

Mad Gods – Redux Volume I

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MAD GODS

TM

VOL. I



Athanasios



MONAXIA



- Monaxia -

TIME: MAY 29TH, 1960, ISTANBUL, TURKEY

Istanbul conjured images of ancient history. Medieval Christian sculptures and mosaics stood among electric streetlights and movie posters. As he walked the city's streets, Kosta Paleologos saw the past amidst the modern hustle and bustle and felt grief, called *monaxia* - a longing for home and the familiar, which deepened in Istanbul. Everywhere, he saw faded glory, and turned Istanbul to *Kostadinoupoli*. Greeks to Byzantines.

Every year, he returned to the city on May 29th. It was a duty, which had been handed down through generations of this family with brown eyes, *monaxia* and brown hair. They were successors to Athens, Sparta, Macedonia and Rome. Pericles, Leonidas, Alexander and Caesars, from Julius to Constantine, evolved into Byzantine's Emperor. He was Christ's Caesar and ruled by divine decree, undreamt of by later pretenders. France's Louis and Napoleon, England's Henry and Charles, paled in comparison to Justinian and the First Constantine the Great. They were history. They were gone in every way, but in memory. Nothing remained as it was. No amount of prayer, hope or *monaxia* could change that.

Kosta knew this and came to Istanbul, because there were souls, still clinging to the history of their memories. Just as people prayed to God, Greeks felt *monaxia* and souls roamed *Kostadinoupoli*. To them, it was still 1453, and they fought desperately to keep their city. These unfortunate souls were unable to leave. They wandered and died in their memory. Over and over, they suffered lesser pain, than the total agony of death. They were terrified to face this absolute split from life. They were unable to accept the fact that they lived in history, because giving into its finality would utterly destroy them.

They were right. It was total destruction they feared - death. In order to stave it off, they existed in the past. Their frantic grasp of the belief that they would vanish kept them in *Kostadinoupoli*, when it was Istanbul.

Kosta and his family held no such illusions. They pitied the Byzantine ghosts, wandering their ancient, stone streets, but knew that history and *Kostadinoupoli* were gone forever. They were fabricated memory. They were similar, but not the past. A photograph isn't the representation of reality we've come to believe it to be. God isn't either. Our prayers make Him what we want Him to be. We've been told that history and God were and are, real, therefore, we believe.

Most in the Paleologos family believed. Even the extended families they married into believed in the Byzantine, Orthodox *Theos*: God. The Agelopoulos, Kazatzakis, Galanis, Gatzoyiannis and the rest believed like good, Greek Orthodox. Many envied that Kosta came to *Kostadinoupoli* every year - they didn't call it Istanbul. Kosta rejected his uncles' and cousins' appeals to accompany him. This was something only he could do.

He looked up *Yrebatan Caddesi* and saw *Hagia Sophia* in the distance. The grand church was still distinguishable, between the later minarets and near the Ottoman, Blue Mosque. All about her, Turks, Greeks, Italians and too many others to list, walked on their individual ways. Some didn't see the racial distinctions that Kosta noticed, but most didn't care. They were that close to being racist and that far away from caring.

He ran a critical eye over them, trying to locate who didn't belong, looking for someone who stood out from the living. Eventually, he did find her. She didn't see cars or any of the modern details, which through the centuries, eroded a remembered life. Someone who walked with a shuffle to her confused step, as the world around her seeped into the past, clothing her senses. He approached the woman who saw no one. She didn't

see the modern slacks, blue jeans and neckties worn by the living. Her face and clothes were pale and colorless. Her dress, centuries old, fell on her in a shabby mess, beneath the kerchief covering her head. She didn't speak when she noticed Kosta, but stopped abruptly, struck motionless. Her eyes were shocked wide and her mouth fell open in silence.

Kosta reached forward and, with a touch on her shoulder, knocked her into himself. She did not stumble romantically into his arms, but fell into his body and was absorbed. Through his eyes, she saw that ***Kostadinoupoli*** was gone, and was confused by the alien assault on her senses. She saw nothing familiar, no one she knew, heard no known language and saw the impossible. Carriages moved by themselves. Light shone without sun or flame. Nothing made sense to her.

It was this way each time. He felt her internal chaos and let her adjust to his senses. He stepped out of his body and watched his head swing in every direction, reacting to the repeated blows to her memory. Slowly, he came back into himself; his consciousness enveloped her and explained.

Kosta began by sharing his thoughts, without the faulty translation of words, or the loss of context. Through their shared mind, she understood what no verbal explanation could impart. He revealed to her that she was dead. Nothing in her memory would help her, so she must pay attention to him. The quelling of her initial confusion allowed her to grasp his floating thoughts, amidst the storm of her senses. She experienced his mind as her own. She released her memories and moved forward from what she remembered. There was no going back. She moved with time and stopped festering in 1453. After moments, which seemed to last for hours or days, time and history finally lost meaning.

History and ***Kostadinoupoli*** no longer existed. They were no longer the anchors holding her, and she came to a unique peace. She wept when she found her children and family after her centuries of searching in ***Kostadinoupoli***. They waited, just as she knew they would. All were gathered for ***paska***, the Easter feast, laid out before them. Lamb turned on an open fire and she saw, smelt and heard that for which she longed. While she had lived in fragmented memories, centuries passed, but now in her paradise, it was all real, as she had known it would be.

Kosta smiled at her bliss and warmed to the peace that she gave herself.

She wasn't the last. Two more souls still clung to history. This year for the Truth, there would only be three. Three souls would possess Kosta, who would then show them how to release their stubborn grasp on lives long past.

Since the fall of ***Kostadinoupoli***, the Truth, a descendant of the last Byzantine Emperor, returned every year to guide spirits forward to their final rest. He never verbally spoke to them, but transferred his understanding and, by sharing his body, they understood that the world was no longer for the dead, but rather for the living.

Not every year was so light. Not all who were shown reality accepted it with little drama. Many still clung to rage and hate from their pasts. They still fought enemies and attacked them, even as they shared the Truth's body. They still fought any who wanted to take their city. They still fought a six hundred year-old battle. Some of Kosta's ancestors had been lost when they attempted to bring peace to the hate-mongers. They had lost control of themselves and, as a result, lingering hate had possessed the Truth.

Even after such loss, there was always another Paleologos, another Truth, ready to continue the mission. No calling was ever needed, and none was ever rejected. From the time at which they endured the fall of their city, the family had dispersed. They took jobs, married into other families and continued on with time and life, though they never forgot

their heritage.

In every generation, a particular child would show himself to be adept in the Truth. It was never questioned, and only those properly compelled ever took the mantle. It came as naturally as eating and drinking. All of Kosta's family - parents, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents - knew he was a Truth. The choice was no one's to make. It came, as did his brown hair and eyes, squared shoulders, jaw and remarkable nose. He thought of this as he continued onto the next soul he would release, getting closer to *Hagia Sophia*.

One day, ten years previously, Kosta's uncle, George, came with his bulbous nose, easy laugh and huge glasses to, tell him that he didn't want to go on. He wanted Kosta to embrace their task and become the Truth. George knew that he, himself, wouldn't see it to completion. His eyes sparkled, his smile tight, as they spoke. Kosta felt the same smile crease over his teeth at the memory.

His parents let them speak in private. They were always reverent when Uncle George spoke to him. They distanced themselves from the Truth, even their own son, never understanding the gift. His father even pitied him. They once told Kosta that they wished he had another fate. The Truth led a lonely life. Kosta's father saw it firsthand with his brother, George.

That day, when Kosta heard that he would become the Truth, he felt a fear that he, as well, would be alone. Their task left no room for love or family. There was only the release of souls. This was merely an outside perspective. Very few people understood the full implications. Uncle George did; eventually, Kosta did as well. There was no room for self-pity. The Truth rejected all, but his particular task. It was that simple.

"It's almost over now, *ayori mou, kodevou meh, siya, siya, kodevou meh*." Uncle George chuckled at his terrible Greekglish. "Pack your memories and embrace your family. There is no need for any clothes or necessities, as everything will be provided at Alexandria. When we arrive, I'll tell you everything."

Kosta took a few minutes, putting three mementos into his left shirt pocket. They were pictures of his family. Of his parents and sister at the beach, around the paska - Easter feast, his sister's baptism, and of them standing proudly in front of their restaurant. "I've got everything; I can go." Kosta had already kissed his family, when he replied with a casual confidence.

"I know the hard part for anybody else." Uncle George corrected himself, "The impossible, for anyone else, is, for us, instinctive. You'll be taught how to maintain your life, so that you can complete our task. The arrangements have been made for you to look after all of our interests." Kosta looked confused. "What interests?"

"Being the Truth is an all-encompassing job, *ayori mou*. You can't flip pizzas in Restaurant Olympique in your spare time. You'll come to understand this, as has every other Truth, and as have I." The jovial man turned serious and Kosta listened intently. "The Truth, every Truth, must develop many skills, which free them to do their real work - releasing souls." He continued, "A man will come to you after you've spent a while in Alexandria. He'll teach you how to survive."

"Aren't you coming with me?" He held his breath, afraid of the answer.

"I can't," George stated. "I've decided to relinquish this task. I'm finished with it. I've done all that I can do."

"Why can't you show me these other skills?"

"I know how to survive; you need your own answers." He smiled warmly. "You'll do better than anyone can dream," Uncle George assured him. "There are many who oppose what we do - those who don't want peace for Kostadinoupoli's souls."

They've been working against us since before there was a Byzantine Empire."

"The Catholics?" Kosta felt it in his stomach, as surely as the *monaxia*, about which the old Greeks spoke so bitterly. The Catholic Church had lived in the Byzantine shadow, since Constantine I moved the imperial capitol from pagan Rome to Christian ***Kostadinoupoli***. Under his hand, Christianity had evolved from a cult, into the imperial faith. Through jealous centuries, they watched the Byzantine Empire grow to become the envy of the known world, spanning both east and west, Christian and Muslim.

The Byzantines never took part in Crusades. They lived in relative harmony, competing in trade with everyone around them. It was the ideal soil for the growth of a vibrant culture. This cast the stagnant Catholic west further into the dark. The Dark Ages were dark, because they lived in the Byzantine shadow, its light revealing their faults.

It went on until their Muslim neighbors no longer wanted to compete. In 1450, they wanted the golden city, wanted ***Kostadinoupoli***, as their own. They tried bribes, cajoling and offered to let everyone live without harassment, as long as they left. All their attempts were rebuffed and, three years later, by force, they took what they couldn't through either guile or diplomacy.

"The Catholics let it happen," Kosta added. They exchanged parts of the story, just as every Truth did when they passed on the task. The retelling always renewed their determination to continue. Kosta already knew the story, but loved his uncle's embellishments.

In 1452, while still attempting diplomacy, Emperor John VIII, and the best of ***Kostadinoupoli***, went to Venice for help. They met officials from both the church and the state and bartered for their lives. The Venetians asked for trade and tariff agreements, which were small, compared to the Catholics' demands that the Byzantines admit spiritual obedience to the Papacy. After many negotiations with Doge, Cardinals, patriarchs and nobles, the Emperor ordered his delegates to accede every wish.

The Orthodox Patriarchs weren't happy with forced fealty and shouted prophecies of doom to all who would listen. The coming invasion, near complete sale of their culture and impending church rebellion, proved too much for John VIII. He died a year later and left his younger brother, Kostadino, Constantine XI - a career soldier - to rule. His life, which had been spent fighting for his brother, only prolonged the siege. They tried to hold out for the promised help, but it never came.

Venice, Florence, Genoa and Rome let them die and inherited a percentage of their glory. For centuries, they had been business partners, because the Byzantines brokered east to west and vice versa. After such a long association with Muslims and Catholics, they lost their city and empire to one, their grandeur and wealth to the other.

Rome could now boast the sole divine voice of Christendom. The Pope was God's only word on earth, but was just a fraction of the authors and editors of the Bible intended. ***Kostadinoupoli*** was the gateway for east and west, in both faith and commerce. That ended when the wily Venetians let them, and their glittering city, die at the hands of the Ottoman Turks.

After the total annihilation of the empire, the refugees who survived fled to the west, their vitality fueling the Renaissance. Their culture's death breathed new life into the west. Byzantine loss was Europe's gain, finally allowing them to move from under the shadow. Without ***Kostadinoupoli's*** fall, there would not have been a Venice, Florence, Da Vinci, Galileo, Copernicus, Michelangelo, Newton. The tale of their beloved city's fall was a mantra every Truth repeated.

This conversation always exchanged with the transfer of one Truth to another. It reminded them that in Istanbul, those still in limbo, between life and death, deserved

peace. They had fought long and hard, sacrificed, and lost, too much to be allowed to wander for eternity. They needed to continue on with their preordained fate. Remaining in history kept all fates still. It stopped their momentum. Many of those trapped souls might be reborn as pivotal individuals, over the course of time.

Kosta was often reminded of this initial talk. He found himself remembering his uncle, this year more than any other.

