

THE PHOENICIAN CODE

UNVEILING THE SECRETS OF THE HOLY GRAIL



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Karim El Koussa
Ehden, March 17, 2018

To the Keepers of the Word...

If a man loves me, he will keep my word,
and my Father will love him, and we will come to him,
and make our home with him.

He who does not love me, does not keep my words;
and the word, which you hear,
is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

—*John 14:23–24*

Facts

The Great White Fraternity

An ancient fraternity founded around 1500 BC, or even a few hundred years earlier. The Great White Fraternity was a monotheistic religious community that began to function as an esoteric secret society in Phoenicia, and was then immediately adopted by Egyptian Priests.

There existed a great religious and spiritual connection between Egypt and Phoenicia, and especially between Memphis and Gebel (Byblos). Egyptian Priests also adopted the story of Adonis and Astarte that had occurred in Gebel, and identified the names of these divinities with those of their own, Osiris and Isis. The death of Osiris, and his resurrection, is the Egyptian version of the death and resurrection of the Gebelite Adonis.

In addition, the Phoenician's belief in the One Most High God "Al-Elyon" became the corner stone at the Temple of Akhenaton in Egypt, who initiated the preaching of the One God, Aton. Among the early prominent adepts of the Great White Fraternity were Pharaohs Thutmose III and Akhenaton of Egypt, as well as the Canaano-Phoenician Kings, Melki-Sedek of Jerusalem, Ahiiram of Gebel, and Hiram of Tyre (also known as Ahiiram).

The Divine Messenger of the Great White Fraternity was Enoch-Taautus. Enoch (Anak) the Canaano-Phoenician became a Metatron—the chosen one who stood before God. The Father of the spiritual laws was also identified as Thot-Taautus in the Egyptian religion. He was also Mithra for the Hindus and the Persians; Enki/Ea/Oannes in Mesopotamia; Nabū/Nebo in the Babylonian mythology; Quetzalcóatl for the Mexican Aztecs; Thor in the Scandinavian tradition; Hermes-Kadmos for the Greeks, and Mercury for the Romans. He was Adam-Kadmon for the Kabbalists, Edris for the Arabs and Muslims, and recently Enoch for the Druzes.

He was also the god of Wisdom, Science, and the occult teachings.

The Keepers of the Word

A physically non-existent movement in the real sense of the word. It is not an organized entity. However, there are an increasing number of people in the world today who believe that the message of Jesus Christ in the New Testament was a spiritual and social revolution against the God of the Old Testament. That would be the reason for the crucifixion that led to the Resurrection—the real aim of the divinity of Jesus.

Martin Luther wrote in *Christian Liberty*, “Therefore the Promises of God belong to the New Testament. Indeed, they are the New Testament.”

All historical information on art, architecture, and masonry are the fruit of serious and intensive research.

All quotations from the Old and New Testament are accurate.

The three maps at the end of the book are authentic.

Prologue

*1105 AD
Troyes in Champagne, France
Late Evening*

On the top of a hill, just at the outskirts of the village of Troyes, stood a beautiful castle of stone, overlooking the surrounding plains from the four towers on the four sides. It belonged to Hughes, the Count of Champagne. Despite the thick fog encircling the hill, and the heavy rain pouring from everywhere, a faint light could be seen from one of the windows that led to his study.

Behind a wooden desk, clothed in a black cape, a well-built man in his early thirties, a long mane over his shoulders, a thick beard covering his face, appeared engrossed with something on his desk under the dim light of a two-candled chandelier. A sketched map of the Holy Land, and next to it, a beautifully crafted Cross of pure gold. However, three knocks on the door abruptly broke his concentration.

“Come in . . .” he ordered in a sharp tone, lifting his head up.

The door opened, a man, very similar to him in shape and costume, perhaps a bit shorter and thinner, entered the room.

“What is it cousin?” asked the Count.

“A messenger just brought up this letter addressed to you and said it’s urgent. He first refused to give it to me, saying that it should be delivered to you in person, but I assured him not to worry,” he explained, displaying his fidelity, as he moved closer towards the desk.

“Very well then, have a seat.”

Hughes de Payens, the cousin, was very loyal to the Count. In fact, he was his companion and right-hand man. He took care of almost all his businesses, and the Count trusted him greatly. When he found his seat, he handed him the scroll, wrapped with a red ribbon.

The Count took his time before he untied the knot and opened the scroll. His bright eyes, fixed on the written words, soon turned dim. Something bad seemed to have happened. His face began to show expressions of sorrow and exasperation.

Something dreadful had really happened, Hughes de Payens thought. “What’s wrong cousin?” He questioned, in an anxious tone.

There was silence for a few seconds . . .

“Summon the stable boy and ask him to saddle up two horses. We’re riding to Troyes.”

“What! Have you lost your mind? It’s late at night, and it’s raining like hell. Can’t you hear the thunder outside? There is a storm coming . . .” Hughes de Payens argued, with a hint of astonishment, in an attempt to talk him out of that foolish idea.

“Do you doubt my reasoning, cousin?” The Count replied, “Don’t! Just do what I have told you. It is an important matter. Leave now.”

Although Hughes de Payens knew almost everything, down to the slightest details concerning the Count: his love affairs, his money affairs, his political acquaintances, and his social status, still, he doubted the Count might have some sort of connection he didn’t know about. He rarely saw him in such a baffled state.

With no further ado, the cousin obeyed the wish of the Count, and summoned the stable boy. A few moments later, on that clandestine night, the Knights rode on through the mist, and the sound of their running horses echoed eerily in the small valley below. Rain poured heavily that night, and the wind blew in all directions.

A powerful thunderclap resounded, as lightening smacked a big Cypress tree on the side of the narrow mountainous passage, and it crashed on the road. The loud neighs of horses reverberated in the air, as the flash of the lightning strike glinted the way for the two horses coming to an abrupt stop, right at the verge of the fallen tree. The horses stood motionless on the rocky passage.

Completely cloaked in black from head to toe, one of the riders dismounted hastily after seeing his companion sprawled on the ground by the forced halt. The roaring thunder had certainly impeded him from hearing the probable scream.

“Are you all right, cousin?” said the worried voice in the darkness.

“I am fine. Just help me get up,” the Count groaned angrily, as he struggled on the muddy soil.

“Should we go back? The road is blocked . . .” Hughes de Payens

added in an anxious tone.

“No . . . No. We will jump over the hurdle. I have to meet the Big Brother, and urgently,” the Count spoke in resolve as he stood up, cleaning the dirt off his black robe.

“Aha . . . now I understand the rush,” Hughes de Payens reasoned, and the Count gave him an affirmative look.

Back on their horses, the two Knights moved some sixty steps further back, spun around to glare at the crashed tree for a moment then turned around, and whipped their horses to a fast gallop towards the village.

Partly illuminated by oil lamps hanging from the pillars on either side of the road, Troyes appeared from afar like a haunted town. The black Knights entered at a gallop, riding directly to an old, gloomy residential area to the northern side of the village.

Immediately, out of the dark, three armed men—holding oil lamps in their hands—dashed towards them. Despite the drizzling rain, the light helped the Knights discern the road better and more clearly distinguish the three guards nearing them.

“Reveal yourselves!” One of the guards commanded.

“I’m Hughes, Count of Champagne, and this is my cousin, Hughes de Payens,” the Knight on the black horse responded, as he lifted the hood off his head.

The men came closer in order to identify them. One of them, evidently reassured by the identity of the Count, said: “Please, follow us. The Master is very ill, and he is waiting for you.”

The Count and his cousin followed them silently to an ancient, somber house where they got off their horses and waited, as one of the guards knocked on the massive wooden door, once then again. The door opened, and a huge man with a bald head, thick eyebrows, dark eyes, and a big moustache appeared at the doorstep. The two knocks on the door were apparently a signal for those inside to respond by opening, yet not enough for the Knights to be allowed inside, for the man at the door ordered them to stop.

“This is Hughes, the Count of Champagne and his cousin. They are here to see the Master,” explained the guard.

“Are you sure about their identity?” asked the guardian of the door.

“Well . . . not yet, but I guess they are saying the truth,” answered the guard.

“We will know in a moment. Have you searched them?”

“Yes . . . they are unarmed.”

The guardian of the door stepped out slowly, and walked steadily towards the Knights, turning around them once then again. While having his stabbing stare fixed on them for a few seconds, he came closer, near the Count.

“What is the password?” he asked in a low voice.

The Count looked at him through jagged eyes, and whispered in his ears the word: “RASHI”

“Wait here!” the guardian intoned hastily, as he gave the Count and his cousin a quick look, before he turned on his feet and headed towards the door.

Long moments passed before the guardian appeared again, inviting the Count in, “You can enter now, Count. Master Rashi is ready to receive you.”

The Knights entered the house, but the Count alone continued left into a room behind a colorless curtain. Obviously, his cousin was not permitted to see the Big Brother; the letter was specifically addressed to the Count. Inside a dreary bedroom, lying on a luxurious, well-crafted wooden bed was a man, wrinkled by age and weighed down by life. Few white-and-gray, fine threads of hair covered his head. His face was round, his eyes lifeless, half open, in search of the visitor who had just entered. The Count drew nearer, and sat on a small black leather stool next to the bed.

After establishing a long-time, special relationship with Hughes, Count of Champagne and his friend Godefroi de Bouillon, Master Rashi appointed Godefroi—who was the Duke of Lower Lorraine at the time—to be the first Master of their secret, religious, political, and military Order under the name of the *Priory of Zion*. This had happened almost six years ago, in the year 1099 AD, the same year in which Jerusalem had fallen into the hands of the Christian Crusaders, led by men like Peter the Hermit; Godefroi de Bouillon; Hughes, Count of Champagne; and Raymond de Saint Gilles, Count of Toulouse.

Rashi had earlier revealed to Godefroi de Bouillon that the Sacred Cup and the Ark would confer amazing support and power to those who would find them. He had informed him that both items were hidden in the ruins of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. However, this important information had been totally concealed from the Count, but it seemed that Godefroi, who was sick and dying back then, had actually transmitted the secret to his brother, Baldwin of Boulogne—who became King of Jerusalem one year later, in 1100 AD.

“Anything new from King Baldwin . . .?” Master Rashi inquired with a sudden cut off of his question due to his continuous painful coughs.

“No. He told me to inform you that he had not yet found the item you are searching for, Master,” the Count answered in a low voice that betrayed his disappointment.

On a table nearby, reposed an iron chandelier with seven lit candles, their light diffused dimly, extinguishing, like the old man in his bed. The Count stared at him with hidden pity; for he had figured out that his days were numbered.

“You’ve been there for a few weeks . . .” he muttered, his voice unstable, “And you haven’t found anything! Baldwin has been in Jerusalem for six years now, and he hasn’t found it yet? He won’t . . . he won’t ever find it!” he shouted out loud, painfully. “The Cup might have been taken a very long time ago to a different place by . . . this darned Joseph . . .” the Big Brother uttered the words with a great rage that clearly showed the blue thick veins on his old face, and with difficulty, because of his persistent coughs. He was, indeed, in a very anguished and feeble condition.

“Here . . . drink some.” The Count handed him a glass of water from the bedside table.

A few seconds later . . .

“What Cup, Master? I was not there searching for anything. My visit was strictly for political reasons. The search, I believe, was Baldwin’s mission.” The Count explained; justifying himself from the burden Master Rashi had put on his shoulders. Besides, he knew all too well that Rashi was in the mixing-things-up phase of his life.

“Come . . . come a bit closer,” the old man urged him with a tremulous intonation. “I’m dying, as you can see,” his eyes almost closed, no more power to keep them open, or half-open, “but before I die . . . before I leave, I want to reveal to you something of great importance . . . hem . . . hem . . . a secret about the Temple, the Ark, and a Sacred Cup . . .”

The Count abided with veiled excitement that he found hard to conceal as the Master whispered strange words in his ears.

The storm had calmed down when the two Knights left the village of Troyes that night, heading back to the castle of the Count, over the hill, just at the outskirts.

The old man died a few days later. It was 1105 AD.

In the couple of months that followed, the Count lived every single day in great perplexity. The secret the Big Brother had revealed in his last

moments had haunted him since. He became obsessed with it, almost losing his sanity. What he knew was also, already known to Baldwin—King of Jerusalem—but what the King—the second Master of the secret Order of the *Priory of Zion*—didn't know was that the Sacred Cup might have been taken, a very long time ago, to a different place by a certain man called Joseph.

“Who was Joseph?” The Count muttered under his breath. It seemed that Master Rashi was not able to pronounce the complete name of that person, but the Count reasoned that Joseph might have been an important Christian figure. Curious to know the real identity of that man, the Count decided to travel to Jerusalem along with his cousin Hughes de Payens.

The search for the Cup, the Ark, and Joseph has begun . . .

- Part I -

1

*Present Time
In a small town, Lebanon
Early Morning*

A square shaped building of only two floors, bounded by olive trees, and standing almost perfectly behind a church dedicated to St. John the Baptist. Over the main entrance, a white tinted iron door, the words: HOUSE OF PRIESTS inscribed on a golden plate. The short corridor with doors on both sides was unsoiled. Beautiful oil paintings adorn the walls with Angels, Old Churches, and the newly elected Pope, Benedict XVI. Straight ahead, at the end of the corridor, a white-painted wooden door plated with the words: PADRE JOSEPH.

“No . . . I’m afraid this cannot wait any longer, Maya. It is very important that we meet, and you just cannot miss it . . .” a firm, yet gentle, voice came from the room. “I am asking another person to the meeting as well.”

Inside his humble office, a soft beam of light seeped through the window, and traveled through particles of dust, to shine upon an open book: The NEW TESTAMENT resting serenely on a brown large desk. Padre Joseph, a man that looked to be in his late sixties, sat on a black leather armchair behind the desk, holding a newspaper in one hand, and the telephone handset in the other. His serious blue eyes softened the reddish tones of his round shaped face, as did his white hair to the black color of his religious suit. Despite the slenderness of his body, Padre Joseph reflected nothing but an admirable vigor.

“You truly sound very serious about it, Padre,” Maya’s sweet voice echoed in his ear. “What is . . .” her voice suddenly became intermittent. The call then went static, the connection almost lost.

“Hello . . . Hello,” Padre Joseph spoke aloud, a bit anxious. “Are you there, Maya? Can you hear me?”

“Just a little bit . . .” she answered back, a moment later. “But . . . it’s

difficult to understand what you're saying."

"Where are you, right at the moment?"

"I can hear you now, Padre. It is coming . . . the connection is coming back. Stop here . . . to the left please, stop now . . ." She ordered, and Padre Joseph could hear her thunderous voice well. He quickly realized that she was speaking with someone else, probably a driver, urging him to stop the vehicle at once. "Well, Padre, I am with the team on route up Mt. Hermon, and the wind was blowing hard on us."

"I see . . ."

A green convertible military Jeep, followed by another four wheeler, a white Range Rover, had just made a turn on the Mountainous tight road, only to stop immediately to the left side; trailing behind them a storm of dust. On the seat next to the young man driving the Jeep sat an attractive woman probably in her mid-thirties. With a silken face against the wind, and long light-brown hair flowing down her shoulders, she held the mobile phone to her ear, and waved with her free hand at the driver of the Range Rover, occupied by three people, to stop just behind them. Maya was clad in a casual outfit, a straw hat on her head, and elegant sunglasses that covered her eyes.

"Your lexis, Padre, sounded really serious," her lovely voice echoed again in his ear. "What is it?"

"Right now, I can't talk much about it over the phone, besides, you're not alone. All I can say . . ." he paused for an instant. "Well, it is actually something related to what you do," he then uttered, looking at the picture of a man in the newspaper.

"Archeology?"

"Yes . . . and much more than that."

After a moment, she rejoined with a curious yet affirmative tone in her voice, "Alright Padre, I'll be there." Obviously, she had never before felt that strange seriousness he showed in his call today.

"Very well then, I'll be expecting your visit next Wednesday, around 4 PM. Try to make it on time."

"I will."

"Until then, have a nice day, bye."

"You too Padre, bye."

He hung up, reverted to his seat, all too slowly, picked up his phonebook, searched for a name, and then dialed the number. The cell phone began to ring . . . once, twice, before a male hand picked it up from a small wooden table, topped with a beautiful African-designed ashtray,

containing a cigarette not yet lit.

“Hello,” a man, in his mid-thirties, spoke. Sitting on a long swinging chair in his backyard garden, his face was round with brown eyes, a nice goatee on his fine chin, and black hair that covered most of his head. He held a book he was reading in his other hand. *The Mythic Past, by Thomas L. Thompson.*

“Hello, Paul, are you there?”

“Definitely, is that you, Padre?”

“Yes, Paul. Do you have a minute?”

“Certainly.”

“Good. Listen, I am setting up an urgent meeting with a couple of people, and I want you to attend. It will be something of great interest to your work.”

“What’s the urgency?” Paul asked, concerned.

“I just can’t relate the matter to you now, over the Phone, Paul. We need to meet.” The Padre’s voice sounded foreboding.

“Where and when?”

“My office, on Wednesday, around 4 PM. Can you make it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Alright, we’ll be waiting for you. Have a nice weekend, bye.”

“Same to you, Padre, bye now.”

He put the phone down, slipped back on his seat behind his large brown desk, and looked outside through the window. *It has begun*, he thought. *One more name.* He then turned towards his desk, and took his phonebook again to search for the name he had in mind. He found the number and dialed, while tapping with his fingers on the desk and looking at the tree outside.

A Cedar tree planted almost in the center of his backyard placed him well in its shade. He looked up, and breathed in the refreshing air. He always enjoyed being here in his house up in the mountains. Still seated on that long swinging chair, Paul Khoury resumed the reading of the book he held in his hand, after taking a sip of coffee. Yet, something began to agitate his mind deeply. A few minutes later, it stopped him completely from turning the pages. He could not concentrate on the text in the book anymore. His mind was elsewhere.

He was thinking of the weird call he had just received, and the urgent meeting he was supposed to attend next Wednesday. In fact, he had never before received such an important call as this one from the Padre. *It will*

be something of great interest to your work, he said to himself, as he recalled the exact words uttered over the phone.

Paul had known Padre Joseph for almost eight years now. They had met at the Padre's office, immediately after his return to Lebanon from a two-month trip he took to Scotland. The voyage was mainly about discovering the unusual, paranormal activities that take place there, and the findings he had made were just enthralling. Along with that, it was the religious and esoteric research on the Phoenicians and the Egyptians—with their *Book of the Dead*—which had led the two men to meet, although they had both lived for quite some time in the same small town in Northern Lebanon.

All his life, Paul had been strongly fascinated in subjects such as History, Religion, Philosophy, and—in particular—topics related to ancient civilizations. With that in mind, a strong passion impelled him to study and major in 'Ancient History & Religion' at the Lebanese University. Great cultures like the Egyptian and the Canaan-Phoenician had always mesmerized him.

Perhaps for national reasons, he always enjoyed old historical and geographical books that described the Phoenicians as being the native people of ancient Greater Lebanon. In the old books, the Phoenicians settled along the coastal cities and some major parts of the inlands, Lebanon in particular, Syria, Palestine, Israel, and even the Al-Arish area in Egypt. However, 'Phoenicians' and 'Canaanites' are the same people. Canaanites were the Phoenicians—living up in the mountains. Phoenicians were Canaanites—living along the coastal cities.

Paul stretched out his hand to the nearby table, brought the cup of coffee to his lips, and sipped the last bit of it. He then lit up the cigarette, and puffed away the smoke, before it could enter his lungs and damage them. The cigarette smoke seeped through the air in a foggy shape . . .

2

House of Priests
Wednesday, around 4 PM

A white dense mist had been gradually forming on this day, which Paul had been waiting for with great excitement. Wednesday had finally arrived. The fog had already—and completely—cloaked up the house in the mountain. He was looking at its strange translucent formation outside the window. It was a bit chilly, yet Paul enjoyed that specific moment at the end of September.

A few minutes later, he left the house, down the staircase. Getting into his blue Jeep, he drove out of the garage and into the driveway, before reaching the main road. He then headed slowly down to the small town, around 30 kilometers from where he had been. The digital clock on the dashboard marked the time as 3 PM. *Great. One more hour before the meeting with the Padre. I have enough time*, he thought.

Two lines of tiny buildings; composed of three, four, sometimes five floors for habitation, and the ground floor—for shops and businesses—lined the streets. Each line of buildings by the side of the main road was divided in half by a row of different types of trees. Although the setting might look organized at first sight, to a visitor or tourist, the buildings opposing each other were actually constructed in a disorganized manner.

Driving through that small town was often a tedious ride to Paul Khoury. He disliked his hometown so much that he had once called it Hell in comparison to the beautiful and magical village up in the mountains that he called Heaven. Paul rarely left Heaven for Hell, and he would only do that for a good reason. Meeting Padre Joseph on an urgent errand was, obviously, enough reason for Mr. Khoury—who had at times named it: ‘the town of ghosts’. This could be true at night.

The blue Jeep made a turn to the left on route number 10. Paul then turned the wheel left again, into the parking area behind St. John’s Church. Surrounded by olive trees, the House of Priests appeared, facing

the blue car coming to a halt now. The engine stopped, and Paul got out, walking towards the main entrance. To his surprise, Paul found the door locked. He came to a full stop. *This door has never been locked before*, he thought. However, what made his surprise grow even more was the Interphone he saw, installed on the right side of the main iron door. *An interphone with a camera? Why?* He wondered. He searched for Padre Joseph's name among the list of priests, and pushed the corresponding button.

"Paul . . . Come in," the firm voice of the Padre was heard over the Interphone, and a clicking sound came from the locked door. It had been unlocked. "Please, close the door behind you. Thank you."

The small, always neat, hallway welcomed Mr. Khoury. Although short in length, Paul took his time crossing it, speculating about the security procedures that had been put in place here for the first time. *What's happening?* He marveled at the situation. Sauntering slowly through the corridor, he finally reached the door that led to the Padre's office at the end of the hall. PADRE JOSEPH, he read the plate on the door, before he knocked three times.

"Welcome, Paul."

He opened the door, and entered.

Facing him, sat the Padre on his black leather armchair behind his large brown desk. The serious blue eyes in his round reddish face met Paul's eyes in a swift moment of magnetism. Although the Padre looked relaxed, something truly unusual glittered in his eyes and alerted Paul.

To his left, his eyes met the green eyes of a good-looking blonde woman, sitting reposefully on the black leather couch. She stood up directly, to salute him, as he stepped forward. Padre Joseph introduced them to each other. Her name was Youmna Hamade, and she was probably in her late twenties or early thirties.

"Youmna has a Ph.D. in modern Chemistry," the Padre continued, delightfully, his eyes on Paul. "She works at the AUB Laboratory—the American University of Beirut—as a vice-provost, and I was also informed, by a common friend you will meet in few minutes, that she stands as one of the finest experts in Alchemy."

"Alchemy! How interesting," Paul commented with curiosity.

She just smiled.

"What about you, Paul?" she asked, with a look so powerful yet so tender it caught him by surprise.

"I have majored in Ancient History & Religion . . . so I guess I'm a

historian, certainly not a theologian. In fact, I leave theology to the Padre,” he replied with a smile, and looked at the religious man behind the desk, in wait for a statement.

Before Padre Joseph could comment on Paul’s words, the Interphone—installed on the wall, over the desktop computer—beeped loudly. The Padre rolled his armchair to the left, and pushed the button to see who was there. The camera showed a woman he seemed to know very well.

“Come in, Maya . . . and please, lock the door behind you. Thank you.”

What’s going on? Paul wondered for a moment, as he found a seat facing Youmna. *This meeting is getting busy. There must be something important going on.*

A minute later, three short and fast knocks on the door were heard, and the woman who had appeared over the Interphone camera entered. The Padre introduced Maya to Paul, as he stood up to shake her hand. Her name was Maya Deeb, an Archeologist of the highest caliber at the AUB. The Padre portrayed Ms. Deeb as such, and she obviously felt flattered. It appeared all over her lovely face.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said and leaned towards Youmna to kiss her, before sitting next to her. “How are you, dear?”

Youmna smiled at her, with joy on her face. It appeared to Paul that the girls had known each other for a long time; they had probably met at the AUB, or knew each other way before then. However, he felt that neither of them truly knew a thing about this strange meeting with the Padre.

“Now . . . since you’re all here,” the Padre began, all at once, “and perhaps speculating why you’re here in the first place, I will tell you everything, but first, what would you like to drink?”

“I’ll have tea,” Paul articulated with a smile.

“Me too,” Maya followed suit.

“So will I,” added Ms. Hamade.

“Very well then,” said the Padre with a calm voice. “We’re all having tea. My favorite drink at this hour; it soothes the mind.”

The tea was served almost ten minutes later. A young boy, who seemed to serve at the church, brought four cups of tea and a kettle on a nicely crafted wooden tray, and placed it on the table in front of them, with chocolate cake on the side.

When all were relaxed in their seats, enjoying the tea, Padre Joseph wouldn’t waste another moment, he put on his eyeglasses, took the newspaper in his hands, looked at everyone in the eyes—to catch their

attention—and began reading from the front page.

“*An Architect has been found mysteriously dead—Full story, page six,*” he read carefully. “This is an intriguing title. Isn’t it?” he asked, looking again at each one of them.

Not one of his three guests commented, as if they wanted the Padre to impart them with the full story. He knew that already, and immediately skipped the international and national, political news, and went for the report on page six, “*An Architect, working on ancient Phoenician relics, found dead in his backyard two days ago,*” the headline announced, and the article continued, “*Hiram Melki, a famous Architect was found dead by his wife in the city of Tyre . . .*” he then stopped, putting the newspaper down on his desk.

A moment of silence echoed in the room.

“That’s an interesting story,” Paul broke the silence that didn’t seem to last more than a few seconds, “but I don’t really understand why you have gathered us here and for what reason, Padre. I mean, what does that story mean to us, after all?”

“It means a lot, actually,” he replied quickly, before sipping his tea. The vapor coming from the cup almost hid his facial expressions. “You’re a Historian Paul, and ancient Phoenicia is your specialty. Isn’t it?”

Paul didn’t answer. He just nodded, still confused.

“Maya is an Archaeologist, and anything related to ancient relics is her specialty. Isn’t it Maya?”

“Yes indeed, Padre,” she rejoined with satisfaction. “Yet, I don’t get your point.”

“You will, in a bit.” He confirmed.

From above the white head of the Padre, a picture of the Lebanese flag—attached to the glass of the large brown wooden bookcase behind him—appeared to the visitors. On his left stood a nice silver-plated frame with a picture of Einstein. To his right, and maybe all around his office, pictures of Pope John Paul II and some other prominent Christian religious figures and saints were found.

“I knew the Architect well,” he began, with a sore tone to his voice. “He was a good man, really honest. A hard worker, who excelled in his architectural projects of modern houses and villas until, one day, he fell in love with ancient architecture, especially Egyptian, Phoenician, and Sumerian.

“After many years of research, Hiram grew fascinated by the work done by a very famous Phoenician Architect from the city of Tyre. He

spent many hours and days looking at aged records, and examining old maps, prepared by that ancient Architect by the name of Hiram Abiff, known for his excellent work done on the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem,” Padre Joseph took a short pause to drink from his tea, before it got cold.

“His name being Hiram probably played an important role in his great approbation to that ancient Architect by the same name.” He grinned at his guests, and then added, “In fact, nothing happens by chance. There are no coincidences in life.” He stopped to take a long, deep breath. “I have a belief that names can inhabit our personality, and sometimes, strong names from the past affect it even more. Don’t they?”

Nobody replied.

Although confused by that weird statement, they somehow seemed interested in the theory. Comfortably settled in their seats in front of him, they listened attentively to his words, their eyes on him, and their minds relaxed in the peaceful ambiance of the office. Nothing would lead their minds astray, unless something unexpected, like a phone call, should take place. That, however, did not happen.

“Hiram,” the Padre resumed his talk, “learned that the eminent Architect, Hiram Abiff, set the foundation of the Temple of Solomon, as per the remarkable structure of a Phoenician Great Temple known as the Temple of Baal-Melkart, already built in the city of Tyre,” he paused for a thought. “Of course, with only few, but interesting distinctions, kept secret from King Solomon by the Architect.”

Silence filled the place for a moment . . .

“Being an Architect himself, that piece of information he had just learned was, indeed, incentive enough for him to start inquiring about the Phoenician secret, kept hidden by the ancient Architect. His search—in his own hometown: the city of Tyre—had led him nowhere. After giving the matter much thought, and suspecting for the longest time that this old secret could be just a myth, Hiram decided to quit. Then, something happened which stopped him from doing that.”

“In fact, his thorough research had led him to know that the skillful Phoenician artisans and scientists, who had worked under Hiram Abiff in the construction of the Temple of Solomon, were mostly from the city of Gebel. This very thought brought him to life. He turned his eyes to Gebel, and reinitiated his search.” Padre Joseph took the cup of tea delicately in his hand, and drank the rest of the tea, before putting it back again on his desk.

His three guests looked at each other intrigued for a few moments, before Maya broke the silence.

“Did he find anything?” she asked the Padre, in excitement.

Padre Joseph opened the right drawer of his desk, and took out a pack of cigarettes. He took one out, and lit it. He was not a heavy smoker at all, but he sometimes allowed himself to enjoy a cigarette, and only during a moment of reflection.

“Well, last time I heard from him, he was on the verge of discovering something. He was working on the Sarcophagus of Ahiram, King of Gebel.”

“King Ahiram! That’s really interesting,” she exclaimed immediately.

“Isn’t that the famous Sarcophagus that held some important Phoenician inscription on it?” Youmna looked at the Padre.

He nodded and said, “And here comes your part of the story. Aren’t you a great expert in Alchemy? I believe anything related to ancient codes is your specialty. Isn’t it Youmna?”

“Well yeah, that’s right,” she responded, looking a bit confused.

“Alchemy, Padre! What has Alchemy to do with History and Archeology—Ms. Deeb’s and my own specialty?” Paul asked, surprised.

The Padre didn’t respond to that. The two girls, however, looked at each other, and managed a melodious soft laugh, before looking back at Paul.

“In fact,” Maya rejoined calmly but with a bit of irony, “I’m the crazy, digging-deep-into-the-mysteries-of-the-past Archaeologist, whereas my dear friend Youmna, well, she is a great Chemist, and indeed, the finest specialist in Alchemy I have ever worked with.”

“That’s fine. I respect that, I truly do, believe me, but I still don’t see the link between History, Archeology, and Alchemy?”

“Alchemy, Paul,” Youmna began with a smile, looking at her brunette friend—who nodded in approval—for something she seemed to want to add, “Alchemy is best described as a philosophical and spiritual discipline. We are a team of mystery seekers, Maya and I, not just some classical scientists you meet every day at the AUB Academy of Science. While Maya—a devoted Archeologist—looks at every stone we find, as a speaker of history, I look at it as if it were the Philosopher’s Stone itself.”

“Aha . . . a seeker of the elixir of life . . . of Immortality, at the dawn of the 21st century . . . how eccentric!” Paul spoke, in defiance to her beliefs, yet with a warm voice that showed interest in her or maybe in what she said. She probably thought he had no idea what she was talking about.

She simply shrugged her shoulders, and turned to look at the Padre.

Watching that attractive young girl with green eyes and long blond hair gesticulating angrily, Paul shook his head, and grinned at her. She didn't notice. With her beautifully perfect body, Youmna could be mistaken for a top model, when, in reality, she was a Ph.D. graduate in Chemistry, and an Alchemist as well. Quite a fascinating person, she sounded like a firm believer in the spiritual world, something unusual in scientists today.

"How old is it? The Sarcophagus, I mean?" she then asked the Padre.

"Very old indeed," Paul advanced at once, startling her. "King Ahiram was a great King. History narrates that he probably died sometime around the year 1240 BC, so the Sarcophagus must have been built around that time."

"Aha . . . interesting conclusion!" She answered back with a hint of irony in her voice.

Paul didn't reply. He knew what she meant by that. He just smiled again at her, and she turned her face.

"Very well . . . now . . . since you have just begun to get to know each other," the Padre, a grin on his face, instigated in a smooth tone, "which is a good start, however, you must be wondering what the real reason behind my invitation is, and I will tell you everything now, as I have promised." He took a pause to clear out his throat from the fumes of the cigarette. Their eyes turned on him, very curious to know what was on his mind.

"After reading the sad news concerning the Architect, I gave the matter some thought, and decided to act. Two reasons made me decide, actually. First, Hiram Melki was a close friend of mine, and secondly, because he might have unlocked a very ancient code." He breathed deeply.

"In fact, it was a little hard to choose, who should inquire on the matter. I chose the three of you very carefully," he paused, looked them straight in the eyes, and added, "You, my friends, are going on a mission to discover the truth about the murder," he smiled.

When the Padre had concluded what he had in mind, his last words were like a thunderbolt in their ears. Their faces went through a most remarkable series of changes, from admiration at his words to total confusion.

"On a mission?" Youmna was the first one to react, verbally.

"Yes, dear," Padre Joseph cut in, firmly.

“Why us?” Maya questioned.

“As I said before, and I will repeat it once again: I chose each of you very carefully. Maya, you are an excellent Archaeologist. Your friend, Youmna, is an exceptional Alchemist, and Paul is a brilliant Historian. You are perfect for the mission, and I’m sure you’ll form a great team,” he explained with resolve.

The Padre’s determination to know what had happened to his friend, and the conviction in his voice, finally made sense to Paul. He looked at the old man behind the desk, for a moment, then at his future colleagues, and nodded.

“How shall we proceed?” he asked calmly.

His question came as a surprise to the girls, who at first appeared astounded, as they looked at him for a moment, and then back at the Padre. Padre Joseph seemed to have sensed the exhilaration in their eyes, and knew they were eager to take on the mission at once. He knew that they had agreed.

“I have previously talked with Dr. Nabil Hourani, the director of the Beirut National Museum. He has arranged everything for you. He will initiate contact with you, very soon, and will give you an official authorization permit to work at the Archaeological Site, under the Museum’s banner. No one should suspect anything.”

There was silence for a few seconds until Paul suddenly invoked, “What about the Lebanese Ministry of Culture?”

“Don’t worry. Everything has been taken care of.”

“What site?” Maya inquired excitedly.

“Gebel,” he stated, with sharpness.

“When?” she then asked, thrilled by the idea.

“As soon as you can. A week from now would be fine. We can’t really delay the matter longer than that. It’s urgent, you know?”

Maya looked at the Padre in admiration, opened her little brown leather pack, and extricated a small notebook. On it, she seemed to have her schedule. She was mumbling beneath her breath, “that can be postponed . . . that too . . . and that.” She looked back at the old man sitting behind his desk. “Fine with me,” she confirmed.

“Me too,” Youmna followed suit, with a smile on her face.

A moment later, all three sets of eyes were on Paul, who seemed a bit perplexed and uncertain about it.

“Well, what about you, Paul?” the Padre asked in a prying tone. “Are you ready to accompany the girls?”

“I’m afraid that will be impossible for me. I’m sorry.” He looked at the girls. “I have an important convention to attend at le *Château de Chillon* by Lake Geneva, next week. But, I will definitely meet up with you in Gebel, as soon as I return,” he smiled to them.

“It’s ok,” Maya answered back.

“Enjoy it there,” Youmna added nicely.

“Very well then,” the Padre said with a grin, “Have a safe trip.”

“Thank you.”

The clock on the wall marked 6 PM.

“Alright, Ladies, Paul, since everything is set, let’s get this journey started. Let’s go into the past . . .” The old man smiled. “And, uh, don’t forget to report back.”

A moment later, the three guests, who came without any indication on the purpose of that sudden meeting with Padre Joseph, almost two hours ago, left the clerical office on a strange mission. A mission to crack a secret code, left unsolved for thousands of years in the land of the Phoenicians.

3

*Geneva Airport, Switzerland
Wednesday, 10:43 AM*

The captain flying the Airbus A321 had just announced to the passengers that the plane was nearing the Geneva International Airport at that moment, and would reach its destination in approximately ten minutes. “Please, fasten your seatbelts, and remain seated until we land,” a sweet, female voice followed. “Welcome to Geneva,” she then uttered.

There was an immense relief on the faces of almost all the passengers, when the plane landed safely and smoothly at the Airport, a few minutes later. It was Wednesday, October 6th, 2010. The time read 10:45 AM on Paul Khoury’s watch. He smiled.

The monitors on the walls of the Airport terminals clearly displayed the flight details to the people standing in wait for the arrival of their loved ones, friends, and visitors. A tall man, wearing a blue suit and a cap on his head, was standing among the crowd, reading the details of the flight he was waiting for.

Origin: Beirut International Airport.
Airline: MEA Middle East Airlines.
Flight: ME213.
Status: *Arrived.*

The word ‘Arrived’ flashed in red in front of his eyes. He immediately paced the floor of the Airport, until he reached the arrival gate for that flight, coming from Beirut. He held a small electrical board in his right hand, where the name: *Mr. Paul Khoury* appeared clear-to-the-eye in its digital format.

Standing in front of Customs with just a garment bag in his hand, and a laptop on his shoulders, Paul waited for the woman to finish monitoring his passport, photo, and visa for authenticity. A couple of minutes later, she gave him a cordial look, as she stamped the arrival notice of the

Geneva International Airport on his passport.

“Welcome to Geneva, Sir,” she expressed, warmly. “Please, enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you,” Paul replied with a grin, and headed for the arrival gate. Looking past the heads of the travelers—walking ahead of him, left and right—he noticed something a few meters ahead, though he was not sure what it was. As he rushed, further ahead, he spotted his own name on the electric board, and knew the man was there to pick him up, and take him to the hotel, where he would be staying during his short visit to Geneva.

Paul made a gesture with his hand to the man standing by the pillar in the terminal, and walked forward to meet him.

“I’m Paul,” he said, in a nice manner.

“I’m Sebastian, your taxi driver, sent here to pick you up by the *Bureau du Conseil* of the Château.” The man thus introduced himself, in a convivial tone of voice. “Can I help you with your luggage, Sir?”

“I don’t have any heavy luggage on me, just this rolling garment bag and my laptop. I can handle it quite fine. Thanks for asking, Sebastian,” Paul assured the taxi driver that he was ready to leave the Airdrome.

“Very well, Sir, please follow me.”

They went slowly in the direction of the exit gateway ahead of them. Paul seemed to be excited about visiting Geneva at last. It showed plainly on his face. As a Historian, he had always anticipated making such a trip, for in fact, Geneva stood as one of the very few cities around the globe that organized conventions of such high caliber.

Sebastian was heading towards a brand new black Mercedes Benz with the registration plate: ‘GE717’. He had parked in a ready-to-go location, outside the Airport block. When they reached the car, Sebastian immediately stretched his hand to take the garment bag from Paul, opened the trunk, and put it delicately inside. He then rushed to open the backseat door for his client. Paul nodded with a grin to the tall man holding the door, and got in.

On the road, a few minutes later, Paul suddenly asked, “Sebastian, how far is the Phoenix Hotel?”

“It’s not far at all Sir, but we’re not going there anymore,” he answered quickly, glanced at the rear-view mirror, and found Paul in total confusion. “There is nothing to worry about, Sir.” He fixed his eyes back on the road again. “There has been a slight change in your residence plans here. I’m taking you to the Eden Palace Hotel on the other side of the lake, which is very near the Château.”

“Ah . . . I see,” Paul rejoined, with a sense of relief. “And . . . how far is it?” he lifted an eyebrow.

“Around 95 Kilometers, almost an hour’s drive from now. I can make it in less time, but I prefer to always drive safely.” His smile reflected in the rear-view mirror.

“Very good.” Paul smiled back. “I guess I’ll have enough time to relax a bit, have a decent lunch—because I’m starving—take a shower, and get my papers ready for the convention tomorrow. That suits me pretty well.”

“Yes, Sir,” Sebastian grinned. “First time in Geneva?” he asked, looking at the mirror again.

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

“Oh, then welcome to Geneva.”

“Thank you.”

The drive to Eden Palace Hotel, on the roadside of Geneva Lake, was very enjoyable to Paul, very smooth, actually. It was 12:30 PM when they reached the little district of Montreux. They stopped at 11 Rue Du Theatre where the beautiful huge white building that composes the hotel stood since 1895, as informed by Sebastian. Very European in style and architecture, it was almost a perfect combination of traditional Victorian and contemporary design. The Swiss red flag, with a white cross in the middle, seemed to hover in the wind at the top of the hotel, harmonizing with the red curtains that ornamented the windows.

Sebastian parked the car to the right, on the front side. He got out of the car, opened the trunk, and extracted the luggage, handing it over to Paul, who was in total awe with the beauty of the place he had just reached. Somehow, he felt that he could enjoy his stay here, and it showed on his cheery face.

The Hotel was located a few steps from the Lake, close to the city square and all the International organizations. The access to the Hotel was a big glass door, covered with a glass ceiling, stretching all the way to the outside. A white wooden plank with the name: EDEN PALACE appeared, attached to the door from both sides.

“I’ll be here around 2:30 PM, tomorrow, to pick you up. The convention at le Château starts at 3 PM, so I don’t think I need to be here earlier, but in case you need me before that time, feel free to call me at this number,” Sebastian announced in a clear voice, and delivered his business card to Paul.

“Thanks a lot, Sebastian,” Paul took the card, with a smile on his face; “I think I will not be in need of that. 2:30 will be fine.”

“Very well. See you then,” the taxi driver grinned back, and took off.

Upon entering the Eden Palace Hotel, it felt to Paul as if he were entering a presidential palace of some sort. The lobby was elegant, nicely decorated with two pairs of luxuriously upholstered chairs, two side tables between them, and a set of three couches with fine glass-top tables in front of them, overlooking the outside terrace and the Geneva Lake, floating underneath. The reception was to the right. Beautiful granite pillars linked the floor—covered with a fine white-brown rug—to the agreeably decorated ceiling, lit by two classy chandeliers.

Paul advanced towards the female receptionist, sitting behind her desk. She beamed at him a welcoming smile.

“Good morning, Sir,” she intoned smoothly to Paul, “How can I help you?” Behind her, one of the most gorgeous paintings Paul had ever seen hung from the wall.

“Oh . . . Good morning,” Paul looked at her cheerfully, while distinguishing the name written on the identity tag, attached to her white shirt. “Well, dear Fiona, I believe there is a reservation in my name: Paul Khoury.”

“Certainly,” she nodded, “Let me check, please.”

While that beautiful blonde girl with big blue eyes and long curly hair—nearly reaching her wide shoulders—inspected the Hotel reservation documents, Paul turned around to examine the Lobby. About twenty meters away, straight ahead, facing the Reception desk, two beautiful fine-art paintings, each on an elegant dark-brown wooden stand, appeared to decorate the entrance of the ‘Salon Belle Epoque’ from both sides. Paul could almost see the details of the two paintings from where he stood. They absorbed him into their world.

“Sir,” Fiona’s sweet voice broke his attentive examination. He turned around. “Confirmed, we have a reservation for seven nights in your name. Please, sign here,” she handed him the Hotel register, and pointed with her finger where he should sign. He smiled.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said, “Here you go . . . the key to your room. We usually get the rooms ready for new visitors at around 3 PM, but since your case is particular—like that of five other people visiting us today—special guests at ‘Le Château’, it has been made ready in advance.” She smiled.

“Thank you so much for the delicate service, Fiona,” Paul grinned back. “It appears to be a nice hotel, large but cozy. How many rooms have you here?”

“One hundred, Sir, divided into two categories. We have the Standard single and double, and the Deluxe single and double, as well. Yours is a Deluxe Single Room on the 4th floor,” she stated calmly. “Any other luggage with you, Sir, so I can call the porter to help you?” She asked kindly.

“No . . . no need for that, really. Thanks anyway. Just these two bags,” he explained pleasantly. “Oh, just remembered! Is there Internet access in the room?”

“Definitely, Sir.”

“Very well,” he answered delightedly, and as he took his first step away from the desk, he came to a halt, turned around, and looked at Fiona again.

“These paintings are beautiful,” he said, and then asked, “Who is the artist?”

“Ah, these,” she sounded confident, as if she knew very well what she was about to say, “These are not the original ones, but they are good copies of the originals, done by Konrad Witz, a German/Swiss painter of the 15th century.” She stood up to look at them better.

“The one on the right, *Christ on the Cross*, is in permanent exhibition at the *Staatliche Museen* in Berlin, I mean, Berlin State Museum. It is a beautiful piece of art; don’t you think?” she smiled. Paul nodded, affirming her statement.

“The composition is wonderful. The colors are stunning, and just look at the people underneath Jesus on the cross. I can see the sad expressions on their faces from here,” he added to her enthusiasm. Fiona nodded.

“Are you a painter?” she asked. “Or, is it just fascination for art?”

“Admiration, I might say. I’m a Historian.”

“Paul Khoury!” she uttered underneath her breath. “A Middle-Easterner I suppose.” She gave him a warm smile.

“True, and to be more precise, I’m Lebanese.”

“Oh . . .” she intoned compassionately, “It must have been difficult for you to live in a war zone.”

“Well . . . yeah,” Paul replied, in a hesitant sort of way. He sounded as if he didn’t wish to engage in such a conversation with Fiona. “War comes and goes . . . like a boomerang. We just want it to be over for good. Peace is the only solution,” he ended, in a sore voice.

“Of course,” the blonde receptionist agreed. “Let’s hope for the best,” she said, adding these nice words to his wish, before turning her eyes to the paintings once again. “Now, the painting to the left, *King Solomon &*

the Queen of Sheba, is also being displayed in Berlin. Never moved from there, I think.” She looked at Paul, who looked a bit confused.

“I can tell from the look in your eyes that you hadn’t yet figured out the identity of the two personages in the painting,” she concluded.

“Quite honestly, I hadn’t,” he replied, still looking at the painting. “And I just wonder what’s in the Queen’s hand. It seems like she’s offering something to Solomon. No?”

“Yes, she is. A jug of some sort,” she replied, still looking at the old Royal figures. “You think it’s an interesting painting?” Fiona asked with curiosity.

“I’m not quite sure. It’s just part of an ancient myth, don’t you think?”

Fiona didn’t know what to say. No lucid answer came to her mind. She just sat back on her desk, watching Paul take off towards the elevator.

“Oh, excuse me, Mr. Khoury, Sir . . .” she exclaimed, as she stood up again. He turned around. “Hope you enjoy your stay in our Hotel,” she said radiantly, with welcoming blue eyes. He smiled back.

The elevator lifted him to the fourth floor, where his room would be. He steadily paced the long corridor with ivory walls and a dusky rose floor, tiny chandeliers hung from the ceiling, to illuminate the way during the night. A few seconds later, he reached the door to his room. ROOM 404. He stood there for a moment, before he opened the door.

The room had one king-sized bed with two bedside tables, a phone on one of them, two small lamps—fixed to the wall—surrounded the bed, and a nice painting hung over it. Two chairs were set around a table, graced with a plate containing a variety of delicious fruits; another plate was set with a fork and knife on a napkin. A bottle of champagne was nested in a cold container, and a white flower fixed into a pot. The room had a brown mini bar, a closet, and a makeup mirror of the same color, a safe, a desk with its chair, a TV, and another painting on the wall. The whole décor was done in a Louis XVI style, giving Paul a warm feeling.

He immediately put the luggage down, opened the white curtains and the French doors to the petite balcony. A small table with two chairs was already there. His hands on the banister; he looked down. One of Geneva’s most beautiful parks lingered down by the Lake. He then gazed a bit far beyond it, and the Majestic Alps emerged though vaguely. The Château de Chillon appeared to his left.

Paul took a deep, long breath.

Château de Chillon
Thursday, 2:57 PM

“Good afternoon to all,” a courteous female voice echoed from behind the stand in one of the four halls of the Château. “By way of introduction, my name is Alexandra Von Gunten, and I am responsible for the cultural affairs taking place here at the Château.” She grinned at the intellectual congregation of more than seventy people present there. They all nodded with respect. The elegant timber clock, hanging from the wall, marked 3:00 PM.

Ms. Von Gunten, probably in her early sixties, had short light-brown hair covering her round cheery face, framed by a nice pair of glasses that gave her the look of an intellectual. She wore a tumbleweed jacket and a red scarf around her neck, which made her look elegant, as well.

“We are, in fact, gathered here to discuss a very important topic related to ancient history, and in particular: Biblical Archaeology.” She took a deep breath and gazed at everyone.

“As you may already know, from the personal invitation cards you have received and the billboard posted at the entry of the Château, this Convention, or better said, this two-day Seminar is sponsored by the ‘Geneva Art and History Museum’ in collaboration with the ‘Catholic Church’. The decision was warily taken, to hold the Seminar at the *Domus Clericorum*, here, in this superb hall, for all of the Château’s historical significance. So, thank you all for coming.”

A warm and loud round of applause echoed in the exquisite hall located at the heart of the Château. Delicately built in aged stone and roofed with wood, the *Domus Clericorum* gave the impression that the Château had been around for many centuries, maybe even more than a thousand years. Perhaps, it was this very fact that had inspired artists and writers like Victor Hugo, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Lord Byron, Delacroix, and others to mention the Château in their work.

“Besides,” she then added, “as all of you may have seen, the location of the Château—in one of the most breathtaking settings in the world, between the shores of the Lake Geneva and the grandeur of the Alps—is, somehow, quite enchanting. And that, ladies and gentlemen, would certainly make one feel that they are in a sanctuary, at home—a place where one could share one’s thoughts and knowledge freely.” She paused for a second, and looked at the three guests sitting at the table, busy preparing their papers. “Isn’t that so, Professors, Doctor?” she grinned. They looked at her, and smiled back. They were ready.

“Very well, today, our three eminent guests will talk about the *Historical Methodology of the Study of the History of the Biblical Israel*. It is a very stimulating subject indeed, and that, we all know with great certainty. Don’t we?” she lingered on that thought for a moment, and gave a quick look at the eager audience.

“However, before they start reading their papers, for which twenty minutes will be allotted to each speaker, with a fifteen minute discussion period after each one of them in turn; let us cordially welcome our esteemed guests, authors of many controversial books. Initially, however, allow me to introduce them in order of appearance: Mr. Thomas Lampson, Professor of Theology and Head of the Biblical Studies Program at the University of Copenhagen.”

Professor Lampson stood up, and waved to the standing audience ahead of him, clapping their hands, and indubitably waiting for what he was about to reveal in a few minutes.

“Second in role,” Ms. Von Gunten resumed excitedly, “comes Ms. Kathie Whitlam, Professor of Religious Studies and Head of the Biblical Analysis Series at the University of Chicago.”

Naturally, Professor Whitlam stood up to greet the ever-eager listeners, composed of more than seventy Academics, Scholars, and students from around the world, standing in front of her. She had a fine-looking face with short blond hair that reached just a little below her ears. Wearing a white blouse and a black tailored long skirt and jacket, she personified the academic image perfectly.

“And finally, we will end today’s event with our last speaker, Mr. Jacob Inklestein, Professor of Archaeology at Tel-Aviv University,” Ms. Von Gunten revealed the identity of the third guest.

In turn, Professor Inkelstein, probably in his late forties, clothed in a grey suit over a black shirt, stood up to salute the audience in feverish expectation. His grey-white beard suited his hair of the same color, and

created a firm contrast with his tanned face.

“One more thing before we start, allow me to give you a brief idea of tomorrow’s schedule. Three of our guests, now sitting on the front row, will also read their papers,” Ms. Von Gunten announced.

“Authors of new theses, let us first acknowledge Ms. Aziza Ahmed, a Ph.D. graduate in Archaeology from Cairo University. She will talk about *Akhenaton & Monotheism*. Next up will be Mr. Aaron Ben Levi, a Ph.D. graduate in History from the University of Haifa. He will speak about the *House of David and the Kingdom of Israel*. Lastly, Mr. Paul Khoury, a Ph.D. graduate in Ancient History & Religion at the Lebanese University, who will converse with us on the *Myth of the Temple of Solomon*.” She came to a halt for a sip of water, took a deep breath, and then glimpsed at the audience in the hall. They appeared to be in a state of exhilaration.

“Great topics, indeed,” she said. “And now, Professor Lampson, the stage is yours. Enlighten us.” She smiled to him and moved away.

“Good afternoon to all of you,” a warm yet firm voice echoed in the *Domus Clericorum*. “Thank you, Alexandra, for your trust in me to enlighten you and the lovely audience gathered here,” he looked at her then at the listeners in wait, and smiled. “The truth is that I can only shed a little light on some facts that have been neglected by the Biblical Society for many different reasons . . .” he looked outside through the window, and then back inside the hall. “Well, I guess we all know the reasons! Don’t we?”

Mr. Lampson—probably in his mid-sixties, short white hair with thin black streaks here and there, a nice anthracite-colored suit with a red tie over a light blue shirt—left that question lingering in the air for a few seconds, put his eyeglasses on, and resumed his speech.

“With the advent of great sciences such as Anthropology and Archeology in the last one hundred years or so, I believe we are no longer living in the dark anymore. And . . . how can we be? We, seekers of light,” he came to a halt. An idea seemed to have crossed his mind. “Great sciences, indeed,” he smiled.

“It is now evident to most of us, and I mean free minded Academics, that the preceding old claims that say the Bible, the Old Testament in particular, is a historical document, are pretty obsolete. Great uncertainties have been fairly uttered, and not only regarding the authenticity of the Patriarchs mentioned in the Book of Genesis, but also, very intelligently questioning the historicity of personages like Moses, Joshua, and the Judges too.” He took a sip of water to clear his throat.

“However, there might be some sort of confidence in the scholarly mind, regarding stories related to later figures such as Saul, David, and Solomon . . .” he paused, looked at the audience seated in front of him, and continued, “. . . but that is fading away even as we speak.”

As soon as Professor Lampson finished his last sentence, many indistinct murmurs had been heard across the hall. Yet, some people mumbled unpleasant words on the person of the great Professor, and that was quite audible in the room. *This Professor is going truly senile. This man is anti-Semitic . . .*

“I’m hearing some mumbo-jumbo in here, but that’s ok. I understand the frustration that some of you feel, but as Academics, Scholars, and students you should always strive to prove your point of view in a civilized manner, the same way I am doing at this moment. You will certainly have your chance, and time to discuss it further when I finish. Right now, I’m making a point,” he announced resolutely, welcoming those who did not agree with him to an open debate after his talk.

“We have researched almost all the ancient-world historians, beginning with, let’s say, both Sanchoniaton and Philo of Byblos writing on the wonderful land of Phoenicia, Manetho recounting incredible tales of the mysterious Egypt, Berossus on Assyria, Josephus on Judea, and Herodotus on Greece . . .”

“In fact, almost all the accounts mentioned within the pages of the Old Testament are analogous to stories appearing in the writings of ancient civilizations, and mainly those describing the traditions and life of the Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Mesopotamians. The question that always lingers in my mind, and in the mind of others I have shared ideas with, is why has humanity believed the stories of the Old Testament to be the true words of God, and neglected the stories of others? This is certainly a very important question that I think every individual seeking the truth should ask.” He stayed with that idea for a minute. The look in the audience’s eyes showed great puzzlement indeed.

“You may ask yourselves, what and where is the truth in the world’s historical accounts. This is a legitimate question, an Academic, a Scholar, and a student in history would ask.” Professor Lampson smiled. “If we take Josephus, for example, I assure you that he knew next to nothing about ancient history that we didn’t already know from other sources around the Mediterranean world. The trick is that he learned from other sources, transcribed it, and claimed it as his.” He looked at the audience. They were all extremely attentive. “The worst thing Josephus did is that

he reworded everything to his own taste and the taste of the people he belonged to.” He took a deep breath. “I wouldn’t actually trust him for a beer at a bar.” He murmured all too low with a grin on his face, but the people in attendance chuckled at the words he had just uttered. He had thought they had not heard him. His features changed into an expression of surprise. He laughed quietly with them.

Mr. Lampson continued reading from his paper with much veracity and authenticity. He revealed to the audience that he was not just an Academic, a Professor of Theology, and Head of the Biblical Studies Program at the University of Copenhagen, but a true historian with grand feelings for humanity, and a deep concern for the *truth* behind their beliefs—the truth lingering in the shadowed reality, awaiting the light.

Paul plainly noticed these facts with undeniable feelings in his mind and in his heart, as he listened to the debate that ensued after Professor Lampson had ended his talk. The Professor contended with those who argued against him, in the decent manner and gentle tone of voice, which only a great man can master.

After him, Ms. Alexandra Von Gunten, responsible for the cultural affairs at the Château de Chillon, gave the podium to the other two eminent speakers that followed, one after the other. Ms. Kathie Whitlam, a Professor of Religious Studies and Head of the Biblical Analysis Series at the University of Chicago, and Mr. Jacob Inklestein, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Tel-Aviv.

It was fifteen minutes past 5 PM when the seminar reached its closure. The other two guests spoke of similar matters to Professor Lampson’s thesis. As a whole, the three challenging papers stood as an outstanding work of erudition, certainly bold enough to undermine the already given-for-granted suppositions concerning the history of the Old Testament.

The theories presented at the *Domus Clericorum* truly embraced a freedom of speech, spirit, and vision, ardent enough to argue that Ancient Biblical Israel has been modeled as such by authors of biblical scholarship, belonging to a later period in time than actual historical facts, taking place some thousands of years ago.

Of course, a few people present inside that particular hall of the Château had been rather persistently annoyed at the revelations. A feeling of resentment had overwhelmed them, Paul noticed clearly, but not to the point of provoking a commotion of sorts. The intellectual and cultured impression that a place like the Château de Chillon imposed on

people would certainly not allow for such a hassle to take place.

Outside the Château, just by the side of the road, Sebastian was waiting inside his black Mercedes Benz for Mr. Khoury to appear in his rear-view mirror. He would drive him back to the hotel, as formerly agreed. When he did, a couple of minutes later, they took off at a leisurely pace, for Paul did not at all seem in a hurry to reach his destination. He, in fact, wanted to enjoy the early evening drive in a city he had come to visit for the first time.

Sixty minutes later, perhaps a bit more, upon reaching the Eden Palace Hotel, Paul walked over to a comfortable brown couch with its coffee table, at a corner of the large outside-terrace, and sat down. *Time for tea*, he thought. The modish hallway stood well above him, and Geneva Lake just underneath him. “How beautiful,” he muttered under his breath.

While typing the password for his email account on the screen of his grey laptop, he took a leisurely sip of his hot tea. The fragrance coming from the cup filled the air surrounding him. Looking at the lake, the diffused yellow lights, from the long black lampposts, erected at the edge of the walkway, shone beautifully on the water surface. He smiled as he admired the peaceful scene around him. It was, indeed, a quiet place for Paul to enjoy.

