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TO FLEE OR NOT TO FLEE - THAT'S THE QUESTION

An Assessment of Flight as a Response to Plague by the Muslim and Non-Muslim Residents of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th Century

Gisele MARIEN¹

Abstract

This study analyses the behavior during plague outbreaks of both Muslim and non-Muslim residents in the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. To this end, the travelers' accounts of Ogier de Busbecq, Dr. John Covel, Evliya Çelebi, and Giovanni Tommaso Minadoi were consulted as well as the diary of Marino Sanudo. Another source of information formed the selected cases of Ottoman judicial records, as discussed by Jennings. The theological aspects of flight in times of plague were illustrated using the nineteenth-century Turkish translation of the plague treatise *Risâletü'l-Ibaâ an Mevâki'i'l-Vebâ* by İdris-i Bitlisi and the fetvas of Ebussuud as edited by Düzdağ. The findings of this investigation were subsequently contrasted with the image of Islamic “fatalistic” attitude towards plague.

Key Words: *Ottoman Subjects, Plague, Social Behavior, Orientalism*

Özet

Bu çalışma on altıncı yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda ikamet eden Müslim ve Gayrimüslim nüfusun veba salgınları esnasındaki tavırlarını incelemektedir. Çalışmada, Ogier de Busbecq, Dr. John Covel, Evliya Çelebi, Giovanni Tommaso Minadoi gibi yazarların seyahatnameleri ile Marino Sanudo'nun günlükleri kaynak olarak kullanılmış, ayrıca Jennings tarafından inceleme konusu yapılan Osmanlı kadı sicillerine de müracaat edilmiştir. Veba salgınının ortaya çıktığı yerin terk edilip edilmeyeceğine dair teolojik tartışma ise İdris-i Bitlisi'ye ait *Risâletü'l-Ibaâ an Mevâki'i'l-Vebâ* adlı risalenin on dokuzuncu yüzyılda yapılmış Türkçe çevirisi ve

¹ PhD Student, History Department, Bilkent University, Ankara. marien@bilkent.edu.tr

Düzdağ tarafından hazırlanmış Şeyhülislam Ebussuud Efendi'nin fetvaları ışığı altında değerlendirilmiştir. Bu incelemenin neticesinde elde edilen bulguların, veba söz konusu olduğunda dile getirilen İslamî “kaderci” tavra yönelik sabit fikir ile örtüşmediği görülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Osmanlı Tebaası, Veba, Sosyal Tavır, Oryantalizm*

The presumed fatalism of the Ottoman Muslim population with respect to plague, far from being a relic of nineteenth-century Orientalist imagery, is still taken for granted by numerous contemporary historians.² After all, in the earliest days of Islam, which coincided with the continuation of the Justinian plague pandemic, the religious principle was formulated not to flee from a place infected by the disease. Added to this tenet was the Islamic refusal of the mechanisms of contagion or infection. Giving weight to a fatalistic interpretation of this Islamic theological framework were the observations by contemporary Western visitors of the Ottoman Empire, who marvelled at the stoic calm of the Ottomans in the face of the calamity. Most of all, the assurance that “their fortunes were written on their forehead”,³ impressed the foreign visitors. Thus, the image became firmly rooted of complacent, fatalistic Ottoman Turks versus resourceful, mostly western, Europeans, who devised a thousand ingenious ways to be spared the disease.

In order to assert the veracity of this presumption, it helps to look at how Europeans were actually behaving when they were residing in the Ottoman Empire in times of plague. Important source of information form the diaries written by Marino Sanudo. This corpus of letters, reports and personal comments contains among others the commentaries of the Venetian baylo and their personnel over a period of thirty-six years in the first half of the sixteenth century, allowing us insight into their reactions when confronted with the disease in Istanbul.⁴ The first fifteen years passed with plague being mentioned only briefly, but in a letter of November 1512, the baylo *Nicolò Justinian* reported to have fled Istanbul with the rest of the Venetian merchants.⁵ A year later, he made the balance of the toll the plague had taken on the city.

² For an example see Lowry's article “Pushing the Stone Uphill”, 131

³ Ogier de Busbecq, 189, likewise Covell, 88

⁴ Marino Sanuto, *I diarii*.