He still searched the crowd, looking at all the living passersby, but not finding anyone worth his attention. There were years, his uncle had warned, when there would be many. He had even warned that Kosta's preparation wouldn't equal the desperation that some of the souls would have for contact with reality. For too long, they had existed in memory, not knowing their hunger, their *monaxia*, for life. Kosta attracted them with his empathy and insight into their despair. He watched each go from ignorance to bliss, resignation or terror. Each and every respective destination was unique. Their destination was determined by their beliefs. Whatever they believed that they deserved for decisions they had made, and how they had lived, was the end which they finally faced.

There was one who steadfastly refused the Truth. Over generations of Truths, stubbornly, he only saw what he wanted. At times, he glimpsed all that went on around *Hagia Sophia*, saw the minarets and new inhabitants of *Kostadinoupoli*. Kosta found him haunting the grounds around the very church at which he had been patriarch during life. Patriarch Athanasius didn't want to let go of the past. He didn't want to let it die. He wouldn't let it pass to memory, for no one would then remember the defenders of the city as they were. No one would remember that they were successors of Hellas and Rome. Only history might recall the brilliance and grandeur that had been coveted by the medieval world.

He saw Kosta and rushed forward to rail at him. In Kosta, he saw what remained of the emperor, who had sold them to the Catholics. He was the ruler who had let an upstart church, from a provincial city, become their master.

"Why do you return to take souls away from their homes? There is no one left!" he spat. "You've brought more ruin on us than your cursed ancestor ever did!"

He brought Kosta up with a start, echoing the thoughts expressed during the final talk with Uncle George. The patriarch retold how John VIII, and later Kostadino XI, unified the Orthodox and Catholic churches, in hopes of military aid, which never came. Patriarch Athanasius led many citizens in open protest against the decision. Centuries after the ruin that befell them, Athanasius felt vindicated by time. It was the same discussion every Truth shared when he took the mantle fate held for him.

"I know what you think, Patriarch, and you might be right." Kosta spoke to the invisible presence and drew stares from those passing. "You chose to stay, and that, alone, is your choice. You hold no sway over anybody. They made up their own minds; they made their own choices."

"Why do you return and take those who fought so hard to defend their homes? Haven't they been through enough?" Athanasius labored, exhausted from the effort of existence. Now that he was alone, he didn't have the energy to go on.

"I've only tried to help those who want my assistance. They see the Truth and go to their judgment, which they have chosen."

"What kind of a devil are you then, to judge thus?" He couldn't comprehend how Kosta could be so presumptuous.

"I'm no devil and I don't judge. They see the Truth and they see whatever they have already chosen as judgment."

"You're no angel then. I've seen enough of whom you've sent screaming into hell

to know that you're no angel."

"Why do you say these things? I only show them the Truth. They've already judged themselves." Kosta felt the presence of the man and hung on his every word. In life, and even now, he commanded respect, reverence. Athanasius could only try and hold onto whatever he believed. Kosta pitied that the patriarch, having lost everyone else, was also losing the consciousness to which he'd clung, in frenzied desperation, for centuries. With every passing second of isolation, he was dissipating. He was becoming less substantial and joining the all-encompassing ether.

"Even if they go to *Satana*? How could you damn them?" His anguish brought him back from the fading shade to which he was slowly drifting.

"How did the church?" Kosta shot back, without thinking.

"We were God's will on earth!" the patriarch was outraged. "How dare you?"

"Your power came from the Emperor. No other could deal with God, except through him." His response was shocking, even to himself. Kosta had never felt this authority, which lent credence to his argument. He was all that was left of the imperial office and proved it to the patriarch.

"You are no emperor, only pale remnants of the office," he shot back, petulant.

"I'm enough to remind you that your church switched masters, quicker than a whore at an orgy. Once the city and emperor fell, they prostrated themselves before their new masters." Kosta's initial pity quickly turned to irritation, in response to obstinance of the old ghost. "Don't pass any judgment on me when you can't stand under the weight of the same."

"You lie! That could never be true! Liar!!" he screamed in despair, refusing to listen. He simply could not, would not, believe.

"It was survival, Patriarch! I don't fault them for it; it was what they had to do. If they hadn't, there would be no church. It would've died along with *Kostadino* and his city."

"You bear more than just his name. Your blood has the same arrogance." Athanasius, not used to disobedience, forgot that the Paleologos were the few people whom he must obey.

On the Istanbul street, Kosta's exchange appeared to be a monologue. He attracted attention and many people gave the man a wide berth. They suspected that he was mad, and avoided looking, but there was one who couldn't take his eyes off of him. A priest, with military bearing, watched intently from the shadows as Kosta continued talking, as it appeared, to no one.

"I'm sorry you don't see and won't listen, but finally, it's irrelevant. What I do is necessary, in order for those souls to find peace."

"You're damning them!" he screamed, but Kosta ignored him.

"I'm completing the duty which has fallen to the Truth. What the emperors have always done." His words were firm.

"*Ioanni* and *Kostadino* damned us all when they gave into the Pope's weakling church!" Athanasius railed, though he was slowly losing momentum.

"It was the only way! They needed the Catholics' help!"

"None came! It was all for nothing!" he sobbed, feeling the full weight of the Truth. "No help ever came."

In a bare whisper, Kosta asked, "Are you now ready?"

"They left us to die. Like lambs to slaughter." He pleaded, "*Kostadinoupoli* will rise again, won't it?" This forlorn, impossible hope escaped his lips. He wished that by saying it out loud, he could make it so.

“You’re history, you and **Kostadinoupoli**.” Athanasius heard Kosta's response and knew that it was true. He nodded and left, finally reduced to nothing. Kosta felt absolutely nothing from the patriarch’s thoughts. No heaven, no hell. There was nobody waiting for him from his past. He went into total emptiness. A void.

Minutes later, Kosta continued past **Hagia Sophia**, down **Yerebatan Caddesi** and **Ordu**, to **Koca Mustafapasa Caddesi** and the **Yedikule Fortress**. It was quite a walk, past grand Byzantine stone, still standing next to apartment tenements, with lines of wash drying on inset balconies. As he went from **Koca Mustafapasa** to **Yedikule Caddesi**, the buildings were medieval, two or three stories with overhanging upper floors and exposed, unpainted wood. Almost at the fortress, he passed a squat, stone construction that housed a convenience store, selling film and gum to tourists, on their way to the towers of **Yedikule**.

Kosta went between the tower, built by Theodosius I, another by Theodosius II, and past the five put up by order of Memhet the Conqueror. There stood Porta Aurea, the once Golden Gate. It was since bricked up, becoming a small doorway, through which a tall man could barely walk. Its gilding was gone. The mosaic Christ no longer presided over its lintel. It had been removed by the city’s conqueror, who had demolished it when he heard that angels kept the final emperor safe beneath its span. They said that he feared that if he left it intact, one day, **Kostadino XI** would return, saber in hand, and reclaim his city.

It had been a nice myth, which mere wishing could not make true, despite the hopes of the Greeks. They prayed that one day, Istanbul would be **Kostadinoupoli** and, once again, they would be Byzantines. No Truth had ever had that illusion. Until now, the task had never included their ancestor.

The Truth knew that his final charge was the armored figure, striding towards him from the once glittering gates and through the ruined stone walls. Beneath heavy brows and the steel crosspieces of his jeweled helmet, Kosta saw his grandfather’s eyes. They both recognized familiar features in each other as **Kostadino XI** faced **Kostadino XII**.

“It’s almost over for us. We’ll see if the Truth can finally have a life,” Kosta addressed his namesake.

Regret shook the emperor’s face from side to side. “No, I’m sorry, but there will be no rest for you. The Truth’s task will continue.” His eyes softened under his heavy brows.

“They always said that my task would be complete when all the defenders of the Golden City knew peace. What else do you want from me?” he yelled. “Haven’t I done enough already?!”

“No. Your current task has ended. You are to take on a different task - one that Plathon began years before our ruin.” He stated this with an effortless authority, against which Kosta fought anxiously. In life, this man’s word had always been taken as fact. His requests, never questioned, were carried out without thought of opposition. Kosta did more than think.

“What new task? Nobody spoke of this; I wasn’t told!”

“Nobody knew. It was only to be entrusted to the final two emperors when we unified the churches. It was to be the first step to unifying them all.” He replied without ceremony and his tone never hinted at the enormity of Plathon’s scheme.

“All the churches? Unifying all religions in the world?” Kosta wished that his bafflement had struck him mute. He prayed that this wasn’t real, rather one of his many nightmares. “You can’t be serious.”

“They’re all one. Many opposing faiths are merely alternate interpretations of

God. They're more similar than they are different," bartering his point and putting the explanation down as currency.

"What am I supposed to do with that?" Kosta saw no value in his words. "What do you want me to do!?" He couldn't believe this turn of events. He had never fully dreamed of a normal life, but in the last few years, he had allowed a glimmer of hope shine through. That tepid thought was drowned in the tidal wave of confusion, with which he was now confronted. "Plathon chose you to tell me," Kosta stated.

"You wouldn't have listened to anybody else." He confirmed the clever path, which the old teacher, Plathon, had chosen to take.

"Why should I listen to you? Why can't I go ahead and live life like everyone else and have a family? Why am I always Uncle Kosta?" He gave full reign to his frustration. "Why should I sacrifice anything more!?"

"I sacrificed everything. I could've left and lived luxuriously in any European court for the rest of my days," he countered, unmoved by his descendant's plight.

"You would've been a spectacle. You would have been little better than a performer - an amusement for courtiers and pampered nobles." Kosta could never see the once Byzantine Emperor presiding over any lesser post. Pride would never allow it. The highest rank in the world could condone nothing less.

"That doesn't sound terrible. I would've been alive. Instead, I chose to die here, with my city and my people. I had to wait centuries to talk to you." He added, returning to an earlier point, "If I hadn't been the last soul, you wouldn't have even listened."

"What is it that you wish to tell me!?" Kosta exhaled, exasperated.

"Return to Mystra. Find Plathon. He will tell you what you must do," the emperor concluded cryptically.

"Why can't you tell me?" This confused Kosta more. What could they be expecting that they couldn't say all at once? The build-up from his namesake, and this final edict, dictating that he must seek out another, was anticlimactic. He was enormously disappointed.

"I can only convince you to continue to another task after the Truth is done here," he answered.

"What does Plathon want? What's he after?" Kosta asked.

"He wants to continue what began on our trip to Venice. Where he convinced Cossimo de Medici to start his collegio, when we sought their help." His eyes shifted down, remembering the betrayal that followed all the false promises by Doge, Medici and Cardinals.

"Where they promised aid, which never came." Kosta poured salt on the wound, further bowing the emperor's head.

"Yes." His whispered answer boomed with the regret of centuries, emperors gone and a culture squandered, left to die. A culture built on commerce and diplomacy, not conquest. They watched as the west went on Crusade after Crusade, never, themselves, taking active part in war. It wasn't good for trade, for which they were envied, their success and confidence despised as arrogance. Those, under their shadow, coveted their wealth and position in trade, and in Venice, bartered with them, winning them over with false assurances.

"Their Pope and Cardinals assured us," he stated.

"They let you die to take your place. The Pope usurped your place as the Word of God, and Venice became the wealthiest and most envied city in Christendom." Kosta added piteously, "You died so that they could inherit a fraction of your glory."

"You're right. They wanted our wealth and our place." He took the blows and,

unconquered, added. "The aid we expected was only one reason we didn't just let the sultan have the city. The other was our teacher's plan."

"Georgios, Gemistos Plathon." Kosta counted out the obscure name. "That's all you can tell me? You died, sold out your culture and people for that?"

"We were desperate. We had no other choice, but we also saw an opportunity to further Plathon's scheme." He had never had to argue like this, to explain himself to any man.

"You want more of my life for something you won't explain? I've done enough! I won't do that!" Kosta turned away, his rage shaking his shoulders and neck. A second later, he added in a conspiratorial tone, "What if I don't finish the Truth?" The emperor looked horrified. He continued, "The Truth's job ends when the last soul of *Kostadinoupoli* is put to rest. You won't say why I must go on." Grimly, he finished his final bargain. "If you don't tell me, you'll never leave your city. You'll stay with the *Tourkos* forever."

"You are a Paleologos. Do whatever you wish. I've passed all the lifetimes, about which your family laments, and you complain of sacrifice?" The last emperor, *the Dagoses*, passed his descendant's fury. "You don't know what sacrifice is! If it is your pleasure to make me squander eternity here, because you don't want to shoulder any more responsibility - to be a man - then so be your pleasure, sir!"

Both men now faced each other, and had they been mortal men, they would no longer be talking. One a specter and with no physical form the other a normal man with a corporeal form couldn't put their hands on each other. Their fight would remain one of wills, thoughts and words.

"Know this, your obstinance puts all creation in danger. What you refuse will still go on, even without your help or involvement."

"What is it!?" he screamed. "Tell me!"

"It is your choice - if you want to be a part of the sublime spectacle, or watch it engulf the world as Revelations foretold," *Kostadino XI* answered, undaunted. "Plathon is the only one who can tell you and he'll only appear if you agree to the task!"

"If I don't? What then?" The question was sharp and naked, lacking his previous guile.

"I don't know that either," the emperor replied to Kosta as he began to turn away.

"I'll find him in Mystra then? Where?"