Back to the screen in front of his focused brown eyes, an email from Maya Deeb appeared in his inbox. He wondered for a moment about that. His features revealed a certain level of surprise. His first and only encounter with Maya and her friend Youmna had taken place just a week ago at the Padre’s office, certainly not long enough ago to be getting an email from her so soon, he thought. Yet, his curiosity increased as he clicked to open it.

Dear Mr. Khoury,

Hope this email finds you well.

It was a pleasure meeting you at Padre Joseph’s Office last week. What a great man he is!

Anyway, hope you are enjoying your stay in Geneva.

Listen, we just thought of telling you, Youmna & I, that we started the digging in Gebel four days ago. Everything is going fine. No surprises.

See you soon,

Maya.

Paul appeared to be enjoying himself, as he slowly read through the email he had just received. His face broadened with a smile, after he was

done. Amused by it, he wrote back to her in a confident mood, choosing his words carefully, and assuring her and Youmna that he would be with them by next week.

Just about an hour later, after checking his emails, communicating with friends on social networks, and finishing his second cup of tea Paul stood up, left the table, and then ambled through the pathway, three small steps beneath the terrace. He sat on the bench; his eyes set on the smooth water of the lake, lit a cigarette, and seemed to sink into reflection.

Sauntering onward and backward on the beautiful walkway, minutes later, his mind labored intensely, formulating the concepts he would put forward, and the many thoughts he would share with an attentive audience the next day, concerning the Temple of Solomon. As a Ph.D. graduate in Ancient History & Religion representing Lebanon, his own country, in a global convention of such magnitude, Paul would do his best not to allow any flaws to appear in his thesis.

Dressed in a cobalt-colored suit over a white shirt, his face round with average-sized brown eyes, Paul walked inside the Lobby with his laptop case over his shoulder. His mind was set for tomorrow's seminar.

"Mr. Khoury, Mr. Khoury . . . Sir," a vibrant sound came like a scream from the reception desk. It echoed all around the Lobby. Paul quickly turned in the direction of the sound, and walked towards the lady standing with a smile behind the desk. She was not Fiona, the receptionist he'd met on his arrival at the hotel. This was Andréa, the other receptionist he had conversed with in the morning.

Young and attractive, like Fiona, Andréa extended her right hand towards Paul, handing something to him that looked like an envelope. "This is for you, Sir," she uttered, with a wide grin on her soft face. "It arrived almost half an hour ago."

"Thank you, Andréa," Paul smiled back, looking at the watch on his wrist. It marked 7:56 PM.

The envelope had been secured with the red sealing wax frequently used in official correspondence. The seal had been embossed with a letter 'B'. *What is this?* he mulled over it, utterly puzzled. *This is weird!* the thought had quickly crossed his mind, as he lifted his eyebrows, and opened the packet.

Paul tensed, as he read the words, written on the black paper he had pulled from the envelope. Unexpected words that surged into his mind like a thunderbolt, a warning he did not feel in need of at the moment. He

had been listed for an important speech tomorrow, in front of Professors, Academics, Scholars, and students. Backing out was not an option.

With an anxious look on his face, he gazed at the receptionist. “Who gave you this?” he asked in a commanding tone, filled with fury.

“I don’t exactly know, Sir, who brought this letter in. It was not during my shift,” Andréa articulated in a gentle yet perturbed voice, sensing something was not well. “Is there anything wrong, Sir?”

Paul did not answer. He just left the hall, and walked to the elevator. Once inside his room, he threw the black paper on the bedside table.

It read:

The Temple of Solomon is not a myth.

It is a living reality to us.

No room for error. Be wise, or . . .

5

Gebel (Byblos), Lebanon

Friday, 11 AM

The pit was dug in the form of a square, encircled with a thick blue rope, attached to four poles on each of the corners of the geometrical form. Nailed to each of the poles was a signpost with a clear inscription that read:

Do Not Trespass. Excavation Work.
Beirut National Museum.
Lebanese Ministry of Culture.

Inside the ditch, two attractive young girls, dressed in casual outfits with hard hats on their heads were kneeling on the ground, side by side, observing some ancient stones that stood in front of them. They seemed to have had uncovered these recently; having such archeological tools as trowels, a shovel, a digging spade, hand brushes, a hand pick, a caliper, and cotton gloves, all placed near them.

They held a number of documents in their hands, to which they referred to during their analysis. However, the stones she and Youmna had just found, to their understanding, held no secret notation. Maya and Youmna were thrilled at what they'd found during their dig up here, at Gebel's Archaeological Site. Although the relics appeared historically important, going back perhaps a thousand years before the time of Jesus Christ, they, in fact, held no mystery at all. They were just the usual sorts of building stones that Archaeologists often find at excavation sites all over the world. In the end; they had both finally concluded.

"Zago . . . Zago," Maya shouted, moments later. "I need you for a second," she said.

Not too far from the ditch, somewhere among the ruins, a bald-headed man with a thick black beard, that made him appear somehow older than in his mid-twenties, was speaking over his mobile phone. He

turned to Maya, and signaled to her that he would be with her in a minute.

“Do you truly trust the guy, Maya?” Youmna asked, giving the impression that she really doubted the wisdom in her friend’s choice for asking Zago to escort them to the site.

“He’s been assisting me for almost ten years now. He has been a reliable person since high school. In fact, he loves to be a part of anything mysterious, and the city of Gebel is indeed one of the most ancient, mysterious places on Earth,” Maya rejoined in a comforting voice.

“I found his, how shall I put it, his *overall attitude* a bit foolish, don’t you think?” Youmna persisted.

“Well of course, with his unpredictable, impulsive character, Zago could well be a bit annoying at times, but he really is ok,” Maya explained. “He has never been an impediment to my work. On the contrary, he’s been a great support.”

“I don’t know . . . he sometimes scares the hell out of me with his piercing eyes,” Youmna added, shrugging her shoulders.

“Don’t be too judgmental,” Maya started. “You see he has been greatly influenced by Occult Doctrines. Zago is a seeker, compelled by a strong desire to know and comprehend the mysteries behind the façades. But then again, my dear Youmna, who would shun away from the truth on account of the outer shell? Right?” She reached out to her, as her imperative question lingered on.

“I mean, look at you, at close range you are an Alchemist, in constant search for deeper realities behind what your eyes see, and even you sometimes go hysterical when you don’t understand things. Yet, I must admit, some of his misleading exploration has categorically exhorted him to believe in superstitions and false magic, something you haven’t fallen prey to. But that is all there is to him, nothing else. Trust me.”

In fact, to grasp the knowledge of the occult world, in full, is definitely a difficult matter that requires a tight control on the mind, Youmna reasoned to herself. She did not comment out loud.

“Ok Maya, here I am, how can I be of assistance?” Zago asked in a serious tone, as he approached the girls, working on the ditch.

“Very well, do you recall the data we collected back at the archaeological site, in the city of Sur, a couple of months ago?” Maya inquired, pensively.

“Yeah, of course, I have it all on my laptop at the base camp,” Zago answered without hesitation.

“Great. Please file this information in concordance with the Phoenician masonry folder,” she handed him the document to be filed electronically.

“Oh, Zago,” she called him back. He turned to face her. “Please do that as quickly as possible, and when you’re done, come back and give me a hand. We’re moving the equipment to ditch number three.”

Zago turned right, in search of ditch number three. He suddenly came to a halt when he found it. “The Great Phoenician Temple!” he exclaimed.

“Yes!” she answered sharply.

Without commenting on her decision, which took him by surprise, he lifted his thick eyebrows, and left at once.

A few meters away, at the back of a small wall to the south of the Archaeological Site; the team had already erected the base camp, made up of two medium-sized tents set up in the shape of a square. It was enclosed within a triple-layered thick blue rope, attached to six wooden posts, one on each of the four angles, and two in the middle of the eastern side of the square. A sign was affixed to each of the posts on the angles with the following message:

Do Not Trespass. Base Camp.
Beirut National Museum.
Lebanese Ministry of Culture.

When Zago entered the base camp in order to work on the data he had received from Maya, Youmna, who had kept silent about her friend’s sudden decision to shift from one ditch to the other, turned to confer with her. Maya was just finishing her work in the ditch at that point, and getting ready to move up to leveled ground.

“Are you quite sure there is nothing more in here?” Youmna queried, with a focused look on her eyes that only great researchers get.

“One hundred percent positive,” the Archaeologist uttered firmly. “I have thoroughly examined the beautiful work of engineering done on this Temple, and compared it to similar work done on some religious buildings in some other sites around Lebanon and the Levant. In fact, they all, in some way, follow a pattern of basic convention in the plan structure.” Maya took a sip of water from her flask, but before she could continue her explanation, Youmna interrupted her.

“Hold on to that thought. What do you mean, exactly?” she addressed her in a stern tone. “I mean, I saw you fetching through your private documents, but . . .” she bent down to pick up her blue notebook off the

ground. “I didn’t quite understand what you were doing and what you are saying right now.” She bypassed her, looking for her tools on the ground. “I truly thought we would carry on with the digging right here. In fact, you surprised me when you opted to change trenches.”

Maya looked confounded. It didn’t occur to her that Youmna could really create an argument out of her decision. She decided to sort things out with her, before they continued their exploration.

“Oh, dear, listen to me, I am not here to boss you around and do things according to my wishes. We form a great team. Please, rest assured of that. In fact, we both inferred that even though those stones are historically important, aging perhaps a thousand years BC, they are void of any puzzling meaning, just simple building stones of the ancient world. Right?”

Youmna nodded.

“Just fine, so, would you like to tell me what you are basing your analysis on?” Maya asked in conformity.

“Well, on various factors, mainly on the color of the stone, material, smell . . . everything that has to do with Alchemy in fact,” she replied.

“That’s great,” Maya agreed with her. “Let me tell you what I based my decision on, for moving off this trench.” She gave her friend an explanatory look. “Common buildings, and some religious ones, are often planned and laid out from the exterior to the interior, and I mean from the façades of the outside walls to the core outlines of the inner walls. This is about the exact blueprint I saw here.” She took a deep breath, like a jogger getting ready for a race. “And so, dear friend, what I’m truthfully looking for is a construction, planned from the interior to the exterior, from the heart to the shell.” She paused for a second. “An edifice equal to the marvelous structure of the Phoenician Temple of Baal-Melkart in Sur.”

A thought passed Youmna’s mind, a reminder of a previous conversation at the Padre’s office. It was the illustrious Architect, Hiram Abiff, who placed the foundation of that marvelous Temple, and the Temple of Solomon as well, as per the Biblical story. He had requested the help of the skillful Phoenician artisans and scientists in the construction, mostly originating from the city of Gebel. However, Phoenician legend has it that Hiram Abiff kept the secret of the makeup hidden from King Solomon.

“You think that ‘The Great Phoenician Temple’ is built that way, from the core to the surface?” she asked, impassioned.

“We’re here to find out. Aren’t we?”

A wide grin surfaced on their faces, ready for an adventure in a world long forgotten by modern men and women alike.

Yet time always lingers in wait.

6

Château de Chillon
Friday, 2:45 PM

The black Mercedes turned left, on slow wheels, and then came to a stop at the side of the road, in front of the Château. Paul had just finished arranging his papers inside his brown briefcase. During the pleasant ride from the Hotel to the Château, he had briefly reviewed the thesis he was about to discuss at the *Domus Clericorum*.

“I shall be here around 5 PM,” said Sebastian, with a joyful expression on his face. “I’ll wait for you in the car until you come out, like yesterday.”

“Very well, thanks, Sebastian,” Paul nodded in agreement.

“Oh, Good luck!” he then uttered encouragingly.

Paul grinned back at the driver, left the car, and walked in compact steps towards the archaic drawbridge that led inside the Château. To the left, a beautiful evergreen garden had been elegantly pruned for the public to gather for a chat. They would sit on benches, scattered here and there, or stroll under and among the trees, while enjoying the fine-looking ivy leaves on one of the walls, surrounding it.

The Swiss flag, on the highest peak of the Château, moved with the soft wind blowing in the air. A huge and beautiful ancient clock on the left wall of the entrance alley had just marked 2:50 PM. Paul hastened his steps, as he walked over the bridge, a few meters above the surface of the Geneva Lake, between wooden logs that formed the two banisters on either side of the lane, roofed with brownish-grey blocks of brick.

Upon entering the Château, Paul read his name and the title of his lecture, written on the billboard that was posed on a fine mahogany stand, which decorated the entry. “This event is organized by Ms. Alexandra Von Gunten, Responsible of the Cultural Affairs at the Château de Chillon, and sponsored by the ‘Geneva Art and History Museum’ in collaboration with the ‘Catholic Church’”. After reading that, a wide smile appeared on his face, as he moved right, heading towards the hall on the

first floor of the ancient castle, where this event would be taking place today. His steps through the passageway, amongst those of many others attending, were steady and confident, sensing the positive vibes oozing from them, yet piercing eyes were also focusing on him all the way.

“Once again we meet to discuss great topics,” Ms. Von Gunten declared. “Our three guests for today are authors of interesting and novel theses in their countries of origin. Ms. Aziza Ahmed, a Ph.D. in Archaeology from Cairo University will be speaking about *Akhenaton & Monotheism*. Then, Mr. Aaron Ben Levi, a Ph.D. in History from the University of Haifa will be talking about *The House of David and the Kingdom of Israel*. And finally, Mr. Paul Khoury, a Ph.D. in Ancient History & Religion at the Lebanese University will share with us some thoughts on *The Myth of the Temple of Solomon*,” she stopped, lingering on that thought for a while, inhaling deeply, while looking intently at the respectable audience in the hall.

“Each one of our speakers will present his or her paper within their twenty minutes, before allowing a discussion of up to fifteen minutes from the audience,” she repeated the rules she’d described the day before. “Anyway, I guess we are all ready to start the seminar today. So, without further ado, please welcome Ms. Aziza Ahmed from the land of the Pharaohs,” Ms. Von Gunten heralded merrily, giving the Egyptian Archaeologist a big smile before ceding the place at the stand to her.

“*Salam*,” Ms. Ahmed began in a hoarse voice. Clothed in a black pullover and a multicolored scarf round her long neck, she looked to be in her mid-thirties. She had big maple-colored eyes on a circular face with rigid features, black curly hair reaching her wide shoulders, and a charming necklace, akin to ancient Egyptian artifacts, decorated her breasts.

She narrated how Amenhotep IV came to power in Egypt, becoming its King during the Eighteenth Dynasty, reigning from 1375 to 1358 BC. He changed his name to Akhenaton, which means ‘it pleases Aton’, strongly revolted against the traditional polytheistic religion of the Egyptian Priests of Amon-Ra, and won against them. After wrecking their Temples, Akhenaton abandoned Thebes as the capital city. In so doing, he introduced the cult of Aton.

Aton is Aten, the Red Solar Disk, the Sun at its pinnacle, open and strong, stretching its long rays down to Earth. Depicted in the form of hands, by which Aton would receive offerings from the Egyptians, these rays would offer in return the *Ankh*: a sign of life. By representing the

One and only God, Aton became the Divine heavenly Ruler of the Egyptians, having King Akhenaton as his prophet and equal in divinity to him—the god Aton himself.

A brilliant religious concept that lived for many years during his reign, especially in the city he had built in the northern region, using the wealth seized from the funds for the construction of Temples and Palaces to Amon-Ra. Akhetaten, *Horizon of the Aten*, known today as Tell el-Amarna, developed into the capital of his Kingdom, where Akhenaton and his wife—Nefertiti ruled Egypt. However, after his death, the toppled cult of Amon-Ra soon regained power, and succeeded in seizing complete control over Upper Egypt, three centuries later.

“During my many years of research, I’ve come across the term of ‘heretic’ being linked to the character of King Akhenaton.” Ms. Ahmed continued, “In fact, the accusations are not new. His adversaries, at the time, had been harassing him with it ever since he began his mission. However, the profundity of his thoughts and insights, which surfaced on the inscriptions in the tombs of Tell el-Amarna speak for themselves. Yes, they do.” She sipped at her glass of water to clear her throat and continued.

“Heretic! Why? Because he was the pioneer of modern ideas? Ideas that shook Ancient Egypt, and broke its established polytheistic beliefs in Amon-Ra! Or maybe, because he had introduced the thought that Egypt should worship a single deity?” she stared at the audience with stern eyes.

“And then, at any rate, humanity came to witness his great conception of Monotheism that had preceded the Jewish tradition of Moses, as per the teachings of the Old Testament. Some scholars would suggest that Akhenaton’s notion was not Monotheistic, but rather, Henotheistic. What is Henotheism? Let’s find out.” She opened her notebook, put her eyeglasses on, and read a definition from one of her references.

“Henotheism is a term, initially penned by Mr. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, at the early dawn of the 19th century, to express some early phases of Monotheism. A few decades later, the German Philologist and Orientalist, Mr. Max Müller, applied the term commonly, to depict the veneration of a single god while tolerating the existence, or probable existence, of other gods.” She then took her eyeglasses off, and addressed the attentive crowd, “It’s not our concern, at present, to delve into more details on Müller’s criticism of Western theological and religious exceptionalism that focused on Monotheism and held it to be, both, basically precise and naturally better than any other distinct

concept of God, which we may find in Ancient Eastern Religions, like in Hinduism.” She paused for a deep, long breath, as if ready to surprise the crowd, or maybe the scholars who accepted Akhenaton’s notion as of Henotheism and not of Monotheism for a reason she knew all too well.

“If Akhenaton’s vision that Egypt should worship a single deity, the sun god Aton, is to be considered Henotheism; how could we then classify the concept of Moses on Yahweh, as a jealous god among many?” She looked around the hall. “I leave you with that thought, to brood over it for a while. Thank you for your time,” she ended with a grin.

After the fervent discussion—which took up the entire fifteen minutes—on the early history of Egypt during the reign of King Akhenaton had ended, a great number of people agreed with her, and few discarded her thesis. A break of five minutes ensued.

“*Shalom,*” Mr. Aaron Ben Levi began his speech, the moment he stood behind the stand. Dressed in a black suit over a grey shirt, he had short, messy onyx-colored hair covering most of his forehead. With small raven eyes marking his oblique-shaped head, he looked at the audience.

His detailed narration on David, his Kingship and Kingdom was a tale, incredibly familiar to the people attending the seminar that day. Academics, Scholars, and students had often heard the same lingo, over and over again, from many Jewish thinkers throughout the years. As most people, they had also read the tradition in the Bible.

It seemed that very few people were interested in the subject tackled by Mr. Ben Levi. The majority of the attendees felt a kind of boredom creeping into their minds, which had been lucid in concentration about half an hour ago, when Ms. Ahmed was speaking.

Mr. Ben Levi proposed nothing novel to the scientific minds facing him. Unlike his compatriot, Mr. Jacob Inklestein, Professor of Archaeology at the Tel-Aviv University, who offered a meticulous explanation of his controversial Archaeological findings for the last twenty or more years; Mr. Ben Levi’s dry idiom was arranged, in such a manner, that it disconnected, perhaps entirely, from the thematic that this seminar had been originally organized for. Although he related his telling to ancient history—Jewish in particular—he seemed to have totally ignored the point of the seminar: Biblical Archaeology.

To cut a long story short, Mr. Ben Levi presented zilch newsworthy material related to the *Historical Methodology of the History of the Biblical Israel*. He probably knew, way before he participated in this intellectual affair, that he would not be here to oppose or doubt his

people's traditions, by scientific methods, in front of a mixed audience. On the contrary, he would rather do his best to keep things the way they were by religious cognizance.

"Thank you, so much, for your valuable input, Mr. Ben Levi. You have truly enlightened us," Ms. Von Gunten smiled at the scholar, who had reached his chair with a feeling of victory. She then directed her attention to Paul, getting himself prepared for his speech. With an amiable welcoming gesture, she invited him to take his place at the stand.

"Thank you," he uttered, a bit timid. Standing behind the podium, facing the stern audience from all over the world, composed of Academics, Scholars, and students was something that felt rather heavy on Paul. Yet, he had to face the crowd in front of him. *There is no room for fear now, Paul. You cannot go back*, he thought to himself. In fact, Paul would not allow the menacing letter he had received the night before to impede him from speaking-out his mind. He took a deep breath, and scanned the audience with the eyes of an Eagle.

"*Shalam Likum*," Paul saluted the audience, using a language strange to them. "This is how my ancestors, the Phoenicians, saluted each other and people from other nations," he explained. "Some of you would say, and it's a debate that has been going on for some time now, that a Lebanese is an Arab and not a Phoenician. With all due respect to the scientific minds of modern day, this could only be true on linguistic grounds. It is the same with today's ethnographers who would add the Canaanites or Phoenicians to the Semitic groups of the old days, like the Arabs, Babylonians, Assyrians, Hebrews . . ." he looked across the hall, and then added, "In fact, the Phoenicians belonged to the Hamitic/Afro-Asiatic group of peoples like the Egyptians, for instance." He then looked at Ms. Aziza Ahmed who seemed to have nodded in approval.

Dressed in a blue suit over a white shirt, adorned with a red tie; he had a stylish pair of glasses covering his focused brown eyes. "Sorry for this out-of-context prologue," he began, "but I truly felt the need to impart this to you, as I thought it would be appropriate to clear things up, once and for all. At any rate, my topic today is the Temple of Solomon." He halted for a sip of water to clear his throat. "According to the Bible, or to be more specific, the Old Testament, the Temple of Solomon had been built due to a brotherly request made by King Solomon to Hiram—King of Tyre. Since the Hebrew people were only nomads, and used to worshipping their national god, YHWH, inside a movable tent, the idea of a Temple to house their god greatly fascinated them. The Old Testament

narrated how the Tyrian King appointed one of the best Architects in his court, Hiram Abiff, to do the job that was to be accomplished many years later.”

“Now, on the historical level this big event was not found in the available Phoenician Historical texts. Of course, I would be more than happy to prove that this is true, if only for national pride,” he chuckled. “Yet, truth is always much more important than anything else.” He paused and surveyed the people listening to him. To his surprise and great satisfaction he found the lively eyes of the three professors: Mr. Thomas Lampson, Ms. Kathie Whitlam, and Mr. Jacob Inklestein straight on him. He grinned to them, as he inhaled more energy for his speech.

“Some later documents revealed that Hiram Abiff, the Architect, had requested the assistance of skillful Phoenician artisans and scientists from the city of Gebel, known also as Byblos to most of you present here, to help him in the construction of the Temple of Solomon. This part is true, but not at all related to a construction of some sort in the city of Jerusalem, at the time of King Solomon.”

A staggering quietness befell the *Domus Clericorum*. Not a sound or a word! Not even a whisper! Hungry eyes looked at Paul with great expectation, as if wanting and waiting for a great mystery to be revealed that night. Yet, some angry eyes looked at him differently.

“The Truth! One of the great ancient Phoenician historians, by the name of Sanchoniaton, related the existence of a great Temple in the city of Sur, known also as Tyre. A Temple known as the Temple of Baal-Melkart, built by the Architect Hiram Abiff, at the time of King Hiram of Tyre—a great King, who ruled the city of Tyre, sometime between the years 971 to 939 BC. Logically, the Temple must have been built before he died.” He took a sip of water and resumed his lecture, all too slowly.

“At the time, Phoenicians—and surely their brothers—the Egyptians, were both great nations of Sacred Builders, and great builders in Phoenicia prospered in Gebel, a city as old as time itself, so to speak. Surely, Hiram Abiff would use the skills of the Geblites, in the building of a Temple for his King. Moreover, and to be more punctilious, Herodotus—one of the great Greek Historians, who lived between 485 and 425 or 414 BC—confirmed, without a doubt, having seen the whole Temple of Baal-Melkart at Sur.”

“Herodotus described the Temple of Ba’al . . .” Paul was reading from the notepapers in his hand, “. . .As ‘richly furnished with many votive offerings, and has two massive pillars that shine at night, one made of

pure gold and the other of an emerald stone’.” Paul stopped reading, and looked at the audience. “I’m not certain about the emerald stone,” he said. “Our Phoenician records narrate that the Temple was one-of-a-kind in all of ancient Loubnan. It stood magnificently impressive. At each side of its entrance, two winsome pillars stood as guards to the main door—made of Cedar wood. One of them was made of *Hajjar al Urjouwan*, the Purple Stone or Ruby, not an emerald stone, and the other shone as Crystal or Pure Gold.”

“At any rate, this is a beautiful representation of the Temple in Sur that somehow mirrors, to a certain extent, the story of Solomon’s Temple in the Old Testament. One may definitely ask: could the Temple of Solomon be just a plain exact copy of the Temple of Baal-Melkart?” He looked at the audience sitting still on their chairs, probably not knowing whether Paul was asking them that question, or pronouncing it for himself.

He seemed to know the answer very well, for he gave them a wide grin, and continued confidently, “Unlike the Temple of Solomon, which has no historical proof, and was only mentioned in the Old Testament, the Temple of Sur was cited by Sanchoniaton, Herodotus, and even Alexander the Great. The latter, who deemed himself to be the son of the incarnated God Heracles (Hercules), known as Melkart, had a dream to visit it, and not only pay Heracles homage, but convene a ritual there; something the Priests of Baal utterly refused, for only the High Priest could perform such an honorable, holy feat,” he paused and took a deep, long breath. “Obviously, I can openly deduce, in conclusive verification, that the Temple of Solomon is naught but an imaginary copy of the Temple of Baal-Melkart, a *myth*. Yet . . .” he paused for a daring thought, “Its reality, but a dream kept secret from King Solomon . . .”

On stating his last sentence, Paul closed the notebook in his hands with a smile, ending with that his twenty-minute lecture. A swift instant of silence ensued for the majority of the people attending the seminar to assess the historical information he had just offered. Judged very reasonable, a few moments later they stood up, and greeted him with loud applause.

“Thank you all,” he said in a happy tone. “Any questions?”

A few seconds of silence passed until a man stood and called out, “Mr. Khoury, excuse me, I’m John Miller, a Professor at the University of Oxford lecturing at the faculty of Hebrew and Jewish Studies. I must admit that I am a bit curious to know more about your theory. Can you

provide proof that the Temple of Solomon did not exist? Or let me phrase it this way, what are the associated studies on which you based your Academic thesis?" Mr. Miller, one of the attendants on the left side of the hall, asked in a serious tone.

"Thank you for your question, Sir," Paul answered the man, with a grin. "Well, I'm not an Archaeologist, and have never been in Israel. In fact, Lebanese are not allowed to travel there, due to the war that has been going on for years now. War is ugly, and I truly hope that peace reigns in the Middle East. As you may well have heard Ms. Von Gunten's introduction at the beginning of the seminar, I have done my studies in Ancient History & Religion at the Lebanese University, and therefore, like every committed academic, I base all my work on proofs, not myths." He sipped at his glass of water.

"You were probably here yesterday, and have heard what the three great Professors have said about the lack of evidence, concerning the true history of Ancient Israel, as mentioned in the Old Testament. Unlike the vague tale of the Patriarchs, the miraculous Exodus from Egypt, and other narrations of the kind in many books of the Old Testament, some scholars have agreed that the Kingdom of Israel could be the first Biblical period that probably has some historical foundation, or perhaps, that was what they thought and wanted the world to believe." He focused his attention on one part of the crowd. "If the Kingdom of Israel fails to exist in history then the whole Judeo-Christian culture would crumble! At any rate, when we study Ancient Israel, we first come across the Kingdom of Saul, described as the union of the Israelite tribes, followed by the idea of a nation-state under King David and his son—Solomon, which most biblical scholars call the Golden Age of the Kingdom of Israel. Right?" He was looking at the audience.

"However, reality in the fundamental nature of History is totally different. For example, the Old Testament, which is not a book of history in the complete sense of the word, but a compilation of fables and fairytales, has related nothing we could learn of the procedures taken in government during King David's reign! Although the Old Testament describes the grandeur of Solomon's Royal Palace, the Temple in Jerusalem, and other building activities he engaged in, they all fail to produce a single shred of proof for their own existence. If such a Great Kingdom of United Monarchy had really existed in the course of history, with all its wealth and power, then why has it not been mentioned by the Egyptians, who used to record almost everything, by the Mesopotamians,

or even by the Phoenicians, at least in the few documents that have survived time?”

“With no Historical or Archaeological verification offered, regarding the Kingdom and the Temple, most respectful Biblical historians, such as Thomas L. Thompson, Philip Davies, Niels Peter Lemche, Israel Finkelstein, Neil Asher Silberman, Keith Whitlam, etc. have another exciting explanation. They tend to believe that, for some ideological and political reason, the whole Biblical narration of the history of Ancient Israel could be nothing more than the intricate operation of a skillful clandestine group of priests, living in Jerusalem at some post-exilic time.”

“Within the same line of logic, some other Scholars and Professors have a propensity to believe that the statement about the historic reality of such an Israel could be naught but a clear mirror, to reflect the modern state as a sanctuary for European Jews—a nation of power.” He came to a halt, and gazed at the attentive audience in front of him. “Consequently, the reality of the Temple of Solomon as a focal symbol of power is, in fact, a very important substance for Judeo-Christian scholars, for it efficiently gives an ideological excuse and a religious-political right to conquer and dominate foreign lands. Isn’t that what happened in modern times? War is ugly, and it gets even uglier when it’s founded on myths . . .” he took a deep breath. “Think about it and thank you for your time,” he said with finality.

The discussion that followed his speech was even more convincing than the speech itself. The greater part of the audience, seeking reality, might have felt that the great mystery behind the Temple of Solomon—that they had long been waiting to unlock—had been totally exposed tonight. Yet, very few, annoyed people considered his lecture inconsistent with their beliefs, and tried to create havoc in response to the political notion he had made, but the administration of the Château controlled the situation at once.

Paul hadn’t had in mind to actually imply a connection between Israel’s history, religion, and politics, when he first began preparing his paper at the request of the Cultural Affairs Department of the Château. Yet, the issue was so complicated that it had dragged him to mention the whole picture, the way he saw it after so many years of extensive research in the History of the Levant.

The night was still young when Paul headed to the Hotel. Sitting leisurely on the same comfortable brown couch with its coffee table at the large terrace, holding his cup of tea in his hands, he was looking pensively

at the Lake. *How beautiful*, he stated.

A nice piece of undulating music anchored in his ears.

He smiled.

A dwelling in the woods
Saturday, 6:06 PM

In the midst of long Cypress trees—superbly decorating the plain, beneath one of the most imperial peaks of the Alps—stood a huge double-structured mansion, built in Swiss Chalet style: a black and white stronghold, lit within the faint yellow lights that surrounded it. Roofed with dark-brown pieces of brick, it had three towers, topped with tiny dark-grey stones. The silhouette of a man, standing behind the window’s bulletproof glass, moved the curtain left then right, peeking outside.

Not a soul could be seen moving within the short scope of his vision, and surely nowhere around that prestigious dwelling. The perimeter was completely secured, not only by the most fierce guardians of all times: dogs—dozens of black Dobermans lurking in wait all around—but also by the most sophisticated security systems ever invented to date.

“We cannot carry on like this,” his croaky voice echoed towards the back, reaching the attentive ears of the two other men who were sitting on comfortable couches around a rectangular black and white table in the middle. “The great legacy the brothers had shaped, almost nine-hundred years ago, is fading gradually. I sense the danger of losing ground, losing power,” he alerted them, his thumb rolling the golden-black ring on his index finger, his face still directed to the outside.

“We can still give him an offer he cannot refuse,” one of the men, seated on a luxurious couch suggested, while tapping with his right hand fingers on the black desk close by. A silver ring, crowned with a blue precious stone, gleamed from his fourth finger.

Clothed in a light-blue shirt, topped with an elegant dark-grey costume, he looked to be around his late fifties. A well-trimmed moustache decorated his round face with large blue eyes. Golden hair covered his head. “I mean, we did it before, hmmm, we did it many times before, so why not go with it again?” he added, giving more meaning to

his proposition.

“And how do you suggest doing it, Brother James?” asked the man facing him on the other couch. His thumb swaying a golden ring, capped with a precious red stone on his ring finger. “Do you think he would be interested in our means?” he gazed at him with serious eyes.

He was clad in a black outfit over a white shirt. In his early thirties, he had a clean-shaven, rhombus-shaped face, with little green eyes, and long black hair streaming down to his shoulders. “He is Lebanese. He won’t fall into our trap. I suggest we give him an ultimatum to leave the country, instead,” he adjoined.

“Every man on the face of the Earth has a price, Brother Herbert. We all know that. Let us ask ourselves a very basic question here: what does this man, Paul, want? Is it money? Is it fame?” B.: James looked at him, and then at the man still standing by the window, looking older than both of them. “I’m sure we can buy him. He came to Geneva to show himself, and he, well, succeeded, to a certain extent, in attracting the minds of the intellectual community present at the Château. So . . . if we offer him international exposure, allow him access to the mainstream marketplace in both the UK and the USA, write his name in the Hall of Fame, he would certainly comply with our demands. They all do, in the end. Don’t they?” his words surged more as a matter-of-fact plan that never failed, than as a question addressed to the Brothers, meeting clandestinely, inside a well-furnished room in the style of the Middle Ages.

B.: Herbert remained quiet. He, in fact, couldn’t find a single word, to contend with the logic proposed by B.: James. He just lingered, perhaps in profound thought, pondering about the possibility of such a scheme working out, without certain public exposure of the Brotherhood by the media.

“And what if this man fails to negotiate with us?” The old man, probably in his late sixties, moved away from the window to take his place on a large royal armchair, situated on the western side behind the desk. Dressed in a black suit over a black shirt, he looked like a man of powerful status. His long shady face with a dark-grey beard, added to his curly hair of the same color, gave the clear image of a practiced person.

Attached on the wall behind him, a painting, depicting a Temple, loomed over them like a specter. “Our: *Ordo Supremus Militaris Templi Hierosolymitani* has been established in the doctrine, implemented principally by the Knights Templar; originating from France in the most sacred year: 1118 AD. Since then, the Craft has been operating; stealthily

moving out from the House of Shlomo, and into the Temple of Solomon in the Holy City of Jerusalem.” He looked at them—one after the other—with piercing fiery eyes, took a profound breath and continued, “We will not tolerate a child, at the dawn of the twenty first century, coming from Lebanon, to imperil our very existence,” he said, with finality.

“Excuse me, Grand Master,” B.: James interferred, “Mr. Khoury is not a child. The report we got on him showed that he is very well versed in ancient history, and particularly that of Phoenicia. He has an insightful acquaintance with the Temple of Ba’al-Melkart in Tyre, something we can never ignore or even judge as a myth because of its historicity. His attack on the historicity of the Temple of Solomon is legitimate, from a historical point of view, something we cannot deny or prove otherwise,” he paused for a thought.

“Sheer profanity, Brother James,” the Grand Master snapped in anger. “This is total betrayal of the Doctrine. Are you siding with him; with history?” he asked, enraged.

Brother Herbert was in total shock at what he had just heard. Young and passionate; he must have surely considered the input of B.: James as nothing but a blasphemy against the Craft, something he would not accept as long as the phantom of the Great Temple of Solomon hovered above them in that room.

“On the contrary, I’m siding with the Lodge,” B.: James rejoined calmly. With his time-tested tactics in critical situations such as this one—and being a shrewd speaker—he explained, “Mr. Khoury’s profile revealed that he has a deep tendency towards everything related to esoteric science and Secret Societies. In fact, his familiarity with his ancestor, King Hiram of Tyre—whom we consider the second great symbolic pillar, representing Strength—could be an asset to us.”

“How is that so?” B.: Herbert asked in a nasal, yet ironic tone of voice.

“Let me finish,” B.: James retorted, with a strange authority that impeded the man facing him to open his mouth. Assured that he would not add anything else, he continued, “Again, Paul’s awareness of the Architect, Hiram Abif—a man he considers one of his great ancestors; while we, the Brotherhood, deem him the Master Craftsman, forming the third great symbolic pillar of Beauty—could add even more to that asset.”

“Hold on a second, Brother James,” the Grand Master veered on his regal armchair, with eyes probing the air left and right. He leaned, all too slowly, on the desk; his ten fingers interlocked, and faced the man he had just addressed, “I don’t know if I understood well; or maybe my aged ears

are deceiving me. But are you, in a way, insinuating to offer the enemy a membership into the Craft?"

"Not at all. I'm merely suggesting that I arrange a meeting, and try to reason with him on the concept that King Solomon, who embodies the first great symbolic pillar to us—that of wisdom—was but a good friend, a brother to his ancestors. Playing on his national ego, I can also show him puzzling documents that would wash his brain completely, and turn him into a friend." He paused for a thought, his thumb wobbling his silver ring. The blue precious stone sparkled in the room, legitimating his crafty mind.

The Grand Master and B.: Herbert were in total incredulity upon hearing that.

"When this transpires," B.: James resumed his talk, breaking the silence that had reigned for a few seconds, "We keep him at bay, a confused friend, not an enemy. Only then will we offer him riches in a world that he so much desires, the world of intellectual Shows; something we can afford to do easily. Therefore, blinded by his success and fame, Mr. Khoury would unconsciously be giving us . . . total Obedience," he finished with great tenacity, took his pipe out from his small leather case, and lit it in a calmness only sly people can master.

"You, Brother Herbert, what do you think of the plan?" the Grand Master invited the young master to speak.

"Well, I'm not actually as experienced as either of you, Masters, to know what is the right thing to do under such circumstances," he replied in a modest voice, respecting the hierarchal status each man had within the Craft. "The plan sounds practicable, however, if it was solely me deciding on that, I would revert to my previous thoughts; give that Lebanese an ultimatum to leave the country at once." He gave a forthcoming look at Master James.

"Aha, and what would we have gained from that?" M.: James asked pryingly. "Mr. Khoury would keep on attacking the sole cause of our existence, something we cannot accept," he uttered, in a tranquil motion, using the logic of the Grand Master, who turned his eyes towards M.: Herbert.

"Nothing at all!" he answered almost automatically. "In fact, we would have gained nothing, and lost nothing. As long as the man speaks in Lebanon, he would cause us no danger."

"Aha . . . but what if Mr. Khoury got another chance to communicate his ideas in some other western country, such as this one?" M.: James

asked, considering.

“No one would take his words seriously. Have you forgotten? We control the western media, and it is, indeed, the most powerful weapon we have. Do you really think that the audience that heard him speak yesterday will remain under his scholarly influence for so long? I don’t truly think so.” He paused for an idea, and continued, “Have you forgotten what happened to the Copenhagen Group?”

Silence reigned for a few seconds.

“Very well, Brother Herbert, since you’re not truly afraid of an imperative damage done to us by his speech, in the long run, as you said, though contrary to our beliefs; why make such a big fuss over sending him out of the country? He could stay here instead and talk as much as he wished against us.”

“Quite the opposite! I . . .” B.: Herbert rushed to counter his brother in the Craft, but was instantly interrupted by the Grand Master. “That is enough!” he snapped loudly, as he looked at each of them in turn, with an authoritative motion.

“Enough with that winner-or-loser kind of debate.” He forcefully banged his fist on the wooden surface of the desk, enough to cause them to swerve quickly towards him in submission. “Your plot, Master James, of brainwashing that fellow called Paul might truly work. A possibility I don’t neglect, but I will not debate it now for the simple reason that we do not have enough time to play games with him. It is only *fear* that I believe works most of the time. Bullying him and sending him out of the country is just the right method to get his mind paralyzed; in a world we govern: the New World Order,” he uttered with great firmness.

After hearing that, M.: James lowered his eyes slowly away from the Grand Master, and looked elsewhere. His scheme of winning the enemy over by rational means had failed. “*La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure*,” he mumbled under his breath in French. The fumes rising from his pipe made him think that the Grand Master had opted for force rather than diplomacy.

“My mind is set,” the Grand Master revealed, as he looked at M.: Herbert. “Send Mr. Khoury the ‘BB’s’ ultimatum without delay. This meeting is through. Thank you, Gentlemen, and good night.”

M.: Herbert was very pleased, indeed, by the decision of the Grand Master. He smiled back at the old man, who was standing up, preparing to leave the room. His wrinkled hand reposed on a black wooden cane, crowned with a white silver skull. “Right away, Grand Master,” he uttered

in the total silence that ensued.

* * *

Back at the Eden Hotel, Paul had just finished surfing the Internet, checking his emails, communicating with friends, and enjoying his second cup of tea outside on the terrace. With a grin, he greeted a nice blonde couple, sitting on a table nearby. He reckoned they were German from their looks and language. As usual, Paul left the coffee table, and strolled to the lane beneath the terrace. He sat on the bench and lit a cigarette, his eyes set on the smooth water of the Geneva Lake. He seemed to have been thoroughly enjoying the picturesque scene ahead of him. Yet, time flew by him, and he couldn't believe the watch on his wrist when it marked 8:47 PM.

Dressed in a casual outfit: a pair of jeans and a red shirt, he walked into the Lobby with his laptop on his shoulder.

"Mr. Khoury, Mr. Khoury, excuse me Sir," an animated voice he seemed to recognize echoed all around the Lobby. Paul quickly turned in the direction of that sweet sound, and walked towards the person who was standing with a grin behind the reception desk. It was the beautiful Fiona this time. When he reached her, she extended a hand, delivering an envelope to him. "This is for you, Sir," she uttered softly to him.

Paul didn't budge, not moving an inch towards or away from her. He just stood there like a statue. The envelope looked like the previous one he had received two days ago—the envelope that contained the threatening message. Only this one was a bit bigger. His heartbeat accelerated, his breath faded.

"Thank you, Fiona," he said, trying to get past this turbulent power. With a smile that he managed with difficulty Paul took the envelope from her delicate hand.

"It arrived about . . . an hour ago," she asserted softly, as she looked at the clock hanging on the wall. "Two men dressed in black suits, wearing white gloves, delivered it. Gosh, they looked so serious."

Paul didn't say a word. He just nodded, and left the Lobby to his room. All he could hear behind him was her asking, "Are you ok? Is everything alright?"

Like the previous envelope, this one had also been sealed with the red wax often used in official correspondence. Only, this time, two letters seemed to have been imprinted upon the seal: the letters 'BB'. *What*

could that be, now? Paul was even more confounded than before in the very depths of his mind. Strengthening up, he lifted his eyebrows, and unlocked the packet.

The intense words inscribed on the black paper shook him to the bones. “An ultimatum this time, not just a warning!” he muttered under his breath. With a hollowed and anxious look on his face, Paul felt something else that was concealed within the package. A rope, something wiry, perhaps for strangling or at least that’s what he concluded. With a mixture of fear and rage showing on his round face, he tossed the package on the bed.

The black paper read:

*The Temple of Solomon is a reality.
You have 6 hours to leave the country.
No room for mercy.
Time is ticking . . . 5 hours and 59 minutes left*

8

The Escape
Sunday, 02:07 AM

In the middle of ROOM 404 at the Eden Palace Hotel, Paul was pacing the floor back and forth in total confusion. He didn't have the slightest idea what to do. How could he? His mind was completely blocked, no clear thoughts whatsoever. In fact, the *MEA*, Middle East Airlines flight back to Beirut was an impossible option at this moment, and not even 6 hours from now. It was scheduled 4 days later on Wednesday morning, the 13th of October.

Then, a thought came rushing into his mind like a glimpse of hope. He turned on his laptop, hooked onto the Internet, and checked for alternate airlines flights. The cheapest one he found was listed for the next day at 2:10 PM, almost 17 hours from now. The closest one was around 6:00 AM, almost 9 hours from now, and it was very expensive. *Either way, I will be dead by then*, he pondered. That specific thought frightened him to the last neuron in his brain.

"Damn!" he snapped. Paul took a quick glance at his watch. It marked 9:27 PM.

5 hours and 32 minutes left, his mind calculated. "Think. Think. Think," he uttered under his breath.

Then, he thought of checking the train stations. *Why not?* he reasoned. Paul spent almost another half an hour calling them, one after the other, but nothing worked. No train was leaving Montreux before the deadline, except one, which was unfortunately packed.

4 hours and 57 minutes left, his mind analyzed. His heart throbbed faster. Then, out of nowhere, it dawned on him like the early rays of the sun. He moved along the room towards the bedside table, picked up the phone, and called the reception desk.

"Hello, Fiona, it is Paul Khoury," he greeted her, calmly.

"Oh, Hello, Mr. Khoury. How can I help you, Sir?" she asked softly.

“I need you to connect me to Mr. Thomas Lampson’s room, please.”

“Right away. Please hold a second.”

“Thank you.”

The few seconds that elapsed, before Fiona succeeded in linking the two men together, seemed like an eternity to Paul. His mind was relieved when he heard the voice of the erudite Professor over the phone.

“Mr. Khoury, how are you?” Mr. Lampson asked in a warm tone.

“I’m doing ok, Professor. Thank you. Hope you’re doing fine as well. I thought of contacting you in hopes of meeting you for an urgent matter. Would it be possible to meet now?” Paul asked all at once.

“Sure. Listen, I feel like having a glass of wine at the restaurant. Would you care to join me in 40 minutes?” the Professor inquired.

“Definitely. That sounds good.”

“Very well, Mr. Khoury. I’ll see you then. Bye for now,” Mr. Lampson hung up with a concerned frown on his face despite presenting a posture of contentment.

At the restaurant, almost 45 minutes later, Paul and Thomas were sitting side by side in a classy bar—displaying chestnut wood furnishings—enjoying their first sips of wine. The waiter interrupted the little chat they were having about the seminar by serving them wine a couple of minutes earlier. He placed some French cheese arranged in a nice plate in front of them.

“Courtesy of the Hotel,” he said, smiling.

Paul and Thomas nodded kindly to the man. Behind them, the restaurant was packed, although it was big enough to welcome over two hundred people, maybe more. A series of rectangular beige pillars, linking the carpeted floor to the wooden ceiling, divided the bar from the dining tables. Nicely furnished with fine tableware and perfumed candles to the side, the tables were framed by lovely plants, placed in light-brown wooden pots, adorning the restaurant. The lights were soft.

3 hours and 52 minutes left, Paul chewed, as he looked at his watch. It marked 11:03 PM.

“What’s wrong, Paul?” Thomas queried, pensively. “I have a strange feeling. I mean, ever since you came to meet me here, a few minutes ago, your mind seems to be elsewhere, as if preoccupied with something that is bothering you. Is that so?”

Paul didn’t answer right away; he just looked at Thomas for a few moments. Somehow, he felt assured that the man sitting next to him was a caring person. It was clear from the sound of his voice, and the look in

his eyes. He pulled out the two envelopes from his jacket, and placed them on the bar.

Mr. Lampson extended a hand to get a hold of the envelopes, and a minute later, he froze. “What is this?” he asked determinedly. “Who sent you this?” he was looking at Paul, intently.

“I don’t really know. They were delivered to the reception desk by two men, dressed in black suits and wearing white gloves,” Paul answered. “The receptionist informed me that they looked very serious.”

The Professor looked at him in astonishment, and then at the two envelopes now in his hands. With an inquisitive look behind his thick eyeglasses, the red seals—one with the letter ‘B’ and the other with the letters ‘BB’—made him wonder for a moment. His mind seemed agitated, pulsing with perceptive familiarity.

Without a word, he looked at Paul then at the envelopes, opened them up, and read slowly. After a moment, his eyes widened, as if trying to understand what had been written. He put the envelopes back on the bar and looked away.

“You should get out of Montreux, at once,” Professor Lampson suggested in a stern voice, too serious for Paul to make out the gravity of the situation he was in. “I will help you out!” he declared impassively, as if the matter concerned him as well.

Paul looked at him, managing a subtle smile, and then at his watch, shuddering. It marked 11:31 PM. He made the calculation in his mind once, twice, just to make sure the tension was not betraying his mental capacity.

“How much time is left, Paul?” the Professor inquired.

“3 hours and 24 minutes.”

“Don’t worry, Paul. We’ll find a way out!” he whispered, close to his ear. “Go up to your room, and pack your things. I have some phone calls to make,” he ended.

Paul was amazed by the calmness Thomas displayed, and the certainty of obtaining some help for him; this man he had just met. He smiled back at him, as he took his first steps away from the bar.

“Thanks, Thomas.”

“Go now. I’ll call you as soon as possible. What number is your room?”

“Room 404”

Minutes later, Paul walked back and forth across the room like a bee in its hive, assembling his clothes, shaving set, and shoes; putting everything in his garment bag. He placed his laptop inside its black case,

and his passport in his jacket's inner pocket. He checked his wallet; cash and credit cards were all there.

Everything was set. He was ready to leave the country, even though he hadn't truly had the chance to enjoy his stay at his own leisure. His life was at stake now, a matter of life and death.

Seconds passed like the words of a prayer spoken in times of fear, the minutes weighing on him like an eternity trapped in earthly matter. Sitting on one of the chairs around the breakfast table, and looking through the open door to the cold night marching through the balcony, Paul smoked his cigarette much faster than he normally would. He was really stressed.

It was 12:07 AM when the phone by his bedside table rang. Although frightened by the scant *2 hours and 48 minutes left*, before the strange men in black would pursue him, Paul gave a sigh of relief when he heard the Professor's voice greeting him.

"I have made several telephone calls to some of my acquaintances, which may have been of help, with no result unfortunately," Mr. Lampson imparted the bad news to Paul, who remained silent.

"Are you there, Paul?"

"Yes, I am, Professor," the historian replied in a trembling voice.

"Don't worry, Paul. I promised to help you, and I will. In fact, I had just remembered that two of my best students, who came from Germany to attend the seminar, are staying here in this hotel. I tried to contact them but couldn't reach them. They might be out, you know, being Saturday night, so I left them an urgent message to call me back as soon as they got here."

Paul didn't really know how to change the course of events to his advantage in this crooked situation without making a mess of things in a country he didn't know well, so he could and goad the shadowy chasers. Nonetheless he sensed a note of brotherly affection in the Professor's voice.

"Thank you, Thomas. I trust you can help me," said Paul, feeling slightly uncertain now of whether this man could really help him.

"I know time is running out, and I know you might be scared about what could happen in case they get you, but rest assured that I'll get you out of here, before they get their chance. Wait for me," he said, and hung up.

Knowing that he couldn't do anything but rely trustfully and faithfully on the erudite man, who swore he would offer help, Paul walked out into

the balcony. With his elbows on the banister, a glass of whisky in his left hand, and a cigarette in his right, he looked down.

In the darkness, he could just make out the shape of people, walking back and forth along the track, one level beneath the outside terrace of the Hotel. Time was passing quickly, and as his mind started to labor on this frequency; tension and fear grew inside of him. Images of men in black, wearing white gloves, and chanting the letters 'BB', while walking along the same track he had seen from his balcony, began to soar up from the depths of his imaginative mind.

It was not the whisky, but the gravity of the life or death game that took a firm grip on his senses. Paul had just realized how vulnerable he really was in the face of horror and death threats. After all, who wasn't? He had often believed he could stand strong against any storm, against any kind of provocation. Perhaps his heroism could be measured in proportion to his ability of free motion. Here, he was paralyzed, completely trapped.

Sunk deeper in his thoughts than before, he heard a cyclic sound coming from inside, a sound he had been waiting to hear for over an hour. The phone was ringing too loudly. He hurried and picked up, while looking at his watch. It marked 01:11 AM.

1 hour and 44 minutes left. He made the math in his nervous mind. His heart beat faster, quickly as a metronome. *Free at last!* he thought.

"Get yourself ready," said the Professor in a tone more akin to a General than to that of a rescue missionary. "You're leaving in . . ." the voice halted, causing Paul to sweat more profusely, "45 minutes. Meet me at the restaurant, as soon as you're ready, Paul."

"Thanks a lot, Professor. I'm all set right now."

"Very well then, I'll see you in ten."

As soon as Paul hung up the phone, he picked up his garment bag, placed his laptop bag over his shoulder, and checked for his passport in his jacket's inner pocket and his wallet in the back pocket of his jeans. Everything was set; he was ready to leave the country. He turned off the lights. "Farewell, Montreux," he uttered, and closed the door.

Seated on a small table of this semi-packed restaurant, edging the glass windows, the Professor elucidated to Paul the rescue plan he had set forth. He was to leave Montreux en route to Munich, Germany, by car, accompanied by two of his leading students. A German Historian and an Archaeologist. Mr. Lukas Steiner and Ms. Alycia Schiffer had come to attend the seminar, strictly for Academic research purposes, concerning a

book they were working on.

“Mr. Lukas will be driving from Montreux, crossing the Austrian borders, and then all the way up to Munich. No need to worry! You’re in good hands,” Thomas reassured the confused man with a smile on his face. Somehow, Paul felt a sense of victory in the Professor’s eyes, as if it was his own rescue being executed, or as if he had shared the same fate once upon a time in his own life.

“This is great . . . and how long from Montreux to the borders?”

“Around 2 hours and 45 minutes.”

“2 hours and 45 minutes?” Paul snapped. Mr. Lampson lifted an eyebrow, as if demanding an explanation. “There is 1 hour and 32 minutes left. They have plenty of time to follow us, and kill me before we ever set wheels in Austria.”

“Right, but how would they know in which car you travelled, if you left 1 hour before their deadline?” the Professor replied smoothly, comforting his anxious mood. “Relax now . . . relax.”

Twenty minutes later, the two Germans hadn’t yet arrived, and Paul was unable to ease his nerves anymore. His adrenaline was soaring. He looked at the Professor in a way that implied he should call them as soon as possible. However, Mr. Lampson explained that they would be here in no more than 15 minutes.

“They had a hot Saturday night,” he added. “You know how it is with Germans and beer.” The professor smiled. “Anyway, coffee and a hot shower will get them alert for the road. Be a little bit more patient, my friend.”

Paul kept silent, resolute to advance towards safety, by setting a firm foot, first in Austria and then in Germany. He had never been there, and had always wanted to visit the two adjacent countries one day. He smiled at the man who had given him a hand and waited.

Minutes later, while Paul was looking through the window to the outside terrace, he thought he saw two men in black, wearing white gloves, traversing the floor of the patio, and stopping under one of the trees for a smoke. Paul stood up, and focused outside. The Professor followed him with his eyes. “Could they be the hunters?” Paul muttered to himself.

“What did you say?” Thomas asked, worried.

“The two men, under the tree . . . I think they are the killers,” Paul uttered loudly. “And . . . they are . . . moving now . . .” he added in a spasmodic voice, swirling away from the window, away from the table,

and into the darkest area of the restaurant. Many people stared at him, astonished by his acrobatic move.

The Professor came close to him. Paul wondered why the two men had been here earlier than he had expected and calculated. He took a quick look at his watch. It marked 01:55 AM.

Why? Why, now? I mean, I think I still have 1 hour and 5 minutes left, to comply with their demands, he reasoned, before it suddenly dawned on him like a thunderbolt an instant later. He recalled Fiona, informing him that the envelope had arrived roughly an hour ago prior to receiving it from her. That would be one hour before he read it. He said as much to the Professor, who stood motionless like a statue.

“If the time on the black paper, marking *5 hours and 59 minutes left*, actually began to tick when the envelope was placed at the reception desk, then . . .” Paul gawked at his friend.

“Then, the time left is 5 minutes,” he looked back at Paul. “It’s time to move, and move quickly,” Thomas concluded urgently.

Amongst the multitude of people getting ready to leave the restaurant towards their rooms, the Professor and Paul managed to walk out towards the Hotel’s lobby. They suddenly halted behind one of the granite pillars, as they noticed the two bald sturdy men in black already in the lobby, standing at the reception desk, inquiring—no doubt—about his room, Paul thought.

Then, a minute later, the two men moved in the direction of the elevator, just as a blonde couple had opened its doors and stepped into the lobby, speaking a fluent German as they passed by them. Mr. Lampson saw them heading for the restaurant, but abstained from calling them out, afraid to catch the others’ attention.

The instant the hairless men stepped into the elevator, Thomas, assured they were gone, dashed for Lukas and Alycia. Still static in the dimness behind the pillar, Paul waited for them anxiously. He saw Thomas pointing at him before they all walked together towards him.

They met, and he immediately recognized them as the couple he had seen at the terrace earlier that evening. Lukas had long, curly blond hair, while Alycia’s was soft, long and straight, cascading like a river down her back. Dressed in casual outfits with bags on their shoulders, they were ready to depart. Paul didn’t waste another moment to thank Thomas for his immense help.

“Stay in touch,” said the Professor.

Paul nodded in confirmation. Along with his two new acquaintances,

and somewhat relaxed now, he walked towards the exit. As they were stepping out, the two men in black were unbolting the elevator door with similar angry expressions on their faces. Their features changed, however, as soon as they noticed Mr. Lampson, looking at the exit. Recognizing him, they followed his gaze, and were able to see Paul, or what was left of his figure, waving goodbye to the Professor through the glass door.

They immediately ran after him. Instantly, Thomas yelled out to Lukas, warning him.

“Run now . . . run fast,” Lukas shouted in turn, as he firmly held Alycia’s left hand in his right and ran. Paul sprinted after them.

“Where’s the car?” he asked.

“Two blocks from here,” Lukas responded, trying to catch his breath. “It’s a red hatchback Volkswagen.”

“There they are,” one of the two bald-headed men snapped aloud, loud enough for the three frightened scholars to hear.

They scurried from one street to the next at an alarming rate of speed. They never imagined they had it in them, or was it fear that made them run so fast? Followed by the two men, roughly 100 meters behind them, they made it to the block where the car was parked.

“50 meters left and we’re out of here . . . just a bit more,” bellowed Lukas, in an attempt to encourage his academic partner, and the man they were about to save.

A scream of pain echoed from behind them. Paul halted for a second, swerved on his feet, and noticed one of the men had stumbled upon a rock on the sidewalk. His friend stopped to check on him, but the man on the ground cried out, “Don’t stop now, you idiot, just get the bastard . . .”

Paul’s sprint, off the spot he had stopped at, was faster than the man’s gallop behind him. From his current location, Paul was able to see the Germans, getting inside the car. While Lukas turned the ignition on, Alycia opened the back door for Paul to jump inside.

20 meters left, he calculated, between his present point and the car moving out of the walkway. With a strange bodily movement, and an ability not known to him, or so he thought, he turned his head to look behind him. The killer, who had just been about 100 meters away, an instant before, was now only about 25 meters away. *How did he do it?* Paul thought.

And as fast as the speed of light, Paul approached the moving car, threw his garment bag and his laptop in, and then, like an African

leopard, his whole body was propelled into the car, which took off instantly, too fast for the man to reach it, some 10 meters behind them. He took his gun though and fired at the racing car. Hearing the gunshots, Alycia screamed, and lowered her head in a spontaneous auto-defensive motion, and so did both men: Lukas and Paul. Three bullets hit the car. The first one cracked the right taillight, the second destroyed the right mirror on Alycia's side, and the third hit the rear-window, shattering it into hundreds of little pieces, scattering on the backseat where Paul had just sat and all over the interior of the car.