⁵ Sanuto, vol 15, col. 410.

To Flee Or Not To Flee - That's The Question

According to his estimates, some sixty thousand people had died in the course of the epidemic.⁶ From his observation that 'business was slack because the Ottoman court had left Istanbul', it can be inferred that he and his fellow Venetian merchants had not followed the court to healthier surroundings. That the outbreak made such an impact can be attributed to the fact that, if the diaries of Sanudo are to be believed, the disease had been absent in the city during the previous eight years. This meant that a new generation of children had not been previously exposed to the disease and so was especially vulnerable when the outbreak arrived.

The next years, plague was a regular visitor to the city, its occurrence most likely being caused by the major troop movements caused by Selim's vigorous campaigning in the East. In the summer of 1516, the new baylo *Lunardo Bembo* wrote that he had to leave his house in Pera because someone in his household had caught the disease. His remark shows that leaving town whenever a plague outbreak occurred had not been standard procedure for the Venetian baylos. For in spite of the fact that the disease had made great progress during the whole of summer, as other letters testify, Lunardo Bembo had not left town before conditions eventually forced him to.⁷ However, his successor, *Tomà Contarini* was not so cool-headed, when he in turn was confronted with a huge plague outbreak in Edirne during spring of 1520. Desperately, he wrote the Venetian senate that he lacked the money to leave the city and return to Pera that presumably was then plague-free and even thought of selling his furniture to finance the trip.⁸ The description of his misfortune might have been exaggerated to make the senate of Venice pay for his traveling expenditures, but *Tomà Contarini* did indeed in the end leave for Pera. From his home there, the baylo again sent a letter in the month of August of that same year stating that he would have to go back to Edirne, since Selim had intended to spend the winter there. Again, he voiced his concern about the unsalubrious conditions in Edirne, where he claimed the air was bad.⁹ However, inspite of his good intentions the baylo apparently took his health more seriously than his duties, for when Selim

⁶ Sanuto, vol. 17, col.159 and 160

⁷ Sanuto, vol. 23, col. 115 and vol 23, col. 40/41.

⁸ Sanuto, vol. 28, col. 229-230.

⁹ Bad air was considered a great risk, while it was thought to provoke plague according to the miasma theory.

died the next month, he was still in Pera.¹⁰ Great must have been his relief when he learned about Selim's demise, which relieved him from the obligation of confronting plague himself in Edirne. However, the baylo would once more have to deal with plague before his term ended. In August of 1522, his successor *Andrea di Priuli* wrote that plague had hit Istanbul once more terribly, with twenty three thousand people dying in almost as many days. Moreover, the Venetian galley *Querini* onto which the former baylo Tomà Contarini had boarded, was reported to have plague on board! As a result, the vessel could not join the rest of the fleet in Candia and had to anchor off the shore of Frascia.¹¹

Whether or not *Andrea di Priuli* shared his predecessor's fears, fact is that he stayed in Istanbul despite the outbreak that continued the same way next year. There he fell victim to the disease and reportedly died within two days on July 16, 1523.¹² The Venetian orator *Piero Zen* had been granted an audience with the sultan Süleyman shortly before the death of the baylo, which clearly illustrates that even the Ottoman sultan was at risk to contract the disease himself, for the orator had supped with the deceased on the evening before he became ill. Maybe Süleyman indeed considered the danger to his health too great, for he did not agree to any more audiences afterwards. This proved a sensible precaution, because although the orator himself did not go down with plague, several people in his household did. Moreover, the sultan actually paid the orator money to stay at home with guards preventing his leaving the house or entertaining guests. These measures were abolished after some time.¹³

Andrea di Priuli was not the only high official to die of plague while exerting his functions in Istanbul. Two and a half years later, the dragoman *Ali bey* was also to succumb to the disease. The dragoman's sense of duty, though not of sound judgment had been so high that he reported to *Ibraim Pasha* while too ill to be able to stand upright. In spite of the outbreak making as many as five hundred to six hundred victims a day, and of the unhappy fate of his predecessor, the baylo *Piero Bragadin* did not leave Pera and dutifully continued his visits to the Ottoman dignitaries. Besides, there were no fellow Venetians left to socialize with, for they had all fled to the vineyards!¹⁴ Upon

¹⁰ Sanuto, vol. 29, col. 322. Selim's death triggered an avalanche of reports and letters, speculating about the sultan's demise, which was believed to be caused by plague.