"Follow the signs that Plathon left for you centuries ago." He watched as he turned completely and began walking away. He didn't ask if he would return and give him the same rapture, which the other Byzantines had earned. He was at the Truth's mercy, waiting, hoping one day, he take pity and allow him to have peace. Three steps away, he turned. His face was darker than the night which condemned him.

"You could've prevented most of this..."

"Nobody could have prevented any of it," *the Dagoses* interrupted, further infuriating the Truth.

"Then lessened it, but you let it all happen!!" He rushed at him. "Because you saw an opportunity!? You vicious, cold bastard!"

"I am no bastard!! My mother was a queen and my father was an emperor! You whine and complain like a scullery maid, a common woman!" The emperor's face twisted in contempt. "Why aren't you wearing a dress?"

"Asshole!" Kosta yelled, eliciting a baffled expression from his namesake. "I'll go to Mystra and I'll find Plathon, but you'll stay here!"

"I won't beg for release, you dim speck of my blood," he derided Kosta. "You're

merely a fraction of anybody who defended this city. You're weak and I'm ashamed that you are of my line." He spit on the ground and walked away.

Each word struck Kosta harder than the last and he was, in turn, ashamed. He tried to find ***Kostadino XI***, but he had disappeared. Every Truth had always known there was no room for self-pity. Their job's is their responsibility and must be dealt with accordingly. Complaining will only make things worse. He chided himself a ***tebely***, lazy and looked ahead to finding the departed imperial tutor at Mystra.

TRUMP OF XOS



- Triumph of Xos -

TIME: JUNE 5TH, 1960, SPARTI, GREECE

Kosta was being followed. They were Papal assassins, who did whatever their masters ordered. Amongst those milling in the train station, there was a dark blue clad man who didn't take his eyes off of Kosta, directing two others through furtive head and hand gestures. He should've spotted him earlier, and cursed himself for not being more careful. He tried to shake off the cloud he felt on his senses since *Kostadinoupoli*, and thought it gone, but it kept up to him, wearing a dark blue suit and fedora. All three were similarly dressed and proportioned, square jawed and shouldered. Their coordinator was a doppelganger for Robert Mitchum, in *Night of the Hunter*. This errant thought assured Kosta that he was regaining his senses; entertainment minutia always calmed him.

He heard a song, playing somewhere in the Spartan station, and was surprised that it wasn't one of the heart-tugging melodramas about the *eleftheria*, war of independence, or *katohi*, German occupation. His mind raced with the task of recognizing the low violins, and trying to form a plan to get rid of the pursuers, who were now triangulating on him, as directed by Mitchum 2.

"Oh the Shark has perfect teeth, dear..." he mumbled under his breath as they closed in. He had to act quickly. He rushed to a nearby *periptero*, newsstand, and scanned the rack of newspapers. Going by *Eleftheria*, *Hestia* and *Vema*, he read that Eisenhower had met Khrushchev in Paris more than a week ago, and that they were still writing about it. This would soon be overshadowed by the distraction of the Olympics in Rome. Kosta registered this haphazardly, using it to focus his thoughts, feigning interest in the news, and keeping an eye out for Mitchum 2 and his cronies.

He picked up *Vema*, a few chocolate bars and tourist trinkets, paid for them and continued to deliberately read the front page. More than a week before, Adolf Eichmann had been captured in Argentina and brought to Israel to face justice.

He took the paper, rolled it around a ballpoint pen. This pen concealed a spring-loaded, poisoned blade, which would break upon impact. The sliver-thin shiv would then remain in the wound, minutes later, killing its victim. All he needed was something to distract the other two, who were still watching him. He approached a gang of scruffy boys, *alites*, urchins looking for easy targets, *xenous* to *grift* - to con them out of their money.

To the wiliest looking of them, Kosta handed 100 *drachmas*, and promised another 100 for each of his friends. In return, all they had to do was attempt to sell the candy and trinkets to the other two men. The boy smiled slyly and demanded all the money upfront, before he returned to his *filous*, pals. Kosta agreed and, seconds later, the boy gestured excitedly at his friends, conveying his plan.

Mitchum 2 saw that the urchins were distracting his Brothers and went for Kosta, himself. There was no time to waste on intricacies. So much the better, Kosta thought. Away from the door, and in denser crowds, any scuffle would be hidden by the natural distractions and confusion.

Each took six steps and collided, both making it look accidental. Kosta caught his wrist and Mitchum 2 caught the rolled up newspaper. The spring-loaded pen went off with a twist of his wrist. The man dropped the dagger he had been attempting to use, doubling slightly forward. Too late, Kosta saw that the commotion had attracted the attention of the other two men. This wasn't optimal, but was still better than before. The odds improved, and very quickly, Kosta feigned a glance at his watch and ran out the door, leaving the crumpled Mitchum 2 behind.

Things continued to look up, as he saw the clean Laconian sky and walked into the tree-lined street, named after his imperial ancestors. He went at a brisk trot, chancing a glance backward to see that the other two men were coming out of the door from which he had just exited. They carried their leader, allowing Kosta to widen the distance between them.

He continued up *Paleologos Othos*, and quickly turned into an alley. He removed his jacket and reversed it, from olive to the tan inside. From an inside pocket, he also took out a matching hat. Thus disguised, he returned to the street and crossed over to the train station.

Back inside, he saw that his two pursuers still carried their Brother, entering the alley which Kosta had just left. He didn't waste any more time and crossed the station. He returned the urchin's mischievous grin and exited from another door, facing west. He rushed to a motorcycle dealership near the station and rented a machine, solid enough to go cross-country. He had to go across the rocky and uneven *Evrota Valley* to get to Mystra.

He left *Sparti* and saw no sign of pursuit. His quick thinking had allowed him to escape, but he had to stay sharp, because Mitchum 2 probably knew where he was going. If he did, a head-start didn't matter. They could already be there, waiting for him. If Mitchum 2 died before he said anything, Kosta had nothing about which to worry. The chances were fifty-fifty he would be walking into a trap. Those military, Brother Catholics were nothing, if not relentless.

He thought back to his early training; about how to survive the Vatican hounds who hunted the Truth. When his uncle brought him from St. Pie to Alexandria, they went directly to meet his new tutor. So, it was with a mixture of excitement and regret, that Kosta faced an aged man, wearing a tan suit, with perfectly groomed beard and hair. George introduced his nephew to Dwight Malone, a friend to the Truth, who would take over his training.

On the voyage, Kosta learned that Malone had remained after the British occupation, which had occurred during the building of the Suez Canal. He had faked his own death in order to stay, intent on continuing his own research and discoveries.

"What research?" Kosta asked.

He searched for peace, his uncle answered. Most of Malone's life was spent in patriotic duty, which, too often, seemed at odds with wherever he was sent. He was told to kill or hurt people, who weren't who his superiors claimed they were. He distanced himself from his youthful ideals, searching for a reason to his life.

"The Truth, changing by choice. A rare moment, George." In one fluid motion, the tanned man rose and offered his hand. Kosta noted how effortlessly he moved and wondered if this was something, which could be learned. "Could this change be unique?" Pursing his lips, he nodded. "Yes I do think it is," he said as he looked from one Truth to another. "You are each unique in your own ways, Paleologous."

"I give my task to a younger man. I no longer have the taste for it, Malone. Surely you can understand that?" The question was rhetorical, but still elicited a response.

"I can, indeed." After amiably watching George for a few moments, he turned and focused on Kosta. The gaze was searching and made the young man uncomfortable. He stared back curiously, his gaze lacking the same intensity.

"He's already good. He looks at me without preconceptions." Malone smiled, revealing a short flash of upper teeth. "Sit down, both of you. George, for how long are you staying?"

When his uncle stated that he would be leaving for India the following morning,

Kosta felt his excitement tempered with regret. Malone nodded with approval. "A good beginning. I hope you find all for which you're looking. Until tomorrow, let's enjoy each other and become acquainted with the new Truth."

Over the course of the night, the regret melted away. Their conversation rambled as the older men told Kosta that loss is something, which can only be understood through experience. Malone reached into his jacket pocket and removed a dog-eared copy of *Kazantzakis's Zorba*. "Read it, my boy. It will prepare you." In the coming months, Kosta did read it; he felt much better about his uncle's absence, as well as the life he had left and the family he wouldn't see for years. Life is loss, he realized. The impermanence is what gives it value.

That night was etched on Kosta's memory, even as he came within sight of Mystra. He recalled that Malone had added that loss and danger give life a particular value. Of course, danger comes in many forms. Physical danger is the most readily guarded against. It is something for which a person can prepare himself. For Kosta, this danger manifested itself in the form of the Vatican Police.

"The Catholics have police?" Kosta asked.

"Not in the badge-carrying, uniform-wearing sense," Malone answered. "These agents do the bidding of bishops, cardinals and the Pope. Like MI-5, CIA and KGB, they act on the orders of their superiors."

"Like you did?" Kosta asked.

"Yes, exactly," he answered. Kosta read volumes into the way he shifted in his seat and rolled his shoulders. His actions confirmed that Malone had not only been British Intelligence, but one of the Vatican agents."

"Who are they?" Kosta asked, intrigued. "How can I identify them?"

"They're a lot like Malone," Uncle George answered. A pained twitch in Malone's eyes confirmed Kosta's initial suspicion.

"You know so much, because you were one," Kosta whispered.

"Kosta! *Then drepeseh*!?" Aren't you ashamed, George exclaimed. Malone's mouth fell open, but quickly snapped it shut.

"First and foremost, young man, you've got to learn to hide yourself," he answered. "In any contest, it's critical to know when to fight. If you're able to control the timing, you will always have the advantage."

He raised a hand to calm George and show that Kosta hadn't offended him. "He feels comfortable, George. Unlike you and I, he doesn't have the armor or experience. This one will learn to fight without armor. He must work with agility and grace. Our days are done." He turned back to Kosta, allowing George to calm down from the empathetic insult. Kosta, however, didn't look pained or embarrassed.

"Yes, you're right. Your nephew is very insightful, George."

"I never knew," George sputtered. "I had no idea."

"You thought I was MI-5. There are few who ever know."

"You're a Templar then?" George asked and, mindful of their public forum, added under his breath, "Part of the Papal Grey Eminence?"

"Yes," he answered pleasantly. "There are some in every agency."

"Weren't Templars a medieval order of knights, monks?" The new Truth asked.

"Originally," Malone replied.

"Once a Brother always a Brother," George stated ominously.

"Oh, come off it, George," Malone answered, irritated. "I have been honest about why I left the service. Nothing's changed."

"Why should I believe you?" George asked.

"I can't tell you. Which agency I left no longer matters to me. If it does to you, I can't help that."

George looked suspiciously at Malone, who ignored him and proceeded to answer Kosta's question. "Yes, again. I'll not go into the varied histories of the Templars. You could read up on them and form your own conclusions." He nodded to the smoldering George, "Everybody has their own perspective about my past affiliations." He continued, "The twelve years I was with them, they pushed their own agenda through MI-5, CIA, KGB."

"It's possible that you have your own agenda," George offered.

"I do. I'm helping you." Malone's response elicited a disbelieving smirk. "If I had any other, you could easily both be dead." This blunt fact did much to assuage George's suspicion.

"If I still followed the Templar agenda, to destroy the Truth, I could remove the last two this very moment." After a long sigh, he added, "I'm sorry that Kosta perceived that which you did not. I never told you, because it doesn't matter. My past is simply that - the past. It has no place in the present, except to help you." He looked glanced at Kosta.

"How does the Vatican even know about us?" Kosta asked. "How does anybody know about the Truth?"

"Initially, the Templars were knights who protected visitors to the Holy Land. They remained long enough to absorb pagan and early Christian beliefs. These were the same beliefs that Catholics eradicated, only allowing their interpretation of God to survive." He looked at Kosta to be certain that he understood. "These early beliefs evolved into different beliefs, which we only now understand weren't heretic, merely different interpretations. They included Gnostics, Coptics, Cathars, Orthodox and many others which have since been forgotten."

"In one way or another, the Catholics saw to it that they were destroyed," George added.

"Because they were in constant contact, the Templars were very familiar with the Orthodox Church and Byzantine culture. After they were officially dismantled by Pope Clement in 1307, they became part of the Grey Eminence. They shared all that they knew with their new masters."

"Why are we enemies?" Kosta asked. "What can we do to them? We've lost everything."

"You're the only remnant of a power to which they still feel inferior," Malone answered.

"To which they are still inferior," George emphasized.

"It's all or nothing." Kosta understood. "There can be *no* dissent. It's worse with the Truth, because they envied the Emperor's unquestioned, divine authority."

"If you asked them now, they would say that you are a proponent of an ancient heresy, which should've been suppressed long ago," Malone said.

The memory ended as Kosta brought his motorcycle around the bend of *KatoHora*, lower-town of Mystra. His eyes searched for any of the Templars he had left in *Sparti*, six kilometers away. It was late afternoon, the milling tourists were leaving through *KatoHora* to enter waiting buses. He saw no sign of his pursuers, proceeding through *Kastro Gate*. One side of the gate was cut out of the cliff, and the arched cover was two meters wide by six meters high. The slope of the hill was eased by stone steps, built up with rocks and worn smooth from centuries of use. The arch connected to a sizeable, squarely built, crumbled-topped, solid tower.