The shooter failed to kill them. A curse of fury reverberated across the alley.

Breathing profoundly in a relief he longed to feel at last, Paul looked at his watch. It marked 02:07 AM. The escape to Munich had just begun . . .

9

*Evangelical Lutheran Church, Munich
Sunday, 07:35 AM*

Taking the first right onto Avenue du Casino, and following Route 9, a few meters away, Paul felt a twinge in his hand. He lifted it up, and realized that a small piece of the window glass had penetrated it, causing a slight injury of the skin. He was surprised he hadn't felt it at once, when the shattered glass fell on the backseat, perhaps because of the rising adrenaline in his brain. He asked Alycia for a sterilized bandage to cover the wound, after plucking it out.

"Are you bleeding?" she inquired, a bit worried, after finding the bandage in the car's first aid kit.

"Just a minor scratch," he answered calmly.

Driving on Route 9 was pleasant and smooth. The full moon projected its daring light, amidst total darkness, on the quiet surface of the Geneva Lake floating to their left, lending a relaxing mood to Paul and his two companions. Thinking they had truly escaped the life and death game, they began to talk.

"The Professor told me that you are both working on a book. If I may ask, what it is about?" Paul finally managed to speak.

"The Exile from Babylon," Lukas imparted, gazing at Paul through the rear-view mirror.

"We're trying to separate reality from myth, regarding that specific event in history," Ms. Schiffer continued. "It's really hard work, but quite challenging," she added, grinning.

"I bet it is," Paul avowed all too seriously. "Anything avant-garde in your findings?" The glow in Steiner's eyes was reflected in the rear-view mirror.

Mr. Steiner gave a slight turn of the head towards Alycia and grinned to her. She smiled back. There was no answer to his question from either of them, yet the smirks they avidly shared made Paul understand that

they had probably found something important, which they didn't want to reveal for reasons he believed he knew very well, being a Historian himself. Out of respect for their choice and a sense of Academic confidentiality, he remained silent.

Almost fifteen minutes passed, before the small red car turned right on Rue Gambetta, to continue onto Route de Chailly a few minutes later. Alycia turned her head towards Paul, who had his eyes semi-closed, and kept staring at him. Her conversation in German with Lukas made Paul open his eyes thoroughly; to find her smiling at him, as was Lukas through the rear-view mirror.

Paul thought they might have been talking about how he had fallen asleep for a few moments. With a slight grin to them, he fixed his body on the backseat, trying not to fall asleep again, though it was a bit hard. The watch in his wrist read 2:34 AM, his habitual time to go to bed.

“How long have you known the Professor?” Lukas inquired excitedly.

“We met at the Seminar,” he replied. “Then, we had a cup of coffee on Friday morning at the hotel. I guess that was it until tonight.”

It seemed that both Lukas and Alycia were quite surprised by the answer. They had most likely assumed that the two men had known each other for quite some time. They knew the Professor very well. He was not a man to trust people so quickly. Somehow, his affinity to Mr. Khoury had played a major role in creating a sense of trust so suddenly.

Silence prevailed for some time, under the blanket of that October night. A soft breeze seeped inside the car from the smashed rear-window. It revived all of them, and awakened Paul completely from the drowsiness he had felt before. Tonight, he was not meant to sleep in any way. Complying with the twist of fate, he did not.

“The Professor told me that both of you were his students,” said Paul. “He made it clear that you were not like any other apprentices he has had before. You are two of his top scholars; he was delighted to tell me.”

Lukas and Alycia were indeed very happy to hear that, certainly feeling proud of their accomplishments. It showed on their faces. Still gazing at him, Ms. Schiffer brushed a handful of strands of her light-blond hair away from her face and then said, “We were there, at the *Domus Clericorum*, when you gave your speech. Quite interesting what you had to say. It made sense, at least to me.” She looked at Lukas for confirmation.

“We came across the challenging issue *à propos* the Temple of Solomon, while going through the Exile from Babylon,” Lukas stated

seriously. “In fact, our extensive research led us to the same conclusion as yours about the Temple.” He paused in his train of thought, and then added, “We haven’t studied History and Archaeology for years, only to eventually validate some mythology that has existed in some people’s tradition, and especially within the pages of a book that has been pushed on us—Christians—as a holy book,” he ended.

“The world has changed. Indeed it has,” Paul affirmed.

“True!” Alycia agreed. “Most people around the world are seeking truth and knowledge nowadays. I fully believe that in today’s enlightened mind there is no room for legends and fairy tales. These were lovely stories to tell back then, a castle in the sky, or shall I say, a Temple,” she chuckled, as she looked at Paul. “Yes, time has come for a real change,” she declared, and turned towards Lukas, who was busy steering towards the right lane at the traffic Circle, and taking the first exit onto the A9 ramp towards Lausanne/Berne; merging, soon after, onto the A9 Toll Road on Autoroute du Léman.

It was then that the unexpected happened. A black Van, shadowy as the falling night, flashed its headlights on the Volkswagen. The lights hit both mirrors at once: the one on the driver’s side and the rear-view mirror. They glared into Lukas’ eyes, blurring his sight, and impeding his driving. He almost smashed into the car to his left, but veered quickly away from it, steering straight into the car on the right, yet with unbelievably accurate reflexes he managed to maneuver between the cars, and return to his lane without even a scratch to any of the cars. He did it as though he had been half-asleep. And . . . quickly, Lukas stepped on the gas!

“Damn it!” Alycia snapped. “How did they find us?” she asked, trying to ease down her tension.

“Don’t you remember?” Paul asked, lifting an eyebrow, and gazing at her. Agitated himself, he tried to explain, “One of the men who chased us into the alley, saw us getting into this car, Alycia. The broken window was meant as an indicator for them to recognize it, in case they chose to pursue us. In fact, they must have stealthily followed us the instant we took off or shortly after that, for they already knew the car.”

Alycia did not seem to get all of this. It showed clearly on her face. That’s not at all what she had in mind. She turned to Paul, “I recall very well what happened, but that’s not what I meant to ask. They could have taken another route, heading anywhere else. I wonder how they figured out we were taking this route in the first place!”

She's completely right, Paul thought. *How did they choose to track us on this particular road?* He pondered again over the matter.

The black Van was close to their small car, travelling at a high speed more than halfway through the A9 Road: Autoroute du Léman. Lukas' skillful maneuvering results were short-lived, just as he had expected. The van's heavy bumper shook the Volkswagen from behind.

Despite their fastened seat belts, the force of the thump launched them a few inches forward. Alycia lost her temper. She cried out in anger while Paul tried to soften her mood. Lukas stayed focused on the road for the sign to *La Veyre* and was about to make a slight right on it at the E27 Road.

Another impact. It barely waggled the red car this time, and Lukas managed to make it to the new Road. "These guys are damned serious!" he mumbled under his breath. "It seems your speech really got under their skin, Mr. Khoury." He glanced at him through the rear-view mirror to see his reaction, but all Lukas could see then were the faces of the two sturdy bald men in the black van, in a rage and ready to kill.

Mr. Steiner shifted the gear stick in the manual transmission, and stepped firmly on the gasoline pedal. The black van followed suit, racing after him for yet another kilometer, before Lukas curved on to the right with the flow of the road, taking the A12 Partial Toll Road.

"Well yes, I guess I did hit them hard after all," Paul answered the driver, eyes focused on the road. "Though I had no idea at all that it would come to this," he replied in a tone that betrayed not fear, but rather concern for the safety of his two new companions, whom he had unwittingly dragged into this mess, jeopardizing their lives. "I'm sorry about all of this," he finally said.

"No problem," Lukas assured him. "Some neurotransmitter conveyance, from time to time, is not bad at all. It reminds us that we're alive." He grinned at Ms. Schiffer, who was pleased in Lukas' courage—to see it through to the end.

However, the two men in the black van had another point of view. They wanted to see the people in the small red car dead, not alive. The task to pursue and kill Paul had changed into a mission to make his German friends dead, as well. In fact, the ultimatum sent to Paul—in order to frighten him into leaving the country in a hurry—had changed into a real crusade, orchestrated by *The Ordo Supremus Militaris Templi Hierosolymitani*, better known in the English speaking world by the name of: The Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem.

“What the hell are you waiting for, Levin?” the furious man, seated on the passenger’s side of the black van with his feet still aching, asked in rage. “It’s a long route, more than 75 kilometers. It’s now or never. We should dispose of them right on this road,” he commanded.

“I know that, David, I know that very well,” Levin acknowledged. The goal of the chase was to destroy the car and kill everyone inside. “I’ve been doing my best, but their driver is good; he’s focused on the road, and more disciplined than I had anticipated.”

“This is not a good reason to fail the mission. We have an advantage over him, a huge one. We’re in a van; they have a small stupid car.” He sent him a piercing stare. “After we make the serpentine twist ahead of us, you will push the accelerator to the ground. Got it?”

The driver alerted his mind, and set his van off at high speed in a last attempt to destroy the enemy. Approaching the small Volkswagen, Levin flashed the headlights on and off, in rapidly incessant movements that broke Lukas’ concentration, and decreased his speed for a few moments. Immediately after, the black van’s heavy bumper knocked the car’s tail from side to side, breaking its rear fender. Still attached to the body of the car, it dangled loose, causing electric flickers upon contact with the asphalt road.

The men in black, pleased now in the damage they had caused, felt the time had come to complete the mission they had been entrusted to fulfill. Levin drew forward, nearing the left side of the car where Lukas sat and jolted into it with a massive blow. The car skidded right in a continuous gliding motion, as Lukas seemed to have lost control over it. Alycia screamed at the top of her lungs, probably foreseeing the inevitable collision about to happen. Paul bit down on his tongue in a frenzy of nerves.

The driver of the black van moved away from the car, preparing another hit to the side that would undoubtedly be fatal this time. From the driving compartment, the two bald men looked at their prey, bleeding in red color! With a broken rear window, a dangling fender, and smashed doors and windows, the car halted by the side of the road appeared to have been engaged in battle. Contented by the sight of this, they readied themselves for their ultimate strike of victory.

Levin set off at top speed, advancing straight towards Lukas, whose head leaned slightly on the door. David’s eyes were glowing with anticipation, waiting to rejoice in the final moment of defeat of the enemy; an enemy they didn’t know quite well, who had nothing to lose at

this point, and was ready to turn the table. His head was still spinning from the impact of the first strike, and yet, Lukas waited in absolute stillness for the van to come nearer and nearer.

At the very last moment before collision, Lukas made an unbelievable movement in his will to survive. He changed the gear stick to first, and floored the gas pedal with every last ounce of strength and muscle he had left in him. He took off much too quickly for Levin to stop the van, which missed them, rushing into a group of trees at the side of Road A12, and overturning in a field nearby.

Each one of the three tired passengers in the damaged Volkswagen whispered a sigh of relief almost at the same time. Alycia drew nearer to Lukas, hugged him tight, and kissed him on the cheeks. She probably couldn't control her strong feelings of joy at being brought back to life by her colleague, the man she had just kissed so warmly, maybe even for the first time. A wide grin appeared on Paul's face. His road to safety was now paved with good intentions.

No more than two hours later, they entered Austria at the early crack of dawn. The needles in Paul's watch pointed 5:06 AM. Although tired to the bones, they all decided not to rest here. Another two-hour's drive and they would be relaxing in Munich. Alycia insisted on taking the wheel, allowing her hero, Lukas, to take a break for the remainder of the journey.

Time passed slowly along the road to Munich.

Located on the southern side of Germany; Munich, the capital city of Bavaria, stands as the third biggest city after Berlin and Hamburg. They had reached it by 7:28 AM. Few people appeared to be on the city roads on that early Sunday morning. It was usually jam-packed with more than a million inhabitants, both Catholics and Protestants living within the city limits. The Isar River streamed along its side, and the beautiful Bavarian Alps stood above it in regal posture. A vibrant city that looks like the Human brain on a map, well connected to the rest of Germany and to many other popular cities and towns.

A diverse selection of buildings, both old-world and modern, make Munich a one-of-a-kind in all the Country, with a beautifully special motto that reads: *München Mag Dich*, which means: 'Munich likes you'. Certainly, this open wide spirit of Munich gave the city the ability to play a crucial role in its ever-changing image.

Paul liked Munich too, and his admiration grew bigger, as he enjoyed the sight of the Buildings he ran across during his ride in the city center.

A couple of minutes later, the car continued on Sonnenstraße, and then a slight turn to the right off the main road onto an alley on Nußbaumstraße, and parked under a tree in a designated area at the side of the road.

A beautiful metallic-grey dome in a strange modern architectural design appeared on Paul's left, as he got out of the car. Lukas and Alycia breathed in the uplifting air they had been missing these last few days, happy to finally be back home. Paul saw it in their eyes. He wanted to go home, himself.

"What is that beautiful building?" Paul rushed to ask in amazement.

"Oh, that's the *Münchner MotettenChor*," replied Lukas with a grin. "It's the auditorium where the musical church choir sings. The concept was created by Hans Rudolf Zöbele, in 1960; it later developed into a tiny group of students, keen about music, at the University of Munich. They had originally joined the choir, as a musical accompaniment for a speech given on sacred music, created by the great 17th century German composer and organist, Heinrich Schütz," he explained.

"The audition was a success!" Alycia interrupted excitedly, sending an apologetic look towards Lukas. "And so, many concerts followed, mainly on the *Seven Last Words on the Cross* and about the *Passion of Christ*, all performed as per the logia of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Matthew just behind it." She paused, thinking, before she added, "Through the many years that followed, the place expanded beautifully in size, as you see, and the choir's repertoire grew rapidly to include Bach, Beethoven, and many other great composers, as well." She then turned to Paul, alight with a sense of national pride.

"It's in this Church that you will find shelter, Paul," Lukas confirmed, as he looked at his new friend. "That of course, if it is ok with you; it's better here and much safer, just in case the men in black choose to chase you again."

Paul nodded. "Thanks for helping me out," he said.

Even though he was a Middle Eastern, Maronite Christian, following the Catholic Church of Rome, Paul considered Martin Luther as one of the greatest men in Christianity. His way of Protest was not a hideous, messy revolution that would bring down the Catholic Church based in the Vatican, but quite the opposite; Luther advanced a theological motion to reform Christianity with the doctrine of Justification by Grace through Faith alone.

After walking around the massive musical auditorium, and admiring

its beauty, they headed towards the Church, built in amber colored stones with a long tower, topped with an elevated cross. Paul recalled some great works penned by Luther that he had been thoughtfully acquainted with, during his Historical and Religious research of modern times, since he was a specialist in world ancient History & Religion. One book, though, flashed into his mind: *Christian Liberty*.

Luther taught that if Justification, that single firm rock which is the chief article of the entire Christian doctrine, stands then the Church stands. If it falls, the Church falls. He believed Justification to be a living, dynamic, and day-to-day reality for anyone who accepts Christ, for he alone forgives, and practically makes people righteous in their lives. It is in the gospel—the New Testament—that we find the divine grace and the faith in Christ's righteousness. It is the core of the Christian faith, around which all Christian doctrines are based.

A few minutes later, as the three entered the Church, Lukas gave a brief historical prologue about his home city and that of Alycia's. The name *München* is a derivation from the Old German word, *Munichen*, directly related to the monks of the Benedictine Order, who founded the city around 1158 AD. A monk, with wide-open arms, holding a red book—the New Testament—in one hand, and wearing a black tunic with a yellow-gold cross over it, has been depicted on the city's coat of arms. Because of its religious foundation, Religion has long been a vital constituent in Munich's life, and this is obvious from the many chapels, churches, and cathedrals that adorn the city. Among the most reputed, one may surely find; the inspirational Church of our Lady, St. Peters Church, St. Michael's Church, St. Matthew's Church, and St. Luke's Church.

When Paul approached the altar in reverent steps, Lukas and Alycia were already standing in the right corner, having a talk with a lean, tall priest, probably the minister of the congregation. Paul couldn't hear what they were talking about. Engrossed in his prayers, thanking God that he was safe, he guessed they might be asking the priest to shelter him for a couple of days.

Two days had passed, and Paul stayed in self-confinement at the Church, but that was the end of it. He couldn't take it any longer. He called Lukas, first thing Tuesday morning, and told him that he felt like going out for a cup of coffee, and perhaps later in the day, have a tour of Munich. Lukas complied with his wish.

Later that night, after he'd checked for available flights from Munich

to Beirut, he tracked one down and booked it for Thursday afternoon. Moments later, an email alert bounced on the lower right-hand corner of his laptop screen. It was an email from Maya. He rushed to open it.

Dear Paul,
Hope this email finds you well.
I'm writing you this email with great excitement. The Archaeological digging we have been carrying out, here in Gebel, has unearthed a Stone of dazzling beauty. A strange stone indeed! Youmna and I believe that it will reveal something of great importance.
Having said that, we require your presence here, with us, at your earliest convenience.
Anyway, hope you are enjoying your stay in Geneva.
See you soon,
Maya.

Paul's face lit up after reading Maya's message. *A strange Stone with dazzling beauty*, he thought for a minute. "What could that be?" he muttered to himself. Thrilled by the astounding news, he wrote back to her in anticipation, confirming his arrival to the site in Gebel no later than Monday. That night he slept calmly and dreamt about the discovery.

It was Thursday, October 14th at 6:20 PM, when the jet to Istanbul's Atatürk International Airport took off from München's Franz Joseph Strauss Airport. Paul Khoury was onboard, a wide smile on his face. After 2 hours and 35 minutes in the air, the Turkish Airliner, flight 1636, had finally landed. A stopover of 1h 55m took place, during which Paul changed jets to board flight 828, heading for Beirut International Airport, where he arrived on Friday at 1:35 AM.

"Home sweet home!" he breathed.

On Friday afternoon, he went to see the Padre.

- Part II -

*The Archaeological Site, Gebel
Monday, October 18, 11:15 AM*

Lengthy, yet trouble-free, Paul's journey brought him closer and closer to his destination: Gebel (Jbeil, Byblos), the ancient Phoenician city that had recently recorded seven millennia of history, perhaps more. Gebel means 'Geb-El', *The Well of God!* Yet, some believe this is one of the three interpretations made by historians. The second meaning refers to the *Mountain of God*, whereas the third interpretation means the *Sacred Land of El* and it sounds like a more appropriate meaning, according to one of the old Hamitic/Afro-Asiatic languages.

Time passed leisurely, as Paul drove his blue Jeep in a pleasant mood along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The many thoughts about life in general, the escapade in Montreux, and the strange Stone with dazzling beauty that Maya mentioned in her email occupied his mind.

The meeting with Padre Joseph on Friday was vital to Paul. He conveyed to the Padre what had happened in the city of Montreux, and showed him the two envelopes sealed with the 'BB' sign, along with the ominous messages written on the black papers inside. Immediately after reading them, the Padre sat up straight on the black leather armchair behind his brown desk, the New Testament peacefully reposing on it. His tranquil blue eyes emitted a strange gaze towards his guest. *I have never seen that stern look on the Padre before*, Paul thought to himself. Something had passed in the depth of his eyes. Paul might have seen it: a shape, a form, perhaps a distant memory.

"Listen to me, Paul, and listen very carefully," Padre Joseph stated after a few minutes, following the long silence that had surprised his listener. The gravity of his voice did not alter the look of his round-shaped face in any way. With all the authority of a Priest in his religious vestment, he resumed, "The situation is dire, not at all simple for me, as you might have anticipated. You have stepped into thorny ground, a

shadowy place with no leniency. Hell . . . if I may say so.” He paused for a sip of cold water to clear out his throat from the heat the thought had provoked.

Paul appeared to be in shock, more confounded than back in the heat of the moment, when he was on the run from the men in black. He didn’t expect this at all. However, the exigency of the situation urged his mind to hurriedly labor on something that he was not sure he would comprehend.

“Would they follow me, still?” asked Paul, “I mean, here in Lebanon?” His mind was in great turbulence.

“I know they can, they have the means, but I’m not sure they will do that. Yet, everything is possible with these furtive people.” Padre Joseph couldn’t just hide the truth from the man looking at him with fear in his eyes, and tell him that they couldn’t. He definitely wished the opposite, but sometimes . . . most of the times; reality was just very different from wishes. “The ‘BB’ is not a guild for money and fun, as most people around the world think. They can be extremely serious and dodgy. Nothing can stop them from executing their plans, anywhere, anytime.”

“Who are they?”

“The Babylonian Brotherhood,” the Padre answered him with strange solemnity. “I will tell you everything you need to know about them later on, but for now, I urge you to keep a low profile, while working on the site with the two ladies waiting for you.” He halted for a second, opened the bottom right drawer of his desk, and retrieved a light-brown A4 envelope. “This is for Youmna. A book she might need.” He smiled. “Good luck,” he concluded.

Despite the gravity of his words of caution, Padre Joseph reflected admirable vigor, and that’s what explicitly helped Paul to leave the office with a sudden grin on his face.

The Babylonian Brotherhood, he pondered on his way to Gebel. *I have to keep a low profile*, he thought.

Seated on the passenger’s seat next to him, Jim turned his head, and urged him to be cautious on the soggy road, for he looked a bit distracted. It had rained a tad and the road could be slippery. With his long, wide forehead, curly short hair, and dark beard, Jim embodied the typical artist that he was.

The artistic work of this painter and musical composer, in his early forties, never ceased to amaze Paul. His paintings, so expressive, would depict the old village stone-houses, or simply some wooden doors slightly

opened, as if to the unknown. His *mélange* of colors, and the mystical expression of his creativity allowed his brush to depict Nature most beautifully. A musician of a rare quality, his lyrics always resounded authenticity and sincerity, and were rooted in his culture—rooted in ours.

Certainly, Paul hadn't conveyed to Jim anything, related to what had transpired before or after he had presented his paper at the seminar in Montreux. He told his friend that everything had gone well, as predicted. Out of an affinity for art and history, he called the artist on Saturday, and suggested the trip to Gebel. Jim showed a lot of interest, of course. He had his own purpose for it. For Jim, Gebel and its great ancient ruins would form a beautiful theme for his paintings, not to mention the musical inspiration he might achieve there.

Around 11:15 AM, they reached the beautiful city of Gebel. It was one of the mildest days in October. The Sun shone directly after some slight rain, this rapid shift in the weather often took place on the Mediterranean coast during the first month of autumn. They leisurely drove in the direction of the port of Gebel, parked the four-wheeler in a designated parking area, and took down their backpacks.

Moments later, they continued on foot towards the Archaeological Site, walking through a long Roman road in ruins, surrounded by a public Garden. They arrived at an intersecting point with two directions to choose from. The first one was to the right, the other, straight ahead. However, they decided to go to the right first, towards the medieval city of Byblos. Their stroll through the beautiful old souk was delightful. They next passed by the Unesco Square then the College of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, the Gebel Wax Museum, St. John the Baptist's Church—built around the year 1150 AD, the Church of Our Lady of Deliverance, a couple of Restaurants, a hotel, and the port.

Jim took some photographs of all of them, before they lingered at the port for a while, enjoying the beautiful view of the fluctuating water in the sea.

"Alas," Paul spoke, breaking the silence that had endured for a few minutes. "Look at the waters, the once great waters of the Mediterranean Sea, flirting today with the new idle port of Gebel. What happened to the old one?" his words sounded more nostalgic in nature than a mere question for Jim to answer. Yet, he seemed to know all too well the answer himself. "Time . . . Time is what happened." He looked at Jim, then back at the waters. "I can't but imagine the old port, busy and jammed with hundreds of sailors, travelers, ships that used to dock here

at this very same place, Jim, to head away again, every bright new day towards a different corner of the world.”

Jim gazed at the forsaken port of today. Indeed, nothing remained from the vestiges of that astonishing past. Few insignificantly tiny fishing boats and others—perhaps for private owners—lingered there, in wait of motion.

“I believe the Geblites carry the blood of the ancestors in their veins,” Jim whispered above the surface of the water, in wait for a confirming note from Paul, who often had his eyes on the past.

“True, yet all ancestral traces seemed to have bled away. Time is a killer. Has culture died in our collective memory?” the historian in Paul asked critically, before he continued, “Unfortunately, I could not dismiss the feeling of regret for that great loss,” he uttered in sorrow.

Between the beautiful rocks, carved by the gifted hands of nature, and the deserted ancient port of Gebel, built ages ago by the Phoenician Geblite seafarers, some pieces of Cedar wood scattered here and there, half buried in water and sand; the only remnants of what once used to be a vast Empire of the Sea.

Time runs and everything changes . . .

Almost half an hour later, they marched back to the intersecting point, and continued straight ahead, this time towards Gebel’s Archaeological Site. With steady steps, they walked into history. With its very close cultural and religious connection with Egypt, Gebel had always held a certain magnetic interest for lots of people around the world, and especially for the Lebanese.

It seemed as if something, quite unknown to Paul, had abruptly attracted Jim along the way, made him suddenly turn to the right, and disappear behind a wall between a small annex to the Roman road in ruins and the Crusader Castle. Paul didn’t waste a second, he just followed his friend, and moments later Jim drew out his camera from his blue backpack and began capturing the beauty of this archaeological monument; commenting, between his shots, on the art of masonry used in its construction—by the Franks—in the 12th century AD. It was still standing. Next to it and across a tiny road, on the eastern side of Gebel’s Archaeological Site, there stood the remains of a Persian Castle, built in the mid-6th century BC.

However, Jim’s appreciation of the ancient Site, as an artist, grew, upon catching sight of the artistic architecture that the ancient Geblites had left as testament of their skill—in the Phoenician Temple of the

Obelisks—standing next to it. Built at the order of Abi-Chemou, King of Gebel, around 1800 BC, the construction in Egyptian style increased his enthusiasm. As usual, he was deeply engrossed in setting the right angles for his camera in order to get the best photos, which Paul assumed Jim would be using as subjects for his upcoming drawings. The amalgamation of these two great civilizations of the distant past—Egyptian and Phoenician—was, in fact, what concerned Paul the most.

After admiring, for a while, the few Obelisks rising in the midst of layers of ancient stones, and edged by some palm trees; they left off, treading ahead through lots of ruins, some of which lay sadly absconded amidst the bushes. A fervent discussion nearby attracted their attention and made them both veer towards its source.

There was a ditch in the ground in the form of a square surrounded by a thick blue rope that was attached to the four poles on each of the corners. A signpost, with a caption had been nailed to each of the poles.

It read:

Do Not Trespass. Excavation Work.
Beirut National Museum.
Lebanese Ministry of Culture.

Debating on the foundation of the Phoenician Alphabet and some other related topics, Youmna and Maya seemed completely absorbed by a flat ancient stone posing in front of them. *A strange Stone with dazzling beauty*, Paul's face immediately changed, as he seemed to remember the words used by Maya in the email she had sent him almost a week ago while he was still in Munich. With the archaeological tools at their sides, and some documents in their hands that they were referring to over the course of their argument, they seemed to have reached a dilemma.

Impelled by a mute complicity, Paul walked in steady steps toward them and introduced Jim to the girls. Friendly and amiable, both the Archaeologist and the Alchemist invited him to join them moments after they came to know the gifted artist. Paul took the opportunity to inform his friend about the work done on the site.

“The ladies came with a definite purpose, to uncover important relics with Phoenician writings, study them on site, label them properly, and then get them ready to be moved to the Beirut National Museum,” Paul related to Jim, without explaining the true reason behind the excavation.

“The Stone we've just unearthed here, at the so-called 'Great Phoenician Temple', held an unfamiliar Phoenician inscription of some

sort,” Youmna stated, fixing Paul with those green eyes that colored her attractive face, her blond hair glowing under the sunrays. “It’s really confusing,” she added.

“It’s been almost completely hidden beneath three layers of sand and rocks,” Maya joined, with a most remarkable facial expression. Her long light-brown hair flowed round her silken face and down to her shoulders.

“Interesting to know that you both work at the Museum,” Jim stated keenly.

“Not exactly,” came Youmna’s rebuttal, as she took her red hard-hat off, pulled her hair back, and then put the hat back on. “We were only commissioned for this job by the Museum. We actually work at the AUB, the American University of Beirut.”

What Youmna said was enough to keep Jim unsuspecting about the exact nature of their work at the site. Moments later, while the artist busied himself taking photographs of just about everything, Paul approached Youmna, and gave her the envelope Padre Joseph had sent her.

“He said you might need it.”

Youmna opened the package with immense eagerness, and retrieved a book from it. “The Alchemy of the Letters,” she murmured, loudly enough for Maya and Paul to hear, as they drew nearer with apparent interest. *The Alchemy of the Letters*, she thought, before she came to realize the probable significance of such work.

The Author’s name was not written on the book cover, and that left her perplexed. Quickly, she opened it to the first page; the smell of the Ancient world seeped into the air. Slowly, she read, too low for Jim to catch any of it:

*This work is as ancient as the beginning of time.
It is believed to be the Book of Thor, the Geblite.
It has the knowledge of the Sacred Alphabet.
Each of the twenty-two letters has a physical denotation.
Each of the twenty-two letters has a spiritual meaning.
AA secret code has been hidden in Gebel.
The structure is Alchemical . . .*

“Oh my God! This is . . . How odd!” Youmna sputtered in disbelief and, with a passionate look at Paul, who looked back at her completely astonished, she added, “I was telling Maya almost the exact same thing I just read, when we unearthed the Stone with the strange Phoenician

inscription on it!”

“What do you mean?” Paul asked pryingly, with an inquisitive look on his face.

“Alchemy, Paul . . . Alchemy,” she clarified in excitement, and peeped back at Maya. “Other than the tangible yet baffling written words we found in the physical stone, what could be hidden in the Philosopher’s Stone?”

“The Philosopher’s Stone,” Paul whispered. It seemed that Youmna had awakened something dormant in his memory. What she had suggested rang a bell.

The Philosopher Stone, Maya thought within the depths of her mind, without saying anything.

It would be quite a bizarre thing to think of all this as just a simple coincidence, though they must have known all too well, that the sacred chants of Gebel, rumbling throughout the long-lasting ages, had brought them all together for something.

One could still hear them.

A letter with a powerful light
Tuesday, October 19, 01:49 PM

At the base camp, the second day, Youmna, extremely puzzled with the ancient book in her hand, decided to conceal it inside her backpack. She then paused for a moment at the thought of hiding it right now, and looked around to see if anybody was there. Reassured to find that she was alone, seconds later, and with extreme curiosity, evident in her eyes, she opened it, and turned a couple of introductory pages. Her vibrant green eyes caught sight of the first letter of the Phoenician Alphabet, *Aleph*, which rose up, whirled in a spiraling motion through the air, and halted for a moment of glorious light that inundated the tent. The light of the letter dazzled her eyes, and warmed her entire body. When she least expected it, it magnified, blinding her, and dispatching her into a journey through the past . . .

“At the beginning, there was the void and the void was like a big, black cloud stretching out in all directions towards *Infinity*. However, behind that void, there was something, which the physical senses of men and women could not discern. The intensity of its mysterious presence overpowered their minds through the Holy Spirit.

It must be the *Force*, hidden beyond the manifested void. It is the Creator, the Primordial Harmony, the Unbecoming, the Unborn, and the Unformed! It was the *Source*.

Then God, the Source, ordered: “Let there be light!”

The Shining Light proceeded from that Central Fire, and diffused through the immense darkness. This Intelligent, self-sustaining Spirit was unique. Without being divided or even manifested, it was eternal and unchangeable.

God, the Central Fire, the One, was indeed that “Unity Point”, which contained infinity. It was the Absolute Creator, and the *Father* that

circulated through the circumference of existence yet to come.

Father-Light . . . What power!"

When she got back to her senses some time later, she opened her eyes, to find herself on the floor; a soggy sensation pervaded the skin on her hands. It seemed as though the powerful light of the first letter had landed her on the floor with an incredible thrust, after sending her on a flight to the distant past. She could barely recognize her surroundings when two silhouettes appeared, crouching on the floor near her. She hazily remembered she had been alone before, but could not identify the people she was looking at now. It had felt just like it did when she stared at the powerful light of the Sun and, immediately after, at another object. A feeling of blindness took over, and it scared her for a moment, but then she rubbed her eyes, and opened them once again. She could see now, and her eyes came to rest on the forms of Maya and Paul in front of her.

"What was that?" Youmna exclaimed. "Did you see what I saw? Were you here from the beginning?" she inquired curiously. "I've never seen anything like it before."

"Don't know," Maya answered, her heart still beating in a frequency very new to her. "I saw something . . . many things . . . just can't remember what really happened. It was just . . . weird. There was a void . . . then a beautiful light . . . then . . ."

"Then . . . God, wasn't it?" Paul intervened with a smile. "That's precisely what I felt." He looked as if he was still enjoying the state of bliss he had just lived through. "Yes, we were here from the beginning. We followed you here, ever since you left the ditch." He paused for a moment, holding on to a strange thought inside his mind. "We felt attracted by the book."

A moment of silence ensued.

"Then I heard the gentle voice of God . . . and felt a kind of . . ." Maya slowly revealed in a serene voice, as if she was still in a trance. "A strange presence . . . a power I had never felt before," she halted for a second. "It was beautiful!" she confirmed in a mumble.

"What you guys described was exactly what I felt," Youmna finally said, assured now she was neither dreaming, nor hallucinating. "How could that have happened?"

"It wasn't a dream . . ." Paul rushed to answer. "We couldn't have had the same dream, all three of us. It's just impossible. There's only one explanation for it. It was a vision," he avowed with a tranquil certainty.

“A vision!” Youmna exclaimed.

“A vision . . .” Maya murmured.

In fact, the vision they had just experienced felt akin to those mystical dreams that hovered over the minds of holy men at the time of sleep. With the vision now gone, their consciousness touched base with the reality of their presence in this arcane place, known as Gebel’s Archaeological Site. It seemed unbelievable to have crossed through time and space, as if leaping into another frame of existence, to witness a sublime truth related to God—the Source of Light. It was not fiction, but Reality, processed by the Light that crossed the threshold of their eyes, to reach their spirits. It was the Light of the Sacred Alphabet.

Each of the twenty-two letters has a physical denotation. Each of the twenty-two letters has a spiritual meaning. Youmna remembered the mysterious words mentioned on the first page of the book.

“What do you know about the Phoenician Alphabet, Paul?” she inquired with enthusiasm as she came out of her reverie.

Paul glanced at her, pretty indeed, that Alchemist in front of him with her lovely face crowned by blond hair, flowing down her shoulders like a profuse waterfall, her green eyes probing, peaceful and warm. As a long-time researcher on the Phoenician Alphabet, Paul felt a keen energy inside him to generously expose his life’s interest in Ancient History & Religion to these remarkable girls, standing in wait for him.

“I think the early Phoenicians had developed both the Mesopotamian Cuneiform and the Egyptian Hieroglyphs into a more advanced system of writing, the Phonetic Alphabet,” he informed the girls with a note of pride for their Ancestors. “Mr. Saïid Akl, however, advanced that the Phoenicians had invented an entirely new Alphabet, based on audible perception. The other forms of writing relied only on the visual senses, based on images. The Greeks, according to Mr. Akl, adopted the Phoenician system for its practicality. Undeniably, this new method presented a more practical and easier way to write history.” He paused for a moment, looked around him, and added, “In fact, that was the main reason, which compelled Mr. Wil Durant, the American historian and thinker, to declare that the Alphabet was indeed the biggest gift ever offered by man to mankind.” He took a glimpse at them, weighing their level of interest, and the glint in their eyes encouraged him to proceed. “As we all know, Mr. Saïid Akl, an acclaimed Lebanese figure, is a contemporary poet and thinker, who followed the footsteps of our great ancestors. He invented a new writing method for the Lebanese language,

based on the Phoenician letter system. It differs from the Arabic system used in the region. In fact, it is a combination of both, an Arabic dialect and Latin letters.”

Maya nodded in agreement, to what he had just said. Of course, as an Archaeologist, she must have learned this at the University, while studying some History courses, since History and Archeology are identical twins. Youmna, in turn, did not issue a comment. She appeared confused and withdrawn, as if her concern lay somewhere else. Although she seemed to appreciate the topic of Paul’s conversation, the persistent brightness in her eyes, and the curiosity her face expressed said it all. Indeed, she wanted to know more . . . much more than that.

“How interesting to know that . . .” Youmna acknowledged with a smile, as she looked back at Paul. Her tactful response was aimed at sparing his feelings, since it seemed she had already been acquainted with the information he had provided. The crucial question she posed, confirmed this, “What are the odds of finding secret codes for the letters inscribed on the Stone?”

“I’m not quite sure, but the chances are quite slim, as you’ve previously pointed out; that bizarre Stone held some unfamiliar Phoenician writing,” Paul promptly replied to her ardent query with apparent excitement.

He then looked well all around him. Making sure no one was approaching the tent; he came closer and closer to the girls, and whispered into their ears. “Other than the mission entrusted to us by Padre Joseph, to find any direct clues related to the murder of the Architect, Hiram Melki,” he paused, looked into their curious eyes, found them trustworthy, and added, “I am actually here to also investigate an interesting theory I had read about a long time ago. It concerns the Phoenician Alphabet,” he revealed avidly. “Please keep this between us,” he ended.

“Oh sure . . . I see . . . and what is it about?” Youmna inquired.

“It’s deeply connected to what the book is saying,” he grinned, secretly amused by the eagerness he saw glowing in their beautiful eyes. “Let’s explore it, shall we?” His final declaration was in fact nothing but an invitation to start the search without delay.

“What shall we do with the book?” Youmna asked in anxiety.

“Hide it,” Paul rejoined automatically.

“Yes, Youmna, I totally agree with Paul . . . please hide it,” Maya declared in confirmation. “Thank God, Zago was not here to see what we

have seen, I mean, what the book has revealed.” She smiled widely and added, “If he laid hands on the book, he may think we’re into witchcraft.”

Youmna laughed to herself; at last, feeling somewhat relaxed from the burden Padre Joseph had put over her shoulders, by sending her the mysterious book.

“Who’s Zago?” Paul asked, interested.

“Well, Zago is my assistant,” the Archaeologist answered with a smile still on her face. “He is another story, truly. You might say he is a true believer of superstitions, due to his great fascination with the Occult. Anyway, you will find out who he is, when you meet him soon,” she said in a tone that amused Paul.

The discussion continued fervently for a while inside the tent. It became more focused now on the dazzling theory that had been laboring inside their minds, concerning the hidden knowledge within the Ancient Alphabet.

“Oh, by the way, Paul,” Maya seemed to have recalled something, as she searched his eyes, “I intended to ask you this before. Have you communicated any of this to your friend, Jim, the artist?”

“Not at all.”

*A Strange Stone with dazzling beauty
Wednesday, October 20, 10:27 AM*

Obviously, it was not by coincidence that they had met there, at the Archeological Site of Gebel, but rather, a crying voice of the Ancients, beckoning their subconscious. Paul had been reasoning with himself, *Is it by chance that people meet in life? Is it really by random decisions that we find ourselves in the company of others, who have the same urge for discovering the mysterious and the unknown?*

Moments later, Paul and Jim joined the girls working inside the pit. “Any ideas yet?” Paul broke into their thinking process, nosily asking Maya, who was carefully observing Youmna, totally engrossed in the Stone ahead of her, moving her fingers smoothly over the letters, in an attempt to decipher them.

“We have unearthed many objects and stones during our 16 days of work here, since October 4, but none as peculiar as this Stone. The writings on the objects and stones were easily read, but this one . . .” Youmna corroborated, and Maya nodded in agreement. “The inscription is really bizarre. The way the letters are lined up next to each other, beneath and above each other, in mixed up lines that look like a configuration of some kind do not make sense at all. I believe this could be . . . way older than the common form we know,” she explained in puzzlement. “I’m afraid my knowledge is limited, concerning that ancient form of writing,” she confessed.

“A configuration of that sort is relatively impossible in Phoenician inscriptions, I believe,” Paul said. “You might be totally right. That could be very old.”

Youmna nodded. Maya looked for a solution. Jim lingered expectantly.

“Maya, could you please brush away the surface of the inscriptions, and try to get rid of any residual substance that might still be adhered to

the central part of the Stone?” she asked encouragingly, as if trying to come up with a last recourse to solve the riddle, before she could ultimately give up. The Archaeologist complied at once with renewed energy, hoping this might reveal hidden lines within the inscriptions.

“Anything?” Paul inquired.

“Nothing,” replied Youmna. “But . . . wait . . . wait a second . . .” she scrutinized a bit longer, lifting an eyebrow. “This hazy configuration reminds me of something I think I know.”

“Really?” Maya exclaimed.

“Yeah, but I can’t remember what it is,” she pondered, as she brushed a strand of her golden hair behind her ear.

“May I ask exactly what you’re looking for?” Jim suddenly questioned, looking at the Alchemist, who looked at Maya in confusion.

“Nothing . . . nothing in particular,” Paul hastened to answer his friend, who all of a sudden sounded interested in the ancient Stone and its bizarre inscription. He felt compelled to keep him from knowing their exact mission. “It’s part of the habitual work Archaeologists come across on ancient sites,” he added.

“I see. May I then have a look?” Jim addressed Maya, who in turn looked at Paul. The Historian nodded in agreement.

“Very well, Jim. Go ahead,” Maya welcomed the artist inside the pit.

After looking at the inscription for a few minutes, the trained eyes of the artist seemed to have captured something within the inscription. He left the pit, opened his backpack, and retrieved a transparent piece of paper, used mainly for certain kinds of drawings.

Back inside the crater, a few moments later, Jim drew the inscription meticulously on the paper, in the exact position as it showed on the Stone. Outside the trench, Paul and Maya stood still, carefully observing what he was doing. Still inside the pit, Youmna moved closer in his direction. He stepped back after he finished the drawing, and looked at the Stone from about a meter away, to get an overall look at it. He seemed very surprised.

“What is it?” she asked.

Jim didn’t respond; he just kneeled over the Stone, and placed the transparent paper with his drawing precisely over the inscription. “Typical match!” he uttered in excitement, turned his head to Youmna, and looked at Maya and Paul, who waited in great anticipation. “You will be very surprised,” he revealed. “This inscription, my friends, depicts the exact pattern of one of the Constellations in the sky, the Constellation of

Taurus,” he conveyed.

“Constellation of Taurus!?” Maya inquired in confusion. Her eyes focused on the Stone, as she approached it little by little.

“The Constellation of Taurus,” Paul muttered under his breath.

“That’s what I thought I knew,” the Alchemist revealed energetically, as the ancient inscription began to surface in the shape of the Taurus’ Constellation clearer and clearer for all to see. “Quite amazing,” she sighed.

“May I ask where this could lead us to?” the Archaeologist inquired. “I mean, could you do the reading now, Youmna?”

Youmna did not find a quick answer. She was not sure she could do it. Although the secret of the configuration, which made the inscription look bizarre to Youmna and to the others, had been finally revealed, the inscription itself was still a mystery.

“Excuse me, Maya?” the artist interjected. “Before Youmna does the reading, I think it’s imperative to know what the Constellation of Taurus means.”

“And do you know the meaning of it?” she stared at him.

He nodded.

“Really?” Youmna exclaimed at Jim in clear excitement. Maya stood still and gawked at Paul, who did not comment. He knew Jim had a vast knowledge of the ancient world.

“Sure, I learned the celestial shapes years ago . . . eh . . .” Jim hesitated and blushed, then confided evenly with a smile, “Well, it was during my studies and research as an artist.”

“This is great!” Youmna expressed delightedly, “Tell us about it!”

“Phoenicians, as well as ancient Egyptians, considered this very Constellation of high religious significance,” Jim stated. “The Phoenicians thought it to be the place from where the Divine Messenger, Enoch-Taautus, came to them, and became a Metatron—the chosen one, who stood before God. The Egyptians, however, related the Constellation to their god Osiris,” he informed them, referring back to his historical studies and religious knowledge about these great Civilizations from the past.

“Exactly so,” added Paul in confirmation. “This is the celestial sign of Thot-Taautus, also known as Enoch or Thor, the inventor of the Alphabet. This Stone could really be much more than just a mere piece of rock with an inscription on it. We might be close to what we’re searching for, Youmna. I believe I now know how we should read the Inscriptions.”

“And how’s that?” Maya inquired at once.

“We can only interpret them according to Thor’s formula, and that is very ancient.”

“Do you know how?” Youmna asked Paul, surprised by his knowledge of Thor.

“I know someone in London who might: Dr. Jane Fraser. I met her accidentally in Geneva, while I was participating in the seminar. I can get in touch with her right away,” he conveyed eagerly, looking past them, half-closing his eyes, biting on his lower lip, as if trying to remember something. “I may have the notes with me, on my laptop. It’s in the Jeep . . . Wait for me,” he uttered, as he hurried through the ruins, and disappeared out of sight.

The girls smiled in anticipation, as Jim took some shots of the Stone, after asking them if it was all right to do so. Minutes later, Zago arrived at the ditch, and Maya introduced him to Jim, who greeted him with a smile.

“Anything new?” Zago asked excitedly.

“Yes. The Stone revealed an outline of the Constellation of Taurus. Paul and Jim believe the Constellation was deemed to be of high significance in both Phoenician and Egyptian Religious systems,” Maya informed her assistant, who gazed at Jim with a grin.

“It is the celestial sign of the Egyptian god Osiris and of Thot-Taautus, also known as Thor the Geblite, the inventor of the Alphabet,” Jim added. These words seemed to appeal to Zago.

“Very Interesting! And . . . who is Paul?” he asked amiably.

“The Historian I told you about,” Maya responded.

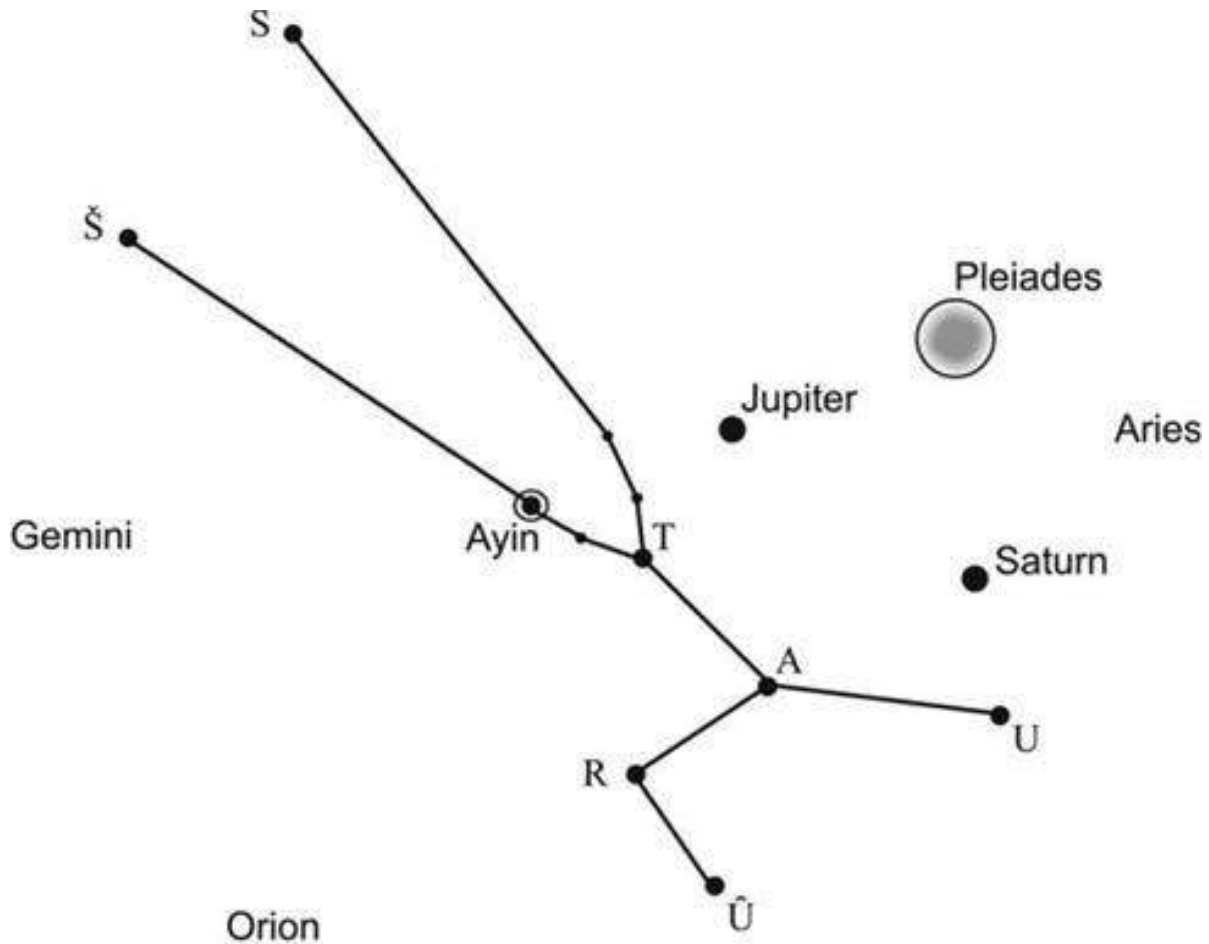
“You’ll meet him soon,” Youmna added in a different tone. “Ah, here he is,” she pointed at Paul, walking along a path, amidst the ruins. Moments later they were introduced to each other.

“I have heard so much about you, Zago,” Paul expressed, and the girls repressed their amusement. Of course, Paul would keep private what Maya had revealed about Zago. He probably wanted to get to know the man he had just met, in due time.

In turn, Zago gave no response; he just grinned at Paul, who had found a flat stone near the ditch to sit on, took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it quietly. After the first two drags, he turned on his laptop, and began searching for the information he wanted so badly . . . Thor’s formula.

Thor’s formula . . . they all thought about it.

“Here it is,” announced Paul, a few minutes later. “Come close so I can show you a picture of the Constellation of Taurus in a clear sky,” he added energized.



Thor's Constellation

Youmna was the first one to draw closer to Paul and his laptop; Maya and Jim followed her immediately. As for Zago, he stayed a bit a ways, shrugging off his shoulders, acting somewhat indifferent, yet his voice quavered when he asked, “Could you possibly think a modern picture of the sky could decipher an ancient inscription on a Stone?” His words, meant to explain his nonchalance, came out of his mouth with a nostalgic soreness for an unknown past.

Paul was just extinguishing his cigarette, when he heard Zago's comment. He glanced at the picture on his laptop, weighed the important

discovery of the Stone the girls had made—while excavating the ruins of the Great Phoenician Temple—and looked at Zago squarely in the eyes, despite the powerful sunrays blurring his vision.

“Yes Zago, it can,” he confirmed. “The picture of the Taurus’ Constellation has not changed through time. It has ever been the same, now and thousands of years ago. Let me show you.”

Zago didn’t comment, he simply came closer, to see what a picture of the sky could reveal.

“This is one of the 13 Constellations of the Zodiac,” Paul began. “It was the Ancients who invented Astrology, relating animal and human shapes to the stars glowing in the night sky. No one really knows when it happened. However, most researchers believe that it started somewhere in Phoenicia and/or Egypt, since both cultures shared a deep connection. Few others believe that it all began in Mesopotamia.”

“The Ancients considered Taurus as one of the many animals hunted by Orion, the Hunter—located to its left—for reasons only known to Phoenician and Egyptian priests!” Paul paused for a breath, probably still thinking about that mystery, and then continued, “Now, if we look at the celestial map, we find that Taurus, the Heavenly White Bull, is situated between Gemini, on the left, and Aries, to its right, topped by the Pleiades.”

“Alpha, Aleph, is the first letter in the Phoenician language. It meant both Ox or Bull, and a letter or a sign describing God!” he gave a quick but evocative look at Maya and Youmna, as if trying to revive in their memory the vision they had experienced at the base camp, from the mysterious book sent by the Padre, *The Alchemy of the Letters* . . .

Sitting all alone, in the silent part of the base camp, Youmna had earlier opened the book on the page describing the secret meaning of the second letter, *Bet(h)*.

“Be it!” God ordered solemnly. “Let me be . . . physical.” The godly voice resonated up in the Heavenly Kingdom. Instantly, numinous sounds and divine harmony beckoned the Cosmic Energy and Cosmic Matter out of chaos and void.

Creation . . .

Creation of the indivisible essence and of the divisible substance resulted from the union of the will of the Eternal Energy and the faith of the Eternal Matter. The odyssey of physical life began, following an order of broken Divine origin! The One manifested, and became two. Far

distant galaxies and stars beamed, one after the other, in the dark-blue sky . . .

And yet, God held time captive in His hands.

A holy moonlit night turned into day, when the Sun appeared from the bosom of the Light—the Most High. The Sun became the Son of God. It stood as the Master in the center of its own system, radiating energy in all directions, towards and throughout the circumference. In that circle, *the planets*—disciples of the Sun—followed an order of strict consistency. They breathed in its heat, and looped around it in an act of worship.

Earth moved quickly . . . It rotated around itself and around the center: the Sun. Billions of years passed to transform it, evolve it, bit by bit. Volcanoes erupted, floods took place, and a change in temperature cooled its atmosphere. Earth lost its virginity, and was ready to deliver. The birthing labor ceased in due time. Organic life would appear anytime now, somewhere within its womb.

The brush of a Great Artist painted the Horizon with orange-red color. Uncanny grayish-blue clouds hovered above the sea. Yet, the Sun had already seeped through, and drawn its own reflection in golden lines upon the surface of the water. Through the mist, those luminous lines appeared like treaded paths, at a time when life beat in the abyss of the ocean, to evolve in silence, in cold and darkness. Life took its first steps on those paths towards the land, where trees and vegetation welcomed the children of the water with open arms. They lived and multiplied, and later in time, some of them soared into the air.

Born into blind matter, governed by the planet Saturn, *Man* appeared, embodying the pure Spirit that emanated straight from God. The curtain dropped, and the many different masks Human Beings wore on their faces concealed their true divine nature from their own sight. Even their inner eye was utterly concealed! It is very true; the meeting between spirit and matter impeded the awakening of Humans, from the realm of a deep unconscious sleep! *We . . .* have already entered the Circle of Necessity, the Wheel of Life, where the surrender to the twofold deities of this world took place.

Night and Day, Darkness and Light, Blindness and Awareness, they became the two apparent manifestations of paradoxical aspects, which enfolded the existence of the creatures of the Earth. They breathed in Life and breathed out Death.”

Then, the sound of sea gulls that glided through the air created a

musical harmony in her mind and spirit, awakening her to the present.

Decoding Thor's Formula
Wednesday, October 20, 11:47 AM

Their vivid and young memory seemed to have rejuvenated their inner perception of God, the way Paul meant it to with his explanation of Alpha, the first letter. Maya and Youmna suddenly came to realize the meaning behind what was written on the first page of that book. A work, ancient as the beginning of time, believed to be the Book of Thor, the Geblite, had the knowledge of the Sacred Alphabet, each of the twenty-two letters had a physical denotation and a spiritual meaning, a belief that a secret code has been hidden in Gebel, and that its structure was Alchemical . . .

“Although Alpha, the first letter in the Phoenician alphabet, meant Bull or Taurus in Astrology—a science fashioned by the Ancients—it was, nevertheless, the second sign of the Zodiac, directly related to the fixed earth element,” Paul elucidated, but before he could continue, Maya, who sounded deeply interested in the topic, interrupted him.

“What is the first sign then?” she asked, unable to conceal her curiosity.

“Aries,” came his immediate response. “Aries is the Ram and considered as having a pioneering spirit, a leader in the space chart, always eager to rise to a challenge, initiating original tactics to defend Taurus from the hunt of Orion, lingering on the left side. In order to do that, Aries, associated with the cardinal fire element, had to cross through Saturn—the planet of evil—then Jupiter—the planet of Knowledge—both located on its path, from right to left, hence, finally reaching the central point of Taurus, ‘T’, where it had to make fortifications against the Hunter,” he halted, and lit another cigarette.

A moment of reflection ensued.

“So!?” Youmna suddenly broke the silence. Her eyes focused on Paul. “I don’t frankly understand how this can help us in deciphering the inscription?”

“According to Dr. Fraser, Thor’s formula should work, by following the system I’m about to explain. The inscription should be read in five lines. The first line is read from the central point ‘T’, down to the second point ‘A’, continuing to the third point ‘U’. The second line starts from ‘A’ to ‘R’. The third line reads from ‘R’ to ‘Ū’. Then, the fourth line starts from ‘T’ to ‘S’, forming the right horn of Taurus. Finally, the fifth line is read from ‘T’ to ‘Ayin’, the open eye of Taurus, and then all the way up to ‘Š’, which is the top point of the left horn,” he said in conclusion, and looked at his friends, with great expectations of unraveling the riddle of the Stone.

No one commented. They were probably thinking about it, and it showed on their faces. Zago moved away, and stood alone in silence, observing the ruins all around them. His mind was somewhere else. Without a word, he moved around the pit, sat on a small ancient stonewall on the opposite side, and looked at them, curiously moving down the pit. Perhaps this stonewall had originally been built as a separating wall between the rooms of the Great Phoenician Temple. With every step towards and around the mysterious Stone more ideas had been exchanged, and a bond had been built between them.

“How could she possibly know that? I mean, Dr. Fraser?” Maya inquired.

“Dr. Jane Fraser is a British Symbolist and Philologist. She informed me that she learned about the symbol of Thor from her grandfather, who, in turn, learned it from his grandfather, going back generation after generation to their ancestors, the Druids.”

“The Druids who built the beautiful Stonehenge?” questioned Youmna.

“Yes,” Paul answered, smiling. “When she knew I was from Lebanon, the land of Thor, she was pleased. When I told her about the thesis I was about to give on the myth of the Temple of Solomon, she rejoiced at hearing it.” He paused, remembering her happy face.

“‘My gift to you, Mr. Khoury,’ Dr. Fraser said, ‘is a very special piece of knowledge to me and my ancestors. I’m positive you will be delighted with it, and maybe use it one day.’ And when I asked her what that would be, she replied with an incredible smile on her face, ‘It is Thor’s Formula.’”

“When I asked her why she chose to give me that gift, she passionately replied, ‘I’m giving you back what your ancestors have given mine.’ So I asked her what she meant by that, and she simply referred me to a book

called, *The Phoenician Origin of Britons, Scots, and Anglo-Saxons*, by L.A. Waddell. ‘Read it,’ she said to me, ‘You may find it interesting.’ ”

Minutes later, engrossed in her task, kneeling on the ground, Youmna, at Paul’s insistent request and Maya’s encouragement, began to copy the Phoenician inscription found on the Stone, letter by letter and line by line, on a new page of her red notebook. At her side, Jim, with his artistic eye, eagerly observed the letters that delicately took shape under her enthusiastic endeavors.