¹¹ Sanuto, vol. 33, col. 448, 449, and 468.

¹² Sanuto, vol.34, col. 384 and vol. 35, col. 257.

¹³ Sanuto, vol. 35, col. 257.

¹⁴ Sanuto, vol. 40, col. 513-515.

returning to Venice, *Piero Bragadin* was careful to mention his responsible behavior in his report to the Venetian authorities, emphasizing that he had not avoided talking to plague-stricken people nor in any other way protected himself while performing his duty. However, his fellow Venetian *Piero Zen*, who had witnessed the swift demise of *Andrea Priuli* in Istanbul a decade before had most likely not forgotten the experience. Therefore, when he was present as a vice-baylo and orator in Istanbul during the summer of the year 1532, he took the precaution of renting the house of Cantacuzenos, although the city was free of the disease at that time. Meanwhile, *Contarini*, who returned to the Ottoman Empire as an orator to the sultan the next year was still as scared of plague as he used to be when he first had been appointed baylo a decade before. Thus, when his galley arrived in Dubrovnik (Ragusa), he refused to stay in that town because it was suffering from a fierce plague outbreak.

In a time span of twenty years, six Venetian baylos were each confronted with serious plague outbreaks in Istanbul. Contrary to conventional expectations, they did not all flee the city when confronted with an outbreak. Indeed, according to Sanudo's diaries, three of them fled while the others stayed behind to take care of their duties. Moreover, of those that left, *Lunardo Bembo* took the pains to explain that he was forced to leave, because plague in his household had made it inevitable to do so. A decade later, *Piero Bragadin* pointed out while reporting in person to the Venetian senate that he had continued his duties notwithstanding great personal danger and even getting ill with what seems to have been plague.¹⁵ It is obvious that he thought his attitude to have been worthy of praise, not ridicule. Mockery on the other hand was reserved by Sanudo for the anxious *Tomà Contarini* who was “endlessly lamenting” about the hardship he suffered.¹⁶ This brief analysis thus shows that the baylos often decided to confront the disease, and that their fellow Venetians thought it laudable to do so.

In contrast, a few decades later the Habsburg envoy of Flemish origin *Ogier de Busbecq* did all he could in order to persuade the Ottoman ruler to allow him to leave Istanbul during a major plague outbreak¹⁷ At first, the sultan flatly refused to grant permission for his departure and de Busbecq and his household were obliged to confront the disease in Istanbul. After the death of

¹⁵ Sanuto, vol. 40, col. 513-515.

¹⁶ Sanuto, vol. 28, col 232.

¹⁷ De Busbecq, 182-183.

Rüstem pasha in 1561, his successor Ali pasha proved a better negotiator on the part of de Busbecq, for when there was another outbreak, the latter was allowed to go to Büyükkada, where he spent a few months in self-imposed exile. At first glance, the initial refusal of Süleyman, based upon the opinion that “the time and manner of each man's death is inscribed by God upon his forehead; if, therefore, he is destined to die, it is useless for him to try to avert fate”, seems to confirm a fatalistic attitude. This impression is reinforced by the fact that in his reply, Süleyman set his own behavior as an example, explaining that although there were cases of the disease in his own household, he had not bothered to leave. If this story represents a true reflection of the sultan's thoughts and actions, it illustrates the evolution of Süleyman's character, for the sultan had been previously known to leave the city in times of plague. A number of historians have claimed that Süleyman had become more pious during the latter days of his life and de Busbecq himself made a similar observation with regard to the sultan.¹⁸ The Habsburg ambassador wrote how Süleyman had banned the choir of boys he enjoyed listening to or had refrained from eating from silver plates after he was told that these were impious acts. Judging by the fact that these changes took place while de Busbecq was there to witness them, they must have taken place between 1554 and 1562. A similar change of attitude might explain Süleyman's stance towards plague. As mentioned before, the sultan had been known to have left Istanbul during plague outbreaks. In 1533, for instance, the Venetian baylo Nicolò Justinian reported that the sultan and Ibrahim pasha had fled to Beykoz out of fear of plague.¹⁹ And when de Busbecq arrived in Turkey, he had to travel to Edirne to meet with Süleyman, who had the habit of leaving in winter for the hunting grounds within the vicinity of that city, both because he was a keen hunter *and* because he believed the air there to be beneficial for his health.²⁰ But as we observed, near the end of de Busbecq's stay, he chided de Busbecq for not acknowledging that "pestilence is God's