Kosta, still wary, continued to the second shorter arch of the gate. He also

searched for signs of the last imperial tutor. Framing the steps on either side where solidly built rock walls, eroded by the weather and half crumbled, though they still blocked some of the wind that blew atop the hill.

The complex of churches, monasteries, cozy mansions, stone arches and firm fortification, were cut into the smaller hill of **Mount Taiyetos**. The stones were all from nearby ancient Sparta. Mystra's builders had used the past to construct their defenses. At another time, Kosta might have paused to ponder the irony of Christian trees growing from pagan seeds, but now he had no time. Now he looked for zealots.

He passed more long, wide, stone steps, overgrown with grass, curving around the hill from which they were cut. He looked over steep slopes, interrupted by partial walls. Arched doorways and windows hid rock foundations. Only this hard stuff survived in the sheer, weather-beaten **Taiyetos** hills. The twists and turns of the steps and walkways recalled roads cut into the ravines of **Pelloponisos**, all through **Laconia** and **Messinia**. Kosta neared the **Monemvasia Gate**, separating **KatoHora**, lower-town, from **AnoHora**, upper-town, composed of nobles' houses and higher churches.

He went left, straight for **Agios Dimitrios**, with its triple nave facing the gate, arch-windowed dome topped by red tiles. It was also cut into the hillside; its many parts and tall walls followed the slope of the hill.

He passed a group of visitors, amongst whom was a uniformed police officer. They smiled and bid him a **kalispera**, good evening. The cop even leveled a **yia-sou**, to your health. They emerged from **Agios Dimitrios** as Kosta entered. He walked straight down and to the left, up two steps, looking about the still visible, frescoed torture of the patron saint.

He searched the floor for a double-headed eagle, carved out of purple, imperial porphyry. This is where, purportedly, the last Paleologos was crowned. However, history is sometimes mistaken. Kosta knew this, as did the shape that sprung at him from behind a pillar. Kosta blocked a knife, coming up to gut him. He half expected to be tackled by another assailant, but was surprised when he merely had to step away from a slash, aimed at his chest. He smiled at his Templar attacker. Had he been wise, he would've waited until dark, when there were no others in the abandoned hill town.

"**Voithia**, help!" Kosta shouted. "Someone is trying to rob me. **Tholophonos**, killer!" The attack proved that before he died, Mitchum 2 had been able to tell his Brothers where Kosta would be. They had probably split up to cover more ground. His attacker faced the door, through which two men from the passing group came at a run. He desperately swung his knife to ward them off, but Kosta rushed and flattened him with a knee to the stomach, a full right-cross across his face. He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

"**Pios einai, ton xeris?** You know this guy?" They asked.

"No," Kosta answered in Greek. "He wanted my money, and when I refused, he said he'd kill me." Kosta thanked them, and the police officer, who had wished him **yia-sou**, handcuffed the still insensible man. Slapped awake, the Templar blinked blearily. As he was led away, the policeman said that Kosta would have to give a statement the following morning. He said that this **akatharma**, filth, would keep in a cell until then.

Once they were gone, Kosta continued to look for the porphyry. He finally found it and bent down to wipe it clean with his kerchief. As he wiped, he uncovered its deep luster in the quickening twilight of the early evening. After centuries of wear, the double-headed eagle was almost worn smooth. Kosta waited for some indication, a sign, that this was Plethon's resting place. He found nothing. All was still. No spectral philosopher materialized from the stones and the frescoed scenes of Christ, or the life of his virginal

mother.

He left and continued past the side of *Agios Dimitrios*, up a rocky slope of completely eroded stairs, and turned left, up more stone steps. They were more than three feet deep, as were all the steps through Mystra, but these were in better condition than the ones in *KatoHora*. The walls fared no better. Some of the corners jugged up and pointed to the sky.

A single arch spanned a stairway, leading Kosta through to the *Kastro*, castle. He followed a downhill course from the entrance, continuing past the Despot's Chapel of *Hagia Sophia*. He didn't enter the small doorway, inset in the center of the triple-arched, red roof-tiled portico. A church wasn't the place to look for a secular, humanist philosopher.

He headed down the path again and chose the right fork, coming upon the *Palataki*, little palace. This was where Plethon's home would've been, considering his place in the imperial structure and importance to late Byzantine culture. It was at the *Palataki* that he taught the last academy of Greek philosophy. Future patriarchs of *Kostadinoupoli*, cardinals of Rome, despots, lords, dukes and emperors, had lived the last blossom of the ancients' thoughts, beliefs and mysteries.

To the right of the entrance, Kosta could see *Sparti* in the *Evrota* Valley. The city was so high, it appeared to be a tan smudge on the darkening fields surrounding it. Roads led away to *Tripolis*, and to the left *kiparisia*, cypress trees, were tiny in the valley floor. He walked along the ruined walls and, in the far left corner of the little palace, he saw a wily old figure. Tiny eyes glinted in the darkness, indicating gleeful wit and cynicism. A clever smirk curled the man's thin lips as he asked, "Do you accept *Xos* as your savior and redeemer?"

"Yes," Kosta replied, without a second thought.

"Fool. I thought the Truth would know better." He laughed a short snicker motioning for Kosta to beware. He quickly turned to see the last Templar, who had followed him from *Sparti*. He rushed at him with enough momentum to send them both over the edge of the *Palataki*. He was moving very quickly, and not wanting to impede him, Kosta stepped out of his way. He didn't go over the edge, but ran into one of the walls with a sickening crunch of his face. Kosta pushed him over the edge, the limp body hitting the cliff six times on its descent.

Plethon looked at the body intently and added, "It was actually a mercy that you showed him. He would've died painfully from hitting the wall with his face."

"He had it coming," Kosta answered.

"Well, considering your first response, as well as your handling of that pitiful fellow, you're not as imbecilic as your ancestors." He smiled appreciatively.

"Thank you, I think." Kosta was surprised at the familiarity of this specter. He was used to medieval finery, not the familiarity, the flippancy, this little man showed. He was very little, barely five feet tall, and wore the fur-lined, plain robes one would expect of a country noble. On his head was the brimmed, conical hat of Byzantine gentry, though it didn't quite fit.

"Nobody calls me the Truth. Who are you? You're certainly not the old teacher."

"Oh, those clever, clever Greeks." The smile, cleaving his face, was malignant, a gash that looked as though it would explode in a torrent of gore. He wasn't pleased to be exposed; the grin belied any compliments that slithered past his tongue. His stare punctured Kosta's imagination, as he saw this little man rending him limb from limb, ripping his skin from his body. He shook off the vision, taking a step backward as it slithered forward.

"I'm Old Nick and I've been watching you for quite some time." He saw Kosta's eyes widen in alarm. He pressed on emotions to exact his deepest fears, conjuring up perfect apparitions. He saw all of his family suffering, as nightmares come to life, carving off pounds of flesh and flaying skins off their writhing forms. This impostor didn't relent as Kosta staggered from his molested senses. He jumped away from imagined things, made real all about him, however, the barrage of visions came too fast. None ever exacted a deep enough horror from him. They were locked in a desperate bid to overwhelm, which nearly succeeded.

"You're not He," Kosta said between gasps, recovering his self-control. "What would Satan be doing in Mystra? You don't lie well enough, and boast far too easily."

He continued to deride the evil spirit. All the while, he was tracing shapes into the night, which began to glow in the gathering dark. The spirit bared his teeth and lunged forward unsuccessfully. Something held him to the ground. The shapes, which Kosta had woven, dropped at his feet, clung about him and rooted him to the ground.

"What have you done with Plethon?" Kosta asked.

"He's safe," The imp answered defiantly.

"That's not what I asked." Kosta turned to the far corner of the ruined **Palataki**, where the little man had first appeared. There, he saw a pile of rock, stacked, instead of fallen from the surrounding walls. He walked to the pile and chanced a peek at the writhing little man, tugging at his feet in an attempt to free himself.

"Stop it," Kosta commanded, gesturing for the binding roots of light to intensify, burning the man's exposed, cleaving fingers. He growled in agony, but no burns showed on the hands he now clutched to his chest.

"You don't know what you're doing!" he wailed. "Don't let him out!"

Kosta paid him no heed and stopped before the unnatural pile of stone. Between chunks of the rock, he saw a blue light, trying to escape. After shifting a few stones, he was blinded by a brilliance, which he grasped.

This was Plethon. The other had merely dressed in the flesh of old philosopher. Clutching the light, Kosta walked to the hysterical, thrashing impostor, pushing the light into his face and rubbing it in. The resulting guttural screech and ferocious growl drove Kosta to his knees.

A light touch brought him to. "Get up." A gentle insistence revived him enough to stand. The same little man looked at him. The malevolent, vulpine glint had vanished from his eyes, replaced with boundless understanding. He looked at Kosta in the same way that a supremely efficient public servant would an eager citizen. He was there to answer any questions and proffer any help.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," Kosta replied. "I'll be fine."

"How did you know what to do? How did you..." He replicated the motions Kosta had used to bind the demon.

"I've done more reading than any other Truth," he answered.

"More than all combined." The old teacher nodded, impressed. He walked to the edge of the rock pile, which had so recently been his cell. "Thank you. I'm indebted to you. I have been imprisoned since Mystra was abandoned to Turks, Venetians and traitors."

"How? Why?" Kosta tried to be more precise. "How did the demon take your form and why?"

"When bitter Dimitri, the emperor's brother, handed Mystra to Mehmet, we lost all protection. God completely abandoned the Byzantines." The old man felt bitterness

choke in his throat. He stared out on the *Evrota* Valley, with the *Taiyetos* Spire ranging and enclosing it, looking silently at *Sparti's* lights.

"It's still there. After it's ancient stones were used to build Mystra, I thought that *Sparti* would never rise again. How ironic the we look at its bright lights from this darkness." He turned and smiled at the Paleologan eyes.

"Without protection, we were all in danger," he continued. "Those dark ones used me to deceive any who came looking for guidance. They lured them into their dark designs."

"How did they manage it?" Kosta asked.

"It wasn't through conjuring or magic," he said, ashamed. "They asked why the Catholics should rule the world since they let Byzantines die." He shook his head. "It all sounded so right. Why should we let them win? Those upstarts didn't deserve our place." He smiled bitterly. Both stood silently now, watching the *Evrota* Valley, completely shrouded in the dark of night. Stars, *Sparti* and Neo Mystra's lights, shone without horizon, enveloping them in a black starry cover.

Under his breath, Kosta asked what Plethon wanted him to do. He was breathless, fearing the reply.

"We take things so literally," Plathon said. "There is no task like the one in *Kostadinoupoli*. There are no souls to be given peace. I only wanted to tell you where to go to satiate your thirst for knowledge. Find Ptolemy's Library of Alexandria. It's a wonder beyond any description." He went on, "Nothing's been lost; it's all still there!"

"*Kostadino* said that you wanted to unite all churches. This is what you waited centuries to say?" Kosta was perplexed.

"Yes. It is what you wouldn't hear from anyone else. You were led to this moment - to this place."

"The Truth's duties will be complete when the emperor's released. Then, I can embark on whatever life I choose."

"Yes." He answered instantly, watching intently, because he was sure that Kosta understood.

"I had to find you to understand what I should do next." Kosta said incredulously, "More than obligations to family, friends, more than anything, you think I'll go of my own accord, because it's what you would do?"

"Precisely," he exclaimed, overjoyed. "I spent all my adult life pondering life - the why of it. When I found out that the Library was still intact, I was too old to attempt the trip."

The old man's excitement was infectious. "Once I get there, where do I begin?" Kosta asked. "For what should I look?"

"Look for a volume called *Idammah-Gan Codex*." He stared at him pointedly. "Once you've found it, you'll know what to do."

"Are you still..." Kosta asked suspiciously. "Is this still part of what *Kostadino* said you wanted?"

"You had the choice to come here," he answered. "You also chose to leave your ancestor alone, walking in his empty city. We wanted to show you a path you didn't know you wanted. You can still have a normal, uneventful life. You don't have to go to the Library, walk amidst shelves and stacks which have been undisturbed since Marc Anthony gave them to Cleopatra." He was blunt. "You don't have to do anything that you don't want."

Kosta listened and knew that he wanted to see those pristine shelves. Books and scrolls filled with thoughts and beliefs, which had been unseen for millennia. He wanted

to read the works of ancient masters, unadulterated by translation or duplication. “How do I find it?” Plethon smiled at Kosta’s question.

“It’s by the ancient harbor.” Plethon spoke softly, even though there was nobody around to hear what he said. “The real treasures are in the catacombs. Only copies were kept in the grand halls and reading rooms. The originals were off-limits to any but the initiated.”

“Why now? Why me?” Neither of them expected these queries. Kosta was more surprised than Plethon.

“I traveled extensively before I settled and taught high-born students. I covered the world, from Andalusia, in Spain, to the Delhi lands. I spoke to devotees of Mohammed, Buddha and Christ.” He stopped, surprised at his own words. “After so much time, it didn’t matter to whom I spoke, instead, I just listened.”

