalese village of Sankhu, just to the northeast of Kathmandu. The large open courtyard was surrounded by small brick and timber homes juxtaposed with shops that had open frontages selling their wares: clothing, food and small items for the home or jewellery. Dusty orange earth, yellow bricks and whitewashed walls contrasted with the colour of the surrounding green hills.

Being a small and wiry 35 year old man with round spectacles and shaved head, Jeevan Devi could have been inconspicuous on any street, but for his orange coloured monk's robes. Jeevan's simple appearance belied his deep-thinking and personable nature, evident from the brightness of his smile and sparkling brown eyes. His nature was not like other monks, who preferred to talk in lowered tones. An unusual holy man, he was a little more assertive, brave enough to speak out when the occasion needed, and inquisitive of the world around him. People saw him as sympathetic and trustworthy, giving, calm, and dignified – the epitome of Buddhist values.

Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, had been born in Nepal more than 2,500 years ago. As a young prince, he lived in Bihar, north-eastern India. The suffering of so many people there convinced him to give up royal life. After meditating for days under a fig tree at Bodhi Gaya, he attained enlightenment of Buddhist principles, becoming known as 'Buddha'.



As an offshoot of Hinduism, Buddhism had many things in common with the much older faith. In some ways, Buddhism complimented the spiritualism of Hinduism. It emphasised the meaning of consciousness, teaching followers how to free the mind from the bondage of human ego.

Jeevan had left school at only fifteen and entered the Buddhist monkhood, even though his family were of Hindu extraction. He wanted to help the less fortunate through the Buddhist faith.

Long ago, Jeevan had decided that the pursuit of wealth was not for him. He had always believed that the age-old caste system promoted a life of privilege for a few, at the expense of the many. He wanted nothing to do with castes, even if he came from the educated *Vaishya* 'middle' class of merchants and landowners. Since Jeevan had been a child, he had noticed the suffering of *Sudra* caste peasants, toiling in the fields and factories like the metal works, or even worse, the plight of the 'Untouchables'. They were only good enough to do jobs like cleaning streets and toilets.

The sounds of children mingled with the bustle of the nearby market, and the crows of a persistent rooster, which clearly hadn't realised that the sun had been up for hours. A light smoky veil drifted across the roughly tiled rooftops from the forges of the nearby metal works, just down the dirt pathway leading towards Kathmandu. Jeevan could hear the *clang-clang-tong* of their hammers, metal on metal in the near distance, creating the beautiful silver and gold jewellery pieces the wealthier castes desired.

A girl with untidy medium length black hair wearing what looked like a shabby, torn blanket – but in fact was an old cloak – stared from the corner of the courtyard at the children playing. Jeevan felt something intangible, a sadness she carried within her, even though she could've been one of the many children playing in the dirty streets. Jeevan adjusted his robes as he stood. The girl was looking blankly away from him, just standing in the shadows alone.

"*Namaste*, what's your name?" asked Jeevan, using the Nepalese greeting.

The girl was silent. Her huge blue eyes gave no emotion away. Jeevan noticed how long and beautiful her dark eyelashes were.

"Dear, what's your name? Are you OK?"

"Jharna... I'm four." He reached towards her with an open hand to reassure the little girl.

*Bang!* A loud metallic sound invaded the senses from a collision of two vehicles trying to navigate the narrow village streets. It wasn't close, but it was enough to cause the little girl to be startled and run off. Jeevan wondered if she was from a less fortunate caste, and had wandered to this part of the village out of curiosity.

The rooster finally decided to stop crowing, but that only made the sound of the metalworkers more obvious. Jeevan walked slowly down the path, past the open sewers, towards the dilapidated homes of the Untouchables.

*The foul smell... Lord Buddha, it just isn't right.*

Jeevan was taking in all the sights and sounds that had been his life up until now, good and bad, before the change in his life. Some time ago, he'd made a decision, although he hadn't articulated it to anyone else until now. After twenty years as a monk, Jeevan had decided to continue his studies in the spiritual centre of Buddhism – Tibet.

While Nepal and Tibet sat astride the great Himalaya Mountains, they shared the Buddhist faith, albeit with Hindus greatly outnumbering Buddhists in Nepal. Jeevan had heard about Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, through the stories of monks that had travelled there. He knew in his heart that he had to travel, even though it meant leaving his home and family. His family... and such a close knit community.

*This wasn't going to be easy.*

Jeevan's father Pravin Devi had passed away many years ago, but not before he had told his son about the history of his family. Pravin had described a world from long ago that echoed with tradition, going back to the roots of Indian civilisation – an ancient place from where his family hailed. The patriarch of the family had moved from Patna in India to Nepal to escape the crowding of the growing city situated on the southern bank of the sacred Ganges. Buddha had passed through this city, known as Pātaliputra then, when it was the centre of the ancient Ganges River civilization.

Pravin Devi was a teacher. He described to his family how the great stone and brick structures had spread along the river embankments, so pilgrims could clamber down to bathe in the cool waters that had originated in the Himalayas. At times there might be thousands of orange-clad worshipers in the river, in a kaleidoscope of humanity. The sacred waters of the Ganges cleansed more than illness. It was the place where many came to spend their last minutes of life.

From Pātaliputra, the great Indian King Ashoka the Great ruled about 2,200 years ago. His Maurya Empire stretched across the Indian Sub-continent after Alexander the Great's Greek and Persian armies had withdrawn from the area 50 years earlier. When his father described the conflicts of the time, Jeevan imagined the King's battle elephants with their fearsome shrieks and huge size terrifying opponents, while archers riding on top fired their deadly arrows into the ranks of hapless infantry. It was Ashoka the Great that helped to make Buddhism a world religion, after embracing the faith in his middle age.

Jeevan had learnt from his father that even Patna was not really that ancient, when compared to the 5,000 year old Indus Valley civilisation, and even earlier settlements like Mehrgarh. Pravin had described academic studies of Mehrgarh, suggesting the site had witnessed some of the earliest farming of rice and animals more than 8,000 years ago. There the little mud and stone houses that clung to hillsides west of the Indus River were a focal point for some of the most important milestones in mankind's journey to civilisation. Agriculture had changed the course of humanity's existence, as people no longer needed to search for food like nomads and could settle in one place – to prosper, learn and build.

The Devi family and friends gathered in a small courtyard between the mud, brick and stone homes that constituted that part of the village. Everyone from Sankhu had come to see him and wish him well it seemed. In recognition of the mission he was about to undertake, his family and friends had mixed feelings.

“Children, wait please,” admonished Jeevan's mother Madhu.

The savoury smell of Jeevan's favourite dish – *momo* – was enticing as it was being served. A type of dumpling filled with goat meat, the *momo* was accompanied with bowls of rice, *roti* flat bread, and many other succulent foods.

“Thanks for preparing this meal Mama, it really smells delicious.”

“I couldn't have you leave on an empty stomach Jeevan. Look at those children; you'd think they'd never had *momo* before the way they're eating...”

“I'll miss you all, but I'll especially miss your cooking.”

“I'll be sad to see you go, but I'm proud of what you are doing... everyone's proud of you Jeevan.”

“It's a dream to study with the most senior Buddhist teachers, and to see the famous pilgrimage sites of Tibet.”

Madhu, whose name meant 'honey', was still active at the age of 58. She was a small, rotund woman with long grey hair neatly tied back and glasses, cloaked in a simple purple sari. Madhu was a conscientious and industrious person, so she was busy making sure the food was served properly, and with meticulous detail.

Jeevan loved his mother for her diligent care of the family, but he wished she wasn't so pompous about her *Vaishya* caste, as she tended to look down on others from lower classes. He remembered her constantly telling him to 'make sure you don't marry someone below your caste'. In recent years, it was his brother Rajesh's turn to be harangued. He had felt uncomfortable with the assertion that a person could only associate with his own class. It was one of the catalysts to join the monkhood, but he didn't have the heart to tell his mother.

Jeevan recognised that his own calm persona must have come from his mother, as his father had been a little more animated. Jeevan thought that it might have been because his father enjoyed presenting as a teacher. He recalled the time the news came. Terrible news, such that it strikes the receiver dumb with shock, and even his normally composed mother started to shake and convulse with grief that day.

Madhu Devi had just been told by the police of a tragedy – her husband and two of her children had been engulfed in a landslide on the way to the western city of Pokhara. Falling rocks and slips were an all too common occurrence in mountainous Nepal. Even today, she lit a small candle every morning on the little shrine with their images at the family home. Jeevan had only been a teenager, but his realisation of life's fragility at that moment convinced him that his destiny lay in becoming a monk.

A relaxed Jeevan watched as the festivity started. There was *Gunlā Bājan* music, with *dhaa* drums, *sitar*, cymbals and woodwind instruments to get people in the mood for dancing, with spiritual Tibetan overtones. Dance they did. The rhythmical movements of hands from waist to above the head and sway of the girl's hips accentuated their long dresses and ponytailed hair.

The dancers were wearing their finest jewellery – golden bands around their heads with ornaments that dangled in front of their brows and tinkled as they came together, complimented by gold earrings. Everyone was clapping to the sound of the beat, and stamping their sandaled feet on the dusty ground.

The first drop of rain landed on Jeevan's head with a *plop*; coolness in the sultry air. Kathmandu might sit at the foot of great mountains, but it was at a low enough elevation to have a warm, subtropical climate. That meant plenty of precipitation.

"Jeevan! It's going to rain!" said his younger brother, who was seated next to him.

"It's a good omen, Rajesh. The mountains are crying, but our crops will be green."

"...but the food."

Jeevan smiled. "We've eaten most of it... and no one seems to mind the rain while dancing. It's warm tonight."

At eighteen and the fourth child, Rajesh was much younger than Jeevan. He was a tall, strong young man with broad shoulders and short black hair, towering over most of the other family members, just as his late father had done. A large, rounded nose dominated his expressive face.



The young Devi loved cricket. Some would describe him as an assertive alpha male. He enjoyed bowling wicked 'bouncers' that would fly past batsmen's noses if they weren't careful. His spirited and extroverted character was quite the opposite of his brother Jeevan. What they shared was a quiet determination to succeed. That spirit was necessary on the cricket field, but sometimes Jeevan's quiet words were needed to guide the young Devi's proud passion towards more sensible options in life.

Into the night they danced. The rain drifted down like a veil from the hills above, gently soaking but not deterring the revellers. Jeevan sat quietly watching, gently rubbing the walking stick he would use on his odyssey. He decided to retire a little earlier than the others, so he could pack the things he needed for the long journey.

Rajesh concluded that the rain wasn't so bad after all, even though his collarless white shirt and dark trousers were soaked, as the village girls noticed the young man wasn't a bad dancer. A thunder clap sounded like the end of the world, signalling a more intense storm on the way, and the end of the evening's fun.

On the hill above Sankhu, Jeevan visited the old Buddhist stupa of Boudhanath for the last time before he left. It was a time of quiet contemplation after the sound of celebration the evening before. The religious relic site had a massive white mound-like base surrounded by prayer wheels. Jeevan felt their large brass cylinders, smooth as silk as they rotated. His thoughts were of wonderment: *how many... perhaps millions of pilgrims and travellers had passed this way?*

Boudhanath's tall pyramidal-shaped spire with ever-seeing eyes on each face dominated the skyline. Tibetan merchants and other travellers following the trade route from Lhasa had offered prayers at Boudhanath for fifteen centuries, and now it was Jeevan's turn to pray here on his way to Tibet. Madhu, Rajesh and the rest of the family accompanied him from the village to say goodbye.

Attached to Boudhanath's spire were lines of prayer flags fluttering in the breeze. The flags were of five colours, representing the Buddhist elements: earth, wind, fire, water and consciousness. Jeevan felt his awareness of his own being growing stronger. Each time the wind blew, the flags carried the prayers of the faithful to the universe.

Jeevan noticed a boy sitting quietly on a rock near the stupa, next to the flat *mani* stones, which were inscribed with the Tibetan purifying mantra '*Om Mani Padme Hum*'.

"*Namaste...* are you alright young man?" Jeevan enquired. The boy replied with a beaming smile as Jeevan, Madhu and Rajesh approached him.

"*Namaste!* I'm OK thanks, just tired. I'm Tenzing from Tengboche."

“Why’ve you come here alone?” asked Jeevan. Tenzing might have been a bit rebellious, but he was never going to lie to a monk.

“I ran away from home. I came to see Kathmandu and climb mountains.”

“Well you must have climbed a few getting here!” Madhu said jokingly.

“My father wanted me to be a mo...,” Tenzing’s voice tapered away. Jeevan placed his hand gently on his shoulder.

“Young man, a true monk will only be so if he submits to religious service. You must find your own way in life. If you want to climb mountains like other Sherpas, then you will climb mountains... but right now you are young, and you must return to your family in Tengboche until you can make a decision like this for yourself. This is my brother Rajesh; he’ll look after you until you’re strong enough to go back.”

Madhu looked at Rajesh towering over Tenzing.

*Such a difference in height, but only a few years between them.*

Tenzing knew inside that this kindly monk was right, and that he’d been a little impetuous. He felt a little unsure, now he knew he had to return home.

“Come on Tenzing, I think we still have some *roti* and *momo* left from last night, and then we can play some cricket,” urged Rajesh.

Tenzing looked a little confused. “Do you know cricket?” asked Rajesh.

“Not really... I heard it was a game from England.”

“There’re two things that unite India, Tenzing – the English language and this crazy British game called cricket,” informed Jeevan with a grin.

Jeevan touched his hands to his forehead in prayer to comfort his mother Madhu. She was trembling and teary-eyed, but aware how much this meant to her son.

“Mother, brother, family and friends, I must start my long journey now. Thank you for coming; it has given me great strength.” With those few words, he waved and took his first steps on the trail.

The ‘Roof of the World’, as Tibet was known, was never going to be an easy place to acclimatise to, but Jeevan saw it as his calling. Looking back from the winding path leading to the mountain pass, he felt sad to see Sankhu disappearing far below in the smoke-shrouded Kathmandu valley. At the same time he felt exhilaration at the thought of seeing Tibet.

The monsoon from the south-west had brought heavy rain since June, and nature had responded. Green rice terraces and vestiges of tropical jungle created a breathtaking late summer landscape. The white colour and sweet fragrance of the trumpet flowers common to Nepal punctuated the green bush, overcoming his senses momentarily.

Turning his eyes to the path ahead, the towering white massifs looked as if they were an impenetrable barrier; but faith could overcome any obstacle. He needed to hurry before the onset of the cooler months closed the mountain passes. Grasping his walking stick, Jeevan strode on.

Many weeks later, the first time Jeevan saw the Potala Palace he just stopped and stared in wonder. This was the winter residence of the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists.

*How was it possible to build this incredible edifice in the mountains?*

Dating back to 637, the famous building soared 110 metres high on the hill overlooking the valley from the white painted stone lower floors to the red coloured palaces at the top. Jeevan Devi felt at home, despite being in such an unfamiliar environment, gasping for breath in the thin air of high altitude.

The name *Dalai Lama* meant ‘Ocean of Wisdom’ in Tibetan, reflecting the divine respect he was held in by his people. As the Head of State and leader of the Tibetan Buddhist faith, he presided over an isolated, feudal nation that was very conservative and deeply religious.

The deep, repetitive *thud* of drums and rhythmic *ting* of small metal cymbals heralded the start of a religious festival, one of 68 held in the Tibetan calendar. The drums were large circular instruments, light green in colour and delicately balanced sideways on the musician’s left shoulders; they were a cross between an acrobat and a musician.

Jeevan noted Lhasa was almost medieval, with men and women wearing traditional costumes. The main mode of transport was on foot or by horse, as if the modern world had passed Tibet by.

The Tibetan monks in the procession wore yellow headpieces that gracefully arched forward, like the crest of a Roman helmet. Their orange-red gowns flooded the streets. Jeevan was now one of thousands of holy men either taking part or watching the ceremony – about one in five of Tibet’s population were monks in the 1930s.

Some women he saw were of high society. They wore a long-sleeved outfit underneath a silk gown wrapped around their torso and an apron. Many women had two long hair plaits that reached below their waist, with ribboned tassels tied at the end. Government officials were very noticeable. They wore large blue turquoise and orange coral ornaments around their necks, signifying their status as part of an aristocratic family. Jeevan knew from his father’s teachings that these treasures had been traded on the ancient Silk Road that ran north of the Tibetan Plateau.

The sweet smell of *tsampa* reminded Jeevan he was hungry. It was a staple food here, made of roasted barley flour mixed with yak butter and tea to make dough.

As Jeevan passed the food merchants on the edge of the square, a women worshiper came forward with her hands in prayer above her, kneeling to ensure she was lower than Jeevan's head as a mark of respect. She wore an ornate patterned hat with fur side flaps, a black fur jacket and an apron with some of the finest multi-coloured hand stitching Jeevan had ever seen. The lady placed a small package of *shapale* – meat and flour wrapped in cabbage – into the small bowl Jeevan always carried. She was careful not to touch him, for it was forbidden for a female to touch a monk. The act of merit-making was acknowledged by Jeevan with a short prayer for long life and luck for the worshipper.

As the first snows arrived in the coming weeks to fill the air with silently drifting white flakes and sprinkle the surrounding hills, Jeevan hurried to complete the *Lingchor*, a walk that circumnavigated Lhasa. The smoke of rhododendron and juniper twigs being burnt as incense permeated the air. Beggars lined the route, so pilgrims could assist the less fortunate. Jeevan felt a mixture of feelings. It was good to see people being treated kindly, unlike the fate of the lower castes in Nepal, but it saddened him to see so many poor people. Inside, he wondered about so many monks being supported by the small population of Tibet in such an inhospitable climate. To an outsider, it might not have seemed fair. Buddhism had never been based on democracy, but somehow people found what they could to 'make merit' regardless.

About a kilometre west of the Potala Palace, a small stone bridge arched over a duck pond lined with weeping willow trees. Many of the faithful were prostrating themselves, kneeling and then laying themselves full-length on the ground in spiritual connection with the sacred path as they completed their walk. Jeevan marvelled at the pilgrim's faith.

*Such complete devotion by so many people is not often seen.*

Jeevan's accommodation in Lhasa was at the famous 600 year old Drepung Monastery. It was white walled, red roofed, and crowned with gold-trimmed spires. Though sparse, Jeevan's new living quarters were now his home, and his fellow monks his companions.

Jeevan noticed a little girl praying to a group of small Drepung Monastery statues that pilgrims had decorated with gold leaf. The girl's expression was solemn for a child that age, standing motionless in front of her mother. She had brought her daughter to the Monastery for 'merit-making', and it was obvious from her old attire that her family was very poor. Still, the mother shared what little food she had with Jeevan, reinforcing the simple importance of thinking first about others.

Jeevan was reminded how important religion was for people living in such a difficult environment. It was a means of finding inner peace, no matter what the circumstances of their lives. He had read about European ways and heard about the English desire to dominate the people of India as part of their British Empire. He wondered how different the world would be if the British had values like the mother he was blessing.



## CHAPTER 4: THE COAT HANGER

The British Empire had cast its influence across the planet, even as far as the Pacific.

*Thok!* Jack Thompson had managed to strike the leather ball, about the size of an apple, clean off the middle of his willow bat. He was thrilled – but then his joy turned to horror as the ball sailed well over his mate Johnny's Stewart's head, and into the edge of the churning surf near the beach with a *plonk!*

"Bloody hell mate, you better get that. Be *quick*, the ball will be ruined," Johnny cajoled.

The love of cricket was not confined to India or Rajesh Devi playing in Kathmandu – it had spread to most parts of the British Empire, including Australia, where the two 21 year olds were playing at Bondi Beach in Eastern Sydney. The sweat poured from Jack's brow as he waded a metre or two into the water to retrieve the ball. The tepid Pacific Ocean was a welcome relief to the waves of heat; hence the reason for them just wearing shorts. The beautiful curved white sand beach was filled with swimmers, most in a one-piece swim suit, watched by the ever-present surf life savers on a sizzling hot summer day.

Jack had been careful to play cricket away from the crowds on the hard-packed sand near the water's edge at the end of the bay, to avoid the ball striking someone. Now the ball was somewhat worse for wear, after getting a saltwater soaking from Jack's exuberant blow.

"*Bugger...* it's ruined," said Jack, examining the soggy ball. "Sorry mate."

"No worries mate. Let's go and swim... there're plenty of sheilas here to distract us," said Johnny, using the local slang word for a young woman.

Australia had just beaten the unfortunate touring South African cricket team five nil, and emulating their sporting heroes was something most Australians enjoyed during the January holidays. In Australia, sport was almost treated like a religion; such was the fervour for outdoor pursuits. It was seen as an essential part of Australian culture, promoting a healthy upbringing in the baking sun.

Jack was a typical Aussie 'bloke', the colloquial term for man. He also enjoyed a bit of Australian Rules, or 'footy' as it was known locally, drinking with his mates; and he wasn't shy about women either. His slightly unkempt medium-length blonde hair and bronzed tan from the time spent on the footy field and beaches gave him the look of a surfer, although that sport was still in its infancy in 1931.

Jack's athleticism and tall frame had enabled him to excel at sports through his childhood. For him, sport wasn't just about keeping fit and having a beer with his mates after the game; the girls seemed to enjoy the company of sportsmen too. He saw himself as extroverted, spontaneous, and confident.

His mate Johnny Stewart was shorter than Jack, but was built very strongly across the shoulders. He had a prominent jawline to match his pugnacious character, and a thick mane of red hair like a Scottish chieftain – reminiscent of his family roots. A nasty scar across his right hand indicated a colourful past, but Johnny wore the mark as a badge of honour. Jack had met Johnny on the footy field when he met his match in a furious tackle from the redhead that sat him on his posterior, winding him in the process. From then on they'd been friends.

Life hadn't been easy for Jack growing up in the working class suburb of Balmain, just west of Sydney's busy city centre. It was a peninsula of small wooden rented cottages that protruded into the beautiful natural harbour, first named by British Captain James Cook in 1770. Port Jackson had been a river system that was inundated by the sea in ancient times. Its many inlets formed a vast tree-like shape, with the sparkling waters of the Pacific Ocean filling many branches that jutted off the main deep-water channel.

In Balmain, socialist worker's advocacy groups formed the Australian Labor political party in 1891. The presence of a coal mine and industries such as shipbuilding and a metal foundry meant that engineering was in the blood here. Jack grew up with every expectation that he'd work in metal industries and factories; a life of sweat, grease and danger.

Jack's mother Rose had raised him alone. Back in 1892, at the age of four, she had immigrated to Australia with her family. They were like many from England who had been attracted by a better life after hearing about the Australian gold rushes in the States of New South Wales, Victoria and West Australia. He never knew his father, an Irishman who left not long after Rose had announced she was pregnant.

With no hero for a boy growing up in a tough neighbourhood, Jack built a reputation for himself on the streets. He had learnt at an early age how to protect himself with his fists. Perhaps it was the Irish in him. Although the family had precious little, with Rose doing cleaning jobs and working in the rough bars of the time, at least Jack could go to school.

Jack never forgot the overpowering feeling of being alone the day Rose died, after a short illness from Spanish Influenza. He couldn't take his eyes off her pale but peaceful face, with her fair hair looking like it had just been brushed. Jack never cried; he was in shock. He had his first ever beer that day at the age of ten, provided by a well-meaning but thoughtless relative.

Jack didn't know much about the 'flu, as they called it, but he read later that it came from returning ANZAC soldiers that had suffered in the appalling conditions of trench warfare during the war. He had read about the shocking tales of what Europe called the 'Great War' at school. Poisonous gas curling cruelly through the muddy trenches looking for victims; and tens of thousands of lives snuffed out by machine guns and exploding shells. The descriptions of Gallipoli in Turkey were especially harrowing. Many of the authors of the letters that carried the news of the torrid battles against Enver Pasha's Ottoman Turks never returned.

The ANZAC Day commemorations at dawn were very moving occasions, with memories of 60,000 Australians and 18,000 New Zealanders lost in the Great War. The Gallipoli disaster created a bond between the ANZAC soldiers that endured as the inspiration for truly modern nations, independent of the British Empire. For Jack, it was a personal loss. He stood in remembrance at the ceremonies as a child, knowing that his gentle mother had been one of the war's final victims.

After being taken in by friends, Jack could only stay at school for another three years. At fourteen he was now doing a 'man's job' in a nearby shipbuilding factory. Jack's respite from the reality of his youth came on the footie field. He was good enough to play at senior club level at 17. At that age, his mates like Johnny were his family. At least at the factory he could enjoy learning about boats. Besides field sports, sailing quickly became his greatest passion as he delivered supplies from Balmain across the water to central Sydney. There was something about the freedom, the spirit of pushing the boat against the maritime elements, and the fresh salt air that felt right to him.

The economic collapse known as the Great Depression had begun in the United States during September 1929. Then a worldwide catastrophe occurred the next month, when the stock market crashed on 'Black Tuesday'. Australia's dependence on agricultural exports meant it was badly affected. Falling demand and low commodity prices resulted in soaring unemployment levels – reaching nearly one in three workers. The fabric of the young nation's society hung in the balance, with many incidents of civil unrest.

Jack had been laid off from the shipbuilding factory with no orders coming in, so the work on the Sydney Harbour Bridge was important for him and many other 'blue collar' workers. Besides, it was fun for a young man, testing your courage over a hundred metres above the water on the great steel arch that would affectionately become known as 'the Coat Hanger'. Only a young engineer could love an environment where the sun's heat shimmered from the vast expanse of metal, and the smell of paint, welding and grinding was everywhere.



The gentle breeze from being so high fluttered Jack's fair hair. His only protection was a pair of worn denim overalls, leather gloves and boots, as construction works didn't require helmets in the 30s. A man had to look and act tough then.

The clanging sound of Johnny's oversized hammer stopped after he'd driven one of the massive rivets into place in the steel girder he was working on. Johnny was attired in only his street clothes: old jeans with a leather belt, walking shoes, brimless cap and white singlet. Even that had grease stains from his work.

The churning sound of a ship's propellers and engines could be heard approaching.

"Mate, look at that," Jack yelled.

His workmates hanging below 'the Coat Hanger' turned to see the Royal Australian Navy's cruiser *HMAS Canberra* gliding underneath the bridge. The funnels produced the stench of a strong oily, smoky odour – almost perfume to Jack and his mates! The sweat dripped from Jack's brow, seemingly dropping right onto the warship.

"Now that looks like it needs a few good engineers!" Johnny noted, as the ship's smoke stacks cleared the bridge's horizontal section that was nearing completion.

"I reckon! She's a beauty isn't she?"

"Wouldn't mind getting my hands dirty on those gun turrets."

"That's the bloody Scots for you... always looking for a fight!"

"Too bad you came off second best last week on the footie field," sneered Johnny.



*HMAS Canberra and the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Australia  
(Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, AWMP01869.001)*

“You can bloody talk, mate, after the big fella on the other team bugged your leg.”

“He bloody fell on me mate. The Irish have never been shy of getting involved! Anyway, it was just an accident”

The impressive looking warship sailed on towards the Port Jackson Heads, and the Pacific Ocean. Johnny walked nonchalantly towards Jack on the metal girders as if he was strolling down the street, not high above the water without a safety harnesses. He had a determination on his sunburnt face that Jack hadn't seen before.

“This bloody bridge is going to be finished soon, so maybe the Navy's the way to go” Johnny stressed. “Anyway, I hear the girls like Navy boys,” he added with a wry grin.

“Too right, mate.”

Jack didn't need any further encouragement. He liked to set goals for himself, and was determined to do better than the adverse circumstances life had dished out to his mother Rose. Unemployment was not for him, so he promptly joined the Royal Australian Navy with Johnny the next week. He could never have known that years later he would be serving on that very same ship that inspired them both. The next weeks of basic training were the hardest in Jack's life, but he had no romantic misconceptions about the military, after understanding as a young man the pain of war the ANZACs had faced.

“Geez Jack, I'm struggling to be honest.”

The two recruits were lying in their barracks trying to recover. Jack looked at the sweat-covered face of Johnny, with his eyes closed and chest still heaving from exertion. He coughed repeatedly, as if a tickle in his throat was irritating him.

“I know Johnny, I thought I was fit from playing footy, but the Senior Sergeant is killing me. I can hardly catch my breath.”

“Did you hear about the big earthquake across the ‘ditch’ in New Zealand?”

“No what happened?”

“It was on the East Coast of the North Island... apparently it destroyed a city called Napier and killed 256 people.”

“Bloody hell mate, that's a tragedy. I hope they're able to rebuild OK. What else was on the radio news?”

“Just some guy called Joseph Stalin saying the Soviet Union needed to industrialise because they were 50 to 100 years behind advanced nations. He reckoned only strong, industrialized countries could win wars...”

“Yeah?”

“He said *either we do it, or they will crush us.*”

“Really... I wonder who ‘they’ might be that he’s referring to? Speaking of ‘advanced’, did you know the Scots invented half the modern things you see?”

“Like what mate, haggis?”

Johnny laughed and hurled a pillow at his mate. “Tar sealed roads, bicycles, steam engines, and the telephone... What’ve the Irish invented then?”

Jack thought about it for a moment and then recalled what his mother Rose had told him about his Irish father. “Whisky! The Irish invented whisky...”

“No way mate!”

“More than four centuries ago, as far as I know.”

“Rubbish, the *Scots* perfected whiskey.”

“It’s true the Scots make a fine drop, but whisky was first made in Ireland, and then the craft spread to Scotland.”

Johnny looked unimpressed, scratching his head, now with only a short crop of red hair.

“Well I still reckon the Scots invented more.”

Garden Island was so named because it was where the first farms had been established in January 1788 to support the embryonic British New South Wales colony after Captain Cook’s visit. HMAS *Penguin*, a land-based training and maintenance facility on Garden Island had become the Royal Australian Navy’s primary naval base, encompassing the nearby Sydney suburb of Woolloomooloo.