¹⁸ According to Caroline Finkel, the sultan both became more pious in his later years *and* concerned to project 'a sober image of the Ottoman dynasty, one considered appropriate to an Islamic world power within more or less fixed frontiers.' Finkel, *Osman's dream. The Story of the Ottoman Empire 1300-1923*. 2006, 144.

¹⁹ Sanuto, vol. 58, col. 697-699.

²⁰ De Busbecq claims that 'the Sultan... was attracted by the opportunities offered for hawking and for enjoying a climate more bracing than that of Constantinople, both of which he regarded as beneficial to his health.' *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq*, 88. As observed above, it was the common assumption that bad, putrid air or *miasma* caused plague, whereas clean, dry air worked preventive.

arrow, which does not miss its appointed mark. If he wished me to be smitten, no flight or hiding-place could avail me..."²¹ Maybe these were philosophical remarks on the part of a tired, elderly man, who in the previous years not only had to suffer the loss of his beloved wife, but also had to intervene in the power struggle of his sons. Religious restrictions should not needed to have bothered the sultan, for if he had any qualms about the matter of flight, his Şeyh'ül-İslâm Ebussuud Efendi could have dispelled them. Indeed, one of his *fetvahs* answers the question whether it is according to sharia to flee from plague with the remark: "*Hak te'âlâ hazretinin kahrından lütfuna ilticâ etmek niyeti ve i'tikâdi ile câizdir.*"²² If it is with the intention to seek refuge in the mercy of God, flight is permitted. Though one of the most influential *ulema* of the sixteenth century, Ebussuud had by no means been the first Ottoman religious authority to assert the Ottoman rulers that flight was permitted. In his plague treatise dedicated to Süleyman's father Selim, the scholar İdris-i Bitlisi, who had fled Syria when confronted with an outbreak there, explicitly described this event before going on to argue that is lawful to leave a place that is plague-stricken.²³

Nevertheless, apart from pious reflections, there may have been a more mundane reason for the sultan's initial refusal to allow de Busbecq's departure. The Habsburg envoy was his *de facto* prisoner, pending the outcome of endless peace negotiations. That the possibility of his escape was indeed a concern is illustrated by the anxiety of some of the pashas, who were concerned that staying on an island, de Busbecq could easily find ships with which to flee.²⁴ Despite the fact that the diplomat was spending his time fishing and going on long walks, he obviously missed the companionship of his friend and member of his household, Dr. William Quacquelben, whose death from plague had preceded his second request to leave Istanbul. It is very well possible that some of his less flattering comments on the sultan were the result of feelings of animosity towards the sultan, whom he might have kept responsible for his friend's death by initially having refused permission to go outside Istanbul, thereby leaving him and his friend exposed to the disease. From his writings, it is clear that de Busbecq believed that the disease spread by way of contagion

²¹ De Busbecq, 182-183.

²² Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislâm Ebussuud Efendi Fetvaları Işığında 16. Asır Türk Hayatı*, 182.

²³ İdris-i Bitlisi, transl. by Mahmud Han "Hisnü'l-vabâ." (translation of *Risâletü'l-Ibaâ an Mevâki'i'l-Vebâ.*)

²⁴ De Busbecq, 189.

and especially that the clothes of the plague-stricken were dangerous to handle.²⁵ However, in spite of that fact, even he let loyalty and friendship prevail over precaution. For when his friend William contracted plague he did not hesitate to go to his room and spend a long time with him, although he must have understood that his friend was suffering from the disease.²⁶