She tilted backwards, sat straight on a flat stone nearby, turned on her laptop, opened a text file, and started meticulously typing the letters in the order she had copied them, using a certain program for Phoenician characters. The team of four lingered at her side, carefully observing the operation, as she proceeded with the notes on Thor’s Alphabet formula that Paul had explained, initiating a deciphering process of the Phoenician Code.

“Oh My God!” the Alchemist exclaimed with an astounded expression on her face, her green eyes glimmered, as she looked at them, one by one, before she continued, “I’ve done the translation three times, to thwart any risk of error, and always received the same result. Here’s what the inscription says:

*I am Thor the Geblite, Inventor of the Sacred Alphabet
This is the Bet(h) of God, El-Elyon
The Seven-Pillared Temple
It was built with the arms of the Kabbirim to the Sun
See its sketch here on the right. . . .*

She suddenly stopped the reading at the ‘Ayin’ point, before she resumed in an intermittent tone, “and behold . . . hidden . . .” she stopped again.

“Behold what?” Maya inquired automatically.

“I don’t know. There are missing words here.”

“Hidden? Where . . .?” Paul asked excitedly.

“It doesn’t say. The text ends right there,” she rejoined in excitement, and her mind began to seek a logical explanation for the missing words in the ancient text. “Perhaps the missing words and the lost letters of the inscription had been erased by time, or . . .” she searched through her mind for another probable reason, “caused by waves of natural erosion like sand friction, winter, rain, temperature, humidity . . . I just don’t know,” she anticipated.

“What sketch?” Jim inquired in a probing cadence only a vigilant painter, like himself, would exhibit.

Upon hearing what Jim had asked, and realizing the magnitude of his meaning, they instantly leaned down towards the strange Stone in search of a sketch: underneath, above, or near the words of Thor. Alas, the whereabouts of the sketch had not been determined in the inscription. Quickly though, Maya picked up her hand brush and began sweeping the area beneath the configuration. Nothing. Above the Constellation? Nothing emerged. On the two sides? Still nothing.

“Well, perhaps the sketch has been eroded like the missing letters of the text, as Youmna suggested,” the artist hypothesized.

Youmna nodded, “It could be.”

“You will find nothing here,” Zago suddenly spoke, as he shot to his feet like an arrow. He ambled between the ruins, back and forth, before approaching them. “Look around you, there is nothing here. No mysteries. Everything is gone . . . erased by time.”

“What do you mean by that, Zago?” Maya asked nosily, surprised by his unexpected input.

“The only place where you can find Mysteries is in Egypt—the Pyramids. So stop wasting your time here,” he added ironically.

“I don’t quite understand this weird behavior. This negative attitude is new to you, Zago. You’ve never acted like this before. What is it with you?” Maya addressed her assistant, who didn’t answer. He just looked away. “Although I always accepted the notion that Egypt would stand as the land of mysteries *par excellence*, I never did for a moment eliminate the theory or neglect the fact that Phoenician Temples also held great mysteries, akin to Egyptian Pyramids,” she paused for a second.

“Besides, Zago, you know all too well that Phoenicians had a long and rich history of religious, social and cultural achievements. You’ve seen a lot of great things while assisting me. I will need some explanation from you later on,” she concluded in a firm tone, and turned towards the Stone.

Zago’s negative attitude might have been derived from the fact that he had never heard of Thor’s secret formula, which led to deciphering the inscription, something he might have found hard to accept, since he always considered himself as the only person assisting the Archaeologist. The team of two had now become a team of five, including him, and yet, the fact that he had not been the person who had come up with this idea, or helped in the decoding might be responsible for provoking his ego into

playing tricks on his mind.

Undeniably, the many years of assistance he spent with Maya during her research, had led him to the conclusion that Phoenician History was ancient as time itself. He looked around him, and saw the eyes of Youmna, Paul, and Jim focused on him with resolution. He felt them, blaming him for his last statement, as if asking him to be more respectful and considerate towards the commitment of the team to the great history of Lebanon, and to be more willing to show appreciation of the discovery they had all made here.

“You should at least give us the benefit of the doubt that what we have discovered here could well be something of great importance,” Paul suddenly interfered. “This is a matter of national interest. Your help is needed much more than your criticism at this point,” he added.

Zago felt what Paul had just said hit a nerve in him, while the three others down the trench looked at him in a manner that showed he was plainly in disgrace. This would certainly alienate him from the convivial atmosphere that was building up between them. Something he could not tolerate for long.

“How can I help?” he then said, approaching them with his head down. He might have felt ashamed.

“Well . . . you can start by appreciating our endeavors,” Youmna addressed him in a clear-cut voice.

“I do . . . I do . . . please don’t get me wrong. It’s not that I don’t respect the work you all have done here; it’s just that I am extremely angry at the fact that there is nothing left of our great Temples . . . only ruins of stones, and it hurts me a great deal.”

“I understand your anger, Zago, I really do, but I will never comprehend your negativity,” Maya stated with a fixed look on him.

Zago did not answer.

“You know very well that all the pieces of information we have collected throughout the years, regarding our great Civilization, have come to us, either through the direct writings of others and those of our ancient writers, or . . .” she looked him squarely in the eyes. He looked at her. “Or, through Archaeological excavations done here and almost anywhere that Phoenicians existed. I think you have witnessed before what a stone can tell us . . . and this special Stone has already told us so much and will tell us still more,” she said.

“Exactly so,” added Youmna in assent, “and for that reason, Maya and I are not backing off, and neither are Paul and Jim, I suppose. Now, I

truly have some work to do on that Stone, and I don't have time to waste on dull arguments.”

They left him with nothing left to say. He just crossed his arms on his chest and gave them a reluctant smile.

“Aha!” Paul exclaimed. “And what is the nature of the work you're willing to do on the Stone, Youmna?” he asked fervently.

“I will explain to you how I'm going to proceed in a while, but first, we have to move the Stone inside our base camp . . .” she replied, and pointed south.

“This is great, let's get to work then,” Maya declared enthusiastically.

To their surprise, Zago entered the pit, pushed them all away, and with all the might of his powerfully built body he lifted the Stone all by himself and placed it on a special rolling plank. He then rolled it towards the base camp. He followed the girls like a guardian angel, followed by Paul and Jim. A few meters ahead, they reached the base camp: two medium-sized tents set up in the shape of a square. Jim and Paul saw that the base camp had a similar blue rope outlining it like the dig site had except that this one has been affixed to six wooden posts—four on the angles and two in the middle of the eastern side of the square. They then perceived the no-trespassing writing on the signposts, when he, Paul, scrutinized the area all around him. *The perimeter is secured . . .* he thought to himself, as he remembered the words of the Padre, warning him about how serious and dangerous the Babylonian Brotherhood could be. ‘I urge you to keep a low profile, while working on the site with the two ladies . . .’ the words echoed in his mind.

The Seven-Pillared Temple
Wednesday, October 20, 12:49 PM

Time ran quickly, yet it rushed backwards, with the echoes of the past resounding through the nearby monuments and Temples, or perhaps, what had been left of them. The shapes and colors of the stones added a sense of magic to their eyes and one of belonging to their hearts.

The sense of serenity that showed on their faces gave the impression that they felt their spirits had rejoined the spirits of those who had dwelt around this place, way before them. And the ground on which they sauntered had marked in its memory: the footprints of merchants, priests, kings, engineers, tourists, and many others. Today, the land registered theirs, the way it would register the footprints of others coming after them.

Indeed, time runs and everything changes.

Moments later, the team walked in through the two main wooden posts on the eastern side—forming the entrance gate to the base camp—after Maya detached the thick blue rope from one of the posts, and fixed it back once they got in. Immediately, Youmna guided them inside one of the tents, and asked Zago to carefully place the Stone on the table in the midst of the tent. She looked very excited about it. So were all the others.

“Thank you, Zago,” she said kindly. He smiled at her.

“What now?” Jim asked, impatient.

She looked at her watch, before she explained, “Well, Maya will start a proper cleanup of the Stone with water, to wash off any lingering debris, while I will prepare a very purified chemical substance to be used on it, after she finishes. This substance, I hope . . .” she halted, thinking, and then continued, “. . . should reveal the missing words and the lost letters of the inscription, as well as the sketch, in case it’s there . . . or anywhere!” she smiled.

“Oh, excuse me, Youmna, but what do you mean exactly, by saying ‘in

case the sketch is there’?” Paul inquired. His eyes fully focused on hers. “If I may ask, are you in some way implying that I may have been wrong in the use of Thor’s formula for the decoding?” he sounded annoyed at the way she had proposed her idea.

“No, Paul, not at all. I’m just . . .” Youmna began offering an explanation with patent sincerity in her soothing tone.

“I could still email Dr. Jane Fraser the text, to confirm the readings,” he continued, cutting off her attempt to justify her own words, in case she had really meant anything by it.

“Well, that would be our last option, in case we don’t find the old lost sketch, but we honestly trust in your vast knowledge,” Maya interceded politely. “I’m truly sorry for this misunderstanding, but I’m quite sure Youmna didn’t mean to doubt your competence,” she added with a grin.

Youmna followed suit.

Paul nodded and, without adding more to the situation, he smiled back.

“May I ask what purified chemical substance you were referring to, Youmna?” Jim inquired eagerly after a moment. Of course, the artist in him, who enjoyed mixing colors together repeatedly, always searching for the best substance for painting, felt extremely curious to find out the Alchemist’s secret formula.

“Aha . . . It’s called *Mercurius Spiritus*,” she revealed.

“*Mercurius Spiritus!*” Paul exclaimed.

“Yes, the Spirit of Mercury,” she clarified. “You may find this interesting, Paul. Mercury is a very ancient alchemical substance, known to the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Indians, Tibetans and Chinese. It was found in Egyptian tombs that date back to, perhaps, 1500 BC.” She halted for a passing thought, then resumed, “*Rasavātam* is the Indian name for Alchemy, and it means: the ‘Way of Mercury’. It is called *Hydrargyrum*, a Latinized word from the Greek name *Hydrargyros*, which means: the watery or runny silver, since it is the only metal that has a liquid form like water, and a shiny color like silver.” She paused for a breath, and added, “However, Alchemists don’t share their secret ‘Philosopher’s Stone’ formulas with anyone, Jim. Or, do they?” she ended with a strange brightness in her eyes, and the curt answer she gave betrayed his concealed bitterness.

“No, they don’t,” he replied, after managing a grin. She smiled back.

“Excuse me, Youmna,” said Zago, finally interested enough to share his thoughts with the team. “Might this secret chemical substance you’re

talking about cause any sort of damage on the inscription currently on the Stone?”

“On the contrary, Zago,” she assured him, her eyes on everyone present. “It will enhance it even more, and could well reveal the missing words of the inscription . . . You may note that I’m not using Mercury, but its spiritual form, and that is one of the secrets of Alchemy.”

Although astonished by her answer, Zago nodded with a sense of great relief. In fact, they all seemed puzzled yet satisfied with the work to be done on the Stone.

“Great!” she uttered. “Let’s get to work then!” she ended with much anticipation.

Therefore, when there were no questions left, Youmna initiated her work on a small table located at the left-side corner of the tent. While busy preparing her secret formula, Maya was working on her task—a careful cleaning of the Stone.

“How much time does it take?” Zago interrogated, keenly assisting Maya with the clean-up.

“What? The clean-up, you mean?” Maya asked.

“No, not that. I meant the effect of the Spirit of Mercury . . . that magical formula, the strange potion Youmna intends to use on the Stone?” he explained. In fact, Zago loved this sort of stuff. The word Magic played a certain charm in his unconscious mind.

“Well it depends,” Youmna spoke, without looking back at them. “It really depends on many different things, but it usually takes two to three hours, sometimes more, from the time I put the substance on the Stone. You see?”

“Yes,” he answered, and did.

Silence reigned inside the tent . . .

“Are you finished, Maya, or not yet?” she checked, as she approached them a few minutes later.

“Yup, just about, dear!” Leaning over the table in the middle of the tent, Maya had just finished her job properly. She moved out to wash her hands, and invited the rest of the team for a quick tour around the Archaeological site. She definitely wanted to leave Youmna alone with her secret.

“We’ll be back in half an hour, for lunch,” she said, loud enough for Youmna to hear.

“Okay,” her reply was heard outside.

The base camp was not far from the Archaeological shrine, known to

most as the 'Well of the King', a spring from Neolithic times, and the only source of water for Byblos. Ahead of them, another Temple stood completely in ruins. They passed by it, as they read the sign that introduced it as the 'Temple of Baalat Gebel', the Lady of Gebel, which Phoenician artificers built, sometime around the year 2800 BC.

"The Lady of Gebel had been Astarte herself," Paul said. "She surely represents the ancient prototype of the Virgin Lady of Christianity, with all her divine characteristics as intercessor and protector," he explained.

The walk amidst the ruins of the Temple continued through the Roman Colonnades almost attached to it. Very few pillars were still standing from the Roman period. Maya explained that these were the only remnants of a huge Roman construction, composed of Temples and civic buildings that were erected on this very spot.

They proceeded west towards the Phoenician Royal tombs, dating back more than two thousand years BC. Sarcophagi made of white limestone were excavated from the ground, to be placed near the original site, where they had been found. The site contained nine Royal tombs, but only eight had been found there. The most important Sarcophagus of all was that of King Ahiiram, one of the greatest Kings of Gebel. The Sarcophagus' additional historical value was that it held significant Phoenician inscriptions. It had been guardedly moved to the Beirut National Museum, and is still one of its masterpieces even today.

"The Sarcophagus of King Ahiiram!" Paul muttered just loud enough for Maya to hear. He looked at her discreetly. She didn't look back. Yet, they both remembered the words of the Padre, concerning the great riddle, his friend, the Architect, Hiram Melki had been working on, before he died. *Was Hiram working on the Great Phoenician Temple, as well?* he wondered.

Jim was taking photographs on the walk from the base camp.

A few meters ahead, to the south, they came to the Roman Theatre of Gebel, a splendid amphitheater overlooking the Mediterranean Sea to the west.

"It was probably built at the beginning of the 3rd century AD," Maya informed them. "The Romans, like the Greeks before them, were fascinated with the magnificent art of developing plays out of ordinary social and political life. They presented their richly mixed lives in a series of dramatic and tragic scenes," she explained.

Indeed, what a charming effect actors and actresses might have had in the minds of the audience of that time, as they performed on that lofty

stage with a beautiful view of the sea, set as background. One could only imagine them acting at sunset, as the horizon intermingled with grey clouds behind them, or perhaps at night with the moon and stars, accompanied by the sound of waves on the shore, as an audio-visual background.

They lingered there for a while.

The watch in Paul's hand marked 01:50 PM. *Time to go back to the base camp for lunch*, he thought. Once back, a few minutes later, Youmna was already sitting on a bamboo chair outside the tent, enjoying the mild October weather reigning all over the Lebanese coastal cities. She had finished more than an hour ago from placing her secret alchemical formula on the Stone, and waiting now for the unknown to be revealed.

The team of 5 assembled around the tent for a light meal, composed of salad and sandwiches. This gathering, however, created a new sense of intimacy between them and it was a bit strange, since they had not known each other for a long time. Afterwards, Jim took some great pictures, as a way of keeping a record of such good memories.

What are we without memories, anyway? Jim thought.

Time had passed by quickly. When Youmna glanced at her watch, it marked 02:40 PM. She stood up quickly and entered the tent to monitor the progressive effect of her secret substance over the Stone. Minutes later, she called them in, filled with anticipation. They hastened inside to find her standing by the table, wearing a strange kind of eyeglasses, and projecting an ultraviolet light all over the object.

"Positive!" she screamed. "Come closer, and have a look." Her voice sounded victorious.

Paul was the first one to step in beside her. Indeed, the sketch of the Temple had surfaced, once again, after thousands of years, to the right side of the Taurus Constellation. He was looking at it through the special spectacles that Youmna provided. Paul just couldn't believe what his eyes saw.

"The Temple the Sacred Builders built, here in Gebel, was divided into three parts, as the sketch shows," he conveyed, exhilarated. "The entrance walk from the outer court circular water basin, supported by 12 Taurus statues, towards the stairs and up, between *The Pillars* that lead to the anteroom, constituted part one. The second part contained the main hall, called *The Saint*. Finally, the last part held the ritual room, known as *The Saint of Saints*."

“This is just incredible!” Maya exclaimed with delight. Jim and Zago stood speechless, in view of the amazing description they had just heard.

“The Temple had Seven Pillars, and that was the reason why it was called the Seven-Pillared Temple,” Youmna exclaimed conclusively.

“Exactly,” Paul resumed. “There were two, standing majestically outside, flanking the entrance door, which led to the anteroom. Another two, smaller in size than the initial ones, stood at each side of a small altar, where incense was burned and that was in the main hall, just before the inner stairs, leading up to the door of the third section. And there, my friends, inside the Saint of Saints, another two, smaller than the previous ones, stood at either side of what looked like a Great Altar. It is clearly visible in this sketch. The seventh pillar appears to be standing just behind the Great Altar, and it looks like a statue of the God *Al*. Amazing!” he stated.

The team fell into silence, which they obviously needed to assimilate the astonishing revelation that had been kept concealed underneath the ground for centuries, here in Gebel . . . here, on a single Stone found within the ruins of the Great Phoenician Temple.

Could the Temple, so neatly depicted in the sketch, be the Temple they were excavating? Only time would tell.

“A Great Temple, the Pillars, the Saint, the Saint of Saints!” Youmna muttered loudly enough for all of them to hear. “I mean, the whole setting is similar to that of the Old Testament and the story of the Temple of Solomon,” she thought aloud again. “Could that sketch be the original portrayal of the famous Temple, built by Hiram Abiff?” she asked.

“Well, that could just be a miracle!” Jim interceded, inspired. “This sketch fits exactly with the description of the Old Testament! You’re absolutely right, Youmna.”

Zago didn’t comment on hearing that. His mind was in confusion.

Maya remained silent, thinking, yet still resolute, to undergo the mission the Padre had entrusted her with—along with Paul and Youmna—hidden from both Jim and Zago. Although Zago had been assisting Maya for many years, a man she trusted since college, she could not convey to him the reason why she was there, finding proof of the murder of the Architect, Hiram Melki.

“This Temple must have been so great,” uttered Youmna, all of a sudden, looking once more at the Temple sketch imprinted on the Stone. “Who was the real Hiram Abiff?” she inquired. “He must have been a genius.”

“He was a genius!” Paul rejoined, too low for anyone else to hear him. However, within the considerable thoughts that cropped up, one, or rather, a stream of them seemed to have haunted him. It was showing on his face. A weird idea had sneaked into his brain. Paul focused harder, trying to recall the sketch in his memory.

Could it be?! he thought.

Like King Solomon, the wise man of the Hebrews—claimed in the Old Testament to have admired the great work of the Phoenician Architect, done on the Temple of Yahweh—Paul was at that very moment, admiring the beauty of the Temple depicted on the Stone.

Then, a scene from the past transpired in his mind:

After crossing the two pillars, guarding the door of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Hebrew priest would enter the second room, the Holy Place, to burn the incense. And, as a matter of protection, only the High Priest would be allowed in the third chamber, the Holy of Holies, to pay homage to the God, dwelling outside and inside the altar.

It was not, though, an ordinary altar, said the Old Testament, but one that held the Ark of the Covenant.

It contained the promise that the Hebrew God vowed to the first spiritual leader of the Hebrew people, Moses, a promise that guaranteed a full commitment on God’s part, to live with his people, his chosen people, despite all difficulties.

The other part of this covenant, or present-day agreement, so to speak, demanded full responsibility from the Jewish people, to accept him, YHWH, as their God—the only true God of all the gods—to worship him without doubt, and abide by his commands.

Yet, any breach would cause them death and great abandonment!

“A breach to an agreement with God?!” Paul murmured, and wondered about that.

“So . . . who was the real Hiram Abiff, Paul?” Youmna asked with insistency, bringing him back to the present.

“Oh . . . well, with the few Phoenician historical documents at hand,” Paul rejoined, in introspection, “we can, in some way, confirm the information conveyed to us by one of the great ancient Phoenician historians, known as Sanchoniaton. He has related the existence of a great Temple in the city of Sur. A Temple known as the Temple of Baal-Melkart, built by the Architect Hiram Abiff, at the time of King Hiram of

Tyre, who was a great King, sometime between the years 971 and 939 BC.”

“Aha, I see . . .” Youmna said. “So, what’s the relation with King Solomon then?” she asked in all seriousness.

“None!” the Historian answered at once, before he added, “The great Greek Historian, Herodotus—known as the ‘Father of History’, who lived between 485 and 425 or 414 BC—affirmed having seen the whole Temple of Baal-Melkart, at Sur. Even Alexander the Great, who deemed himself the son of the incarnated God Heracles (Hercules), also known as Melkart, had desired to visit it.”

“In fact, history faithfully presented the Temple in Sur, but not at all the Temple of Solomon—mentioned only in the Old Testament. I have often asked myself if the Temple of Solomon could be nothing more than an exact replica of the Temple of Baal-Melkart, and always answered myself: It is.” He looked at Youmna. She was a bit bewildered. “Yet, the Old Testament and the records of one of the most enigmatic secret societies in the world, Freemasonry, have both related a mythical connection to Hiram, the Architect, and Solomon, the King,” he concluded.

“I’m all ears!” Youmna uttered smiling radiantly, inviting Paul to narrate that story.

He took a deep, long breath before he said, “Let’s go for a walk . . .”

*The Architect, Hiram Abiff
Almost three thousand years ago*

Frankly though, nothing other than remembering narrations, from what he deemed as books of poetry and myth, encumbered Paul in drab this Wednesday afternoon. Yet letters, alchemically organized together, constantly shuffled through his mind: King Ahiram, King Hiram, Hiram Abiff, Phoenician artisans, King Solomon, Old Testament, Freemasonry.

For a few meters they strolled peacefully to the south, guided their eyes to the charming Roman amphitheater of Gebel, looking over the Mediterranean Sea, reposing silently to the west. He then remembered well the story he wanted to narrate.

According to the Old Testament, the Temple of Solomon was built due to a brotherly request, made by King Solomon to Hiram, King of Tyre. Since the Hebrew people were only nomads, and used to worship their national god, YHWH inside a movable tent, the idea of a Temple to house their god fascinated them a great deal.

The Old Testament narrates how the Tyrian King appointed one of the best Architects in the court, Hiram Abiff, to do the job that was accomplished many years later.

Yet, some later documents revealed that Hiram Abiff, the Architect, had requested the assistance of skillful Phoenician artisans and scientists from the city of Gebel, to help him in the construction of the Temple of Solomon.

In Freemasonry, the most reputed theory—concerning the Initiation of this secret organization—mentions major Masonic ties, originating with the construction of the Temple of Solomon. Therefore, the key elements in this theory are King Hiram of Tyre, King Solomon of Jerusalem, and Hiram Abiff, the Architect. The story narrates that Hiram

Abiff had coordinated the artisans of the Temple into three degrees. Each level had assumed particular duties and missions in the construction of that great edifice. Each degree had retained its own secrets.

The third degree—the highest, the Master degree—refers to Hiram Abiff, the Master Architect of the Temple. Strangely though, and contrary to the Old Testament story, freemasonic historians have declared that before completing the building of the Temple, three brothers of the society had killed Hiram inside the Temple, because of his previous refusal to entrust them with the secrets of Mastership.

The story in Paul's mind continued to restructure itself before uttering it into the ears of Youmna.

His body disappeared, lost like the word of the Master . . . King Solomon sent nine brothers on a mission to search inside the Temple and throughout the entire surrounding area. After many days and nights of exhausting exploration, the brothers found the body of Hiram, buried in the ground. Miraculously, a tree of acacia had blossomed from that soil, and enveloped his decaying body.

The brothers immediately reported to Solomon the sad news. Solomon grieved the loss of his friend and brother. There was no Master to reside over the Temple! he realized. True enough, for the Temple was not yet completed, and hence, needed not only a Master Architect, but a religious Master, as well! he figured. In silence and total secrecy, Solomon declared himself the new Master of the Temple!

“The death of Hiram Abiff . . . the death of the Architect, Hiram Melki . . .” Youmna muttered to herself.

The story also mentioned, with little consideration to its importance, the legend of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. Apparently, the royal couple produced a son to whom Solomon gave the Ark of the Covenant to protect!

Paul's memory didn't betray him at all. It seemed to have recollected even more additional fascinating parts of the story.

Sheba was most probably a place located in Yemen. Balkhis, the Queen, came to visit the King of Jerusalem at the time the Temple was almost completed. Solomon fell in love with her, and assumed she would love him in return, for he was the King of a big nation. 'It would be a perfect match between Royalties,' Solomon reasoned in his legendary

wisdom.

Solomon, the wise, was not only charmed by her Arabic, Yemeni beauty, but by her rich monarchy, as well, that promised an increase of power for him, and wealth for his kingdom. 'A perfect alliance between two kingdoms,' he concluded. Balkhis, on the other hand, mesmerized by the power that emanated from the Temple, fell in love with it. She requested to meet the man who had designed and built it, wishing for a similar one back in Yemen. Hiram Abiff, that enigmatic person, mentioned in the Old Testament, had the honor of meeting the Queen in the palace of the King. The moment she laid eyes on him, a strange rush of energy quaked her being, and she could not resist falling in love with him. She was not at all interested in Solomon, neither in his kingdom, nor in his alleged wisdom. Everything she dreamt of and searched for in a man—wisdom and power—she finally found in Hiram. He was elegantly standing in front of her, holding the Tau in his hand.

Solomon realized that his plan to expand his kingdom, and enrich it with gold and jewels, through his coalition with the Queen of Sheba, might not see the light of day. He was stunned! There must be something he could do to change that, the King pondered in the stillness of the night. As days passed by, Solomon, the wise, conceived every trick he possibly could, to change the heart and mind of Balkhis. However, the Queen had already surrendered her mind and heart to the energetic aura of the Master Architect. They convened, almost every day, around the palace, and in the Temple. Solomon, infuriated at seeing his dream fading away, refused to accept such insult and deception any longer. He was the King, after all, the great King of a big nation! His majestic eyes flickered dangerously in anger.

Heeding the royal rage, Balkhis and Hiram started to meet in secret, for they both knew the King was readily determined to destroy the strong bond that tied them together. In fact, the King began to pressure the Architect and treat the Queen with disrespect. Both, Balkhis and Hiram, realized that their secret relationship could not continue, as long as they stayed in Jerusalem. They decided to leave the city and set up a plan, accordingly. Balkhis, who no longer held the King in high esteem, asked her court to prepare their secret departure. After having built one of the most beautiful Temples to house God and the Ark of the Covenant for the King, Hiram ended despising Solomon.

At night, the Architect made his final visit to the Temple, through the west gate, to admire one of his loftiest creations for the last time.

Moments later, as he stepped out from the south gate, Hiram—also known as Adoniram—was assaulted by a man, who had previously asked him for the secrets of Mastership. After brilliantly managing to escape, Hiram was then attacked by the brother of that man, lurking in wait for him at the north gate. The second aggressor failed, as Hiram flew toward the east gate, where, unfortunately, death awaited him. In fact, the third brother captured him there, and slew him, right there; inside the Temple Hiram had built with much faith and love. With his death, he took the secrets—the secret word of the Master—to the grave. That night Balkhis waited long hours for Hiram to join her under a Cedar tree on a small hill to the eastern side of the Temple. This particularly beautiful Cedar tree, Hiram had brought from Tyre, years ago, as a reminder of his beloved Lebanon, and planted it on that hill.

Paul halted, gazing pensively at the sea for some moments, and then, the remaining part of the story flashed back in his mind.

As an experienced Architect, Hiram had believed that every project was a new adventure that would enable him to unleash more of his Masonic imagination and skills. In his mind, he had envisioned a perfect Temple, much more monumental than the one of Jerusalem.

“Where is he? He is late!” Balkhis fretted, impatient. Night fell, bestowing dark despair upon her. She realized that Hiram would not come that night, and maybe not . . . ever! Struck by this gloomy revelation, she knew, without a doubt, that Solomon had a lot to be held accountable for. She rushed to him in query, yet Solomon denied it. He suggested that Hiram must have returned to Phoenicia. Balkhis refused to believe him. She knew the man to whom she was betrothed, and with whom she had planned to travel to Yemen for their wedding, in a Temple Hiram was to build in Sheba. Her heart cried silently, “Where is my lover? He just couldn’t have left me here alone!”

The grin in King Solomon’s haughty face filled her with fear. An alarming awareness drenched her eyes with tears, and her heart with anguish. Yet, her queenly dignity impeded her from breaking down in front of Solomon. She whirled on her heels, and left the palace with such poise as befitted her stature. Inside her royal tent, Balkhis wept out her heart in silence. With the certainty of Hiram’s death, her dreams, her love, and her hopes vanished painfully. King Solomon had failed to win her love . . . and her kingdom. That same night, the Queen of Sheba left

Jerusalem for Yemen, leaving behind her a frustrated King and . . . her shattered heart.

“What a story!” Youmna suddenly spoke, awakening Paul from memories of the past. “Who were the three brothers who murdered the Architect?” she asked.

Paul sighed, and gazed at the sea again, trying to absorb all the secret meanings behind this story. He pondered for a moment, *who killed the Architect?*

“Well, Masonic legend bestowed many different names to the three killers of Hiram Abiff.” He said. “One theory claimed the names to be: Jubela, Jubelo, and Jubelum. Names related to Jubel, Gebel . . .”

“Gebel!” Youmna exclaimed, surprised. “Were the three pre-sumed killers Phoenicians? It cannot be. Right?” she questioned, in shock.

“This is just a theory, Youmna, a mere hypothesis that I strongly doubt,” the historian retorted seriously. He looked at her; she looked confused.

“It is most probable that the founders of this conjecture have based their allegation on the historical connection that related Hiram Abiff to the dexterous artificers he brought from Gebel,” he explained. “Working for him, they must have been lured by the knowledge of the secrets he knew, and that was the reason why they sought to kill him.”

She looked at him, expectantly.

“However, since they were skilled in the art of Masonry, and had been engaged in building so many Temples in Gebel, and all around the land of Phoenicia, this accusation falls short of logic, and can’t find ground, especially with the Guild of Sacred Builders of ancient Phoenicia and Egypt.”

“That’s what I thought,” Youmna stated, albeit unsure she understood the last sentence.

“Strangely though,” he added, “Masonic dictionaries clearly cite the three names in the plural form, as the *Juwes!*”

“Juwes?”

“Yes. It meant Jewish masons or brothers. They might have been working simultaneously for Hiram *and* King Solomon. Or perhaps, working secretly for the King, who desired to know the few but interesting distinctions, kept secret from him by the Architect.”

“I still don’t understand, Paul,” the Alchemist confessed, looking at him, after a moment of silence had passed. “I mean . . . why the huge

inconsistency in the Masonic accounts of two totally different and opposing accusations, against the killers of Hiram?”

“I frankly don’t know the answer to that, Youmna,” he admitted solemnly. “I’m not a specialist in secret societies, as you well know,” he turned his head, and looked into her eyes. “I guess we should dive deeper into that, don’t you think?”

She nodded.

A King, a Queen, an Architect, a Temple, an adventure, a love affair, a mystery, a murder . . . all that mixture in just one story. Could it be a historical fact, pure imagination, or just an allegory for something else? Paul thought.

A soft touch on his left shoulder dragged him out of his thoughts a few moments later. His eyes met the green eyes of Youmna, staring at him with a hint of shyness. Preoccupied by his inquiries, he had almost forgotten her, standing next to him.

The Sun, shimmering on the surface of the Mediterranean Sea, declared a day of great revelation.

“Let’s go to the base camp,” she said smiling, but before they set to leave, she stopped. “What happened to the Ark of the Covenant?” she asked.

“A lot,” he said. “I will narrate that interesting part, later on.” He smiled, as he led the way to the base camp.

The Inscription Revealed
Wednesday, October 20, 4:17 PM

Back inside the tent, the keen Archaeologist—bending over the table, in the center, and bounded by Jim and her devoted assistant—seemed bewildered, extremely preoccupied by the Stone, looking at it through the special spectacles Archaeologists and Alchemists use.

“Yeah . . . it seems so,” she said in reply. “Youmna and Paul should be right here now, to take a look at what the Stone has just revealed,” she added, without even noticing that both the Historian and the Alchemist had just entered the tent at that very moment. “I’m sure they would be much intrigued by the new findings we just made,” Maya spoke with interest, as she smiled to both men, standing around her.

“We’re here,” Youmna and Paul intoned concurrently, and grinned at each other with pleasure.

“What is it?” Paul rushed to ask.

“Well, it seems that Thor, who sketched the Temple, or had one of his masons sketch it for him, did not ignore to mark its dimensions,” Maya informed them. “They are calculated in the following order: the length of the first part, which is the entrance walk from the water basin towards the stairs, and up in between *The Pillars* that lead inside the anteroom, is 15 arms. The second part that constitutes the main hall, known as *The Saint*, is 15 arms, as well. Finally, the third part that holds the ritual room, called *The Saint of Saints*, is measured at 5 arms. The width of all the parts of the Temple is 10 arms, and the height is also 10 arms.”

A moment of silence ensued in which they pondered over the dimensions of the Temple.

“Amazing!” Paul uttered, inwardly questioning the veracity of what he had just heard.

Maya nodded in assent, with a wide grin on her face. “It’s true, Paul,” she confirmed, inviting him to have a look at the new discovery.

His eyes brightened.

“Wow . . . You have to take a look at this, Paul,” Youmna’s voice, who had rushed to examine the sketch on the Stone, echoed loudly inside the tent. “It’s true what Maya is saying!” She halted, suddenly. “Oh my God . . .” she sighed. “The inscription too!” she exclaimed.

“What about the inscription, Youmna?” Paul inquired, confused. “Oh! Do you mean to say that the lost letters, forming the missing words of the inscription, have been finally revealed?” He lifted an eyebrow in disbelief.

Jim and Zago remained motionless.

“Yes, Paul,” she replied joyfully. “The inscription is completely revealed now,” she added with satisfaction. “Listen to what it says:

*‘I am Thor the Geblite, Inventor of the Sacred Alphabet
This is the Bet(h) of God, El-Elyon
The Seven-Pillared Temple
It was built with the arms of the Kabbirim to the Sun
See its sketch here on the right, and behold the Cup of Life, hidden in the Saint of
Saints.’*”

She finished reading in absolute astonishment.

The Cup of Life! Paul wondered within the depths of his mind.

The tent was in total quietness. Not a whisper was heard. The revelation was just amazing, too overwhelming for anyone to comment on it. The Mystery of the Great Phoenician Temple had been solved at last, and the ruins had spoken after thousands of years of absolute silence.

The team was on the verge of a great discovery.

“The Seven-Pillared Temple . . . the Pillars . . . the Saint . . . the Saint of Saints . . . the statue of the God Al . . . the Cup of Life . . .” Paul whispered so softly that the rest could barely piece together what he had just said. “I just noticed something of great importance,” he stated.

“What is it?” Maya questioned in an eager voice.

“Well, I just came to realize the difference between the alleged Temple of Solomon and this Great Phoenician Temple. The Old Testament narrates that the altar that held the Ark of the Covenant—that special agreement between the Hebrew God and his people, through their first spiritual leader, Moses—was placed in the Holy of Holies,” he paused, meditating. “Whereas here, in the Saint of Saints, the Phoenician Priests placed the Great Altar that held the Cup of Life—the Grail that contained the Elixir of Life, given by God to Humanity.”

A soft breeze swept through the tent.

“Amazing!” uttered the Alchemist, profoundly reflecting upon this. “The ancient Stone, the Philosopher’s Stone, the Elixir of Life . . . it’s all here,” she declared, overwhelmed.

“I often wondered about the Ark,” Zago suddenly spoke, speculating. “What is the exact story, Paul?” he asked, unable to conceal his fascination.

The Historian smiled, took a deep breath, as his mind began recollecting from books he meticulously investigated.

Harsh creaking and crunching sounds met him, the moment he took his very first steps into the unknown space ahead. A strange, powerful energy filled him, as he started to inhale a different kind of air. It was unfamiliar, even peculiar, this feeling that pervaded him along the path he treaded. Mysterious textures tinted the odd forms and shapes of the surrounding existence. Surely, he was in a different world, and quite reasonably, the hidden nature of this world bewildered him deeply. ‘Was it hostile or peaceful?’ he thought. ‘Demonic or Angelic?’ he ignored this. Nonetheless, the long river nearby deluded his brain, and enticed his imagination, which became openly receptive to the unusual vibrations in the air.

The wilderness of the Egyptian desert!

An ancient time and place, when holy books and history had registered in the collective memories of nations . . .

He continued his journey into revelations, traipsing on the cracks of long-time dried soil. At a crossroad, to the left, a fire kindled from a bush before him. He stood in awe. His name was Moses, and the bush introduced itself, ‘I am what I am.’

Ever since that meeting with their God in the desert, the Hebrews became known as the “Chosen People”! The Ark of the Covenant had been given to Moses, and it traveled with him and his people everywhere they went. It dwelt with them for forty years in the desert of Sinai, and later accompanied them into the land of Canaan, traveling inside a tent from one place to another.

After many long years of struggle in Egypt, wars against the Canaanites and others, the Hebrews experienced a nomadic life in the Middle East. They finally settled down in the Land of Canaan. It was a promise, or rather, an agreement signed between them and their God. Everyone who stood against them, along the way, from the Pharaoh of

Egypt to the people of Canaan, defending their Land, were defeated in the end because the God of the Hebrews was much wiser, and much stronger!

Henceforth, the Hebrews won over their enemies, and lived in Jerusalem and in neighboring villages, as well. There existed, however, a people in the region, the Old Testament narrated, always ready to fight against them: the Philistines. During those endless wars, the Philistines succeeded once, in stealing the God dwelling Ark, which was restored back to its original place in the heart of the Tent after a ferocious battle . . . at the time of David. With his son, Solomon, this was destined to change. The Ark would no more be carried by nomads, wandering around, as had previously been the case. On the contrary, it would finally find a resting place, inside a Temple, forever, a Temple to be built especially in reverence to the Covenant between YHWH and His people!

Upon a special request made by King Solomon to King Hiram of Tyre, said the Old Testament, the famous Phoenician Architect, Hiram Abiff, prepared his fellow artisans, the best masons in the land, and headed to Jerusalem, to lay the foundation of the Temple of God!

All around the Mediterranean world, the Phoenicians, along with their brothers, the Egyptians, had excelled in the art of stonework, and in building great edifices to the divinities they worshipped. Their reputation had spread widely, at that time, all through the neighboring countries, including Jerusalem.

Accordingly, King Solomon approached his good neighbor, King Hiram of Tyre, to dispatch the best artificers among the skilled Phoenician masons. King Hiram also supplied trees—cedar trees for the roof of the Temple. Satisfied, Solomon ordered the initiation of the construction, happy to realize, at last, his long-held dream.

Now, the Hebrew God and the Covenant He made with His chosen people would finally find an eternal resting place. Inside the third part of the Temple, in the Holy of Holies, the Ark and Yahweh finally rested, altogether. The two pillars—Joachim and Boaz—stood as guardians at the door of the Temple, ever ready to protect it.

As time elapsed, Jerusalem became an unsafe place for Yahweh, the Ark, and the Temple. Many different invasions followed, but the most terrifying remained—the ones of the Assyrians, between 700 and 600 BC, and those of the Babylonians, in 587 BC, under King Nebuchadnezzar—which totally destroyed the Temple, and crashed the

two guardian pillars to the ground.

However, the Biblical account revealed that some Jewish priests survived the invasion, took the Ark of the Covenant away from Jerusalem, and hid it in a today-forgotten place. Others stated that Solomon gave it to his son, born from his relationship with Balkhis, the Queen of Sheba. In consequence, the Ark could be hidden somewhere in Yemen! Some say in Ethiopia!

Paul finished laboring through his memory, looked at Zago who had heard him well, and then all around him, “Another story . . . Another mystery . . . However, regardless of which story we refer to, the Ark of the Covenant was lost. Afterwards, chaos prevailed in the lives of the ‘chosen people’ . . .” he said in conclusion.

The recounting had been great, and the team had thoroughly enjoyed the story, as if they had attentively watched all these events unfurling in successive frames before their captive eyes. Nevertheless, could all that be true history, or just an accumulated work of myths?

Some moments of reflection lingered their minds, yet back to reality, minutes later, and after looking at the sketch for a while, Jim began drawing a copy of it on a piece of paper, along with the dimensions of the Temple, as recorded on the Stone, with great infatuation. “Does anybody know how much an arms-length is, in centimeters?” he inquired.

“70 centimeters, as I remember,” Maya replied.

“Aha I see. So . . . 15 arms are equal to 1,050 centimeters, or 10.5 meters. I guess this would be the length of each of the two parts, the first and the second. The width and the height are also 7 meters each. As for the length of the third section, it would then be 3.5 meters.”

“Hold on a bit, Jim,” she rushed to say, lifting an eyebrow to him in confusion. “Would you please repeat the numbers, and give me the total length, width, and height again?” she asked.

“Ok. Wait a second . . . here it is, total length of the Temple is equal to 24.5 meters, whereas the width is equal to 7 meters, and so is the height.”

“24.5 meters! For total length,” Maya wondered aloud. “I don’t know. I’m not sure about that.” She paused for a second, doing a quick study in her mind, regarding ancient Phoenician Temples. “Well I’m afraid this could be a wrong measurement,” she expressed, her eyes rolling up and to the left, as if looking at her transcendental thoughts. “And, 7 meters for each, width and height? I also doubt it,” Maya concluded.

“What are you saying?” Youmna snapped. “That the numbers on the

sketch are wrong?”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“But, you do mean we have a wrong interpretation of the numbers here. Right?” Youmna asked, trying to clarify the confusion.

“It looks like it. In fact, I’m wondering if an arms-length to the Ancients was exactly the same as an arms-length today,” she reported, laying out her concerns.

“Maya could be totally right about her speculation,” Paul suggested. “But, then again, how would we know how ancient Phoenicians truly measured their Temples.”

“Well, as an active Archeologist who has worked on the field for some time now, I can easily confirm that Phoenician Temples have proven to be of bigger size than that. Their lengths vary between 28 and 49 meters. Their widths and heights vary between 10 and 14 meters each,” Maya explained. “So . . . if this was known as the ‘Great Phoenician Temple’ of Gebel, the House of El, it should have at least been constructed according to these measurements, no less,” she ended and they all reflected for a moment.

“With all due respect to your great experience, Maya, there is only one-way to find out if the numbers are correct,” Jim declared politely.

“How do you intend to do that?” she inquired, feeling confronted.

“Let’s go out, and inspect the Temple field, according to the numbers we have found, and we’ll see if these numbers do match it or not,” he suggested enthusiastically.

“I’m up to the challenge,” she said, with conviction.

“Great idea,” Zago agreed, certain of Maya’s victory.

“Alright then,” said the Archaeologist. “Go ahead, and I’ll follow you with the mapping device.”

When Paul, Jim, and Zago were about to leave, Youmna hastened to ask them for their help, securing the Stone in a safe compartment she had already set in the tent. Then, they all departed towards the ruins, followed by Maya with her mapping device, five minutes later.

Upon reaching the ditch of the Great Phoenician Temple, Maya, assisted by Zago, immediately started to prepare the device, to map the area according to the calculations they had received from the ancient sketch. They also took into consideration that the place where they actually found the Stone could well be the entrance to the Temple; and as Maya had explained, regarding Phoenician Temples, the altar should be directed towards the East; and this meant that the sun should be shining

from behind it.

While ambling between the ruins, Jim stepped on a rock along his way. He stumbled and fell hard on his knee, releasing the sheet of paper, on which he had drawn a copy of the sketch. It flew and whirled in the air before landing precariously on a heap of rocks, a few meters ahead.

“Damn!” he shouted, as he stood up unharmed, and ran for it. As his hand reached for the paper, an unexpected breeze blew, displaced it, and then shoved it through a gap, between the stones. Youmna sprinted after it.

“Hold on!” he cautioned, without taking his gaze from the place where the paper had disappeared.

Astonishing as it may have been, Jim frantically heaved away one rock after another. *Why the bother?* Maya thought. *He could have easily tried to draw the sketch once again,* Zago said to himself. Oddly, Jim concentrated on his task, as if his whole life depended on it. Paul didn’t comment. He knew his friend, the artist, very well.

“Just give me a second, please,” he finally managed to say. “I just want to outline the place in exact concordance with the sketch on the paper,” he explained. “Oh, there it is.” He smiled at them.

He finally got hold of it.

Moments later, they began mapping the Temple field. It was late in the afternoon.

“It looks small to me,” Youmna reasoned, as she shaded her eyes with the back of her hand to maximize her view. “The Temple field is certainly bigger than the Temple dimensions we had calculated before, from the information found on the sketch. Maya could be right.”

“I guess so,” Jim added in agreement, as if passing on his apologies to Maya, who just grinned.

“Exactly,” she confirmed. “So, if we dig according to the dimensions at hand, in search of the Cup of Life, hidden in the ritual room—the Saint of Saints—we may instead stumble into the ruins of the second part of the Temple—the Saint. That would be a great discovery indeed, I tell you, but aren’t we all searching for the Cup of Life?!” she concluded with great fervor in her voice. Her eyes shone as never before, and her silken face blossomed.

“Of course we are,” replied the Alchemist at once.

In fact, the Cup of Life could well be the Philosopher’s Stone itself, which Youmna has long been searching for. The elixir of life . . . of Immortality . . .

“Yes . . . we all are,” Zago agreed, looking at them.

“What to do, then?” Jim rushed to ask, baffled.

“We have to find the exact dimensions. That is all,” Maya replied acutely. “In fact, Archeologists often fall into this trap, a factual riddle, because there are usually two different standards of measurement: the regular and the Royal.” She paused for a wistful instant. “I have a strong feeling that we have considered the regular arms system of measurement, while we should have taken into account the Royal one instead, here, for this Temple,” she enlightened the team.

“And what could the Royal arms system of measurement be here?” Paul inquired. His eyes fixed upon her.

“I simply don’t know. If I knew, I would have told you without hesitation,” she said. “We, Archeologists, usually deal with regular and royal cubits systems of measurement, not arms. I believe . . . and I’m just proposing, that there should be a similar system of measurement for regular and Royal arms.”

A few moments of silence passed away, then it dawned on her, as she smiled.

“What is it?” Youmna hurriedly asked the Archaeologist in an eager voice. “Have you found the way to measure it?”

“No. I haven’t,” she rejoined, “but I know someone who knows.”

A soft breeze of air hovered above the Temple field.

*The Beirut National Museum
Friday, October 22, 09:17 AM*

They did not dawdle inside the pitch for long; after Maya had made a phone call to someone they didn't know but had heard of. It was Dr. Hamid Saab, former Professor of Archaeology at the AUB, and head of the Archaeological Research at Mount Hermon. She requested an urgent meeting from her teacher, after she conveyed to him the brief information about the Stone. Then, she sent him an email with the complete data. Dr. Saab called her back, an hour later, and arranged a meeting with her on Friday morning.

The team took advantage of the lovely October, Wednesday afternoon, to meander in the Old *Souk* nearby. The girls bought some souvenirs to take home and a few others to send to friends they knew abroad, as they eagerly chatted. Jim, on the other hand, took several additional photos of the old houses and shops in the area. Paul and Zago enjoyed the walk thoroughly.

They made it a point to lighten up, and enjoy the sunset, while lying down on the soft sandy beach below the site, before they gathered for dinner in a small seafood restaurant close by. White wine was served at their table, as the restaurant quickly became packed with both Lebanese and foreign tourists in cheerful moods.

Time went by quickly, and the day faded away, with the sun parting from his celestial realm, giving room to his sister, the moon, to take his place. She shone timidly over the Mediterranean Sea. It was a perfect time for Jim to play his guitar, the sound of which echoed in the far-spaced night sky.

Thursday passed without much activity. In fact, they didn't have much to do on the Archaeological site, only a few things here and there, as they waited for something to unfurl, before the expected meeting tomorrow, Friday morning.

The cafeteria that edged the new port had been designed to welcome everyone, however, the tourists: Historians and Archeologists, who had jammed the Archaeological site of Gebel the previous day, were among the first to come. A wooden cottage with a comforting interior, decorated with fine hand-made tables, and bamboo-stem curtains welcomed the team of five. While Jim, Maya, and Zago ordered coffee, Youmna and Paul voted for fresh orange juice and warm croissants.

The remarkable quietness that reigned over the place at this early time of the morning matched their silent meditation. The sea captured their gazes through the glass windows and soothed their internal turmoil. The water formed flimsy foam a few meters away from the cottage, as it gently brushed against the greenish rocks below. Yet, on the calm surface of the water, sunrays shone beautifully, in gracious scenery, which only nature could create; a nature to which they belonged.

Moments later, a group of multinational tourists entered the cafeteria, and sat nearby. It was not difficult to guess their origin from their appearance and language: Americans, British, Germans, Italians, French, and Arabs. Lebanese have seen them around enough, to recognize them. Then, a woman in her fifties, apparently the guide, initiated a historical description on how the Greeks, and later the western world in its entirety had adopted the Phoenician Alphabet. The expressions on their faces went through the most remarkable series of changes, from doubt to neutrality, then awe and admiration. They had, indeed, come to visit the most ancient urban place on Earth—Gebel.

A gentle shake on Paul's shoulder hauled him out of his deliberations. He turned his head to meet Maya's eager eyes, looking down at him with a note of urgency. Lost in his deep thoughts, he had failed to see her getting near him at the table.

She gently waved Jim's sketch in front of his face, and said, "I want to go to the Museum, Paul. Would you be able to take me?" She brushed a strand of her light-brown hair behind her ear, a habit of hers that made her look very charming.

"Yes, but . . . why the rush, Maya? Have you called your teacher, I mean, Professor Saab, and checked if he has solved the riddle yet?" Paul inquired.

"Yes I have . . ." she said, and paused. "And he confirmed it," she added in excitement.

"Very well then. I'm very excited to find out what he has to tell us. Let's go!" Paul stated clearly, ready to leave at once.

“Thank you, Paul. The Museum opens in just about an hour, I think,” she said with a smile that brightened her face.

Paul observed the far-distanced sea in front of him, and then looked at the ashtray on the table, putting his cigarette out. He sighed deeply, and closed his eyes. *The Cup of Life, the Philosopher’s Stone, the elixir of Immortality . . .* he thought. Without a word, seconds later, he got up, moved away from the table, and left the cafeteria. A few silent steps ahead, and he reached the sandy shore of the city of Gebel. He lingered there for some time.

Guarded by a police squad, the inside and outside of the Beirut National Museum swarmed with tourists from all walks of life. Maya and Paul bypassed beautiful ancient relics, some dating back to Prehistoric Canaanite and Egyptian eras; others to Bronze and Iron, Phoenician, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, and Mamluk periods. Then, they hurried toward the hall, where the Sarcophagus of King Ahiiram resided. It was there that the meeting with the Professor was set to take place.

Protected by stern-looking guards, and surrounded by a fence, a white limestone Sarcophagus stood with ancient nobility. Many people lined before it, in wait for their turn to see it.

“That’s it,” Maya exclaimed, “The Sarcophagus of King Ahiiram of Gebel!”

They scurried through the crowd and towards the coveted object of their interest, as they stole quick glances over people’s heads, left and right, to find where the Professor was waiting for them.

A man of mid-stature, Professor Saab was in his late seventies. He wore an elegant brown suit over an ivory shirt with a red tie and a blue scarf around his neck. His abundant white hair and white moustache made him look solid and charismatic.

“This is a friend of mine, Paul Khoury,” Maya introduced the two men, after she greeted her teacher with warm affection, and great respect. They hadn’t seen each other for some time.

“Paul is a historian,” she said with a smile.

“I see,” the Professor intoned with firmness. “It’s nice meeting you,” he uttered. “Are you here for the Sarcophagus?”

“I would like to know more about it, but I’m actually here for the Stone,” Paul answered straightforwardly.

The professor gave Maya an inquiring look, over his fine eyeglasses. She nodded.

“Here’s a brochure on the Sarcophagus, I got it from the guide in

charge. It has all you need to know,” he said gently with a warm smile on his face.

The brochure conveyed a notable piece of information that caught Paul’s attention immediately. The Sarcophagus had two inscriptions, one above the other. The first one read as follows: *‘This Sarcophagus was made by Ittobaal, the son of King Ahiram of Gebel, for his father, Ahiram, when he placed him inside his eternal place of rest.’* The other one read: *‘. . . and if a king among kings, or a governor among governors, or a commander of an army rides against Gebel and opens this Sarcophagus, let the scepter of his dominion get plundered and his royal throne get overthrown . . .’*

The apparent engraving on the Sarcophagus depicted King Ahiram on his Royal Sphinx Throne, holding a reversed lotus in his hand, a sign of his death, and receiving homage by his subjects, standing in line. In front of him stood a table, filled with food for sustenance in the afterlife.

That was it. There were no clues of anything mysterious in nature. There was nothing else, but a burial description of the King, by his son, and a curse against intruders and relic hunters.

“What do you know about it, Professor? Is there anything else we should know?” Maya asked curiously.

“Well, this Sarcophagus was made by Ittobaal, for his father, Ahiram, as the brochure narrates,” Dr. Saab said, looking at them and shrugging off his shoulders. “It is still considered one of the best works done by Phoenician artisans. It was made out of beautiful white limestone. However, its Phoenician inscriptions are of a later period, sometime around the year 1000 BC. They are indeed living proof of the beautiful Phoenician writing system,” he explained eloquently.

The Professor was proud to be one of the descendants of an ancient civilization of great achievements. However, his vibrant eyes that had seen much glittered with a strange light, as if he had a deep knowledge of things of great importance that he did not wish to reveal. The Historian in Paul, who had perceived that mysterious light in the Professor’s eyes, wanted to know the hidden facts, regarding the Sarcophagus, but he decided to respect the man’s wish for now. In fact, his focus was on the Stone and only the Stone.

“Anyway, let’s go to a quiet spot, there, on the right,” the Professor said, and led the way. “I have analyzed the data you emailed, Maya, and I must frankly say: it’s quite interesting,” he uttered in a low voice, and looked at her squarely in the eyes, before looking at Paul. “If we read the

inscription again, we may find that Thor mentioned the House of El as the Seven-Pillared Temple, built with the arms of the Kabbirim to the Sun. Right?” the Professor inquired.

“Yes, that’s absolutely right,” she rejoined, looking a bit perplexed.

“And so . . . what are you implying, Professor?” Paul inquired in a steady voice.

“Before I respond to your question, Mr. Khoury, I’m sure we are standing before something quite unique, Maya. I have often heard about the Seven-Pillared Temple, during my many years of research and work, but . . .” he paused for a thought then continued, “I always thought it was just a myth.” He fixed his eyeglasses on his tanned face. “The sketch on the Stone is a great revelation; you couldn’t know the repercussions of such a discovery on the Academic front, if it were to be released worldwide. Do you know what this means? It means a great deal, in terms of history, religion, and politics. It could change what was taken for granted for decades.”

“You mean, in regards to the Temple of Solomon and the Biblical Kingdom of Jerusalem?” Paul asked attentively.

“Certainly . . . certainly, Paul. And, that’s why we should be very cautious, in dealing with this delicate matter.”

“What do you mean?” Paul asked impatiently, his concerned eyes set on the Professor’s. His sore memory of the escape from Montreux to Berlin—because of the audacious thesis he had presented at the Château de Chillon, in which he had refuted both the Temple and the Kingdom—flashed back in his mind.

The Babylonian Brotherhood . . . he thought, all to himself. I should inform Maya about them.

“Oh . . . there is nothing to worry about for the time being, Paul,” said the Professor in a comforting tone. “Just keep the discovery of the Stone limited to very few and selected people, and this goes also for you, Maya.”

“Don’t you worry, Professor,” Maya reassured him. “The Stone is well protected, and only seven truthful persons know about it.”

The professor nodded in agreement, yet with vigilance and time ceased for a second.

“What about the arms of the Kabbirim?” Maya inquired. “I believe this is what concerns us right now.” She was trying to lead them back to the focal point of their discovery. She had no clue of the implications the Stone may have on them. “Although the sketch is of great significance, it would mean nothing if it were not followed by tangible verification on the

ground,” Maya stated.

“True,” said the Professor. “Let me explain the veiled meaning behind the inscription. Since the construction was made by the arms of the Kabbirim, it would then be impossible to measure the Temple according to the standard arms-length.” He paused, looked around him, and resumed, “the only reasonable key would be to consider the arms-length of the Kabbirim, and I mean, the Royal Arms.”

Maya didn’t comment on the instructive words of her teacher. She had indeed thought about that, when she’d been in the ditch, two days ago. Proud of herself that she had reached the same conclusion as the Professor, she smiled. However, what truly escaped her was the exact measurement of the Kabbirim’s arms.

“How should we calculate them, Professor?” Paul hastened to ask, before she could.

Time seemed to have accelerated in her mind, as she waited impatiently.

“In a bit, Paul. In a bit,” uttered the Professor calmly. “In fact, we first have to know who the Kabbirim were, in order to know the exact measurements of the construction made by their arms. Isn’t that right?” he asked, teasingly, yet serious.

Maya nodded in total approval, followed by Paul.

“Very well then, there were actually two synonyms for the word Kabbirim or Cabiri in ancient Phoenicia: ‘Giants’ and ‘Sages,’” he informed. “We are not concerned with the synonym ‘Sages’ here, as it does not relate to what we are searching for.” He paused for a moment. “It is believed that a Giant was double the size of a modern man in dimension, so, whether this is true, a myth, or just an allegory for something else, the numbers may have been calculated accordingly, during the construction of the Seven-Pillared Temple, as Thor’s inscription states. Hence, the arms-length of the Kabbirim is double the arms-length of modern men,” he concluded.

“Aha.” Maya gave a sigh of relief at this explanation. “So . . . 15 arms of the Kabbirim are equal to 10.5 meters times 2, and that would be 21 meters in length, for each, the first and the second parts. As for the length of the third section, it would then be 3.5 meters times 2, thus reaching 7 meters. The same formula goes for the width and the height.” She dwelt on the numbers, making the full calculation. “Accordingly, the total length of the Temple would then be 49 meters, while the width and the height are 14 meters each. Could that be correct, Professor?” she asked

passionately.

“A perfect match with the proportions of the Great Phoenician Temples,” he answered her with a smile.

“Very well,” Paul stated, thrilled. “We’ll map the area accordingly then,” he said.