He didn’t look impressed at all. Lieutenant Commander Henry Showers was Master Attendant for HMAS *Penguin*, a serious looking officer. Born in Melbourne 31 years earlier, he managed the ships in harbour and the maintenance of the ships docked there, but right now his piercing small dark eyes under short dark hair were focused on Johnny. Defence Minister Ben Chifley was just arriving in a black car. Naval trainee Johnny Stewart stood rigidly to attention in full dress white uniform, but struggled to recover his poise after a passing seagull had landed on his cap. The bird teetered precariously but stayed after flapping once, knocking it askew. Jack didn’t help the situation when he murmured something about the chances of the bird shitting on his mate when it took off.

Showers had been a midshipman on Her Majesty’s Ship *Glorious*, a battle cruiser that saw World War action on the North Sea against the Germans, while his brother had been wounded at Gallipoli. His military background and determination to succeed did not stop Showers having a reputation as a gentleman captain of ‘happy ships’. But right now he was not amused.

Though of average build, Showers was a talented boxer, and also played cricket, soccer and hockey. But his favourite sport was rugby, and he had been selected for the English representative team when he was based in England.

A no-nonsense man, the Lieutenant Commander walked over to Johnny after the errant bird took to flight, leaving Johnny's cap crooked. Jack was desperately trying not to laugh by pursing his lips together in a grimace, while Johnny was attempting to right his hat with a flick of his head.

"Sailor! What the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

"Nothing sir... the bird did it." The other sailors let out stifled laughs.

"So you're a bloody flag pole attracting seagulls now, are you?"

Jack snorted in an attempt to suppress his laughter, which only caused him to break wind. As the Lieutenant Commander turned his attention towards Jack, Johnny quickly levelled his cap; *relief*.

"I've got a bunch of *frigg'n* clowns on parade for the Minister, eh? You can look forward to some extra drill, that's for sure."

Showers pivoted neatly on his right heel, and marched to the end of the parade line to greet the new Defence Minister Ben Chifley with a snappy salute. The Minister exited from his car wearing a light woollen double-breasted suit, black tie and dark felt fedora hat. He had short silver coloured hair and carried an authoritarian air with his pipe, but his warm eyes told more about the inner man.

"A fine looking group of men, Lieutenant Commander."

"Yes, Minister... we're still knocking some rough edges off though."

"Well don't be too hard on them Lieutenant Commander... I'm sure you'll do a great job. I understand that you fought in the Great War against the Germans, serving on ships and submarines for the UK and Australia."

"You're well briefed, Minister."

Chifley walked down the line of sailors. He briefly stopped to look at Johnny's auburn hair, or what was left of it poking out under his cap, standing out in the sunshine.

"You're Irish?"

"No sir, I'm Scottish!"

"My family's Irish... You're Australian now sailor. Remember, our young nation depends on the collective strength of all our fighting men. Well, good luck with the training..., and don't let the crap get you down."

Jack and Johnny would laugh long into the night about that conversation. Laughing was about all they could do, with their body aching from the extra parade duty and the long march around Garden Island with full kit. They would learn the hard way that it was best not to upset officers during basic training.

Chifley came from a strong Catholic background, and was born in 1885 at Bathurst. It was a small New South Wales town about 200 kilometres west of Sydney. Like Jack, he came from a working class family. He'd worked in the railways before politics, shovelling coal into steam engines as they chugged their way up the mountain inclines.

The Blue Mountains near Bathurst were spectacular; not high, but rugged sandstone hills dissected by deep gorges. The Blue Mountains were so-called because of the faint blue haze caused by airborne oil droplets from the millions of Eucalyptus trees. These mountains were part of the Great Dividing Range, running the entire length of the Australian East Coast.

Bathurst itself was a town of perhaps 10,000 people. Eighty years earlier, the discovery of gold near Bathurst had brought an influx of new settlers. Now the town was more known for farming and motorcycle racing.

Jack and his mates were enjoying themselves on some 'shore leave' as it was called, even though they'd never left land during their basic training. It had been tough, with the warm weather causing the trainees to lose several kilograms of extra weight from the tough physical training. All those beers over the years were coming back to haunt them.

At the end of their training, they were determined to let their hair down and enjoy some 'shore leave'. King's Cross, a district of Sydney close to Woolloomooloo, had a long reputation for its brothels and trading of *sly grog*, illicit liquor. Louis Armstrong's version of *Just a Gigolo* was playing loudly on the speakers, and some scantily-dressed girls were dancing with intoxicated servicemen on the other side of the bar.

"How about some company tonight, sailor?" asked the girl, sliding her arm around Jack's. Like Johnny, Jack was in his formal white naval shore uniform.

She had too much red lipstick on and a red dress at least a size too small, so her breasts pushed out of her décolletage. Times were still hard, so a girl had to earn a living somehow. Jack enjoyed the view, but he preferred the company of girls with a bit more 'cultured' background.

"Mate, I think you're going to be lucky tonight," Johnny exclaimed with a grin, slapping Jack on the back.

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Just a Gigolo video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EK-0gc9b4c> (link and video not guaranteed)

“Sorry lady, but I haven’t finished my drink. Maybe later...”

Jack was not one to relish being put in a corner. He gently moved the girl’s arm and placed his beer down on the table next to him, turning around to continue his discussion with Johnny. He might like girls, but not like this. Undeterred, the girl placed her hand on Jack’s shoulder and moved back in front of him.

“Buy me a drink then, matey. I love seamen” she punned, with her tongue gently pressed against her upper lip, and playing with her long black hair.

“OK lady, give me this drink with my mates and I’ll see you later on maybe.”

The girl’s expression changed abruptly. She looked frustrated, and her arms were thrust down near her hips, with her hands clenched. At that point, the girl in the red dress turned away and nodded to someone on the mezzanine floor of the bar, then casually sauntered away. A minute later, Jack felt a tap on his shoulder.

“I think the lady wants a drink,” said the barrel-chested man.

Jack sized up the pimp’s strong arm. He was at least 120 kilograms and standing in front of Jack with his eyes focused sternly on him, so much so that he looked cross-eyed. At 90 kilograms, Jack was not in the same league. Johnny was up for a pub fight anytime, but then he noticed the second man, almost as big as the first, standing behind in the shadows.

Jack turned to ignore the man’s suggestion, eager to avoid a problem. He adjusted his white sailor’s hat as he did.

“Mate... something wrong with your hearing?” Mr Barrel-Chest persisted, tapping Jack on the shoulder even harder than he did the first time.

Jack turned and spilt his beer on Mr Barrel Chest’s shoes.

“Bugger, now that’s a waste,” Johnny said facetiously.

“What the...,” Mr Barrel-Chest uttered in a surprised tone.

Jack dropped his head, and his cap fell off, as if accidentally. As Mr Barrel-Chest looked down, Jack buried his fist on the point of Mr Barrel-Chest’s chin in a flash. The man’s startled face froze for a second. Then he wobbled, and collapsed to the floor.

The two sailors looked menacingly at the second man, who backed off wisely.

*All that training has paid off, at least in the bar!*

Jack turned to Johnny. “Thanks for the support mate. Let’s get out of here... the military police will be here soon.”

“The theatre’s just down the road. Let’s duck in there.”

The darkness of the movie theatre was punctuated by the flood of light from the whirring projectors. Johnny noticed the girl sitting next to him wasn't bad looking, but then he saw her boyfriend, a soldier in uniform, sitting next to her. It was not his night it seemed.

The opening scenes of the popular black and white *Movietone* News flickered onto the screen, showing blurry images of people in China struggling to wade in water that was past their waists, and buildings that had been inundated by flooding.

"Bloody hell mate, look at that," Jack said as he pulled Johnny's attention from the girl to the screen. "They're saying millions have been killed during massive floods."

It was not the only disaster to befall China at that time.

## CHAPTER 5: THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

It was a cool September evening in Manchuria, Northern China. In the months ahead, first frigid winds, then winter storms would roll across a barren, flat landscape from the Arctic before they reached the low range of mountains just north of the capital Peking, and the Great Wall of China. The first delicate sprinkling of snow lay on the ground in Manchuria. It signalled a change to more difficult days ahead. There would be little abatement in the harsh weather for five months.

Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of a unified China, had built a significant part of the mammoth walled fortification more than 2,200 years ago to protect China – not from the weather, but nomadic raiders. The stone, brick and earthen ramparts had been built like a magical ribbon, twisting and turning for thousands of kilometres across deserts, along ridgelines, rivers and over hills. It could never succeed in holding back the tide of warriors from Mongolia fourteen centuries later under Chingis Khan, but it was a graphical demonstration of the Middle Kingdom's power at the time.

Manchuria had always been fought over, especially for its rich natural resources such as coal. It was a place of mines, factories and commerce. The Japanese had been using the minerals from Manchuria to bolster their drive for a modern economy, as Japan had few raw materials of its own.

Japanese Lieutenant Colonel Kanji Ishiwara stood in front of his commander, his piercing brown eyes fixated ahead in attention. A baby-faced, slight 42 year old with a shaven head, his family were from the *samurai* class, so it was natural for him to leave school as a teenager for a military career. At only 13 he joined a military school, and by the age of 21 he was serving in Korea after its annexation by Japanese forces in 1910. He was passionate about Japan's military prowess; that was obvious to anyone who listened to his ideas.

"Colonel-san! We must attack now! The Chinese will be confused by the explosion!"

A decade ago, the Lieutenant Colonel had left Japan to study German military strategies in Berlin. Ishiwara viewed Japanese culture as superior, and was determined to end the colonial influence of the West in Asia. All his training said the time was right – for the first step in his imaginative plan to prevail over an Asia 'liberated' by Japan by defeating non-Asian powers like the Soviet Union, the United States and Great Britain. He felt exhilarated.



Colonel Seishirō Itagaki said nothing. He was a bald man of short stature, narrow eyes and a small dark moustache. The Colonel was also from a *samurai* background but four years older than his subordinate. It was on his orders that the Japanese artillery had been secretly deployed, after Ishiwara had first suggested the plan to him. He was more cautious than Ishiwara by nature as he thought the Lieutenant Colonel was fiery, impulsive, and exuberant, but Itagaki knew a crucial moment had arrived. In any case, he was equally determined to crush any resistance to Japanese dominance in the Asian sphere.

Itagaki indicated to his subordinate he was listening with a gruff exhalation. Ishiwara urged his superior officer to take a bellicose position to ensure the Japanese Imperial Army's supremacy in Manchuria, and with that, wrestle complete control of its valuable resources.

"...Everyone in Japan will know why we had to attack the garrison."

The wind gusted, and rattled the window of the old musty wooden building the two commanders were in. The interior was dimly lit by a single lamp. Even that glimmered, as if the electricity could fail at any moment. Itagaki's face looked as serious as Ishiwara had ever seen him, illuminated like a ghastly apparition of doom.

"Lieutenant Colonel, I hope you're right."

"Colonel-san, the opposition forces in Manchuria are weak – they're not trained and equipped as well as our troops."

"You're a brilliant strategist Ishiwara, but Tokyo will be very angry that we did this without their express permission."

"Sir, if we attack the Chinese and control Manchuria, then the glory it will bring for the Emperor will override any opposition."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"Who's going to stand in our way?" Ishiwara impetuously asked. "Prime Minister Reijirō is weak, and Chief of General Staff Prince Kotohito is old at 66."

"Defence Minister Minami! He's sending General Tatekawa to intervene, I'm sure."

"Then we have to act *now* Colonel-san. The wealth of Manchuria's resources will strengthen Japan and the Imperial Army. For too long Japan has been asleep, while others like the British have taken advantage!"

Colonel Itagaki pondered his choices. Ishiwara was very cunning, and the Japanese Kwantung Army had sufficient strength to defeat the Chinese, so the only risk was if someone in Imperial Headquarters was upset by the pre-emptive action. On the other hand, Itagaki knew that the young nationalists in Headquarters would definitely support the action.

"Strike now!" Itagaki ordered. Ishiwara couldn't hold back his enthusiasm.

“*Hai, Colonel Itagaki-san!*”

Although he stressed his affirmative answer to convey respect to his superior, underneath Ishiwara was already thinking about how far he could go to achieve his vision of a strong, ascendant Japan, even beyond Itagaki’s mandate.

It was four o’clock in the morning black. Under the cover of darkness, First Lieutenant Suemori Komoto walked with his squad down the railway line at the isolated depot called Mukden. He felt cold; a numbing cold in the breeze. Frost covered the ground and railway sleepers on an otherwise beautiful clear night with thousands of twinkling stars above. The standard uniform of the Japanese Imperial Army didn’t provide the sort of warmth needed to keep this kind of icy wind out. It was light green, with two leather belts that crossed front and back before passing over his shoulders, wrappings over his trousers from boots to knees, and a distinctive cap with one rear and two side flaps.

Komoto carefully gave his rifle to one of his soldiers. He slid the explosives one by one from his leather bag under the steel rails, as he’d been commanded to do by Lieutenant Colonel Ishiwara. He didn’t understand why he was destroying Japanese property, but no Imperial Army soldier would dream of disobeying his superior officer Itagaki. He had been known for his harsh response to challenges in the past. Discipline and obedience were a natural part of Japanese culture, taught since a child.

It wasn’t easy, fiddling with wires under torchlight. The feeling in Komoto’s fingers was disappearing in the bitter cold, but he and the squad were well trained. They carefully laid the wires along the track, where the explosives could be safely detonated.

The dull *thump* of the explosion could be heard from the building several kilometres away, where Ishiwara waited. It caused little damage to the railway line, but that was part of the plan – to blame the Chinese for terrorism, and thus have an excuse to invade.

Within an hour, the first Japanese artillery rounds had devastated the nearby Chinese government garrison. Dazed soldiers stumbled from their burning barracks, unsure of who was firing at them. At the time, China was in turmoil. A civil war had been fought for years between the Kuomintang government forces led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Communists led by their 39 year old charismatic leader Mao Zedong.

As Itagaki had predicted, some of the Japanese Imperial Army Headquarters commanders in Tokyo were dismayed by the unilateral action they had taken. However, Ishiwara’s bold plan was admired by those seeking to demonstrate the rise of Japanese power, especially young Army officers with a nationalist view.

Within a couple of months, the experienced Japanese Army units led by Itagaki had subdued the bulk of Manchuria. It enabled the Japanese to establish the 'puppet' State of Manchukuo in Northern China, with its strings being pulled by Tokyo like a marionette. Itagaki remained in Manchukuo to direct operations against the Chinese, while Ishiwara returned to Japan with an enhanced reputation, to take command of a regiment in the city of Sendai.

Aisin-Gioro Puyi, a slight 25 year old, suave man in an expensive dark business suit with silk tie, round black-rimmed spectacles and short hair sat in the Garden of Serenity. A picture of green despite the onset of autumn, it was a place of quiet contemplation in the Chinese coastal city of Tianjin southeast of Peking, part of the Japanese enclave.

Puyi had been crowned emperor of China at the tender age of two years and 10 months. When he was enthroned, the young child had screamed at the frightening pageantry of the ceremony and loud sounds of drums and music. Since then, being the Emperor of the Middle Kingdom was all he'd known. The 'Last Emperor of China' – it had been a most unwelcome label for Puyi since his abdication from the throne and expulsion from the Forbidden City in Peking in 1912. Sitting in the Garden, he was wavering between anger and confusion at how things had worked out for him, faced lined with thought after the news from Manchuria.

*People used to bow to me and avert their eyes, as the supreme ruler, Emperor of China. I used to walk where no other person could, on the dragon line. How did I get to this point, where I'm now just an ordinary person?*

Puyi remembered the Forbidden City in Peking fondly. It had been home to Chinese emperors for 600 years since the Ming Dynasty. Commoners were not permitted within its grounds, and even if a commoner saw the Emperor outside the Forbidden City, they could be killed. Its grand buildings were mainly constructed of highly decorated timber with sweeping yellow tiled roofs of classical Chinese architectural design. Massive red coloured columns sprouted from white marble terraces, supporting ceilings with painting and sculptures of dragons and phoenixes. More than a million workers had used rare, precious trees from the provinces of Southwest China like Sichuan, and huge blocks of quarried marble that took the skills of many artisans to craft; fourteen years of toil to create a wonder upon Earth.

Since his forced abdication from Peking, Puyi had mainly stayed in Tianjin, which had effectively been colonised by other nations after the Chinese Boxer rebellion in 1900 against foreigners. After the defeat of Qing Empire forces by an unlikely Eight Nation Alliance of Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Tianjin and other Chinese resources were carved up like a pie by the world powers.

Puyi had previously written a letter to the Japanese government in the same Garden of Serenity he now sat in, urging them to restore him to the throne, now that the Japanese had invaded Manchuria. Hearing of Puyi's overtures to the Japanese, the Chinese government had ordered his arrest for treason, but they were unable to capture him in Tianjin, where he was under the protection of the Japanese Imperial Army. Puyi laughed as he thought of the futile efforts of Chiang. He would show his disloyal subjects he was still a force to reckon with.

Ironically, Chiang had studied with the Japanese at their military academy in Tokyo in his early twenties. He was a 45 year old with a slight figure, thinning hair and a small moustache, but his ego-driven steely determination and extravagant military uniforms made him an intimidating figure. He had a reputation for a quick temper, but according to reports from battle, he was also a brave under pressure.

Chiang's rival Communist leader Mao had grown up as the son of a land owning farmer, a strict disciplinarian who caused Mao to rebel against his Confucian upbringing. He had a natural empathy for the plight of millions of peasant farmers, and by eighteen he had joined the revolution that led to the abdication of the Chinese ruler at the time, Emperor Puyi. Mao's short but thick black hair and receding hairline gave him a look of assuredness, useful in these troubled times. The simple four-pocketed long-sleeved and collared grey tunic he wore would one day become known as a 'Mao suit'.

Mao had paradoxically been inspired by the Nationalists in his teenage years. However he became increasingly interested in Marxism and Soviet-style Bolshevik Communism under Vladimir Lenin while studying at Peking University. When Lenin died of a heart attack seven years ago at the age of only 53, Stalin continued to spread the Communist ideological seeds Lenin had sowed, reaching out to socialists like Mao in universities around the world. Mao changed allegiance from the Kuomintang government to the Communists, as he increasingly identified with the downtrodden classes, rather than the ruling elite.

The Kuomintang and Communists had been allies until 1927. Then Chiang decided to massacre thousands of Communists in Shanghai to subdue their growing powerbase. It didn't work, as Mao's peasant 'Red' Army slowly built into a force to reckon with, fuelled by anger about events such as the Shanghai bloodbath.

The Chinese civil conflict between the Nationalists and Communists suited the Japanese, who didn't have to face a united Chinese foe. China's fractured governance led to the rise of many warlords, eager to create their own fiefdoms. Driven by vast resources of coal and iron ore, the Manchurian steel mills started to feed the hungry Japanese war machine at an ever-increasing pace.

It was March 1932. Puyi was unsure what to expect, after being invited to Manchukuo by its Japanese landlords. His black limousine arrived in front of the austere stone building with the Manchukuo flag hanging next to the Japanese 'rising sun' pennant, fluttering in the cold breeze from the northwest.

*Maybe the Japanese will respond positively to my proposal? The Colonel is of low rank. Why isn't a higher rank like a general here to meet me?*

Itagaki stood impassively at the entrance as Puyi gingerly stepped out of the black car in full military regalia. Medals adorned the Emperor's chest, which made a light clanking sound as he walked stiffly forward.

Itagaki was irritated, but tried not to show it while in public.

*What sort of pretentious show is this when he's just a servant?*

Saluting the Emperor as he approached, Itagaki waited until they were both inside and out of view of the media and troops before he revealed his true perspective. After Puyi sat, the Colonel made it clear by the tone of his voice and body language who was really in charge.

"Sit down, Puyi" he said with a smirk. "You are here at the will of the Imperial Army... and there is only one Emperor – *my* Emperor! You will be celebrated by your people, but you will do *exactly* what I direct you to!"

Puyi was shocked inside but not surprised by Itagaki's tone, given the reports of how the Japanese were not tolerating any dissent. He had been trained from birth to be emperor, and a leader had to maintain some dignity, no matter what the circumstances.

"Colonel Itagaki, Confucius once said that 'The green reed which bends in the wind is stronger than the mighty oak which breaks in a storm'."

"What?" Itagaki looked confused.

"It means we must recognise the need to be flexible when the occasion requires..."

"We'll be flexible when *I* decide to be, Puyi!"

Emperor Puyi would do exactly what Itagaki wanted, as the Emperor could act as a ruler only with the backing of the Japanese forces. The Japanese were keen to use Puyi as a puppet Emperor to cement their control of the region. It was like any symbiotic relationship. Now, Puyi would be able to regain at least some of his former glory in this part of China, after his ignominious abdication twenty years ago.

Nations adjacent to China were worried that the aggressive Japanese expansion in Manchukuo might one day affect them. Though there was peace on the Tibetan Plateau, and thousands of kilometres separating the Great Wall from Lhasa, Tibetan leaders had always cast a wary eye on events occurring in Peking.

Jeevan was contemplating the year ahead in Tibet. As a Nepalese, he missed the warmer climate of his homeland and his family. He had spent many hours helping the less fortunate in Lhasa during the last 18 months and was now well-known in that part of Tibet, but inside he wondered how long he could continue.

Jeevan was listening to a *Cham* dancer tapping a small, elaborately painted drum. The monk had an ornate black hat with a flat brim and a flamboyant decoration on top, complimented by a gown in beautiful hand-stitched orange, blue, yellow and green silks. Jeevan marvelled at the precise tantric movements of the dancer, in time to music from cymbals and the deep, resonant sounds of the traditional Tibetan six-stringed lute called a *dramyin*. In Lhasa he'd learnt that *Cham* dance moves were intended to bring merit to everyone watching and were a form of meditation. They were prescribed by the scriptures: deliberate, measured, and deeply symbolic of Buddhist rituals; a connection to the deities.

Even though he was from a mountainous country himself, Jeevan still felt a little faint from time to time, his breathing shallow. He often sat quietly so as to not overexert himself, with his orange-red robes wrapped tightly to ward off the lingering cold.

The high altitude in Tibet took its toll on many, but Jeevan felt stronger these days. Winter snow drifts near Lhasa were slowly melting. The air smelt fresh, so pure.

Jeevan was preparing for an audience with Thubten Gyatso, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The smell of incense sticks burning in the corner produced a sweet odour, while Jeevan meditated before venturing out. Welcome sunlight poured into the small, spartan room.

The Dalai Lama sat on a throne higher than the officials and monks attending him. The throne had a large cushion to sit on, and was covered by impressive cloths and carpet. Pictures and figures of significant people surrounded the throne, providing a link to the past. The large Potala Palace hall was adorned with beautiful painted murals and patterns, and *thangka* paintings that depicted the life of Buddha.

"Kundun," acknowledged Jeevan, using the respectful Tibetan word for 'presence', as the Dalai Lama motioned him to come forward.

"Jeevan, your work with the poor in Lhasa has not gone unnoticed."

"Thank you Kundun."

Thubten Gyatso was considered by his people to be the reincarnation of the Dalai Lamas before him. For the last 53 years he had ruled from the Potala Palace, from the age of three. Over the years, his considerable political skills had enabled him to rebuff the power games of the British and Russian Empires, and an unprovoked invasion from the Chinese 'Middle Kingdom' in 1910. The Tibetans were shocked, and shaken from their complacency.

After Emperor Puyi had been deposed two years later, the new Kuomintang government apologised for the actions of the Qing dynasty, and offered to support the restoration of the Dalai Lama to his former position. Relations with the British Mission to Tibet were cordial, while a lingering tension with the Chinese remained.

“I would like you to test yourself Jeevan. This summer, you are to travel to care for pilgrims as they undertake the Kailash Kora – have you heard of it?”

“Of course Kundun, it is a circumnavigation of the Kailash, a mountain that represents supreme happiness for Buddhists. It is a sacred place, not just to Buddhists, but to the Hindu and Jain faiths as well.”

“Jeevan I know you have suffered here, away from your country, your family and in this place of high altitude.”

“It is in service Kundun, and I’ve learnt much here.”

Jeevan had also learned a lot about himself, while spending hours in solitude and mediation at Drepung Monastery.

“Our lives are not lived in isolation – we do not breathe by ourselves, for if we do, then we truly *are* alone. Those that work for others are fulfilling an essential role of mankind – to demonstrate humanity. Jeevan, after you complete this task, return to me and I will direct you to your next role.”

“Thank you Kundun.”

The Dalai Lama descended from his throne and stepped into his *palanquin*, an elegantly decorated sedan chair. He was ready to leave his winter residence at the Potala Palace to the Norbulingka, known as the ‘Jewelled Park’. This restful space in the middle of bustling Lhasa was famous for its gardens, sculptures and pools.

Jeevan felt honoured to have been granted special attention by the Dalai Lama, and was filled with enthusiasm for his task. It was truly a test of faith. During the month of difficult walking it took to travel 800 kilometres west to Mount Kailash, Jeevan stayed in monasteries and inns that offered him shelter along the pilgrimage route. In Buddhist tradition, monks were treated with reverence, and people would provide food for blessings.

The *chortens* stood in line along the mountain trail like guards protecting the travellers that passed them. There were dozens of these religious stone artefacts, all the same size – about a metre high, carved in stone with a gold coloured spire on top. The pilgrims that passed here felt strengthened by the presence of the *chortens*, standing unmoved by the inhospitable environment.

Jeevan felt strong, despite the cold, and weeks of walking; but he was here. He gazed across the dry, rocky hillsides that had finally shed the snow which had covered the landscape only weeks earlier. Mount Kailash revealed itself under a partially cloudy sky as Jeevan walked around a bend in the path. It had a rounded crown of white snow, not sharp and angular like most Himalayan peaks. Jeevan knew that Hindus treated this mountain as sacred because they believed Lord Shiva lived there. Despite his tiredness, Jeevan felt exhilarated. Peace and serenity were infinitely present.

*This is a special place. What enlightenment can be found here?*

It was one of the sacred places that Jeevan came all the way from Nepal to see. He was transfixed on the mountain as he walked past the bend. So much so that he didn't see the small ice patch in the shadows on the side of the trail.

"Whoops!" he yelped impulsively.

Feet slipping, sky was not where it was supposed to be. To his horror, Jeevan found himself airborne, robes flying. He landed with a dull *thump* on his behind in front of some shocked Indian pilgrims. The travellers looked at each other and tried to suppress their natural inclination to laugh – this was a holy man in a rather undignified position. They rushed to assist him, but were unsure what to do, as they felt a duty to pay homage to a monk.

"Don't worry my friends, a little bit of levitation training gone wrong," Jeevan giggled.

The Indian pilgrims smiled, a little surprised that Jeevan was talking to them in Hindi, but understood from his down-to-earth mannerisms that this monk was a person of the people. Helping Jeevan to his feet, they asked if he was alright before kneeling. When Jeevan confirmed he was uninjured, the pilgrims held their hands in prayer and respect to him.

A shaft of light pierced the clouds from above Mount Kailash, sending sunlight streaming across the valley to illuminate where Jeevan and the travellers were standing – a surreal scene. It was a serendipitous moment. In the coming months, Jeevan would give comfort to many travellers on their own personal journeys of discovery, before he returned to Lhasa.

The low, prolonged blare of prayer horns emanated from the Potala Palace across Lhasa. It was a sound of spiritual calling, reverberating across the mountain valley that cradled the milky white Kyi River, pure glacial water. The Dalai Lama smiled at seeing Jeevan in Lhasa, after a six month trial of his inner strength.

"Jeevan, after years of study and servitude here, do you not desire to return home?" Thubten Gyatso asked.

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Prayer horns video: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1\\_C3TLXRII](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1_C3TLXRII) (link and video not guaranteed)



A gentle wind stirred and brought cooler air rippling across the hall, as if to remind Jeevan of the change that was ever-present in the mountains.

“It is service to the temple and the people here that is foremost in my mind.”

“It’s clear that service and devotion to people can be made in any place, but more importantly, where you’re needed most,” the Dalai Lama said in a quiet and measured way. “As a monk for 22 years, you’ve risen to be a teacher. Teach your people what you have inside. They need you.”

As a Lama, Jeevan could teach the *Dharma* doctrine, aimed at purifying and transforming humans to a state of self-liberation or ‘nirvana’. He bowed his head and didn’t say another word. After more than two years away, Jeevan longed to return to Nepal. He knew in his heart that he could do so much good among his own people.

After an arduous trip through the vast array of Himalayan peaks that took seven weeks, Jeevan was welcomed by his community. Word had gone ahead of his return to Nepal. A great procession of moving colour transformed the emerald-forested mountainside, as Jeevan was accompanied down the slopes towards Kathmandu by crowds of well-wishers. Green trees and bright flowers – everything was so colourful in Nepal, as if nature had burst into life.

As the great white-domed shape of Boudhanath loomed into view, Jeevan could see an even larger crowd waiting expectantly. It was a pleasant autumn day, with the prayer flags fluttering in a moderate breeze. Standing next to the official podium was a welcome sight – his mother Madhu and brother Rajesh.

“*Namaste* Son, you’ve returned safely... with a *few* people!” Madhu exclaimed.

“Thank you Mama, I missed everyone.” He reached out to Rajesh with two hands, who acknowledged his older brother with his hands held together in prayer.

“Rajesh, what’re you doing in army uniform?” asked Jeevan.

“I’m twenty now, and cricket isn’t going to give me a career to support a family,” stressed a mature looking Rajesh. He noticed Jeevan was thinner and seemed to be much older than he remembered. Jeevan smiled and took his brother by the hand, as he was not able to touch his mother, and led them to a stage with a number of waiting seated dignitaries. The crowd cheered as they approached.

“Even the Prime Minister’s here to greet you,” said Madhu proudly.

Jeevan politely acknowledged the greetings of officials and the crowd with his usual smile, but refrained from anything more than a brief ceremony, so he could start his work as soon as possible. There was much to be done.