The above examples clearly establish that accepted precautions against plague, such as fleeing or keeping away from patients were frequently *not* implemented by the Europeans residents of Istanbul, be they Venetians or Flemings. But did the Ottoman Turks themselves always remain in their cities in times of plague, convinced of the unavoidability of plague? From the judicial records of that period, it can be inferred that they did not.²⁷ As Jennings discussed in his article on Plague in Trabzon, the city suffered from the disease in the years 1565-6. As a result, such an important part of the population fled that the local hammams ran out of customers and had to plea for a reduction of their taxes. Moreover, it is clear from certain entries in the recordings that not only the non-Muslim population of Trabzon fled. Turkish officials in its surrounding villages did as well, thereby risking to incur the wrath of their superiors. Although it was harvest time, the sipahi İbrahim ibn İskender chose to foresake his duty as *kabancı* to weigh the crops and fled out of fear of plague.²⁸ However, was he an exception to the presumed fatalistic attitude of the Ottoman Turks? Other fetvas issued by Ebussuud indicate that he was not. One *fetva* argued that *imams* and *müezzins*, who fled town, leaving the poor and destitute behind without anyone to perform the Islamic funeral rituals on them, should be punished.²⁹ Another question concerned Muslim villagers that sent their families to a plague-free Christian village during an epidemic.³⁰ Both questions indicate that the practice of flight occurred and that even Muslim clergy did not hesitate to leave town, thereby foresaking their duties. That the plague outbreaks which hit the Ottoman empire were as terrifying and lethal in the second half of the sixteenth century as they were in the first half, is apparent from Evliya Çelebi's observation of a terrible outbreak that took place during the reign of Selim II. Announcements were made that a special prayer would be

²⁵ De Busbecq, 189 and 68

²⁶ De Busbecq, 184,185

²⁷ See the numerous examples cited by Jennings in *Plague in Trabzon*, 670-673.

²⁸ Jennings, "Plague in Trabzon and Reactions to it According to Judicial Registers", 671.

²⁹ Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislâm Ebussuud Efendi Fetvaları Işığında 16. Asır Türk Hayatı*, 178.

³⁰ Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislâm Ebussuud Efendi Fetvaları Işığında 16. Asır Türk Hayatı*, 93.

To Flee Or Not To Flee - That's The Question

organized in the Aya Sofia mosque and unsurprisingly, attendance to the service was so high that people were standing shoulder to shoulder.³¹

Finally, it seems that the observations of Dr. John Covell, who visited the Ottoman Empire in the late seventeenth century, illustrate the general attitude of the Turkish people.³² During his stay in Edirne Dr. Covell, who was a member of the household of the English ambassador Sir Daniel Harvey, fled the city because of a dangerous plague outbreak. In the little village where he stayed, a number of Turkish households had likewise sought refuge for the disease. As he commented:

*'The best sort of people fled to other places, as the Turkes likewise did from Adrianople to their houses there. (And although) there is a story that they are not afraid of the plague, because their fortunes are wrote in their forehead; for all fled, but such as were poor or had offices about court, and could not get away.'*³³

Dr. Covell obligingly repeats the famous observation that Turks did not care about plague, because fate was written on their forehead. His personal experience had thought him that this was just a *story*, a convenient fiction, because he witnessed how Turks that had the opportunity to flee did so unhesitatingly.³⁴ Again, according to Covell, those Turks that were compelled to stay behind did not seem to worry unduly about the menace of plague. This display of careless attitude was recorded by other sources such as de Busbecq or Giovanni Tommaso Minadoi, who wrote the *Historia della Guerra fra Turchi et Persiani* at the end of the sixteenth century, likewise marveled about the complacency of Ottoman Turks when confronted with the disease. In the words of Minadoi, "Most Turks are no more afraid of plague than they would be of any other benign disease".³⁵

These and similar recordings by contemporary observers of the Ottomans later became evidence for the Orientalist stereotype of the fatalistic attitude of

³¹ Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatname*, 1, 54.

³² John Covell, *Voyages en Turquie, 1675-1677*

³³ Dr John Covell, *Voyages en Turquie, 1675-1677*, 88.

³⁴ Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens, Vol II, Les hommes face à la peste*, 164-165, cites several examples of city-states such as Florence and Udine, which tried to impose this kind of unpopular measures.

³⁵ Giovanni Tommaso Minadoi, *Historia della Guerra fra Turchi, et Persiani*, 347.