“What did you hear?” Kosta was intent on his reply, forgetting his earlier questions.

“I heard no reason for distinction. They’re all the same. They are but different interpretations of the unexplained. I can’t tell you what this is, because the only understanding I have is my own and you have to come to yours.”

“Why now? why me?” Kosta repeated his questions, though, slowly, he started to understand, even without explanation. His questions ended up being rhetorical.

“Any path, or way you follow, is someone else’s.” Plethon added, “Now, because so much faith has eroded, reason has, once again, become our best tool. Just as in Plato’s time, we use humanity as the measure of all things. I’ll go a step further. Properly prepared, we can find all things within ourselves. In ourselves, we can find what we revered in gods. It will be different for you, as it was for me, as well as for others who searched for their own way. I can’t explain any further. Any words will only sully it. Will provide an even more incomplete explanation.”

“But why me?” Kosta wanted to know the reason why this duty fell to him, rather than any other Truth, his Uncle George or Malone. There were many people more deserving, or capable of understanding all that Plethon had said.

“Nobody else would understand.” He waved his hands about the ruined *Palataki*, indicating far more than the crumbled, stone walls. “What the Truth did to those unfortunate Byzantines in *Kostadinoupoli* is what the world now needs.”

“The world?” Kosta was overwhelmed.

The old teacher laughed. “No, not like that. The change you’ll make is one of perception. Within the pages of many books, starting with the *Idammah-Gan*, are keys which will unlock a sequence, releasing the world from a shackled understanding.” He smiled. “I don’t mean each person, individually, rather, collectively. You’ll see.”

“All right then.” Kosta touched the old man’s frail chest, sending him to his reward. It was where they now stood, but it was warm and roofed. The room was filled with Laconian sunlight. He sat at a table and pondered an obscure scroll, atop an open, velum leafed book. Plethon had already known peace in his lifetime. It was a peace that he easily recalled.

Before Kosta could leave, the old philosopher asked him if he needed to know the location of the entrance to the Library’s catacombs. Kosta replied that he knew where to look. He thanked him and walked out of the building - from where he came, to where he had originally intended to go.

Home: Alexandria.



- Dangerous Words -

TIME: AUGUST 10TH, 1961. ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

So much forgotten; so much more lost.

The thought weighed as heavily on Kosta's mind as the tons of earth above him. He felt the burden every time he stood still and wiped sweat away from under the miner's helmet, which emitted just enough light for him to be able to see the path. Signs, worn by the millennia, were almost impossible to follow beneath the ruins of the Royal Library. Above him, bare foundations marked where the complete knowledge of antiquity had been housed and twice burned alive.

It had taken five centuries, a Caesar and a Bishop, to destroy the Library of Alexandria. The Ptolemies, Egyptian successors to Alexander the Great, had erected it beside their busiest port. They had ordered that every ship and traveler must surrender all books, or texts, in their possession. They were then copied and returned. Their owners were never able to tell that the originals were never returned, but remained at the great library, whose renown grew to mythical proportions.

Kosta knew about libraries; he was pained when he first saw these ruins. His search through the underground had begun, and stopped, more than a year before. After leaving Plethon at Mystra, he had tried, and failed, to find the entrance to the library's catacombs. He had then been forced to search elsewhere for clues. He traveled the world, going from one exclusive, unique library to another, searching for knowledge lying long dormant, thought lost, forgotten, more powerful and dangerous than anybody believed. He searched through tomes, codices and secret texts, incredulous that he was able to understand every language he read: French, Latin, German, Aramaic, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and ancient Greek.

In order to have access to these private libraries, he bargained, bribed and used every subterfuge, wile, trickery, deceit and deception. If necessary, he even gained entry through impersonation. Rothschild Institutes & Depositories, Sufiya and Astan-Quds Razavi, Medici Library, Mortlake Residence and The Philosophical Research Society, all willingly opened their doors to him. He also went through many of the newly discovered works from Nag Hammadi, later called the *Gnostic Gospels*, which included *La Tome de Les Parfaits*, *L'Histoire des Elites*, the *Sangrael Gospel*.

In addition to the private collections of the wealthy elite, there were other texts, guarded and kept well hidden by clandestine parts of the Roman Catholic Church. In the Vatican, itself, there was more than thirty miles of shelves, known as the Secret Archives. The church's judicial bodies – the Roman Rota, Apostolic Signatura and the Apostolic Penitentiary – each had their own chanceries.

At any time during his quest, had he been discovered, his life would have been at risk, not only as a result of his subterfuge, but also because of where he ventured and who he was. More than the church's judicial bodies roamed the secret corners of the Vatican. Kosta passed many priests, their hands scarred from fighting. He looked into many blankly staring eyes, but his lies were always sufficient to dissuade further suspicion. They wanted to believe the lies, so he let them.

By itself, much of the knowledge he uncovered was unique and innocuous. Each individual piece came alive to him from information he had uncovered in unrelated codices, fitting together the puzzle pieces as no one else had ever done. The deeper he penetrated, the easier it was to remain unknown.

His command of forgotten dialects and languages became unparalleled. During the seventh months of his immersion in rare, forgotten texts and unique volumes, he

discovered the repeated prophecies of a unique birth. It was spoken of at length in many manuscripts. It was detailed in the reputed, original collections of Nostradamus' *Quatrains*, the *Gnostic Gospels*, the *Apocrypha*, *Idammah-Gan Codex* and early Christian volumes, not included in the modern *Bible*.

After he completed that odyssey of discovery, he returned to Alexandria to find the original text, about which Plethon had spoken. During his first week, he had searched the wider ruins, along the major, original book stacks and reading rooms, finally discovering the entrance to an abandoned stairway. It was close to where Caesar's men had carelessly lit the fires, which had burned down Alexandria's wharfs and docks. The collateral damage was never even mentioned in his memoirs, the *Civil Wars*, because it would've pricked at his vanity, worse than the pugios did on the Ides of March.

After Kosta found the stairway, he descended and searched the honeycomb of passages for a passage to further stairs, leading to where all the original works, ever held at the Royal Library, were stored. It was true that every book entering Alexandria had remained there. Even Marc Anthony's wedding gifts to Cleopatra were copied – every one of the 200,000 Pergamon scrolls, texts and codices.

After another ten-day search in the dark, Kosta finally located the stairway. Near the hidden entrance, he found a corroded, ancient cross and bent down to rub some of the dirt off its surface. Some deluded, early Christian zealot, under the influence of Patriarch Theophilus' mob, had nearly done what *Kostadinoupoli's* St. John Chrysostom called, "Vanishing from the face of the earth, every trace of the old philosophy and literature of the ancient world." They had almost been successful, Kosta thought with a chill.

He suppressed a shudder and felt for the edges of the stone door, pushed five specific points in exact order, and ancient pulleys screeched the door open. At first, clouds of dust hid the doorway, but soon dispersed, revealing the foot-thick stone-hinged opening, much like any other door. He walked through the opening easily enough, pushing the door shut behind him. Kosta was very careful. He didn't want anybody else to know about the resurrection of the Royal Library. He was absolutely sure that no living person knew of the lost entrance, let alone its exact location, but was prudent, nonetheless.

He stood for a moment, and snuffed out the light on his helmet. As his eyes adjusted to the dark he sensed phalanxes of shelves, with heaps of scrolls and leather-bound velum, leafed volumes and rows, stretching past perception. He sensed the vast breadth of storehouse; its edges stretched for hundreds of feet to his left, right and before him. Every other library and archive that Kosta had visited – private, secret, rare or unique – was now forgotten. Some of those places had contained rare volumes on forbidden subjects and lore, which would've damned or maddened lesser men, yet there he stood, sensing pregnant danger in this dark. All other past dangers paled in comparison to that which he now felt. This danger was latent, rolled up in parchment, bound in velum or forgotten pelt. The dark, itself, or the reading of these words, freed them, allowing them to coalesce into their most vicious possibilities.

Their danger lay in their essence, what they were – lies. Lies were valuable. The best lies were able to stand the test of time and weren't measured in black and white, fact and fiction. Rather, they became society, respected thought, accepted dogma. If enough people believe these lies long enough and hard enough, they will them to become fact. The belief of these lies transmuted them over centuries into truths, for which faithful millions had killed and been killed.

Christians were told that somebody had died and three days later, had come back to life. This was an old lie that many believed and continue to believe. None of it was

real, rather, it was the product of human imagination – and all-powerful want and desire. This lie had been believed and told long enough, that it became a something, without which faith couldn't continue. This particular belief illustrated that if something is desired for long enough, imagination makes it real.

In the past months Kosta had read myths that spoke about the creation of all life. These creation stories explained that when the cosmos was alone and there was nothing else, it wanted to breathe and experience and, therefore, started life. It then furthered experience and went on to touch, to eat. In time the cosmos wanted to experience more and made the overwhelming abundance of life we know today. These myths explained that all the diversity of life was made so the cosmos can experience itself. Nobody knew what was before the desires for experience. The need to live became more basic than thought. It was unquestioned. The questions came with why life existed at all. Clerics, priests and philosophers, whose musings filled libraries, had tried to answer with mixed results. History called them Pagans, Christians, Luciferians, Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists. It was all a matter of personal choice. That was the essence of what Kosta had read, of all the combined lies: desire.

He came across many references to two copies of a singularly unique tome, whose owners believed each was original, but was actually a reproduction of the *Idammah-Gan Codex* – a single, hand-written book. One copy was located in the private library of a self-styled, poseur Satanist in the south of France. The other was much harder to access. It was kept in the bowels of the Vatican, in its Secret Archives, which spanned over thirty miles of shelves. The Secret Archives held heretical works, by men such as Copernicus, Galileo and the like, who were later exonerated by the light of reason and science. The Vatican had held onto these works because in the past they were dangerous, inflammatory and if dissipated to the population at large would damn the world.

Most people now believe that words, ideas and written discourse are not dangerous and would not damn anybody. They were intellectual curiosity and dialogue no more. True danger only resides in the physical, but over the course of his research, Kosta had discovered that danger was also hidden in the pages of some books and texts. It wasn't the ideas and beliefs of the Martin Luthers, Newtons, Marxes and Hitlers that were dangerous. Rather, it was the lost and better-forgotten texts, which revealed our true nature. Some people couldn't abide this revelation and went insane, their minds snapping from the weight of this realization. For most people, the real truth was better left unknown, lost and forgotten, the lies never revealed.

Kosta began to murmur under his breath and, after a while, the words, upon leaving his mouth, glowed in the air in front of him. He slowly continued the incantation, as it went past priceless stacks and shelves of scrolls, parchment, velum and pelts. The incantation continued, turning right, left, around marbled busts and reliefs of Ptolemies, Alexanders, Cleopatras and major political, religious figures, both forgotten and remembered, who, after a millennium of complete darkness, once again saw light.

The glowing words came to an ordinary shelf, among the many others, and slowly dipped to the second from bottom shelf. It then wrapped around a pelt-bound volume, with cracked edging and four equally-spaced steel bindings. Kosta bent down and retrieved the tome, snuffing out the glowing breath like a candle. The incantation would not have worked on anything other than the original *Idammah-Gan Codex*, and Kosta could not have known it would work until he used it. If he hadn't found the lost mother of all libraries, and had the original texts been returned to the ancient travelers in Alexandria, he wouldn't have the *Idammah-Gan Codex*. There were so many ifs, woulds and maybes, conveniently converging, that Kosta forgot to breath. He became

lightheaded and nearly forgot how to light his miner's helmet.

It took a few hours to weave his way back along the path of the incantation. Kosta burned to sit and examine the book he carried, but knew he could only examine it under daylight. The darkness hid too many unknowns, and he wanted to concentrate on the codex, not on fighting phantoms and madness. He would return again when he was more prepared to deal with these uncertainties. Now, he needed to read the pages of the codex and plan anew. All of his beliefs were gearing up with the renewed hope, provided by the codex.

A plan, designed by a long forgotten, medieval philosopher, was about to be discovered. After a year of searching, Kosta held what George Gemistos Plethon had longed to read. In his search for its recovery, Kosta had learned what it was all about and that he must handle it with caution. The volume detailed all the many lives of the main character in St. John's Revelations. After a long enough time in our imagination, the mythic Beast had been made real.

TIME: AUGUST 14TH, 1961. WHITTIER MANSION, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A

Balzeer walked lightly down the corridor of the third floor in the Whittier Mansion. At various intervals of the hall, he passed lounging glassy-eyed devotees, some on the floor, some on chairs and couches, all there to experience something different. The beatniks had carved out an attractive scene, which had attracted many like-minded people. Some came to sit and listen to Kerouac, Ginsberg and Bukowski read aloud from *Lonesome Traveler*, *Kaddish* and *Howl*, so they could snap their fingers in appreciation.

The sad fact was that Kerouac had nearly gone mad from drink and was traveling all around the country. Ginsberg was traveling the world, traversing the U.S.S.R., Scandinavia, China and the Communist Block countries. Bukowski had never even come to San Francisco until later in his life. He lived and worked in a post office, doing his cultural wailing only in his spare time, while sober, or most likely while he was not.