The smell of *roti* brought a rush of childhood memories. The family gathered for a meal together, rare these days. Jeevan's family could see the changes in him. Over the months since returning, they had encouraged him to play a more prominent role by assisting people in other than spiritual ways. Jeevan could feel within him a yearning to do more than administer to the sick and poor, but to help all, irrespective of caste.

"You know Rajesh, it seems that Jeevan is more of a politician now," Madhu whispered, as her son attended to some people that had knocked on the door with a plea for assistance.

"I know..., they follow him, and in turn he has an affinity for the people. I have enough problems trying to keep out of trouble in the army, let alone trying to survive the ravages of politics. I don't envy him..."

"As his mother I worry about it. But the people seem to love him, so with their support he must follow his own path."

"I think his destiny is beyond religion. We certainly need good political leadership. Here people are secretly talking about the future of the Rana Dynasty, and did you hear about Mahatma Gandhi in British India?"

"Isn't he the one advocating noncooperation with the British?"

"That's right. Big changes are ahead I think, and maybe someone like Jeevan can help."

Jeevan finished talking to the visitors and came to sit at the table.

"That *roti* smells so good! Rajesh... I was thinking; whatever happened to the young Sherpa we met at Boudhanath before I went to Tibet?"

"You mean Tenzing? He stayed a few days to recover before returning home. I taught him some cricket but I think his heart was really not in it. He kept looking at the mountains."

"I'm not surprised Rajesh. The mountains are sacred to the Sherpa, and the Nepalese as a whole. They are a powerful symbol to remind us of the strength we have, as a people of this alpine nation."

The Himalayan Mountains witnessed the transformation of a holy man into a political leader, with the hopes and aspirations of Nepal's people on his shoulders.

## CHAPTER 6: YEREVAN

The snow-capped Mount Ararat – or ‘Masis’ in the Armenian language – dominated the cityscape of Yerevan. Armenians had revered the conical shaped mountain from the ancient times of Hayk. Their heritage recognised Ararat as a precious icon, protecting Armenia and being a spiritual part of the people.

Taguhi was walking with her fourteen year old friend Silva Kaputikyan in the park next to the two-storey stone building with its tiled roof housing the Yerevan State University’s Faculty of History, where Taguhi had been studying. The Kaputikyan and Amatuni families had known each-other from the time they had all lived in Van during Artur’s time.

Silva had short dark curly hair, and was intensely intelligent. She was keen to study writing and poetry at Yerevan State University when she was older to express her innate romantic view of the world. Despite her short stature, Taguhi knew Silva was fearless and valiant, and especially unafraid to speak her mind on matters of national identity.

“Taguhi, you told me a little about the uprising in Arpa before, but I wanted to know more. They must have been courageous standing up to the authorities in Yerevan.”

As a vivacious and intelligent young lady, Taguhi also wanted to talk about what had happened in Arpa during 1930, but it was dangerous to say something negative about the Communist system out loud, so she had kept it to herself until now.

“Silva the trouble started just before I left Arpa,” said Taguhi in a lowered, almost whispered voice after looking furtively around to see if there was anyone close to them. The interest in Silva’s vibrant brown eyes urged Taguhi to continue.

“Many of the village people were really upset at having their animals and produce taken away, and they were also unhappy about their religion being suppressed... They decided to refuse to cooperate with the *Selsoviet* Office and left the village to live in the mountains. Our village elder Razmik-*papi* advised me not to get involved and he was right, because the rebels then started to influence other villages.”

“That was when the Armenian Army was sent to quell the rebellion?”

“Yes, the soldiers were told the rebels were Kurds, but when the Army started shooting at the villagers they realised they were Armenians. We were horrified by the sound of the firing in the hills we could hear from Arpa.”

“It must have been a shock to the soldiers that they’d been lied to.”

“I agree Silva, because the Army withdrew. But then the authorities in Yerevan sent Russian Army soldiers. I heard that the Armenian commander of the Alexandropol Cavalry Regiment went to Arpa to try and make peace. He was called Baghramyan.”

“It’s amazing that the Soviets suppressed information about this, so that not many people know it happened. I suppose they were frightened of a revolution.”

“Did you hear about the revolution in Germany?” Taguhi asked.

“I read in *Pravda* magazine that a man called Adolf Hitler has taken over.”

“Apparently he’s been in jail for an uprising a decade ago in 1923, but now he’s calling himself Chancellor of the Third Reich.”

Silva screwed up her face as if in pain, her thoughts taking her back to the tales of horror from the World War when Germany and the Soviet Union had been at war.

Taguhi continued: “They’re saying he’s a madman, intent on building Germany to threaten Russia like they did in 1914.”

“1914?”

“You know, the Great War, before the Czar fell.”

“Yes... but do you think the Germans will attack again?”

“The Soviet Union’s a lot stronger these days... I don’t know, my professor is always telling us that history repeats itself, and Napoleon tried before the Germans.”

“Can you imagine what it must have been like in Moscow then?”

“We learnt that the city was burnt deliberately by the Russians before being occupied by the French... then Napoleon was forced to make a disastrous retreat.”

“Well I hope we don’t see that again. I prefer that we all live in peace after what Armenia’s been through. What are you doing for Easter break?” asked Silva.

“I’m going back to Arpa as Mama’s getting married.”

“*Really?* That’s wonderful news!”

“I know. She’s nervous though. I guess she’s still unsure about commitment since she lost Hayrik – we all are.”

“I suppose it’s trauma from what she went through, not just losing her husband – the distress of the massacres as well.”

“I know Silva, Mama has such deep hurt inside her whenever she talks about that time.”

“Taguhi, even though I was born in Yerevan, my father told me about the expulsion of our family from Van by the Turks. I can’t feel the same pain as those who experienced the ordeal, but they survived to give our generation a future.”

“That’s true, but we live knowing that Masis is inaccessible, though we can see it... it’s so close.”

“The Turks can slay our people and take our precious Masis by force, but no people can be enslaved if we carry the truth, and the beacon of freedom burns within us.”

“Silva I know that studying our history is my interest, but you have an extraordinary talent through words to inspire people about our past.”

“Thanks Taguhi. I have to go and study for my school exams. Have a nice trip home and see you after the break!”

“I’ll miss you Silva, good luck with the exams!”

With that, the two students hugged each other and waved goodbye.

The antique Armenian dragon carpet hanging on the wall greeted everyone entering the small house in Arpa that Lilit called home. Crafted in predominantly red and white colours, with black and powder-blue outlines of the intricate figures, these carpets were heirlooms, and as precious as any painting hung for decoration. Carpet weaving was said to have originated in the area from Armenia to the Caspian Sea, more than 2,000 years ago. It was a proud tradition that had been passed on from generation to generation.

Lilit liked spring the most. The white and pink blossoms covering the apricot, cherry and apple trees signalled times of abundant fruit and warmer days in Arpa. She wondered how she might feel when she saw him. For all the joy of the season, Lilit waited nervously in the small lounge that also served as a dining room, fidgeting with her dress. Taguhi was sitting on a chair at the table, wearing her favourite white frock.

“I’m so excited Mama.”

“I’m thinking of Hayrik... I can’t help it.”

“He would want you to be happy Mama. He gave his life to get us here safely.”

“I know, and we’ll never forget him, no matter what.”

The Amatuni home was sited between Eva and Rudik’s houses, on the main village track that led from the bridge to the *Selsoviet* Office. It was at the intersection of the rough path that led up the hill past Razmik’s small cottage to Noravank. The front door of the house that Taguhi called home opened directly into the lounge. At the back of the room there were two doors, one leading to the bedroom and the other to the bathroom with an external rear exit. Like most rural village houses, the toilet was a separate, small external building on the side towards the river, as was the kitchen. Apart from the dragon carpet, the house was modest and a little bare, but it was still home for the family.

Lilit heard an excited chattering noise outside, and Taguhi jumped to her feet to open the front door. Lilit's closest friends from the village, wearing their best dresses, poured into the small lounge. One of her fiancée's relatives excitedly carried the bride's veil. Lilit looked a little stressed, her face lined with worry.

"Lilit, please sit down. Your daughter hasn't come all this way from Yerevan to see you unhappy," said Armine.

Armine wore a light blue ankle-length traditional dress accented with yellow embroidered front panels. She tended to Lilit's hairstyle, while other ladies fussed over her makeup. Times were tough, but the ladies could always find something by pooling their resources.

"Lilit, you look beautiful in that dress," Armine said.

It felt strange for Armine to see Lilit in the porcelain white wedding dress with hand-stitched lace that she had loaned her, but it was wonderful to help a friend.

"Thanks Armine. Taguhi, why don't you pour us all some *ginny*?"

"Ayo, Mama."

She took a bottle of wine from the shelf. The ladies toasted Lilit with the locally-grown wine for her special day. The sound of singing and clicking glasses filled the little home.

The door resonated with a *rap-rap, rap-rap* sound. Taguhi ran to the door and opened it, after Lilit and the ladies had moved to the bedroom. Standing there was a shy looking Rudik dressed in a black suit with his trademark bowler hat, holding a huge bunch of flowers that needed both arms to carry. Taguhi recognised the blooms as roses and cornflowers that Rudik grew in the vineyard and two large sunflowers from Razmik's garden.

After the ladies had finished the bride's makeup, Armine held the veil and moved it around Lilit's head seven times clockwise, as the ladies counted for luck. Narine sprayed a floral-scented perfume on each of the ladies called *Krasnaya Moskva* – a precious rarity from Moscow in Soviet times. Somehow Lilit felt the nervousness disappear; now it felt right with all her friends there.

Lilit emerged from the bedroom and smiled at Rudik under her veil. Rudik walked slowly over to Lilit. He lifted the veil to see her sparkling eyes, and kissed her like a delicate treasure. It was just a little peck, but it was enough for the ladies to clap and cheer.

The sound of the *zurna*, an ancient woodwind instrument common to these parts could be heard, entertaining the relatives and the small crowd that had gathered outside.

"Mama! We forgot the *tarosiks*!"

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Zurna dance video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1Qt4y-xQV4> (link and video not guaranteed)

“Not really dear, they’re over here.”

Taguhi walked over to the cane basket containing the small, hand-decorated items like miniature ceramic pomegranates traditionally given to unmarried guests at weddings. They were examples of Armenian craft from skilful hands that had made jewellery for centuries. She hoisted the basket above her head and proceeded outside where Rudik’s friends and family were waiting. Taguhi and the other ladies danced to the music Armenian-style, with their arms moving gracefully above their heads.

Standing outside the Amatuni house was a horse-drawn cart, decorated with flowers and vine leaves. Everyone danced in circles together to the sound of music from the *zurna* and the *dhol* drums. Sounds of celebration were not common these days, and it showed in the delight on everyone’s faces. Taguhi noticed that even Eva joined in after being encouraged by Narine and Yura, and she even had a rare smile on her face. Rudik and Lilit were standing quietly to one side; Lilit nervously squeezing Rudik’s hand. In turn he kissed her gently on the cheek to convey everything was as it should be.

Taguhi caught Lilit’s eye and sent her a smile to let her know she was happy. Lilit silently mouthed her love for her daughter: “*Yes qez sirum em.*”

Taguhi replied with the same message. Sauntering towards the couple to speak to Rudik, she pointed to his moustache, which looked the same as the leader of the Third Reich’s.

“You know, with this Hitler fellow causing a stir in Germany, you’ll have to get rid of that,” Taguhi cheekily suggested.

Lilit laughed while Rudik had a bemused, uncertain look across his face. He hadn’t heard about Hitler before, so he didn’t know what was so funny.

After the music stopped, Rudik assisted Lilit up into the cart for the short trip to the *Selsoviet* Office. This was the Soviet Union – there would be no church marriages here.

Two children were playing with their gaily painted hard-boiled Easter Eggs. In victory, a girl cried out in glee as she managed to break the boy’s egg she had just struck from above, causing a frown to appear on the boy’s face.

The cart lurched forward, and the children abandoned their games to chase the couple down the rough dusty road past Rudik’s house. It was a fine sunny day in Arpa, with the spring flowers emerging from the side of the road and across the green fields.

The *Selsoviet* Office was a simple, two-storey wooden framed building with stone and clay walls. It was past Eva’s home, just before the track climbed the hill towards the school.

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Dhol drums video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uu3DRUAcphE> (link and video not guaranteed)

After climbing the wooden stairs to the large veranda that led to the main double doors, Taguhi and the others entered the small hall. She noticed the large picture of Josef Stalin that dominated the small room, but at least there were flowers and even some balloons to lift the otherwise austere office.

*It's a sombre place*, thought Taguhi.

The *Selsoviet* was where villagers came to register important events, and to obtain their passports – not for international travel, but for permission to live elsewhere within the Soviet Union. Almost overnight after Sovietisation, many Armenian households had been asked to transform from patriarchal, three-generation extended families, to the model with two adults and two children preferred by Moscow.

The practice of unregistered ‘marriages’ was common as the authorities made it difficult to get divorced – the names of people seeking divorce were published in newspapers in an effort to shame the applicants. *Pravda* magazine, which meant ‘truth’, told everyone that the Soviet Union needed healthy, productive families, but it wasn’t all bad. The incidence of forced marriage in the Caucasus – commonly after a woman was abducted by a man’s family – was suppressed by Soviet law. The simple ceremony for Lilit and Rudik’s marriage registration lasted only 15 minutes, with Armine and Razmik acting as witnesses. Armine noticed at the conclusion that Razmik looked weary.

“Are you OK Razmik?”

“Just a bit tired today... it’s a good day though.”

“Let me help you.”

“Thank you dear.” Armine helped him to slowly descend the *Selsoviet* Office stairs with his walking stick. She noticed that he winced from a bit of pain in his left leg.

*He’s been through so much in his life*, thought Armine.

Taguhi thought how nice the happy newly-married couple looked together as they walked towards the gathering near the bank of the Arpa River. Her mind drifted back to Yerevan, where she would later return to complete her studies of history. She would’ve preferred to study archaeology, but was also nervous about leaving Armenia. At least she knew Lilit had someone to share her life with now, as did Rudik.

The dinner table was full of fresh barbequed meats with a wonderful savoury aroma and local produce. The village was enjoying the rare opportunity to celebrate together. Narine was sitting next to her husband Yura, relishing some succulent fresh lamb, across the table from Taguhi, Rudik and Lilit.



In an adjacent field, a colourful pheasant with a red head, and orange and yellow feathers on its body was calling. It made a sound like two repetitive short rasping screeches.

“I wouldn’t mind catching him for dinner,” Razmik suggested to Eva, who was sitting near him at the end of the table.

Everyone was dressed in their best clothes: the men in suits and hats, and the women in dresses, some of traditional design like *sarafans* and Armenian embroidered garments with aprons. Lilit thought how nice it was, as the villagers normally dressed in plain attire with almost no colour, in case they attracted the attention of the *Selsoviet* Office. Lilit noticed that Narine’s face had gone very pale, and she wasn’t talking, just staring ahead blankly.

“What’s wrong dear?” asked Lilit.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I feel sick...”

No one was sure where to look as Narine brought up her food after turning away from the table; ...no one, except for Eva.

“Morning sickness...,” she whispered in a not-so-quiet voice to Razmik.

“*Mama!*” yelled Yura, angry at his mother for letting out the news like that. He comforted Narine from behind by cradling her, as Armine brought Narine a drink of water.

“Sheko’s *pregnant*? That’s something else to celebrate!” announced Razmik as he reached for a bottle of *ginny*.

Narine recovered her composure, and sat looking at Eva and Razmik for a second.

“If everyone in this village should know, then I should announce that the doctor said I’m having *twins*.”

Yura went an ashen colour, and mumbled: “twins?”

Narine turned her attention back to her husband.

“Chut I’m sorry, I only found out this morning.”

“Twins...” Yura repeated, this time a little more feebly, before fainting, his head coming to rest with a light *thump* on a plate of *lavash*.

“*Yura!*” yelled Eva. “What’s the matter with you?”

“He’s happy...,” Razmik facetiously remarked.

Two weeks later, Taguhi was back in Yerevan, standing in front of the centuries-old Surb Zoravor Church. The old church had been closed by the authorities and was used for storage, but still stood proudly with its pink–ochre coloured stones revealing the building’s age. The only way people could practice their religion was behind closed doors. There was great danger conducting secret religious services in homes, or for people like Gaspar wanting to learn from holy men.

“*Bari Or, Ter Hayr*,” Taguhi greeted the young trainee priest near Surb Zoravor.

Gaspar was dressed in normal street clothes, but had a prominent cross hanging on his chest under his dark jacket and white shirt. Taguhi noticed that Gaspar was now growing the beard that seemed to be a prerequisite for religious men.

“*Bari Or* my child, how’s the study going?”

Gaspar studied Taguhi without meaning to. He noticed her long unbridled hair, twisting with gentle curls down the simple but figure-hugging black dress, and little tassels of hair cascaded down her porcelain cheeks like a ribbon. Gaspar made sure he just glanced at her pretty eyes and smiled. Not that he was looking.

“It’s OK, thanks *Ter Hayr*, but the university doesn’t offer archaeology as a major, so I’m doing history. I’m planning to study archaeology sometime.”

Taguhi stopped to contemplate the difficult task for Gaspar – surreptitiously learning how to be a priest.

“So how’s the priesthood study going?”

“I’m still not sure I’m going to be the best priest, that’s for sure, but I feel at peace here. This place is small and we try not to attract the attention of authorities. I can’t go out with robes, but I can learn from the church elders here.”

“Well I still think you’re very brave. I’m sorry but I have to go, *dasvedanya*,” Taguhi said in Russian, as the language was often interchangeably used with her native Armenian tongue.

“*Dasvedanya* Taguhi.”

Weeks later, it was a cloudy but warm summer day. Taguhi was doing her best to study a book propped up against a nearby tree as she ate. She was sitting on the grass in the park near Yerevan State University having lunch with other students. Long hair loosely falling down her white blouse and simple black skirt, she was enjoying the attention of some nearby male students who were pretending to be just eating.

“*Enkerh* Armine!” called Taguhi.

Armine was walking towards the Faculty of History. Taguhi jumped to her feet and came to greet her former teacher.

“*Bari Luys*, Taguhi. How is your study? ...oh by the way, you don’t need to call me *Enkerh* any more, remember? I’m just your friend.”

“Sorry Armine, I keep forgetting. I’m enjoying history, but I would really prefer archaeological studies.”

“Yes it’s a pity that they don’t have this subject. How are you finding Dmitry’s lectures?”

“Professor Ghukasyan is a good lecturer – he really knows his history, except he sometimes forgets his lesson plans,” Taguhi said with a knowing grin.

“It’s the same at home! He’s got a brilliant scientific mind, but then he forgets what the plan is, or he decides to change things on the spur of the moment. I bet he’s forgotten that we’re meeting for lunch.”

Just at that moment, Dmitry scuttled past them, head buried in his papers. He was instantly recognisable in his classic dark grey single-breasted suit.

“Dmitry! *Where* are you going?” With a startled look, the professor looked around to see his wife standing there, frowning with her hands on her hips. He looked instantly guilty, rubbing his thick blonde, slightly unkempt hair with his right hand where his hair part was. Taguhi thought that the 38 year old had a handsome face and blue eyes. His tall, lean features had come from his Russian mother and family, based in Moscow.

Dmitry looked at his wife and marvelled at how good she looked, despite her hands on hips ruffling her loose white dress. He gave Armine a meek smile back.

“Oh no, I’m so sorry dear, I forgot our lunch... *Bari Luys*, Taguhi.”

“*Bari Luys*, Professor.”

“Dmitry *how* can you remember so many things about history, yet you keep forgetting our schedule?”

Armine wasn’t actually cross with her husband, but she kept her I-am-not-impressed body language for effect, as if she was unhappy.

“You’re right, dear... sorry,” Dmitry said, holding his hands up, “guilty as charged.” Armine’s previously hard eyes softened, and she hugged her errant husband.

“That’s alright, my precious professor, we love you as you are!”

Dmitry looked a little sheepish, but the corner of his mouth curled up in a smile as he realised his wife had just been joking with him.

“Taguhi, how’s your study going for the exams?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Very well, thanks to your assistance.”

“Well I hope you continue your studies as you’re a very good student. I know you’d prefer to be doing archaeology – so I’d like to recommend you for entry to Lomonosov Moscow State University.”

“Really?”

Armine stood side by side with Dmitry, her right hand around his left arm at the elbow. Taguhi had always thought that they were well matched with Armine being more organised to support her high-flying husband, and their mutual affection showed.

“Taguhi, both of us think you have something special within you. Those who’re brave enough to follow what their hearts are telling them can inspire others to follow their lead. We believe you can make a difference... a big difference to this world by helping to rediscover our past,” Dmitry urged.

Armine nodded in concurrence. “I don’t know what to say... Moscow is a long way from Arpa, but I know I want to continue my studies of ancient humans... Thank you.”

Armine hugged Taguhi, while Dmitry looked on proudly. He knew Taguhi had rare qualities: vision, and a determination to succeed.

Taguhi was always busy with her studies at the university and didn’t get out much, except to see Silva. Scrambling up the dry hill just a few kilometres south-east of Yerevan and the university, Taguhi could see a line of great pink and grey blocks of stones projecting above the low sparse green shrubs near the top.

“Taguhi, wait, I don’t think my shoes are any good for climbing!”

“This is so interesting Silva, don’t you think? Did you know that Yerevan was named after Erebuni Fortress?”

“Yes, but I don’t know much about its history.”

“Erebuni... it’s situated on a hill called *Arin Berd*, which means ‘Fortress of Blood’. We learnt that it was an ancient fortified city from the Kingdom of Urartu – you know, the Kingdom of Ararat that’s mentioned in the Bible?”

Silva was still busy emptying dust from her shoes.

“I knew I shouldn’t have worn a white dress today, but I thought we were going to have a nice picnic.”

“We are Silva, but why not have it here?”

“You are such a keen student of history Taguhi. Sometimes I think it’s taken over your life! Aren’t there any men in your life? Look at you, pretty in that skirt and blouse and yet you’re picnicking with me!”

“I’m not that interested in boys Silva. I like the attention, but most of them are immature. The only one I really liked I couldn’t have.”

“What do you mean?”

“Can you keep a secret?”

“Of *course*, Taguhi.”

“I thought our local trainee priest was pretty nice...”

Silva grinned. “*Taguhi!* You devil! Trying to attract someone of the church! *Bad girl!* But what did he look like?” she asked whimsically.

“Tall, handsome... but of course he couldn’t pay any attention to me.”

“What was his name?”

“Gaspar Haroutyunyan. But he’s also about eight years older than me. He’s here in Yerevan trying to learn from the elders at Surb Zoravor Church.”

“He’s brave then. Do you see him?”

“Not really, he wouldn’t want me to attract attention I suppose. I’ll go and see him after the summer break. What about you then?”

“I like poetry, art and romance. Boys my age are interested in other things!” Silva had always had a more mature view of the world than boys her age.

“They don’t seem to change as they get older you know!”

Silva knew that the boys found Taguhi very attractive and inside, she felt she had a plain look in comparison. It seemed a little ironical because her friend appeared to be less interested in men than she was. She looked at Taguhi’s eyes, and read in them that her friend was searching for something – perhaps something ancient, maybe a man someday.

“Taguhi, why hasn’t Erebuni been excavated yet?”

“It’s been left here a long time and needs a major effort. Erebuni was part of an Iron Age civilisation nearly 2,800 years ago, with its capital near Lake Van. I suppose that’s been one of the good things about Sovietisation. Now people are much more interested in science.”

“My family told me that Yerevan was just like a poor country village before the Red Army came to Armenia. You’re right Taguhi. There have been some positive changes, like the construction of factories so people could be employed.”

“Now people are better educated and have higher literacy,” Taguhi said, while she dug away at the soil next to a buried wall.

“Even if they don’t tell us the truth sometimes,” Silva replied. “*Taguhi!* You’ve got dirt all over your dress!”

“Ops, now I’m sure the boys won’t look,” she said as the pair giggled.

It was several months before she returned to Surb Zoravor at the end of summer. The small courtyard at the front of the church was quiet, and its door was closed. She could still feel the spiritual nature of the church though.

*That’s unusual*, thought Taguhi. Then she saw the old man sitting on the veranda of the small house next to the church.

“*Bari Luys*, do you know where *Ter Gaspar* is?” she asked. The old man didn’t respond. She could see he had his head down, but thought that he might be unable to hear very well.

“*Bari Luys*, do you know where *Ter Gaspar* is...?” she repeated, as she came closer to the man. She recognised him as the senior priest.

“They took him,” the priest said. “They took him away for doing God’s work.”

“Oh, no...”

Taguhi felt her heart miss a beat. The fear that everyone felt, but did not talk about seized her, and the hairs stood up on the back of her neck. People could disappear in the Soviet Union for doing the wrong thing – and preaching religion was not condoned, according to Communist doctrine. She was surprised by her own reaction, a deep, swelling angst the more she imagined what had happened to Gaspar.

*Perhaps Gaspar means more to me than I’ve admitted to myself before?*

“They sent him for re-education back in June, but I heard he was then sent to join the army after a couple of months. I guess they wanted to keep their eye on him.”

“I’m so sorry,” Taguhi said in a sad voice. Inside her head swirled as she tried to think. Her stomach felt tight.

“It isn’t right,” she stammered.

The old priest’s an inner strength returned to his eyes.

“My child, I sense in you the same faith and courage that *Ter Gaspar* demonstrated, despite his occasional mishaps,” the senior priest said with a widening smile. He looked at her distraught face.

“But he was a good man, not harming anyone...”

“I know, but the world has changed.”

“I wonder if I want to be in such a world...”

“There was a time not long ago that priests were revered. Now we’re hunted down like criminals and have to hide in the shadows.”

“But they can’t stop us thinking, I mean, what we believe in.”

“They can lock away our churches and our people, but they can’t get rid of faith. It’s part of our being.”

“Is there anything I can do to help him?”

“You’re courageous, child. I see in you an inner strength to make a difference in the world. But there is nothing you can do right now except to pray for him.”

“That’s all? There’s nothing else?”

“Go, my child. Be safe yourself and don’t speak of this. Don’t come back until you fulfil your destiny.”

Taguhi didn't feel very courageous. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she turned to walk away with the priest's words echoing in her mind. She knew he was right – she could do nothing, and had to put this out of her mind to concentrate on her studies to go to Moscow: to repay the support of her mother Lilit in Arpa, and the faith of her friends like Silva and Armine in Yerevan.

Suddenly she felt the warmth of the autumn change to a chill. Winter was coming.

## CHAPTER 7: O CANADA

Peter Qappik sat on the coast, watching the first spring sunrays peer across the horizon to illuminate the Canadian Arctic Ocean. It was a spiritual moment. His imagination wandered as he dreamed of himself being a university student, studying far from here.

There were good things about the freezing six month darkness, such as the beautiful aurora borealis or ‘Northern Lights’ shimmering in green and gold across the sky, and hunting for the Arctic fox. But Peter was looking forward to warmer days. His thick light brown and white caribou – also known as reindeer – fur trousers and hooded jacket kept him warm. But he liked to write; and that was hard to do in bulky fur gloves.

As a boy, Peter hadn’t been an average Canadian Inuit youth. Despite growing up in one of the world’s most remote places, he had a passion for learning about other peoples. Above all, he enjoyed reading, but books were hard to get in Tuktoyaktuk, a small settlement north of the Arctic Circle near the Mackenzie River Delta. The Europeans called it ‘Port Brabant’.

Peter was a strongly built 25 year old man, typically shorter than the average Canadian of European descent, and with medium length black hair. It would be shorter but he hadn’t cut it for two months. His pink-skinned round face was framed by thick eyebrows, a wide, dark moustache, and narrow Asiatic eyes typical of Inuit peoples.

Peter yearned to travel beyond the Arctic. Surviving in such a tough environment, Peter grew up as a calm, serious child, earnestly pursuing his interests in an organised manner. Sometimes he was so conscientious with his projects that his self-centred focus meant he forgot about the time. That might be OK during the worst weather when he was stuck inside, but not when he needed to be out hunting for the tribe’s food.

The sound of ice crunching and cracking under the combined pressure of waves and the increasing temperature, even if it was only just above freezing, could be heard across the bay. Peter’s knee-high fur boots known as *kamiks* crunched across the brittle ice on the shoreline as he walked back to Tuktoyaktuk, only a few hundred metres away. They were double-layer watertight boots, worn in much the same way as his trousers and jacket: one tight-fitting layer – the *atigi* with the fur side against the skin, and the other with the fur turned outwards.



Soon the kayaks would be navigating through the broken pack ice to find the seals that Peter's tribe depended upon. In the meantime, Peter would return the next day to hunt seals at a breathing hole broken in the ice.

"*Prevet Malina*," Peter greeted his neighbour and closest friend in the Russian language.

"*Prevet Peter*."

Malina was sitting outside as he walked towards her small wooden home. During the long winters, Peter had learnt to speak Russian from his now-deceased father when he was younger. Peter had always been close to his father, so he felt that whenever he spoke Russian it was almost a legacy from his parent. It was a memory of happier times before his passing after contracting measles. The Russian language had been a common trading language along these coasts, as Alaska had once been part of Tsarist Russia until 1867. Then the great frozen land was sold by the Russians to a young and growing United States for the bargain price of only \$7,200,000.

A year younger than Peter, Malina's name in the native Inuktitut tongue appropriately meant 'Goddess of the Sun'. Her namesake bathed Peter's face and piercing dark eyes with sunlight. A golden glow glistened off tiny ice crystals on the furs that covered Malina's head. The fur fringe around her hood was made from the glossy hairs from a wolverine to repel moisture, and ice could be shaken away with a graceful flick of her head. Like Peter, her *annuraaq* parka jacket was made of caribou hide, so the hollow hair could help insulate her from the deadly cold climate.

Some of Malina's medium-length dark hair protruded from beneath her enlarged fur-lined hood, which had been used by her older sister to carry around a child inside. Even with the 'packing' parka's or *amautik*'s hood on, her smile and almond-shaped brown eyes were windows that revealed the attractive lady underneath. She had full, rosy cheeks, and her wide lips conveyed a warm greeting to welcome Peter.