“Good luck,” said Dr. Saab enthusiastically. “You will be careful, won’t you?” He glared at them with the same look of warning he had given them before, and Maya found this recurring behavior of the Professor a bit strange. “Oh, it’s almost 10:30; I have an important meeting at the Research Centre at 11:00. Please, excuse me, for I must make a hasty departure, Maya, Mr. Khoury.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Maya said in a gentle tone. “We really appreciate your help. I’ll keep you posted.”

The Professor nodded, and left immediately.

“Let’s go back to the base camp, Paul.” She looked at him with keen eyes. “We have work to do.”

He concurred with a wide grin.

In search of the Saint of Saints
Saturday, October 23, 05:27 PM

They had finished preparing the mapping device for the Temple field, according to the new calculations given by the Professor. Once again, they considered the exact spot where they found the Stone to be the entrance door to the Temple. They also presumed that the Great Altar should be in the direction of the East, as per the Phoenician tradition. Having done that, the team was able to identify the area where the Saint of Saints should be located under the ground.

Immediately afterwards, and with great enthusiasm, Maya brought her archeological tools to the spot she designated as proper for the digging. It would be the first two meters of the aboveground surface of the ritual room. She then sketched out the area, in the shape of a square, secured the premises with a triple-layered thick blue rope, fixed to four wooden poles, each within 7 meters distance of the other. She finally nailed the no-trespassing signposts for excavation work on each pole.

The watch in Paul's wrist marked 3:30 PM when Maya began the digging. With fervent feelings all through the process, Zago moved stones and sand away, to clear the path for Maya. The rest of the team felt somehow guilty, watching him sweating alone, so they moved to help.

Time was running by quickly, and the solar disk rolled into the horizon, that Friday afternoon, donning orange-red attire over the Mediterranean Sea. It was getting too late to continue the digging. Time to stop for the night, as the watch in Maya's wrist marked 6:15 PM.

"It will be crucial now, to erect a tent over the excavated spot, to secure it from intruders," Maya verbalized the possibility, which they all had thought about, and which had to be taken into great consideration. "We will resume the work, tomorrow morning," she added.

The team erected the tent and, afterwards, went for tea and coffee at one of the cafés around the *souk*.

* * *

Meanwhile, amidst the plain, beneath one of the most regal peaks of the Alps, the double-structured Swiss Chalet, roofed with dark-brown pieces of brick, beautifully surrounded with long Cypress trees, and lit with faint yellow lights, welcomed the *Ordo Supremus Militaris Templi Hierosolymitani* inside its alluringly luxurious walls.

The three towers, topped with tiny dark-grey stones, overlooked the wide perimeter, completely secured, not only by dozens of black Dobermans, lurking all around, but also, by the most sophisticated security systems. Not a soul had been seen moving within the short scope of his vision, and surely nowhere around the prestigious residence. His silhouette, standing behind the window's bulletproof glass, moved the curtain, left then right, peeking outside.

"Are you sure about the information you received from our secret agents in Lebanon, Brother Herbert?" The Grand Master's croaky voice resonated in the back, reaching the attentive ears of both, B.: Herbert and B.: James, sitting on comfortable couches around a rectangular black and white table, set in the middle.

"No question about it, Grand Master," he confirmed. Clothed in a black suit, over a pallid shirt, in his early thirties, B.: Herbert had a clean-shaven, rhombus-shaped face, with little green eyes and long black hair, streaming down to his shoulders.

"This is a very critical situation," the Grand Master warned them. "We have heard of these Seven-Pillared Temples of the Phoenicians. We knew there were seven, built all over the Phoenician land, but we only knew the location of six. The most archaic one was at Mt. Hermon, known as the Mountain of the Meetings. Another one was built in the ancient city of Gebel and this is the Great Phoenician Temple the Lebanese team is exploring now. The third, built in Tyre, is called the Temple of Baal-Melkart. There was another, constructed in Sidon, and, one for Baal, the Phoenician representation of the Sun, in the *Heliopolis*, known as the city of the Sun: Baalbeck. The sixth Temple was erected on the top of Mt. Carmel, and is dedicated to El," he informed them, and then paused, "however; the location of the seventh Temple has been kept hidden from us. We don't really know where it is." He took a deep breath.

"At any rate, if the Seven-Pillared Temple in Gebel revealed itself fully to the people working there, we will definitely lose the credibility we have been trying to create throughout the long history of the Craft, not only as

a historical reality, but also as a symbolic religion.” The old man, probably in his late sixties, walked away from the window, and took his place on a large regal armchair on the western side behind the desk.

“If they ever find the Cup of Life,” alerted B.: Herbert, “Then, I believe, everything we have built will crumble into little pieces,” he said this, as he looked at the two paintings of the Temple of Jerusalem and the Tower of Babel, hanging on the wall next to each other, and looming over them like ghosts. His thumb swaying a golden ring, topped with a precious red stone in his ring finger.

Clad in a black outfit, over a black shirt, the man with the influential status of Grand Master had a long shady face with a dark-grey beard and curly hair. His clear image as a skilled person quavered with his annoyance. “What do you suggest, Brother James?” he managed to ask.

Seated on the luxurious couch in front of the desk, and dressed in a light-blue shirt, topped with an elegant dark-grey suit, B.: James, in his late fifties, turned his head in the direction of the Grand Master, to speak. A well-trimmed moustache decorated his round face with large blue eyes and golden hair. “I cannot neglect the repercussions that a revelation of such magnitude may have on the Craft. However, and due to the sensitivity of the issue, I cannot but think of an urgent meeting, to be held at the council of the Big Brother immediately.” he said with resolution. A silver ring, capped by a blue precious stone, gleamed from his fourth finger.

“Very well, but a meeting at the congress of the Big Brother cannot be prepared on such short notice. Time is playing against us now. Instead, I shall arrange a videoconference, right now, with the 6 major points of the luminary,” the Grand Master announced emphatically. “I will inform you about the outcome, when the meeting is over.”

A bit more than an hour later, the videoconference, held in a special private room inside the black and white stronghold, had ended. The Grand Master entered the meeting office, where B.: Herbert and B.: James were anxiously waiting for the final decision.

Sitting on his large stately armchair, he put his hands firmly on the desk in front of him, looked at his two brothers squarely in the eyes, and uttered, “The Big Brother has finally decided. We, the Babylonian Brotherhood, have voted unanimously on the verdict. We will act immediately, as indicated by the charter of the ‘BBB’.”

“You mean, a full attack?” wondered B.: James, and looked at B.: Herbert in confusion. “Isn’t it too early . . . too exposing for the

Brotherhood?”

B.: Herbert didn't join in B.: James's anxious expression. He remained silent, seated on the luxurious couch with a happy look on his face.

“War has been indirectly declared on us, B.: James. Can't you see? Why can't you see? What they may discover will potentially expose our account of history, to the entire world, as a false tale, and thus, we cannot afford to use anything less than full power.” His thumb rolled the golden-black ring on his thorny index, while the Hebrew letter *Yod*, (י), emblazoned on a six-pointed star-shaped jewel inside the ring, glistened all over the room.

B.: James tapped his right hand fingers on the black desk, in a gesture of fretfulness. He just couldn't come to terms with the fact that warfare he knew could be of devastating proportions had been launched on an unarmed team of people, simply for having a keen thirst for knowledge. Yet, he could not react.

“We have been watching Lebanon, that old country, for centuries now,” the old man behind the desk spoke in a croaky voice, and added, “knowing that if anything comes to endanger our very existence, it would primarily surface there. And, when this transpired, last month, we sent the Architect—Hiram Melki—to the pit, not aware that anyone could come, as quickly as this team has, to jeopardize our Brotherhood again.” He paused for a sip of water from his golden cup. “Let it be known that no one, outside our council, is safe. A meager critique will be enough to mark anyone as a potential target. The Big Brother has decided to unleash the Knights Kadosh,” he concluded, and ended the meeting.

Time ceased to run . . . yet time had not ended.

* * *

The early Saturday morning light bathed the Archaeological Site in Gebel with the warm rays of the sun. It was 10:30 AM when they entered the tent they had erected the day before to cover the ditch, and resumed their digging of the Great Phoenician Temple. Avid feelings of expectation and hope engulfed them like the day before. Maya, Paul, Youmna, Zago, and Jim worked together as a harmonious team, as if they were only one person at work. They had never felt like this before, a bond so strong that it made them envision the enormity of the commitment they embraced for the spirits of their ancestors—the Phoenicians.

Frustratingly though, the more they removed rocks and sand out of the way, the more the digging continued, and time flew by them with no result yet noticeable. In consequence, a strong determination took hold of them, until they finally reached a large flat stone that seemed very ancient.

“This could be it,” Maya exclaimed, all of a sudden. “I think we’re close to something. This is a prime building stone that the ancients used. It could be from the ground floor of the ritual room. Give me some space to manage things around here, before I proceed further,” she said.

With a hand pick, a thin trowel, and a hand brush, she cleaned the space around the stone that soon revealed, bit-by-bit, its true dimensions. Although thick, the stone suddenly split in half, with a creepy resonance that ricocheted in the dark hole that appeared beneath them. Maya leapt back in surprise. They were all startled by that unexpected and strange incident.

What could they find there . . . down in the hole?

Could it be some sort of a tunnel that may lead to the ruins of the Saint of Saints? Maya thought, as she lowered her head to look right and left.

“A torch, please. I need some light here,” she asked of them.

Could it be a secret underground chamber? Paul wondered in the stillness of the moment that ensued. *That, however, was not mentioned in the sketch on the Stone,* he thought again, yet his enthusiasm didn’t prevent him from calling Padre Joseph, and relating the discovery of the hole to him.

The sun edged nearer, lower, then centered in the horizon, and a chilly wind enfolded them. The watch in Jim’s wrist marked 05:37 PM. Youmna dug out a torch from among the archeological tools nearby, and passed it on to Maya to illuminate the hole.

She breathed . . .

“Oh God! What is that?” she called out gaudily, astonished.

“What! What is there?” Zago nagged her.

“The Saint of Saints!” Youmna exclaimed, standing beside her.

“Could it be?” Jim inquired excitedly. “It’s just not possible,” he said, coming back to his senses, shaking his head in bewilderment.

The Archaeologist, who seemed to be in shock, did not answer at all. Her mind stayed focused below, as if she had been witnessing history in the making, or remaking.

“Could it be, Maya?” Paul questioned eagerly. He felt that her silence

could not denote otherwise. “I mean . . . how?” he wondered. “The ritual room should be in ruins after thousands of years. How come it is still standing, even now, although underneath the surface?”

“It couldn’t be it . . . no . . . it’s out of the question,” Maya suddenly spoke, breaking the silence that had captured her for some minutes. “It could only be a replica of the original one.” She paused. “I can’t really think of another possible explanation,” she added.

“A replica?” Paul asked, confused.

“Yes, could be, perhaps in an attempt to secure the Cup of Life,” she uttered, as if in a mystical trance.

The sound of the word, *Cup of Life*, resonated deeply in the hole below. Then, they all heard it, bouncing off the walls, once, twice, three times . . .

“I can’t see things clearly, down there,” Maya revealed in a wondrous tone, after she finally managed to savor the revelation she had perceived. “But I must inform you of what my eyes see; an altar of cubical shape, surrounded by two pillars, something like the drawing in the sketch.” She then said, “There is an object of some sort, resting on the altar . . .” She paused for a minute, “I cannot really discern its nature.” She tilted her head right, and then left again. “I can also see some inscriptions, there on the walls, but I can’t truly know what they say.” She shook her head then added, “Too many layers of dust and spider webs on the walls. Yet . . . this is . . . amazing! Really startling!” she ended, grinning in bewilderment.

“No matter what it is . . . I believe we should go down,” curt and brief, Youmna announced with resolve, after a long silent moment had passed.

“What?” Zago screamed in surprise, exchanging strange glimpses with the rest of the team.

“It’s only a few meters down the hole, and I don’t have enough time for waiting, Zago,” she answered. “Sorry, Maya,” she uttered enthusiastically and snatched the torch from Maya’s hand, but before she could jump in, the mobile in Paul’s jacket rang.

“Hello,” the abrupt voice of Padre Joseph echoed in Paul’s ears. “Can you hear me, Paul?”

“Yes, Padre, I can hear you very well.”

“Good. Listen. We have a situation here.”

“A situation?” Paul exclaimed in a worried tone, looking over at his friends, who appeared fully attentive. “What’s going on?”

“The Professor you told me about, yesterday, the man who had decoded the riddle regarding the dimensions of the Temple, Dr. Hamid

Saab . . .” the Padre came to a brief halt.

“Yes. Is he ok? What happened?” Paul asked, confused, afraid. He stared at Maya then away.

“I’m sorry to tell you that he has been found dead, strangled in his own house, in Beirut, a couple of hours ago.”

“What?” Paul’s outraged voice alerted his friends, Maya in particular, that something evil had transpired.

“What’s wrong?” Maya asked in fear.

Paul couldn’t answer her right away, as he tried to hear the encroaching voice of the Padre on the cell phone, telling him, “Leave the archaeological site, right now, leave Gebel, get rid of all possible traces that may lead to the exact location of the hole you recently found in the Temple field. Dismantle the tents . . . everything, and . . .” he stopped for a thought, “Run for your lives.”

The warning came as powerful as a thunderbolt in Paul’s ear. He pushed the red button on his mobile, to end the call. Although he wondered about how Padre Joseph had learned of the Professor’s death, he judged that the situation was extremely risky to ponder about it for now. He, instead, informed the team about what had happened.

Maya couldn’t believe the sad news coming from Paul’s mouth, as she mumbled incoherently under her breath, “They killed the Professor, my teacher is dead.” Her face turned yellow, a shiver ran down her back. Tears flooded her eyes. Yet, time was not appropriate for any delay.

No more than half an hour later, around 06:18 PM, the team of 5 finished dismantling the base camp, the Temple tent, the signposts, all traces . . . and left Gebel. While Paul and Jim took off together, Maya, Zago, and Youmna left, each for a different destination.

In the shelter of the night, a bizarre sound of silence reigned over Gebel.

- Part III -

Kadmus Sequence
Wednesday, October 27, 06:39 PM

The instructions Padre Joseph had given Paul in the heat of the moment, when the Professor's murder had been notified, were extremely serious. His words, concerning the safety of the team, had been firm. The five of them had found shelter in different places around Lebanon, in an attempt to keep themselves away from the eyes of the Big Brother.

Thinking about that, Paul started to wonder how the Padre had known about the Professor's death, only two hours after the incident had occurred. It was clear he knew of the Architect's death, since he'd read it in the Newspaper, but his knowledge of the Archaeologist's death left Paul deeply perplexed; unless Padre Joseph had a secret network connection that had informed him of the bad news, Paul reasoned, and wondered in the silence of his mind.

Time must have passed too swiftly for all of them and particularly for Paul. Night descended on him faster than he had expected. Having found a safe haven—in one of his best friends' houses, in Batroun, an ancient Phoenician coastal city—he reposed in the calmness of the Mediterranean Sea ahead. All of a sudden, amid the wide and unbound sea surrounding him, a beeping sound came from his laptop, announcing that an email had arrived at his inbox.

Although he'd heard it, he hadn't immediately reacted to it. In the uncanny blue sky above him, an odd small white cloud swiftly hovered over the sea, as a prelude to rain that did not pour down. It felt cold and damp. A few minutes later, Paul moved from the balcony into the room and towards his laptop. The email was from Padre Joseph, and it was written in a secret cryptogram, only Paul and the Padre knew about, or at least, that's what he thought!

This coded system of writing, known as the 'Kadmus Sequence', was based on the 22 letters of the Phoenician Alphabet. The reading of the

encoded message was done, first, from right to left, on the horizontal-vertical scale of 1 to 5 (Heh), to be followed, from top to bottom, on a vertical-horizontal scale of 1 to 4 (Peh). The second reading began, from top to bottom, on a vertical-horizontal scale of 5 to 2 (Kaph), to be followed, from right to left, on the horizontal-vertical scale of 4 to 2 (Sadhe). Etc . . .

5	4	3	2	1	
He(h) ⌘	Dalet(h) ⌘	Gimel ⌘	Bet(h) ⌘	Aleph ⌘	1
Kaph ⌘	Yod(h) ⌘	Tet(h) ⌘	Cheth/Zayin ⌘ ⌘	Waw ⌘	2
Ayin ⌘	S(h)amekh ⌘	Nun ⌘	Mem ⌘	Lamed(h) ⌘	3
Tau (Taw) ⌘	Shin ⌘	Resh/Qoph ⌘ ⌘	Sadhe (Tsade) ⌘	Pe(h) ⌘	4

Naturally, Paul’s adrenaline raised, as he hastened to decipher the many sequences in this email, which Padre Joseph had sent him, using a different name for additional safety measures, in case this particular message were to be intercepted by the ‘BB’s secret agents.

The embedded information in the first two paragraphs revealed that the Police had taken the matter of Dr. Hamid Saab’s death very seriously. They had cleaned up the crime scene immediately, after finding the famous Archaeology Professor’s body strangled to death. It seemed the Police had, somehow, successfully linked this incident to the death of Hiram Melki, the famous Architect. The investigation had been led by a special unit, under the leadership of Major Antoine Kanaan—a very well-known police officer among Police Departments in Lebanon and abroad—reputed for having taken on, seemingly impossible and enigmatic cases, such as this one.

An Architect, an Archeologist! What a strange coincidence? Paul thought.

Although the Architect had been found dead in his backyard more than a month ago—the deciphered text continued—his file had been conveyed to Major Kanaan for additional examination, almost immediately after the death of the Archaeologist had occurred. Both victims had been killed in the same fashion. Nobody knew for certain whether or not there was a connection between the two murders, but it seemed quite logical to Major Kanaan that both deaths were somehow linked to the historical research they had both been conducting on Gebel.

Of course, the fifth and sixth paragraphs continued, the Police didn’t

know a thing about the relation between these two men and King Hiram's Sarcophagus. They also lack the classified information that would relate the two murders to the strange ancient Stone you have found in Gebel. They certainly know about dangerous secret agents working in Lebanon, but they might not be aware of the 'BB' and their connection to these murders. This essential lack of information will be mitigated, no more than a few hours from now, for we, the Church, have decided to inform both the Police and the Lebanese Government about it.

Paul felt stunned by the information he had just read in the Kadmus Sequence. He had often wondered about the Padre's special connection to the Church. Although a conformist Priest, he was well versed in esoteric knowledge, something that the Church might have found inappropriate to its teachings. Nonetheless, it seemed that he had some status within the Church.

Loneliness and a heavy flow of thoughts about all that was happening flooded his discomfited mind, as he went about doing errands through the room on that day when, suddenly, he remembered an interesting conversation he had once had with the Padre, concerning his unorthodox beliefs.

It had taken place in the Padre's office.

"Excuse me, Padre, but the other day, I was thinking about the Doctrine of Reincarnation. I wondered if there was any concurrence with such beliefs in Christianity," Paul asked him in all seriousness.

"Yes, there are, Paul," he answered without hesitation; his eyes sparkled with great interest. "Everything is in the Bible, the New Testament, I mean. Such indications are actually mentioned in different places, in Matthew, Peter, and John, but . . . the problem is, nobody reads anymore."

Confounded, the Historian and seeker in Paul sought for tangible proofs. "Could you give me an example, Padre?" He loomed forward expectantly, rested his arms on his knees, and joined his hands, waiting.

Encouraged by his patent interest, Padre Joseph hastened to put on his black-rimmed glasses, and keenly leafed through the pages of the book in front of him. "Well . . . you must know that early Christians truthfully believed in Reincarnation." He paused for a while, and then resumed his search, as he muttered, "It will only take a few seconds . . . It's in here, somewhere . . . uh . . . I will find it. Don't worry."

Seconds later, he snatched off his eyeglasses, and smiled in pleasure, as if he'd found a treasure—a spiritual treasure, long lost within the pages

of a book that millions of people around the world considered holy. Behind him stood a brown bookcase, filled with different sorts of books on Religion, Philosophy, History, Science, and more. The neatness and precision with which they had been settled on the shelves denoted their owner's character.

“And Jesus answered and said unto them,” the Padre read aloud, in a deferential tone, quoting from Matthew 17:11-13. “Elias truly shall come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, that Elias has come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatever they pleased. So also shall the Son of man suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he spoke unto them of John the Baptist.

“Here as well, in Matthew 11:11-15, he had earlier said to his disciples,” the Padre continued, quoting the words of Jesus again, “Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater one than John the Baptist: yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violent attacks, and violent men try to take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; and if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

Paul felt compelled to admire not only the Padre, but also the book in general and the profundity of these words, written in one of the four Gospels. A long silence followed that revelation. Paul was acquainted with the Doctrine of Reincarnation, also known as Metempsychosis, mentioned in several world religion books and traditions like in Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Pythagoreans'. Frankly though, to find it in the teachings of the Christian Master was something very surprising and new to Paul.

“Padre, excuse me,” Paul said, breaking off the silence that had settled in. “I just want to clarify a few things that trouble my mind. I mean, why has Christianity discredited the belief in Reincarnation and . . . when did this start?”

“Well . . .” he nodded, and stood up to grab an impressive book from his bookcase. From the title on the leather cover, the Historian comprehended that the content conferred on Christian history. “The Doctrine of Reincarnation is based on one essential law that says, *‘you reap what you sow’*,” the Padre read, still standing by the bookcase. He

then turned in Paul's direction, and continued, "It clearly states that humans live an eternal life through a journey of evolution and experiences they ought to have on the spiritual, mental, and physical levels. Hence, on the physical plane, humans are responsible for whatever actions they take in their lives, in the present and in the future."

Padre Joseph reverted to his seat behind the desk, and pursued, "In my opinion, this law does not at all contradict the teachings of Jesus and the God he preached about." He paused, taking a breath. "On the contrary, it strengthens the position of humans here on Earth and out there, in the wide Universe. It shows that we have great responsibility to assume in life, for we reap what we sow . . . Henceforth, if we have been sowing well, we should be reaping well, evolving, to finally become what we really are—Sons of God. Jesus always encouraged us to become what we are, in reality. Didn't he?" He looked at Paul piercingly.

"Unfortunately, such a belief was misperceived by the Church as a great danger to the power of the Christian dogma. However, not only Christianity but also Judaism and Islam consider Reincarnation a belief-form of paganism! I wonder why? Anyway, the Doctrine of Reincarnation was absconded around 553 AD, at the Second Synod Council of Constantinople, held under the reign of Emperor Justinian. Strangely though, and without the attendance of the Pope, the Council declared: 'If anyone asserts the fabulous pre-existence of souls and shall submit to the monstrous doctrine that follows from it, let him be excommunicated.' "

A moment of intense reflection passed for Paul, as he slouched back on his seat. "Hmmm . . . Could you please elaborate a little more, say, philosophically on the Doctrine of Reincarnation?"

"I will," Padre Joseph asserted, taking off his glasses. "Our present life is determined by our former one, whether it has been lived in a rightful way, by good virtues, or a wrongful way, by evil deeds. In addition to that, the actions of this present life determine the conditions of the future one, as well. It is a cycle, processed either by our conscious mind, or by our instinctive will," he answered calmly and closed the big book.

"I see!" Paul said. "If we look from afar at the chain that ties that cycle in knots, we would not deem this present life as predestined by God, but rather, by an omnipresent conscious state that links the past, present, and future into one frame of total existence," the Historian suggested philosophically and waited for the Padre's opinion.

Padre Joseph placed his right hand on his forehead, and closed his eyes in deep meditation. Paul seemed to have a comprehensive respect

for the infinite silence that ensued, and the Padre's moment of personal reflection. Finally, he took his hand off his brow, and extended his palm in Paul's direction.

"God is that Omnipresent Power," he asserted firmly. At his guest's lack of response, Padre Joseph took the New Testament in his hands, and read, "Christ said God is Love. He, who cannot love, cannot know God." He removed his eyeglasses swiftly, threw them on the desk, and spoke with great emotion, "These words are beautiful. He is amazing. I mean . . . St. John. Don't you think?"

"Yes, they are, indeed, very nice words, but . . . but if God is Love, then Padre, why does hate exist and killing persist?" Paul caught him by surprise.

"Hate, my son, is not the work of God, nor is killing. Evil comes from us humans, not from God. Do you know why? The answer is simple. It is because we do not know how to love. If we knew that, we would definitely have known God and his Son. Let me tell you what happens after that. Peace would prevail on Earth only when we come to comprehend, and live by this great truth of all time—Love," he explained succinctly, and with that powerful charisma that characterized him, he looked at Paul straight in the eyes. There was no doubt that a knowledgeable person, such as him, knew perfectly well how to put words together—words that appealed to every listener.

Paul smiled. Despite the Padre's unorthodox beliefs—on what is termed as esoteric teachings, refuted by the Church—they did not alter his deep faith in Christ, as Light of the world, the Path, Truth, and Life. "He is the true prototype of the Kosmic and divine man. He called upon us, not to be slaves, but rather, to be *free!*" the Padre had often said.

Then Paul recalled that he had not asked the Padre about the Holy Grail, a religious Christian symbol he had wanted to know about for many years.

"What is the Holy Grail, Padre?"

"Oh! The Holy Grail!" He sounded really surprised, his eyebrows lifted as he wondered. Then, he slouched back on his seat, and advanced, "The Holy Grail was the sacred cup used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. Legend relates that Joseph of Arimathea, a Christian adept, kept the Grail with him after the last supper ended. During the Crucifixion, he filled it with the blood of Jesus, bleeding on the cross. After departing for Britain, Joseph kept the Cup of Life, and passed it down from generation to generation in his family."

“Legend also relates that the Knights of the Round Table, who appeared in Britain around the 6th century AD, had endorsed a secret holy mission: the quest for the Holy Grail. From among them emerged a few prominent figures, like the semi-legendary King Arthur, Lancelot of the Lake, Merlin the Enchanter, and Parsifal,” he concluded.

The discussion between Paul and the Padre had become engrossing. Paul took several drags from his cigarette, and smiled. Padre Joseph, very well versed in Christian esoteric knowledge, filled him in on a few more details on the Holy Grail, saying that the Blood in the Grail meant the Spirit in the Body. It was a spiritual search! The Historian paused, contemplating that prospect. Those last words meant a lot to him. Time flew by. Almost two hours had passed before Paul finally stood up, and left the office with a tranquil and contented mind, and the Padre made sure, as always, to bid him farewell with the blessings of the Virgin Lady!

Coming back from his reverie, Paul walked slowly to the balcony of his shelter in Batroun, put his elbows on the banister, and enjoyed the view of the mild sea waves crushing gently on the rocks a few meters beneath him. His watch marked 07:17 PM. In spite of all the tranquility he perceived, four words kept coming back from memory, pending in his mind, and haunting his present.

“The Cup of Life,” he muttered under his breath.

Even though Padre Joseph had not made any connection between the Holy Grail and the Sarcophagus—neither in the coded messages he had emailed earlier, nor during the course of that conversation, long ago—Paul could not stop thinking about it the next morning on the road down to the Beirut National Museum. There was no doubt about it, one of the paragraphs he had decoded, using the Kadmus Sequence, still lingered unequivocally in his mind. *The Police don't know a thing about the relation between these two men and King Hiram's Sarcophagus. They also lack the classified information that would relate the two murders to the strange ancient Stone you have found in Gebel.*

Once inside—just over an hour later—Paul hurried to the exact spot where the Sarcophagus had been exhibited. It was not there! Immediately, he questioned one of the guards at the Museum who informed him that the director of the Museum had recently relocated the Sarcophagus into the ‘Restoration Hall’, further down to the right.

“What?” Paul spat out in outrage. “You mean . . . I cannot see it?”

“I'm afraid not,” he answered politely. “It needs to go through some repairs . . . and please, Sir,” he added with power, “Could you lower your

voice?”

“But . . . it’s important. I have to see it!”

“That cannot be possible,” he sounded adamant.

Paul turned his head in disbelief, and moved away like a broken knight who had just lost a battle. *It seems the situation is very critical*, his mind considered in total confusion.

“Sir!” the guard called, as Paul reached the exit door. “The item you wanted to see will be back on display in a month or two.”

Hearing this was not pleasant to the Historian. He continued out, jumped into his blue Jeep, and drove back to Batroun. An hour later, he lay back on his bed, looking pensively at the ceiling. And then, it dawned on him like a flash, as he remembered the meeting with Padre Joseph, when it had all started, after he had arranged everything for them with Dr. Nabil Hourani—the director of the Museum.

The Church is at work . . . Paul grinned.

The Mystery Chamber, Gebel
Saturday, October 30, 10:15 PM

It was Friday afternoon when Paul received yet another email from Padre Joseph with three encrypted paragraphs. The first was about the investigation the Police had been meticulously undertaking, and the hidden message revealed that they had found a strange mark, branded with a heated iron on the victims' chests.



Police experts in ancient symbols had suggested that the odd mark they'd found on the bodies resembled the 18th letter of the Hebrew Alphabet: *Tsaddi*, (צ).

It took him about ten seconds to realize that these events were unfolding in a very mysterious and perilous way. His life could be at stake, so were the life of his friends and the Padre's. His heart throbbed as he felt the blood draining from his face. He could hear his own breathing, as it dawned on him that this letter could mean death. "Death!" he wondered aloud.

Without another thought, Paul stood up, left the table where he had his laptop, and walked to the balcony. He just wanted to be in a place where he could breathe easier, see clearer, and think more calmly. He just wanted to pull himself together. *I can't possibly back off now!* he thought again. Although death was a tough enemy to defeat or escape, he strongly believed that he had succeeded in escaping from it back in Montreux.

Back in front of his laptop, minutes later, he began decoding the second and third paragraphs, in which the Padre asked him to go to the

Archaeological Site in Gebel, and get into the underground chamber of the Great Phoenician Temple, without being noticed by the Police, who were guarding the place. He was to look for the Cup of Life, placed on the Great Altar, as the sketch on the Stone had shown. The last sentence said, 'Should you find it, Paul, take it immediately, and keep it in a safe place away from Gebel.'

A shudder ran down his back. Paul couldn't believe the complexity of the mission Padre Joseph had entrusted him with at such a critical time. He left the house, and walked down to the beach. Perched on the rock that had hosted one of his former moments of meditation, located almost in the middle of the sandy shore, he observed the orange-red disk sliding down to meet the Mediterranean Sea. An encounter of the two elements of Nature occurred—Fire and Water. In a way, similar to that of the Pythagorean brothers, the Historian silently indulged in an exam of conscience, and moments passed.

At the first signs of nightfall, on the second day, he decided to face with courage whatever was hidden underneath the Great Phoenician Temple. Surprisingly, Padre Joseph's voice murmured soothingly in his mind, and at once, he resolutely walked into the Archaeological Site, surpassing the Police squad, installed there to secure the area, and hid behind an ancient wall, close to the ruins of the Phoenician Temple.

From there, Paul tried to assess the exact location of the entrance stone that lead to the underground chamber. This stone he knew well, for he had marked it with a special symbol, which no one else would recognize. In fact, he had been the one to cover the hole, after receiving the Padre's call, beckoning them to leave.

When the blue sky turned dark-blue, and a few lit spots appeared, twinkling now and then through its infinite surface, Paul crawled down towards the Temple, and lied down next to the stone, hearing footsteps approaching from behind. He lingered breathless for some time until silence reigned again.

Silently and cautiously, he began digging through the ground and around the stone, using only a tiny light from his mobile phone, a small hand pick and a trowel, which Maya had inattentively left behind, in the midst of their urgent escape, last week. Half an hour later, he had managed to move the stone enough, to allow him a narrow entrance into the chamber. Realizing he was on the verge of success, he tied himself to a thick brown rope he had previously fixed to a large rock nearby, shoved the stone farther away, and slinked into the hole, a meter down. Still

hanging, he pushed the stone shut from the inside, leaving a small gap for the rope to pass through, then sloped easily all the way down, until his feet touched the ground.

“I’m Ok . . . I’m Ok!” he muttered, assuring himself.

There was a long silence, as he held his breath in apprehension, wrapped in total darkness. He then took the flare that he had in his jacket and flashed it in front of him.

“Oh! Mother of God!” he uttered, and the thought reached his ears in sporadic beats that added to his dread. Paul gasped for air, quicker, deeper . . .

The rotten smell that met his senses conveyed the first warning that he was trespassing into a long-forgotten past, perhaps thousands of years old, forbidden underground. Paul waved the flare on the ground, revealing layers of dust, patches of mud and, here and there, a multihued floor, lying beneath.

Mosaics!? he mulled over, as he sank to his knees in a swift motion, frantically sweeping away the dirt. The exposed scene rendered him speechless and motionless, as he gazed in total awe, at the Mosaic image of the legendary Phoenix, holding a Cedar branch on its right talon, and engaging in what looked to be an eternal combat against an ugly devilish beast, trying to take hold of a world map.

“What’s that on the walls?” he mumbled, breaking his idle state of bewilderment. His words, although barely audible, bounced back in an uncanny echo that agitated him, “*Walls . . . walls . . . walls . . .*”

He gasped aloud. Amused by his instincts of self-preservation, he shuddered. His pupils widened, to take in the surroundings. The first thrill of discovery dimmed, in light of this new, bloodcurdling situation. Paul swallowed with difficulty. Spiders had spun their webs all along the walls, capturing all sorts of hideous insects, from flies to cockroaches. Even small reptiles couldn’t escape the spiders’ many traps. And some insect’s wings were still fluttering. A few serpents’ skins lay scattered around, or hanging loose from the crevices between the ancient stones of what, he believed, was a copy of the Ritual Chamber of the Great Phoenician Temple. He took a deep breath.

Out of irritation, surely not fear, he unconsciously shook his hands up and down, as if something had stuck to them. He hastened to reassure himself with a forced grin that he would get rid of this feeling in a moment. He flashed some light on the rusted torches he’d noticed hanging from the walls, and proceeded to clean up the walls in

spasmodic, random movements, revealing bizarre shapes, numbers, and inscriptions.

“Wow! It’s beautiful!” he exclaimed then heaved a sigh. He experienced the Historian’s sense of awe, in admiration of the amazing work of the Ancients.

In the middle of the room stood an Altar of cubical shape, flanked on either side by an odd pillar, just as the sketch had shown, but something strange caught his attention and perplexed him. On the roughly pointed top of the left pillar rested a golden stone. It sparkled in a yellowish light, adding even more light to the Mystery Chamber. The other stone, perching on the top of the right pillar, glowed in a reddish-purple light, somewhat similar to a crimson-rosy color, a precious stone, a kind of ruby.

Yet, something about the tarnished wall behind the Great Altar attracted his interest even further. He realized that there was more to that façade. In frantic expectation, he shoved away the spiders’ webs, thick with ages, and nervously dug his shaky fingers in the patches of soil, hardened by time. Paul could almost perceive his heartbeats, echoing in the arcane chamber; heartbeats that almost came to a standstill, when he stepped back to scrutinize his discovery.

The ancient wall revealed what looked like a Phoenician priest, skillfully painted, performing a sacred rite, the finest ever, that of Wine and Bread, here shown, lifting his hands towards the ceiling, as in sacrifice. Paul looked up in that direction, and was surprised to see that the ceiling stretched out in a perfectly clean condition! Amazingly, time had spared the beauty of the painted blue sky above him, enhanced with the Zodiac. The Taurus Constellation took shape, predominantly, among all other constellations, and finally, the seven heavenly bodies in a rotational movement.

“The Constellation of Taurus . . . The celestial sign of Thot-Taautus . . .” Paul whispered aloud, remembering his friend, Jim, and marveling at how the eye of the artist in him had been able to perceive it, in the odd inscription written on the Stone.

He stood speechless with admiration, gawking all around the place, where a fine harmony of colors; purple, green, and turquoise pervaded. Astonished at his discovery, and the twist of fate that had brought him here, he reveled in the presence of a unique work of the Ancients’ most refined art.

A resurrection of the past! A treasure! he thought, and the sound of

his thoughts produced a bizarre resonance in his whole being. An impression of *déjà vu* dazzled him unexpectedly. He breathed deeply, trying to concentrate, in order to extract from the depths of his memories images similar to these. From a time, far away, shapes and colors surged, swiveled, and materialized, as his mind dazed before the similarities. He gasped, mystified, thinking about the sketch on the Stone and the Seven-Pillared Temple of the Kabbirim.

Time came to a halt as Paul came closer, carefully, to expand on his investigation, analyzing the precious golden and purple stones. His intuition told him that there must be something hidden here, somewhere on the surface of the Pillars. He searched for some engraved inscription, anything that would confirm his hidden expectation. His moves became slower, cautious not to miss any sign, his hands sweeping the surface of the Right Pillar, removing the dust, as he explored it, bit by bit, respectfully. His fingers halted at an indistinct shape. Time stood still. *The vine!?* On the Left Pillar, *an ear of wheat!?* he wondered. Uncertain, he drew closer, in order to scrutinize the engraving, when he suddenly heard a mysterious sound coming from the Great Altar, standing almost three meters away in the center of the Pillars.

Paul seemed troubled as he walked towards it, his mind now focused on the beautifully ancient, cubical shape ahead of him. There was no sound at all, total silence. He wasn't even sure he had heard anything in the first place. Perhaps, after all, the mystic chamber had affected him in some way, or maybe a metaphysical phenomenon had directed his unconscious mind towards the Altar.

Reverently, almost religiously, he stood there, waiting for something to happen. It was then that he saw it. There, on the Great Altar's perfectly smooth surface rested a Cedar-wood box, supported by an old iron stand.

"What is that?" he asked himself aloud with a frown, as he rubbed his jaw in perplexity. "This is a box, not a cup," he muttered under his breath. "Could it be . . . the Cup of Life!?" came his own reply in a hesitantly bewildered voice.

Silence prevailed for few moments, before Paul managed to walk further ahead towards the Altar, to observe the box from all sides without touching it. Minutes passed as if in slow motion. Then, with gentle blows, he cleared the ancient dust off the box, and a superb aroma of Cedar wood gushed out, alerting all his senses.

"Shall I take it off?" he asked himself, speculating.

Completely hesitant, his hand faltered. A mixture of anxiety, fear, and

excitement invaded him, impeding him from any other thought. His mind stimulated his imagination, which expanded in its own dimension. Then, without any further delay, he tried to lift the box from its iron stand, but it did not budge. Yet, suddenly, as if his efforts had triggered a secret engine of some sort, a shade materialized slowly on the lid of the box, clearly outlining the shape of what appeared to be, the palm of a human hand, the right hand!

A loud gasp echoed throughout the Mystery Chamber. Dumbfounded, he remained completely still for a few seconds. However, the Historian in him began to think like the Alchemist in his teammate, Youmna, believing that—since the box could not be the Cup of Life he was searching for—it could be naught but the holder of the Philosopher’s Stone she had been searching for all her life. *Yet, is there any difference between both mysterious objects?* he mused.

Wondering how this had happened, how the mark had appeared when it had not been there a moment ago; he started to think like the Alchemist again. *It might be a chemical process*, he thought. *A Para-psychological phenomenon!* he speculated. It seemed to Paul that when he had tried to move the box, shaking it slightly, something chemical might have evolved within, and hence, have caused the human palm to surface on the lid, after arising from lethargy.

A few seconds passed before it dawned on him like a thunderbolt. “The palm of the hand is the key to open the box,” he mumbled, reasoning.

“Shall I open it?” he asked himself with anxiety in his voice.

Paul was watchful, yet his curiosity proved stronger than his uncertainty; a brilliant idea had formed in his mind. His right palm might fit the mark on the Cedar box. *There is no way to back off now*, he figured.

He held his breath, as he edged closer, and all too slowly stretched out his hand, wavered a moment, in which he swallowed audibly, and then hastened to place his palm on the mark. The lid split open soundlessly, moments later. A breeze of ancient air seeped out. Out of the Cedar box, a tablet of marble emerged. Bemused, he swiftly sprinted back, and gasped at the phenomenon that unfurled slowly on the tablet. One by one, the letters of the Phoenician Alphabet took shape, as if an invisible hand was drawing them for him.

Blazed with light, one letter—the 18th—floated up to the ceiling, in strange circular movements. The light it cast inundated the Ritual Room,

and dazzled his eyes. The Capricorn constellation that the Ancient artificers had depicted on the *lowest* part of the blue sky, above his head, shone fiercely. At once, the Mystery Chamber beamed with a heavy, alarming presence.

Hanging in the air, amid the constellation, the letter of Death, *Tsaddi*, darted towards him like a ball of fire! It stopped abruptly in front of him, faced him, and then hovered quietly above him. There was a different kind of sensation inside the Mystery Chamber that Paul felt—a unique and weird sense of strain. He totally ignored the outcome of the next phase, yet his eyes were still open, vacant.

What was the ball of fire waiting for? He thought. His heart pumped faster. When he least expected it, a moment later, the light magnified, blinding him, and dispatching him into the unknown as a gloomy silence filled the place.

The creature from hell
Saturday, October 30, 11:06 PM

Turning and spinning at an extremely high speed, the ball of fire suddenly exploded and gave birth to a dwindling human-like form and to a great darkness. Paul leaped back, horrified. His heart felt whacked by the explosion and by the hazy human figure under the dim light of the torches. The blood seemed to have frozen in his veins. With great efforts, he gathered his courage and strength to face the nameless entity with such an atypical human form. From under its black hood, two shafts of light pierced Paul's eyes, attempting to penetrate his mind . . . *Or was it my soul he had aimed at?* he thought.

At the strength of its stare, where creepy shadows alternated with fiery sparks, Paul promptly lowered his. A filthy smell swamped the Ritual Room, nearly suffocating him. Paul breathed repeatedly, panting for clean air, but the presence of the entity became more and more offensive, and in an instinct of survival, Paul braced himself to defend the territory he claimed as his, against the incursion of a terrorist force.

Was it an illusion? Yet . . . it looked so real. Was it Satan? How can I succeed in getting it out of here? his thoughts rushed in torment.

"You have something that I need," the voice rose, throaty, metallic.

The Historian swallowed hard, but stood firm on his ground, wondering if the entity could read the hidden terror on his face.

"If you give me what I need, I'll give you everything in return," its voice drifted gruffly through the short distance that separated them.

"I know you're a Historian who travels the world, to speak about your research. I can make this easy for you. I can make you succeed in attracting the minds of the intellectual community all around the globe. Isn't that what you want?" it asked in an alluring tone of voice that seemed irresistible in its temptation. "I can offer you international exposure, allow you access to the mainstream marketplace all over the

world, and write your name in the Hall of Fame.”

Paul did nothing but remain motionless. He had the impression that the black robe, which draped the strange entity, camouflaged something underneath, yet he could not fathom what it was exactly. Instantaneously, the entity sputtered angrily at Paul’s silence, obviously impatient. Then, in a swift motion that left Paul in dismay, the entity clapped its hands sturdily, transporting them—in the blink of an eye—out of the Mystery Chamber, and onto the top of a small mountain.

“Never mind! I can do better than that,” it said. “Do you see this?” it pointed at one of the most beautiful mansions Paul had ever seen in his life, or even in his wildest dreams. “I can give it to you!”

Paul glanced at the entity with doubt and caution. *Who could it be, to express such generosity? Who might this entity be that seemed to have such great power of control?* These questions harassed his reasoning.

“Oh . . . oh, I can actually give you a lot more,” it spat with arrogance, before it pivoted on itself, clapped its hands again, and his conjuring power shoved them right into a showroom, where the most luxurious cars’ latest models lay displayed.

“Just pick any your heart desires, and it’s yours,” it loudly proclaimed, its hands opened towards the various models. “What else do you want? A yacht? It’s yours,” its hands waved in the air, and a luxurious yacht appeared in front of them. “No? What then? A jet? You can have that too.” It enticed Paul again with a glamorous, private jet. “Maybe both, I suppose . . . ah!” It sneered and snorted, watching the temptation, as it coursed through the man. Paul did not answer, too startled to do so.

In fact, this luring presentation rendered Paul breathless. It puzzled him to the very last thought. The materialistic offers the entity had tried to coax Paul with seemed to have succeeded for a moment. For under the great power of manipulation, he vacillated on the dangerous edge of surrender. His imagination met in line with a luring collection of prospects, images, and feelings. He fancied himself driving a luxurious car on that splendid road to his glamorous mansion up in the mountains, creating—along his way—an impact in the minds of others. He delighted, already, in their expressions of awe and admiration.

Why not? Sailing my yacht across the ocean, and docking at every harbor around the world? Why not? Flying my private jet up in the air, mighty and free, as in my loftiest dreams, and looking down at the world beneath me, so small, contemptible and controllable! Paul felt them, down to his neurons: these pleasurable sensations of power, no

man ever resisted.

What else do I want, really? he inwardly rebuked his own uncertainty. His eyes widened then closed tight on these wonders. He felt the nameless form looming forward, as he flashed his eyes open, meeting the fiery sparks of the entity.

“What if I grant you the presidency of a huge company? You would then own both power and money,” the words it uttered wheezed out with a stinking smell right into the man’s face.

It does not give up easily, does it? Paul’s inner voice retorted from within the smoke of chimeras, suffocating his brainpower. He fantasized a life of power and commodities where hardships were laid to rest, a carefree existence where he would never again struggle for survival.

At what cost? Ask it! At what cost? his inner voice hissed, almost inaudible now. *Right . . . the entity did say it needed something I own. What could that precious thing be, for it to grant me such wonderful contributions in exchange?* he wondered.

“I’ll tell you what!” It jerked Paul’s attention back to its exploitation. “Forget about even working as head of that mega-company. I will open an account for you with unlimited amounts of money and large quantities of jewels; you can keep in the treasury safe of the bank!”

Paul’s intake of air barely reached his lungs. In a dizzying clap of its hands, the entity launched them inside a bank, right at the doorway of a sumptuous office. ‘Seth Servitor, General Manager,’ he read the inscription on the golden door.

“All you need to do is come inside with me, and sign one little piece of paper,” it said encouragingly, giving Paul a pleading smile.

Only a signature? Paul marveled. *Without having to work, to produce, or to do anything, I would live, rich as a King!* he rejoiced secretly at the tempting notion of sitting down, relaxing all day, and not giving a damn about anything. *Why not?* Thus, under such irresistible expectations and overexcitement, he pushed the door open, and entered. The entity followed him to the desk, akin a ghostly shadow. The Bank Manager, whose features he could barely notice in his thrill, smiled as he handed him an official paper and a golden pen. Paul smiled back, grabbed the pen, stooped to sign, and then, halted at once.

Something alarming took hold of him indeed. He heeded some whispers, yet too softly and too vaguely for him to comprehend their meaning. He turned abruptly, and met with angry impatience in the cinder-like eyes of the nameless form. Paul held the beast’s anger for a

second then asked, dubiously, “If I sign now, it means I will have everything you offered?”

“Yes!” the reply came swiftly.

“Fine, but what is that thing you want in return?”

Rage flashed from its cindery eyes, under that hideous black hood then vanished at once, as it took control of its temper. It attempted a meek smile, and in a velvety voice that bestowed Paul with more apprehension than comfort, it confirmed that it needed nothing from him. Not persuaded at all, Paul stood his ground, and insisted to know his part of the deal.

The entity shoved its hood back irately, and nailed Paul with a ferocious glare. The man instantly recoiled at the hideous scene that unfurled in front of him. With its patience gone, it bristled and fumed like a monster; a monster it had physically become, absconding its previous human-like shape. Smoke puffed out from its wide nostrils. Its eyes turned blood-red, and two horns spurted out from its head. Repulsive noise wheezed through the distorted teeth of its mouth. The sound of an explosion, resulting from the claps of its hands, followed them back to the Mystery Chamber.

“Give me the *word!*” the creature from hell screamed in mighty wrath, and the walls trembled. So did Paul. “Give me the ineffable secret name, or I shall break you into little pieces.”

Paul fell back. Terror crawled all over his skin. His lips moved to speak, but no words came out. He gasped for air, but the creature seemed to have had engulfed it all, to increase the power of its scream. Paul’s lungs ached. The hammering of his heartbeat painfully blocked his ears. He didn’t know what the creature had meant by the *word*, but he guessed it could mean the denial of his faith in Jesus Christ, and so, with an extraordinary exertion, he retained the *word*, and summoned up all the strength he could muster for his survival. Against all odds, he firmly stood up, back on his feet, and braced himself to fight. “Wretched!” he countered back.

A stunned silence ensued.

They each held their ground: the faithful man and the beast from hell. Their eyes initiated a fiery war. Then, the creature pointed at Paul with its long, bony fingers, in an attempt to hypnotize his mind and steal the *word*. It seemed to have cunningly planned every stage of that movement, and stood there; waiting for Paul to breakdown, as it furiously probed his memory.

With a desperate effort, Paul amassed every remnant of his dangerously dwindling energy, to resist the powerfully penetrating stare of his enemy, hoping for its demise. However, the creature had previously read his mind. *He could do it again!* Paul's heart shivered at that prospect. He knew then that the only way to win was for him to block the beast out completely. Yet, as the minutes ticked away, Paul began to feel an unbearable distortion of his perception. It soon evolved into a terrible headache. The intricate network of the narrow synapses of his brain weakened alarmingly, and his brainpower wavered under the invisible pressure.

At this point of infirmity, Paul detected nothing more than a blurred image of the horrid entity, standing in front of him. His breath was stifled, as if someone or something was strangling him in the invading darkness. His energy waned. Numbness took hold of his limbs, and spread through his body to the very essence of his existence. He reached the point of no return . . . almost at the edge of losing consciousness . . . losing the war.

Paul collapsed.

The Guardian of the Chamber
Sunday, October 31, 10:10 AM

The following day, or so he thought, Paul woke up from the vision he had the night before with a minor headache, yet he felt light, as if a great deal of weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He browsed his surroundings, totally disoriented, the setting unfamiliar to him. The heavenly bodies had disappeared from the ceiling, and the walls were barren of inscriptions and paintings. In fact, the walls he saw now were just ordinary walls, in an ordinary room with a window, a door, a chest of drawers, a closet, a bedside table, and a bed, in which he rested. *A bed! Could this be my bedroom?* he questioned, startled. *Did I dream all those events?* he wondered.

Confusion nailed him to the bed, and a sense of loss overtook him for a long while, until the door opened slowly and noiselessly. A female silhouette moved across the room towards the window. The woman slid the curtains open, and a vivid light rushed in throughout the room.

“Ah . . .,” she gasped, as soon as she turned to him, revealing a noble face of about fifty. “You’re awake. Praise the Almighty Lord!” She lowered her green eyes in deference, to perform the sign of the cross on her chest, and then drew nearer. Her voice, soft and serene, added in explanation, “We were worried about you. We thought, after we’d brought you in, and made sure that you were not dead, that you’d be in a coma, but we never lost hope for your awakening. Thank God we did not! You’ve been sleeping for nine days.” She sat graciously on the chair near the bed, and took his hand in hers in a tender manner that took him by surprise. She sighed softly, observing his face, and then imparted somberly, “We found you amidst the ruins of the Great Phoenician Temple.”

Paul remembered at once; the ruins of the Great Phoenician Temple; the Mystery Chamber, the vision, the creature from hell. *Am I dead? Is this Heaven? It cannot be, since the woman had just said that I’d been*

sleeping for nine days. Who is she? Is she real? Or is this just another trick from that vision? What is going on here? How did I disappear from the Mystery Chamber underground, and appear among the ruins above ground?

As if reading his mind, she rushed to say in a polite tone, “Oh, I’m sorry. I should have introduced myself earlier.” With a charming motion, she adjusted the silky blue veil on her head. Her beautiful face held the gracious features of a Lady. Paul gazed at her with respectful admiration. “I’m Mariam. Youssef, my husband, was the one that found you, one early morning. He thought at first that you were dead, but he did not see a death mark on you, so he brought you here immediately. What a great day it is today,” she declared in a light tone that dumbfounded Paul. She stood up, and put her balmy hand on his forehead. Her gesture was as tender as the smile she offered, while adding, “You seem better today, and hopefully, you will be perfectly recovered, and back on your feet again in a few more days.”

While still in shock about what he had experienced the night before, and what he had just heard, he finally managed to thank Mariam for the help she had offered. “And, please, thank your kind husband on my behalf.” He hesitated for a second, before the benevolence of her gracious green eyes, and then asked for clarification, “How did he . . . uh . . . what did he mean by a death mark on me?”

“I simply don’t know . . . but don’t worry about that now, my son. I will be back in a few minutes with a hot cup of tea. It will do you good.” Having stated that in a motherly way, she moved out; Paul could clearly hear her, calling her husband, “Gabriel . . . Gabriel! He is awake.”

The veil Mariam wore, in the ethnic style of some Lebanese villages, reminded him of his late grandmother, who used to wear a similar veil. Mariam reminded him, as well, of his Aunt, the nun. The sound of footsteps behind the door brought him back from his memories and made him turn his eyes in the direction of the sound. He held his breath then exhaled audibly, after seeing a man of about sixty, entering the bedroom with a joyous expression on his face.

“Oh . . . Thank God you’re awake!” His exclamation held all the sincerity Paul could read in his sharp, umber-colored eyes. The man was of middle-height, and had a long tanned face.

“I’m Youssef,” he said, introducing himself. “This is my house, and you’re welcome to stay as long as you want.” He grinned wittily.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Paul answered smiling. “I’m Paul.”

He paused for a moment. "Thank you for saving me," he added.

Youssef smiled back at his guest, as he approached the window, looking out. "The weather is fine for a little walk today. What do you think, Paul?" Youssef gave him a look that inspired confidence.

"I'm all for it, Youssef. I guess a short walk would be great, especially after nine days of sleep." He chuckled.

"Great, after you drink your tea then. My wife prepares it very well and she will be here in a minute."

"Can't wait for that, she said the tea will do me good," Paul said with a smile. "Oh, by the way, I heard your wife calling out for Gabriel. Who would that be?" he asked with curiosity.

"I am Gabriel."

"What?" Paul shook his head in confusion. "I don't truly understand."

"Well, the general public knows me as Youssef. Gabriel is my name in the Society of Keepers," he explained.

"Society of Keepers?" the historian wondered, more puzzled than before.

"Yes. I'll tell you all about it when you are fully recovered. Now, take it easy, and let's enjoy the tea," he turned his attention to his wife, Mariam, entering the room with a silver tea tray. She looked peacefully contented.

Paul adjusted his position, straightening up in bed so he could enjoy the aromatic tea, and was soon absorbed by the story of Youssef, alias Gabriel. He related how he had found him unconscious, among the ruins of the Great Phoenician Temple. In a pleasant way that contradicted the seriousness of the occurrence, he described his shock at deeming Paul dead, his hope at the prospect of survival, and Mariam's apprehension when he had arrived with his guest. In spite of the light mood and their amusing jokes, Paul comprehended the anxiety they had experienced, while attending to him, and waiting for his recovery. Their sincere smiles were contagious, so was their laughter, and as all three enjoyed several cups of tea, Paul relaxed in the amiable family atmosphere.

After that, Youssef and Paul left the house for a stroll, and after a while, sat on a nice wooden bench. Bathed by the sun, Paul looked around, inspecting his surroundings. The house, a beautifully designed wooden cottage, was not too far from the Archaeological Site. In fact, it was perched on a small hill, overlooking the Site itself. The setting made Paul feel safe, away from the 'BB's secret agents. *They cannot find me here*, he thought, and a smile of satisfaction drew on his face. His mind seemed troubled with something, though, as his memory came back to

him, little by little.

“I remember the Mystery Chamber well, the scary vision I had there, and how I fell hard to the floor. Honestly, I just don’t understand how you found me among the ruins!” Paul inquired, perplexed.

“In fact, I didn’t.” Youssef’s answer came, quicker than Paul had expected, as if the strange man was waiting for this question. “I haven’t told my wife about the Mystery Chamber, for her own safety.” He paused, thinking of something; the love for his wife showed in his eyes. “It’s there that I found you, Paul, lying on the ground, almost dead. Shocked by the scene, I instantly ripped your shirt open, to see if you held the mark, but it was not there. Assured of your safety, I brought you home with me.” He looked at Paul with a smile of affection.

Paul smiled back at the old man who had saved his life, happy to be alive. “What do you know about the mark?” he managed to ask.

“Later, Paul. Later.”

“Who are you?”

He moved closer to Paul, almost looming over him, his face bright like the powerful Mediterranean sun, his piercing eyes staring into Paul’s eyes with a flicker of intelligence in them, and the words came . . . close to his ears, “I am the Guardian of the Chamber!” His voice vibrated like the blissful sound of an ancient bell.

Two days later, after breakfast, feeling much better, Paul excused himself and went for a long walk. He needed to see the open fields and feel the burning sun on his skin. The fresh air had an immediate effect on him, and he felt content that the pain had completely vanished, and that his consciousness had recovered well. He walked along the sandy beach to a familiar rock, which had hosted many of his meditations during the excavation period, and there he sat, his eyes lost in the vast sea ahead. He began to recall clearly now, the Mystery Chamber, and the ugly creature from hell. *Oh . . . how could I have lost the greatest battle of all, the battle against evil?* He fretted, in defeat. His shoulders felt heavy, too heavy for him to handle. At that aching moment, he wished for the sea to wash the anxiety away from his soul, and wipe out of his recent past that ugly memory of his downfall.

He watched the game of the waves, breaking softly on the beach for long hours, until the sound turned to a musical play that soothed his temper, and raised his spirits. It made him realize that losing a battle was not a complete defeat of the will. No matter the complication of geometrical forms, water would still defeat their complexities, and resolve

their problems.

He smiled in silence, and then, a gentle whisper hummed in his ears serene echoes from a long distance. He imagined them coming from the depths of the Mediterranean Sea, after crossing time and space. Tranquility inhabited his being. "I want to be like the water," he whispered back. Like water, he wanted to be transparent and flexible, maneuvering around any possible blockade that might hinder his journey. He wanted to defeat Satan if, indeed, that nameless form he had confronted had been Satan!

Then, precipitously, in a series of flashing images, his past appeared before his eyes, like a movie, the way some people experience it on the brink of death. Almost all of his experiences, from the earliest moments of his childhood to the present, rushed through his inner realm within moments. However, he was well alive, and safely breathing in the gleeful air of Gebel.

He breathed . . .

Instants later, Youssef's voice broke into the peaceful silence from behind him, "Here you are! I have been looking everywhere for you. Would you mind if I join you?" he asked politely, as he stepped nearer.

"No . . . not at all, please do."

Youssef sat by his side, and gazed wordlessly at the Sea, his eyes impenetrable with that mysterious look of his, a mystery that still puzzled Paul. Maybe he would come to discover it, one day, and know who he really was, and why he carried that other name, Gabriel. He had promised to tell his guest all about the Society of Keepers, and Paul had hoped that, in time, he would come to learn all he could about that mystery.