The Supreme Tribunal passed a dark-haired beauty who watched him in disbelief. Her hazel eyes widened and her petal mouth slightly parted at Balzeer's touch. His hand traveled down past her stomach and began to hike up her short skirt. She looked around for support from some of the others, who were now starting to watch, but only saw hungry eyes. She was in a drugged haze and could not bring her hands up with enough strength to ward off her bald abuser.

The effort that she made to push him away only spurred him on, as it seemed that she was only grasping for him. She could not manage to speak, to tell him to stop pushing his hand down her panties and parting her pubic lips. Her grunts and groans were stopped as his mouth closed on hers, and then there was only the sound of a slow scuffle.

He pushed her panties to the side and stroked her mound with an open palm. All the while, his other hand traveled up to cup the back of her head and bring it closer to his. His kisses had turned hard and rough, but his hands stayed tender, though still unwanted and unwelcome. The hand behind her head moved and came over her chest, parting her shirt and, at the same time, tearing it.

His lower hand moved and, with a few quick movements, undid his pants, which promptly fell to the floor. In a matter of seconds, he was on top of her, thrusting into her with slow, languid strokes. He held her ankles spread wide as he pushed forward, the couch banging the wall behind them.

Her head bobbed back and forth, her black hair falling over her face, hiding the tears that ran down it. She hoped that it would soon be over and prayed that she would

only remember it as a bad hallucination.

His strokes quickened until he stopped, then he climbed off of her. He reached down and pulled up his slacks, and with a sharp clink of his belt, buttoned up his pants and walked away, never glancing back. He did not see the six other ravenous forms advance on the sprawled, still-gasping girl. The ordeal had only begun for her, and even if he had noticed, he wouldn't have cared.

There were many other disillusioned men and women, many of them hardly past childhood. They would never be missed. They had come here to connect to something different from their parents' Judeo-Christian ethics. Some, like this girl, became lost in the crowd as they waited their turn. The life they found was much worse than the life from which they fled. They did not find freedom. As the girl was repeatedly violated, she realized that she had lost all of her personal rights, her fragile protests ignored, if they were noticed at all.

Balzeer McGrath wasn't interested in either the girl or the others. For him, sex was like peeing, or any other bodily function. He did it when the need arose. Since he'd become an adult, he had never denied his urges and lusts. He had long since stopped being able to distinguish his desires from his needs. What he wanted, he got.

He continued down the immaculate corridors of the mansion filled with antiques. Some had been bought with the house, while others had been collected from various ancient, condemned and damned places, all over the world. Everything was steeped in death, misery or brutal apathy. Even the art was stygian and ghastly, created by madmen who had been condemned for their ruined imagination and subjects of lunacy, by both the church and decency.

De Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Children* hung on the wall. This was mild fare, compared to the depictions of rape, pillage and massacre that spilled and tumbled everywhere in the inner corridors through which he trod. Every piece of art depicted monstrous atrocities. Unknown, unseen commissioned works from masters were also here. Botticelli, Michaelangelos, Raphaels, Da Vincis and Caravaggios depicted black masses and Luciferian ceremonies. For these renderings, the artists would've been condemned, or excommunicated, had their existence been a matter of public knowledge.

Balzeer was the latest in a long line of church leaders who followed a path very divergent from that of the Catholic Church. They worshiped the First and Rightful Son of God, Satanael, not the Weakling Son, Jesus. Balzeer and his predecessors continued in the old ways – open belligerence for those that followed the Weakling's Citadel, the Catholic Church, and complete submission to the pleasures of the flesh.

The new initiates, and even some of the existing adepts, had shown their desire to make their faith seem more amiable. Their time would surely come, but for now, Balzeer and *his* dogma ruled.

He turned two more rights and went down a narrow stairwell to the back entrance of the library. As he twisted the brass handle of the mahogany doors, their weight turned on intricately carved, gleaming hinges.

He surveyed the vast room and the book-lined shelves, openly contemptuous of anyone present. To his regret, the room was empty. No one was seated on the leather couches, or the luxuriously upholstered wingback chairs, situated by one of the room's three fireplaces. The seats would have been comforting, had they not been placed before hearths that depicted the torture and torment of the Venetians' Inferno. Balzeer had commissioned a promising group of art students to carve them, to his specifications, from a long forgotten volume. It took them nearly a year to complete the project. They finally went mad from the constant exposure to the images. Eleven months after they had started

their work, seven bright, young, promising gibbering idiots left the mansion. He remembered them as one would remember a particularly good screwdriver; they had been worth his attention.

He walked to the center of the room and stopped. His left arm began tracing unseen patterns before him in the air. They remained invisible until he mouthed words and phrases of slithering intimacy, like a lover's whisper or the slit of a sharp knife. His intonations barely audible, the tracings began to glow with the sickly yellow of a festering wound. Continuing his work, Balzeer raised his right arm and weaved patterns below him. The patterns took on a tone of an angry purple bruise.

Beneath him on a priceless rug, weaved from the hair of slaughtered innocents of a bygone era, a swirling whirlpool of colors materialized. He began to slowly sink into it, unperturbed, until a short time later, he was gone. Only the smell of mutton indicated that he, or his textured whirlpool, had been there at all. He glanced around the chamber into which he had sunk. At each place he glanced, a black candle sparked to life. They only produced enough light to reveal the abominations surrounding him.

All about the room, and at various stages of decomposition, were human remains. Some dangled from hooks, while others were impaled on stakes from beneath and from the sides, hanging like forgotten clothes. Impossibly, considering their state, a few continued to move, unnaturally kept alive to suffer and to provide the room with its needed fuel. The room ran on misery – it was its spark, its essence and its lifeblood. Balzeer had created it during a moment of inspiration. He literally detested getting his hands dirty, but he needed the ever-present sacrifices, so he kept them all alive as long as he could. Some had been suffering for years, others merely for weeks.

There were no animals, because they were incapable of providing the required agony. No animal expected, or wished, for anything besides a painless existence and food. Humans, on the other hand, had a lifetime of dreams and hopes that he could grind into dust.

The physical pain was part of it, but the real fuel came from their mental and psychic torture. He chose people who had the most to lose. Sensitive souls, just entering their adult lives with promise and expectations, found themselves barely surviving, until a bald persecutor came and showed them the essence of true pain. When they were left alone with each other and their shared grief, it all seemed horrible, but somehow, the true terror was forgotten. The mind cannot remain focused on constant pain; humans simply are not equipped to handle pain without some respite.

Balzeer went to a cage in the center of the chamber and knelt down. Using a pair of long tongs, which belonged in a foundry, he brought out a squirming and snapping land piranha. Fully equipped with the trademark teeth and scales of a fish, this contrived beast breathed air, at least for a short period of time.

He walked over to a strong, still-flailing brute of a man. At one time, he had been a professional athlete. Balzeer had made sure that no one would miss this him; as far as the rest of the world was concerned, he had died in a car accident. As he got closer, the man tried to kick out with his legs, unable to use his arms, as they were impaled against the far wall.

Balzeer stopped short and looked about him. On the floor, he saw another stake, a yard in length, and hefted it with his left hand, still holding onto the snapping land fish. He launched the stake and caught the man's left leg, just about at his ankle, pinning it to the wall. Balzeer was quite impressed with his accuracy, but did not linger on it. He had more important things to do.

He stepped closer to the man and, mumbling a quick incantation, he pushed the

fish forward, into his body, without need for an incision. It was a small fish, barely two inches long. It would not do too much damage, but the pain of being eaten inside out, was that for which Balzeer was aiming. It would burst inside the man from over-eating, like a mosquito hitting an artery. However, that wouldn't happen for another hour.

He repeated this with five of the eighteen other people surrounding him. Some were easier to handle than the football player, but the results would all be the same. After he had finished with the last one, he turned to the center of the chamber and saw that the pentagram he had fashioned was beginning to pulse with life. It was quite large, intended to shackle something monstrous.

The pulse was a raspy breath, drawn in and out with the effort of traveling a great distance in a very short period of time. The glow further illuminated the rest of the dark chapel. Screams echoed as his charges saw their surroundings in full light. Some gagged, and vomit began to permeate the air.

The pain, inflicted by the munching little land fish, was only part of the fuel being used to usher in the shape, whose outline was beginning to form in the center of the pentagram. The true nourishment that the brute needed was the fear, pain and torment that the rest of the captive assembly released. They were reminded that this agony would continue for the rest of their lives and, if Balzeer so desired, eternity.

The shape was a behemoth, its sloping shoulders blocking out the candlelight in the room. Tufts of hair spiked out from shoulders, as wide as the athlete, who had earlier faced Balzeer, was tall. The expected horns grew out and up from just above glowing, red eyes. The eyes shone as though they had already materialized, waiting for the rest of the body to catch up.

Tree trunk arms held up an overwhelmingly large upper body, which bulged and writhed with shackled power. More tufts of hair covered the hands, from the knuckles of the fingers, traveling up the forearms, all along the shoulders, and disappearing behind the head. Slobber shone in the candlelight, dripping off frog jowls that hung forward over serrated teeth. The mouth was ajar and spanned the entire width of the head, disappearing well behind the ears. The creature's legs were bowed, supporting the massive upper weight. It appeared as though they did not quite belong, an after-thought to the rest of the hulking shape.

"You are the Keeper of Shrouds? You're barely an infant. Look at you. You're not even mature enough to form a suitably impressive form," Balzeer spit out in contempt. "Do you know to whose summons you were sent? I hold the six marks on my body. You can feel them as I speak to you."

The glowing eyes dimmed as they darted to six points on Balzeer's body. For milliseconds, they rested on his shoulders, his hips, his groin and the middle of his chest.

"Yes, you are as you say. What do you command of me?" The demon's voice rumbled like thunder, and some of the glass in the room vibrated, producing peels of sharp noise.

"Begin by stopping with the parlor tricks. If they were any good, or done with enough skill, I would let you continue, but I immediately tire of a half-assed job. So, show your true self and speak with your true voice. This, I command."

A grimace crossed the demon's face. It drew back from its accuser and winced, as if struck. It bowed its head in obedience and set its jaw in a further grimace, a pout deep enough to reach the bull neck it had chosen.

From the tip of the horns, eight feet high, a contraction began. Rippling covered every extremity and moved inwards and downwards. The frog face, stooped shoulders, tufted arms, hands and bowed legs all agitated in the air, until a standing three-month-old

baby replaced them. It was bald, like its interrogator, but maintained the same pout, as that of its earlier manifestation. However, the black eyes were not the same, and concealed a watchful revenge which had not been present in the red coals of the invented demon.

“As you wished.” The voice was also that of a child, but sounded obscene. Vocal chords, lips, tongue and gums, which should not have been able to pronounce anything other than cries and gurgles, now spoke. “What is it you seek?”

“The signs for the one we all await have stopped and I want to know why. I want to know everything.” Balzeer’s earlier contempt had faded and was replaced by a wary respect. Only the most volatile of demons were given forms of innocence. Their forms were an insult from their masters, in order to keep them at the height of irritation and keep them subservient.

“It is not known. We are also very dismayed that there is this apparent alteration to the prophecy. Even our own divinations reveal nothing of his whereabouts.”

“That is not acceptable!!” Despite his earlier wariness, Balzeer’s slippery control of his towering temper disappeared. “I am charged with bringing this world to a point where His only son can come and prepare it for His kingdom, and I hear this?!!” His voice began to break as it reached a higher register. “A mere Shroud Keeper is withholding divinations from me?!!! Be gone!!! Go back to your pit and send me your manager, you filthy little speck!!”

At his utterance, the demon was replaced by a thin man with cloven feet. He shifted from foot to foot with agitated restraint.

“What is your displeasure, Supreme Tribunal?” Like any competent manager, the satyr set Balzeer at ease with his manner and words.

“Your Shroud Keeper is not giving me what I require to complete my task.” The answer was clipped.

“We shall give you all that we have to give, temporal lord. Do you require another Shroud Keeper?” He offered everything, held nothing back.

“No, the change would take too long.” Balzeer’s responses were still terse.

“What is your will for this displeasure?”

“I’ll leave it up to you.” The words were an afterthought.

The baby demon returned, but now shorter, lacking any lower limbs. He could not stand, yet he did not bleed from the stubs, which looked like a pair of sliced hams.

“Now, you insolent speck, what do the divinations you’ve mentioned reveal?” Balzeer’s instincts told him that there was something there, but that he would have to pick it out.

“Of late, there have been complete gaps around the Redeemer.”

“You are still holding back, Keeper, and you still have two limbs.” He needed to coax out the information.

“His birth is unique, an event that could not be hidden from our eyes, anywhere in the world. We will find him.”

“It’s like he’s being hidden, despite our best efforts,” Balzeer muttered under his breath as he paced before the segmented baby.

“And have any of the Seekers caught any sign?” Balzeer stopped; a few short seconds passed and he slowly turned to press his question.

“There have been Seekers, but there is more to the emptiness of our divinations. Since he is invisible outside the use of Seekers, we have concluded that He is outside of reality.”

“How is that possible?” This was what Balzeer wanted – insight, which no one on

earth could've given.