"*Kak Dela*," Malina asked how he was, also in Russian.

"*Kharashow*."

In reality he was far from fine. Inside he felt trapped. Nowadays there wasn't much use for Russian, but his insatiable interest in the outside world drove Peter to the feeling that he had to escape, despite his normal calm disposition.

*Maybe I can use the Russian language elsewhere? I'd have to speak English down south.*

"What are you doing Malina?"

"Just finishing this new *annuraaq*."

She was affixing the blue, red and yellow hand-woven straps to the edge of the leather hide, creating a more colourful appearance than the plain jackets worn by men – although their attire had leather tassels around the waist like the women's. Her fingers were a little sore from the effort of manipulating the leather, but Malina was used to such exertion.

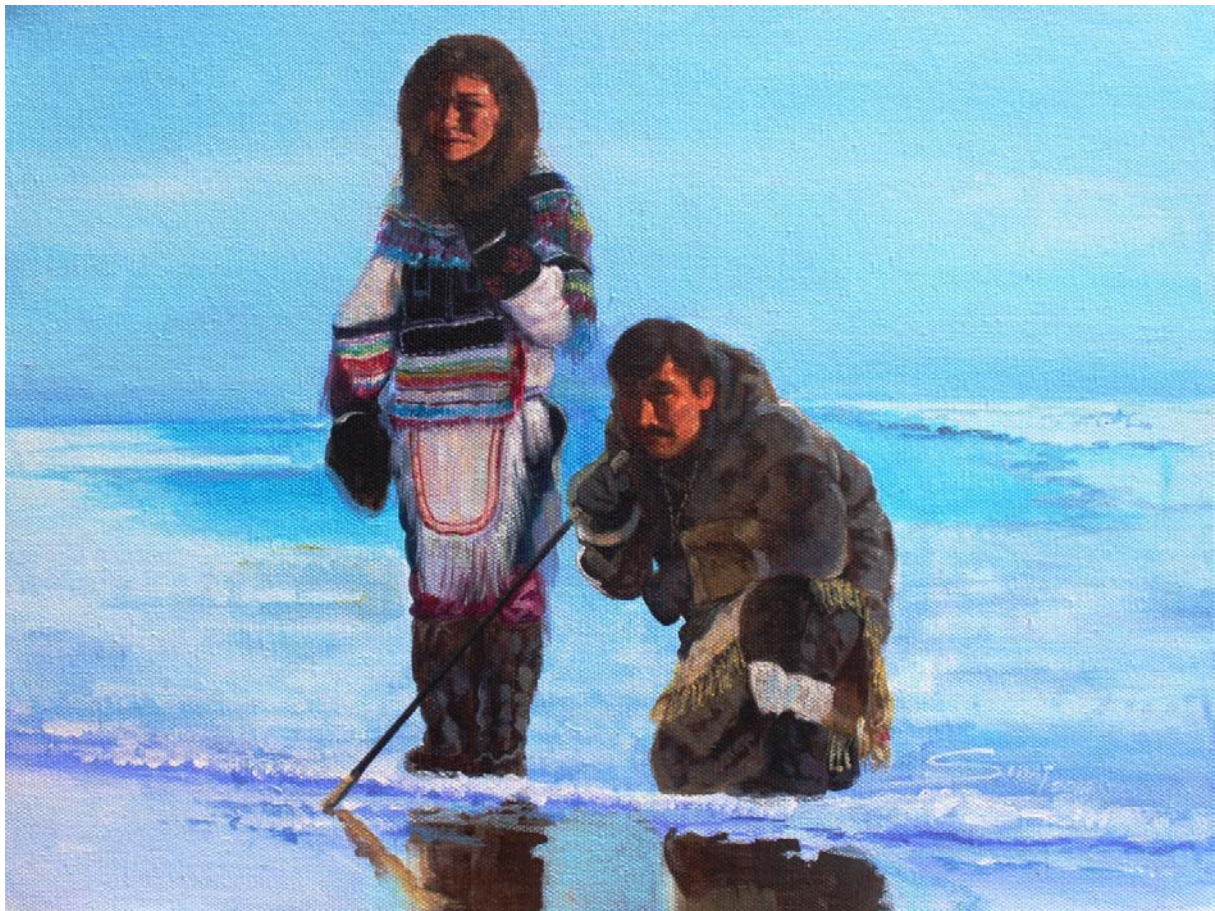
"I got the wool for the straps from 'La Baie' trading post." The Hudson's Bay Company was an old French fur trading company that bartered goods with the Inuit people. Malina was carefully sewing the straps using caribou sinew for thread, and a tiny needle made from bone. It was exacting work.

"Look Peter, my new *qulliq*," showing him the traditional stone lamp sitting at her feet that was lit by whale or seal oil.

"That's great Malina..." Peter's face changed to a wicked grin. "So if you know how to look after the *qulliq*, then you're allowed to marry!"

Peter was only half-joking. Tending the *qulliq* lamp as a pre-requisite for marriage was an old Inuit norm. Malina just smiled back.

"I'll bring some preserved berries and seaweed for you later."



*Malina and Peter, Tuktoyaktuk, Canada*

“Thanks Malina. I plan to have a seal hunt tomorrow morning, so I’ll bring you some of my catch.”

Food sharing was common among Inuits, especially to help the elders of the tribe as a mark of respect.

“Well, good luck. *Dasvedanya* Peter.”

“*Dasvedanya* Malina.”

Peter’s breathing became heavy, as he laboured to lift the heavy seal from the breathing hole after he’d harpooned it. The seal had made the hole in the ice with its claws for survival, but it was ultimately the mammal’s downfall. Peter’s father had taught him to hunt when he was just a child. He was always wary about falling into the water, after doing so in his youth. It was then that he had found that the reverse end of a harpoon could be used for retrieving clumsy boys. Peter was grateful for his father’s strength and quick thinking then. His harpoon had a three metre long wooden shaft made from a sapling brought from a warmer climate thousands of kilometres to the south where such trees could grow, and a spearhead carved from walrus tusks.

The light was weak as the sun climbed not far above and circled the horizon. It was still frigid but Peter was wearing a sealskin third boot like an overshoe, as added protection against the sharp edges and ridges of ice. There was another, insidious danger – if he hadn’t removed one of his jackets before exerting himself, he would have overheated. Sweating profusely, his clothing would be frozen – leading to frostbite and death. Life here was always on the edge of existence.

Peter often found himself hunting long after everyone had succeeded in finding their prey. Like most Inuit, he was used to travelling as the seasons dictated. He didn’t enjoy hunting much, but it was a matter of life and death in this part of the world. His preference was sitting quietly in his small cabin reading the books that he had bought, after selling some of his precious fur pelts to the Hudson’s Bay Company trading post. He yearned for information from the outside world, but news took a long time to get here, unless it came by radio.

The most valuable furs Peter traded were from the remarkable Arctic fox, which was able to survive in temperatures as low as a death-defying 50 degrees Celsius below freezing. The fox’s deep, luxurious coat changed colour from white in winter to brown in summer, so Peter was busiest hunting in winter and spring.

Peter’s passion was studying human society, and since he hadn’t met many other people, he had mainly studied his own Inuit culture. He knew that the Inuits were similar to those races found in other Arctic regions like Scandinavia, Alaska and the Northern Soviet Union.

Peter's books had described the initial contact between Inuits, and European whalers and explorers in the eighteenth century. The Europeans had brought new goods such as rifles and cloth, but the Inuit people became increasingly reliant on the barter trade. Worse still, diseases were introduced that local people had no immunity against. The effect of alcohol and infections had been devastating on Tuktoyaktuk over the years, and it was a combination of these that Peter's parents had succumbed to.

One of Peter's key interests was talking to tribal elders to learn about the Inuit belief system. It was called animism, according to which all objects and living things had a spirit. That *anua* or soul existed in all people and animals, including their sled dogs and the seals that they hunted. He wrote about the complex system of taboos that tribal members had to follow to ensure that animals could be hunted successfully. Peter's writings talked about the spirits that controlled the weather, affected humans, and inhabited the underworld. It seemed to be a mystical world, connecting the living and the non-living – a nexus to ancestors long dead.

The tribal Angakut or Shaman lived next to Malina's home. This was a wooden structure fashioned from the salvaged timbers of a wooden whaling ship beached here long ago, as were most of the village buildings. The Angakut was the spiritual leader of the tribe, able to interpret the reason for sickness or poor hunting by identifying the broken taboo responsible for the ill luck. He did this by entering a trance, accompanied by drum beating and chanting. For Peter, the altered consciousness state was interesting as the Angakut appeared to retreat to past moments, becoming aware of visions others couldn't see or remember. Though he preferred science to religion, he recognised the value of the Angakut to tribal people, as they were able to provide answers to some of the more difficult questions in life.

Peter picked up his scant belongings. He could smell the distinctive odour of the seal meat kills, drying on wooden racks in the sun. It was time to say goodbye to Malina. She knew in her heart that it might be the last time she would ever see him. Trembling, she wept quietly to herself, but understood that he had to follow his heart.

Peter felt torn between his feelings towards his home and his people, and his desire to learn about the outside world. He'd only told Malina of his plan to leave the day before. A fur trader had told him that gold had been recently discovered near a small town called Yellowknife.

*It's my exit cue; the chance I've been waiting for.*

Peter hugged her.



“Malina, we’ve been friends since childhood. You’re a treasure and I’ll miss you dearly,” he whispered in her ear. “I have to go, but I’ll have so much to tell you when I see you again. I wish you could come too.”

Malina didn’t speak, but squeezed Peter’s hand.

“*Dasvedanya*,” Peter said, saying goodbye while he slowly walked away.

He looked back towards Malina for the last time. She’d already turned away, not wanting him to see her tears.

*I wonder if I’ve made a mistake.*

He launched his kayak and paddled as hard as he could to put Tuktoyaktuk behind him, and out of his mind. But that was not really possible as he kept seeing Malina’s face.

The endless corrugated lands near the Arctic turned into more rugged mountains, as the great Mackenzie River coursed between boulders on its way to the ocean. It was hard going, as there were times when the current or rapids were too strong for Peter to paddle his way upstream. Then he had to lug his kayak and his provisions past a seething mass of white water, created by large boulders in the river canyon.

*Thank goodness the kayak is made of lightweight skins*, he thought.

*Crack!* An almost explosive sound caused Peter to turn around quickly. Above, a large rock had given way, crashing into the river with a great shower of water just after he had passed. The relief sent shivers through him.

*That was close.*



*Journey from Tuktoyaktuk south to Yellowknife, Calgary and Vancouver, Canada*

After a couple of weeks, Peter started to see green – dwarf, stunted shrubs at first, but increasingly bigger evergreen conifers dominated the landscape as he progressed. It was then he truly realised just how large Canada was. A month of travelling and he was still nowhere near his destination.

Peter wasn't mentally tired. Everything was new and exciting – terrain, flora and fauna that he had only read about. On the first week he had seen a great herd of migrating caribou. On the third a magnificent moose stood on the river's edge watching him go by, completely aloof to the intruder. Peter didn't need fresh game; luckily for the moose, as he was carrying caribou meat. The portable food was the dried meat known as *pemmican* in the Canadian native Cree language. Sometimes he picked the little red and purple berries he found near campsites, but mainly the fat-rich *pemmican* had enough nutrition to keep him going.

A bald eagle soared overhead, resplendent with its huge brown feathered span of more than two metres. Its head was crowned by white plumage that gave it a distinctly majestic look. Peter knew that this bird was important to the spiritual customs of Native Americans, and was a national symbol of the United States.

On the forty-first day, Peter finally arrived at Yellowknife. The gold rush was in its infancy in 1934, evidenced by the clusters of tents around the small hills on the northern shores of the Great Slave Lake.

The landscape was alien, with short evergreen trees and shrubs clinging to the rolling hills. There were birds he'd never seen before, like ducks. The many lakes in the area filling the depressions scoured by ice-age glaciers provided a perfect home for water fowl. Exposed bare rocks were everywhere, suggesting some giant had played marbles here. Those rocks not exposed to the Arctic wind tunnel from the north were often covered by grey and light-green lichens. But even they were rich with life compared to the Arctic wastes of his home.

The tired Inuit arrived at the main Yellowknife trading post with his furs too late.

"Didn't ya know that on Saturdays the post closes early because everyone's down the bar drinking?" said the man with long dark hair tied into two ponytails with a knowing drawl.

The stranger had an accent which Peter recognised as being influenced by French, but he didn't look French. The colour of his skin was a light tanned complexion. He was attired in a neat looking waistcoat, and trousers with feathers on them.

"You're from the Cree tribe of Central and Eastern Canada, right?"

"Sure, and you... you're from the north?"

"I'm an Inuit... I came because of the gold rush, but I intend to head south to Vancouver after I've traded, and maybe some prospecting."

“Vancouver?”

“I’m hoping to study anthropology at university there.”

The Cree tribesman looked at the bag of furs Peter was carrying.

“Anthrop... don’t know what that is. You hopin’ to trade those white fox pelts?”

“Yes, but I guess I’ll have to wait until the post is open.”

“Don’t worry about it friend. I’m a fur trader myself, like many Cree.”

The ear-deafening blare of a trumpet screeched across the lake the next morning, causing Peter to wake.

*Too early! It’s a bloody Sunday*, thought Peter. *Why the heck can’t they keep the drunks quiet on one day of rest?*

Peter poked his head out of his tent. It was nothing special – an expanse of canvas propped up with timbers that he’d cut down with his tomahawk, a hatchet. It was not the only reason why the small axe was his first and most prized trade on this journey. It was the tomahawk’s Cree heritage that was even more interesting to Peter, with its feathers and band of patterned turquoise, red and yellow threads that reminded him of Malina’s sewing.

“What’s going on?” Peter asked a miner in a neighbouring tent with a face as rough as the country he’d just travelled though.

“It’s the first of July, you know... Canada’s Dominion Day – they’re celebrating.”

“It sounds like they’re drunk... and now they’re singing.”

“They are... drunk that is. I believe that it’s a French Canadian patriotic song called *O Canada*.”

The words of the song drifted across the water from the revellers.

“...O Canada! Our home and native land!”

“True patriot love in all thy sons command...”

“With glowing hearts we see thee rise..., The True North strong and free!”

It was hardly a melodious rendition, but the song had powerful lyrics that Peter could relate to; especially the reference to the great northern lands of the vast nation that he called home.

Though it was summer, the temperature only hovered between five and ten above freezing on the Celsius scale. That might have bothered the ‘greenhorns’ from the south that had rushed to Yellowknife, but for Peter it was just fine. It didn’t take long to find work. At first he didn’t mind the labouring – sluicing soil and gravel with the cold water. Everything was new and interesting.

There were no permanent buildings in the embryonic town of Yellowknife like banks and schools yet. Enterprising traders were quick to set up temporary shops to sell food, mining goods, and even the jeans so favoured by miners for the tough, outdoor conditions. Peter decided he could meet more people by working at the trading post, even though it involved hours of heavy lifting. He no longer needed his fur jacket and leggings, so he traded them for a leather jacket, flannel shirts and jeans.

Peter looked up at the sound of the person entering the large tent that served as the trading post. He was surprised to see a black-skinned man standing in front of him, the first African person he'd ever seen. Peter couldn't help staring.

*He looks friendly enough.*

The customer, a tall man with short, black, curly hair in his early thirties smiled back with a huge mouth full of white teeth. Hands creased from hard work, the man was wearing a tall hat like a Texan cowboy, accentuating his height, and blue jean overalls with miner's boots.

"Oh I'm sorry, it's just..."

"Not a problem, my friend. My name's Abraham."

Abraham looked at Peter, who was still searching for words.

"They do much worse than stare down south. Besides, there ain't so many of us coloured folk in these parts."

"I'm Peter. Where're you from?"

"My family originally came from Africa."

"I think it would be interesting to go to Africa... to see the green jungles, the animals. That would be something. I've only known the cold."

"Didn't know much about Africa myself... it was a long time ago, and my grandfather never talked about it. Where are you from?"

"A long way north of here... on the Arctic Sea coast."

"So we've come from opposite sides of the continent and met here! It must be providence," Abraham said through a wide grin. "Could I have some flour, sugar and beans please?"

"Just a minute." Peter scurried around and collected the items requested. "OK, here you are, my friend. Good luck."

The next day a wind howled from the northwest, making it feel even colder. It didn't trouble Peter, except the gale blew some of the lighter goods over and caused the tent to flutter loudly. The sound of hammering on timber told the tale of a town under construction.



Peter was closing the trading post for the day when a familiar face appeared at the door of the tent.

“Abraham isn’t it?”

“Oh sorry... um, Pierre, you’ve closed shop?”

“It’s Peter... What can I do for you?”

“Sorry Peter; always been bad with names... do you have any rope? I got things flying around with this wind.”

“Sure thing Abraham. Here, will one coil of rope do?”

“Give me two, thanks Peter. It looks like we’re going to have a storm in a day or two... say, how about a quick drink if you’re finished?”

“Sure, I’d like to learn more about your tribe.”

“My *tribe*? Hah, that’s a good one. I have no idea.”

The bar was just a wooden building, recently built with rough-sawn timbers. It had a smell of smoke and ale already, much like its patrons.

“I’m interested to know more about how your family came to America,” Peter enquired as he drank his beer, as inquisitive as ever.

“Stolen they were, slaves sent to Louisiana to work the cotton fields for the white folk.”

“Where did you go from there?”

“My family eventually moved to Mississippi after the Civil War. We’re supposed to be free, but we’re not equal, that’s for sure.”

Peter felt a little embarrassed hearing Abraham’s story. He knew about the slave trade from his history books, but meeting a person face-to-face describing the horror of slavery was a different matter. It was a sobering moment; very different than merely reading about things. Peter had realised just how badly humans could treat each other.

“Abraham thanks for helping me understand. It sounds like a tragedy, a bit like the loss from diseases my people suffered when we were first exposed to outsiders.”

“I guess we gotta make the best of the opportunity God has given us then Peter. I feel lucky being here, as I have a real chance to earn a few dollars. It means I can make a new life and settle down somewhere on the East Coast. OK I have to get going to secure the camp site. Thanks again for opening the shop for me.”

“Sure, Abraham, keep safe – mining is dangerous work!”

“Not as dangerous as being a slave! OK, goodbye Peter, nice to meet you again.”

“Goodbye Abraham. Thanks for illuminating me about Africa.”

Working every day for the next four months, Peter saw Abraham only once again when he called in to get some more provisions. Mining was an all-consuming task and the cooling weather made work even harder. By November, Peter had saved enough to continue his journey, and travelled by road to Calgary in the Canadian prairie province of Alberta. It was the first time Peter had seen a railroad.

*The steam train makes a terrible noise, but it's fantastic. I couldn't imagine going over these mountains to Vancouver any other way.*

Peter was stunned by the scenic majesty of the Rocky Mountains as the train wound around steep hill sides and through tunnels. He marvelled at the railway, wondering how it was possible to construct the steel highway that snaked its way through such rugged alpine terrain to the Canadian Pacific Coast.

This land was very different. The Arctic where he had come from was flat, ground down under the massive weight of the huge ice sheet that once covered it. Huge snow-covered mountains with jagged peaks soared above the wooded hillsides, shedding fast-moving streams that tumbled over escarpments, sending a torrent of water spraying into the cool mountain air.

When Vancouver came into view, Peter was in for another shock. He'd never seen a city this big before, and Vancouver was full of different peoples that Peter had only read about. Europeans from the East Coast, but also Chinese, who'd helped to build the railway.

*So many people; like herds of caribou.*

Peter didn't see many African-Americans in Vancouver like Abraham. He thought one day about how brave Abraham was, to have come so far from his home, and how his forebears in Africa had suffered so much from slavery. It was a subject Peter vowed to study.

Vancouver shops were full of Christmas lights, and people were busy carting fragrant pine trees for their homes. It was a season of festivity, a winter wonderland. This was a dream to Peter: to live in a land surrounded by green mountains, covered by firs and conifers, set in a myriad of ocean inlets.

*Oh Canada, how beautiful you are,* he reflected.

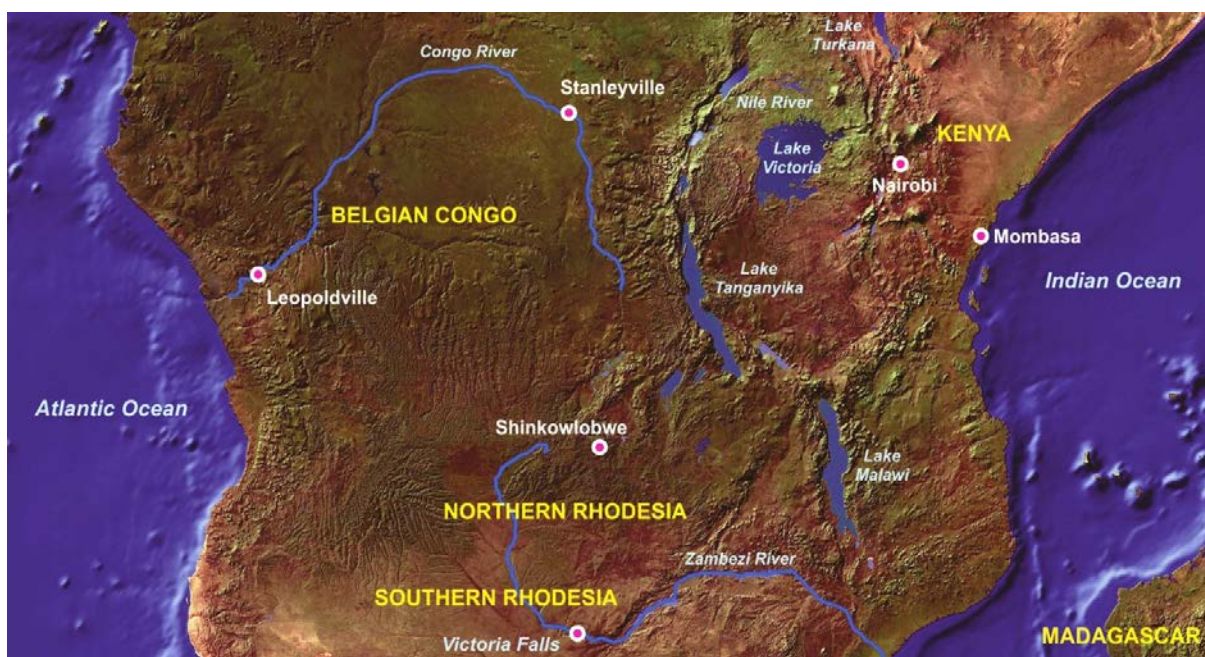
## CHAPTER 8: RIVERS OF AFRICA

*Whatever people make, it could never be as picturesque or as amazing as nature here in Africa,* thought Ndaya Musasa.

Ndaya, a 23 year old Congolese woman, was sitting on the bank of the great river passing her by. The giant continent teemed with exotic wildlife in seemingly endless tropical jungles, mountains, grasslands and deserts. She felt at peace here, surrounded by an ocean of green forest. Nothing happened quickly in such an isolated place, away from the main populated areas of Africa. When she opened her large brown eyes from her moment of peaceful contemplation, it seemed the world was like paradise.

A tall, elegant lady, Ndaya was built a little differently to the larger figures of most local women. High cheekbones, full lips and captivating figure, she noticed men noticing her – but perhaps not how much. Ndaya's defining characteristic was curiosity, especially with the world around her. She was a complex person, normally cheerful, but also emotional at times, especially when thinking of her past and her family. This often caused her to swing in mood and become sentimental.

A flock of green parrots flitted past, chattering their presence to the heavens. From her school studies, Ndaya identified them as Black Collared Lovebirds, rarely seen because of their shyness. Introversion certainly wasn't part of Ndaya's character as she loved to sing.



*Congo and surrounding nations, Central Africa*

Most people had heard of Victoria Falls in Southern Africa, arguably the world's greatest waterfall. In contrast, Stanley Falls were not so well known outside the Congo, where the native people called them 'Boyoma Falls'. Actually a set of rapids rather than a single fall, the river crested over seven cataracts like a long staircase, creating one of the largest waterfalls on the planet during the rainy season. Downstream, the enormous Congo River was the primary outlet for the almost incessant tropical rainfall that fell over the vast Central African jungle.

The bustling port city of nearby Stanleyville or 'Kisangani' as it was known in the local Swahili language was only 50 kilometres north of the equator. Here, hot and steamy days were the norm. It was the furthest a riverboat could navigate up the Congo River, before reaching the cataracts of Boyoma.

Ndaya was wearing a simple dress with white and blue patterns that she'd made herself at the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary Mission. It was a contrast to the gaily coloured attire that many Congolese women wore, largely because of her conservative religious upbringing.

The fine spray from the Stanley Falls gently covered the nearby jungles, and settled on her long black hair with tiny beads of water. Cascading from her high forehead with a light curl, Ndaya's hairstyle accented her slender figure. She revelled at the thunderous sound and power of the river and its rapids. She watched the brave fishermen from the village as they waded into the churning water to tend their wooden traps in the white froth.

A ramshackle collection of iron and timber buildings, Stanleyville was Ndaya's home, but the jungle was where she felt truly alive. Even the roar from the mighty falls couldn't drown out her beautiful voice, as she sang a traditional African lullaby. The gentle sounds of her melodic voice echoed the story of her own loss in younger days.

"Our father is gone, now we cry for our mother..."

"Who will protect... and watch through the night?"

"Who will be there... to blow out the light?"

"Who will sing my lullaby?"

"Who will hold me when I cry?"

"When I awake, and no one's there..."

"Who will sing my lullaby?"

Ndaya hadn't realised it, but tears were gently welling up as she sang. To her, singing was a way of exorcising some of the demons of her past.

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African lullaby: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BudsPWKIZU> (link and video not guaranteed)

Little yellow and blue parakeets flew from tree to tree nearby, while pink flamingos stood on the water's edge. Even the butterflies seemed to dance in tune to the exquisite melody. The morning had brought plenty of rain from passing thunderstorms. As Ndaya had ventured out that morning the storms had reduced, and now the sunshine was streaming through the trees on a glorious day. Even the insects were joining in, with their repetitive rasping noises increasing as the day got warmer.

"*Kiambote* Ndaya!" Nyota called, using the local Bantu Kongo language to greet her.

"*Kiambote Mama*," Ndaya replied, using a respectful term for her aunt.

From her earliest days, Ndaya had been trained in medicinal cures by Nyota, a portly tribal healer. The sun gleamed from her prominent cheeks, part of her cheerful disposition that was crowned by her smile and a head of short, tightly curled black hair. For Ndaya, Nyota was the most encouraging and helpful person she knew – the only family member that she could depend upon. Her billowing traditional long dress was a kaleidoscope of colours in a green, yellow, purple and black diamond-shaped pattern. African women were known for their colourful attire that mirrored the world they saw.

Nyota's intimate knowledge of plant extracts and natural healing had been passed through the generations; there were few medical books here. The extraordinary biodiversity of the thick jungles surrounding Stanleyville created a rich laboratory of natural substances, many not yet known to European medicine. It was on long walks together that Nyota passed on her knowledge of the jungle and natural healing to Ndaya. Knowledge gleaned from centuries of patience, trial and exploration – extraordinary skill it surely was.

"What are you doing, dear?"

"Just thinking about the past..."

"Ndaya I know it upsets you."

"I need to know Aunt Nyota... Please, I'm old enough to know everything."

Nyota looked at Ndaya's face, full of passion.

*So much desire in someone so young.*

"Let's walk and see what we can find in the jungle today. We can talk on the way."

Ndaya rose and proceeded with Nyota down a narrow jungle path. The screech and song from birds calling each other, and distant howl of monkeys told the story of a jungle alive with creatures. Nyota knelt down to pick a small green herb growing near the path and placed it in a leather bag she was carrying. Just above, an epiphytic plant that clung to the side of a tree with tiny white flowers caught her attention.

"Ndaya, there's no way I'm climbing that tree for the orchid, child."

“Don’t worry; I’ll get it Aunt. But I want to know everything!”

“For years I tried not to upset you Ndaya, but your family has been through so much. We think your grandparents were taken by slave traders before you were born. They disappeared, but we’re sure it wasn’t magic. The tribal songs tell of great sadness – stories of Africans kidnapping other African men, women and children; slavers mercilessly herding people like animals into great white canoes.”

“What do you mean by ‘great white canoes’ Aunt?” Ndaya was reaching upwards from her precarious perch on the tree, her lithe arms proving to be very useful in the circumstances.

“Please be careful child... I meant European sailing ships... with large white sails, but that’s what our people called them in legends.”

“Where did they take them?”

A look of despair came across her aunt’s face, very different from someone that would normally be quivering with laughter.

“I’m not sure... but all I know is that we never saw them again.”

Ndaya slid down the tree, ripping the dress she was wearing in the process.

“Opps...”

“Oh dear, the Sisters will be cross when they see your dress. Let’s get that fixed in the village before you get back.”

“Thanks Aunt. So you told me my mother got ill when I was a baby...” Ndaya didn’t remember much of her younger days.

“One day your mother Mukala suddenly became ill with a high temperature. Her limbs started shaking uncontrollably, as if a grave darkness had come over her. She became barely conscious and I was desperate to do something.”

Nyota was watching the reaction of Ndaya. She had started to tell this story many times and not proceeded, as her niece had become emotional in the past.

“It’s OK... please, go on.”

“I helped her get to the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary Mission, where the nurses diagnosed her suffering as malaria. Mukala never came home, and neither did you Ndaya. She passed away at the age of only 22, leaving you alone. But I continued to visit you at the Mission over the years.”

“I know Aunt Nyota. You’re my only family. And my father Armand?”

“Your father died many years ago from a hunting accident before you were born.”

It was common to hunt for ‘bush meat’ – wild animals to supplement the family diet, as farming was difficult in such densely forested areas.

“I’m sorry dear.”