"It is a glorious day," he finally uttered then inhaled deeply with an expression of contentment.

Now was the time. Paul sensed it, as his mind clearly reminisced about the Mystery Chamber, and the vision of the letter of death. Then, a fretful thought taunted him. Had his defeat to evil snatched away the gift, granted to him, as a Historian, by time and knowledge?

Guardian of the Chamber . . . Society of Keepers! The correlation astonished him, as he intently observed the man at his side, hoping for a clue that would lead him to discover the mystery behind his puzzling character. As if reading Paul's mind, Youssef turned a serious look at him, and then his expression became gentle.

Now is the time, Paul realized with an inward knot of apprehension.

"It has been a long time, generation after generation, since my family

settled down here, by the shore of Gebel,” he began with a tone of nostalgia. “It’s a legacy we take pride in keeping alive, ever since my ancestors retained the honorable mission of protecting the Secret. In childhood, I learned from my father the story of that Secret, which, in turn, I conveyed to my children, in order for them to transmit it to their offspring, who will one day do the same, and so on, in perpetuity. The reason that compelled me to share this with you today, lays in your valiant survival of the dangerous letter *Tsaddi*.”

Along these lines, Paul understood, without the shadow of a doubt, that Gabriel knew all about the vision. His avowal of the Secret, which his family had protected all through their lives, started to, somehow, make sense to Paul, who realized that he didn’t need to question the man, as his revelation had but started.

“Very few among those who enter the Mystery Chamber, and face *Tsaddi*, are able to come out of it sane and alive,” he declared with a swift glimpse of approbation towards his guest.

Paul felt choked, taken by an unexpected rush of emotion that held him by the throat. “I gather you know about the death of the Architect and the Archaeologist? They both had the mark of *Tsaddi* branded on their chests, although they hadn’t entered the Mystery Chamber,” he managed to ask, “I found it a bit unusual, I mean, how could their deaths be related to the letter when both men were found dead in their homes!” He looked confused.

Gabriel shook his head in negation, “They did not die because of a *direct* connection to the letter,” he paused, “Extreme horror,” he said evenly, and Paul could read a hint of sorrow in his eyes. “They were strangled and then had their throats cut.”

“Oh my God!” Paul, perched on that rock, almost lost his balance at the realization of the brutality of the crime. He had learned from the Padre—whose relationship to him, he chose to keep undisclosed for now—all the secret information about the ‘BB’ and their victim’s deaths by strangulation. What he had not even had a clue about was the fact that they had also been decapitated. He turned to Youssef in misery. His voice revealed the tremors in his body, as he finally managed his next question, “Who would do such a thing?”

His inquiry lingered for a moment, during which he could still vividly recall losing his ability to breathe, during his struggle against that gruesome creature in the vision of *Tsaddi*; a strangling sensation he was not likely to forget for a long time.

“A very dangerous group, known as Seth Servitors,” Youssef replied, breaking into his thoughts.

Seth Servitor! he gasped for air, recalling one scene from his recent vision, where, inside the bank, at the doorway of the sumptuous office, he read the inscription on the golden door that said, ‘Seth Servitor, General Manager.’ Lost in his thoughts, or perhaps in the vision, he finally queried, “Who are they?”

“It is unwise to presume that all General Managers of banks are Seth Servitors,” he commented with a hint of irony, as if he knew what Paul had gone through. “But, anyone who tries to buy your soul, or steal the *word* from you is surely one of them. ‘Seth Servitors’ means ‘Satan’s Servants’, because Seth (Set) is the enemy of Osiris. You will learn everything about them, later on. Let me . . .”

“And . . . do the Police know about it?” he asked, interrupting his host.

Gabriel remained silent before he finally said, “Yes, we’ve exchanged some information with them through high channels, but I strongly recommend that you keep it a secret.”

Paul stood still silent. The echo of this revelation had a great impact on his mind. It became too confusing for him to understand the situation any longer, as he came to realize the likely connection between the Guardian of the Chamber and Padre Joseph. Then a strange thought flashed through his mind. *Is there a secret organization at work against the ‘Seth Servitors’ or the ‘BB’?* He was not sure.

“Are there any suspects? Perhaps potential perpetrators?” he asked; not certain if there really were any.

“They are using only a couple of people as decoys. Meanwhile, the Police are gathering as much information as they can, and sufficient evidence on the ‘Seth Servitors’, so they’ll be able to raid them at the right moment, and ultimately put them to justice.”

“Aha . . .”

“Anyway, let me continue telling you about the Secret of Gebel and its Mystery Chamber. Very few are acquainted with this Secret, and very few they must remain, at least for the time being. You must realize the magnitude of the repercussions, should the Secret ever leak from the tight circle of the Society of Keepers,” his tone expressed devoted responsibility.

He went silent for a moment then sighed deeply.

Society of Keepers . . . Paul wondered, as his mind rushed to conclude that the secret organization he had previously thought might be at work—

against the ‘Seth Servitors’ or the ‘BB’—was, in fact, none other than the Society of Keepers.

“Can we continue later on?” Paul requested. “I need to think about a few things,” he explained.

“Sure. Go rest now,” Gabriel answered in sympathy.

The last thing the Historian heard, that sunny day, was the magical sound of sea gulls, gliding through the air, creating a musical harmony in his mind and spirit, and unconsciously awakening within him, something unknown, which he had yet to discover.

The Secret of the Mystery Chamber
Tuesday, November 2, 11:23 AM

The seeker in Paul, that thirsty voyager in continuous search of truth, craving the breath of certainty in order to survive, lurked at ease; in the absolute assurance that knowledge was about to gratify his long lasting hunger.

The waiting did not last for long. Two days later, at 11:23 AM, Paul and Youssef sat side-by-side on the wooden bench, next to the house that perched like a beautiful castle on the small hill, overlooking the Archaeological Site below.

“In the old days,” Gabriel initiated his revelation in a steady voice. “Thousands of years ago, people were lost in an extraordinary dilemma. Egyptians, Sumerians, Chinese, and other ancient civilizations used images, ideograms, and symbols to communicate. Such primitive, inaccurate methods of writing eventually caused misinterpretations. Human understanding was at stake. Only the Priests of these civilizations, who had actually created these primitive methods of writing, could decipher them in their full meaning. The illiterate masses, obviously, could not comprehend and they became a breeding ground for manipulation.

“Our ancestors, however, the Phoenicians, thought of finding a solution to that problem. Their first few attempts failed to create a universal system. Later, a man from Gebel came up with a solution . . . he invented an Alphabet, a Phonetic one. He divided this Alphabet into two forms, an esoteric one, for the *inner circle*—the Priests—and an exoteric one, for the *outer circle*—the populace,” Gabriel paused for breath.

“That was Thor . . . right?”

“Yes, this is true. Kadmus, *Initiated* by Thor-Taautus, became the head of the Religious Scribes within the Phoenician Temples. He later traveled to Greece, and introduced the exoteric form of the Alphabet to

the people there.” He paused for a second. “Legend says, he went in search of his sister, Europa, kidnapped by Zeus; the most High God of the Grecian world. His search lasted many years and extended all over Greece, where he introduced the Alphabet, and founded many cities, the most famous one of these was Thebes. A legend remains a legend. However, we know, for a fact, that the Alphabet was, indeed, introduced in Greece, and then spread throughout that vast continent, named Europa—after the daughter of Agenor, King of Tyre.” Gabriel stopped; his eyes blurry, as if delving into that ancient memory.

It became quite clear to Paul that Gabriel knew almost everything about that mysterious ancient world. He was familiar with Thor and Kadmus, and probably knew their secrets well. He must have sworn an oath to the Society of Keepers—of which, he had said, he was a member—to keep the secrets of the Mystery Chamber concealed from the populace, the same way he hid it from his own wife, but that was for security purposes.

Paul began to wonder why Gabriel had chosen to tell him all about the Great Mysteries, and why he had chosen to entrust him with the Secret. Then he remembered that his survival of *Tsaddi* had entitled him to such an honor. He smiled with pride, and looked at his old host with admiration and respect. A sudden doubt urged him to cautiousness though, as he tensed, alert to the possibility of Youssef sitting as decoy, in order to steal the *word*. Maybe the alleged Satan was at work here! What an irony! That he should come to think like this about the man who had saved his life. Besides, he had always denied the existence of Satan within the material frame of existence, even after he had seen this creature from hell in his vision. He paused in thought then shook his head in dismissal, and admonished himself for considering that stupid thought, even for a brief moment. “Satan was but a myth,” he mumbled under his breath, too low for Gabriel to hear him.

How could I have failed in the vision? How could I have allowed, that which I have always refuted, to defeat my willpower? Once again, Paul thought in retrospect of that incident. The most important thing, however, was the irrefutable fact that he had survived the illusions of *Tsaddi*. In fact, he needed to clear up his mind, and carefully listen to what Gabriel wanted to reveal. Gabriel looked at his guest, and saw an anxious desire to know more about whom he was, and how he had come to be the man he was today.

“Barka-Thor was one of the few Scribes working under Kadmus,” he

resumed. “He was his loyal and devoted adept in the world of the Alphabet. Kadmus *Initiated* him, not only into the exoteric part of the system, but also into the esoteric dimension. Before he left for Europe, Kadmus appointed Barka-Thor as keeper of the Secret of the esoteric nature of the Alphabet, hidden in the Temple of Gebel—the Sanctuary of Thor-Enoch.” Gabriel paused as he reached to retrieve a black leather pouch from his blue jeans’ pocket, opened it, and took out some fresh tobacco.

With a very fine piece of paper, he rolled a cigarette. Feeling Paul’s attention on him, Gabriel glimpsed sideways at him. His unmistakably sharp wit shone in his amber eyes, as he smiled unreservedly. “It’s clean . . . no chemicals in it . . . a pure Lebanese tobacco, harvested from the soil of the Northern Lebanese Mountains,” he informed. “Shall I roll you one?” he proposed invitingly.

“Yes, please.”

He lit the cigarette with much care, passed it on to Paul then rolled another one, in the same, reverential manner, for himself. He took the time to light his cigarette, before resuming the narration of his mysterious story.

“Barka-Thor and his descendants, generations of the elite, remained loyal to Kadmus. All, one by one, swore an oath to keep the Secret meaning of the Alphabet hidden from the ears and the eyes of the profane. For more than three thousand years, the Secret was kept safe. Ever since that time and to the present date, only few have had access to it. Do you know why? Let me tell you,” he said, as he looked at Paul straight in the eyes, and continued, “The voice of Thor had selected these few people, and very few, even from among those, proved to be qualified to carry the Secret. When the time came, these men undertook their Initiation at the altar in their local Mystery Chamber, and into the very heart of Mysteries they entered with confidence. Throughout Human history, they have appeared as great men of fame, mastering both the exoteric and the spiritual worlds. They have lived in different countries all over the world, and, in fact, today—as in the old days—only fifteen places in the world shelter those few, selected great men. Gebel is one of them.”

He took a drag from his cigarette and switched it skillfully between his fingers. Paul’s cigarette had already extinguished, burnt out swiftly in his excitement at the unfurling revelation.

“Those Chambers, scattered around the Continents, hold the same Secret,” he continued, a moment later. “Thot-Thor, the Great, established

only two of them, himself; the Mystery Chamber here in Gebel, and another one still operating clandestinely at Memphis, in Egypt. The descendants of Hermes-Thor secretly organized the remaining thirteen Mystery Chambers around the world, for the same purpose of Initiation. The scribes, who appeared in those countries, followed the same Tradition as those of Canaan-Phoenicia and Egypt; they kept the Secret hidden from the eyes of the vulgar. Nowadays, all around the world, the *Initiates* of that special Order count very few. In each Mystery Chamber of the thirteen, there must be only four adepts transmitting the *Message* to the others. However, in both Egypt and Loubnan, the adepts must be five. In Loubnan, four members have already received the Initiation into the Mystery. They are waiting for the fifth,” he insinuated with a sideways glance at Paul then looked at the sky.

The Historian followed the direction of his stare, and noticed that the Sun had already reached the central point of the vast celestial dome. The watch in Paul’s wrist marked 01:47 PM. Time had swiftly eluded them.

“Who are you, Gabriel?” he finally decided to ask Youssef the pertinent question that had been lingering in his mind, ever since the old man had come into sight, a couple of days ago, sporting a bright face with piercingly witty eyes, whispering strange words in his ears, ‘I am the Guardian of the Chamber!’

Silence ensued before Gabriel turned his head towards Paul; his facial features showed remarkably symmetrical lines of expression. His eyes opened to their full width, and sparked off tiny sharp lights. “I have already told you who I am, but it seems you have not been paying attention. I am from that same great lineage of Scribes I just told you about. I’m the *Guardian of the Chamber of Gebel*.” His voice echoed, deep within the depths of Paul’s being.

After this revelation, Gabriel stood up, and excused himself with a courteous smile, saying, “Mariam and I will be waiting for you to join us for lunch. Don’t be late.”

Paul nodded, unable to utter a single word. His mind was in great turmoil, as he hadn’t anticipated that his host, the Guardian of the Chamber, came from the same bloodline of the Ancient Scribes, the *Inner Circle* of Thor. He sat still on the wooden bench, watching Gabriel heading home, and thinking about what he had told him.

This revelation had shocked Paul. Added to his previous surprise—regarding Youssef’s concealed name, Gabriel, and being a part of the Society of Keepers—he had also learned the astonishing revelation of his

role, as Guardian of the Chamber, and now, his lineage to an ancient bloodline as well! Who could have ever imagined that an ordinary man, at the beginning of the 21st century, with a humble house in Gebel, could be of such importance in the secrecy of a clandestine society that dates back thousands of years?

At times, the Historian had assumed that the old man might have experienced the same vision of the letter of death, *Tsaddi*. *Well, it could have happened to him. After all, he is the Guardian of the Chamber!* he thought to himself. Maybe Gabriel could offer him guidance through this dilemma, and help him get over his lost battle against the creature from hell. He probably knew more about the Sarcophagus of Gebel and its relationship with the Cup of Life, the Holy Grail.

After lunch, Paul spent almost the whole afternoon reassessing and organizing his thoughts. A splendid dusk smoothly brushed the day aside, and the Sunlight faded away, for nature to welcome the shadows of the night. It was time for him to join his new friend, and his wife, for dinner. On his way to the wooden cottage, he caught sight of Mariam by the window, rushing around in the kitchen, probably preparing the night meal. A delicious aroma of seafood wafted to him as he drew closer, and he felt the urge of hunger speeding his steps.

A good time later, after enjoying a nice dinner, Mariam excused herself, she was tired and needed a good night's sleep. They had enjoyed their meal, drinking local white wine from a carafe, bottled in the high Lebanese mountains. Silence lingered peacefully. It was then that Paul decided his turn had come to open up to the old man, as he felt the urge to ask him about the Society of the Keepers.

Yet before he could do that, Gabriel spoke the words in Paul's mind. "You may believe that the vision you had is an illusion of some sort, but it is not." Gabriel had Paul's undivided attention now. Encouraged, he pursued, "I have met Kadmus in the world of visions and learned from him. Over time, the visions became more ingenious and informative, even more spiritual. It seems as if a hidden order of things began to unveil its secrets to me, bit by bit, and I effortlessly responded to their meaning. In fact, it was all going well, until I came upon that vision, the one of the 18th letter, *Tsaddi*. I encountered that hideous creature, called Satan, who tried to force me out of the world of visions. He failed," he stopped, revisiting his memory of that time.

Paul was silent, waiting for the old man to react; yet he remained speechless in his meditation. Paul hesitated to confess his spiritual

weakness, his failure now compared to Gabriel's success. He averted the Guardian's eyes, and decided to speak, "I'm completely lost; completely. Do you know what I mean? How could I face Satan again and win over him, if that is what's required in the end?"

Amazingly, an overwhelming sense of relief took over Paul. In fact, Gabriel was the only person to whom he could have revealed such a secret. After all, he had explained to Paul that the only reason he had received the revelation of the Secret of the Mystery Chamber was due to his survival of *Tsaddi*. Gabriel remained very calm. In total silence, he lit his cigarette, and finished his last sip of wine, before looking back at Paul, who could have sworn that, for a brief moment, he had seen the image of Kadmus, staring back at him, through Gabriel's eyes!

"I understand what you are enduring," he finally said dryly. "I really wish I could help you overcome this situation, but I'm . . . I'm not the right person for that particular task."

The rejection felt awful . . . as if a thunderbolt had struck Paul, and the numbing aftershock had congealed his blood, spreading through his body to his mind. All that he could think of was that Gabriel could not help him, and that he had mistakenly assumed he could have been his guide and mentor.

Paul straightened up. "Who could be my guide then?" he then asked imploringly. "I thought it would be you. Why are you backing up? Why have you changed your mind? I mean . . . if it is not you, Youssef, who could help me fight Satan again, and win? Who could tell me everything I need to know about the Society of Keepers? Who could help me understand the true nature of the 'Seth Servitors'? Who?"

Gabriel inhaled from his cigarette with incredible calmness, the kind of calmness known only to fishermen, and those who live by the sea. "Oh . . . brother, I have truly done my part," he replied with a voice full of regret. "It is true that I cannot guide you along the path, but do not fret, someone else will and very soon," he revealed with a smile.

"What do you mean by that? You are confusing me!" Paul exclaimed in protest, yet a new hope surged in him at Gabriel's insinuation.

The old man discarded his cigarette in the ashtray, gazed at his guest—with all the compassion Paul had hoped for—and said, "I am the Guardian of the Chamber of Gebel. You, my brother, are a Keeper of the Word. Only a Keeper of the Word can guide a fellow Keeper of the Word."

Paul gasped at such refreshing news, but felt even more perplexed than before. He longed to hear more, and sensed Gabriel would tell him,

presently, “Here in Lebanon, as I have previously mentioned, there are four *Initiates* to the Mystery of the Alphabet . . . of the *word*. They are the Society of Keepers I’ve told you about, they know the Phoenician Code, and are waiting for the fifth adept to complete the Chamber.” He paused and could almost hear Paul’s heart, beating fast, indubitably overwhelmed with great excitement. So he continued, “You are the anticipated fifth adept, Paul. With you, the five points of the Star will come to completion. They will explain everything to you when they meet you. Now, I advise you to take some rest, for the night is well advanced, and we’re both tired.” He stood up, and walked out to the balcony for his final cigarette of the night. Paul followed suit, automatically. “Tomorrow is another day . . . tomorrow is Wednesday, a day dedicated to Thor-Hermes, the *first Initiate* into the mystery of the word.” He looked up at the stars, after he lit his cigarette. “Enjoy the night view, my friend,” he eloquently ended.

Alone now, with his countless thoughts, Paul smiled profusely, almost at the edge of laughter, despite the astonishment, which the words of the old man had provoked in him. He felt invigorated by a new energy at the idea of meeting them soon, the Keepers of the Word; somehow expecting they would warmly accept him into their mysterious *Order*.

With peace of mind, half an hour later, Paul went to bed, and surrendered to the world of dreams . . .

The Fortress
Wednesday, November 3, 09:05 AM

With a new vigor, Paul woke up early the next morning, to the sound of seagulls over the nearby seashore. Half an hour later, he enjoyed a delicious breakfast with Mariam and Gabriel. The meal, a simple one consisting of tea and toast, topped with melted cheese, tasted splendid to him.

And still, he ached for the reassurance Gabriel had given him last night. He glimpsed at Mariam, certain that she was not acquainted with the Secret, and felt relieved at that. “On second thought, Gabriel, eh . . . are you sure of what you told me last night? Might you not be, in some way, mistaken? I mean, how do you know I am, what you said I am . . . the fifth . . . you know?” he spoke cautiously.

Maybe Mariam knew something, he thought again. She probably didn’t know about the murders of the Architect and the Archaeologist, but he recalled her mentioning the death mark, and calling her husband by the name that the Society of Keepers had given him, Gabriel. Yet he had to believe his host, concerning this matter, for Gabriel had assured him that she wasn’t informed about the Secret at all, for safety reasons.

Gabriel stared at Paul with a kind look, and murmured, “Would you please finish your breakfast, in silence.”

The guest tried to abide but time went by, frustratingly slow, and turned into an enemy, fiddling with his nerves, trying to make him surrender and lose patience. Finally, Gabriel stood up. “We move in an hour, my friend. We’ll take to the shore, and head to the mountains . . . for the Fortress,” he said casually.

The Fortress! That took Paul by surprise.

Mariam walked to him with those easy confident steps of hers and handed him a crucifix. “It’s for your own safety. You will use it one day . . . believe me, my son.” She nodded at something, which only she fathomed

at this stage, and squeezed his hand. He was speechless.

Around 10:15 that morning, they drove out of the city of Gebel, and up towards the mountains, an agreeable journey that gradually expanded its view of more cities along the Mediterranean Sea. The shore gave way to pastures of plentiful greenery, and the air cooled into a revitalizing climate, as they moved further up. The villages, which they crossed successively, turned more ethnic in their structures and habitations, and the trees, more impressive in age and height. Mile after mile, the road became ever more deserted, until Gabriel took a secluded, single-lane narrow path. The drive became difficult; rocks and bushes scattered all along slowed them down. In front of them, on both sides of the road, cypress trees formed two parallel lines, looking like soldiers in eternal formation.

Despite his secret excitement, the trip started to deplete his resolution. Paul took a cigarette, and speculated about the meeting ahead with the Keepers of the Word. Faces of all shapes and colors populated his imagination. What would they look like, these sage fellows? How should he behave in their company? A sudden cramp got a hold of his neck, and the palms of his hands dampened.

Nervous, all of a sudden, Paul shifted in his seat, trying to find a more comfortable position. He knew his discomfort came from the recognition that he was but an ordinary man, seeking answers to certain queries. To be claimed a Keeper of the Word, out of the blue, was more than he had ever anticipated when he had first undertaken the path of knowledge!

He tried to visualize the Fortress, its structure and age, its doors and walls. *An old fortress, more than likely*, and this thought, in his mind, spurred a mystical and enigmatic prospect. Gabriel remained as quiet as when they had initiated this journey; his thoughts unrevealed, his features resolute, his eyes attentive on the road, and his hands firm on the wheel. He looked determined to reach their destination, no matter what. Other than keeping the Chamber safe, his mission, as Guardian of the Chamber, included finding the fifth element that would close the lines of the *five-pointed star*. He had found Paul; the fifth adept he had kept an eye on, and was now guiding to the *Inner Circle*.

At the top of the hill, he saw something that looked like a tower. Paul assumed it was part of the Fortress he was longing to see. The road circled the hill, up to a massive iron gate. On a cubical stone, at the right side of the entrance, stood a remarkable statue of a man, holding a Scepter entwined by two serpents. The vivid image of a *wise man* flashed

in his mind; the wise man and his Scepter, who had instructed many, on the genesis of man in a world created by God.

Whose statue is it? he wondered. The moment Gabriel stopped the car at the gate; Paul looked out from the car window, to read the inscription at the foot of the Statue. It read, “No entry for the profane.”

“Here we are. Could you please step out?” Gabriel invited with a smile of encouragement, but he did not move, nor did he seem intent on doing so.

“What!?” Paul exclaimed. “You’re not coming with me?”

“No,” he uttered, shaking his head with regret. “I can’t.”

“What do you mean? Why can’t you? Aren’t you the Guardian of the Chamber? Surely you could, come on!”

“Still . . . I . . . can’t,” he muttered with soreness in his voice.

“But . . . you are not profane, Gabriel,” the Historian heard him well, and argued, determined to bring him along, wherever his destination might be.

The old man gazed at him, and again, Paul could have sworn that, for an instant, he recognized the image of Kadmus in the man’s eyes! Kadmus—whom Gabriel had met in the world of visions.

“Nor am I a Keeper of the Word,” he justified, and nodded.

Paul clearly understood what Gabriel had meant. In fact, he understood that he was expected to continue the journey without him. As he stepped out, and closed the door behind him, Gabriel’s voice called back to him, “Brother . . .” Paul came closer, and crooked his head through the open window to listen to what he had to say. “This statue was sculpted by a skillful Phoenician artist. It represents Thor-Hermes, the father . . . the father of the spiritual laws.” His voice echoed in Paul’s mind, as he veered to look at the statue, in awe, and remained thus, for a long while after the car had disappeared down the hill.

Somewhere behind the Iron Gate—Paul assumed—the enigmatic Fortress stood out of time—and within its walls the Secrets of the Society awaited him. As he tried to peek through the iron bars, the gate opened widely, as if inviting him in. He hesitated for a moment, until he realized that backing off now was not an option. If he was indeed the fifth element, as Gabriel believed, these fellows needed him, as much as he needed them.

He treaded inside, with slow careful steps. On both sides of that barely asphalted road, rose some old majestic Cedar and Oak trees. He contemplated them for a moment, basking in their pleasant aroma, and

in the splendid environment around him. The air, cool and pure, revived in him a sense of belonging to some hidden aspiration. He inhaled deeply, and proceeded in his journey on that forsaken road towards the unknown. He walked for a few minutes, before he reached what he had wrongly perceived, from afar, to be a dead end. In fact, the road stretched out to the right. With no hesitation, he pursued his expedition.

Suddenly, when he least expected it, the Fortress appeared in all its magnificence, amidst lavish shrubs of laurel. Overwhelmed, he took a lungful of air, and then drew closer, in order to scrutinize its imposing structure, made of stones, huge in height and width, most probably from Phoenician times. Whoever had built that edifice had used the stones of a Temple, belonging to ancient times, and maybe several others from a later period. Some of these ancient stones remained scattered all around the hill.

On the right side, a glorious tower of strange design stood, overlooking the road from which Gabriel and Paul had come. He imagined the Keepers watching their arrival from there, and then, opening the door for him to enter. His heart skipped a beat, as he beheld the huge Cedar door to the Fortress. Paul stood, gazing at the splendor of two golden Sphinxes, sparkling with sunlight, on either side of the door. At once, he recalled the image of the pyramid and the Sphinx of Egypt. The inexplicable light of their eyes emanated a magnetic power that transfixed him. He remained motionless, wondering. A few meters away, on a nearby wall, he discerned an inscription in, what looked to be, an ancient language.

A sweet fragrance of Cedar wood drifted around him, as he loomed over the geometrical configurations of celestial figures carved on the door. He neared one of the sphinxes, and swept his hand over it. *Strange*, he thought, for the briefest moment he heard them roaring, like lions. He backed off, grinning. Traditionally, a Sphinx was shaped as a lion, with a male human head, just like the one rising before the Pyramid of Khephren, in Giza, sculpted from a single piece of rock.

Khephren, a pharaoh of the fourth dynasty, had lived around the year 2650 BC. The face of the Sphinx had probably been fashioned from the image of that Pharaoh. Sphinxes—although usually identified with Pharaohs in their immortal aspects—had represented the Living Horus: the son of Osiris and Isis. A combination of two living creatures, a man and a lion, the Sphinx had never really existed but as a symbol. To be more accurate, esoterically, the Sphinx had symbolized, not only two, but

four creatures: the hoofs of an Ox, the upper body of a Lion, the wings of an Eagle, and, the most intriguing part of all, the face of a Man.

Egyptologists, however, had given no conclusive analysis of what the Sphinx epitomized. For centuries, the Sphinx has remained one of the greatest riddles of all times. The brightest thinkers of every nation, culture, and religion have endeavored to unlock its secrets. A long series of men and women, over time, have attempted to interpret its meaning. One of them, Oedipus, was said to have conquered the Sphinx, and ended that great intellectual struggle. If, however, the Sphinx has sunk into the deepest abode of defeat and oblivion, blame it not on the resolution of its riddle, but on the fact that Oedipus had corrupted the concept of the spiritual, the divine, the immortal Horus: forever dishonoring the great Truth.

The inscriptions on that wooden door had originated from Phoenician times, and the geometrical shapes were those of the Zodiac. Above the door, a Pyramid was carved on the stone. On its top, a glorious Sun appeared. Its rays bypassed the lines of the Pyramid, radiating all around its circumference. *The Pyramid, the Sun, the Eye of Providence!* The Historian remembered he had seen these symbols in one of the books related to the History of Symbolism, in a chapter that interpreted the meaning of the 16th Phoenician Letter, *Ayin*. If these symbols were clearly visible on the façade of the Fortress, although far from the eyes of the profane, then what could lay hidden behind its walls?

He knocked . . . once. A man with short brown hair, who looked to be in his late thirties, opened the door. Dressed in a long white jacket, over a white suit, he faced Paul, a hint of a smile curving his lips, as curious eyes surveyed his guest. “We have been waiting for you,” he said cordially. “Please come in.”

Without hesitation, Paul stepped in, with only one great desire: knowing the Secrets hidden in there. The air changed into an enchanted ambiance that felt as magically old, as the Fortress itself. He stopped there, inhaled deeply, and then glanced inquisitively all around.

“Let me show you around,” the man ushered, from behind his guest, with a serious, although friendly, voice.

Paul followed the man’s slow steps. An exquisite mixture of wood and stone formed the interior halls, whose walls exhibited scenic paintings in antique frames. At this stage, in the dimly lit interior, Paul could not distinguish the differences of their antiquity, yet some appeared to convey esoteric and mystical messages.

They then entered the Living Room. The windows allowed sunrays to seep in and shine all around, with a particularly focused spot, on a round-shaped table in the center. A fireplace, carved on the wall, attracted his gaze, and he was surprised to see Gabriel's wooden cottage depicted in a beautiful painting above the mantle. An antique brass and crystal chandelier of eight candles hung from the painted ceiling.

The man invited him to proceed out of the room, and through a long corridor that took them to a vast library where thousands of books and parchments stood, cheek by jowl, on the wooden shelves of all the walls. A long cedar wood table reigned in the middle of the Library. The man explained to his guest that the two computers in here were connected to the Internet via a private satellite server. Paul noted with approval the fine oak wood of the bookshelves and the enticing scent coming from them.

"These books and parchments are divided by subjects, antiquities, and authenticities," the man informed in a neutral tone. "It is very important for you to understand that," he said. "In fact, many Keepers throughout history have worked on collecting this great archive we have here. It contains almost everything you might, one day, need."

Their eyes met for a moment then Paul gazed at the books, thoughtfully. Without a doubt, the Keepers of the Word seemed to form an efficiently organized Order. *But Why? What was really going on? Questions* rushed through his mind. *What about Gabriel? Did he have any idea what was inside the Fortress? Who were the Keepers of the Word?* He craved to know more, yet kept quiet and waited . . .

The tour inside the fortress continued for almost half an hour, through an imposing dining room dressed in Louis XV furniture, a large kitchen—seemingly renovated, several modernized bathrooms, and finally, a storage in the basement for food provisions. The man expressed no reservation in showing him around. Of all the things he had seen, what had intrigued Paul the most was a door with the inscription 'Star Chamber', in front of which they had stopped for a few seconds.

Star Chamber! His eyes widened, and his heart accelerated, as he recalled Gabriel's words, "*With you, the five points of the Star will come to completion.*" A burning desire to know the contents of that secret Chamber pulled him forward, but halted, as his guide shook his head in denial. One thing was sure; Paul's patience was at stake!

"Please follow me," the man invited with polite tenacity, and the guest abided, treading behind his host, up a spiral ladder, to the bedroom

quarters on the second floor. Then, the man halted at a door with the number five engraved on it, “Your room,” he informed, surprising Paul.

“Oh, excuse me . . . but,” Paul stuttered in confusion. “But Gabriel never mentioned that part. I mean, why do I need a bedroom? I’m not staying here, am I?” His eyebrows lifted.

The man’s smile, with a hint of indifference, was quickly gone. “Gabriel is not aware of the procedures we follow here, at the Fortress.”

That, at least answered Paul’s curiosity about how much Gabriel knew. Gabriel ignored what transpired within the walls of the Fortress. Paul still needed some more information, though, to quench his mounting curiosity. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I am simply saying that you’ll be staying here for some time. Everything will be explained to you in time, Paul, and there is nothing to worry about. Meanwhile, you might want to rest in your bedroom, or . . . go to the Library. Actually, you may do whatever you want,” he ascertained with an encouraging smile, addressing Paul for the first time by his name.

“But . . . I don’t have the necessary stuff to stay over,” Paul argued, unprepared for a long stay.

“Everything has been taken care of. Everything you might need, you will surely find in this room. You will also find a clean white outfit and a long white jacket, similar to the ones I am wearing.”

What am I doing here? Paul fretted, inwardly. He took a deep breath to control himself, his astonishment. Leaving the Fortress was out of the question, now that the curiosity of the seeker in him had been piqued. He had no choice but to wait for things to evolve. “I will get some rest now, thank you for your hospitality,” he managed to say, without sounding defeated.

“Good. Oh . . . when time comes, I will be knocking on your door. You will have to meet the Keepers of the Word in the Living Room. Please, wear your new clothes to join us. It’s an important meeting,” he said, as he turned to leave. And then, swiftly looked back at Paul with a wide grin, “I’m Nabil, by the way, a Keeper of the Word, just like you. Welcome among your brothers.” With that late introduction, he disappeared down the stairs.

Inside the bedroom, rest failed Paul, as he succumbed to his endless thoughts.

Meeting the Keepers
Wednesday, November 3, 12:21 PM

Almost an hour elapsed before the expected call came. He leapt to his feet, at once, with his heart at a gallop. Time had come for him to meet fate . . . his fate. “I am now a member of an Order, a very ancient Order of Keepers of the Word—a *Secret Order*,” Paul muttered in thrill.

His hands shook as he tried on his new white outfit. He missed a button or two, unbuttoned the jacket, and then started again. He was quite nervous, and he practiced breathing slowly and repeatedly, in order to calm down, then went to stand in front of the mirror. He smiled, liking his new reflection. It, somehow, reminded him of the Pythagorean Brothers, who used to wear white outfits inside their *White City*. Come to that, the Asayas, known also as Essenes—a religious fraternity of Mt. Carmel and Galilee—had similar outfits too.

His curiosity grew, but he managed to remain composed, as he slowly descended the spiral staircase, and headed straight for the Living Room. Paul stood at the door and heard voices inside. A conversation was taking place.

“Are you absolutely sure that the time is appropriate to reveal ourselves, and the *Secret* of our Order,” the voice demanded with apparent anxiety.

“Don’t worry; all the signs indicate that this man is the long-awaited, Fifth element! I’m sure we can count on his loyalty,” this man’s sharp voice replied soothingly. “The Secret will be well kept with him, as it has been with us, and with all those who have preceded us in the Order.”

No one spoke. Paul felt tense, and swallowed at the silence that followed. Then, the first voice finally broke the silence. “If so, then I would kindly ask our brother, Nabil, to open the door. Let us welcome our new brother.”

As evident as it seemed, Paul doubted they knew he was

eavesdropping behind the door. He stepped back, and waited for Nabil to comply. When he did, Paul was ready to meet those strangers, who had decided to accept him into their *Secret Circle*. He entered slowly, and saw two men sitting at the Round Table. They stood up, at once, and welcomed him among them in a convivial manner that surprised him. They then introduced themselves as Dr. Robert Bechara and Professor Michel Chahine. Paul noted their white outfits, similar to his, and eagerly introduced himself, before he realized that they already knew who he was. Well enough, in fact, to call him: the Fifth adept of their Secret Order. His mind refused to entertain that notion any longer.

He advanced, resolutely, towards the table then promptly came to a stop, surprised. A man, whom he had known for a long time, was slowly making his way to the Living Room. Paul gawked, in awe, at Dr. John Najem, whom he could never have guessed to be part of that Order. Dr. Najem . . . the same friend he had often met and dined with, back in his hometown.

A serene smile met his bewildered countenance. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of thoughts charged into his head, as the man walked towards him, saying in a comforting voice, "Hello, Paul! Glad to see you here, at last. I have been observing you for a very long time. Frankly, I've always delighted in your questions and queries about life and its mysteries. I knew we would, one day, meet under different circumstances, although I wasn't quite expecting them to be right here, like this."

"But . . . I don't quite understand. Why did you never tell me about the *Order*, Doctor?" Paul asked, confused. "I mean, after all these years! You never mentioned anything about it! Why?"

"Yes, I did. Sometimes, I would imply a few things, here and there. I often used to begin my statements, or end them, by saying, 'According to Tradition'. Remember?"

"Well, yeah I do."

Dr. Najem nodded with a grin. "And, you never asked me what I meant by Tradition. And if you had, I wouldn't have been able to tell you, in any case, would I?" he teased him cheerfully.

Paul didn't know what to say. He felt their impatient stares on him. "No . . . I don't believe you could have," he finally conceded.

"Very well then, let's sit and enjoy our coffee."

Then they all smiled cordially, and sat at the Round Table. The unusual situation in which he dwelt reminded him of a famous scene from the past; a movement that flourished at the beginning of the Middle

Ages; the *Knights of the Round Table*. The Round Table had, essentially, served as meeting place for the Knights, its shape a reminder of egalitarianism. Paul immediately recalled Padre Joseph telling him about the Knights, and about their quest for the Holy Grail; *King Arthur, Lancelot, Merlin, and Parsifal*. Their Semi-Legend, however, has remained one of the most famous fables in recorded history. First mentioned, as early as the 6th century AD, the story had evolved progressively into its permanent, popular form, sometime between the 12th and 15th century.

Tradition relates that the Knights had secretly quested for the Holy Grail: the *Sacred Cup* used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. It was the same Grail, which Joseph of Arimathea—the Christian adept—had filled with the blood of Jesus, bleeding on the cross, and had kept with him. Upon arrival in Britain, and according to many ancient and contemporary writers, Joseph founded Christianity, and was known to have built a monastery at Glastonbury in Somerset. Glastonbury could well be identified with the Island of Avalon, mentioned in the Arthurian Semi-Legend!

According to Tradition, the Grail had passed down, from one generation to another, in Joseph's family. The Grail, known to possess many miraculous properties, would supply food for those in need, and strike with blindness and muteness the impure and impious, who would dare come into its presence! Whatever the case may be, another movement had appeared in the Middle Ages with a similar secret quest: *The Knights Templar*.

Who were the Knights Templar? Was there any connection between both movements? Paul wondered. That was yet another dilemma for him to unlock. Maybe . . . just maybe, he could find some answers in the books at the Library. Nabil had earlier claimed that nearly everything a man wanted to know could be found there. The Historian decided to indulge in this invitation as soon as possible.

The time was 01:10 PM in his watch. Lunchtime. The five men sat at the dining room table, and enjoyed their first meal together, as brethren of an ancient Order. Dr. Najem smiled at Paul, across the table, wiped his mouth with a napkin and addressed him, "After reflecting upon your many questions during the course of the many pleasurable evenings we spent together in conversation, I chose to observe you, very carefully. In fact, I have enjoyed every single time we have talked of History, but you caught my attention when you showed so much interest in Secret

Societies and the Mystical Alphabet.” He stopped, and took a sip from his glass of wine. Paul looked at him with eagerness. He wanted to know more.

“Later, I knew you were in Gebel, so I contacted Gabriel, and asked him to keep a close eye on you. He updated me about everything. Slowly, I began to see the signs that, unequivocally, indicated you might be the one we have been searching for . . .” he halted for an instant before he added, “I won’t lie to you, of course; I had my doubts, at first.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, Dr. Najem,” Paul interrupted him, confused, “What do you mean by ‘the signs’?”

The other three adepts: Dr. Bechara, Professor Michel, and brother Nabil, turned their heads to look at him, and then at Dr. Najem. The expressions on their faces reflected curiosity, as if they, too, needed clarification from him. Their eyes lit in expectation.

“You did exhibit an unusual interest in the Mysteries of Gebel. Then, when Gabriel reported to me your exploration of the Mystery Chamber, and your tenacity in entering it—at a very critical and dangerous time—I understood that you have the necessary determination, and courage, to face the unknown mystical world around you.” He smiled widely then cleared his throat with a sip of wine, and continued, “So far, you have proved to possess two major qualities most people lack: the *will of knowledge* and the *courage of heart*.”

“In addition, you never mentioned the vision you had experienced to anyone, not even your friends,” he continued. “You have successfully kept the *word*, without betraying your faith in Jesus Christ, when faced by the creature from hell in the underground chamber. Although you fell in battle against it, you succeeded in refusing its many material temptations,” he paused, “And this, my friend, weighed heavily upon my decision in favor of accepting you,” he ended thoughtfully.

Paul just sat there, quietly looking at the four men around him, with great interest.

“To tell you the truth,” Dr. Najem said, resuming his talk. “Rare are those who have penetrated, deep into the world of the Mystery Chamber, and come out enlightened, true *Initiates*. Other than the four of us, here present, very few in Loubnan, or anywhere around the world, share the Occult knowledge of the Ancients. And yet, my friend, there is still much for you to know.”

“Like Gabriel, right?” Paul put forward.

“Right. It is true Gabriel ignores the procedures of the Fortress;

however, he is well informed of the secrets of the Mystery Chamber. That is the reason why he stands as its Guardian and Keeper. As for you, I had detected the signs earlier, but waited to be certain, before informing my brothers in the Order.” Dr. Najem paused for an all-around glance at his silent audience. “That is how we have concluded that you are indeed, the Fifth element, needed to complete the points of the Star . . . the five-pointed star. You are a Keeper of the Word. You will learn from us, and you will be required to keep the *word* protected. There are others: the Keepers of the Grail, the Keepers of the New Testament, and the Keepers of the Sacred Heart . . .”

The four Keepers nodded in agreement with Dr. Najem’s words. Paul took a deep breath, and sighed in relief and gratefulness.

“At any rate,” Dr. Najem continued, “we have certainly encountered *Satan* in our Initiation journey. We, as well as some other Keepers in the world, have conquered it, that creature from hell: our deepest illusion. How unfortunate that you’ve failed against Satan, despite the fact that you knew all too well that it was an illusion. Fortunately, though, you survived *Tsaddi*. In concordance, we will reveal to you the essence of that evil nature. It is your *evil* side. We are here to show you, and teach you how to defeat it and become what you are: a Keeper of the Word,” he ended with pride in his voice.

Paul frowned, engrossed with so many speculations. *Satan defeated me . . . my evil side defeated me*. He thought of that and of his survival too. *The battle is still on, and I must win the next time I meet it!*

In the world of matter, where human beings live, everything seems to be distorted by a certain measure of unawareness. Time and space captures them forcefully. Their unconscious finds itself unaware of its consciousness. Still, life is not about engaging in the act of killing, whatever the case may be, but rather, absorbing the negativity in the world, and turning it into positive energy.

“We will show you how,” the promising voice of Dr. Bechara captured Paul’s attention. His serious features, softened by the silvery streaks of maturity, made him look like, nothing other than, the prototypical psychiatrist. His somber black eyes inspired respect, as did his strict posture.

“So . . . do you believe that I still have a good chance to win the battle?” Paul asked, anxiety taunting the joy in his heart.

“We will teach you how,” Dr. Najem reassured him with conviction. The eldest among the brothers, Dr. Najem, could pass for a Harvard

professor, the kind who had seen it all in the last six decades of his life. There was an air about him, in his manners, that almost made him pass for a *know-it-all*, were it not for his relaxed and amiable approach.

“Don’t worry, we will guide you along the way to the light that shines inside you,” added Professor Michel, his grey eyes smiling behind his rimless glasses. In fact, Professor Michel seemed to smile all the time, even when he didn’t. Paul assumed that impression was due to his peaceful features framed in soft grey hair, though it probably had more to do with the dimples on his chubby cheeks.

Then, Dr. Najem stood up, and they all did likewise. He raised a toast, and welcomed Paul inside the Order. Sharing that unforgettable moment with his new brothers had surely delighted his enlivened soul. He felt, somehow, unable to articulate all the thoughts that he wanted to express so eagerly. In fact, being an adept of that beatified Order was a choice he had to accept—the best choice ever. *This is my fate*, he believed.

“I hope you have enjoyed your first meal with us,” Dr. Najem addressed his guest, his brother now, with an inquisitive look and a hint of a grin.

“Yes, I did . . . very much.”

“Very well then, we will have some time for rest now. You may do as you please, feel free to wander around if you like, this is your home.” Dr. Bechara sounded sincere.

“Thank you.” Paul smiled widely, and nodded.

“Oh . . . before I forget,” Professor Michel interfered. “We’ll be seeing you at five, for tea. We expect you to be punctual, okay?”

Paul nodded again, in agreement, before they headed out calmly with a promising smile on their faces.

The Guardians of the Grail
Wednesday, November 3, 05:00 PM

With time on his hands to use freely, he decided to check on some matters at the Library; matters related to the Knights Templar. Paul wanted to know if there was any possible relation between them and the other Order, the Knights of the Round Table. A dilemma he wanted to solve.

Eventually, as he perused through the immense archive, he came about numbers of stories on the Templars. The most common being the one found in history books, another was written by Freemasons, as well as other secret societies, depicting the Initiation of the Templars by the sect of the Johannite of the Orient—*the Mandaean*! However, in almost all the other tales, Paul found no concrete evidence of the link between the Knights of the Round Table and the Templars. He began reading from the classical version described in historical records.

The Knights of Christ constituted a religious order, officially established in Medieval Palestine by two Frenchmen, Hughes de Payens (Payns) and Geoffroy (Godefroy) de Saint-(Adh) Omer, sometime around the year 1118 AD. Seven other people joined in, later. All nine members, French, took a public vow of chivalry to protect the Christian pilgrims, visiting the Holy places, during the Crusades. The Crusades first started in 1095 AD, with one main purpose, and that was to drive the infidels out of Jerusalem, and preserve its Christian character.

Those Knights lived like poor monks, searching for the Holy Grail that contained the blood of Christ. They claimed to have found it, and kept it protected. Being on good terms with the authority of Rome, they became the bankers of the Catholic Church, in addition to other European royalty. With time, they succeeded in acquiring thousands of acres of lands that belonged to the Feudal noblemen in Europe, and they

worked on harvesting and making them prosperous.

Their blind and greedy ambition made them extremely wealthy and powerful. The King of France, Philip le Bel (the Fair), and Pope Clement V sought to share their wealth. Obviously, the Templars refused, alienating the powers of France and Rome, a big mistake that goaded the Pope and the King to hunt them down all over Europe. As a result, some were arrested and cast in prison.

The Church accused the Templars of spitting upon the image of Christ, denying God, and worshiping a monstrous idol, the Baphomet! These were enough reasons to end the Order. Jacques de Molay, their Master at the time, was arrested with a few others on Friday the 13th, around the year 1307 AD, and later perished in the flames of condemnation on March 18, 1314 AD. No more than a few years later, the Pope and the King vanished in mysterious ways, but the war continued.

The Knights Hospitaller, who regarded St. John the Baptist as the most important figure in Christianity, after Jesus, opposed the Templars and allied with the Church. Later, they became known as the Knights of Malta. The Church and the Knights Hospitaller confiscated all the wealth and estates of the Templars, and thus, the Order ceased to exist. Those who survived spread throughout Europe, working secretly under a different name.

Here's a possible link! Paul exclaimed inwardly. The only solid link between them and the Knights of the Round Table was their quest for the Holy Grail, but that didn't prove any existing relation. Still focused on the large book in his hands, he decided to ask the Keepers about the Templars, before going through the famous version of the Freemasons.

At five, they met for tea in the Living Room, as agreed. *An urgent matter needs solving right away!* he thought. The guidance to the Inner light within him, which the Keepers had promised, would have to wait, for the time being.

"Excuse me, Dr. Najem; there is an urgent issue I need to discuss with you and the brothers." Paul addressed him, the moment they settled on their seats. "Recently, I've been wondering about the Templars. Who were they? What's their true story, I mean?" he asked, hoping for clarification.

"Well, this is an interesting topic that was meant to be taken up in one of our coming meetings," he answered, understanding his need. "The

story of the Knights Templar is a little complex and eventful. We do not need to worry about all its details now. We will only concentrate on the Templars' belief of the *Grail*." His quick and precise answer shocked Paul, who instantly felt as if Dr. Najem had anticipated such a question, and prepared to answer it in the right way. *Was he reading my mind?* Paul wondered.

"A little introduction would pave the way, right?" He turned to look at Paul, inquiringly. He nodded, having nothing to say.

"The truth is that the Knights Templar were not, as they pretended to be, in quest of the Holy Grail to protect it. It was just a cover up story. In fact, they had hunted down the Grail to give it to someone else! They had searched for a treasure, as well as some secret documents that might lead them to that treasure inside the Temple of Solomon."

Finding the Holy Grail, to give it to someone else? A treasure in the Temple of Solomon? Paul couldn't repress the urge to ask, "What treasure?"

"The Ark of the Covenant."

"The Ark of the Covenant?" he almost leapt to his feet in surprise, yet years of self-discipline saved him from ridicule. He was in dismay.

"Yes, but let's focus on the Templars, for the moment, if you please," he insisted with fatherly patience and a firm stance. He had the conversation under control.

The Ark was lost a long time ago, before the Templars entered history! he thought, but dismissed the notion, reassured that the Keepers would inform him about it at a later stage.

"William of Tyre wrote that the Order of the Templars, also known as the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon, was a secret organization, founded in 1114 AD. Among those who founded that Order, probably as early as the beginning of the Crusades, I can name: Hughes—Count of Champagne, André De Montbard, Hughes De Payens, Geoffrey De Saint Omer, Bernard De Fontaine (St. Bernard of Clairvaux), and Baldwin I—brother of Godefroi IV De Bouillon." He paused for a moment. "However, they had officially proclaimed it in Medieval Palestine, later, sometime around the year 1118 AD. A year after that, they took up quarters within the ruins of the Temple, a residence provided to them by Baldwin II, cousin to Godefroi. They began a secret and excessive excavation campaign, since the Templars, like most clandestine societies, endorsed two different doctrines."

"What do you mean, precisely?" he asked curiously.

“One public and another hidden,” he replied, and added, “The public one showed an ideal marriage with the Catholic Throne. The nine founding members of the Templars took a public vow to protect Christian pilgrims, visiting the Holy places during the Crusades.” He paused, taking a sip from his cup of tea.

“I already know that. What about the hidden one?” Paul asked, eager to know at once.

“Oh . . . I almost forgot, you’re a Historian,” he said with a smile, slowly rubbing his mouth with a handkerchief. “The hidden one . . . well, some leaks of information within the Order divulged their plan to reconstruct the Temple of Solomon—or construct that of the other *Solomon*—by restoring the Judaic worship based on the Kabala.”

A moment of confusion overtook Paul, as he pondered on the *two* Solomons!

“Surprisingly,” Dr. Bechara caught the new brother by surprise, interfering from his calm corner near the chimney. “In 1125-1127, the Templars claimed that they had found the *Grail*, and so, on Bernard’s order, they left Palestine for France, bringing the Grail with them. Almost a year later, the Church Council enacted a meeting at Troyes—in Champagne—hosted by Hughes, Count of Champagne, and presided by Bernard of Clairvaux, who officially recognized and incorporated the Templars.” He stopped, igniting his cigar from a tiny piece of burning wood in the chimney. “Becoming their Patron, Bernard wrote the rules, and composed the eulogy, based on those of the Cistercians. In the prelude of the Rules, Bernard wrote, ‘*With God’s help, the great work has been accomplished.*’ Then, Hughes de Payens, the cousin of the Count, was elected First Grand Master of the Order, and the Grail, kept under their protection, bestowed upon them the title of the *Guardians of the Grail.*”

“Guardians of the Grail!” Paul exclaimed. “Did they really find the Holy Grail, as they claimed, or was it the Ark of the Covenant, as Dr. Najem insinuated earlier?” He then asked, confused.

“Be patient, brother. Patience is a rewarding trait in thinkers and seekers. By the way, do you know anything about the Ark of the Covenant?” Professor Michel asked in a serious tone that was belied by his somewhat indulgent grey stare at Paul’s impatience.

“Just a little, Professor, I guess,” he responded. “The Ark of the Covenant was given to Moses, by God, as a promise, or perhaps as a sort of agreement between him and his God. I remember that it stated that

Moses would lead the people of Israel, the *Chosen People*, on the good path. In return, God would deliver them from slavery forever, and give them part of the Land of Canaan, later called Palestine.” He felt proud to show some knowledge in the matter, in front of these Scholarly Masters.

“True, yet not complete,” the Professor replied diplomatically. “The Ark symbolized an accord of faith made between YHWH—the Jewish God—and the Israelites—led by Moses—at Mount Sinai. It supposedly contained three things: the Ten Commandments, the rod of Aaron, and a pot of manna.” He paused in thought. “The Ark represented the presence of YHWH among the Israelites. They carried it with them while wandering through the desert and during their battles. Later, the Old Testament says that Hiram Abiff, the Tyrian artificer of Solomon, built a beautiful Temple in Jerusalem, and placed the Ark inside the Holy of Holies. Unfortunately, after the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, in 587 BC, some Jewish priests took the Ark of the Covenant, and hid it in a place now forgotten.”

“So . . . the Ark of the Covenant was lost,” Paul stated, and murmured mostly to himself, “I already know that.”

“Yes. We know that you know,” the Professor rejoined. “Some say that Solomon gave it to his son, born from his relationship with the Queen of Sheba, and that the Ark of the Covenant could be hidden somewhere in Yemen.”

“I know that too. Yet, if the Ark had been hidden in Yemen, then what did the Templars find in Jerusalem?” the Historian asked hypothetically. “I mean . . . it doesn’t make sense to me.”

“It doesn’t make sense to any of us, and you’re absolutely right. In fact, it seems that there has never been an Ark of the Covenant, for there never was a Temple of Solomon, at all in Jerusalem. In fact, Archaeological and Historical studies strongly doubt the historical existence of both King David and his wise son—King Solomon. There is not a single reference about them, outside the Old Testament.”

If King Solomon didn’t really exist then who was the other Solomon Dr. Najem had mentioned? Paul mulled over that thought, bewildered at the great secrets the Keepers might reveal in this meeting.

“That’s not surprising at all,” Paul said in conformity. “I have often questioned the historicity of the Old Testament’s tales. There are plenty of scientific documentaries to watch, and quite a few good books to read on the non-historical existence of the two Jewish Kings. In fact, bookstores today are swarming with material written by reputable and

respectable Archaeologists and Historians. They even say that Moses . . .”

“What about Moses?” Professor Michel inquired.

“They say . . .”

“Well, let me tell you about Moses,” Professor Michel interrupted him. “It seems that Moses, the prophet and spiritual father of the Jews, was naught but a copy, created from the image of two important figures, which appeared in the ancient history of both Akkad and Egypt. The life of Moses and especially his birth is identical to the birth of Sargon the Great—the ancient King of Akkad and founder of the Akkadian dynasty—who reigned between the years 2335 and 2279 BC. In addition to that, his image as a liberator is a replica of an Egyptian Priest of Heliopolis.” He fixed his position in the armchair, added more tobacco to his brown pipe, and resumed his narration. “His name was Hosarsiph or Osarsiph. This man appeared almost 200 years after the time of Akhenaton, the Egyptian Sun worshipper, and preacher of the Monotheistic God—Aton. It is believed by many that Osarsiph was the cousin of Merneptah, the son and successor of Pharaoh Ramses II,” he glanced at Paul to make sure he was still focused on what he was saying. “Egyptian history tells that Pharaoh Ramses II continued suppressing the Monotheistic religious idea, brought by Akhenaton to Egypt. However, Osarsiph, a learned priest and loyal follower of Akhenaton, rebelled against the Pharaoh and his son—Merneptah—all in hopes of restoring the cult of Akhenaton—the belief in one God.”

Paul nodded in confirmation. “Exactly, I believe sciences such as History and Archaeology are accomplishing much in today’s understanding of the past and especially, the Old Testament. I guess it’s not difficult anymore to discern between facts and myths.”

“I guess not,” the Professor confirmed.

“Very well, but I want to get back to the Templars. What did they find then?”

“They might have found some Jewish historical and theological documents. This is very logical, but what they claimed to find—the Ark of the Covenant—might be nothing more than a document, concerning the Merkabah or *Merkava* of Ezekiel, Yahweh’s throne, the chariot beheld by Ezekiel, which later took him up to the Sky!” he paused, “Ah . . . see Ezekiel 1. It is, indeed, a Kabalistic creation.”

“What about the Grail? There was no Grail either?” Paul realized at once. “Why did they call themselves the Guardians of the Grail then?”

“In fact,” Dr. Najem intervened, “The Grail that Joseph of Arimathea

kept secretly safe, and passed down from generation to generation in his family, was the same Grail the Knights of the Round Table sought in Britain. They found it and kept it hidden in a secret place. Joseph of Arimathea, his descendants, and the Knights of the Round Table were the true Guardians-Keepers of the Grail.” He took a breath, looked around at his brothers, at Paul, and then continued, “However, in 1127, when Bernard of Clairvaux ordered the Knights Templar to leave Palestine and return to France, he did so because he knew that they would not find the Grail in Jerusalem anymore. He might have been informed by Hughes, Count of Champagne, who came to know it from the other Solomon—a dying old man, who wanted the Grail in order to use its power or even destroy it,” he said, as he stood up, and walked towards the window.

The night was just falling outside, and the wind was beginning to blow all around the fabulous Fortress. Winter had not yet come, in all earnest, and yet, there was a different feeling one could sense in the air, which indicated a mighty winter this year, a winter like no other before it.

“By 1127 AD, Solomon—that big brother—was long dead,” Dr. Najem added suddenly. “Both Godefroi and his brother Baldwin I had reported many a time, to Hughes, that the excavation in the ruins of the Temple had unearthed no such Grail, not of any sort. Concordantly, Bernard realized—through a British legend, dating back to the time of the Knights of the Round Table—that the Grail had long since journeyed to Britain with a Christian adept, Joseph of Arimathea, and that the Grail could have been hidden somewhere in the monastery of Glastonbury, which Joseph had built.” Still by the window, Dr. Najem added, “The Templars returned immediately to France, and claimed to have discovered the Grail in Jerusalem. Bernard, who presided over the Church Council a year later, rushed to recognize them, by granting them the title: *Guardians of the Grail.*”

“Aha . . . I think I understood what you mean,” Paul agreed, looking first at Nabil then at the aged brothers around him. “So, in order to discredit the original story of the Knights of the Round Table and the Holy Grail, the Templars covertly created their own version of the story of the Grail, and spread it around.”

Dr. Najem nodded, and walked to his seat. No one said anything. In the silence that followed, Paul gathered his thoughts. Not by any stretch of the imagination could he now believe that there had ever existed any historical relationship between the Knights Templar and the Knights of the Round Table. His dilemma had been finally answered; there was no

relationship whatsoever. He recognized much too clearly that both Orders of Knights differed greatly, in their beliefs and in the sequence of their historical events. At any rate, the Semi-Legend of King Arthur and his Knights' quest for the Holy Grail had inspired a great number of novelists and poets of the Middle Ages. Their fertile imagination had built up extraordinary stories of love, betrayal, heroism, legends, and Magic.