"You have often bent reality to your whims, lord. It is possible, but as you know, quite difficult. The Seekers, who were dispatched, are searching for anything that can be physically seen, but has no psychic register, no actual earthly aura." Balzeer had only heard of this being done by the most gifted of his masters – the men and women, from the thirteen families, who used reality and fashioned history.

"Does such a thing exist on earth? I have read and heard about it, but have never actually seen it." He would have to primarily rely on the use of Seekers. Increasingly, what Balzeer believed was for the best interest of the Great Dragon, conflicted with the sporadic orders he received from the great families. The Supreme Tribunal's allegiance was to the Great Leviathan Lucifer and his Nephilim.

"Use whatever means, any and all at your disposal. Use any thought of mortals, drifting to sin. The Redeemer should be seen through anything. He cannot be invisible. He should be a mountain among valleys." Using his links in hell would be paramount in this case. The netherworld paralleled our own, and for every man, woman or child on earth, there was an equal darkness.

"Mortals' sinful thoughts. What do you mean? How do we use them?"

"For every mortal on earth, there is a darkness in hell, which makes the sin appear easy, inducing the person to commit the sin." Everyone has their own darkness in hell, waiting for them and cajoling, manipulating and inching their earthly selves closer to a desired union. "In order to do this, we must monitor their thoughts. If they see any sign of our Redeemer, then it would register, maybe not with them, but surely with us. To you, especially." If they succeed in pushing them to sin, their person would go to hell.

"Yes, we shall do this, lord."

"Rather, you do this. I want this information accessible only to me. I want to see any and all mention of our Sire." In the Redeemer's case, hell had come to him; he was, quite literally, Hell on Earth.



- Zealots -

TIME: AUGUST 15TH, 1961. ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

Kosta sat at a *kafenion* table in the heart of the ancient Soma district. For centuries, it was believed that it housed a vast complex of buildings, surrounding the tomb of the city's founder. Now, it used the name and fame of the renowned conqueror as barter for tourists and currency. Kosta loved its open swagger and bold ambition to take as much money as possible from the visitors that sought enlightenment from its ancient ruins. It was a contrast from *Kostadinoupoli*, because it held no longed-for history. Nobody Kosta even knew, or read about, wished for the times of Alexander, mostly because nobody remembered them. There was no *monaxia* for Alexandria. It wasn't even in Europe.

In the noonday sun, Kosta sat in the shade of a Cinzano umbrella and read a codex, wrapped up in the newspaper of the day. If someone had been watching him closely, it would've been obvious to them that he wasn't reading the paper, but in Alexandria, Kosta knew that nobody took any notice. He was part of the furniture. He was a middle-aged, medium, Mediterranean man who wiled away his days at an outdoor tavern, *kafenion*. He was only one of thousands, but the only one who read the *Idammah-Gan Codex*.

He read it there, because it was the only safe place to do so. It had to be by the light of the sun, in daylight. No candle, electric or fire could keep the shadows inherent within the stygian ink of the book, sentenced there. In the day, the black things that made the letters and words were contained and seen, understood, without observation bringing them to life. Out of the sun's light they could take hold of imagination and not let go until it turned to madness. Kosta knew the dangers but he didn't know that any reading modified the final incarnation of the main character. His observation, maybe even the light of day, had brought it out of the darkness in which it had been intended to grow.

TIME: AUGUST 15th, 1961. SECRET ARCHIVES, VAULT 27, SUB-BASEMENT 6, VATICAN

Despite their rubber soles, his polished shoes snapped on the metal stairs. He wore the simple black robe of a parish priest, in order to be comfortable working with the heavy old volumes he lay down in front of his master's mounting material. A scribbled note, held at the end of a heavily knuckled hand, reached above the rising mound of old texts and shook. Not a word was uttered as it continued to quiver, until removed and taken back to rows of yet untouched books. The snap of shoes grew fainter and more distant from the straining, weighed-down table.

Tino Quentin sat very straight in his chair. He glanced through pages, which would have been the envy of any museum. Each volume he picked up, and then deposited, he treated with respect, but not reverence. He was a practical man who would not mistreat his tools, but would not think more of them than he would a serviceable hammer. Their tangible value was secondary to their contents.

At present, he searched through a ninth-century text, which was one of the first codices written by an Irish monk named Thomas. It held no title, just the volume number six. Much of the information, for which Seneschal Quentin searched, was in such unnamed texts. By themselves, the passages he periodically copied meant nothing. Collectively, they spoke of prophecies that would frighten most adults. Some might even hazard a nervous snicker, but one look at his austere face would stop any intended ridicule.

Tino Quentin did not joke. He did not even have pastimes. If he was not actively

completing his duties, he took care of bodily needs – sleeping, eating and eventual evacuation. There was no room for entertainment in Quentin's life. He was humorless, direct and precise.

As a child, he had briefly thought of becoming a police officer or a judge, but thought the occupations limiting. He had also considered the military, but knew that would limit his dedication to doing the right thing. The priesthood seemed the only correct alternative, until he was most of the way through seminary. Just before he took final vows, he was given the choice to serve Jesus by saving souls, or by saving the world. On the eve of his induction into the Dominican Order, the choice was presented by a severe, wiry priest named Jonathan Harker.

Father Harker also inducted some of his classmates, but chose to fully explain himself to Tino. The order to which the mysterious father belonged took the task of safeguarding the world very seriously. They combed through the church's records and gleaned information they then acted upon, without hesitation. In their service, Tino would bring God's just wrath to his most ancient of foes. Tino accepted this without question. He never doubted the temporal presence of evil and wanted to fight it. The task perfectly suited his nature.

In addition to his further, deeper instruction in the unknown mysteries of the Catholic Church, he was trained in, what could only be described as, covert operations. He learned to use most mundane objects as weapons and dispose of anyone he deemed worth such attention. Some intelligence services had the license to kill and the Templars had *carte blanche*.

Nobody they eliminated was ever missed – at least publicly. If they were, those whom objected too loudly were also eliminated. They just disappeared off the face of the earth. The ten years he spent learning his sacred calling went by without notice and he found himself a full member of the Brothers of the Temple. He rapidly rose in the ranks of the Brotherhood. In the order, he encountered none of the joviality he had despised in his life before the Templars. Everyone took their responsibilities seriously. However, there was a time when this dedication went too far.

Almost thirty years before, the order had splintered into their present form, obliterating the Teutonic Order. The Teutons followed the then-rising wave of fascism. In Italy, the Vatican watched as the country was taken over by fascism. The Templars used violence, but only in the service of scripture. Both the fascists in Italy and the Nazis in Germany used force for temporal gain. The Teutons were more loyal to their country than they were to their church. The schism was small, hardly worth noting, but was dealt with harshly.

For most of the Second World War, there were rumblings of their break from strict edicts of the Brotherhood, but it wasn't until 1943 that they openly declared their intentions. They would provide spiritual leadership for their parties, but not adhere to Templar dogma. They witnessed the mass-murder of Jews and undesirables, but they still chose to aid the murderers.

Since their inception, the Templars had never been an inclusive order. If you were Catholic, you were, at the very least, worth notice. Anyone who did not fit into that category was not worth consideration. If crimes against humanity didn't involve Catholics, they didn't matter. They did, however, matter to the Teutons. They actively took part in the Nazi holocaust, something beneath the Templars' notice and were eliminated.

Tino Quentin was the brother given the task of smoothing out the knick in God's armor. He gathered a select team of devout militants and removed every one of the five

hundred and twelve Teutonic members. None of them felt anything beyond a sense of satisfaction. They had successfully put their house in order. None of them sought reward, pride or recognition and none was given.

He laid down the volume he was studying and scanned his notes. He looked for a mention of the damned child – a baby boy, born to rule the earth with evil. References were present in a number of scribbled passages that he had carefully copied into the black notepad he always carried.

He closed the pad and placed it on the table in front of him. Then he removed his glasses, folded them and carefully centered them directly in front of the pad. Folding his hands, he placed them on the book and straightened in his chair, looking forward.

He sat this way for some time, waiting. The initiate who had retrieved brother Tino's requested volumes stopped abruptly, mid-stride, when he saw his Seneschal so still. He continued forward at a brisk pace and placed the books he carried beside the pile he had previously procured.

Quentin turned and regarded him. He did not refer to the initiate by name. Until he became a full brother, he had no name, merely a function. He had been with Quentin for the past five years and had done a competent job.

"Little brother, what is it that we are doing here?"

The initiate stared back at him. "We do God's work."

"The work of Satan is also done here."

"I don't understand, sir. How do we aid Satan with what we do?"

"We do not aid, per se. We are playing our part in the drama that is unfolding."

Quentin motioned for the initiate to sit in front of him. "The codices, the volumes you just set before me, *Le Menace D'Ours D'Enfer*, the *Sangrael Gospel*, the *Tome De Les Parfaits*, and the *Idammah-Gan Codex*, all speak of the son of Satan, the opposite of our own Christ. If we do not fulfill our function, his plans cannot proceed. It is our participation that justifies the passages I transcribe from these books before me." Quentin saw that the initiate did not understand his cryptic explanation.

"You live in important times, young man. Important, indeed." He picked up his black notepad and used it to gesture emphatically. "You do believe in the reality of evil, don't you?"

"In the physical reality. Yes, I do."

"The actuality of it, however, is quite different from the physical to which you refer." He proceeded carefully as he continued. "Evil has no comparison in our lives. It does not fit anything with which we're familiar. It will not resemble a hierarchy in any sense of which we are aware. It isn't like the opposite of our church."

"I don't quite follow sir."

"Satanists, Luciferians chose whatever name they're using at the moment. They base much of their order, symbols, hierarchy on the inversions even perversions of our own order, symbols, and hierarchy. Examples being their usage of the inverted cross and Antichrist for our Christ."

"And how does that pertain to evil being unlike any of that. Satanists are evil versions of the Catholicism. Isn't that what you just said?"

"No I said that true evil does not follow the obvious. It is not so easily seen as the blatant parlor tricks and bold impudence of Le Vey's pranksters."

"Are you telling me that evil is invisible? That we cannot be aware of it?" The nameless initiate was still perplexed.

"No, I'm saying that evil does not fit into our – or anyone's – perception. It is not the two-dimensional entity, or force, about which we read in all these volumes. The

writings here, through which we go, are merely important clues to help us combat it. So, by looking into its past, we can understand its present and, more importantly, its future. Much as a psychiatrist asks a disturbed patient about his childhood, so we look to evil's past to help us understand it."

"Why do you say 'might,' master? Will we not see evil's intentions in the scriptures? In the holy volumes we have here?" The question came out as uncertain and cautious as the lips that delivered it.

"We may not. All we may find here is insight into direction. These texts were written by flawed, imperfect men, such as us, they but give us possibilities of action." Quentin paused.

"Whose?" The initiate was trying hard to follow what the respected Seneschal was attempting to explain.

"Evil doesn't have a single mind. It is not following the plans of its infernal leader." He continued, "In fact, I don't think that Satan is plotting in hell. He's reacting to what is happening on earth. He follows plans that were set in motion by another, or others – just as God, through the Church, is helping us do His work on earth."

"You sound so convinced, master. How can Satan not be plotting against God? Isn't that his nature?" He seemed certain of that fact, though his certainty was decreasing.

"Satan or, rather, evil, isn't some beast, following its own biological, instinctive or preordained path, young man. It is simplistic to think thus, as well as very dangerous." Quentin hoped that the initiate was following. "There are many on earth – normal human beings – who are misguided enough to do the work of evil. In their own desire for power, they strive to give evil prominence

"Why is it so dangerous, master? We are on God's side. We do what is right. We should have nothing to fear," he queried.

"Young man, you must get your head out of the clouds. If there's one thing in this world that is dangerous, it is evil." Quentin continued, "We have nothing to fear in this world, yes, that is true. Not because God is on our side, rather, because we are the church. Nothing in this world can stand before us. I am worried by things not of this earth." Quentin added, "Now, you must heed what, I hope, you understand of this talk. Do not be so hasty that you fall for the easy conclusion. We will be in a battle for all souls."

"We will be fighting for the souls of the world, master?" His statement was uncertain and inquisitive.

"No, we are fighting for our people. We are fighting for those who believe in the true word of God." Of this, Quentin was certain.

"And of those who aren't?" The initiate was still unsure.

"They're on their own, but they will be saved from Satan, if not hell." Quentin stopped for a few moments, pondering if the initiate was capable of internalizing everything he had to share. He finally decided to share everything he understood; he hoped it would not unsettle the young man.

"Currently, we are seeing things progress toward more centralized governments. Europe is swiftly becoming a single economy; the reasons for this are entirely justifiable and logical, but no less diabolical." Quentin watched as the initiate's attention flagged. He was not able to follow.

"Those who work for this final one-world government – the New World Order, as it is coming to be known – are, mostly at any rate, working for noble ends. The true architects of this final end-plan are not. They are the ones who manipulate history, finances, governments and reality, itself, to fit their final goal of world dominance." Quentin knew that he had to conclude when he saw the initiate's face go blank, unable to

further process anything. “I am sorry, my lad. You were not able to accept that with which we work here. You will be taken care of, as a good soldier always is.”