The track emerged from the bush near Nyota’s home. It was a traditional single-storey round building built of sun-dried mud and clay, except for the thatched roof.

“It’s alright Aunt. Look, I’ll be fine fixing the dress myself. Sister Maria will help.”

“OK Ndaya, I’ll say goodbye here then. *Nwenda kiambote.*”

“*Nsaala kiambote* Aunt Nyota.”

Congo was a land of natural beauty, but also of survival. The same rivers that supported the tribes by bringing a wealth of food and water and acting as a highway could also snuff out life in an instant. There were dangers here, and people needed to evolve to survive. The men of the extraordinary Pygmy tribe that lived in the area averaged only 1.45 meters in height to enable passage through the thick jungle undergrowth.

The danger came from floods, and creatures like territorial crocodiles patrolling the water, while in the jungle deadly snakes like cobras and adders, fearsome gorillas and African elephants lurked. But it was some of the smallest animals that were most deadly – the tsetse fly, which caused severe sleeping sickness, and mosquitos that carried yellow fever and malaria – the disease that had taken Mukala.

Even though Ndaya had lost her mother, she knew she’d been lucky to be schooled by the Belgian nuns from the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary. She had fond memories of the nuns from her youth, dressed all in white in their flowing robes, except for the black habits on their head and a dark front panel. Certainly they were strict, but they had a passion for teaching – and there was no other way of obtaining a good education in Stanleyville. She wondered how these dedicated ladies from a cool country like Belgium could manage in a hot place like the Belgian Congo in such clothes.

*Faith, symbolised by the large crucifix each nun wore, is a powerful thing*, she thought.

As she sat listening to the symphony of birds singing in her favourite spot next to the river later that week, Ndaya thought about the early days of her education at the Mission’s small school – plain wooden tables and chairs, and no fans. But it was like being in heaven for a young girl desperate to learn, even if the nuns were distant and reserved sometimes. Not Sister Maria though. She was a kindly older nun with pale blue eyes, glasses and thin white hair. She was the school’s geography teacher. As if she knew Ndaya was thinking of her, Sister Maria appeared, waving and walking towards the river.

“Sister Maria, what are you doing here?”

“I was looking for you Ndaya. I have a surprise for you... a nice surprise I hope.”

“What is it Sister,” Ndaya asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“You know I’m retiring to Belgium... the home of the Charity of Jesus and Mary?”

“Yes, I heard the other nuns talking about it. We’ll miss you a lot Sister Maria. But what’s the surprise?”

“You’re an exceptional student Ndaya. I wanted to give you a chance to do something special with your life.”

“What do you mean, Sister?”

“I’d like you to come with me!”

“To *Belgium*?”

Ndaya’s thoughts raced. At first the excitement of travelling to a new land was overwhelming, but then she thought about leaving her friends and family. Tears welled up in her eyes and her lips parted, trembling.

“My dear, there’s nothing to worry about. This is a wonderful opportunity for you,” said Sister Maria as she comforted Ndaya.

“Ndaya, what’s the matter?” called Nyota as she approached the pair.

“It’s nothing, sorry.”

“I’ve just asked Ndaya to come to Belgium with me to continue her education Nyota.”

“Really, that’s wonderful news Ndaya. Why are you unhappy?”

“I don’t think I can leave you, and my home.”

“Don’t be silly Ndaya. Few of us can even dream of leaving for a better life. This is a chance in a lifetime. You’re a smart girl.”

Sister Maria chimed in: “That’s what I was telling her Nyota. I remember teaching the class that Stanleyville had been named after Welshman Henry Stanley, who was famous for his explorations of the Congo area. Everyone in the class laughed when I explained what Stanley had said to his fellow explorer David Livingstone after six years of searching... ‘Dr Livingstone, I presume?’. Only Ndaya really understood the significance of that moment.”

During Sister Maria’s lessons, Ndaya had learnt that Livingstone, a Scotsman, was the first European to see the mighty Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River. Sister Maria described Victoria Falls as a giant, roaring curtain of water over 100 metres high, eliciting murmurs of profound awe from her fellow students.

“Oh yes, I remember you talking about Livingstone and Victoria Falls... it was called ‘Mosi-oa-Tunya’ by the locals, right?” asked Ndaya.

“That’s correct Ndaya... it meant ‘smoke that thunders’.”



Nyota, Ndaya and Sister Maria reminisced about the past, as they watched the fishermen battling the current of the rapids of Stanley Falls, trying to erect their cone-shaped fishing traps. A lone thunderstorm rumbled in the distance, signalling the prospect of more rain.

“I think it’s fascinating how different the great rivers of Africa are,” said Ndaya.

“How so?” asked Nyota.

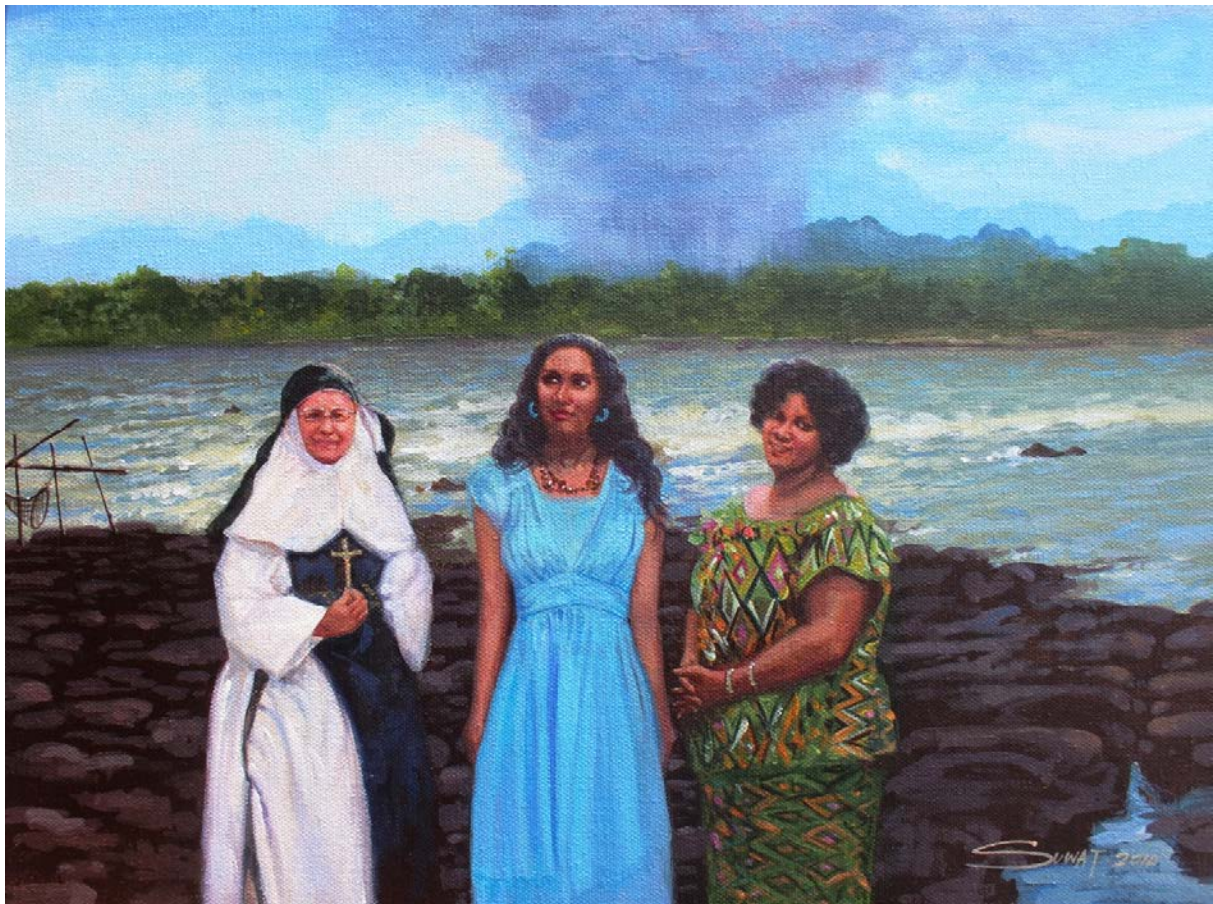
“I mean here we are in the tropics standing near the gushing Congo River, but in Sudan and Egypt the Nile slowly meanders through deserts.”

“Don’t forget about the Zambezi in temperate Rhodesia. I’ve never been there myself but apparently there’re great pods of hippopotami not far from the Victoria Falls.”

“I’d love to see that.”

“From a distance Ndaya, the hippopotamus can be a dangerous animal!” said Nyota.

As Ndaya’s class got older, Sister Maria had taught them about some of the unsavoury parts of Africa’s history, like the shocking African slave trade by Europeans and Arabs over the centuries. She described people being kidnapped and sent to distant lands, such as the southern United States, never to return home again. Ndaya was pleased when Sister Maria explained that Livingstone had raised awareness about slavery, after seeing it for himself.



*Sister Maria, Ndaya and Nyota at Stanley Falls*

While African history was interesting, Ndaya preferred to learn about chemistry. When walking, she would often think about the chemical makeup of the rocks, animals and plants that she could see. Though the Mission was unable to provide a laboratory, the students studied local substances, many that Ndaya was able to bring from the jungle with Nyota's help. She smiled as she recalled the surprise of her teacher when she was able to predict the biochemical changes that would occur when mixing several jungle ingredients.

Ndaya found it interesting to learn in chemistry that the Belgian Congo held rich deposits of minerals like copper and cobalt, and precious gemstones. She understood the minerals were one of the reasons why Belgian Congo was so important to Belgium – the valuable ore deposits that the colony could provide to its master. What Ndaya couldn't know was the significance of the yellow powdery ore aptly named 'yellowcake' being mined in the remote southern mountains – at a place called Shinkolobwe. Nobody did in 1935.

The steamboat gave a loud *hoot* to signal its imminent departure. Ndaya stood on the small wooden wharf, surrounded by her friends and family. She felt nervous about leaving her family and going to a foreign land, one that was cold and alien.

"Aunt Nyota I'm going to miss you, and everyone."

"Ndaya, we'll miss you too, but we're proud of you... we know you'll succeed."

Ndaya embraced her aunt – her arms unable to get around Nyota's large frame.

"Take your chance and make a difference for all of us Ndaya." Nyota held both of Ndaya's arms and looked her directly in the eye to emphasise what she was saying.

"Never forget where you came from... we'll never forget you."

"Africa will always be part of me, Aunt Nyota."

The music was intoxicating. The vibrant sound of *bongo* drums promoted a rhythm in the girls dancing that made Ndaya want to join in, and hid the sadness. Looking back to Nyota and the girls she'd grown up with standing waving at her, Ndaya felt her stomach tighten as she heard the steam engine increase its rhythm. The steamship shuddered; she was surprised with the sudden movement. Black smoke poured from the funnel, creating an oily smudge above the river. With a lurch, the ship moved slowly away from the docks.

All Ndaya could think of at that moment was that she may never see some of these people, and her home again. Nyota wasn't crying, she was cheering like everyone else. The little girl she'd helped was getting a chance. It was a rare opportunity to do something special and see the world, a chance that few in their community got.

“Sister Maria, I’m scared,” Ndaya said in French.

Sister Maria took Ndaya in her arms. She knew that Ndaya’s life would change dramatically, hopefully for the better.

“Ndaya you’ve always been a special student. You have God-given gifts, which you should use to help your people.”

“But Sister, I’m not sure about Belgium; maybe I’ll get lost there.”

Sister Maria laughed.

“Ndaya please don’t be afraid. I’ll be with you all the way. I’m retiring to my home in Ghent, so I won’t be far away.”

“How long will it take?”

“We’ll be travelling down the Congo River to the capital Léopoldville near the Livingstone Falls. Then we take a bigger ship to Belgium. We should be there by October.”

Ndaya still didn’t look convinced, but she felt better as she couldn’t see the people anymore back in Stanleyville.

“Did you remember what I taught you... how Léopoldville port had been named by Stanley in honour of King Leopold II of Belgium?”

Ndaya smiled and nodded.

*Sister Maria’s passionate about her teaching, that’s for sure. God, I’m scared. I hope she’s right about going away. I wonder what Belgium will be like? I’m going to really miss Aunt Nyota.*

The breeze caused by the ship’s movement ruffled the new orange and gold coloured dress Ndaya was wearing. It was a gift from the Mission’s nuns, who were very proud of their protégé. Sister Maria had to hold her habit from flying off, but she wasn’t going to let that affect the enjoyment – the freedom she felt as the vast river lay before her.

The Congo River was coloured green and brown by organic matter and silt that it carried. The thick jungle that had been a playground suddenly seemed to be an impenetrable barrier of lush green foliage each side of the river. As Ndaya could hear the monotonous sound of the steamship with its *chug-chug-chug* noise, she felt her life changing with every kilometre.

East of Belgian Congo was a great and mysterious lake. For years explorers had hypothesised where the source of the great Nile River was. The discovery of Lake Victoria seemed to answer the question; but Sister Maria had reminded the class that even the great lake had rivers feeding it. Both David Livingstone and Henry Stanley continued exploration in the area, until the Welshmen had discovered where the White Nile left Lake Victoria on its northern shores.

As the riverboat surged forward, Ndaya remembered Sister Maria describing the Nile flowing north from Africa's largest lake, through lands where the tropical vegetation slowly receded and was replaced by a giant swamp called the Sudd. She imagined the river passing through an increasingly drier landscape of shrubs, and then the arid lands of Sudan – bringing life-giving waters. The sedate White Nile had already come thousands of kilometres from Lake Victoria when it met the more aggressive Blue Nile, flowing from the highlands of Ethiopia in a confluence of different coloured waters at Khartoum, capital of Sudan. Together these rivers formed the longest river in the world, before eventually emptying into the Mediterranean Sea after passing through the ancient land of Egypt.

Through the Libyan and Sudanese deserts, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini pressed his troops forward in trucks and armoured vehicles. A narcissistic, proud looking man with a prominent chin and a deficit of hair, he loved to parade in sharp looking uniforms to show his military roots.

As part of a rising fascist movement in Europe, the 52 year old Italian dictator was keen to create a new Roman Empire – one that supported his Nazi friends in Germany. For years Mussolini had been planning to invade Ethiopia to expand his colonial aspirations in Africa, and now the time had come. He followed the Blue Nile from Khartoum, pushing into the green, mountainous nation of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie.

Though the Ethiopian forces numbered more than half a million men, their equipment was antiquated. The Italians had vastly superior weaponry, including aircraft and mechanised armoured vehicles. The odds were always with the Italians. The final straw came when Mussolini used poisonous mustard gas to ravage the Ethiopians trying to defend their lands. Falling like flies, the toll was terrible. More than 200,000 Ethiopians died – twenty for every Italian. There could be only one outcome.

Haile Selassie fled to London, pleading for help from the international community, but none came. The world's muted response was not a surprise. Africa at the time was a patchwork of colonies controlled by European powers, so any moral outrage would have been hypocritical from those that had engaged in slavery, exploitation and hegemony over others in the continent. The 'civilised' world had silently witnessed yet another slaughter as they had during the massacres of the Armenian people. In doing so they gave the wrong signal to despotic leaders considering violence to gain an economic or egocentric advantage over others that were weaker.

The Italian victory prompted Mussolini to declare: 'At last Italy has her empire'.

The Italian Empire in Africa was recognised by the Empire of Japan at the same time as Italy recognised the Japanese Manchurian occupation, in an act of mutual gratification. Italian imperial interests were emboldened, and the Italian people were jubilant. On the other hand, The British Empire viewed the Italian conquest of Ethiopia with trepidation. British interests in Egypt had always been threatened by the Italians in Libya, but now the colony of Kenya was also vulnerable to Italian forces in Ethiopia to the north. It stirred British politicians like Churchill to act.

It was hot and dry as the orange sun descended over the large salt lake to the west, mirrored as a shimmering orb in the choppy water. The wind stirred the sands on the eastern shoreline of the jade coloured lake. The turquoise colour was caused by algae basking and blooming in the desert sun. Nestled in the Great Rift Valley – a gigantic crease in the Earth’s surface that extended for thousands of kilometres to the Red Sea and Jordan, Lake Rudolf overlapped the Ethiopian and Kenyan border. It was the world’s largest saline desert water body, an inhospitable environment where scorpions and vipers thrived among the rocks along the shore. A greater danger waited in the water – fearsome Nile crocodiles up to six metres in length that came long ago, when the lake was much larger and probably connected with the White Nile.

It wasn’t always such a hostile place. Beneath the sands lay the bones of some of the earliest human ancestors.

Humanity – who are we? The question might be answered by Peter through research mankind’s origins and survival, but in the 1930s no one knew that ancient Africans called *Homo Habilis* or ‘handy man’ had wandered here 2.3 million years ago during the Pleistocene period. Then the land was fertile, and Lake Rudolf – later named Turkana – had fresh water. The ancient hominids hadn’t discovered how to control fire yet, but they did use rudimentary stone tools. Even so, the flaked stone implements were not sophisticated enough to help defend against the scimitar-toothed large cat *Dinofelis*, which hunted *Homo Habilis* like any other prey. It had taken millions of years to reach this stage of development, and yet the fate of the human race depended on only a few thousand hominids living in a perilous environment. East Africa could easily have witnessed the extinction of humans.

Mussolini wasn’t interested in the study of ancient humans – palaeoanthropology, and nor did anyone know that *Homo Habilis* had eked out a living roaming the same land his troops now occupied. The secrets of these people had lain with them for millions of years – the origins of mankind as a species. They would have to wait a little longer to be discovered.

It was a beautiful day on the Indian Ocean. The sun was shining and the wind gently pushed the grey naval ship from its starboard side as the vessel crested each swell. For Midshipman Jack Thompson, the biggest problem as they moved into the tropics was the hot and humid air. He had been an engineer aboard the naval ship HMAS *Australia*, before being promoted to learn navigation, a subject he had shown a penchant for. A heavy cruiser less than a decade old, the lead warship of the Australian wielded eight 200mm guns.

Jacks' mate Able Seaman Johnny Stewart had spent the last year on the HMAS *Canberra* also as an engineer. Being below decks has its advantages – less exposure to the salt and sun, but the smell of oil and constant metallic noises took some getting used to. HMAS *Canberra* was patrolling in the Pacific, so Jack hadn't heard from Johnny for some time.

From the bridge, Jack watched the green forested mountains of Madagascar rear up from the sea on the horizon. The ship was passing to the northeast of the huge African island on their way from Western Australia to Mombasa in Kenya. Southeast trade winds cooled the sweat on Jack's brow. The same breeze regularly cast moisture-laden clouds onto the mountains of Madagascar, resulting in a lush tropical jungle on the eastern side, and a drier climate on the western side.

Jack didn't know much about Madagascar. The commander mentioned there used to be pirates and Arab slavers here long ago, but now it was French territory. He heard there were massive trees called baobabs that looked like they were growing upside-down with branches splaying out at the top of fat trunks, and tiny monkey-like creatures called lemurs that were endemic to the island.

*Unique animals, just like in Australia,* Jack thought.

The Italian invasion may not have caused a visible ripple on the diplomatic pond, but underneath the surface there was concern within the British Empire. HMAS *Australia* and its attendant ships were carrying military supplies and Australian cattle to supply Kenya.

Jack grinned. This was fun, standing on the ship's bridge, watching the warship surge forward through the azure Indian Ocean. It was moments like this that he didn't miss life back in Australia on dry land.

Jack had a chance to make lieutenant if he continued to impress the commander. He felt he had the skills to command if given the chance; the men seemed to gravitate to him. The only trouble was the commander wasn't too happy, or at least he pretended not to be, the last time Jack played a joke.

*That was funny though.*

Watching the Chief's face turn red after he'd realised the jelly dessert had been made with hot chilli peppers. Tears had rolled down the Chief's cheeks and his nose turned a bright red colour. He gasped, grabbing the nearest drink to consume as if he hadn't drunk for a week. All the crew at the table turned to see what the fuss was about. Jack couldn't help it; laughter swelled up inside him and reverberated around the room. The Chief, with a pained expression, looked up, straight at Jack.

"I'll have you, ya bugger," the Chief Petty Officer had drawled in a heavy Australian accent, despite being outranked by Jack. So the Chief did.

Jack went swimming during the unloading of supplies at Mombasa. He had clambered down the rope ladder that extended near the side of the ship to the launch. Unexpectedly, it slipped sideways just as he was a few metres above the water. The Indian Ocean was warm, but the impact of the water briefly knocked the wind out of him; a mouth full of salt water. Bobbing to the surface, he looked up to the ship towering above. The wide grin of the Chief's face told him all he needed to know.

The boy in Jack saw laughter as a way of dealing with pressure, which was a good thing, given the tough training he had undertaken and the challenges ahead. The navy was no place for the squeamish, and it was good stress relief.

In recent past, everyone in the British military had been concerned about the rapid Soviet Communist expansion, which had been one of the reasons for ordering the construction of HMAS *Australia*. But these days, Australia had bigger concerns about the Japanese Empire. They were building a 'blue water' ocean-going navy to match the British Empire and American fleets, while the Germans were busy building their forces in Europe.

It seemed to Jack that the ego-driven posturing disguised as patriotism, and competing for power on the water could only end in human suffering. Only time would tell if the war clouds would now develop as thunderstorms, or dissipate as fair weather cumulus clouds.



## CHAPTER 9: QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

A roar from nearly 100,000 cheering fans filled the packed Berlin Olympic Stadium. Nazi flags fluttered in the fresh breeze. The sun shone on a proud Germany, whipped up into a patriotic fervour by a man who was driven to restore his nation's greatness after the shame of the Treaty of Versailles following their World War defeat.

After the success of the Winter Olympic Games in Bavaria, Southern Germany earlier in the year, the 1936 Summer Olympics were another chance to showcase the superiority of the white Germanic race. It was the first Olympic Games to have live television coverage, and Hitler was determined to maintain Germany's resurgent momentum in Europe.

Hitler liked to be late and keep people waiting, and he also liked to keep people guessing with an ominous pause. Finally, a uniformed man of rather small stature entered the stadium with his entourage. His steely narrow eyes looked at the hushed crowd; trademark narrow black moustache above a downturned, evil looking mouth.

Born in a small mountain town in Austria close to the Bavarian border, Hitler's view of the world had been coloured by an antagonistic relationship with his father and his strict school, and his experience as a soldier during the Great War. During that conflict, he had been decorated for bravery, and was wounded in the horrific Battle of the Somme. Driven, egotistic and utterly ruthless in his ambition to make Germany great again were his defining characteristics. Hitler believed that Germany had been stabbed in the back by its own leaders and Marxists, which had led to the extreme nationalist view in his book *Mein Kampf*, which was written in prison.

The rise of the Nazi party precipitated an increasingly polarised view of the world in Germany. There were voices of dissent in Germany, warning of the danger of politics based on hatred. Yet Germans embraced him by the millions. The message of a 'New Order' in Europe based on German dominance was an attractive one. Germany saw itself as a phoenix rising from the ashes of the World War to reclaim its rightful place.

The sprinters stood waiting, some nervously shaking their hands to release tension until the Führer motioned to begin and sat down. The crowd responded with the Nazi salute '*Sieg Heil*'. The chants swept around the stadium like an angry thunderclap.



Hitler had a lot on his mind. Europe was in turmoil. But that was just how he liked it – so the old alliances could be refashioned in his favour. In March, his troops had reoccupied the Rhineland – a fairy tale land of castles and vineyards along the Rhine and Moselle Rivers, but it was the industrial might of the Ruhr Valley that Hitler was really interested in.

Now German forces were once again directly on the border with France. Hitler knew that the French would protest the flagrant violation of the Treaty of Versailles, but he didn't care. He believed that the French were scared of war and would do nothing to stop him. He was right.

In July, the Spanish Civil War had started. It was a proxy war, with the Republican government being supported by the Soviet Union, while Hitler and his Italian ally Mussolini supported General Francisco Franco's rebel Nationalists. For Germany, it was an opportunity to test its latest weaponry like the Junkers Ju-87 *Stuka* dive bomber, and counter the influence of Communism.

The Spanish Civil War was part of a larger power struggle between the established 'Great Powers' like Britain, France, Germany and the Soviet Union. It was an ideological battle to impose one form of social construct on the twentieth century European political landscape, either Communism or Nationalism/Fascism. The end result for the average person was practically the same – a centrally controlled, dictatorial system that allowed little personal freedom, and which brutally quashed dissent.

Britain, France and the United States listened to the growing war rhetoric with concern, but in each nation there were those that suggested the better course was the pursuit of peace, or even neutrality. For Hitler, the indecision was all part of a great game, now he was the centre of attention. He viewed his dictatorship as a form of freedom for the German people from the evils of Communism and weak governance of the past.

Jesse Owens stood in the central arena of the Berlin Olympic Stadium, muscles rippling in anticipation. He was the youngest of ten children, born to a poor family from Alabama in the southern United States. Though he was only 75 kilograms, he was an athletic powerhouse with a point to prove.

In the south, African-Americans were still being separated from white-skinned Americans, despite the American Civil War occurring 70 years ago. Owens had noticed since arriving that racial discrimination was worse in Nazi Germany, even though he was accorded some special privileges not normally given to his race. Here he saw Jews, dark-skinned people or anyone else not fitting the right model were being subjected to increasing violence and a lack of basic human rights.

It was the third day of August, and Owens dug his spiked shoes into the sandy ground at the starting position. His heart was calm, sweat dripping from his short black hair. It was surprising in the circumstances, but not for a person that had struggled for everything he had, working part-time to pay for his schooling. The crowd gasped as his explosive power propelled him down the track. Only 10.3 seconds later, the American sprinter had destroyed the hopes of Hitler and his Nazis with a display of frenetic pace over 100 meters. Hitler frowned, and quickly left the stadium. Though Hitler spurned Owens, the crowds cheered the world's fastest man.

In the long jump competition the next day, Owens sat on the ground with a disconsolate look on his face.

"Are you OK Jesse?" asked Luz Long, the German long jump athlete.

Long was a 21 year old, 1.84 metre tall, blond haired athlete – ideally in the mould of the handsome Aryan athlete that Hitler wanted to promote to the world. Long had already set an Olympic record of 7.87 metres in the preliminary competition rounds.

"That's two fouls... one more and I don't qualify for the finals. I can't understand it. I've trained for months and yet I keep overstepping."

"Jesse, I know you're capable of jumping well past 7.15 metres. Why don't you aim before the board and give yourself some leeway?"

Owens looked up at Long, his tall frame looming over him. He wondered why his main competitor was assisting him. He had only met Long since the start of the Olympics, but he knew that he was the European long jump record holder.

*This man is an honourable sportsman, especially here in Nazi Germany.*

"Thanks Luz, I'll do that."

Owens lined up for his approach run, eyes fixed intently on the spot just before the foul line as Long had suggested, his body coiled like a spring. In a flash he launched himself forward, the first paces with an increasingly longer stride before he took his next breath – a heavy, short inhalation to fill the lungs. He reached the take-off point with a rush, planted his right foot and flew through the air. It was not a soft landing at that speed, with sand flying everywhere on impact. But when he looked up, Owens saw that he'd qualified with ease.

"Fantastic, Jesse. Now let's see what you've got for the final," exclaimed Long.

"Thanks Luz, I really appreciate what you did."

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Berlin Olympics video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quQopJmQry4> (link and video not guaranteed)

The final of the Olympic long jump competition arrived, and Owens felt surprisingly calm. He was in his element as the athletes warmed up. Sweat was already pouring from his brow, but Owens was deliberately slowing his breathing to calm his body.

The crowd looked on expectantly, as the American and German athletes matched each other jump for jump, but still Owens hadn't beaten Long's earlier record effort. As he had done countless times before, he dug his shoes in the starting area, and prepared for his jump mentally. He visualised the jump well before his express speed actually carried him down the track and propelled him off the board.

At that moment the world seemed to move in slow motion. After impacting on the board with his right foot millimetres from the foul line, he thrust both arms and legs together, and soared across the sand. Impacting with both feet simultaneously in front of him, Owens pitched forward until coming to rest on his hands first, then his right knee. It was a new world record of 8.08 metres, and the gold medal.

"You *did* it! I knew you'd do it!" Long beamed as he was the first to congratulate Owens, still picking himself up from the sandpit where he'd landed.

"You won silver Luz, but I beat you only because of your advice."

"No, you won by the effort you put into that jump."

The two athletes posed together for photographs and walked arm-in-arm from the Winner's Dias. It was a poignant moment, with the symbolical significance not lost on the watching Nazis. Owens knew that it had taken tremendous courage for Long to befriend a black man in front of Hitler. He understood at that moment that not all Germans had Hitler's extreme views. It was a moment of personal triumph over the divisive politics being peddled in Germany at the time.

Hitler's Olympics showpiece of German supremacy had been usurped by a single African-American. Four gold medals made Owens the most successful athlete at the 1936 Olympics. He was not formally acknowledged by Hitler at any Olympic ceremony, but Owens expected that.

What he didn't expect was the attitude of his own leader President Franklin Roosevelt. When the world's greatest athlete returned triumphantly to the United States, Roosevelt failed to congratulate him. The President believed it would jeopardise votes from the southern United States if he was seen honouring a black man. Roosevelt was re-elected to a second presidential term in a landslide victory, but it left a bitter taste in Jesse's mouth for the rest of his life.

The 1940 Olympics were planned for Tokyo. Now Hitler was looking to Japan for his next move. Special Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath sat waiting for the Führer to arrive. Ribbentrop was a 43 year old former businessman with an extensive knowledge of world affairs, and a close confidant of Hitler. He was a gaunt, serious looking man with close-set eyes and short dark hair, and not a man to be trifled with.