Islam. This commonly accepted cliché does not account for the actual behavior of people as recorded by the sources. In addition, it completely ignores the abovementioned restrictions on the free movement of people and the desire of the central authority to prevent a complete collapse of communal solidarity in times of plague.³⁶ Furthermore, it does not take into consideration that the reformed churches in Europe, such as the puritans and even Luther himself pondered the question of whether it was preferable to confront the disease, perform one's duty and trust in God.³⁷ Finally, if those that were obliged to stay behind remained stoically calm and complacent about it, were they "fatalistic" or "cool-headed"? We demonstrated above that the Islamic tenet "do not flee a plague-stricken place" was not upheld by two prominent Ottoman *ulema*, who considered that Islamic law offered the possibility of flight to those who accepted that the outcome depended on God's mercy.³⁸ This theological approval of flight must have comforted the Ottoman Turks, although it is doubtful whether it influenced their behavior greatly. In any case, they did not act differently from Christian Europeans and often fled when confronted with a plague outbreak.

³⁶ Authorities in western Europe were also preoccupied about a breakdown of social structures and in some cases tried to prevent fleeing by demanding a heavy fine from those who did not return immediately. This measure had little effect, however, for most that fled preferred to pay.

³⁷ Hirst, *The Conquest of Plague*, 45.

³⁸ In fact, this view was also held by certain of the older, Arabic writers of plague treatises. One precedent upon which they based their argumentation was created by the Caliph 'Umar, who ordered his army commander Abû 'Ubaydah to leave the plague-stricken region of Anwas. Abu Umar convinced his pious underling with the argument that whoever arrives in a valley with his animals will choose the green side as a pasture, not the barren land. Yet this choice too, would be the will of God. See Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, 22.

APPENDIX

The recorded outbreaks for the period 1497 – 1533, based upon the entries in Sanudo's diaries were as follows:³⁹

winter 1496-1497: (300/day) Istanbul
summer 1497: full epidemic in Istanbul
summer-autumn 1500: presence of plague in Istanbul
winter 1500-1501: full epidemic in Istanbul
summer 1501: full epidemic in Istanbul
autumn 1501: (800/day) in Istanbul
summer 1502: presence of plague in Istanbul
winter 1502-1503: (200/day) in Istanbul (+200/day) in Edirne
summer 1503: full epidemic in Istanbul
winter 1503-1504: full epidemic in Istanbul and the rest of the country
spring 1510: presence of plague in Edirne
autumn 1512: (300/day) in Istanbul
summer 1513: (300/day) total 60 000 in Istanbul
summer 1514: full epidemic in Aleppo
plague in the camp of Selim's army
autumn 1514: start of outbreak in Istanbul
summer 1516: full epidemic in Istanbul and Tessaonica
summer of 1518: full epidemic in Istanbul
winter 1518-1519: epidemic is abating in Istanbul
winter-spring 1519-1520 : full epidemic in Edirne
summer 1520 : full epidemic in Edirne, low prevalence in Istanbul
summer of 1522: (+1000/day) in Istanbul
summer of 1523: (500/day) in Istanbul
winter of 1523-1524: presence of plague in Istanbul
autumn of 1525: (500/day) in Istanbul
winter of 1525-26: epidemic is abating in Istanbul
summer of 1526: plague in the camp of the Ottoman army
autumn of 1526: presence of plague in Istanbul
winter of 1526-1527: presence of plague in Ragusa and Istanbul

³⁹ For detailed references and the original quotes, see my unpublished master's thesis, *The Black Death in Early Ottoman Territories, 1347-1550*.

Gisele Marien

spring of 1527: increasing epidemic in Istanbul
summer of 1527: (200/day) in Istanbul
summer of 1529: end of plague in Istanbul
summer of 1530: full epidemic in Istanbul
spring of 1532: no plague in Istanbul
summer - autumn of 1532: full epidemic in Cluino and its villages
winter-spring 1533: full epidemic in the Morea
summer 1533: full epidemic in the Morea and Ragusa
started in the Ottoman army
(500/day) in Istanbul

In 37 years, there were 17 years of major outbreaks in Istanbul. As is clear from the discussion above, plague by no means disappeared in the rest of the 16th century.

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To Flee Or Not To Flee - That's The Question

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