Time to think . . .

Royal Blood!

Wednesday, November 3, 08:30 PM

Time seemed to have swiftly drifted by inside the mysterious walls of the Fortress. Paul never stopped thinking about Joseph of Arimathea, the Grail, and the Knights of the Round Table. He wondered why the Knights Templar had invented their own story. The answer dawned on him one evening, as he was heading for the Dining Room, to join the Keepers for dinner. It seemed that the Templars had claimed the discovery of the Grail with a single purpose in mind, to control the Church.

It was not by coincidence that Bernard De Fontaine, known also as St. Bernard of Clairvaux—who presided over the Church Council, convened in 1128 AD—hastened to recognize the *Ordo Supremus Militaris Templi Hierosolymitani*, known in English as the Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem. This Order is none other than the famous Order of the Knights Templar, which Bernard bestowed with the title: *Guardians of the Grail*.

But, which Grail? And who was the other Solomon? Paul wondered, as he stepped into the Dining Room, and took his place at the table. An old couple, a man and his wife, who, as Paul later found out, lived in a small house at the western side of the Fortress, served dinner. After they had poured the wine, they made sure that everything was set properly on the table, and left for the kitchen, closing the Dining Room door behind them.

“There is something you need to know, Paul.” Dr. Najem advanced after a few seconds, confident that the room was secured from outsiders. “Of course, you recall what I have imparted to you earlier on the Templars. Like most secret societies, they endorse two diverse doctrines: one public and another hidden. The first exposed an ideal relation with the Catholic Throne, taking a public vow to defend Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy places during the Crusades. The second, however,

divulged their plan to re-build the Temple of Solomon, or construct one, according to the wishes of another *Solomon*, thus restoring the Judaic worship based on the Kabala,” he said, and took a sip of wine.

Paul nodded. He remembered very well. The other four Keepers smiled, and took a sip of their wine, as well.

“Great!” Dr. Najem said. “We have seen how the Templars furtively created a special version of the story of the Grail to fit their plans, which would allow them to be in alliance with the Catholic Church. This, my brother, was just a cover up story, not only to hide their hidden doctrine related to *Solomon*, but to keep their Grail guarded, as well.” He gazed all around him. His eyes were everywhere.

“Wait . . . just wait. You’ve got me confused here, Doctor,” Paul uttered. “You said, during tea, that they hadn’t found any Grail, and that it was all just a hoax. I don’t quite understand what you mean by: keeping their Grail guarded.” His eyebrows lifted, his eyes perplexed. “You mean there were two Holy Grails?” he probed for confirmation.

They all smiled widely, and then burst out laughing. Paul was startled at that. His face revealed his now even greater perplexity, and their laughter increased. Nabil didn’t join in the laughter, apparently as confounded as Paul, who felt heat burning his face.

“No . . . not at all,” Professor Michel finally decided to end his discomfiture. “There was only one Holy Grail, but two contradictory stories. In fact, the Grail of the Templars was not a Holy Cup, but rather, a woman.”

“A woman?” Paul exclaimed.

“Well, that’s what they alleged. The Knights Templar believed the Grail was a woman, who held in her womb the offspring of Jesus Christ,” he explained.

A moment of silence prevailed, in which the Historian sat dumbfounded on his chair.

“But . . . err, Jesus was never married,” Nabil burst out, breaking his silence at last. He blushed profusely, seemingly upset.

“Of course, and we all know that, so take it easy, Nabil. The Templars believed it, or maybe they were made to believe it.”

“What do you mean?” Paul frowned, his senses on alert.

“Well, here’s the story,” Dr. Bechara began; discarding the cigar he had previously lit. “The Templars and their successors, the Scottish and York Rites Freemasons in some additional degrees, believed that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, and that she was pregnant at the

time of the crucifixion. In order to secure the safety of their child or children, as others have also claimed, she ran off to Gaul (which we now know as France) right after the death of Jesus on the cross. Joseph of Arimathea, the trusted great uncle of Jesus, escorted her to a safe harbor. She found refuge within the Jewish community in southern France, where she delivered a daughter that she named Sarah. The Jews, according to the Templars, protected Mary and her daughter because of their bloodline with the Jewish Kings—David and Solomon—through Jesus Christ, supposedly of Jewish lineage!”

“Oh . . . wait a minute!” Paul interfered, needing to point out the irony of this statement. “This claim is entirely outrageous! Stating that the Jews in France proved to be more considerate towards the alleged wife and daughter of Jesus, and his Jewish Kingship lineage, than those who persecuted, judged, and sought to crucify him at the Golgotha in Jerusalem, as stated in the New Testament, is gibberish.”

“I agree with you, Paul. I don’t really understand why the Jews of France would care to protect the blood of Jesus—the blood their forefathers hold a great responsibility for shedding in the first place,” Nabil joined in, with the same state of confusion and denial.

Dr. Najem coughed lightly, then commented in exasperation, “Well . . . nobody understands that logic of theirs, really. This is not a historical fact, of course, but just a legend, fabricated by the Templars and their descendants, the Scottish and York Rites Freemasons in some additional degrees. As far as we know, Jewish history has never mentioned such a tale!” Dr. Najem waved his hand in a gesture of dismissing that notion for now, and rushed to say, “Anyway, we’ll revert to this issue later. But for now, please allow Brother Robert to continue.”

“Thank you, Brother John.” Dr. Bechara gave a brief smile, and returned to his serious demeanor, to proceed, “Despite the fact that the Jews of France did not mention such an odd story in their recorded history, they surely considered Mary Magdalene sacred because of her kinship with the Jewish Royal blood. In fact, most of the stories that have mentioned the Holy Grail, tried to hide its real meaning. Holy Grail, they said, is nothing but a distorted English word, deriving from the original French word, which means Sangreal, Sang Royal, or Royal Blood. Hence, in their tale, the Templars narrated how Mary Magdalene carried the Royal Blood of Jesus in her womb, from which Sarah was born, and the secret bloodline of Jesus evolved from her.”

“Ah . . . now I see,” Nabil uttered with a quick glance in Paul’s

direction. “According to the Templars, the Holy Grail was not the Holy Cup used by Jesus at the last supper, which later was filled with his dripping blood on the cross, but rather, Mary Magdalene, Sarah, and their subsequent generations. What a luxuriant imagination!” his ironic tone lingered, but the brothers did not share his grin. On the contrary, their faces remained serious, and Paul understood that the dramatic consequences of all this must be the reason.

“Well . . . they claimed it,” Dr. Bechara conceded in a grave tone that erased the smile from Nabil’s face. “Please note that the word Grail might have derived from the word Gratalis, an offshoot of the Latin word Crater, which means *the cup*. In addition, there are no historical references, which say that Joseph of Arimathea lived in France. It was in England where he spread the *word*, and fulfilled his mission. However, Cardinal Baronius—the Vatican librarian—wrote that Joseph first arrived in 35 AD to Marseilles, France, and headed, immediately thereafter, to Britain. Without doubt, Joseph might have gone there with some disciples of Jesus.”

Another moment of silence passed . . . a moment to think.

Dr. Bechara explained that medieval thought and religious aspirations had changed into a strange but practical mixture of Christian faith and, what had wrongly been called, Pagan philosophies. “In England,” he added, grabbing his cigar back from the ashtray on the table, “the Celtic Tradition coordinated primarily with Christian Religion. Joseph of Arimathea founded Christianity, and built his monastery in Somerset, at Glastonbury, where a Celtic monastery remains from as early as the 4th century BC,” he paused for a moment, and then continued, “At any rate, the Templars insisted they should protect Sarah—being the purported holder of Jesus’ secret bloodline—from a presumed continuous danger!”

“A continuous danger?” Paul reacted. The tale sounded interesting to him, and he needed to know what kind of threat had hovered over that imaginary persona. “From whom?” he asked.

“From the Church,” Dr. Bechara answered, curt and brief.

“From the Church?” Nabil spoke in outrage. “Now, wait a minute! Were they really trying to say that they were the true protectors of the faith and, hitherto, expect us to believe it? It’s outrageous, not to mention, insane, to assume that they had cared enough to protect Jesus’ bloodline from the Church that he himself had established!”

“Yeah, right, the Templars: protectors of the faith,” Paul said mockingly. “What a joke!”

There was general laughter in the Dining Room for a minute or two, followed by a calm moment of reflection that Professor Michel decided to break, “After they weaved up that tale, and spread it around, the Templars worked on exhibiting their adoration to John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, and John the Evangelist—the beloved disciple of Jesus,” he began. “They even built churches all over France, the most famous were those built in Provence, Languedoc, Champagne, and Rennes-le-Château, in honor of St. John and Mary Magdalene. Most probably, they did so in hopes of misleading Christians and, most importantly, to mollify Rome’s suspicions. However, doubts remained, for none of their churches had endorsed the name of Jesus, or even his mother Mary.” He halted on that central thought. “They even claimed that the Church feared the secret of the family—Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Sarah—would one day be disclosed to the people, and endanger the doctrine of the Church and its teachings on the divinity of Jesus Christ.”

Professor Michel stood, and walked over to the buffet, poured some hot tea on his cup, added a splash of red wine to the infusion, and turned to the attentive Keepers around him. Their eyes met his, as he took a slow, long sip then stared outside—watching the playful game of the wind on the trees—and pursued his narration, “Eventually, they had to keep their story alive, in spite of its incongruity. And, in consequence, they fabricated and circulated a new tale, stating that the sacred bloodline had secretly spread and grown in France, intermingling, in due course of time, with the blood of the French Royalty, hence, the existence of the Merovingians, and the establishment of the city of Paris!”

Nabil leapt to his feet, “The Merovingian bloodline?”

“Yes. They even say that Godefroi *De Bouillon*, one of their nine founders, as I mentioned earlier, was of the same Merovingian bloodline, and that it was he who found the documents of the Royal Blood,” the Professor added.

“I don’t understand!” Obviously confused, Nabil sagged in his seat, lifted his hands, and dropped them down noisily on the arms of his chair. “Why did they invent—yet another—imaginative story?”

“Not for Religious purposes, that’s for sure,” Dr. Bechara answered evenly from his seat near the chimney. “Obviously, all serious researchers who tackled this particular topic in History believed that the Knights Templar, the Jews of France, and the Priory of Zion had never cared about Jesus Christ, or were ever concerned with his bloodline.”

Paul gazed at him, through the heavy smoke of his cigar, which

scented the Room. “How is it so?” he asked. “I mean, isn’t that contradictory?”

“Exactly! They probably wanted to give their story additional credibility, and claimed that, as stated in the documents of the Royal Blood, Jesus was not divine but an ordinary man. Ultimately, this pretended kinship holds no trustworthiness, whatsoever, since the New Testament often states that Jesus and the Jews were in constant conflict and divergence.”

They all nodded in agreement. The statement stood valid for all of the five Keepers, sitting at the table. Paul bent forward for what was coming up from Dr. Bechara, as he seemed to have more to reveal. He disposed of his cigar on the crammed ashtray in front of him, and stood out of the cloud in which he had surrounded himself with his continuous smoking.

He looked at the Historian and said, “In order to add up to the confusion, and generate another problem, they intertwined another misleading story out of diverse ideas. They claimed that the Sicambrian Franks, the tribe from which the Merovingians descended, were of Jewish origin—a tribe that migrated to Greece and, later on, to Germany. According to their allegations, this tribe was the lost tribe of Benjamin, one of the twelve tribes of Israel. In Germany, they became known as the Sicambrians,” he concluded, as he went to the window, and pushed it fully open, to the patent relief of everyone in the Dining Room.

Paul leaned back on his seat . . . and, even more, on his thoughts. *The lost tribe of Benjamin . . . the Sicambrian Franks . . . the Merovingian line of Kings who founded Paris, the capital of France! Total nonsense . . .*

Professor Michel took over, “History relates that Merovee or Meroveus, the founder of the Merovingian Kings, ruled from 448 to 457 AD. Hence, the name Merovingian was endorsed by the first race of Frank Kings, who were of the Germanic race of the Sicambrian Franks. However, they were not at all of Jewish origin! Moreover, Paris took its name from a Celtic tribe called *Parisii*, a tribe appearing in history, sometime around 50 BC, the time when Caesar began reuniting the people of the Gaule to launch a war against revolutionary movements. Some of the Parisii settled in Great Britain, while others found shelter in *Île-de-France*, originally called Lutèce. They later founded the city of Paris that became their capital, later known as the capital of France—a name derived from the Franks.” He paused and took a breath.

“Merovee; his son Childeric I—King of the Franks, in the year 458 AD;

and Clovis I—son of the latter; were all adepts of the cult of Diana. In 496 AD, Clovis I—King of the Franks, since 481 AD—converted to Christianity. It would be illogical, and completely out of Historical context, to assume that his conversion befell on the lost Jewish tribe of Benjamin, or on the Jewish community that protected the Grail: Magdalene and her daughter.” He grinned at the absurdity of the Templar’s claim before he added, “Clovis I received his Christian baptism at the hands of St. Remi. Ever since that time, he became the protector of the Catholic faith. He even reunited and presided over Church Council in Orleans, in 511 AD. Many Merovingian Kings followed after that, until Childeric III—who reigned over the Franks from the year 742 until 751 AD—he was the last of the Merovingians.” The way he uttered this last sentence gave the impression that he had finished.

Paul stretched out his legs and then stood up, and walked to the window, to gaze at the world outside. Some things remained unclear to him. He veered, and glanced around at the brothers, who seemed drawn in their thoughts, all but Dr. Najem, whose sympathetic eyes met his. Paul decided to address him, “What was the true aim of the Priory of Zion, since they never cared about Jesus and his bloodline?”

Dr. Najem looked at his watch. It marked 10:37 PM. “Tomorrow we’ll talk about that. It’s late and I intend to have some time for a quiet meditation in my room. Good night, Gentlemen,” he bid them, and took his leave.

“Good night . . .”

Outside, the stars moved along their curved paths and twinkled, as they danced through the sky above. Tired now, Paul went up to his room, to get some sleep. As the minutes passed, his mind lost its awareness of time, and entered the emptiness of the night, falling into oblivion. His senses were lost in the deepest recesses of his body.

The Priory of Zion
Thursday, November 4, 05:00 PM

The morning following the revelation, concerning the Templars and their strange version of the Grail, was soothing to Paul. After breakfast, he took a short walk outside the Fortress, and then sat on a bench under a Cedar tree, overlooking the small valley below. Although the information he received from the Keepers was new to him, as a Historian, he felt at ease in the company of those erudite men. He felt safe. He smiled. There still was one topic he needed to understand: the *Priory of Zion*, but that had to wait until their meeting in the afternoon. A meeting scheduled at five in the Living Room, and Paul just couldn't wait to hear what they would reveal.

Time flew by and the clock, hanging on the wall, marked 05:00 PM.

"Yesterday night, you were wondering about the true aim of the Priory of Zion, right?" Dr. Najem began, addressing Paul.

"Yes," Paul confirmed.

"Very well, their only goal was not entirely religious in nature, it was rather political," he explained in an even tone of voice. "They wanted to legitimize their right to the Throne of France, by pretending that they were the ones who had founded Paris."

"Throne of France!" Paul exclaimed, his mind at work. "Priory of Zion . . . What does the name mean?" he asked, leaning back on the window frame, as he slid his hands into his pants' pockets, focusing on Dr. Najem's coming reply.

"The Priory of Zion was a religious and military Order, initiated by Rashi, in the city of Troyes, in Champagne, France. It means: the Superiors of the Religious House of Zion. In opposition to their claims, *Our Lady of Zion* is neither the Black Virgin, nor Isis—denoted as Mary Magdalene, by the Templars. It is Jerusalem—the feminine principle of Zion. Therefore, the Priory of Zion led the Templars, at the time of the

Crusades, in order to govern Zion, the ancient citadel of Jerusalem, which they believed should be ruled by the Messiah, the promised deliverer of the Jews: Rashi!”

“Rashi! Who was Rashi?” Paul asked impatiently.

“Well, here’s the story. As early as the beginning of the Crusades, in 1095 AD, a certain man by the name of Solomon Ben Isaac, in Troyes, made contact with Hughes, Count of Champagne. Solomon, also known as Rashi, became one of the most famous Jewish sages of France, after establishing, in Champagne, a rabbinical kabalistic school based on the Talmud. More than likely, Hughes, the Count, and his friend, Godefroi de Bouillon, had a special relationship with Rabbi Rashi and his school of Kabala. It was, precisely such a connection, which made Godefroi de Bouillon—Duke of Lower Lorraine—First Master of the secret Order of Notre Dame de Sion or *Our Lady of Zion*—the *Priory of Zion*.” He paused for a moment, and took the cup of tea in his hand. In the silence that followed, thoughts whirled in Paul’s mind.

“Rashi had earlier revealed to Godefroi de Bouillon, and to him alone, the existence of the Sacred Cup and of the Ark of the Covenant, both hidden in the ruins of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem,” Dr. Najem continued. “He notified him, as well, that the Ark would confer amazing support and power to those who found it.

“Now, when Rashi—old and sick, on his deathbed, in Troyes—sent for Hughes, the Count, this man rode expeditiously with his cousin, to meet the dying man. That night, he came to know about the Temple, the Ark, and the Sacred Cup, and about the fact that the Cup was not concealed in Jerusalem but in a different place, where Joseph of Arimathea might have taken it, long ago.

“Godefroi became the First Master of the Priory of Zion, in the year 1099 AD, the same year that Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Christian Crusaders, led by Peter the Hermit, Godefroi de Bouillon, Hughes—Count of Champagne, and Raymond de Saint Gilles—Count of Toulouse,” Dr. Najem explained, and added, “However, during his single year of reign, which he spent in Jerusalem, Godefroi failed to find the Cup Rashi had talked about, despite his intensive search. No one knew of a relation between Pope Urban II of Champagne and Master Rashi, other than the one that took place through the Count, as intermediary between them. And it is quite certain that there was no connection between Pope Paschal II, successor of Pope Urban II, and Rashi.” Dr. Najem halted for a breath, and said, “It appeared, however, that all those who masterminded

the campaign were from Champagne. Was it a mere coincidence?” he then asked, and looked over at Paul and Nabil, who stood quietly still.

“Well, no. We do not truthfully deem it as such. A very vital question remains imminent in our minds. Did Rashi and his Kabbalistic School plot to form a cabal in order to restore back Jerusalem through the Christian Crusades? After all, Rashi’s real name was Solomon, the name of the King of Jerusalem in the Old Testament. He might have planned to construct a Temple since he probably considered himself a profound Talmudist, a Jewish Messiah, and ruler of Zion,” he concluded.

Aha . . . It was Rashi then. Rashi was the other Solomon . . . Paul acknowledged, in relief. Outside, the wind rose, whisking the branches of trees in a rowdy rhythm, and lifting particles of debris into the air, blurring most of the view from the window.

“And so it happened,” Professor Michel stated in a grave tone, taking over the narration where Dr. Najem had left off, “that Rashi ruled over Jerusalem for one year, through Godefroi de Bouillon, the First Master of the Order of Zion, and for another five years before he died, through King Baldwin of Boulogne (Baldwin I), Godefroi’s brother, and Second Master of the Order of Zion.” He took a short breath, and then added, “In fact, Godefroi tactically declined the title of King of Jerusalem, and chose instead the title of Principal or Duke. He might have endorsed the name of Solicitor of the *Saint-Sepulcher*; an edifice built in the IV century AD, by St. Helene, the mother of Emperor Constantine. A smart move, indeed, since the Saint-Sepulcher hosted the Tomb of Christ, as per the official Christian tradition. In truth, his only purpose was to conceal his political interest in Jerusalem in order to reign, secretly, through the Order of *Our Lady of Zion*.”

“There is something confusing here,” Paul interrupted him. “Why did the Templars endorse the name of ‘Poor Knights of Christ’ if they held no adoration for Him? They only venerated John the Baptist, Mary, and Sarah!”

“True. Let me explain this,” Dr. Najem answered with a nod. “The Templars were also called the Knights of the Temple of Solomon. It seems they had only wished to restore the lost Jewish faith of the teachings of Rashi or Solomon Ben Isaac. However, when the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple of Solomon did not materialize, they switched their search to the Holy Grail, hence, the Royal Blood story, most probably invented by Rashi.”

“Why, in your opinion, would he do this?” the Historian probed.

“It seems that, in order to protect the Jews, in Jerusalem and Europe, during the early years of the Crusades, Rashi invented the story of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and their child: Sarah. He probably convinced the Count that the Jews in France had protected Mary and her, yet-to-born infant, once they had settled with Joseph of Arimathea, in France, after their escape from Palestine.” Dr. Najem clarified, and uttered, “In fact, the Jews had enjoyed a particularly strong protection under the power of the Templars.” He then took a cigarette from his pocket, and lit it.

“Rashi might have told them that the secret of the presumed family of Jesus was hidden, yet reachable, within the ruins of Solomon’s Temple. This secret, known as the Sangreal documents, allegedly proved the kinship lineage of Jesus to the Jewish kings—David and Solomon—and provided some information, regarding the assumed wife and daughter and other Jewish religious doctrines. Obviously, the Church fiercely rejected the existence of such defamatory documents, which claimed Jesus’ humanity as absolute, and thus, denied the divinity of his teachings. In fact, the Templars reduced his importance to that of a simple teacher and a prophet, like any other prophet.” He smoked his cigarette.

“Did these documents truly exist, or were they just an invention of Rashi?” Paul asked in doubt.

“An invention, of course! Take the Gospels, for instance. Aside from the four Gospels endorsed by the Church, there are many other documents narrating the story of Jesus, which were not accepted in the biblical canon, but are published nowadays. They are called *Apocrypha*, and it means *hidden*.

“We know, for a fact, that some were written by Gnostics, who were divided into two branches: the dualists and non-dualists. The non-dualists were Christians and their stories about Jesus Christ were spiritual. The Gospel of the Magdalene, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Gospel of Marcion are cogent examples. The dualists, on the other hand, pretended to be Christians, and claimed to know the true story of Christ. In fact, their tales closely resembled the story written by the Jews in the Talmud. This is known as the Panthera issue. Many other narratives existed, written by different people, like the *Quelle* documents, most probably issued by the Galileans, and are, to a certain degree, similar to those of the non-dualist Christian Gnostics. There are many, many others, too.”

“You mentioned the Gospel of the Magdalene,” Paul pointed out. *That*

should be interesting! he thought. “What does it recount . . . anything about the tale of the pretended family?” he asked eagerly.

“Nothing . . . nothing at all. It is a purely spiritual book. It describes the spiritual and human relation of Jesus and Mary Magdalene; a liaison between a spiritual teacher, a divine man, and one of his favorite disciples.”

“So . . . it was Rashi who created that fable, to manipulate the Templars for his own interest!” Nabil concluded in a patent tone of relief.

“It might very well be the case. Of course, Rashi did not reveal to those Christian Knights, what the Jews, back then, truly believed, for, in the Talmud, they wrote an odd story on the life of Jesus, known as the *Sepher-Toledoth-Yeshu!*”

“I’m anxious to hear it. What does it say?” Nabil exclaimed impatiently.

Paul felt the same keenness, but remained outwardly collected, he moved away from the window, went back to his winsome chair, and took a seat, waiting for Dr. Najem to proceed.

“Well, between the 2nd and 10th century AD, the Jewish community started to circulate, clandestinely, of course, four documents on the life of Jesus. They organized them in a very clever way, to compete with the Christian Gospels. The Jews, however, still consider them genuine, even today. In fact, authenticity lacks in those documents, which only depict a *falsified* version of the life of Jesus. They narrated that, in the era of the second Temple, at the time of King Herod II, there lived a Jewish man of the house of David, by the name of Joseph Ben Pandera, and his beautiful wife, called Myriam (Marie).

“Joseph had a neighbor, by the name of Yohanan; an impious outlaw and adulterous man, who lusted after Joseph’s wife. One night, in the month of Nissan (April), Joseph left home, at midnight, to perform his religious studies. Yohanan, spotting him leaving home, entered the house, and found Marie sleeping. He forced himself on her. In the darkness, Myriam assumed him to be her husband, driven crazy by his desire to sleep with her, while on her menstrual period.” He paused for a moment, in which his features expressed repulsion, at the evident malice behind the story the Jews circulated.

“Early, the next morning,” Dr. Najem continued his narration, “When her husband returned home, she reprimanded him for his wild deed of the night before. Joseph at once suspected Yohanan; a man accustomed to frequent prostitutes, as stated in the Talmud. Anyway, the story carried

on that Marie got pregnant, and Jesus was born, a bastard son of Yohanan, the impious man, and Myriam, a woman of sin! Joseph, her husband, who could not tolerate the impact of humiliation and shame, left Jerusalem for Babylon. Yet, in another version of the four documents, we find that Yohanan was the husband and Joseph, the impious man, who committed adultery with Marie. These documents were later known as the *Gospel of the Ghetto*,” he ended with a deep breath.

“Another crazy story, indeed!” Paul protested aloud. “Why this nonsense?”

“Right!” Nabil joined in with the same outraged attitude. “If they claimed the illegitimacy of the baby Jesus, then why should they claim to care about his Royal Blood?”

“Exactly. This is another contradiction! Believe me, it is just nonsense,” Professor Michel stepped into the discussion. “In 1139, Pope Innocent II declared that the Knights Templar should be held liable to the Papacy, and from that time onward, the Templars became the bankers of the Papacy; bankers with a hidden agenda, in a relationship based on their own interests. They played their game well by keeping in good terms with the power in Rome, and concealing their true goal from the Tiara. Successful bankers for the Catholic Church they proved to be, as the European nobility and Royalty gradually increased their wealth. During that whole time, the campaigns of the Crusades persisted, one after another, while the Templars deceitfully acquired thousands of acres of lands, which had belonged to the nobility under the European Feudal system, where they had flourished.”

Professor Michel took his time, drinking his cup of tea, as they waited patiently for him, to pursue his recounting of such an interesting story. Hooked on his gestures, Paul held his breath.

As if reading Paul’s mind, the Professor grinned at him, then reverted to his serious stance, and continued, “Their banking system was based on issuing loans to individuals and governments all over Europe. They created a complex system for the transportation of wealth—to and from—the Holy Land. They also came up with a payment system, similar to the modern use of banking checks, where people could deposit their money with the Templars in one place, and retrieve it from another location. This method proved easier and safer than transporting large amounts of gold or silver. In short, the Temple became—or perhaps was secretly designed to become—a Bank with a treasury safe, the *Sanctum Sanctorum* that preserved the Golden Ark, from which *manna* was

created, and . . . in *money*, they lavishly put their trust!” Here, he paused, looking at Paul, who was amazed at the shrewdness of such a secret scheme.

Dr. Bechara, with a cigar between his fingers, took over, in his husky voice, “Their goal of building a Temple in Jerusalem—to consecrate to *Solomon* and then turning it into the Metropolis of the Universe—became an attainable vision. Controlling the commercial route between the East and the West appeared to be a manifestation of their Empire. In time, their greedy objectives made them extremely wealthy and very powerful. However, their arrogance and contempt towards the traditional Christian—religious and social—institutions slowly began to emerge from concealment. In 1291 AD the Crusades ended with the fall of all the Holy places in Palestine, in the hands of the Arabs. The Dream of the Templars and all the other allied secret Orders—like the Priory of Zion—to rebuild the Temple, and restore the Ark of the Covenant, vanished forever,” he concluded.

It was never there, anyway . . . just a myth, Paul mulled over the incongruity of such a disillusion.

“After their defeat,” Dr. Bechara resumed, “The Templars moved to the island of Cyprus where they established their base, in hopes of another Crusade that would restore their dream. At that particular time, the Christian Church in Rome, goaded by strong suspicions, became allied to the Kingdom of France, and conducted a secret scrutiny of the Templars. Soon enough, the real identity and aim of the Order were uncovered, and that happened at the crucial moment in time in which these heretics had plotted to defeat Christianity and Monarchy. Since the Crusades had ended, irrevocably, the Church did not hesitate. Pope Clement V and his ally, King Philip le Bel—Phillip the Fair—of France delivered their verdict throughout France and Europe, arresting and imprisoning, in October 1307, a large number of Knights, including Jacques de Molay—the Grand Master. In January 1308, the British King, Edward II, followed suit, and ordered the arrest of the Templars in Britain.” He thoughtfully paused, and then added, “On the 18th of March, 1314, King Philip ordered Jacques de Molay—Grand Master of the Knights Templar—and Geoffroy de Charnay—Grand Superior of Normandie—to be taken to the ‘*île aux Juifs*’ (‘*île des Juifs*’), later known by the name of ‘*île des Templiers*’. It was there, in that very ancient isle on the Seine, in Paris—located on the western part of ‘*l’île de la Cité*’—where the two Knights met their deaths, the next morning, burnt alive at

the stake.”

Dr. Bechara then explained that the trial had actually begun two years earlier, in 1312, in France, although the Templars had been arrested five years before. And then he read from an ancient book he had placed on the side table next to him some of the accounts brought by the Church and Monarchy, against the Order, for its dissolution:

“Item 1: The Templars possess idols in every province. They call them *heads*, having sometimes one, two, or even three faces.

“Item 2: The Templars venerate the *head* in their Pories and especially in their grand chapters, or lodges, as their god and savior.

“Item 3: The *head* has carbuncle-eyes, shining brightly, as if from Heaven, which makes them believe it a god, their supreme god.

“Item 4: The *head* has half a beard on its face and another half from behind. It is a repugnant thing.

“Item 5: The Templars believe the *head* will give them power, allow them riches, make miracles, generate food, and let herbs grow in the desert.”

“However, the most imperative item, the *main charge* leveled against them,” Dr. Najem took over, “Said that during the Initiation ceremony, the aspirant was asked to deny Christ thrice, and to spit thrice upon the cross! The Templars, known as Knights of Christ, were, in reality, a disgrace to the title they endorsed. By denying Christ, they showed naught but a complete dedication to an Order, carrying the fingerprints of an even older religion.” He paused for a thought, “Anyway, whether the Templars—or their direct descendants, the Scottish and York Rites Freemasons in some additional degrees—conducted such rituals in their secret chapters—worshipping the Devil in the shape of a goat, the Baphomet—or not, they certainly did not consider Christ, as the Christian *word*, or the son of God, as preached by Christianity. Entirely misguided, they avoided mentioning the Christian Master in their Lodges, and confined their knowledge entirely to the Old Testament. Whether or not Jesus Christ was the *son of God* in the real sense of the word, a human mind could not conceive of a person, better than him, to hold that Highly Majestic, Spiritual lore.”

“Know this, my brothers,” Dr. Najem declared, loud and clear, “The *head* the Templars venerated as their savior, their Messiah, was none other than Rashi, a Hebrew name that means: *head*. Indeed, he was the head of the Kabbalistic tradition of the Templars. Know this also, brothers, the Temple of Solomon Ben Daoud never existed, but the Templars of

Solomon Ben Isaac did.”

Time stood still on this incredible fact . . .

Paul looked at the handsome clock on the wall; it was getting close to 06:25 PM. Time had flown by, inadvertently. He went outside the Fortress, and silently watched the Horizon . . . perfectly aligned with the sea.

- Part IV -

Keepers of the Word
Thursday, November 4, 10:35 PM

The evening was far advanced when Paul joined the Keepers, once again, in the Living Room. They had already had dinner more than two hours ago, and Dr. Najem told him, as they left the table, that tonight's meeting was of great importance. As he imagined, the four *brothers* waited for him at the Round Table.

"Here you are! Come in, have a seat," Dr. Najem welcomed Paul with a warm smile that softened his serious features.

"We have been waiting for you," the others said in unison.

Without any further delay he took his place, the fifth chair around the table, completing, so to speak, the five points of the star. In the center of the table rested a box, similar to the one of the Mystery Chamber. Upon seeing it, Paul's eyes began to move right and left in the direction of the Keepers, his eyebrows lifted, completely confounded. They all nodded with a smile, even Nabil, the least knowledgeable of them.

Still in confusion, the Historian examined it from his place, and noted a strange inscription on its lid. A vague impression of *déjà-vu* made him frown in concentration while he tried to gather the data in his memory. The palm of a hand outlined the background of that intricate symbol of five elements. His eyes kept probing, and his mind, composing and decomposing the shapes and forms until it became clear to him. From the *palm* of the hand, four elements emerged: a *caduceus*, a *five-pointed star*, a *lotus*, and a *cross*. He leaned back on his chair with a smile of satisfaction, then, with an absent gaze at the ceiling; he browsed his memory in search of these four elements on the wooden box of the Mystery Chamber. Yet, within its entirely elaborate artistic work, his memory failed to show him a caduceus, a five-pointed star, a lotus, and not even a cross. *Where, inside the Mystery Chamber, could these symbols be hidden?!* he fretted in silent frustration, as he realized the

impossibility of going back to check for them now. The danger must still be lingering there . . .

“Cheers!” Dr. Najem called out gleefully, as he stood up with his glass of wine raised for a toast. “Other than Wednesday and Sunday, today, Thursday, is another special day in the calendar of our Society of Keepers of the Word. Let’s drink a toast to that!”

At once, all the chairs jostled noisily, as the other four stood up in good grace, to comply with the call. They lifted their drinks, and five wineglasses met above the center of the table in a unanimous ovation and a gleeful clatter of glasses. Eyes shone above the drinks they consumed, and a new bond linked them together at this very special moment. They resumed their places at the Round Table with the same merry noise, and for some reason; Paul matched the scene with that of the medieval Knights of King Arthur. A great feeling of belonging inundated him, as he felt proud to partake in a Society that strove to keep an ancient mystical Tradition well alive and to share its mysteries with the Keepers.

“I think, yesterday you acquired a thorough knowledge of the Templars, their Grail, and their beliefs,” Dr. Najem commented, looking in his direction.

“Yes, indeed. I did.”

“Very well, then,” Dr. Bechara expressed his satisfaction with the trace of a smile showing on his face. “We will now turn our attention to a secret that very few people know. In fact, it is one of the most powerful secrets of all times. It has been concealed for centuries.”

A secret much more powerful than that of the Templars? Paul glanced at him in wonder. *What could that be?*

“Please, brother, don’t look so amazed,” advised Professor Michel, addressing him, “Being a novice in our Society, just like Nabil, who has been here only a bit longer than you, has earned you the right to know the ultimate secret. We trust you to keep it protected. You are a Keeper, after all.”

At once, memories flooded him: of how he’d entered the Fortress that first time; of when he’d met Nabil in his white outfit; and then, when he’d tried on his own, and looked at his reflection in the mirror—comparing himself to Pythagorean and Essenian brothers. In fact, that peculiar subtlety had boosted his curiosity about the Order. Likewise, another flashback brought him back to the moment when he’d stood at the door, overhearing their discussion on his behalf, and then, the revelation about the signs that had confirmed his loyalty and his acceptance as the Fifth

element.

Now, glancing at them in wait, Paul met their smiles of acceptance. He smiled back. Anxious yet thrilled, he wondered about that ultimate secret. The importance of his presence—there, as a member of that Great Society—dawned on him at once, as he was better able to encompass and discern his mission in life. There should be no doubts, no fears, and no more blind or confused notions about the true meaning of his historical and spiritual identity as a human being.

They all looked at him with respect and honor, for he had become a brother who would share their same beliefs, ideas, and vision. A vision that would enable them to witness, analyze, and live in a better world; a world based on the realities of life and on the aspirations of the true faith, rather than, consciously or unconsciously, indulging in false History and fictitious religious ideas.

They smiled warmly . . . He waited.

“Throughout the ages,” Dr. Najem started in a serious tone, “our goal was always to keep the *word* protected from the ignorant mind of the vulgar. The search has long ended. We have found the Grail, hidden it and protected it. As long as we live, and our descendants after us, we shall always keep it protected.”

The Grail is with us . . . The Grail is the word . . . Our goal is to protect it forever, Paul recapitulated in his mind with a sense of bewilderment. He recalled the Cup of Life, the Sarcophagus of King Ahiiram of Gebel, the Architect, and the Archaeologist who had both perished in an atrocious way, for edging close to discovering the secret of the Holy Grail—through their work on the Sarcophagus. *The relationship is quite clear*, he thought, as he instantly decided to ask Dr. Bechara for a credible answer, “Gabriel told me that the two researchers were killed by ‘Seth Servitors’. Why?”

“Gabriel was right,” he answered. “Satan Servants is a very powerful, religious and military, organization that controls the underground stream of falsified secret knowledge, and progresses silently in the dark. We have been fighting them for a long time. They managed to steal the Grail from us, but not the *word*. The longer we keep it, the sooner we’ll get the Grail back.”

“What do you mean? I don’t follow. Dr. Najem has just said that the Grail is with us!” the Historian rushed to ask, confused.

“Sure, we have the Grail. They only stole its shape, and changed its blood, but could not steal its essence—its real blood. Soon you will

understand what I'm talking about," he reassured with that soothing grave voice of his.

"Fine for now," Paul conceded with a light nod, "But tell me, Dr. Bechara, is there any relationship between the Sarcophagus of King Ahiram of Gebel and the Grail?" he asked, looking inquisitively at him, as he recalled the Kadmus sequences sent by the Padre—which did not reveal any possible connection.

A shadow of grief darkened his eyes at once, and with a frown and a dry voice he avowed, "The Architect and the Archaeologist were members of our Fraternity. Their death was a terrible loss for us, but history has proven that our power of resistance has never lacked strength. They cannot intimidate or threaten us!" Somehow, his face darkened, as his shady eyebrows linked fiercely together and his mouth drew in, forming a thin line that almost disappeared through his beard. Determination had its say on that matter. He refilled his glass of wine, and went to stand by the window, his back to them.

Professor Michel tapped his fingers on the table, to draw everyone's attention. He intended to pick up where Dr. Bechara had stopped, "The Sarcophagus once exhibited a remarkable and clear drawing just below the Phoenician inscription. Time erased some of its details, but we can still clearly depict the scene of seven Phoenician priests, performing religious rites in the presence of King Ahiram. Perched on his Royal Sphinx Throne, the King held in his hand a reversed lotus—being the sign of his death. Just ahead of him, a religious table or altar held a cup of wine and a loaf of bread. In fact, the sacred ritual of *bread and wine* was first practiced by Melki-Sedek, the High Priest of EL. Jesus Christ later performed this same ritual at the Last Supper with the famous Cup—known today as the Holy Grail."

"Of course, you still remember how the Phoenician Alphabet took shape, one letter after the other, on a tablet of marble, emerging out of the Cedar box inside the Mystery Chamber," the Professor uttered, looking straight into Paul's eyes.

Paul nodded.

"Very well, the Sacred Alphabet originated in Gebel, the holy land of 'El'; as the name asserts. King Ahiram was a great devotee of the God 'El'. The connection is obvious. Can't you see? At any rate, you will soon fathom it all," he ended his explanation, leaving his new brother in suspense.

Paul hooked his eyes on the Professor, and waited for more.

Removing his eyeglasses, he rubbed his eyes, and then put them on again, before resting the back of his silvery head on the thickly padded high chair.

Sure enough, Paul had seen the Sarcophagus of King Ahiram in the Beirut National Museum. The altar appeared very clearly in the drawing, but he could not discern if it was the cup of wine and the loaf of bread, which he saw placed on it. He had to take the Keepers' word for it. He gasped inwardly at the realization.

Outside, the tree branches swung back and forth in slow motion. The opened window brought in a draft of cool air. Time stood still. The wooden box on the Round Table grabbed Paul's attention once again, and he tried to guess what took cover inside. *Was it the Grail?* The one in the Mystery Chamber could reveal the secret meaning of the Sacred Alphabet. *How about this one?* he speculated over the strange symbol on the lid: the palm that had the caduceus of Hermes-Kadmus, a five-pointed star, a lotus, and a cross, all carved within it. *What could that mean?*

A few seconds later it came to him. Five symbols—for the five brothers—around the box! Each brother represented one of the five symbols. Each side reflected a brother. *What was his symbol in that case? These symbols might also exist on the box of the Mystery Chamber, as was the case here!* He felt a strong urge to leave immediately for the Mystery Chamber, to verify his theory, but that would be disrespectful to the brothers and, more importantly, impossible at the moment. Without further speculations, he returned his attention to the wooden box in search of clues, any signs it might afford. Nothing!

"The ultimate secret of all times is the Holy Grail," the voice of Dr. Najem rose, interrupting his thoughts. "It is the true Royal Blood of Jesus. We will show it to you. The Vatican knows it, but is waiting for the right moment to reveal it to the whole world, saying that people, especially Christians, are not yet ready to understand it."

Paul's heart beat furiously . . .

"As a matter of fact, to consider Jesus Christ of Jewish origin was the biggest manipulation ever made in history, and regrettably still is, in the making!" he proclaimed with exasperation, and then glanced at Dr. Bechara, reverting to his seat at the table.

There was an incredible silence before he continued, "It is frankly a bit ironic to realize that both Jews and Christians believe that Jesus was a Jew, in spite of the many historical and geographical facts that suggest

otherwise, and the many vital references noted in the New Testament. I think it is time to change that.”

This statement fell on the Historian like a bombshell. He held his breath for so long that his chest ached. Looking for relief he took his wine, and drank slowly and lengthily. Encircling the Round Table, the Keepers stared at each other in anticipation; yet, they kept a respectful silence, as they focused on knowing the coming Truth . . .

Dr. Najem opened the box at last. A remarkable energy filled the air with the aroma that emerged. Silence prevailed. He inserted his hand in the box with reverential deliberation, and took out a golden book. *A secret book!* Paul fathomed zealously. Dr. Najem gazed at it for a long moment, smelled the old papers, smiled with satisfaction then handed it over to Nabil with deference.

Paul’s eyes carefully followed the book switching hands. Then he stared at Nabil, examining the book—its cover, title, and symbol—and noted the new light in his eyes. A mysterious smile appeared on his face thereafter. Paul turned his head to Dr. Najem, and stopped thinking. Immediately, Nabil stretched his hands to Paul, and handed over the secret book. Paul felt an incredible power warming his hands, the moment he held the book. A great light emanated from the symbol engraved on its cover.

The True Identity and the Hidden Secrets of the Holy Grail—the Royal Blood of Jesus Christ, by the Keepers of the Word, Paul read in silence.

Moments passed . . .

“The Truth shall set you free, said Jesus,” resumed Dr. Najem in a strong voice of proclamation. “It definitely will. The New Testament’s codes will finally be decoded. Now, would you please, brothers, open the book, and seek page 500. *The True Identity and the Hidden Secrets of the Holy Grail—the Royal Blood of Jesus Christ* is a book, written over the ages by the Keepers of the Word. Would you please treat it carefully?”

Without hesitation and with great curiosity, Paul opened the book, and browsed through the old yellowed pages. A sacred and ancient scent rose to his face. It was old, very old. He came to the mentioned page. The title: *The Holy Grail* caught his eyes in a moment of wonder. A subtitle, written in fine delicate calligraphy, glittered in golden letters. It read: ‘*Given only from mouth to ear.*’ Below . . . there were empty lines . . . empty pages!

He gawked at Dr. Najem, questioning, and then back and forth at the

selected page. “There is nothing here except for the title and subtitle! There are only empty lines after that! I don’t understand!” Paul exclaimed in frustration. “Why have you asked us to open the book on that particular page?”

“Well, there will be no more empty lines from now on. In fact, it has all been written already. You just have to open your heart to see.”

“Oh, uh,” the Historian muttered, taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“The Keepers of the Word will fill the empty pages from now on. Our mouths will whisper in your ear what you need to know,” he asserted with a confident smile to both Paul and Nabil, sitting close to each other, marveling at the secret book.

At once, Paul sensed something strange in the depths of his eyes. Their stares met on that note, and Paul knew that he was about to reveal something of high importance.

“Now, would you please open the book to the last pages,” he instructed them, his tone firm yet inviting.

Accordingly, Paul turned the *empty* pages, on and on, until he reached the end of the book. He caught sight of a beautiful map—hued by age into yellowish and brownish tones—and stopped on that page. It was a map of the Holy Land. He scanned all over it, and lingered on a circled spot.

Slowly, he brought the book closer to his eyes so he could read the word written above the dot, which had been encircled. It was the name of a place, a very important place, indeed . . . Bet(h)-Lahem, or Bethlehem. On this map—and on the other two maps that followed on the last couple of pages—there were two Bethlehems: one in Judea and the other in Galilee!

Paul and Nabil looked at each other in disbelief. Professor Michel cleared his throat, bringing their attention into focus, “Think about that in the coming few days, and meditate on the Truth the book reveals. This meeting is adjourned until we convene again on the day of the Sun—Sunday. Peace be with you,” he said with a grin, and stood up to leave.

Dr. Najem and Dr. Bechara followed suit, leaving Paul and Nabil in a state of perplexity. The antique clock hanging on the wall marked 11:53 PM. It was late, and the night had already consumed all the light of the day and all the energy from the humans on Earth.

Time to sleep . . . for Sunday marks a new beginning.

The Galilee of the Nations
Sunday, November 7, 05:05 PM

Paul bid his time, waiting excitedly for Friday and Saturday to pass. He thought of contacting Padre Joseph, to tell him that he was safe, but reasoned that his phone might be bugged. He then considered sending him an email using the Kadmus Sequence, and discarded that idea a minute later, for he couldn't tell him where he was or who he was with. The 'Keepers of the Word' was a secret Fraternity, which no one should know about, not even the Padre. He couldn't betray their trust by divulging their existence to anyone. He wondered about his friends who had shared great revelations with him at the Archaeological Site of Gebel. Jim, Youmna, Maya, and Zago! *They should be ok!* he thought.

Despite the secrecy that the Keepers had upheld through the ages, and their revolutionary revelation—concerning Jesus and his non-Jewish identity— Paul had heard about this from the Padre. Hence, what the Keepers had just revealed, by showing them the two Bethlehems, confirmed what he had already known. In fact, Padre Joseph had written a book in Arabic, at the end of the year 1999, in which he had proven that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Galilee—a grotto, located at the northeastern foot of Mt. Carmel. Anyone acquainted with the Padre had expressed keenness and admiration for his courageous new theory, Paul included! Upon reading this invaluable book, Paul discarded any doubts he ever might have harbored about that historical hypothesis. Truth be told, what he might have presumed at first to be a theory, proposed by Padre Joseph, was instead a reality, not only to the Padre, but also to the Keepers of the Word—the ancient Society he had recently joined.

Is there any relation between the Padre and the Keepers of the Word? Paul speculated, confused as he had ever been.

Time came for them to convene in the Living Room at 05:00 PM on the day of the Sun. Paul had so many questions to ask the Keepers, but

kept silent, as they sat around the Round Table. *The True Identity and the Hidden Secrets of the Holy Grail—the Royal Blood of Jesus Christ!* he pondered in the secrecy of his mind.

“Is it true, then!?” Nabil began, looking straight at Dr. Najem. “There are two Bethlehems?” he asked.

The grin that brightened Dr. Najem’s blue eyes, as he bobbed, made Paul smile.

“The book written by Padre Joseph: *The Messiah was born in Lebanon, not in Judea*, is filled with just such explicative maps,” Paul deemed fair to state. “He strongly believes that Jesus was not a Jew but a Phoenician. Have you read his book?” he asked, in an attempt to perceive any likely connection between the Padre and the Keepers.

“Yes, we all did,” confirmed Dr. Najem with a nod of approval, “Padre Joseph is a very learned man. Actually, he is a very close friend of our Fraternity.” He smiled wittily in Paul’s direction, probably at the look on his face just then.

“What! This is something really . . . amazing, and uh . . . just shocking! I never thought he . . .” Paul sputtered nervously.

“Yes, it’s true,” Dr. Najem interrupted him, “the real Bethlehem was in Galilee, not in Judea. Jesus was a Galilean,” he confirmed then added, “Historically speaking, Galilee was a place swarming with people from many different nations: Canaano-Phoenicians, Aramaens, Romans, Greeks, a few Buddhist missionaries, and others. They all lived together in peace, stability, and harmony. There were no Jews living in this area at the time of Jesus, however, if there were any, and this is a very, very dim supposition, they would have formed an extremely closed group. In fact, Jews, back then, called Galilee: the *Galilee of the Nations* or *Galilee of the Gentiles*, as stated in Matthew 4:15. That surname came from the certainty that Galilee was inhabited only by Gentiles, and therefore, non-Jews!” he explained, and continued, “In reality, it was only after the destruction of the Jewish Temple by Titus, in 70 AD, that Jews took Galilee as a place to live. And only because they were expelled from Jerusalem into neighboring regions and among them, Galilee, where they gradually started to wipe away any Phoenician traces they came in contact with.”

“Very few people have noticed that fact,” Professor Michel commented. “But more and more Scholars are acknowledging it as time passes. One of the greatest characteristics of Truth is that it cannot remain concealed for long. It reveals itself at the right time. And now is

the right time!” he lifted his glass for a self-congratulatory toast of this denouncement, and his enthusiasm made Paul smile.

“Allow me to take over,” Dr. Bechara began with a seriousness that dispelled all the glee the Professor had brought in. “Today, there is a growing number of Academics, and I mean, Theologians, Scholars, Historians, and Archaeologists who suggest that the birthplace of Jesus was not Bethlehem of Judea, but rather Bethlehem of Galilee. It seems they have finally identified it, after gathering an immense body of evidence. However, a lot of people might not yet be ready to accept this old-new idea.”

“Like who?” Nabil snapped with a frown, leaning his elbows on the table, looming forward.

“Christians in their Catholic majority, and their Orthodox and Protestant minorities along with them, and, of course, the Jews, who would certainly not accept it. In fact, Judeo-Christian culture would ferociously stand against this idea,” he replied.

“I don’t quite understand why Christians would go against it,” Nabil interfered again, “I mean, it’s easy for me to comprehend why Jews may refuse such a fact. After all, to keep claiming that Jesus was a Jew would certainly give them a great ideological, political, and economical advantage over the entire Christian world. They would always be supported due to that so-called *Bloodline*.”

“True,” Paul conceded at once. “I think that any idea that reveals Jesus Christ was not a Jew would definitely jeopardize their ambitions in the world. It is a political issue, not spiritual, it seems. However, what if History proved that Jesus was not a Jew? Wouldn’t that be a wonderful concept for Christians? What if that was the Truth? Would they still oppose it, or even oppose the man who said: *I am the Truth*?”

“In the world today,” said Dr. Bechara, “Academics, as I defined them a moment ago, state that the story of Matthew about the Nativity of Jesus in Judah is far away from the historical fact. In truth, Jesus was called: Jesus of Nazareth, in other words—a Nazarene. Being one, he must have been born there, in the city where he spent most of his life. It was Nazareth of Galilee!”

Paul examined the maps at the end of the book . . . Bethlehem was indeed in Galilee, a village a few miles west of Nazareth. *Geography doesn’t lie!* he mulled over the idea, as he showed them to Nabil.

Dr. Najem, who seemed to be enjoying this congregation on the day of the Sun, interfered with a new declaration, “The contemporary American

Scholar and Protestant priest, Bruce Chilton, stated that the Bethlehem of Galilee most certainly held a close connection with Christianity since the birth of Jesus; that both Joseph and Mary were from Bethlehem and Nazareth; and that it is possible that Mary was born in Sepphoris of Galilee,” he paused, gathering his thoughts. He then added, “Chilton also suggested that Matthew did not entirely fabricate the story of the Nativity, but simply *chose* to switch the two Bethlehems. In addition to him, the German Theologian, Harmut Stegemann, also proposed, back in the sixties . . . that Jesus was born in Galilee but not in Bethlehem, rather, in Capernaum by the lake of Genezareth.”

Paul weighed the information for a moment. Whatever the case may be; Padre Joseph had earnestly confirmed that Mary was from the Phoenician-Galilean village of Kana. Quite logically, Joseph must have been from Galilee as well. He looked pensively at Dr. Najem and then at the three other men in the room. “Okay, I know that Matthew wrote his testimony several decades after the death of Jesus. But why confuse the two Bethlehems?” he asked.

“Well, it seems that Matthew, known to have addressed his Gospel to the Jews, had intended to create a story, favorable to them, perhaps in a desperate attempt to convert them into the new Christian faith,” Dr. Najem replied.

“Ah . . . so, it is for that reason that he swapped the two Bethlehems?” Nabil asked for confirmation.

“Yes,” he replied, “the Bethlehem of Judea, near Jerusalem, was always mentioned in the Jewish Bible as the hometown of King David, the father of King Solomon. Reading that information in their Bible, and perceiving their belief—that the Messiah would come from the House of David—Matthew changed the locations only to convince them that Jesus had been born a Jew—in the Judean Bethlehem—and thus, create a link between Jesus and King David.”

It sounds like the tale of the alleged Merovingian bloodline . . . or maybe some Christians had found it convenient to abide by the wishes of Matthew, Paul deducted thoughtfully.

“Although trying to link Jesus to the Judean Bethlehem, Matthew wrote something quite strange in his evangelical story. In Matthew 1:23, we read the following, ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son. They shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us,’” he quoted from the New Testament he held in his hand, and grinned widely. “On his baptism, Jesus was called Immanuel; it means

literally: *El with us*. ‘Al’ or ‘El’ is the Phoenician Most High God. According to Matthew’s—conscious or unconscious, deliberate or non-deliberate—decree, Jesus became the divine holder of the spirit of *Al* through baptism.”

“Quite obvious, I think,” Paul said pensively.

“Again we read from Matthew 2:22-23,” he continued, quoting from the New Testament, “. . . Having been warned in a dream, he (Joseph, Jesus’ father) withdrew into the region of Galilee, and came and lived in a city called Nazareth; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophets: He will be called a Nazarene.’ It is, indeed, a very explicit statement.”

“Striking! But why did Matthew say that Jesus would be called a Nazarene as a fulfillment to the prophecy spoken by the prophets? Which prophets?” Nabil asked excitedly with an inquiring look.

“Of course, it is not at all a fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, but rather, a fulfillment of the prophecy spoken by the Phoenician and Galilean-Ashayan prophets,” Dr. Najem answered, a strange light sparkling in his eyes, “The only reference for ‘Immanuel’ in the Old Testament is found in the book of Isaiah. However, the real name of the Prophet *Isaiah* is *Ashaya*, a purely Aramaic name. It is the same as *Asaya*, which means a member of the Ashayas, who lived and prospered in Mt. Carmel and Galilee. They are also known as: the Essenes.”

“Ashayas!” Nabil rushed to exclaim.

“Yes. The Ashayas were healers, and their religious ideas profoundly influenced their social way of life. The book of *Ashaya* is a Galilean book, the same stands for the Source Q; two books that talked about Galilean Prophecy and Prophets. *Isaiah* was not a Jewish Prophet; nor was his book a Jewish book—claimed to have been written around the year 500 BC. Obviously, it has been manipulated to appear Jewish . . .” he explained, before he added, “In fact, this book—rooted in Galilee with the Ashayas, sometime between the 4th and 3rd century BC—was considered sacred to the Phoenicians, Galileans, and the Ashayas, who strongly opposed the Judeans settling in the Land at the time. It is cited in *Isaiah* 7:14, ‘Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.’ An almost identical verse appears in *Matthew* 1:23, as we have seen earlier.” He paused for a sip of hot tea.

“This is surely not Jewish,” Professor Michel took over the teachings. “As we have seen earlier, ‘Immanuel’ means the *God El is with us*, hence,

Jesus Christ was looked upon as a man holding and incarnating the spirit of 'Al' or 'El', the Phoenician Most High God. This is how Jesus Christ became the Divine Son of God, and Son of Man, who spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew. However, we have to identify the Hebrew language as a mixture of both, an Aramaic dialect and an Akkadian-Babylonian idiom. Yet, the Aramaic by itself is a direct descendant vernacular from the Canaanite-Phoenician language," he clarified, as he looked for a comfortable position on his chair.

"I would like to refer back to the book of Ashaya," he then stated. "It also mentions a reference to John the Baptist. In Isaiah-Ashaya 40:3, we read, 'The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' The similarity is striking to that in Matthew 3:3, it reads, 'For this is he that was spoken of by the Prophet Esaias, saying, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' " here he stopped, pulling from his cigar, and exhaling. He then added, "In the New Testament, Jesus is clearly portrayed as being born from God and the Virgin Lady Mary, and so was Adonis (Baal) portrayed in the Phoenician historical and theological literature, being born from the Virgin Lady Anat and the God 'Al'. The Galileans, who were, in their majority, greatly influenced by the Phoenicians—either by direct contact or by being themselves Phoenicians—were longing for a savior. To them, Adonis was a savior sent by the God, 'El'. To them, Jesus is Immanu-El," he concluded.

Al . . . El with us, God is with us . . . Paul thought, and then wondered why all the names of Angels end with the suffix 'El'. Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, just to name the three most important.

A moment of silence followed, in which everybody sitting at the Round Table, especially Paul and Nabil, marveled at the idea that connected Adonis—the Phoenician savior, with Jesus—the Christian savior. Just as the God 'El' had been clearly portrayed as the Father of Adonis, or Baal in the Phoenician Religion, so did the New Testament portray God to be the Father of Jesus or Immanu-El—the representation of the God 'El' on Earth.

Paul's eyes sparkled in delight, and his desire to know more was perceived by Dr. Najem, who stood up and addressed Paul and Nabil, "Hope you meditate properly about the information that has been given to you so far. Take some rest now, and we'll meet after dinner."

They smiled to him, as he left the room.

Spies on Jesus!
Sunday, November 7, 10:05 PM

The meeting in the Living Room had been scheduled after dinner, like before. Each one at their place, the Keepers sat like the famous Knights of the Round Table in search of the Holy Grail. Yet, the search had long ended for the Keepers; they had already found the Holy Grail, as revealed by Dr. Najem earlier, and were destined to keep it forever protected.

“Anyway,” Dr. Bechara began without preamble, calling all attention to him. The glow in his eyes appeared to be paving the way for a revelation. “Scientists have not found a single shred of conclusive evidence that Bethlehem of Judea was the birthplace of Jesus. Archaeological excavations done in the area showed that there wasn’t even evidence of habitation, at all, in that Bethlehem at the time of Jesus. Alternatively, there appeared lots of evidence of a well-established community in the Galilean Bethlehem.”