A decade older than Ribbentrop, Neurath's shoulders were bent, as though weighed down by the horrors he'd witnessed as a diplomat during the expulsion of Armenians in the Great War. A true diplomat, he was a moderate that had suffered for years from the pressure from more truculent Nazis like Ribbentrop. Pensively, he ran his fingers through his thinning silver hair. He was concerned that a pact with the Japanese might damage relations with the Chinese, and a failed coup by Japanese military officers earlier that year had given him the feeling that Tokyo might be an unstable partner.

Hitler's arrival was the catalyst for the usual salutes, as the Ministers stood to attention, before he commanded them to assemble at the table.

"Sit... *sit*. I want to speak to you about our alliances against the Soviet Union."

"*Mein Führer*, the Japanese are better organised than the Chinese. They're fighting a civil war against each other. The Japanese have destroyed Chinese forces in Northern China," noted Ribbentrop.

"Have we recognised Manchukuo yet?" asked Hitler in a demanding tone. Neurath saw the sort of impatience in Hitler's face that scared him.

*How did we get such an impulsive man in charge? The man's out of control.*

"Not yet, *mein Führer*."

"Well *do* so then!" ordered Hitler. "I need a strong ally in the east against the Soviet Union! Stalin has been tightening his grip on power, and supporting the Cominterns that threaten us."

"*Yes mein Führer*."

The Communist Internationals or 'Cominterns' had been set up by Lenin after the Russian Revolution. Supporters of the Soviet Union called for the armed overthrow of the international ruling elite and the creation of an expanded, international communist system based on Soviet ideology.

"What's Stalin doing? I heard he's executing his own officials," asked Ribbentrop.

“Our Embassy is reporting that during October, Stalin has been purging dissenters from the Communist Party to consolidate his power. They’re describing farcical trials in Moscow that are sending thousands of victims to be executed or to the gulags,” replied Neurath.

“We now have a Rome-Berlin Axis with Mussolini, so a pact with Japan would strengthen the anti-Soviet powers,” emphasised Ribbentrop.

“And what do you think Neurath?” asked Hitler, in a manner that suggested that he expected no disagreement.

*If this is what the Führer wanted, then this is what the Führer would get,* Neurath thought.

“*Mein Führer*, the choice of strongest partner is clear. London is distracted... they’re more interested in protecting their Empire interests outside Europe – which is why they’re keeping out of direct involvement in the Spanish conflict.”

“You think they won’t intervene if we assume our natural right to leadership over Europe?”

“The British clearly have no appetite for war with us, judging from London’s lack of response to the Rhineland reoccupation and the Spanish Civil War.”

“They did nothing when Mussolini captured Ethiopia either,” interjected Ribbentrop with a sneer.

Neurath continued: “They’re also distracted since the death of their King George V in January, and the antics of his successor Edward VIII.”

“What do you mean?” Hitler asked.

“They say he’s had many relationships with women, and gets involved in politics. Although the behaviour of British leaders is laughable, I’d like to continue, with your permission *mein Führer*, to broker an agreement with them so we can reduce the chance of war with London.”

“An agreement with the British will strengthen our position against Stalin. I agree.”

“Yes, *mein Führer*,” meekly answered Neurath. He now understood clearly that Hitler would not use an agreement with the British to promote peace, but as means of actively pursuing German domination of Europe, including the Soviet Union.

The Japanese Ambassador and Ribbentrop signed the Anti-Comintern Pact on 26 November 1936. Germany was moving ever closer to a totalitarian nation, centred on a personality cult of Hitler. The Führer even announced that it was now mandatory for boys as young as ten to join the ‘Hitler Youth’ movement.

Neurath's description of Edward VIII proved correct. The King abdicated on 11 December to marry a commoner he had been romancing. Suddenly, George VI was thrust into the limelight as the British monarch, at a time of great international tension. Neurath only lasted a few more months himself before he was replaced by Ribbentrop, as Hitler sought to surround himself with soulless men. Having succeeded in his reoccupation of the Rhineland, Hitler gazed at the map, looking at the vulnerable lands to the west.

The Low Countries – the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium – had always been at war with the ocean. Over the centuries, dams and dykes had been built to try and protect the lower-lying land from inundation by seawater. Scattered along the coast, windmills took advantage of the perennial sea breeze to pump water from areas below sea level. The fertile land grew crops and a myriad of different tulips the Netherlands was famous for, creating bands of red, pink, yellow, white and orange in fields across an emerald green landscape. Sandwiched between a nervous France and a confident, belligerent Germany, the ocean was not the only danger for the Low Countries.

Ndaya was hunched over, sitting on a park bench in the old Belgian city of Ghent. She was surrounded by the impressive background of Saint Bavo Cathedral and Saint Nicholas' Church, with some of the buildings dating back a thousand years. The Belfry was one of three medieval period towers in this picturesque place, looming nearly a hundred metres above her. Slowly the chimes of the Belfry's bells abated. Ndaya liked this peaceful place. It was a place of tranquillity, but there was nothing here to compare to the natural beauty of the Congo.

She was depressed, but trying not to show it to passers-by. It was easier to hide her quiet sobbing under the huge jacket and blue woollen scarf she had wrapped around her head to keep the winter cool out. Low clouds formed an almost featureless grey carpet above, so the sun was just a dull glow. Ndaya knew she was lucky to be on her life's journey, but she missed the Congo. Everything here was so different from Africa, and so cold!

"Ndaya, what's wrong?" a familiar voice asked. She looked up to see Sister Maria standing beside her, reaching to her hands. Sister Maria wore a large brown jacket over a long yellow dress. It still seemed odd to Ndaya to see her former teacher out of her nun's outfit.

"Are you cold? Are you OK?"

"Sister I'm sorry. No I'm not so cold, it's not that..." Ndaya paused for a moment.

"What's wrong then? Are you missing the Congo?"

"Yes... but I'm also having trouble with the courses at the Faculty of Medicine. I can't understand so much of it because it's in Dutch. I know you've been teaching me the language even before we left Congo but there are so many technical terms I don't understand."

“Oh my dear, I’m sorry I’ve put you to this stress. Did you ask the Ghent University if they could provide any of the study material in French?”

“Yes, but they only do it in Dutch...”

Ndaya held Sister Maria’s weathered hands between her own, then continued.

“The other problem is that I don’t think I can study to be a doctor. People here aren’t ready to be administered by an African woman yet.”

“Times are changing Ndaya. Hopefully one day women might even be able to do things only men can do now, or even vote in Belgium. I think you’re going to do something special one day, when people can see your talent.”

“I’m not sure, but I want to take a break from this...”

“Where will you go dear?”

“I don’t know...”

“I have an old friend in Bruges. The city is only 40 kilometres away and very beautiful. Do you remember where the ship arrived in Belgium?”

“Yes of course Sister.”

“That was Zeebrugge, the port of Bruges...”

“Oh yes, I remember, busy with cargo ships.”

“Maybe you can stay there for a few weeks.”

All of a sudden her bright personality shone through. A smile appeared on Ndaya’s face, and her brown eyes sparkled as she awakened with the prospect of a positive change.

“Thanks Sister. You’re always so wise and kind. One day I’ll repay your faith in me.”

“Just promise me that you’ll never stop dreaming Ndaya. You hold the hopes of your people... and me.”

“I promise Sister,” said Ndaya emotionally, hugging Sister Maria. Sister Maria was sad to see her go, but she knew the 25 year old needed to spread her wings and find her destiny.

*Such a talent; I hope she’ll be OK.*

It was a cold but clear morning in February, and Ndaya was making her way along the cobbled path beside the canal to her work. The canals rarely froze here in Bruges, so close to the sea. She could see the little stone bridge that arched across the canal where she was headed. A girl on a rusty bicycle squeaked past her and over the bridge. On her side of the canal was the beautiful Rosary Quay, or *Rozenhoedkaai* as it was known in Dutch.

*It’s so nice here. The canals are so interesting with their cargo boats coming and going, and everyone seems to ride bicycles. I wonder what it would be like in Stanleyville if we had all these canals and bridges...*

Like many of Northern Europe's cities, Bruges had more canals than roads, similar to Venice in Italy. The city was famous for its fine lacemaking and exquisite painting, but its port had been the driver of economic growth over the centuries. Great merchant sailing ships had plied the oceans from Zeebrugge, transporting goods and even the Christian faith around the world. Indonesian spices, teak furniture and Chinese silks were imported to influence Europe. A strong inspiration from the golden age of Dutch exploration and trading across the world showed in the local architecture, art and food in this part of Belgium.

Not long after she arrived in Bruges, while walking Ndaya had noticed the small pharmacy in a neat three storey brick building, only fifty metres from the *Rozenhoedkaai*.

"Good morning, my name is Ndaya, Ndaya Musasa. Do you speak French?"

"Of course Ndaya, I'm Marc. What medicine are you wanting today?"

*He's as tall as me, short blonde-hair, blue-eyed and softly spoken... handsome."*

"Oh I don't need any medicine. I was hoping to find work if it's possible. I've studied medicine at Ghent for a while and in my homeland in Africa I was taught to use traditional medicines..."

"Where're you from Ndaya?"

"I'm from Stanleyville in Belgian Congo."

Marc had looked in her eyes and saw a spark, a sanguine person that touched him.

*She's got such pretty eyes. How can I say no to such beauty?*

"We don't see many African people around here, but you're very welcome. I can certainly do with some help."

"Thanks so much Marc. You won't be sorry. I'll work every day to keep your confidence in me."

"You can start with inventory Ndaya. I need you to check the stock I have."

"Of course, I'll do my best."

She felt instantly comfortable in Bruges. Marc Heymans was unlike any man she had ever met. The twenty-nine year old's only fault, if she could describe it as that, was his love of a glass of wine – perhaps too much alcohol if he was honest with himself. But he was kind, diligent and trusting, and had given her a chance.

Ndaya thought that he was an attractive man, despite the prominent scar across his left cheek, apparently the result of a fall from a tree in his youth. Marc was a little shy, so it took some gentle probing by Ndaya to find out what had happened. She laughed at the time, telling him that she'd originally thought that the scar had come from a fight, until realising that violence just wasn't in his character.



Ndaya strove for excellence in her drive to study medicine, but her passionate character and emotions sometimes got the better of her. She knew that she had special skills and wanted to help people. Marc helped to convince her that developing medicines was just as important as actually administering the medication. Putting behind her the disappointment of Ghent, Ndaya liked the idea of developing new pharmaceuticals. It reminded her of finding jungle ingredients for traditional medicines.

The sound of the music was magical, cleansing Marc's worries like the sweetly aromatic Gewürztraminer wine from the Alsace region between France and Germany he was holding.

"Ndaya, again please," her biggest fan sitting at the front table insisted in French. Ndaya smiled at her admirer with a scar.

"Of course!"

Her voice softly drifted across the picturesque canal from the club. The African pipes and drums played by fellow emigrants evoked memories of a mystical and special world, truly African. Marc looked at Ndaya with awe at her talent and beauty. It hadn't escaped his attention over the last few months that she had a sexy, slender figure and eyes that enchanted, like the music she was singing.

Ndaya had found a wonderful peace here. Love as well; at least, love behind closed doors. A relationship between a dark-skinned woman and a local man would probably not be accepted by many. They tried not to make their mutual attraction too obvious. Club patrons were young and understood, but a passer-by might have different ideas.

"You look amazing," Marc said, reaching out to hold Ndaya's hand.

"Marc, wait," Ndaya softly asked.

"We're almost home though."

"Only a minute," she whispered with a smile.

Ndaya pulled Marc into the doorway. She pressed her open lips against his. Tenderness, moist kisses, passionate moments that lingered. She took him by the hand up the two flights of stairs to the small apartment they now shared above the pharmacy.

When Black Collared Lovebirds mated, they did so after prolonged attention to each other. So it was with Marc. She felt vulnerable in his arms and was very aware of her own feelings, his heavy breath on her cheeks. Slowly he slid his hand to where she felt moist, expectant. Gently he kissed her there. She felt him inside, deep within her inner being, and after a few minutes of ecstasy, she shuddered in response.

*Was that me? God that feels good.*

Ndaya bit Marc on the arm, gently, with passion. His skin smelt good. He smelt good.

Still standing, the force of his hips on hers pushing against the wall was overwhelming; powerful. Heart thumping, she was swept away in a euphoric state, disconnected from the world. Her rhythms in response were strong, and he gasped in climax, dripping in sweat.

*How could the world look down on love as pure as this?*

It was only then that Ndaya opened her eyes, noticing neither of them had even taken the time to take the rest of their clothes off. It was the happiest time Ndaya could remember. The feeling of loneliness and stress that she had felt since leaving Congo seemed a distant memory, but she knew from the tragedies that took her parents Mukala and Armand that life was always full of twists and changes.

## CHAPTER 10: ALLIANCES

If the European situation was difficult, East Asia was no less tense. The Great Wall of China's fortifications might look impressive as they towered above the passes and mountains, but they were no barrier to modern armies.

Major General Hideki Tōjō had always been a staunchly loyal servant of Emperor Hirohito. After the failed coup in Tokyo, Tōjō had been rewarded for his loyalty with a promotion to take charge of the Japanese Manchukuo forces – the Kwantung Army.

During the years since his victory in Manchuria, Itagaki had made several forays into Chinese-held territory. He was determined to reinforce his position in Manchukuo. The Battle of the Great Wall had thrust Tōjō and Itagaki against Chiang's ill-equipped Nationalist Army, one of a series of skirmishes with the scattered and poorly trained Chinese forces. Although the Japanese eventually withdrew, the message was clear for the Chinese. Chiang knew he was unable to stop the more modern Kwantung Army, which now occupied positions on the Great Wall. The Japanese ironically had used the fortifications as a defence against the Chinese themselves.

Tōjō was peering through his dark-rimmed glasses, and fiddling with the end of his moustache, looking at the charts that were laid out in front of him under the dull lamps illuminating the war operations room in Tokyo. On the other side of the table were Itagaki and Lieutenant General Kanji Ishiwara, who had been given much credit for his strategy leading to the Manchurian invasion. To his right was Chief of General Staff Prince Kan'in Kotohito at the head of the table, and to his left Lieutenant General Yasuji Okamura.

Kotohito was a proud looking man with his flamboyant large nineteenth century waxed moustache and medal-emblazoned uniform. A full Field Marshall, he was a member of one of the Japanese royal family's four branches. Kotohito was firmly in the same camp as Ishiwara, opposing efforts to improve relations with the United States and the United Kingdom. He liked to hold court, as if emperor himself, but Tōjō clearly had the aura of a more powerful individual, even when he didn't speak.

The room was austere, except for the maps on the wall and pictures of past emperors and military leaders. An old-fashioned large wall clock ticked loudly, much to the annoyance of Okamura.

Born in 1884 at Tokyo, Okamura had advised a Chinese warlord during the 1920s and was later a Kwantung Army commander in Manchukuo, so he was very familiar with the situation in China. He had close cropped hair except for a small moustache. His round, dark-rimmed glasses and a downturned mouth only served to accentuate his sombre appearance.

“We might as well start,” said the aged Kotohito.

“What is your strategy?” demanded Tōjō. He directed his question to Itagaki, Ishiwara and Okamura in a tone intended to show who was actually in charge.

“Major General Tōjō-san...,” responded Ishiwara.

“Yes? Speak!”

“We must strike north under the ‘*hokushin-ron*’ philosophy, as it will be completely unexpected... everyone expects us to launch a full scale attack on China. An expansion from Manchukuo to the north will provide many resources... and there should be little resistance in a relatively unpopulated territory,” urged Ishiwara, now the Army General Staff’s Chief of Operations in Tokyo.

Tōjō sat barely unmoved, acknowledging Ishiwara with a momentary upward movement of his head. At that moment, the room lit up with a great flash of light.

“Continue, Ishiwara,” urged Kotohito.

“If we strike south without the resources we need for sustained war against the Chinese, we risk getting bogged down...”

A gust of wind from a passing autumnal storm shook the windows. Soon the vivid red and orange colours of the Japanese maple trees would slowly wane as the leaves fell, in readiness for the cooler weather ahead.

“I cannot agree!” Itagaki responded in an agitated manner. “We’ve proven we can beat the Chinese. We should destroy them while they’re weak.”

Okamura leant forward to speak. “General Itagaki-san, I’m not sure. Even our army can’t expect to take such a large, populated nation like China without adequate resources. Up until now the Chinese have been divided, but now we have reports that they’ve formed what they’re calling a ‘United Front’.”

“Explain please,” demanded Kotohito.

“*Hai!* Our spies advise that the Communists under Mao Zedong have allied with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists as one military organisation.”

The different Chinese factions had recognised the need to form a joint resistance to the Japanese, except for Chiang, who had been more focussed on trying to stop the internal spread of Communism within China. He saw the Japanese as the ‘lesser of two evils’.

A Manchurian warlord by the name of Zhang Xueliang had other ideas. Zhang's father had been killed by the Japanese in Manchuria, so he understood the threat posed by the invaders. In a strange twist, he had kidnapped Chiang in the ancient Chinese city of Xi'an, and refused to release him until he promised to unite the Chinese Communists and the Nationalists against the Japanese.

"Go on," Tōjō urged. He was watching Ishiwara's body language closely to see if there was any uncertainty. There was none. Ishiwara's eyes were fixed firmly on his commander.

"There's another important aspect – our allies. China is not much of a threat to us, but the Soviet Union is. They're determined to spread Communism."

"They probably want to avenge their loss to us during the Russo-Japanese War," Kotohito sarcastically observed. "I witnessed the Battle of Mukden in 1905 that destroyed the Russian Army and studied the decisive Tsushima naval battle that followed."

Ishiwara continued: "The point is... we have to consider the world situation. The Germans have committed to stopping Stalin, and we'd be much stronger as allies acting together. And before I forget, we all want to rid Asia of Western influence, but if we attack the United States, then we risk losing a war to an enemy potentially much stronger than us. We must increase our capability first, so we can then defeat China and the United States when we're ready."

Itagaki listened impassively to what Ishiwara was saying. He didn't necessarily concur with his colleague, but he knew from the Mukden railway plot and the subsequent invasion of Manchuria that Ishiwara was a brilliant strategist.

"Lieutenant General Ishiwara, what gives you confidence that the Germans will do what they say?"

Tōjō had a reputation for making cutting enquiries and quick tactical decisions. Now Ishiwara was the subject of intense scrutiny from the man nicknamed 'razor'.

"Major General, I studied with their military, and their Führer committed to the Anti-Comintern Pact."

Tōjō sat impassively. Then he leant forward, fixing Ishiwara in his gaze.

"We should go to Germany to discuss your strategy."

"*Hai*, Major General Tōjō-san."

Tōjō looked at Kotohito for his 'rubber stamp' consent.

"It is logical. But China and our other enemies will feel our sword in due course."

It was a single decision to consider changing strategy to the north, but one that would alter the world and its history from that point in time, July 1937.

The Chinese looked north from Peking's ramparts with apprehension to the Great Wall only eighty kilometres away, waiting for the inevitable Japanese strike. Chiang expected an attack on Peking, and was rushing support to the capital city. The United Front led by Chiang and his former civil war foe Mao were still poorly equipped to face the Japanese, and in any case the Communists were more experienced at guerrilla warfare. They were not to know that Tōjō had forbidden any major invasions into China in the meantime.

Of course, Tōjō's orders did not forbid attacks to strengthen the Japanese position and keep the Chinese on the defensive. In October as the weather slowly cooled, the Japanese commenced an operation to land troops from ships on the coast near the major Chinese city of Shanghai. They used their naval and air power to mercilessly overrun the United Front's defences and enter the city, then push onto the nearby city of Nanjing. The following weeks brought nothing but horror for the Chinese people.

"We've received reports of a massacre... slaughter of the entire city of Nanjing," said an enraged Chiang. "People are calling it the 'Rape of Nanjing'."

"How many perished?" asked a disconsolate Mao.

"We estimate over 200,000 people killed, women raped... thousands of bodies thrown into the Yangtze River. That's not all. We're receiving reports of atrocities perpetrated by Japanese soldiers on prisoners of war." Mao couldn't bear to ask. "One incident involved two Japanese soldiers having a competition to be the first to behead 100 Chinese prisoners with a sword. They lined them up and killed our men, one after another."

"These people are inhuman. What do they want?"

"To destroy our people, clearly... this isn't war, it's murder."

The advent of 1938 provided no solace for the Chinese. The Japanese continued to taunt them with rapid, disruptive attacks from the east, designed to keep the Chinese guessing. Kotohito sent the first of his communiques to Okamura to commence using deadly chemical weapons on the helpless enemy. The Prince did not act alone in a perfunctory manner – the orders were authorised by Hirohito himself. Soldiers and civilians alike perished as the yellow sulphur-based mustard gas swept across battered city combat zones. Okamura was no saint either. He instituted a programme of forced prostitution – kidnapping civilian 'comfort women' to serve his soldiers like slaves.

The attacks on Chinese East Coast cities were pyrrhic victories. The Chinese fought bravely, losing two or three soldiers to every Japanese combatant, but they managed to inflict enough casualties to make the Japanese withdraw to the coast. Everyone in China tensed, waiting for the inevitable full-scale attack from Manchukuo to the north.

The last of the winter snow had melted, revealing a vivid green carpet between the baroque stone buildings of the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin. On the entrance steps stood Foreign Minister Ribbentrop.

Ishiwara stepped from the second black limousine, along with Tōjō. Ribbentrop pretended to give the visitors a warm diplomatic welcome, as the guards gave a Nazi salute. Underneath Ribbentrop felt very uncomfortable. He simply didn't trust the Japanese. The two Japanese commanders proceeded into the Foreign Ministry to meet the combined military forces – Wehrmacht, and senior German ministry staff waiting inside.

Former World War aviator and Hitler's deputy Field Marshall General Hermann Göring had been Chief of the Luftwaffe for three years. His rotund frame was a contrast to the other senior officer at the table, Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler. The bespectacled secret police commander might have had a less physically imposing presence than Göring and an almost comical copy of Hitler's moustache, but it was Himmler that commanded more fear. Himmler's Schutzstaffel or 'SS' police had been instrumental in rounding up anyone that could pose a problem for Hitler. He personally directed the Nazi's egregious extermination programme – the 'Final Solution'. It was a murderous wave of massacres being waged against minorities, especially the Jewish, Polish, Slavic and Roma, communities.

"We need to act together, or face the danger of the Soviet Union alone," stressed Göring.

"We have our own plans, but the Hokushin-ron Accord was founded on mutual strength," Tōjō replied.

Himmler had an unsettling habit of staring, seemingly without blinking, but Tōjō himself could be intimidating with a cold look. The sweat on Göring's forehead merely indicated he was overheating in the stuffy Foreign Ministry room, with the windows shut because it was still cold outside.

"Our common enemy is also our shared strength General Tōjō. We know that our combined capability would be too much for the Soviet Union," commented a bellicose Ribbentrop.

"Foreign Minister, as a former attaché in Berlin I know Germany's military power."

"Then join us Lieutenant General Ishiwara," invited a serious sounding Himmler.

"Would you give us a moment to confer?" asked Tōjō.

"Of course, General." The Japanese pair was left alone in the room as Göring escorted everyone else out.

"I think they can be trusted, at least for the moment," suggested Ishiwara in a lowered voice. He knew that the Empire could take advantage of any alliance with Germany.

“Yes, we need them as much as they need us at this point. We will agree to the Hokushinron Accord.”

That day, the Empires of Germany and Japan cemented their anti-Soviet Union stance. A chain of events was set in place that would change the face of the world and its peoples.

During the months of August and September, a flurry of diplomatic activity in Europe by the British tried to address the imminent threat to Czechoslovakia posed by Hitler. He claimed that the Third Reich needed to protect Germanic peoples living there after already absorbing Austria. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain still thought that a diplomatic solution was possible, while Churchill warned Europe about the heinous perils of Nazi aggression. He falsely believed that France and Britain would defend Czechoslovakia, and tried to encourage an alliance that included the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Obersalzberg residences of Hitler were perched high above the small town of Berchtesgaden in Bavaria, with sweeping views of wooded forests and green meadows. The Berghof and the Kehlsteinhaus, also known as the 'Eagle's Nest', provided a safe retreat, not far from the Austrian border near where he was born, and the snow covered Alps.

Hat and umbrella in hand, Chamberlain looked calm enough as he climbed the stairs of the Berghof to shake hands with Hitler. It was a nice enough day – birds were singing in nearby trees, oblivious to the events unfolding at Hitler's chalet. Chamberlain knew it was a last chance for diplomacy to avoid war, so it was with some relief that he agreed to Hitler's demands – effectively sacrificing part of Czechoslovakia. He returned to London declaring he had negotiated 'peace for our time'. Not long after, German troops invaded and completely occupied Czechoslovakia. The lesson was clear – never trust aggressors at their word.

The Soviet Union and France were furious, and mobilised their military forces. Churchill was quick to point out the weaknesses of Chamberlain's appeasement policy. He counselled that Hitler would not be satisfied with invading Czechoslovakia after being emboldened, so other neighbouring nations would be next. His message to the British public was that courage did not come from sitting on the fence and betraying the weakest.

In Moscow, Stalin was frantically issuing orders. He knew that Hitler's ultimate prize was to crush the Soviet Union, so it was necessary to desperately build the Communist nation's defences, and fast.

Taguhi was happy to receive news from Armenia. Her friend Silva had written to say that she was going to study at Lomonosov Moscow State University, the premier university in the Soviet Union. It wasn't the only letter she received that day – there was a letter from her mother Lilit in Arpa. She hurriedly opened the envelope to read it.



*My dear daughter Taguhi,*

*I miss you very much but Rudik is looking after me. We're both looking forward to your return next year.*

*We're very proud of your achievements. Some days I see the people from the university going to the cave for research. The whole village know that you're directing this activity, so we feel you're still here.*

*I have some sad news. Razmik passed away yesterday in his sleep. Everyone from Arpa is attending a special dinner of remembrance for him. I know you'll be upset but he was 69, and he would want us to think of happy moments.*

*Narine and Yura are making good parents even if they're young. The twins Mari and Mikael are a real handful. They're four now and so active! Eva's attention is now on her grandchildren so that's a good thing for everyone else.*

*We don't see Armine so much these days now that she's living in Yerevan with her husband Dmitry, but she came at Easter to see the twins.*

*Did you hear that Germany took control of Czechoslovakia in March? Everyone's so concerned about what Hitler will do next. I worry about you being in Moscow, but I know you can look after yourself. I'm looking forward to the day I can hug you again.*

*Your loving mother, Lilit.*

Although Silva would be at the same university, she'd be in a different area, the Faculty of Philology. There Silva could study languages and literature, interpreting, journalism, publishing, writing and poetry. Silva conveyed excitement in the letter, describing how great it would be to study at the same place as literary giants such as Leo Tolstoy, of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* fame.

Silva had spent the last three years at Yerevan State University, and even at the young age of 20 had shown a great talent for writing. She liked composing lyric poetry, as it gave her an opportunity to express her emotions – but not all.

There were times when Silva was completely discombobulated by what was happening in the world as she was very politically aware. *Pravda* reported the continued threat of Hitler to the Soviet Union. The Armenian 'Mother Church' Etchmiadzin Cathedral – the oldest State church in the world – had been stripped bare of icons and its priests taken away. It was something people couldn't openly talk about, although Armenians didn't allow Etchmiadzin to be completely closed. A subject they were able to have discourse about was how strong the Soviet Union was. Silva wasn't convinced by that propaganda, as she was not naïve.

In May 1939, Mussolini arrived at Berlin in his normal flamboyant manner to meet Adolf Hitler. Originally a socialist and school teacher, the dictator had used his mastery of propaganda to steadily build an Italian police state. The regime promoted a cult of personality in Mussolini's leadership, and a resurgent Italia was appealing to many Italians.

Waiting for Mussolini were Göring, and Ribbentrop. The meeting resulted in the 'Pact of Steel' being signed between Italy and Germany, cementing relationships between the 'Axis Powers' of Italy, Germany and Japan. In the Soviet Union, Stalin watched developments with grave concern. He instructed his staff to reach out to Berlin so the inevitable attack on the Soviet Union that he expected could be delayed; then he might have time to continue his own massive build-up of weapons to counter the Axis.

The first of the really warm days arrived in Moscow, with temperatures well over 30 degrees Celsius. The late bloom of the White Poplar or '*topol*' as Russians called it, created a blanket of white fluff across the Soviet capital. It hovered and twirled in the air, covering the streets like a carpet.

Taguhi was eagerly and impatiently waiting for the train to arrive at Paveletsky Station, one of nine main rail terminals in Moscow. It was an ornate white stone masonry and brick building, built at the turn of the century. While she was there she decided to visit the nearby Museum of the Moscow Railway, which contained Lenin's funeral train. A black train with a prominent red star on the front of the engine finally arrived with a hiss of steam and a roar of coal-fired smoke, two hours late. Silva emerged from the train carriage in a red dress with a matching coloured bow in her short curly hair, woollen shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

"*Silva!* Over *here!*"

"*Taguhi!* Thanks so much for meeting me."

The two students hugged in the middle of the busy bustle of people and luggage on the platform as everyone met and eventually moved away from the train.

"Is this the only luggage you have?" Taguhi asked as she helped Silva with two small plain looking brown bags.

"Yes, it's all I need. Anyway I'm hoping to find some nice things to buy in Moscow," she said gleefully.

"Were you cold on the journey?"

"No, not really, my mother gave me this to keep me warm in winter. Oh, you have a red dress like mine."

"It's nice... we're good Communists," Taguhi said with a rueful smile.

Taguhi saw Silva as much as she could, although she was busy through the summer while everyone else had left for a break. Since Taguhi had arrived in Moscow five years ago and achieved her Specialist Degree, she'd been helping to direct field work for the faculty. Of all the ancient sites scattered across the Soviet Union, she was still maintaining a vigil on the excavation of Arpa cave. Unfortunately she'd only been able to travel back to Arpa once, a year ago to see the cavern and her family.