Quentin got up and went to a waiting black telephone receiver. Picking it up, without dialing, he spoke directly to another. “I would like someone to come and take care of the initiate who has been helping me. He has fallen prey to the more dangerous texts we have in the archives. He must’ve looked into them, their contents erasing his sanity.” He listened intently and finished. “Yes, a quick end would be best. I don’t think he intended any harm; most likely, he was curious and read the wrong things. Thank you.”

Quentin replaced the receiver and went back to the slack-jawed young man. He had not moved from where they spoke. He informed the initiate there are certain things that cannot be viewed by everyone. Terrors and evil reside everywhere. Sometimes they are in words, between breaths and around thoughts. They remain that way until they are unlocked by a gesture or a conversational turn. Unless they are unwittingly unleashed, their terrible power and destructive potential remain dormant.

Those who propelled the New World Order thought similarly to the hapless, novice Templar. They sought to give their world strength and stability, but what they actually succeeded in doing was tying it up into a nice neat package for the architect of the master plan and the prophesied son of the Father of Darkness and Lies.

- Idammah-Gan Codex - Depth of Correction I -

TIME: AUGUST, 480 B.C. THERMOPYLAE, ELLATHA

The sweat inside my helmet makes it smell like the taste of blood – tinny, coppery and acrid. This same blood repeatedly spills around me and, more importantly, in front of my brothers as we lock shields and hold firm our line.

There are only 300 of us, standing against thousands. We told the rest of the Greeks to go and raise the alarm with the rest of our *patriots*, while we buy them as much time as our lives are worth. Every one of us was given the choice to go with them and save ourselves, but none of us accepted the offer. If one of us stood and fought, we all did. Even the soldiers behind us, those with the crested helmets, all knew they would die on this field. My helmet bears no crest, neither does anyone else’s on the front line. Our spears are no less heavy, or sharper, than those of our crested nobles. Our armor is also as heavy and our shields as strong.

On this field, we are equal. Thermopylae has successfully united 300 men, creating one man with a single will. We are all Spartan and we will all die before the end of this day. The other Greeks who fled will sing paens of our sacrifice here, just as we sing paens of other fallen heroes. We sing to keep our spirits up as we face such daunting foes.

The Persians shoot at us from afar with their bows; some even find a manner of mark in our ranks, though the only openings are the eye slits in our helmets. At various intervals, someone falls and yet another takes his place. At others times, when someone falls, he gets back up and fights on. He knows that soon enough, he’ll die. Then he can rest.

I saw others fall, but resumed fighting, because when our foes saw that their arrows had little effect, they sent their footmen against us. Like waves, they crashed against our shields. Those who made it through were killed by our rear ranks.

We braced ourselves for their cavalry assault. We were used to some horses, but not on this scale. They sent their horsemen against us, but we threw them back; the

terrain was with us. The horses could not maintain their footing on the rocks and loose gravel around the field.

Two days of fighting passed. We began the battle outnumbered, the entire Greek army thousands strong. We held the hot gates against Xerxes's host, until one of our own, Ephialtes, an Athenian, most likely gave us up. Now, we fight alone — 300 men, with a few Thespians.

To my left, I hear Alcman sing, "Narrow is the way of life and necessity is pitiless."

Near him, Tyrraesis continued, "Let each man spread his legs, rooting them to the ground. Bite his teeth into his lips and hold."

Thank the gods Diecenes still lives. When he was told that the Persian arrows would hide the sun, he stated, "So much the better; we will fight in the shade. All this metal armor is so hot in the sun."

However, our king, Leonidas, had also sent back men with outraged fire in their eyes. Only Spartans with living sons were allowed to remain and fight. He did not want any Spartan line to die out.

This final day dawned with the inevitable sunrise and deathly struggle. It was never this far marching into our ranks. Today, nearly every man I had ever known would die with me. Leonidas fell early on. He had chosen to be in the front lines. He was three down from my right and we fought fiercely to recover his body. He would not die among the *xenous*, rather with us. Once he was safely at our rear, encircled by all his men, we were able to turn our attention back to the business of dying.

Again, they came at us in waves of footmen and arrows. Initially, none had any real effect, but after repeated entries they wore us down. Once we had broken our spears against them, we beat them with the shafts. When we could no longer use our shafts, we drew our swords and used them, until useless. It was at this point that an arrow caught me in my right eye. I grunted and fell to my knee, but kept my shield raised.

The Immortal that faced me thought I was an easy kill, but became mortal, indeed, when I slashed up and cut him from groin to neck. He screamed like a woman and fell, his blood making my footing all slippery.

I could not see to my right, so from that direction came my end. I think it was more arrows, but I didn't notice. I knew that even when our swords were useless, we would fight on with whatever we could find – rocks, our shields, our bare hands, even our teeth.

This struggle awakened a dormant part of me. Our 300 men will go down, along with 20,000 of our opponents. Yet, still will there be an endless supply enemies, attempting to kill the spirit we showed to our last breath.

We never surrendered. We were beaten. We would be remembered.

"Go stranger, and to the Spartans tell,

That here, obedient to their laws, we fell."

I did not fall because of obedience, rather, because I supported my brothers. For the same reason, I knew they would stand with me. Each of us stood shoulder to shoulder in defense of the other. We did not stand to defend any rules or laws. We stood for each other. In the end, nobody stood for principle. Whoever stands, stands for the people we hold dear, for those who matter to us. Principles and laws are just so much air and smoke. At Thermopylae, I saw past this. I hope to remember it for lifetimes to come.

TIME: AUGUST 16TH, 1961. ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

Mesmerized, Kosta read on. The lives spoken of touched him and tugged at his consciousness. There was no doubt about the authenticity of the record. His emotions and attention were enough to confirm its veracity. Through the author's visceral rendering, his thoughts and passions were exposed and defused. In them, Kosta saw a longing. A need to stop the unending battles – battles where the foe never mattered, for it was never the same. The fight went on and on. The author wished to be able to stop, to not only live a life, but to also enjoy living it.

- Idammah-Gan Codex - Depth of Correction II -

TIME: 8TH MONTH, 17TH DAY, 4TH YEAR OF THE REPUBLIC. IBERIA

This time, they call me Remus.

It's strange what you notice. At worst, the gash in my side was a distraction. Through the grill of my helmet, I see everyone in a shade.

This is what I notice.

I'm calm and that surprises me. I've dropped to my knees, while my opponent grabs my chin and snaps my head back. His blade touches my straining throat. I don't care to look at the official decision. Soon enough, I'll know.

As I wait, I encounter a familiar, errant thought.

Where will I end up this time? Once the gash my opponent just opened in my jugular stops pumping out my life, what will I be?

I know I'll come back. I've been coming back since - I can't remember when, though this is the first time I've thought of this on the bright side of death. I know why and I'm dying. I know all of life's answers. The reasons these people reveled in my death. They scream and jeer at my falling body. I represent everybody whom they hate. Everything that has ever hurt or pleased me no longer requires an explanation.

I've dropped forward to lie facedown. I see this from afar. I see my opponent step away from me and throw up his hands, basking in the cheering and adulation. I convulse three more times and am finally still.

It feels like I'm rising above this scene. It's now growing dim and distant.

There is nothing here, but my awareness. There is only blackness, and beyond this blackness, there is void. There is nothing here, nothing. I'm the only one who can see this.

TIME: AUGUST 18TH, 1961. ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

With the account of each subsequent life, the author's wishes are deeper, yet unnoticed. Beneath the continued battle, the story of his lives floats on a layer of colossal regret. The regret goes unnoticed, because he thinks he can triumph over the obstacles he faces. He believes he can reach the light, which is his destination. Every time he thinks that he's almost captured it, the distance is halved, yet he never succeeds. The light is always just out of his reach.

Kosta knew that he would never be able to reach it. He used the wrong vehicle. His perceptions would always keep him at a distance; his thoughts would hold him at bay. He finally saw, understood, the connection he felt to the author's longing. It was the hope for peace. They shared a revulsion against the turmoil and chaos into which they were forced. The monumental, historic struggles for souls, world influence and control, were no longer appealing. The struggle Kosta now sought was more personal and, in the end, was merely that for which anyone ever really fought.

- Idammah-Gan Codex - Depth of Correction III -

TIME: AUGUST 19TH, 33 A.D. GOLGOTHA, JERUSALEM, ISREAL

My mind is in a complete fog. People are crying. I can't tell how many and for whom. There is nothing of which I'm sure, except for the pain in my wrists and ankles. I try to look to my left and to my right, but I cannot see past my extremities. I only wish that I couldn't even see that far. Try as I might, my glance keeps returning to the nails that hold my arms and ankles to this cross. This is the only way I know they're still attached. Hours ago, they went numb. Hanging this way, I struggle to breathe. I only think about pushing my weight back up. There is no way in creation I will go through this again.

When they first hammered me to the wood, the pain nearly drove me mad. My mind threw screams out of my mouth – screams which continued well past when they turned me over to hammer the nails back, ensuring that I would stay on the cross. My mind gibbered disbelief at the fact that I was in this position. I think these words came out of my mouth, but of this I am not certain. "Oh, no. This is not possible. No, no, no, no." These three phrases repeatedly chased each other out of someone's head, through their mouth, and out past their lips, though I don't know if it was me, or one of the other two.

The crying continues and I hope to die. Now, this pain is everything to me. It has taken over both my vision and hearing. I no longer know what is happening around me. I could be the one crying, but I'm very confused.

Someone screams, startled by the thunder and lightning around the hill on which they chose to plant these trees of pain. Rain comes down like fat tears and gives me a small relief, but does not restore my grasp of sight and sound. Time crawls by and I'm still breathing, living this misery.

"King of Jews. Why don't you call upon your God and save us?" One of us says. Is it me? At such a time, could I be so cruel to another who shared my pain?

"He does not deserve to be here. We have done things in our lives to deserve this place. He has done nothing." The response is instant and I instantly feel humiliated and exulted.

It must be days that we've been up here; still, I don't know how to interpret my own senses. The rain continues and my tears join it. I'm sure that I sob with relief, because I feel my strength and life finally ebbing. Endurance is overrated. I wish I were weaker and able to endure far less.

"Father, why have you forsaken me?" The voice is filled with sobbing and comes from everywhere. It brings further darkness and depression. The sky has come closer to my face and reflects the bruises and blood that now describe my body. The tears and sobs leave me, unheard amid the rain and thunder.

"Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." Who does? Why does the voice seek this God, this treacherous Father, who allows this to be done to His son? For a few breaths, I am angry at the criminal violation, which this begged-for parent shows to all his children. Why do we look to Him for this withheld comfort and support?

My outrage continues and, in my death, it follows me to the void. In the nothing I now face, I am alone with my belief that no help shall ever be given, though it be earned a thousand times. I am on my own, to grow strong or be annihilated.

I also think that this seems oddly familiar. In my thoughts, this strange skewing of priorities is nothing new. A silent revelation envelops me and pushes all else aside. In violent death, this always happens. I remember past lives. I remember the death in the arena, as well as when I stood proud at Thermopylae. Not much else, apart from this, is

important. Not my life then, nor any lives before, or since.

TIME: AUGUST 20TH, 1961. ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

Long ago, Uncle George and Malone had told Kosta that the search for truth was that for which everyone fought. Many imposed their truth so that they can justify it, believing that their irrefutable errors were the truth. Kosta wanted to show the AntiX that there was only one who needed no homage. This truth wasn't confined to any single interpretation – not Xian, Buddhist, Pagan, Muslim, Hindi. All were true for those who believed. The struggle was to remember, rather than to get distracted by historic, cultural and familial beliefs, which were bolstered by numbers. Few faiths stood alone.

The three most popular religions taught that the AntiX would initiate a reign of darkness. Their belief was making it true. Kosta read this and saw it reflected in books and many prophecies. For millennia, the struggle between good and evil had been center-stage in our awareness. Some attributed the highest attainments of mortals to divine inspiration, while the basest and lowest crimes and behavior were defined as evil. This somehow cheapened or excused those achievements and failures. This explanation was too simplistic. There should be accountability for actions, both collectively and individually. People were capable of both good and evil. Nobody pushed them to do one or the other. No singular, outside force existed. It did become real because we don't want to accept our power for our actions when we sin we assign blame to others. We can't even take credit for success. We thank God and never blame him for failures.

Kosta was glad that he had taken the time to find the Codex. Glad that wily, old Plethon hadn't told him where to look. Had it been an accident that he hadn't asked him where it could be located before granting him his peace? Or had Kosta needed to search through these other books, which had led him to this moment of epiphany? In the intervening months, he had gone to library after library, yet he wasn't perturbed by the setback. He enjoyed the time he had spent searching. Through the mundane toil of the process, he had learned more from his mistakes than he could've guessed.

For a second, he looked away from the *Idammah-Gan* and stared wistfully at the gathering twilight and the setting sun. He reminded himself that he would have to stop for the day. His reading could not continue without the sun, which allowed the book's custodians to protect the contents. As he closed it, he glanced down at the passage he just finished and was struck motionless, awed. The passage was reassembling itself into another version, which he hadn't already read. With a start, he snapped the book shut and shuddered. If he had waited a few more seconds, who knows with what he would've had to contend. Ordering a bottle of *Metaxa* cognac, he wondered what he would see the next time he opened the Codex.

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