The trip had been a memorable journey. Taguhi and Narine had spent most days of her summer break on the grass near the vineyards that crept close to the river's edge. Sunlight danced from the river, causing light to cast sparkling reflections on the picnicking friends. Mari and Mikael were only five then. The twins were fascinated with anything – the colourful butterflies that fluttered by, and the dragonflies hovering as if surveying the scene. They had even chased the bumblebees buzzing around the yellow sunflowers that Rudik had grown from seed to remember Razmik, near the end of the grape vines.

Her mother Lilit and Rudik had seemed happy together, although Rudik was always getting a friendly telling off because he managed to get dirt on his trousers that found its way into the house. Nothing much had changed. Rudik still wore his favourite dark hat and dark blue overalls, but at least he had shaved off his moustache.

Lilit had moved into Rudik's house, and Yura and Narine were living in the old Amatuni home. It was Yura's idea. He desired a little space for privacy from his mother Eva. Village homes weren't always owned in the sense that money changed hands, but were commonly shared among families and friends. In Yerevan, it was the government that decided the accommodation that each family could live in. This was all part of the registration process conducted by the *Selsoviet* Offices.

Taguhi was insatiably curious, as were all scientists in her field. It would not be enough to simply study at Lomonosov University; the excitement of new discoveries drove her. Inside she felt she knew there were so many more secrets to find. She entered the auditorium nervously as she'd been asked to attend a special lecture by her professor, but she didn't know why. Taguhi looked across the lecture theatre at her fellow archaeology students sitting there. Everyone was looking at her. Then she saw her director, Professor Alexei Galimov.

"Comrade Taguhi! Please come to the front."

"Yes Professor," Taguhi mumbled.

"*Dobra Diyan*," Professor Galimov said in Russian, expressing 'good day' to everyone. "Comrade Taguhi, we'd like to announce that there's been a significant find at the Arpa Cave excavation."

The professor was a 60 year old vastly experienced archaeologist. He'd come from a Tatar family in Bashkortostan, and had grown up fossicking around the numerous Paleolithic and Bronze Age sites to be found scattered around the Ural Mountains. Now he walked with a stick. He was bald but for a few wisps of white hair, and had a beard of the same colour. Taguhi knew that though he might look elderly, his mind was still as sharp as it ever was, and certainly not to be underestimated.

Professor Galimov paused for a moment. He turned to address the crowd, as if it was an ordinary lecture day. It wasn't.

"The Arpa field work has yielded evidence that the people of the village were among the first to cultivate wine – we've found ancient tools and evidence of a winery in the cave. It illustrates the duration of the great civilization that has become the Soviet Union today."

A dull murmur went around the lecture theatre. Professor Galimov continued, so everyone would understand the gravity of the moment.

"Comrade Taguhi, you will be nominated by the Lomonosov Moscow State University for the Medal of Distinguished Labour. Your colleagues appreciate your dedication."

It was a proud moment, but Taguhi was blushing; an old habit whenever she felt in the spotlight. Inside she felt exhilarated by the news.

"Professor, I... I don't know what to say," she stammered slightly. "I'll do my best to honour the university and my fellow students."

The auditorium erupted with applause, and her friends left their seats to surround her in a most informal fashion. As the students milled around her, she looked up and could see Lilit standing there, quietly waiting in the background with Rudik.

"Mama, Rudik," Taguhi gushed. "How did you get here? I've missed you all so much." Mother and daughter embraced, trembling with excitement.

"My dear, you can thank Professor Galimov for letting us know of this moment and the people of the village for helping me to get here," Lilit said, holding back tears. "They miss you too... but they are very proud of your work."

"Thanks Mama. I'm really looking forward to coming home to Arpa."

"By the way, the village name was changed by the *Selsoviet* Office to Areni."

"They *did*? Why?"

"Nobody knows why..., but a rumour was saying it was because the Yerevan authorities didn't want to support Arpa after the rebellion, so it was easier to just change the name of the village to Areni."

"That makes sense I suppose."

Rudik stepped forward to congratulate Taguhi, then Silva. Her friend had known for days about the award but had been asked by Professor Galimov to keep it secret from Taguhi.

“Well done Taguhi, we’re proud of you,” said Rudik, giving her a giant bear hug.

“Let’s celebrate tonight, as we have to return in a few days,” Lilit said.

She smiled and took her daughter from the crowd, hand in hand, followed by Silva and Rudik. Taguhi was floating on air.

*Is this really happening?*

“We’ve been given some home-made *samagonka* on the train to help us celebrate.”

Taguhi grinned. “Mama, I don’t need vodka to be happy with you.”

The imposing Soviet Foreign Ministry was just a few kilometres from the university, across the winding Moscow River. On a hot summer day, agreement on the German–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was reached after a long day of negotiations between German and Soviet officials. A portrait of Lenin hung above the watching Stalin, now General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, and Ribbentrop. It was as if the former Communist leader was observing a moment in history, when the catastrophe of war was averted.



*Molotov signs the German–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (Ribbentrop and Stalin behind)*

The man that the deadly 'Molotov Cocktail' was later named after signed the Pact with a simple flick of his favourite fountain pen. Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, a youthful 49 year old, was immaculately dressed in a double-breasted dark suit with neck tie. His neatly parted thin black hair, moustache and glasses presented the image of a careful man. It was not always so. In his youth he'd been arrested for political activism for supporting the Bolsheviks, and had worked on the underground *Pravda* magazine.

Stalin was wearing a light coloured jacket buttoned up to the neck, and his distinguishing wide dark moustache and full head of dark hair belied his 60 years. Although not yet Premier, only six years earlier he'd overseen the massacre by shooting and starving of more than six million Ukrainians during the *Holodomor* famine. Such a man meant fear itself. Yet even he was beaming with pleasure at the relief of not having to worry about the Nazis marching to Moscow, as Napoleon had done more than a century before. Russians were not people to forget such historical trauma; such was their character.

In Germany, Hitler had no intention of keeping Stalin happy, but for the moment the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact served a purpose. The stone and timber Berghof chalet's hall was full of key Wehrmacht commanders waiting to hear what their Führer would have to say. There would be no sightseeing at the beautiful Obersalzberg today, 22 August 1939 – the Austrian Alps would have to wait, regardless of the heavenly scent of sweet pine everyone could smell.

"Our strength is our quickness and our brutality. Chingis Khan had millions of women and children hunted down and killed, deliberately and with a gay heart. History sees in him only the great founder of States. What the weak Western European civilization alleges about me does not matter."

Hitler looked across the ranks before him, his body language clear: there would be no turning back, no mercy. The intent now was to reinforce that message so everyone else knew. His speech was short, and to the point.

"I have given the order – and will have everyone shot who utters but one word of criticism – that the aim of this war does not consist in reaching certain designated geographical lines, but in the enemies' physical elimination."

Colonel Erwin Rommel felt very uncomfortable with what he was hearing. With a reputation for being humane, he was a 47 year old soldier of exceptional tactical and technical skills. In his youth, Rommel had even built a glider and flew it himself at the age of 14 growing up in Southern Germany. Rommel wanted to be an engineer, but his father had persuaded him to join the army, and for his heroism he was decorated during the World War.

Rommel was handsome, clean shaven and had a plaid scarf wrapped around his neck – a gift from his daughter. Hitler had so much trust in him that he had chosen Rommel to command his field headquarters during this critical time. It was an honour, but he wondered to himself how he could reconcile his own views with a man having such hatred as his central ethos.

“Thus, for the time being only in the east, I put ready my Death's Head units, with the order to kill without pity or mercy all men, women, and children of the Polish race or language. Only thus will we gain the living space that we need.”

The world was unlucky. Two brutal tyrants that cared not for their people but their egos had come to power at the same time, facing each other with the intent of exterminating their foes, internal and external. For the moment, only Poland stood between them.

Hitler was well aware of the actions of the Ottoman Turks against the Armenians in the Great War. This event and the reference to Chingis Khan's brutal campaigns he had recited at the Berghof served as historical examples to reassure his commanders that *no one* would remember the annihilation of the Polish people, any more than they remembered the Turkish extermination of the Armenians.

## CHAPTER 11: ESCAPE

Far from the tension in Europe, the people of Vancouver in Canada were more concerned about the challenges of ordinary daily life. It was a rainy, misty day – a common occurrence, as moisture-laden clouds from the Pacific Ocean emptied their contents onto the surrounding mountains and the city nestled at the head of a West Coast inlet. Peter liked to walk around the historic Gastown district of Vancouver, but the light rain was a nuisance. Here he could meet many different people from exotic ethnic backgrounds, and study them unknowingly.

It wasn't a place for the faint-hearted. Since the Great Depression in the early 1930s, the historical area had degenerated into a place where the less fortunate lived and came to drink. Bars lined the street – 'Skid Road' as it was colloquially called. The smell of rotten rubbish was unavoidable, especially in side alleys. Less fortunate wretches lay asleep or drunk in the shadows, while ladies of the night plied their trade on corners, day and night.

It wasn't all bad. Skid Road was a place people came for entertainment. The rain forced Peter to find shelter in a bar on his last nostalgic visit here. Furtive looks were cast in his direction from shadowy corners as he found an empty stool near the bar. The other 'speak easy' club patrons were enjoying the early evening, as Glenn Miller's new song *In the Mood*, whatever that meant, provided an upbeat background sound. The blue jacket and collar of Peter's white shirt were damp. He shook the rain droplets from his fur hat, before sitting down at the rough wooden stool near the bar.

"What'll be your pleasure?" asked the barman, while he nodded to the girls in the corner. His ruddy red cheeks and chubby features were a clue to his liking for drink himself.

"Just a whisky, neat thanks."

"Sure thing," Mr Chubby Barman responded. He poured the amber coloured drink into a glass as requested, without ice.

"Anything else?" The barman looked again at the bar girls.

"Not really. Thanks but I'm the sort that keeps to myself."

"Where are you from... city-side? I've seen you before."

"I stay near the University of British Columbia. I'm studying there."

"Really? What are you studying?"

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In the Mood video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bR3K5uB-wMA> (link and video not guaranteed)



“Anthropology.”

The bar tender looked confused as he wiped the bar with a flurry. In the corner of his eye, Peter noticed a girl sitting watching and listening to him. She was pretty enough with long dark hair and distracting, large earrings, but Peter was too much of a serious character for this sort of thing.

“Is that like... science?” she asked.

“It’s the study of people actually.”

“People? Do you study women?”

“Of course! Actually I’m researching the origins of different races. Look, I’m just going to take a drink or two while it’s raining so hard, but I really have to get on, I’m sorry.”

Peter really didn’t have a social life as he’d been too focussed on his study to let his hair down. This puzzled the ladies, including the girl with large earrings.

“It’s OK science-boy, my father used to invent things... until the Great Depression when everyone went bust that is. Anyway, I know how important people like you are if we’re to rebuild this place.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

Peter surprised himself. He sat for the next hour talking to the girl with large earrings, describing his experiences since he’d arrived in Vancouver, and his research.

*Perhaps even task-driven people like me need human company once in a while.*

Peter had found it tough in Vancouver at first. He wanted to study at the University of British Columbia but found he had neither the money nor the educational background to walk in the door, despite the extensive knowledge he’d gleaned from books while growing up. After the initial disappointment, Peter had been lucky, as he found work at the Hudson's Bay Company department store. ‘*La Baie*’ – as the company preferred to be called in French – liked the fact Peter had traded furs, as the company had done more for 250 years. He was a visible link to their past, and as a salesman knew more than anyone about fur trading. It certainly helped that he enjoyed the prospect of studying people, so the more he met at work the better.

After six months in Vancouver, Peter had badgered the university staff of the Department of Anthropology to the point that they recognised his self-taught knowledge of human development was remarkable, as was his passion for anthropology. It had been a day he would never forget – being accepted to study at the university.

Peter had taken four years of intensive study when most students took five years. He felt driven to repay the faith of the university staff that'd given him a chance. He was graduating in his favoured subject, but still he thirsted for more knowledge.

The Inuit tribesman often thought about the people that came before his generation. Peter knew that his ancestors had similarities to the people of Siberia in Russia, and he was very taken by the work of Swedish professor Eric Hultén. His description of an ice-age land bridge that ancient people could have used to travel from Asia to North America seemed entirely plausible to Peter. He told the girl with large earrings about his hypothesis, as his normally serious demeanour changed to an almost wondrous, excited depiction of how people could survive in such a hostile environment.

He didn't understand why he was being so talkative to a complete stranger. Perhaps it was easy to discuss a subject with someone who may not have the knowledge to challenge the theory, or maybe it was just a male's instinct to impress a woman.

She listened intently as he described how his own Inuit tribe were more recent immigrants than those that had used the ice-bridge. When he mentioned that his forebears had travelled by boat across the waters of the Bering Strait between Asia and North America, she had a confused look across her face.

"Why is that? I mean, why did they use boats?"

"Because there wasn't a land bridge then... and our people are pretty good at sailing in our kayaks. They've been used for as long as anyone can remember."

"You're such an interesting man, not the usual sort we get around here. A deep thinker... I like that."

The rain came to a welcome stop outside, and Peter knew he'd need to hurry to prepare to leave Vancouver. After five years of study in British Columbia, he was escaping the rain and embarking on a new challenge – although he didn't want to confess that to the lady sitting in front of him.

"It was nice talking... but I don't even know your name," Peter exclaimed.

"Come back some time and I'll tell you my name science-boy."

The girl hesitated for a moment, then leaned over and gave Peter a kiss, leaving a very visible red smudge on his cheek.

"What the...." he said as he recoiled in mild surprise.

"Sorry, just giving you an invitation to come back some time."

"OK I have to get going..."

"Sure thing science-boy. Hey, I don't even know your name..."

“Science-boy is good enough for me, my dear. It’s been wonderful talking. Here, have this, my dear. It’s for your positive thoughts.”

“Five bucks for just talking? Thanks a lot! OK, bye science-boy.”

The kiss would cause a little mirth and gentle ribbing from the girls that he passed as he walked home, but Peter didn’t really mind. He had no intention of returning to Gastown. After years of hard work, Peter knew he had to travel to go further in his real interest, biological anthropology – the study of how humans had changed over the aeons. So he set off the next day on the long train trip across Canada to New York. The invitation to study at Columbia University under the ‘Father of US Anthropology’ Franz Boas was too good a chance to miss, an opportunity to excel by learning from the best.

These were exciting times for a 28 year old Inuit from distant Tuktoyaktuk. The world was becoming much larger for him and everything was interesting, even the bad bits like Skid Road. The news from across the Atlantic in Europe was unsettling with all sorts of messages from warmongers and people talking about impending conflict on the radio, but in America it seemed like another world.

*Surely common sense will prevail if humans have learnt the terrible lessons of the Great War*, he thought.

The train passed yet another road crossing with a *clickety-clack, clickety-clack* noise as it headed east.

Eight days after Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the German–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, the invasion came. Brave Poland was divided on the first day of September, as if no more than a carcass to be split between vultures. Peter couldn’t believe what he was hearing on the radio when he got to a cold and windy New York. He wondered why no one seemed to notice that the Soviet Union had been as treacherous to Poland as Germany, with everyone focussed on what the Nazis were doing. A sudden chill went through him when the radio announcer advised that the Western Powers France and Great Britain had declared war on Germany, fearing they were next. They were right.

A fragile – and temporary – peace descended across Eastern Europe. In England, they called it the ‘phoney war’ – the calm before the storm. The newspapers reported the first Canadian soldiers arriving in Britain. One editorial asked why the 110 divisions of French and British troops in France didn’t attack the 23 German divisions facing them, before Hitler was able to redeploy his soldiers after the crushing attack on Poland. Despite being at war, Neville Chamberlain continued to act cautiously, still hoping for peace with Hitler. Everybody held their breath.

It was May 1940, and the Belgian forests were a verdant green during spring. The gunner of the German *Panzer III* tank had precious little room to move inside the small turret containing three men. But he knew that the tank, with armour up to 70mm thick, could save the crew if it was hit directly so no one minded.

*Better than being a foot soldier.*

The tank was noisy and hot, and sweat dripped profusely from the gunner's helmet and armpits. He'd destroyed no less than three French SOMUA S35 tanks already during the attack towards the French defensive lines. Experience was important. The *Panzer III* tank crew knew their speed of up to forty kilometres per hour could make a difference. But here in the woods between fields where the going was slower, strategy was more important.

Over the bridge ahead, two British *Matilda* tanks emerged from the white artillery smoke. The sound of the first shot from the *Panzer* was deafening inside the turret, creating a ringing in the gunner's ears, despite his earmuffs. The smell of explosives was overpowering. There was no time to think about it, as the loader scrambled another round into the breach with a metallic *clunk*.

The British *Matildas* used in France were slow and old-fashioned with their rounded, tall design, but they were heavily armoured. The first *Panzer* round bounced off the *Matilda* with an almighty *clang* noise, before the *Matilda* returned fire. Close. The explosion missed the *Panzer* by only a metre, shaking the gunner by the blast's proximity. The *Panzer's* second round hit the forward body and tracks of the lead *Matilda*, disabling it and blocking the second tank that was still on the bridge.

"*Vorwärts!*" the commander ordered, urging his *Panzer III* forward.

The *Panzer* now had the advantage of mobility, and it only took one more shot to destroy the first *Matilda*. The second *Matilda*, smashing the battered wreck of the lead tank on the bridge to one side and using the billowing smoke as a screen, was able to sight the *Panzer* and fire first. Heart ponding, the *Panzer's* gunner saw the flash through the smoke, but there was no time to react. He heard a faint ringing like a distant bell, but otherwise there was no other noise.

The *Panzer III* was hit; there was no time to think. Debris was everywhere, and a heavy concussion made the world spin for the gunner. With blood streaming down his face and disorientated, he scrambled desperately to open the turret door. There were only seconds to exit. The commander and loader lay limply inside as the tank was shattered in a sickening explosion.

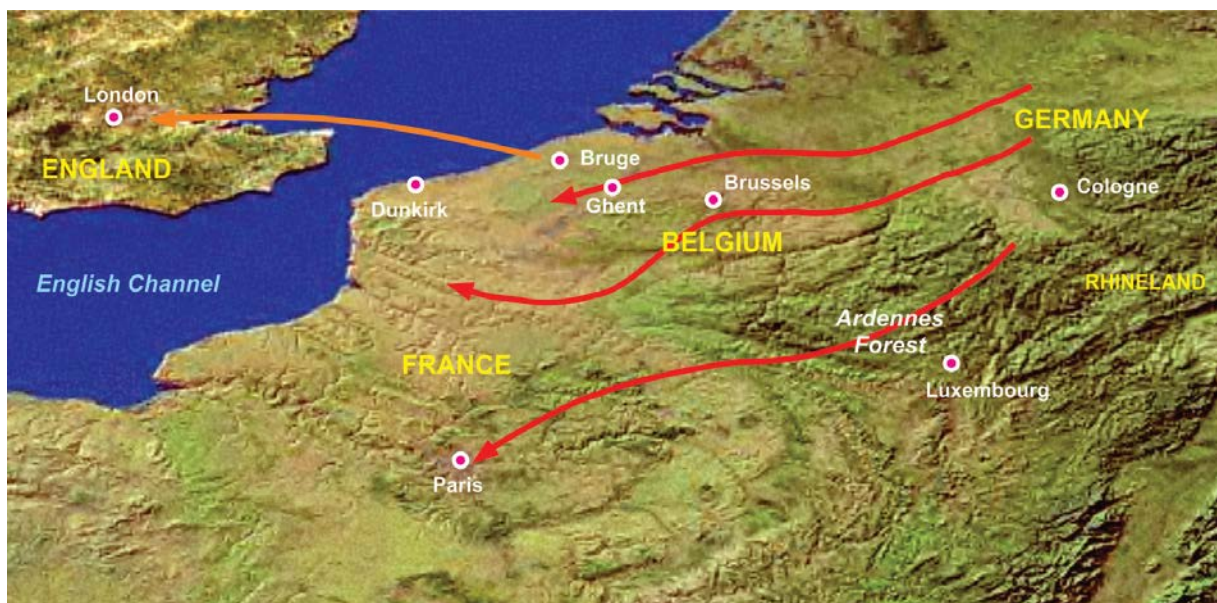
The gunner crawled across the meadow; it was sweet smelling grass, although he was in no position to notice. He lay propped up against a tree, watching the *Matilda* roar past. Then he heard a high pitched siren, followed by a whistle. The enemy tank got no further than a hundred metres before the Ju-87 *Stuka*'s bomb obliterated it in a thunderous blast.

Field Marshall General Hermann Göring was in direct command of the German Operation *Fall Gelb* to invade France, and he was happy with what he was seeing. The *Blitzkrieg* or 'Lightning War' strategy of fast-moving German armoured columns was proving too much for the fixed French defensive fortifications.

The *Panzers* were using the heavily wooded Belgian Ardennes Forest to successfully circumnavigate around hundreds of kilometres of French fortifications like concrete pillboxes called the Maginot Line. Using waves of the fearsome sounding bent-wing *Stuka* dive bombers, French and British tanks were under such pressure that the British decided to evacuate to save their forces.

Major General Erwin Rommel's 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division had such a reputation for its speed and surprise that Göring's headquarters often lost track of them, so they were later nicknamed the *Gespenster-Division*, or 'Ghost Division'. His tanks were, as usual, at the most forward positions trying to cross the Meuse River that passed through Belgium and the Netherlands. The slow moving river gave no clue that it was the oldest in the world, having wound past the green wooded hills for 380 million years, even before dinosaurs existed. But Rommel had a problem. He had no smoke units to hide his men trying to lay pontoons across the Meuse.

"There!" Rommel ordered, pointing to the beautiful old three story brick homes with colourful exterior flowerboxes lining the riverfront. "*Burn them!*"



*German attack during the Battle of France (red); Ndaya's escape to London (orange)*

With the dense billowing smoke from the houses covering the river, Rommel's tanks pressed forward across the pontoon bridge. With a roar of their 12-cylinder Maybach engines, the *Panzers* left a trail of black exhaust smoke heading for northern France.

The British Expeditionary Force was in retreat, but still launched a counterattack using *Matilda* tanks. Some of Rommel's anti-tank artillery rounds were exploding harmlessly off their heavy armour. Although his 105mm howitzers devastated the first column of *Matildas*, a second column of British tanks broke through from a different direction, where all Rommel had was a battery of 88mm anti-aircraft guns.

With the sound of battle ringing in his ears, Rommel personally strode from gun to gun, instructing the gunners to fire on individual tanks that he pointed out through the smoke of battle. The 88mm weapons belched fire, destroying most of the slow moving *Matildas* – the first time anti-aircraft guns had been successfully used against tanks. Burning wrecks littered the red poppy-filled fields; the same scarred meadows that had witnessed devastating trench warfare during the First World War.

Churchill was now British Prime Minister after Neville Chamberlain had resigned. A shattered Chamberlain would die of cancer before the year's end.

"I'm scared Marc."

As Hitler's forces surged across the Low Countries, Ndaya was in a panic. She had heard about Himmler's SS rounding up minorities like Jews and others that were different, so they were never seen again. There was no doubt in her mind that as a dark-skinned African, the Nazis would treat her badly.

"We need to get to Zeebrugge and cross the English Channel. There's no choice, and we need to go now," exhorted Marc.

"But *how* will we get to England?"

"I have a friend with a fishing boat. Don't worry."

Marc saw in Ndaya's eyes something he hadn't seen before – fear. There had always been a concern about someone in Belgium being upset with their multi-cultural relationship in the past, but this was another dimension.

After the short trip to the docks, they boarded the fishing boat like many hundreds of people desperately escaping the German onslaught. Most of the Bruges community sat in their homes in shock as the Nazi tanks clattered through their cobbled streets.

The fresh salt air smelt good, but Ndaya wasn't enjoying the sea trip, as she was tearful for Marc who had left his home in Belgium behind. With the sugar-white cliffs of the English coast – the famous White Cliffs of Dover – getting closer, she finally felt safe.

“As long as we’re together we’ll be fine Ndaya.”

“I’m sorry Marc. You didn’t need to go... your pharmacy.”

“I had to Ndaya; it would’ve been unsafe for you. Anyway, now you can learn English!”

Ndaya smiled, but underneath her stomach was churning.

*What’s happening to the world that such horror can descend upon a peaceful place like Bruges? What’s going to happen to us?*

She took Marc’s hand and placed his arm around her body so he could cuddle her from behind. His strength felt good around her. A cool wind whipped across the choppy sea as the boat lurched forward on each swell and dark clouds appeared to the west over the English Channel. A storm was brewing.

British Major General Bernard Montgomery had been seriously wounded in the same area in the red poppy-covered fields of Northern France during World War I. Now the 52 year old commander known for being a hard taskmaster was desperately trying to protect the retreat of British and French troops, trying to cross the English Channel to Britain in the face of the German onslaught. He marched his men overnight to secure the eastern flank of the evacuation after the Belgian troops had surrendered – a testament to the fitness levels of his soldiers that Montgomery had always demanded.

Göring urged Hitler to let the Luftwaffe finish the British off, halting the *Panzer* advance in the belief that the soft, marshy ground near Dunkirk would be a problem for his armour. It was a tactical error, as the British Royal Air Force flew countless missions to provide aerial cover. The sea was littered with debris, bodies and hundreds of ships – from naval destroyers to tiny civilian pleasure boats. Their combined and heroic efforts managed to evacuate 330,000 troops to safety under heavy fire.

Churchill stood in front of the gathered members of parliament. Ashen faces from the losses of the Battle of France were everywhere. Churchill had always been a confrontational, polarising character, but now it was his chance to galvanise the nation with his bulldog-like approach as he spoke on the radio.

“Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end.”

“We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall *never* surrender...”

“...and if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.”

The speech was greeted with thunderous applause from the members of parliament. But Churchill reminded the country that the successful Dunkirk evacuation should not be seen as a victory.

“Wars are not won by evacuations.”

France fell in only six weeks. The sight of Nazi soldiers passing through Emperor Napoleon's Arc de Triomphe in Paris was a shock to Parisians, especially those old enough to remember that France was not defeated during the First World War. The British Empire around the world was stunned.

The German attack on France was big news in Australia. Though the nation had been independent for four decades, the Australian people still felt close to Britain. The *Movietone* news reels being screened on board HMAS *Canberra* flickered unevenly and with poor quality – grainy black and white imagery. But they clearly showed the Dunkirk evacuations and the bravery of desperate sailors, with nearly one in three ships being sunk. As Lieutenant Commander Jack Thompson watched, he thought of the plight of Great Britain.

*Thank goodness for the English Channel, otherwise the Nazis would be banging on London's door right now.*

Jack's younger boy-like features with short blonde hair had given way to a tougher looking version, with skin lined from exposure to the sun and sea. He might have enjoyed a bit of booze in his youth, but he knew right from wrong, so he steered clear of the bottle these days. Jack had a great knowledge of the Coral Sea off the Queensland coast. He had displayed an uncanny knack of being able to adeptly handle the warship HMAS *Australia*, like the skiffs he'd sailed from Balmain when he was younger. It didn't take long for his skills to be noticed, so he had been posted to the HMAS *Canberra* a year ago.

“What's happening Jack?” asked Johnny.

“Mate, we're returning to Sydney to resupply. This exercise is over,” as the two life-long friends stood peering over the rails near the ship's bow.

“I knew the moment that we broke contact with the tanker early. It looks bad, doesn't it?” Johnny mused, red hair blowing loosely in the wind under his sailor's cap.

“She'll be right, mate,” Jack said, his stern face turning into a wicked grin. “There're sheilas to look after, right?”



“Right, mate. That woman with the red lipstick and dress is probably still waiting for you at King’s Cross!”

“Bet her accomplice is too, Johnny. Come on, let’s get going.”

Before radio and telegraphs, it would take months, perhaps more than a year for news to reach the far-flung parts of the British Empire, upon which the ‘sun never set’. Now announcements from London or recordings could be spread at the speed of light; even to mountainous Nepal. Though it was poor reception, Jeevan could hear the distinct tones of Churchill on the radio. He was urging Britons and people around the world to stand firm against the odds, after the German attack on France.

“Hush a moment please, Jharna. It’s hard to hear...” said Jeevan, sitting in his home at Kathmandu.

“...but if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, this was their finest hour.”

The Nepalese parliamentarian was shocked and dismayed. He knew it wouldn’t be long before Britain itself would be threatened. The British Empire spanned the planet, but even in strongholds like India, there was a sense of dread.

“I have to go,” Jeevan said to the little girl, her bright blue eyes portraying confusion.

As if copying older ladies, she wore a child-sized blue Indian-style sari the same colour as her eyes, her black hair neatly done in a single long ponytail.

Jharna had been an orphan before Jeevan had found the fourteen year old girl begging, close to the historical Durbar Square in central Kathmandu. He remembered seeing her just before he left for Lhasa, when she ran away. Over the past two months he’d cared for her as if she had always been part of Devi family, even though he needed to spend so much time in parliament. Jharna’s life had changed completely in such a short space of time.

“But...,” Jharna cut short her sentence as she wasn’t sure what to say.

“Don’t worry, grandmother Madhu and the rest of the family are here to look after you Jharna. The journey’s too much for a young girl, but I won’t be away for too long. We have to go and meet the British in Delhi to see what we can do, now that Britain is threatened.”

Jharna said nothing. She looked lost, and worried.

“Mother, please make sure that you watch over her, won’t you?”

“Of course Jeevan; Jharna and I get on well, don’t we?” she asked as she took Jharna by her hand.

“Did you see Rajesh? I wanted to say hello.”

“He went to Army Headquarters Jeevan. Almost ran out the door after a messenger came. He muttered something about being mobilised. Is this going to affect us? What’s wrong?”

Jeevan looked at his family, hesitating before answering: “The world has gone mad.”

Churchill sat unmoved in the underground bunker that served as his War Rooms in the Westminster, not far from the famous Westminster Abbey where British Kings lay, and the British Houses of Parliament. He was angry, and in anguish, feeling helpless. From here he could safely make radio broadcasts, but the pugnacious leader would prefer to take the fight to the Nazis. London waited apprehensively.

Life was difficult in London now, and many basic food items like butter were becoming scarce, so there was not much hope of Marc enjoying his favourite bottle of Alsace wine. He used to love the dry German Rieslings most, but now such pleasures were just a distant memory. At least Ndaya and Marc had found somewhere to stay – an old brick unit, after the family occupying it had moved out. The father had joined the ‘Home Guard’ and the mother and children had gone to live in the English countryside to escape the danger, like thousands escaping the danger in the city.

The pulsating roar of the Rolls Royce 27 litre V-12 *Merlin* engine shattered the sky above the Thames River. It sounded almost musical, but this was not entertainment, but a deadly task. Ndaya looked up to see the elliptical-winged silhouette of the *Spitfire* fighter darting through the low clouds. She couldn’t see its quarry, but she knew the quiet of the last few months had come to an abrupt end. The ‘*Blitz*’ had begun.

*This is scary. What’s happening?*

Ndaya was hurrying home to see Marc after getting some sought-after milk and bread. Sirens wailed and the sound of fire engines could be heard in the distance. The smell of burning coming from the nearby factories was enough to make her cough and gag for a moment, as the dense black smoke drifted her way.

As the *Spitfire* punched past clouds to gain height, the pilot couldn’t yet see the group of Heinkel ‘Triple One’ bombers that he’d been directed to by ground radar; but they were not his first concern. The escorting Messerschmitt *Bf-109s* had to be somewhere.

*There, high above the bombers flitting just over the clouds, in perfect position; maybe they’re too high.*

The attacker normally had to engage any defending fighters first, but not now. The German *He-111* bombers were too close to London anyway. The *Spitfire* peeled left with the other fighters close behind, diving for the Heinkel formation. The pilot felt the exhilaration of the Merlin's power throbbing as he urged the fighter forward.

Before the closest bomber's waist gunner could get a bead on the first *Spitfire*, eight Browning machine guns sent a sheet of metal punching through his *He-111* and tore it from the sky. The next bomber's captain saw the flash of the *Spitfire's* wing before it was below his sight. The sound of the *Spitfire's* engine – almost a wailing scream – was terrifying to the hunted as the bombers waited for the next pass.

Three more bombers were hit before the chasing Messerschmitt's 20mm cannons could be brought to bear, and by that time the *Spitfires* had passed the bomber formation. The remaining bombers pressed on towards the target, with fighters locked in mortal combat. On home ground with more fuel and radar assistance, the Brits had an advantage defending their skies. Only one bomber got through, and the remaining German fighters limped home. The sound of jubilant cries from the *Spitfire* pilots crackled across the airwaves. The Battle of Britain witnessed many heroes defending their isolated land.

Ndaya found Marc lying motionless after the dust settled from the single bomb blast. She couldn't see an injury, but his body was obviously broken. She could see it from the angle he had fallen; his blue eyes staring into nothingness. Dust covered his head, so she wiped it gently away in a loving manner from his ashen face and hair. It was a strangely silent horror. She couldn't find the scream of terror in her voice, and just sobbed uncontrollably. The Home Guard were yelling, but she couldn't hear them.

"*Lady*, sorry, but you can't stay here, the place is on fire. You can't help him."

The Home Guard gently carried away Marc's lifeless body, and assisted Ndaya to leave the brutal scene.

Churchill's expression was grim. He was chewing on an unlit cigar, and tapping his knuckles on the desk in frustration. The War Rooms were small and not well lit, but it was the least of his concerns. He had to encourage the British people to be resolute in the face of such destruction.

The British Empire stood alone against the Third Reich. For its part, the United States continued to stay neutral, but tried to help with convoys of materials across the Atlantic to Great Britain. It was all that could be done, given the divisive politics of Washington, D. C. at the time.

There was nothing left in London for Ndaya, now that Marc was gone. Every corner and loud noise brought back memories that would haunt her every waking hour, even in her dreams. She decided to put the horror of war and hurt behind her, and travelled across the Atlantic on a returning convoy ship after volunteering as a medical assistant.

These were dangerous times. She was cold to the bone, and scared, always frightened that an unseen assailant would attack. The German U-Boat submarines hunted in 'wolf packs' and sank many of these ships in what everyone was calling the War of the Atlantic. It was not until she saw the famous iconic lime-green coloured Statue of Liberty, a gift to commemorate America's independence from France, that Ndaya felt safer.

*It's the second time I've had to flee across the water. I hope I can find safe refuge in the United States. I can't run any more.*

Over the last century, immigrants and refugees had passed this point as they saw America for the first time. Standing in the outer harbour serving New York, the copper Statue of Liberty was a beacon of hope for so many, and so it was for Ndaya as well. She gazed with wonder at the lights of the Manhattan skyscrapers and bridges linking the island to the rest of the United States.

Ndaya found herself wandering around for days in New York City, especially in the Broadway area where the theatres were. It seemed strange that people were still going to entertainment here in the United States, when there was war just across the Atlantic.

The music fascinated her. Even the theatre productions here were surreal, with songs like *Oh What a Beautiful Morning* telling tales of a world quite removed from the tragedy unfolding in Europe.

Ndaya found herself work in Broadway at a theatre café, serving drinks to the well-heeled. It was an opportunity to study again, and she enrolled as a student at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. Splendid brick buildings with a spread of green vines climbing its walls were part of being in the 'Ivy League' of top American educational institutions. The university was founded in 1767 as the first medical school in the Thirteen Colonies, so she was very excited to be given a chance to learn medicine again.

Ndaya still felt traumatised and missed Marc every day, but she finally had a kind of happiness. From a girl that'd walked the jungle tracks of the Congo, she was now learning how to administer modern medicine in a modern city. Unfortunately, during these times of war with madmen like Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, her skills might be sorely needed.

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Beautiful Morning video: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_C6J9gij5SQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_C6J9gij5SQ) (link and video not guaranteed)

## CHAPTER 12: CATASTROPHE

The Americans now knew that they faced a crisis. In Africa, the rich yellowcake ore deposits that had been mined at the town of Shinkolobwe, Belgian Congo since the early 1930s were being stockpiled for secret transportation to New York City. Edgar Sengier, the 61 year old partially bald, white-haired Belgian director of the mining company knew that with up to 65% concentration, the yellowcake ore from here was the purest uranium source on the planet. What he didn't know was why American scientists were so interested in this mineral. By the end of 1940, more than a thousand tons of the precious uranium-bearing ore had arrived on the bustling docks of New York for safekeeping by the armed forces.

Mussolini saw his chance in Africa, emboldened by the German success in France and the Luftwaffe's attack on Britain. He believed that the British would be distracted, and Egypt, which had been administered by the British for more than fifty years, might be an easy target. He was wrong.

By autumn, Mussolini commenced an attack on the ancient land of the pharaohs, especially to control the strategic Suez Canal linking the Mediterranean and Red Seas. His antiquated equipment faced British units using weapons like the *Matilda* tank. The British Royal Navy controlled the Mediterranean, so Italy couldn't effectively supply its army. Italian forces, though superior in number to the British Commonwealth military, were forced to withdraw to Libya after their battle tactics had been found to be deficient.

Mussolini called for assistance from his Axis allies, but the Germans did not respond. Hitler had his eyes on another prize. By December, the Italian Tenth Army in Libya had been destroyed. The Italian leader was embarrassed, furious, and vowed revenge on the British. In London, Churchill welcomed the rare good news, with the Luftwaffe continuing to pound the British Isles.

Emperor Haile Selassie returned to his homeland in Ethiopia in May, and immediately set about raising his people to arms. With the assistance of British East African forces operating from Kenya, he led a campaign against the Italians to reclaim his nation, and further humiliate Mussolini. His speech to Ethiopia was extraordinary for its peaceful message, after the violence that had been perpetuated on his people by Mussolini.

“Today is the day on which we defeated our enemy. Therefore, when we say let us rejoice with our hearts, let not our rejoicing be in any other way but in the spirit of Christ. Do not return evil for evil. Do not indulge in the atrocities which the enemy has been practicing in his usual way, even to the last.”

In Europe, the British had been receiving intelligence of German plans to attack the Soviet Union throughout the first half of 1941. Intrigue, paranoia and distrust were the norm in the Kremlin, so Stalin’s response to London’s information was to be typically suspicious. He believed it to be a ruse, thinking it was a trick designed to bring the Soviet Union into a war he wasn’t yet ready for. The Soviet Union’s own spies had also provided warnings about an impending German attack, but Stalin ignored these as well.

It was a sunny June day in 1941. Lviv had been one of the cities in Poland captured by the Soviets after the Non-Aggression Pact with the Nazis, a prize for betrayal of the Polish people. It was full of old preserved stone buildings, a treasure of history – tree-lined cobbled streets and cathedrals. The echoes of Polish culture would not be extinguished so easily.

Gaspar found it peaceful here, after nine years of being in the Red Army. He didn’t think of it as service, but it was either this or being sent to the *gulags* for the unthinkable sin of practicing his religion. He had only been saved because he was a junior priest, nobody important to make an example of. The thought of being taught to kill revolted the young religious man, and the army training was hard. The thuggery meted out to new army recruits in the Soviet Army, including killings, even had a name it was so common – *deyedavshena*. It was almost as bad as being in a gulag. Gaspar didn’t mind the physical exertion, but he was always just going to be an ordinary soldier, as he never put his heart into it.

Gaspar’s tall, lean frame had become a heavier build, despite the diet of canned *tushonka* and whatever the local villagers could spare. *Tushonka*, a stewed, mainly beef product tasted mildly salty, and was often purchased only with special tickets. It was a poor substitute for fresh Armenian lamb, beef and trout, but the Red Army was built on harsh discipline, so no one complained. The beard was long gone, and his jutting hawk-nosed features were a dead giveaway as an Armenian to his fellow Red Army conscripts. They teased him about it sometimes, but Gaspar wasn’t concerned about that. He missed Armenia, but as long as he was still alive, his inner faith would keep him going.

Gaspar preferred to play chess in his spare time. His fellow soldiers in the Red Army were indulging in the traditional Russian game of *lapta* on the grounds of the ancient Kryvka Church in Lviv, near the western border of the Soviet Union. Gaspar’s company had been here for months, and they were bored.

Shouts of glee became groans as their comrades failed to strike the ball properly. The *lapta* players created a noisy racket every time a soldier swung his flat bat and connected with the improvised ball, about the size of a plum. Since rubber was only available for Stalin's military build-up, one of Gaspar's colleagues had ingeniously crafted the ball from the same wood the bat was made from.

*Moving the knight next to the bishop would put my opponent into check, Gaspar thought. No, perhaps this old-timer has set a trap; it's too easy.*

Gaspar's opponent was an elderly Lviv resident. He was constantly sucking on his pipe, grinning with pleasure. Gaspar had given him the small pouch of tobacco from his allotment as he didn't smoke himself.

Some of the other Red Army soldiers nearby were doing their best to attract the attention of the Lviv girls with military sugar rations. One, a big man with a rough complexion and aggressive attitude called out to Gaspar as he was about to make his move. Gaspar knew his fellow soldier as Sergei, but that was about all he knew of him. He had found out some time ago that the man was a bully, who delighted in tormenting the mild-mannered Armenian.

"Hey Gaspar, where's your *queen*?" he joked, teasing him for playing chess when the other soldiers were doing manly things – according to him.

Gaspar turned around, accidentally knocking the chess pieces off the board, to raucous laughter from the soldiers.

"I'm sorry," Gaspar apologised to his opponent. He picked up the game pieces and replaced them on the wooden board, trying to ignore the other soldiers.

*Thonk!* Gaspar heard what sounded like a wooden, hollow noise. Turning around, he saw Sergei buckling at the knees and crumpling to the ground with a startled look on his face. The wayward *lapta* ball that had glanced off Sergei's army cap slowly rolled towards Gaspar's feet. Gaspar had to struggle not to smile too broadly, even after his colleague managed to get to his feet with the help of his friends, and stagger away.

German General Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel surveyed the lines of his *Panzer IVs* – grey, menacing 25 tonne tanks. A prominent brow and high forehead gave him an aristocratic air. A lean 55 year old, Stülpnagel was having doubts about the Nazi regime's ruthless views on minorities based on ethnocentricity. Still, he was a career army officer with a job to do.

The 800 tanks of Stülpnagel's army faced more than 1,000 Soviet 6<sup>th</sup> Army tanks, some of them the venerable *T-34s* with a powerful 76mm gun. Stülpnagel knew he had to use superior strategy to defeat the Red Army, by driving a wedge in their defence to cut the railway between Lviv and the Ukrainian capital Kyiv.

Stülpnagel knew that his opponent was Colonel General Mikhail Kirponos, a Ukrainian who had somehow survived Stalin's purges of senior officers.

*Very little experience left*, thought Stülpnagel.

Stülpnagel had learnt from his spies that the Soviet Red Army units had taken up static positions, and weren't capable of reacting quickly to a rapid *blitzkrieg* attack. Nor were they seriously preparing for one, after the enactment of the Non-Aggression Pact. Even Colonel Ivan Baghramyan's pleas urging his superior officer Kirponos to use the precise plan the veteran Armenian officer had developed to defend against a German *blitzkrieg* fell on deaf ears. It was a major strategic blunder.

Operation Barbarossa started on the twenty second day of June, as an armada of Nazi tanks swept across country villages with a horrifying roar, crushing anything in their way. Thunder brought an unimaginable pain across the Soviet Union's vast western plains and heartache for the millions of terrified civilians in the path of the Nazi invasion.

*Astvats im!*

Lying low, Gaspar couldn't believe what was happening. He could hear the *zip-zip-zip* noise of machine gun rounds as they ripped through the air just above him. The world was spinning; thunderous blasts bewildered him. His senses were somehow disengaged from the awful reality unfolding in front of him.



*Operation Barbarossa (Photographer: Johannes Hähle, courtesy German Federal Archive)*



There were no words Gaspar could find to describe the terror in front of him. He could only watch helplessly as screaming *Stuka* dive bombers picked off nearby Soviet *T-34* tanks one by one, while 75mm *Panzer* shells smashed into the Soviet defensive lines in the coordinated attack. He wondered where the Soviet aircraft were; not knowing that most of their close air support had been hit where they sat on airfields during the first moments of Operation Barbarossa.

Gaspar was aware of his heavy breathing and rapidly beating heart. German soldiers were moving rapidly behind the *Panzer IVs* as they screeched their way up the hill past him. He was shaking and sweating profusely, confused as to what to do.

*Can they hear me?*

Gaspar's comrades, his fellow company of Soviet soldiers had been devastated as he lay prone in the long grass, blowing in the breeze. The *kerthunk-whoomp* blasts on the rise just above him signalled the demise of Soviet artillery positions, sending acrid smoke billowing across the green rolling hills.

*"Vashu maaaaats!"*

The loud, prolonged yell of an obscenity startled Gaspar even in the middle of the battle. Twenty metres away, Sergei had leapt to his feet from where he had laid in wait, *PPD-40* submachine gun in hand, and sprayed the advancing German soldiers in a pure quixotic moment of madness, considering the odds. It took only five seconds to empty the classic round magazine at a rate of 15 bullets a second. Several of the enemy fell, cut to ribbons by the surprise attack. The nearest *Panzer IV* replied with a withering burst of its *Maschinengewehr MG34* machine gun, puncturing Sergei's body multiple times in his last seconds of life.

Gaspar knew it was foolish to break cover but Sergei's sacrifice had caused something to snap – an overpowering feeling came over him. But the Germans were already alerted. He had only half-arisen from the grass when his shoulder shook violently, and he was thrown backwards with the impact. There was no pain, just a complete numbness as he started to go into shock. He could hear German voices, not Russian.

The fertile hills had turned into a killing field, which ran with the blood of men defending their country from the unheralded attack. Gaspar was taken prisoner, along with thousands of his comrades. As he was being carried away on a stretcher after the shoulder wound had been bandaged by a German medical officer, all he could think of was Sergei's incredible bravery.

*Sergei was so brave. Perhaps it needs such indefatigable traits as he had to be so courageous.*

Stalin was dumbfounded, paralysed. At first he didn't believe the early reports. Despite superior forces on paper, the Soviets had lost thousands of aircraft, tanks and troops in the first hours of the conflict.

“What’s *happening*?” Stalin bellowed. “We have the Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler! This is treachery!”

His commanders – those that had survived Stalin’s sadistic purges – knew better than to speak up. In a rage he threw the charts in front of him indicating the rapid German advances across the table.

“No one is to retreat,” Stalin yelled. “If I see any officer not fighting to the last man, he will be the first man to be shot.”

Everyone cowered, not knowing who would be the next to receive a bullet. Their commander’s wrath knew no end, and none would go against him, such was their fear.

There was nothing but chaotic communications between the Kremlin and the battlefield command. Stülpnagel’s *Panzers* had broken through, and there were almost no experienced commanders to strategize the right response to the *blitzkrieg* that Baghramyan had predicted. Stalin’s static defences had failed to react quickly enough. It was bad news, but things were about to get even worse.



*German attack on the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa*



Three hours later, news came from the Far East, where Stalin had sent countless citizens for their misdeeds. The Japanese, led by Itagaki and Ishiwara had completely overwhelmed the Soviet positions at Khalkhyn Gol near eastern Mongolia in a surprise attack, allowing the main Japanese forces to move rapidly west. Even the elite Siberian forces were no match for well-trained Imperial Army troops that poured out of Manchukuo by the hundreds of thousands. Stalin's face was red with fury. His officers noticed he was visibly shaken as he ironically muttered the same phrase meaning 'treachery' over and over again like a madman.

*"Predatel'stvo... predatel'stvo!"*

The next morning, a beautifully fine Moscow day came with no better news for the Kremlin. The 50 Red Army divisions in Siberia were outnumbered by more than double that number of Imperial Army units. The Japanese were rapidly advancing to take Ulan Ude from their positions in Northern China. The Trans-Siberian Railway had been cut in several places with explosives either side of the Japanese incursion – to the west near the Urals and to the east near Vladivostok. Reinforcements were not going to arrive for days.

Ishiwara's advance forces were nearing Irkutsk, on the shores of the ancient Lake Baikal, the deepest body of water on land. In doing so, the Japanese had circumvented Soviet plans to destroy key bridges and tunnels along the Trans-Siberian Railway between Irkutsk and Vladivostok, in case of an attack. That card was now being used against the Red Army itself to prevent a Soviet counter-attack from Vladivostok. The rapid advance by Ishiwara meant that the very apparatus built to transport Soviet troops quickly to the east was instead being used to transport Japanese troops westwards to the heart of the Motherland.



*Japanese attack on the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa (red)*

Ishiwara was exhilarated. His plan was working perfectly, as the iron pincers of the two Axis powers sliced through the Soviet Union from opposite sides, like a huge Siberian brown bear's powerful jaws and teeth slashing its victim's flesh. As he saw the sparkling waters of Lake Baikal stretching to the horizon and the vast Siberian forests, Ishiwara knew the immense mineral resources and wartime labour from thousands of prisoners would provide a massive boost to the Empire. The Soviet troops had fought bravely, but millions of Japanese troops had trained for years and they were well prepared; surprise was complete.

On the Western Front in Central Ukraine, Kirponos's depleted forces were being rapidly surrounded as they desperately tried to defend Kyiv. A huge *mêlée* of tanks swarmed across the rich black earth, with hundreds of tanks engaged in a confused death struggle. Now promoted to Lieutenant General, Baghramyan had been attacked by German aircraft while he tried to counter the German juggernaut as it rolled irresistibly forward. But bravery and fortitude were not going to win the day, given the German's main strategic advantage – Stalin's own ineptitude in planning and purges, which now endangered millions of Soviet soldiers.

After Kyiv had fallen, German troops continued their rapid advance. Not northeast towards Moscow initially, but southeast, tank tracks churning across the increasingly drier grass plains towards the Caspian Sea. Stülpnagel would not make the same mistake as Napoléon by expending his armour on a symbolic target like Moscow. He was far more interested in an important strategic goal – oil.

Tatiana peered out of her broken farmhouse, terrified by any sound or movement. The stench of human suffering was everywhere. The short blonde-haired woman with a round face and captivating hazel eyes could see Russian soldiers lying across chaotic fields that not long ago used to be full of crops ripening for Stalingrad's markets. A simple, patriotic and giving person, she was just an ordinary peasant farmer who worked in the village commune; until now.

Not far away, rumbles like thunder emanated from the battle for the city. A smouldering Soviet *T-34* tank lay close by, devastated by a single German artillery round. Tatiana was shaking, her emotions racing after watching with horror the carnage that had occurred right in front of her.

"Oh no, no," Tatiana quietly sobbed, fearing she might alert the invaders. "My daughter, my daughter..."

*How can this happen? What will become of us?*

At 29 Tatiana was alone, and her happy life on the farm was gone. The world seemed to shrink into darkness.

The weak, muffled cry of a baby broke the strange silence. Tatiana scrambled over the broken timbers and saw her daughter's arm. She flung heavy pieces of broken wood aside in an adrenaline-fuelled frenzy. Looking down at her little one year old child, she couldn't believe that Nadezhda had somehow been unharmed among the destruction.

Cradling her daughter, Tatiana could hear the laboured sound of her own breathing. She hadn't realised the effort it took to move the timbers. She waited as still as she could fearfully for hours, until Nadezhda's cries started again; her baby was hungry. She tried to feed her breast milk but was still in shock, and her milk wouldn't come with the stress of the moment.

Tatiana summoned the courage to crawl across the ploughed fields to the tank sitting close by, near the crest of a hill. She couldn't see any Germans, but she could see thick black smoke coming from Stalingrad, only ten kilometres away. Moving slowly to dozens of young men lying on the ground, she checked their shattered bodies and saw that none were alive. Mud covered Tatiana's pink *sarafan*, and little red blotches of blood from the dead soldiers' uniforms had stained her apron.

"I'm sorry," she softly said while crying, moving one of the bodies to get a pack containing *bukhanka*, a popular black bread in the Soviet Union.

Tatiana heard the roar and froze. Tingles of fright ran up her spine and made the hair stand up on her arms. A German *Panzer IV* tank emerged from the heavy birch forest only five hundred metres away, seemingly heading straight for her. Other tanks followed and the *clank-clank* noise from the mechanised column grew increasingly louder. Not far behind, trucks full of German infantry were doing their best to keep up with the tracked vehicles.

Tatiana just stood petrified in fear looking at the column, as if it was a biblical plague descending upon the Earth. The grey uniformed German soldiers passed her driving through the thick mud as if she was invisible, disappearing towards Stalingrad. Following the lead tanks, Count Claus von Stauffenberg didn't even notice Tatiana, standing forlornly by herself in the field looking at death all around her. The tall, 34 year old German tank commander with an angular nose and short black hair parted neatly on the left was focussed on the task ahead, the assault of Stalingrad. It was not the only thing on his mind.

Captain Stauffenberg, an Iron Cross First Class holder from the Battle of France and a brilliant tactician, had long been troubled by what he had seen since the Nazi uprising. After past German invasions, he had witnessed Jews and other 'undesirables' being dispossessed of everything they owned and interned in work camps.

Stauffenberg noted it had been worse for the physically handicapped and mentally ill, who were rounded up and sent to hospitals, where they were brutally killed in a campaign of terror organised by Himmler's Gestapo SS. To the devout Catholic and aristocrat, he thought the so-called 'mercy killings' were an ungodly act, resulting in the extermination of more than 200,000 people.

*Pity the country that can't protect its most vulnerable citizens.*

The fear had gone within Tatiana, replaced by an overwhelming sense of hatred. After the Germans had disappeared, she gathered as much of the soldier's weaponry as she could carry.

*I need to do what I can for the Motherland. Sasha would've done the same.*

Tatiana had been alone since her husband Sasha Baklanov had died at the beginning of the year. A Don River Cossack, his ancestors had been in this area since the sixteenth century. The Cossacks had a proud military tradition. Sasha had been wounded as an eighteen year old during the Russian Civil War, fighting for the White Russians of South Russia against the Bolshevik Communists led by Lenin. He'd witnessed first-hand the bloodshed and loss. It was a terrible conflict that cost nearly three million people their lives in five years of fighting after the Russian Revolution, ending in a Communist victory.

Sasha hadn't been badly wounded and was able to return to the communal village farm near Stalingrad, but his pain was unseen. It was a cruel, numbing dark cloud that stayed with him every waking moment. He had turned to vodka to numb the memories, and sometimes had taken out his angst on Tatiana. She remembered the days he was worst, and the pain of being beaten. But then she recalled the moment when years of drinking finally caught up with him. Tatiana found her 38 year old husband in the barn, with the bottle that had seduced him lying empty near his boots. In a drunken state he had succumbed to the freezing winter. Strangely, his frozen face looked peaceful at last.

Tatiana preferred to block out the saddest memories – even the violence. She let her mind drift to more pleasant thoughts, and music was always a cathartic escape. Sasha had been an outstanding dancer in his younger days when they first met. She could hear the pulsating dance music of the Cossacks, a steadily quickening beat, accordions, balalaika, and men like her husband who could dance like acrobats.

Stalingrad was quickly overrun in a matter of weeks, leaving remnants of the Soviet Army to flee to the south towards the Caucasus. The Germans pressed on to one of their key objectives, the oil fields of the Caspian Sea.

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Cossack dance video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhtfiKl4VWg> (link and video not guaranteed)

The Soviet Union was in shock, with no place to move the factories that were the lifeblood of the nation, with the Germans pressing from the west and the Japanese attacking from the east. It took only five months, but the Red Army surrendered and the former Soviet Union fell under control of the assailants, each splitting the country to the Urals.

A country that once stretched across nearly half the globe now lay under the Axis jackboots marching through endless lands of *steppe* and forests. Taguhi and Silva sat tight in Moscow, with nowhere to go. World War II was over, lost for the Allies. The Soviet people wept. It was a catastrophe for them, but it was worse for Stalin. Ironically he was found by the Germans in the same Ural Mountains city where Czar Nicholas II and his family were executed in 1918, and suffered the same fate.

The boy was scared by the bang on the door, and tried to curl up in a foetal position under the table. He could see the other inhabitant in the room, a man with a rough beard and filthy uniform, who had been on the run for weeks. Again the door shook; until he saw the German soldiers smash it open with a kick of their jackboots. The boy's eyes widen with fear.

In response, the bearded man cried out 'no' in Russian: "*nyet!*" He fumbled with his pistol, struggling to release his holster.

It happened so quickly that the boy hardly saw the thrust of the German's bayonet. The boy was terrified, thinking he was going to be next. Shocked and dumbfounded, he sat paralysed on the ground, but would not be harmed.

The blood of the man responsible for the deaths of millions of his own people, and who had terrorised a nation seeped through the wooden floorboards and into the frozen soil of Yekaterinburg. Death came after agonising seconds, as his abdomen had been sliced open like a pig surrounded by hunting dogs.

"Who do you think he was?" the German soldier asked the boy, but he couldn't understand the German language.

"I don't know," answered the second soldier.

"He looks like someone of high rank, but look at him. Filthy... and dying on the run like a scared rabbit."

The United States was now very worried. Britain couldn't last long, now that Hitler's gaze could return to the thorn in his side. Churchill knew that Hitler would feel invincible, and appealed to the United States to become involved militarily. His plea was met with nothing but meaningless platitudes. The combination of the peace lobby in the United States and the worry of facing a powerful Axis meant neutrality was chosen by Washington, D. C., instead of intervention to help an ally.

Not far south of Washington, D. C. in Philadelphia, Owens had found employment as National Director of Physical Education for African-Americans with the Office of Civilian Defense. He was very excited to receive a letter from Germany. It had taken months to reach him. Knowing the letter was from his lifelong friend Luz Long, he opened it with glee. His heart sank when he read the letter's sombre contents.

*Dear Jesse,*

*My heart is telling me that this is perhaps the last letter of my life. If that is so, I beg one thing from you. When the war is over, please go to Germany, find my son and tell him about his father. Tell him about the times when war did not separate us and tell him that things can be different between men in this world.*

*Your brother, Luz.*

Owens knew Long had been in combat with the German forces as an artillery gunner during World War II. While he despised Hitler's hatred for other races, he knew his friend held different views, and prayed that Long would be safe. The war might be over, but he knew conflict was not at an end. It could never be, not if the world was to find its equilibrium again after such obvious pain.

The United States decided to accelerate covert activities to provide a strategic advantage. The Manhattan Project began in earnest in late 1941, thanks to Mr Sengier's uranium ore. There would be no effort spared.

It had been only twenty five years since New Zealander Ernest Rutherford had 'split the atom' in England to show the behaviour of different particles in an atom, and in doing so had discovered the proton. Progress was rapid at the Manhattan Project, with all available resources thrown at the research. Hundreds of scientists toiled, but their work had to remain top secret.

Professor J. Robert Oppenheimer, a 37 year old tall, thin, and aloof genius from the University of California with ethnic German roots sat pondering. He was a specialist in nuclear physics, and a chain smoker of cigarettes.

"Oppie..." his Italian colleague Enrico Fermi interrupted Oppenheimer's thoughts. "To be honest I feel a little strange that we're sitting here in the United States, while our people are in turmoil back home in Europe."

Oppenheimer sat back in his wooden chair on the concrete outside the laboratory. He glanced at Fermi, three years his senior – a brilliant Italian scientist with receding dark hair, and large ears that he joked about sometimes. Not now though.



“I know, we heard that my Jewish relatives that remained have all gone, deported. We don’t know where.”

“I bet Albert is pleased that the Einsteins were able to leave Nazi Germany when they did, huh?” Fermi mused.

“Well thank God for having him on our side, wouldn’t you say?”

Over the radio next to Fermi came the melodic Bing Crosby hit *I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas*.

“Geez Oppie, that’s for sure. It’s only two months to Christmas and we’re as hot as hell sitting in the desert. No sign of any snow here!”

The fiery sun sank slowly towards the New Mexico desert skyline. Here the theoretical and the real world would collide. Oppenheimer wondered what would happen.

*What will the future hold for humanity in these dark days?*

END OF PART ONE