When he looked around, he found an eager audience in Paul and Nabil, so he continued, “Ernest Renan, the well-known French Historian, and a peregrinator to the Holy Land, wrote in his book, *la vie de Jesus*—published at the end of the 19th century—that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was most probably from the small Lebanese village of Kana, and that Jesus was Galilean, and not from the House of David.” He paused for a thought and added, “Jacques Duquesne, the French Journalist and writer was even more specific in his book, *Jesus*, published in 1994. He wrote that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem of Galilee, and not in the Judean Bethlehem.” It took him a moment to resume, “The concept that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were from Galilee is not at all new, nor confined to theories written by modern Historians.”

“Are you saying that this theory or, rather, this fact has been presented well before modern Scholars had?” Nabil inquired with a puckered brow.

“Indeed! Around the 8th century AD, Saint John of Damascus—known to have been very devout to the Virgin Mary—wrote that Mary was born at Sepphoris in Galilee, a few kilometers from Nazareth and very close to Bethlehem of Galilee,” Dr. Bechara answered, motioning for Dr. Najem to continue.

“Thank you, brother,” said Dr. Najem with a nod. “In John 7:40-53, we read the following: ‘Many of the people therefore, when they heard this saying, said, of a truth this is the prophet. Others said, ‘This is the Christ’. But some said . . .’ ” He halted to attract the attention of the four Keepers to the meaningful text that followed, “. . . shall Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the Scripture said that Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was?’ ” He raised his eyebrows with an intent look in their direction, and then picked up again where he had left off, “So there was a division among the people because of him. And some of them would have arrested him; but no one laid hands on him . . . Nicodemus (he who came to him by night, being one of them) said to them, ‘Does our law judge a man, unless it first hears from him personally and knows what he does?’ They answered him, ‘Are you also from Galilee? Search and see that no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.’ ”

Dr. Najem finished quoting from John, and continued with a commentary on the text, “Indeed, in the eyes of the Jews, no prophet and no good will ever come out of Galilee, Galilee of the Gentiles, hence, Christ must come from the seed of David. And from what we have just seen, even in The New Testament of John, Christ truly came from Galilee, the land of the Gentiles, and not from Bethlehem of Judea, the village of David.”

Paul reflected upon the fact he had just heard, and said, “Am I to understand that the New Testament holds within its pages a great contradiction, then? I mean, it almost sounds as if there were two Christs: one Galilean and the other Jewish! This constitutes a conflict in itself, since a Galilean is not Jewish, and a Jew is not Galilean.”

“Exactly! The more you study the New Testament, the more you notice these discrepancies—regarding the identity of Christ. In an even clearer statement, we read in Matthew 21:10, ‘When he had come into Jerusalem, all the city was stirred up, saying, who is this? The multitudes said, ‘This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee,’ ” he quoted in confirmation.

“Aha . . . well, his identity here is clear enough,” Paul conceded in

agreement.

“Good! Not only were Jesus and his mother and father from Galilee, but some of his disciples as well,” Dr. Najem added.

“His disciples, too?” Nabil sounded surprised. Although a Keeper himself, he ignored this fact.

“Yes. At least six of them were from Galilee. In John 1:39-44, we see Jesus walking by the River Jordan, in Galilee not in Judea, gathering his disciples around him. In Galilee, Jesus found Philip, and said to him, ‘*Follow me.*’ Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Simon-Peter,” he informed.

“Bethsaida!” Paul exclaimed aloud. “It means ‘House of Saida’, and I’ve read that it is related to the city of Saida, or Saydoun, our Phoenician port. Isn’t that right?”

“Quite right, the name Saida, or its original name—Saydoun, comes from the word ‘fishing’. Please note that almost all the disciples of Jesus were known to be *fishermen*,” he smiled, as he said it.

“Interesting!” said Nabil, “So, these three are disciples from Galilee,” he stated, and then asked with patent curiosity, “Who were the other three?”

“In Matthew 4:18-22,” Dr. Najem referred in reply, “We see Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee, gathering another two disciples. Other than Simon-Peter and his brother Andrew who were both fishermen, he found James, the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, two other fishermen who followed him.”

“This is absolutely superb. We now have five disciples,” Paul considered, sharing his own deduction in a clear voice. Notwithstanding the fact that he was a dedicated Historian, he had certainly missed those interesting details. “Philip, Andrew, and Simon-Peter from the Phoenician-Galilean city of Bethsaida, and James and John, all fishermen from Galilee. Who was the sixth?” he asked, and leaned forward on the table, looking intently at Dr. Najem for an answer.

Dr. Bechara advanced the reply instead, “Simon the Canaanite, wrongly portrayed as Simon the Zealot, for the sole purpose of giving his name a Hebrew meaning.”

“Simon the Canaanite!” once again, the Historian in Paul was elated, and he slouched back, struck by the unexpected revelation.

“Yes. It is noted in Matthew 10:1-4, and Mark 3:18,” Dr. Bechara clarified, “St. Jerome—who lived from 347-420 AD, very well known for his translation of the Bible, the Old and the New Testament, into Latin:

the Vulgate—could not have mistaken the word Canaanite for anything else.” He grinned before he added, “Well, it only signifies one thing and it is that Simon was from Cana or from any other region of Canaan-Phoenicia.”

Six Galilean disciples . . . Paul had never thought about that. He was fascinated by the way in which things became clearer to him, every step of the way. For instance, he had always wondered about the fact that no synagogues had ever existed in Galilee of the Gentiles, Galilee of the Goyims—the non-Jews, at the time of Jesus. In fact, if he were to read the New Testament again, he would most likely come across new and amazing, albeit overlooked facts. With his eyes on the three learned Keepers, he waited for more.

“Again, in Luke 6:1-2,” Professor Michel then advanced, “We read ‘Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first that he was going through the grain fields. His disciples plucked the heads of grain, and ate, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said to them: Why do you do that which is not lawful to do on the Sabbath day?’ ”

“Isn’t that obvious?” Dr. Najem pointed out, “Indeed! If the disciples of Jesus had been Jews, they would have respected the Law of the Sabbath and abstained from work, which brings us to the logical conclusion that they were not!”

“Absolutely right,” said Nabil in an exhilarated tone of voice. “By the way, were there any Jewish disciples, other than Judas the traitor, then?” he questioned, and Paul turned all his attention to the coming answer.

“Yes, it seems there was probably one,” the Professor replied. “In John 1:45-51, we read that Philip found Nathanael, and told him about Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph, but Nathanael said to him, ‘Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, he said, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael said to him, ‘How do you know me?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’ Nathanael answered him, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are King of Israel!’ Jesus answered him, ‘Because I told you, I saw you underneath the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these! Most certainly, I tell you, hereafter you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man,’ ” he ended in a firm tone.

“We undoubtedly understand from this paragraph that when Jesus saw Nathanael under the tree, he immediately knew he was not Galilean,

but rather a Jew; an Israelite indeed, in whom there was no deceit!” Dr. Bechara emphasized that fact, written in the New Testament.

“Behold, an Israelite, a *striver against El*, indeed, in whom there is no deceit! Right?” Paul suggested in confirmation, though his voice remained subdued by the presence of the Masters around him.

“There is no doubt about it!” Dr. Najem ascertained with a grin of approval at Paul’s insight, “and when Nathaniel asked Jesus if he was the King of Israel, Jesus did not answer him. He did not say that he was the King of Israel, for indeed he was not from the House of David, as we have seen earlier!” More light had been shed on that transcendent issue.

“Since Jesus knew that Judas and Nathaniel were not Galileans then how come he took them as disciples?” Nabil questioned.

“Well, he didn’t choose them himself,” Dr. Bechara interfered, his thick eyebrows raised in arcs at Nabil’s ignorance, implying he should have known better than that. “They came to him, and he knew very well who they were. Both were agents for the Rabbis’ Secret Service!” he responded as reminder.

“The Rabbis’ Secret Service?” Paul frowned in doubt, perhaps in disbelief. “The Rabbis had secret agents?” he asked, remembering something.

“They surely did! In Luke 20:19-20, we come to the following, ‘The chief priests and the scribes sought to lay hands on him that very hour, but they feared the people—for they knew he had spoken this parable against them. They watched him, and sent out spies, who pretended to be righteous, that they might trap him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the power and authority of the governor,’ ” he confirmed his earlier statement, dwelling on a thought. He then added, “Surely, the plan was to deliver him to the Roman Governor, for they had no political authority themselves in Galilee. They were not living there,” he concluded.

Silent was the room.

The walls have ears.

“Spies on Jesus!” Nabil burst out in shock. “They sent out spies to Galilee in order to trap him, because he spoke against them! Could that be yet another proof that Jesus was not a Jew?”

“Certainly,” intervened Professor Michel in a calm voice, “In fact, Jacques Duquesne, the French journalist and writer we mentioned earlier, plainly suggested in his book, *Jesus*, that Judas was the only Judean within the group. He was an agent of the Temple.”

A time to think . . . really think!

“I believe this is sufficient information for tonight’s meeting and it’s really getting late,” said Dr. Najem, taking Paul and Nabil by surprise at a moment of great interest. He could see the thirst in their eyes, “We all need some rest now.” But then he looked at them again, and with a smile said, “Our next meeting is on Wednesday, so don’t rush things, just be patient.”

And so it happened that the night ended with so many questions in Paul’s mind.

*The Vatican City, a week earlier
Sunday, October 31, 05:12 PM*

Instantly after presiding over the mass at the Papal Basilica of St. Peter, the Pope entered his office in deep reflection. It seemed something had been taking a hold of his mind and spirit. Seated behind his wooden desk, a beautiful painting, representing God and the creation of life, hovered above, on the ceiling. An exquisite painting, most probably unknown to the outside world, must have been commissioned by the Vatican, to be exhibited here in the Papal Office. Artistically speaking, it was a much more spiritual work of art than the famous one known as ‘the creation of Adam’, rendered by the Italian Renaissance artist, Michelangelo. A fresco that covers the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, built within the Vatican by Pope Sixtus IV at the end of the 15th Century AD, after whom the Chapel was named.

Two beautiful statues of granite—representing Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary—stood behind him from both sides like Guardian Angels. The Pope, dressed in a white simar, rested his right hand atop the New Testament, lying on his desk, and with his left hand, held the gold pectoral cross, suspended from a chain around his neck. From behind his desk, he could hear rushing footsteps coming from outside his office. He knew that the two ecclesiastical Princes of the Church, of whom he had requested their counsel, were approaching the door to his office.

Wearing the usual clothes of his office: a black cassock with scarlet piping and buttons, a scarlet fascia, or sash—worn a bit above the waist, a pectoral cross—suspended from the neck by a chain, and a scarlet zucchetto—covering his head, Cardinal Fodano led the way. Cardinal Friedrich followed closely behind him, as they paced the floor of the Vatican passageway, a narrow hall lit by a great many sconces affixed on either side, and leading their path to the Papal office.

The seal of the Vatican had been sculpted above the huge wooden

door. Four knocks was the signal, and Cardinal Fodano opened the door, followed by Cardinal Friedrich. It has been the tradition in the Catholic Church to raise some Bishops and Archbishops to the College of Cardinals. Because of their particular commitment and sanctity, Cardinals are often called to assist the Holy Father in the administration of the Church, as part of the Roman Curia itself. In fact, they are the ones who elect a new Pontiff when the See of Peter is vacant.

“Come in, brothers of the faith,” said the Pope in a warm tone. “Be seated, please.”

“We have been wondering about your urgent appeal on the day of the Sun, your day of rest, Holiness,” Cardinal Fodano, who occupied the position of Emeritus Secretary of State of the Vatican City, uttered in a low voice, “Are you not feeling well?”

“I’m not well at all,” the Pope answered, “It’s not my body that aches, but my mind and spirit. Everything is wrong.”

“What is it that troubles you, Holiness?” Cardinal Friedrich, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, hastened to ask, preoccupied for his welfare. “What’s wrong, that we may assist you? Is it the governance of the Vatican? Is it the Doctrine?”

“I feel that our teachings have so far been correct in terms of the faith in God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Virgin Mary,” the Pope assured his Cardinals with kindness. “There is nothing wrong in that, and yet, I feel the time has come for us to speak the words of truth, for their time has come, at last. The truth concerning Jesus, his life, his origins, his true identity,” he sighed, “We simply can’t conceal it any longer.”

“What do you mean to do, Holiness?” Cardinal Friedrich inquired with fixed eyes. “The Pope has been named the Roman Pontiff, and considered the successor of Peter for ages. We can’t simply change that, all of a sudden,” he said calmly, “Can you imagine the consequences of such a motion?”

“I’m afraid the consequences would be great, Holiness,” Cardinal Fodano recommended seriously. “We have to continue abiding by the Law, as Peter instructed. We simply cannot separate the Church, and ourselves, from the Old Testament.” He looked at his hands, resting on his lap, considering, and then raised his head and spoke once more, “at least, not for now. We would have to take some preliminary steps. First, we must prepare the large community of the faithful. I believe this will take a very long time, before it can bear fruit on the Christian mind, accustomed as it is to the continuation of the Law.”

The Pope remained silent for a couple of minutes, thinking about what his Cardinals advised. But then he stood up, walked towards a closet, opened it, and retrieved a purple cape, which he draped over his shoulders, looking at a clean mirror on the wall. He turned and faced his Cardinals, seated, watching him and wondering where this would lead.

“Fear not,” the Pope said suddenly, epitomizing Jesus with his white tunic and purple robe. “The hour has come for the manifestation of the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free,” he pronounced, as he sat on his chair once more.

“Amen!” Both Cardinals replied as one, for, in fact, those were the words of Jesus.

“Listen carefully,” the Pope alerted them. “We simply cannot neglect the geographical existence of the Galilean Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Yes, we cannot ignore Galilee and the importance of its many evangelical indications in the New Testament. We cannot overlook Cana in Lebanon where Jesus performed his first miracle. We cannot turn our backs on the name of the God ‘El’ that Jesus always referred to as the Father. We just can’t disregard many other things of great magnitude that show us clearly who the Historical Jesus was. I can’t do that anymore,” he explained, taking a deep breath.

“Even on the theological level, we can’t defy what has been written in John 8:19-47, “Jesus told them, ‘You know neither me, nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father . . . Therefore Jesus said to them, “If God were your father, you would love me, for I came out and have come from God. For I haven’t come of myself, but he sent me. Why don’t you understand my speech? Because you can’t hear my words. You are of your father, the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and doesn’t stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks on his own; for he is a liar, and its father. But because I tell the truth, you don’t believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God. For this cause you don’t hear, because you are not of God,’ ” the Pope quoted directly from the New Testament on his desk then commented, “Two different ministries. I don’t see how they could fit together. This is a straightforward testimony that the Father of Jesus is not the Jewish God.”

A moment of reflection ensued . . .

“Of course,” the Pope added, “Jesus knew the Devil was not an entity,

but the Tempter. His words, from that perspective, are not to be taken literally. The Devil is an errant force of nature, working from the second dimension, the base level of consciousness, which is formed by a chain of malicious wills that create evil actions, like murders. Blind powers coerce this lowest level, set in movement by error and sin.” The Pope paused, “Jesus told them the truth, but they did not believe him. Therefore, had they been impelled by God, they definitely would have heard the words of God. Yet, they did not, for they were guided, not by God, but by these blind forces. He often said to them, ‘Woe unto you, ye blind guides . . .’ ”

“In addition to what has been said, we certainly can’t remove St. Paul’s letter to the Hebrews, Heb 6:20 and 7:11, 15-17, from the New Testament. Can we? I think not. Here, St. Paul spoke about the clear declaration of Jesus on the House of Prayer, and described the Christ, not as a priest after the Law of carnal commandment of Aaron, but rather, as a High Priest of God after the power of an endless life. ‘Thou *art* a priest forever after the order of Melki-Sedek, a one spiritual priesthood,’ says Paul.”

The Pope took a sip from a glass of water in front of him, and continued, “How can we close our eyes to one of the most ancient canons we have of the New Testament, written by a renowned Christian by the name of Marcion?” he asked his Cardinals, and added, “his canon first included the Gospel of Luke and ten of the Epistles of St. Paul. We all know that he was a great follower of Paul and remained faithful to him. Marcion came to Rome around 140 AD with one goal, to rescue Christianity from Judaism, as did Paul before him.”

“But, your Holiness,” rushed Cardinal Fodano, “You know how they’ve often accused St. Paul of anti-Semitism. We can’t open that door now.”

“And we can’t keep it shut for ever, Brother,” the Pope hastened to respond. “No one can accuse the Truth of anything. The world has had enough of propagandistic terminologies; I have too. Rescuing Christianity is what we should have done a long time ago.”

The bells rang outside the Papal Office.

That was a good sign . . .

“Marcion was a Christian, who never believed in the authentic and divine origin of the Old Testament. To him, Jesus was not the son of David, nor was he the Messiah of the Jews, and not even a King, but a Divine Being, sent to reveal to man a whole new spiritual religion,” the Pope explained. “He clarified that Jesus called God—or the Father of goodness and grace—a Loving and Merciful God, whereas the Jewish

God, as shown in the Hebrew Bible, is very different. The Hebrew God is, then, distinct from the Father who sent Jesus to reveal the divine truth, preach the glad tidings, and bring reconciliation and salvation to all men. The Hebrew God is unjust, unmerciful, angry, jealous, and a God of war,” he took a moment to gather his thoughts, and then declared; “No one can ignore the differences. Can you, Brothers?”

Both Cardinals remained silent for a few moments, before Cardinal Friedrich finally decided to speak, “Surely, Marcion must have read *The Song of Moses* in the Old Testament, *The Voice of the Jealous Yahweh*, Deuteronomy 32:24-25, ‘They shall be burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction: I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of serpents of the dust. The sword without, and terror within, shall destroy both the young man and the virgin, the suckling also with the man of gray hairs.’ ”

The Pope did not comment on that song, for he tried, in the silence of his mind, to measure the unmerciful words spoken there. He must have done that many times before with no comprehension at all. “God is Love,” he muttered under his breath.

“I must add my voice to your voices, Holiness . . . Brother,” Cardinal Fodano revealed his deepest secrets, concealed somewhere in the depths of his mind and spirit, “No, I cannot ignore that, either. Marcion came to the conclusion that it was impossible that Yahweh could be the God of Jesus, hence Jesus Christ came to abrogate the Jewish Lord, who was opposed to his God and Father, as *matter is to spirit, impurity to purity.*”

“True,” said the Pope, “Unfortunately, Tertullian of Carthage, one of the early fathers of the Church, viewed Marcion as the most dangerous heretic of the day. He considered his canon and views as Apocrypha, a term incorrectly interpreted as doubtful and false. However, Apocrypha means *what is hidden and secret* . . .” he sipped at his glass of water again, tried to look through the window then added, “Quite understandably so, there were strong voices within Christianity standing against the notion that our Lord Jesus was a Jew, ever since the beginnings of the Christian Church. We must listen to them. We should have done so, a long time ago.” He looked at his Cardinals, and smiled, “These voices, *led by Paul*, considered Christianity a prologue of a new spiritual system, applicable to all, replacing the Mosaic privilege of the Law with a Universal dispensation of Grace. Indeed, these voices have cried, and are still shouting peacefully, but today, voices will rise stronger than ever against those *led by Peter*—who considered Christianity just a

simple continuation of the purported Law, enclosing it into an Israelite institution, or better said: a narrow sect of Judaism.”

Both Cardinals nodded in agreement then the Pope carried on, “Frederic Amsler, a Christian Historian and Teacher, has beautifully explained in his book, *L'évangile Inconnu, La Source des Paroles de Jesus*, that Jesus never mentioned or cited anything from the Hebraic Bible in his ministries, but rather, was inspired by *other sources*,” he paused, recalling pages from the book. He then stared his Cardinals, and added, “The text is better known as the *Source Quelle*, and the book was published in September 2001. It states that the few allusions he made, Jesus that is, allow us to doubt any direct connection with the Jewish Teachings.” The Pope smiled, and said, “The *Source Quelle*, the Q Document, is still considered the earliest text on Jesus. It was a document, carried by a group already established in Galilee that was always in conflict with Jerusalem. This group is none other than the Nazarenes.”

“At any rate,” the Pope added, “It became transparent that Christianity is an evolved system of the Phoenician-Egyptian Monotheistic theology of Enoch-Taautus-Hermes,” he stopped, looking beyond his Cardinals in thought, and then continued, “in fact, some of the learned early Fathers of the Church spoke of *prisca theologia*, meaning Primordial Theology. It consisted of a combination of manuscripts that proved the reality of this wisdom. These Manuscripts of fifteen discourses, known as *Corpus Hermeticum*, were attributed to Hermes the three times great, the Trismegistos, the first teacher, the divine messenger, the *Initiate*. He was the Phoenician-Egyptian Priest *par excellence*. The Melki-Sedek of St. Paul—meaning *my King is righteous*—was his first title,” he concluded.

Cardinal Friedrich, amazed by this conclusion, which he had reached on his own a long time ago, during his studies, smiled, and said, “The knowledge in these manuscripts influenced those early fathers of the Church through the philosophy of Plato, who took it from Pythagoras—the first true philosopher—and through the writings of Plotinus—the neo-Pythagorean. Hence, the *other sources* that might have inspired Jesus allow us to believe that Christianity is a familiar form of the Pythagorean philosophy, and a simplified form of the mystical way of Buddha, brought by Buddhist missionaries who came to the Land of Galilee in the 3rd century BC.”

With great eagerness showing on his face, Cardinal Fodano cleared his

throat, and elaborated, “Accordingly, Jesus did not cite the Hebraic Bible, but took his inspiration from other sources; these were the *other sources* that the Q Documents had intended to disclose. The Galilean-Nazarenes, the group who was in conflict with the Jews in Jerusalem, had carried this Primordial Theology. Why shouldn’t we?” he looked at the Pope. “I agree. We should add our voices to the *Pauline* group. Christianity is a Cosmic Religion, and should be restored into its rightful context. Keeping the *word* protected from robbery, destruction, and lies remains the primary goal of the Church, now and forever,” he took a moment to add, “Let us remember the words in John 10:10-11, ‘The thief only comes to steal, kill, and destroy. I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd.’ ”

“The good shepherd is calling,” said the Pope. “‘He that hath ears to hear, let him hear,’ said Jesus,” he added with a smile. “Let us then spread the word to all the Cardinals, that they may do the same slowly, calmly, and peacefully in their dioceses, and that the Priests will follow suit in their Parishes, leading the faithful in Christ to do the same in their homes, schools, and communities . . . everywhere.”

Outside the Vatican City walls, despite the sunny day, the tedious weather turned to liveliness. There came from the sky a sound like the rushing of a mighty wind, blowing in all directions, powerfully shaking everything along its path. The trees swayed back and forth wildly. Then, the sound seeped inside like the enchanting melody of an Angel, and filled the Pope’s office, where they were assembled. Tongues of fire appeared over their heads, filling them with the Holy Spirit, and giving them the ability to speak with the languages of Earth.

Then the Pope said, “It reminds me of John 3:5-8. The Church must be born anew, for the wind blows where it wants to, and you hear its sound, but don’t know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

And then he smiled.

Jesus Christ was not a Jew
Wednesday, November 10, 05:03 PM

The three days that followed their meeting on Sunday, compelled Paul to think more about the book the Keepers of the Word had been writing for ages, *The True Identity and the Hidden Secrets of the Holy Grail—the Royal Blood of Jesus Christ. The Grail is the word . . . it is the Royal Blood of Jesus Christ*, Paul thought.

Dr. Najem looked at the four Keepers, seated all-around him, holding their breath in anticipation. He looked intently at Paul then at Nabil, before addressing Paul in a grave tone, heavy with admonition, “And you, brother, unless you win over your evil side in the next battle with Satan in the vision of *Tsaddi*, this errant force of nature will continue guiding you. You are now blind, but fortunately, you are opening your eyes, bit by bit. The road is hard and the battle is near.”

His definition of the Devil as an errant force of nature and his warning were convincing and quite logical. *I must be ready for the next meeting with the Devil in me*, Paul thought, as he shifted on his seat twice, suddenly uneasy at the fact that Dr. Najem had mentioned it without preamble.

“Again,” he said, “in John 11:6-8, we read, ‘When therefore he heard that he was sick, he stayed two days in the place where he was. Then after this, he said to the disciples, “Let’s go into Judea again.” The disciples told him: Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’ ”

“This is more evidence, right?” he questioned rhetorically, and answered, “Well, yes, Jesus decided to leave Galilee to Judea, but his Galilean disciples objected, and advised him against it because the Jews of Judea might harm him, or even seek to kill him. Had there been Jews in Galilee, they would have represented the same danger, a fact not raised since there were none!” he explained.

“You’re right!” Nabil exclaimed with excitement in his voice.

“There is more to this,” Dr. Bechara avowed, “It is written in Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, Luke 19:45-46, and John 2:13-17 that when Jesus entered the Temple of God he threw out all the traders of oxen, sheep, and doves, and overthrew the counters of the money changers and the seats of the sellers of doves. He said to them, ‘It is written, my house shall be called a house of prayer but you have made it a den of robbers!’ ”

“The blind and the lame came to him in the Temple, and he healed them,” Dr. Bechara continued, “but when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonders he had performed, and heard the children proclaiming inside the Temple: *Hosanna to the son of David*, they were extremely discontented and reprimanded him, saying: *do you hear what these are saying?*” he paused for a moment.

“Well, I guess we know why they were offended. Jesus was not from the bloodline of the Jewish King David,” Nabil advanced, confirming the theory. “But I truly wonder what Temple Jesus was talking about?” he then asked.

“Certainly not the Temple of Solomon!” professor Michel interfered, arguing with fervor, “Jesus was referring to the Temple of Shalim, built by Melki-Sedek—the Phoenician High Priest of ‘El’. Actually, Jerusalem is a derivation from the word Ur-Shalim, the city of Shalim—the son of ‘El’. As a matter of fact, Shalim was the god of dusk for the Phoenicians. As for ‘El’, or ‘Al-Elyon’, ‘Eloi’, or the *High Al*, he represented the very First Light of Creation, and the sun is but its reflection. The High Priest, Melki-Sedek, built the Temple in the city of Jebus, founded earlier by the Canaanite-Phoenician Jebusite tribe. He later called it: the Place of Shalim or Ur-Shalim, which is Jerusalem.”

“However, the Temple that the Jews—and later, after them, Templars, Scottish and York Rites Freemasons in some additional degrees—took for their headquarters was transformed into a *bank*. It is, still now,” he added, as an afterthought. “Jesus strongly rejected that. He talked about a house of prayer, not a den of robbers. In Luke 16:13, he said, ‘No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon,’ ” the Professor read, quoting from the New Testament, and then continued, “It became evident in his letter to the Hebrews, Heb 6:20 and 7:11, 15-17, St. Paul described Christ, not as a priest after the law of carnal commandment of Aaron, but as a High Priest of God after the power of an endless life. Thou *art* a priest forever

after the order of Melki-Sedek, a one spiritual priesthood.”

“In fact,” Dr. Najem came forward with keenness, “In Acts 24:5, at the time when Paul was being judged, we read, ‘For we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.’ ”

Paul gasped inwardly at the new information, concerning the origin of St. Paul. *He was a Nazarene too!* he thought.

“Jesus used to retreat to his homeland after preaching in Jerusalem, as mentioned in both, Luke 6:17 and Matthew 15:21, ‘Jesus went out from there (Jerusalem), and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon,’ ” he said. “Another important issue appears in Matthew 10:5-6, when we read, ‘Jesus sent these twelve out, and commanded them, saying, don’t go among the Gentiles, and don’t enter into any city of the Samaritans. Rather, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,’ ” he halted for a breath, and then explained, “These words reveal two important issues. First, it shows that the Land where Jesus and his disciples ministered was divided into three areas. There was the land of the Gentiles, known as Galilee of the Nations, the other was Samaria where the Samaritans lived, and the third was, as called here, the house of Israel, known as Judea where the Jews lived.” Dr. Najem looked around him. “Second, it shows that the people of Galilee and Samaria did not need preaching, for the Galileans believed Jesus the Galilean to be the Christos they expected. It appeared also that the Samaritans believed in his words and the words of his disciples and had received their baptism, as mentioned in Acts 8. Even Simon Magus, the Gnostic, was baptized by Philip in Acts 8:13; whereas the people living in Judea did not believe in him, thus needing preaching,” he concluded.

“It is very clear,” Paul confirmed immediately. “This verse states, without a doubt, that the people of Galilee of the Gentiles knew him very well, and admired his wisdom. They heard him talking in the open air and by the rivers. In fact, he was not an ordinary man, but a man with a mission—a *Nazarene*.”

“True! But what does the word Nazarene mean, exactly?” Nabil rushed to ask Dr. Bechara with a glimpse in Paul’s direction, as if wanting to guess from Paul’s expression his knowledge on that particular matter.

“Nazarene is a term that comes from the Phoenician word *Nazir* or *Nazar*. It is given to someone who leaves everything behind and consecrates his life by taking a solemn vow to God,” Dr. Bechara explained, puffing his cigar.

“That explains the life Jesus adopted very well,” Paul interfered.

A moment of silence passed, which the Professor broke at last, “There is a supportive reference to Frederic Amsler—a Christian Historian and Teacher—in the New Testament, for we read in Matthew, 23:13-15, ‘But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him two-fold more the child of hell than yourselves. Woe unto you, ye blind guides . . .’ ”

“Woe . . . Wow!” Paul expressed aloud at the immensity of that statement.

“For the historical record, a proselyte means any convert to any other religion; however, it is always used for a *Gentile* converted to the Jewish faith,” Professor Michel clarified and glanced at Nabil, to make sure he was following.

“I understand perfectly,” this one answered with a grin. “This is another piece of evidence that shows Jesus was not a Jew, and that he was always in conflict with the Jewish faith.”

“Right!” Dr. Najem uttered, encouragingly. “Furthermore, in John 2:1-3, we read, ‘And the third day, there was a marriage in Kana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus was also invited with his disciples to the marriage. When the wine ran out, Jesus’ mother said to him that they had no wine.’ ”

Again, Paul examined the maps showing the village of Kana in Galilee. It had indeed been part of the city of Sur (Tyre) back then. Somehow, he recalled a few works penned by Historians on that matter. The Lebanese Historian, Dr. Youssef Hourani, had written about the village of Kana being in Lebanon, so had Padre Joseph in his book, *Kana of Galilee in Lebanon*, released in Arabic in 1994.

Furthermore, Martiniano Pellegrino Roncaglia—the Italian Professor, Historian, and writer—had succeeded in proving that theory in his two explanatory books: *Cana*, released in 1995, and *In the Footsteps of Jesus, the Messiah in Phoenicia-Lebanon*, released in the year 2004. Both books confirmed that Jesus had performed his first miracle of turning the water into wine, there, in Kana and not in Kafar Kanna, which was a different, tiny place on the road to Nazareth. A verity proved today by many Historians and Archaeologists. The greatest deeds appeared to have occurred in Phoenicia-Galilee.

In addition, Mr. George Nasr, the Lebanese researcher, scriptwriter, and director had shown in his documentary, *If Lebanon told its story*, produced in 1997 that with the advent of Jesus Christ, Christianity had promptly taken root in the city of Melkart in Tyre, and that the first Church ever to exist was built there as early as 54 AD! A mere 12 kilometers southeast of Tyre, the famous wedding of Kana remains still engraved in a rock, picturing people, disciples, the bride, and the faces of Jesus and John the Baptist! It was at that particular wedding that Mary, the mother of Jesus, had asked him for the miracle of wine. Not far from there, beyond the ancient boundaries of the city of Saydoun, in a small village called Makdoushi, people can still see the ancient grotto of ‘Sayadet al-Mantara’ or ‘Our Lady of Mantara’, translated into English as ‘Our Lady of the Awaiting’, standing on a hill above the sea. It was in that place where Mary used to wait for her son to return from his travels, Tradition says. The grotto had lately been converted into a small church, dedicated to the Virgin Holy Mother.

Based on these and many other proofs, Paul would no longer doubt that Jesus Christ had performed many of his first miracles in Galilee. It was there, as well, on the peak of Mt. Hermon, known as, *Jabal al-sheikh*, and called ‘the Mountain of the Meetings’ by Enoch, that Jesus had professed his divinity through transfiguration. It was there too, where Peter had recognized Jesus as the son of God, and as a result of this, Jesus had entrusted him with the keys to his Church, as cited in Matthew 17!

Unquestionably then, the Phoenicians of Tyre and Sidon had constituted the first group of believers in Jesus Christ, whom they had previously worshiped through ‘Al’ and his son Adonis. Jesus had expressed happiness in retreating to the place where he had first felt ‘accepted’.

“Let’s clarify a major point,” suddenly suggested Dr. Najem, breaking into Paul’s thoughts, “at the time of Jesus, the geographical area of Galilee and Mt. Carmel was part of Phoenicia, thus, its territorial boundaries belonged to the city of Tyre. This area had remained a Phoenician-Lebanese territory until the end of the Ottoman era. However, in 1920 AD it became part of Palestine, and later, in 1948, of Israel.”

Why? Politics of course! And politics are business, Paul thought in irony.

“In addition,” Dr. Najem continued, “the Phoenicians had long

erected a Temple to 'Al' and Adonis on Mt. Carmel, hence the name Carmel, Carm-El, the *Generous Vine of El*. Parallel to that, the grotto of Bet-Lahem or Bethlehem, located on the Northeastern base of Mt. Carmel, meant in Phoenician language: the *House of Bread*. Adonis, that young and beautiful god of Gebel who incarnated the cycle of nature and represented the spring—the resurrection of every atom in the kingdom of life—was also worshipped in Bethlehem.” Pausing for a second he then added, “Sir James Frazer, in his book, *the Golden Bough*, originally published in 1922, wrote that Adonis represented the spirit of the corn and that he might well have dwelt and later worshiped in this Bethlehem.”

“Anyway,” he added, “at Mt. Carmel and in Galilee, the Asayas, Ashayas or *healers* lived among the Phoenicians and some other groups inhabiting the area. They believed in the God 'El', and wore Medallions inscribed with the name 'Al', as if embodying the fact that they were Phoenicians, at least in faith. In the *Guide de Mt. Carmel*, published in Jerusalem in 1946, we read that the first Church rose near the grotto of Mt. Carmel in devotion to Mary—still living among them. Some say the grotto was changed into a chapel. Others say it was probably built from the stones of a Temple dedicated to Ashirai (Asherah)—the Mother-Goddess of the Phoenicians. Ashirai was the Virgin Lady Anat herself—the Queen of Heaven.” Dr. Najem closed his eyes for a moment as if in adoration, and resumed his account, “It is also said that Phoenician and Asayan hermits became Christians after being properly *prepared*, ever since the day of the Whitsuntide. Hence, Mt. Carmel—cradle of the monastic life—became a place for the veneration of the Virgin Mary and a sanctuary of the spiritual contemplative life that characterized the Carmelite Order,” he concluded.

“Surely,” Dr. Bechara took over where Dr. Najem had left off, “The Asayas were very different from the Qumran Community, who appeared by the Dead Sea as a closed religious community that strongly rejected the mainstream Jewish Law of the time. They were Orthodox Jews who refused to live in Jewish territory, taking the caves by the Dead Sea as their homes,” here he paused, and reached for his glass of water—taking a sip, and then continued in the same even tone of voice, “Jesus was not a member of the Qumran Community, as some have claimed. He was an adept of the Asayan society—a *healer*. After his baptism by John, Jesus became a Nazarene, an adept of the ascetic branch of the Asayas that counted very, very few members. Among them were: John the Baptist,

Mary Magdalene, and Jesus. Both Mary Magdalene and John knew at once that Jesus was the Christos, and they followed him faithfully ever since.” He took the last puff at his cigar, and delved into his mind.

“The law within the Qumran community was very strict towards women, whom they considered impure.” He continued, “History shows that they formed a male group, choosing and encouraging celibacy in order to engage in ritual purity, and consecrate their life to spiritual awareness. They deemed women selfish creatures, hypocrites, and unreliable. They never trusted nor respected them, as if they’d feared their genus! They were hesitant and careful about marriage, due to the danger of infidelity,” he halted for a moment then added, “The Asayas, on the other hand, respected women greatly. Jesus had many female disciples and followers like Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene—the most famous among them.”

Paul browsed the map again. *Here it is, Magdala . . . it is in Galilee.*

The clock on the wall marked 06:43 PM. Time had passed precipitously, much too quickly for them to notice its ticking.

“Until our next meeting later tonight,” Dr. Najem offered in farewell, after looking at the clock. He left the room that evening with a wide grin on his face.

“Until later,” Paul muttered under his breath.

The Royal Blood of Jesus Christ
Wednesday, November 10, 10:07 PM

Referring to Mt. Carmel with its Phoenician name—*the Generous Vine of El*—and to Bethlehem as Bet(h)-Lahem—meaning *the House of Bread*—made Paul think about the most important Phoenician religious ritual of all time; that of the *Bread and Wine*, performed by Melki-Sedek, and later by Jesus.

Time had come for the Keepers to assemble for yet another meeting on the same day, after dinner. Paul had one thing lingering in his mind since that afternoon: Mary Magdalene—the most renowned female disciple and follower of Jesus—from *Magdala in Galilee*. “Who was Mary Magdalene?” he muttered under his breath, wondering.

“Mary Magdalene played an important role in the life of Jesus,” Dr. Najem began, as if he had heard what Paul had mumbled under his breath. “She was the witness to the Crucifixion, to Jesus’ burial, and to his victorious Resurrection. She faithfully accompanied him as his disciple, his *Initiate*. Mary Magdalene was wrongly, and mistakenly, described as a woman of sin in the New Testament—or a prostitute—as some have suggested. In fact, the intimate relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene surged from a decent religious and spiritual background, and, as such, it remained all the time during Jesus’ ministries,” he paused, sighing, “Only the vulgar and the ignorant would frame that relationship within a sexual context. How cheap and narrow-sighted they can be!”

“In truth,” he continued, “This particular issue comes from the Gospel of Philip 63:33-36, a text composed late in the third century AD mentioning a kiss; not a warm kiss on the mouth, but the one of an *Initiation* rite, on the forehead or the cheek,” he explained, and then added, “At any rate, a kiss on the mouth, if ever true in the text, would not at all imply a sexual relationship. The *Initiation* rite is clear in the fact that blowing a *divine breath* into her mouth would open the way for her—

the way for a new life. Jesus said, 'It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.' This verse purely shows a transmission of the spiritual teachings. So, from *mouth to mouth* Jesus would have given Mary a spiritual kiss, *Initiating* her into the great secret of the ineffable name—the *word*." He halted for a sip of tea.

"The Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Coptic version from around the 2nd century AD, clearly reveals a spiritual discourse between Jesus Christ and his female disciple, Mary Magdalene. It confirms a highly mystical teaching that made his male disciples wonder if such wisdom was really taught by Christ to a female. However, from *mouth to ear* Jesus *Initiated* them into the Mysteries of the Father—the *word*. Similar *Initiation* practices occurred in both the Hermetic and the Pythagorean systems," he elucidated then added, "That Jesus was or ever lived as a member of the Qumran Community should not be a question anymore, since Jesus was not at all Jewish. He simply lived as a true Galilean, an Asaya, a Nazarene," he said at last.

A moment of silence went by before the Professor broke in, saying, "Let's now talk about the hour of the last supper," he proposed. "Judas Iscariot, whom Jesus called the devil, would soon betray him and deliver him to the Jews, as written in John 6:70-71 and John 13:26-27."

"True! In John 18:1-6," Dr. Najem conferred, "When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples over the brook Kidron, where there was a garden into which he and his disciples entered. Now, Judas—who betrayed him—also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples. Judas, having taken a detachment of soldiers and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus, knowing all the things that were happening to him, went forth and said to them, '*Who are you looking for?*' They answered him, '*Jesus of Nazareth.*' Jesus said to them, '*I am he.*' Judas, who betrayed him, was also standing with them. Therefore, when he said to them, '*I am he,*' they stumbled back, and fell to the ground."

"Wait! Hold on a bit on that thought," Paul interrupted quickly, looking at the Keepers around him. "Here is another evidence. Judas was an agent of the Temple, and he knew Jesus very well, whereas the soldiers and the chief priests of the Temple did not know him at all because he was not one of them, not a Jew! In fact, why should they need Judas to identify Jesus with a kiss, if they knew him as one of them?" he wondered

aloud.

“True!” Nabil exclaimed in approval. “Why hadn’t they caught him in the Temple, then?”

“It is mentioned in the New Testament that they could not, for he always managed to elude them,” Professor Michel answered evenly.

“Indeed, they were searching for Jesus the Nazarene of Galilee, a man they did not know well, and rarely saw in the Temple,” Nabil murmured as if to himself.

“Exactly!” Professor Michel replied in confirmation to his theory. “So, without a doubt, Jesus never entered or taught at the Temple. In *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, published in 2004, Ph.D. Darrell L. Bock wrote that Jesus was not a Rabbi. He didn’t even act like one. For the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus didn’t hold an official role within Judaism!”

“Certainly, there is nothing Jewish in Jesus,” Dr. Bechara asserted firmly, holding his cigar between his fingers. “In fact, he appeared only a few times in the outside court or inside the atrium of the Temple when he descended to them from Galilee, down Mt. Olive. It was then that he spoke out to shake their beliefs, which actually was the main reason why they wanted to capture him. Yet, he always managed to evade them. Evidently, the Pharisees and the chief priests of the Temple sent their spies into Galilee because they simply did not know him. Judas stood for their eyes—the eyes of the big brother!” he uttered, as he stood up, and walked calmly towards the window to look outside.

A moment of reflection rendered them all silent.

Dr. Bechara cleared his throat, turned his head towards the Keepers, and commented in a clear voice, “The kiss of betrayal of Judas delivered him to the Jews and then to the Romans. Before Pilate, in John 18:33-37, Jesus was asked ‘*Are you the King of the Jews?*’ Jesus answered him, ‘*Do you say this by yourself, or did others tell you about me?*’ To which Pilate answered, ‘*I’m not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered you to me. What have you done?*’ Jesus then answered, ‘*My Kingdom is not of this world. If my Kingdom were of this world, then my servants would fight, that I would not be delivered to the Jews. But now my Kingdom is not from here.*’ ” After he finished reading the quote, he added, “If truth be told, Jesus refused to be called King of the Jews, for he was not. He plainly declared that his Kingdom was not from this world. He also added something very important, proclaiming that if his Kingdom were of this world, then his servants would fight, that he

would not be delivered to the *Jews*. Well, notice this, he did not say, *that I would not be delivered to my own nation.*”

At that, Paul remembered Padre Joseph and his explanations during his many visits. In a strange silence the Padre would lay his forehead on his right hand, close his eyes, and fall into a deep meditation. When he read from the New Testament, he would speak out with great emotion, especially when reciting from the book of John, whom he considered amazing. Then he would snatch off his eyeglasses, toss them on the desk, and begin . . .

“Of course,” Padre Joseph would say, “Jesus never claimed he was the King of the Jews, simply because he was not, nor did he want to be. Jesus would not claim something out of a lie, and he simply proclaimed that his Kingdom was not from this world, but if it were, he would ask his servants to defend him and fight so that he would not be delivered to the Jews. This is a two-fold answer: one of its meanings is spiritual and the other, material. His material answer would suggest that he meant to tell Pilate that he was a Galilean and not a Jew. On the other hand, his spiritual answer would mean that his Kingdom is the Kingdom of God, of Love, to which he is the son, who never chooses evil ways—like war—to save himself from his enemies, except that Jesus has no enemies! God has no enemies.”

Dr. Najem dragged Paul out of his recollections, his voice rising clear and forceful, as he resumed his explanation on one particular matter gone misunderstood for centuries, “On the Cross, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘*Eli, Eloi*’, which translates into: *My God, my God*. Then Jesus added, ‘*Lamash (leman) Baktani (bachthani, shevachthani)*’, which means in Aramaic, ‘*How much have you praised (glorified, elevated) me!*’ or ‘*leman shabakthani*’ meaning, ‘*for this I was spared!*’ wrongly translated into: ‘*Why have you forsaken me?*’ for ‘*Lama Shabaktani*’ or ‘*Lama Sabachthani*’.” Dr. Najem paused for a decisive moment, “Of course the Father would not have forsaken his son, who bowed his head and surrendered his last breath saying, ‘It has been accomplished.’ Jesus Christ called his God ‘El’, his Father, in whose warm hands he rested everlastingly. He did not call him YHWH. Did he?”

The statement hung over the Historian, heavy with a new realization. Dr. Najem’s inquisitive eyes probed for Paul’s discernment to his revelation. Then, seemingly satisfied, he nodded, and continued,

“Anyway, after the death of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea took his body down from the cross to bury him in . . .”

“Joseph of Arimathea!?” Paul exclaimed, interrupting him, “You mean . . . the same Joseph who was strongly connected to the story of the Grail?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

“Who was he?” Paul rushed to ask.

“That’s a good question,” answered Dr. Najem, “There is not much canonic information about him, unfortunately. John 19:38, Matthew 27:57, Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:50 cited him in an almost identical way. The New Testament reveals that Joseph was the disciple of Jesus. It also says that he was a rich man who appealed to Pilate in secret, for fear of the *Jews*, to deliver to him the body of Jesus. Pilate conceded, and Joseph took the body down from the cross, wrapped it in a clean white-linen cloth, and placed it inside a tomb—within a garden—which he had carved in a rock. Joseph made sure that Jesus would rest in an unscathed, new tomb. He then rolled a big stone to the door of the sepulcher to seal it, before he departed. The New Testament declared him a good and just man and an honorable counselor, awaiting the Kingdom of God.”

“I see,” Nabil uttered in a voice filled with emotion, then asked, “Where is Arimathea?”

“Only the book of Luke mentions that Arimathea was a city of the Jews. In fact, the right name of this city, as known in the time of Jesus, was Rameh. Fortunately though, it is not hard to find, and so if we look at these maps at the end of the book, we find two places with the name of Rameh; one in Samaria and the other . . . well, guess where?” Dr. Bechara asked with an eloquent smile.

“In Galilee!” Both Nabil and Paul replied in unison then looked at each other in doubt.

“Yes! And to be more accurate, Rameh still exists, even today, in Lebanon, very close to Kana—the place from which Mary came, and where Jesus performed his first miracle,” he confirmed.

“What?” Paul burst out in shock.

“Yes, canonic history reveals that there were about six places by the name of Rameh or Ramah, and one of them could be identified with the modern Palestinian city of Ramallah. However, the Rameh from which Joseph originated is located twenty-one kilometers South of Tyre and only nine kilometers from Kana,” Dr. Bechara informed, and moved away from the window to snuff out his cigar in the ashtray on the table.

Without comment Paul sighed in relief, as he studied the maps.

“Not only that. Our archives indicate that Joseph was the Great uncle of Jesus!” Professor Michel added as an afterthought that felt more like a bombshell.

“The great uncle of Jesus?” Nabil blurted out with that same emotional temperament that characterized him.

Paul would’ve smiled widely in amusement, were it not for his own astonishment. He uttered in the direction of the Professor, “You mean . . . he was Mary’s Uncle?”

“Yes. Mary was from Kana, and her uncle was from Rameh. Only nine kilometers separated the two towns. He was indeed a counselor, though not of the Sanhedrin—as explained in the footnotes of the New Testament, but rather, an honorable one—of the Asayas—a good and just man awaiting the Kingdom of God. Besides, Joseph had owned the garden in which he had carved the tomb, and this is, unerringly, a Phoenician custom; they were reputed for making tombs in just such a manner,” the Professor revealed, giving closure.

“You forgot something important, Brother Michel!” Dr. Najem said, and they all gazed at him in wonder. Now that he had their attention, he added, “Joseph of Rameh was a wealthy merchant. He owned a large fleet of Phoenician ships, and ran the tin trade for the Roman Empire between the Land of Tin—known in the old days as Bar-Tanak, the Phoenician name for Britain—and Phoenicia. We all know that the Phoenicians possessed a secret reservoir of Tin in Britain ever since the 6th century BC,” he halted for his final sip at his now cold tea. “They owned mines in Cornwall, west of England, and all across Ireland and Gaul (France), to Marseilles. Accordingly, they used to bring it home, or trade it around both the Mediterranean and the Aegean Seas. Other than that, the Phoenicians shared, in the many voyages they made, their religious and theological mysteries with the Druids, the Celtic Priests of ancient Britain! At any rate, such a strong connection with the Romans allowed Joseph access to the body of Jesus, and the authority to bury him in his garden. Of course, Pilate knew Jesus was not a Jew!” he revealed.

“That’s an important detail indeed,” Nabil agreed with bright eyes.

Time stood still for some moments . . .

The New Testament had swapped the original location of Rameh, exactly as it had done with Bethlehem and Kana. Behind this manipulation of facts lurked, no doubt, an iniquitous purpose to mislead the people on the true Historical identity of Jesus Christ, his family, and

friends. *Or . . . was the New Testament actually written in codes?* Paul thought.

“In reality, the death of Jesus mirrors the death of Adonis, the son of ‘Al’, killed by a boar, and the legendary Phoenix, killed by fire,” Dr. Najem explained. “His Resurrection after three days mirrors both the resurrection of Adonis in the spring and that of the legendary Phoenix from his ashes, three days after. The Resurrection shook the foundations of the natural world, for it was an extension of it—a supernatural and spiritual power. ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him,’ wrote John in 13:31,” he wrapped up with a smile.

The echoes, which followed that last sentence, held them all in respectful silence. Paul tried to absorb the immensity of all these revelations, poured on him in such a short lapse of time. Eight days had gone by, since he had first met the Keepers. He always sought the truth, but what he had experienced so far, inside the Fortress, was beyond his expectations. At this very moment, as he sat—the fifth among the four Keepers—soundless and absorbed, he wished for some time alone, to go over the voluminous amounts of information conveyed to him. Yet, his strong desire to know more, to reach the conclusion, and face the responsibility of his new role, won him over. He observed the three Masters and wondered, thrilled, who would decide to continue. Yet, they all remained calm, silent; perhaps indulging in thoughts he would never guess.

They were five Keepers gathered at the Round Table, and there were five symbols fused into one—fixed on the lid of the wooden box in front of them. *Every brother represents a symbol . . . what is my symbol?* Paul wondered still. From where he sat, the side of the box facing him appeared more clearly than ever, and he noted a sign—a sign that had not been there before . . . *a cross!*

Outside . . . the wind came to gradual calmness.

The sign—a beautifully inscribed crucifix—grabbed his full attention, with new awareness dawning on him. *That’s my symbol.* He marveled for a few seconds, before he remembered Mariam, the wife of Gabriel, and the beautiful crucifix she had offered him before his departure. He remembered her reassurance that it was for his own safety, for he would one day need it. Without further delay, his hands, quivering with excitement, retrieved the crucifix from the front pocket of his shirt, and he examined it with renewed interest. He then distinguished, for the first time, an engraved word made up of two Phoenician letters ‘*EL!*’ Paul

loomed forward, over the sign on the box. Both crucifixes were, amazingly, identical!

The clock on the wall marked 11:27 PM. Time had run by them too swiftly and they all looked very tired. They left.

Paul spent more than half an hour outside the Fortress, admiring the starry blue sky above, and deliberating on the Holy Grail. *The Holy Blood of Jesus Christ was his Royal Phoenician Blood.* The night was beautifully clear; yet, his mind dwelt in confusion about a particular matter that needed an answer from the Keepers, first thing in the meeting, tomorrow afternoon!

The Great White Fraternity
Thursday, November 11, 05:14 PM

Early the next day nothing dwelt in Paul's mind but the Tradition that Dr. Najem had constantly mentioned. He had named it: the Kabala and Paul believed that he would refer it to Enoch-Taautus—*the father of the spiritual laws*. In fact, the Tradition was—in both its Phoenician and Egyptian essence—the same, much more ancient than the Judaic Kabalistic System.

Paul lost the notion of time, engrossed in his thoughts, while he ambled inside and outside the Fortress. When he joined the Keepers again in the Living Room, teatime had already created a relaxing mood around them. Acting as a family, where the absence of formalities spared one from mundane salutations, he nodded a hello in their direction with an easy smile, poured a cup of tea, and went to stand by the window. The Sun blasted its full radiance on the courtyard.

“You might be wondering about the Tradition,” Professor Michel uttered from behind his shoulder.

He veered to face the Professor, “As a matter of fact, I have been.”

“Well, it certainly goes back to Hermes-Enoch. It all started with Enoch or Anak, the Canaano-Phoenician seer of Mt. Hermon, in Loubnan. Please note that the name Hermes, given to him by the Greeks at a later stage, might be a derivative of Hermon. Tradition says that Angels descended on top of Mt. Hermon, and taught him a great universal, spiritual, and occult doctrine that Enoch accepted and called the Kabala, which means *accepting* in the Phoenician-Hamitic language,” the Professor explained. “Enoch is Henoch or Phenoch, the Phoenix that symbolized the secret cycle and Initiation. He was the first Teacher-Initiator and possessor of the true *mirific name*. He linked Humanity through an eternal concordance with the Father. Later, Enoch walked down the Mountain, carrying the Tradition with him to Gebel. In fact,

Gebel could be articulated as *Geb-El* in the Hamitic tongue, and means the *Sacred Land of Al*. I believe you already know that,” he looked at Paul with a smile, as he walked around him. “There, in Gebel, Enoch established his doctrine, and built a Temple to the God ‘Al’, the Most High. Originally, he’d built it in the image of the open semi-Temple he’d previously erected with the help of his son and first adepts at Mt. Hermon—the Mountain of Acceptance and of the Meetings. This semi-Temple was composed of a flat horizontal rock, lying at the top of a wide vertical rock, thus forming an altar, framed by two pillars,” he paused, dwelling in his memory for a moment.

It flashed on Paul like rays of thunder, or, in a metaphysical sense, like the rays of the Divine Monad. An altar . . . the twin pillars . . . Gebel!

“The vast star-illuminated sky above Mt. Hermon stretched as dome for the Temple,” he continued. “The sky was God’s habitat, surrounded by Angels. The altar at the top of the Mountain created the proper link between Earth and Heaven, man and God, and that, through the ever ascending and descending energies processed by the power of the two Pillars. In Gebel, later on, the adepts of Enoch-Taautus built the Great Phoenician Temple, its Mystery Chamber with a cubical altar—having one pillar on each side. They then ornamented the walls with shapes, numbers . . .”

His words echoed . . . Paul recalled almost everything inside the Mystery Chamber, in particular, the wall painting of the Phoenician High Priest in a sacred ritual—the finest ever. He could almost see it in front of him; the cubical altar, the bright golden stone on the Left Pillar with the ear of wheat, the glowing purple stone on the Right Pillar with the vine, the constellations of the Zodiac, the Taurus Constellation, and the seven Heavenly Bodies.

Professor Michel grabbed his forearm gently, and gestured him to sit on the leather sofa nearby. Although the setting was different from the one at the Round Table, Paul abided, somehow knowing the narration would be long. Professor Michel slouched on the sofa by Paul’s side, retrieved his eyeglasses, cleaning them with a tissue, and pursued his commentary, “Enoch, the High Priest, performed on the altar the most sacred ritual of all, that of *wine and bread*. The *purple stone* is the wine, while the *golden stone* is the bread. Melki-Sedek practiced the same rite, later on, in the Temple of Shalim in Jerusalem!”

Wheat and Vine . . . Bread and Wine! the link had not escaped his wit. *Jesus Christ performed this rite at the last supper!* he refreshed his

memory with a brief look at Dr. Bechara, nearing them noiselessly with a cup of tea in his hand.

“From the ancient port of Gebel, Enoch and some of his adepts, sailed to the Land of Ham, and introduced the Tradition to Egyptian priests in Memphis and Giza, where the Pyramids were built. Enoch-Thor became Thot-Taautus in the Egyptian Religion. The Pyramid denoted nothing more than a grandiose symbol of the Temple of God, dedicated by the Egyptians to their divine messenger: Thot-Taautus,” Professor Michel explained, introducing the history of the Tradition.

Dr. Najem joined them, as did Nabil, and they both took their seats on the other sofa, facing them. Paul watched the *circle of five* coming together in a genuine consensus, and an odd feeling invaded him all of a sudden, for he found himself surrounded by avant-garde erudite people. Now a member of this great ancient Fraternity, he deemed it highly important to learn everything he could.

“After being established in Canaan and Egypt,” Dr. Bechara commented, “The Tradition journeyed around the world. In fact, Enock (Anak) the Canaano-Phoenician became a Metatron, standing before God. Therefore, we consecrate Wednesday, yesterday, as his holy day. We have mentioned this to you before, but it’s worth reminding you about it,” he smiled.

It hit him at once that his regular meetings with Padre Joseph had always occurred on Wednesdays, for no particular reason, or so he had assumed. *Was visiting him on that day an unconscious choice of mine? Was it a coincidence?* He inwardly shrugged off the thought. *I don’t believe in coincidences . . . not anymore, and definitely never again after my unintentional first meeting with these soberly confident scholars around me,* he concluded within the depths of his mind.

He observed them discreetly, and then watched as Dr. Bechara walked calmly to the buffet to pour another cup of tea. A delicious aroma of canella drifted about—warm, soothing, and spicy—and grew stronger, as he drew nearer to the circle. He sat sideways on the armrest of one of the antique Henri II armchairs at Paul’s right, and talked, as he slowly spun the teaspoon in his cup. He said that Enoch was known as Mithra to the Hindus and Persians, Enki/Ea in Mesopotamia, Nebo in the Babylonian mythology, Quetzalcóatl to the Mexican Aztecs, Thor in the Scandinavian tradition, Hermes-Kadmos in Greece, and Mercury in Rome.

“He was Adam-Kadmon for the Kabalists,” Dr. Bechara added, “He later became Edris for the Arabs and the Muslims, and recently, Enoch

for the Druzes. Sometimes, the *father of the spiritual laws*—considered as the divine messenger who accepted the *word* of God—was also regarded as the god of wisdom and science.” He took the time to sip from his tea, and then continued, “Later on, the Chaldean savants and magi used the Kabala, based on the esoteric meanings of the Alphabet, incorporating one of the most ancient languages on Earth, to invoke the spirits, either in the written form of talisman, or in the oral form of incantation. That was surely a deviation from its original source.”

A moment of reflection passed in which Paul poured more tea in his cup, and passed the carafe around, followed by the tray of biscuits.

“Throughout history,” Dr. Najem began consistently, “Many religious sects and secret societies, whether in the East or the West, adopted the Kabala in their ceremonies of Initiation, certainly under the influence of the Chaldean, or its later version—the Hebrew Kabala. However, very few underwent the Initiation into the secrets of the authentic Kabala of Phoenicia and Egypt.”

“Our Order is one of the very few that still hold on to the secrets of that authentic Tradition,” he attested. “To tell you the Truth, our Order shall revolve, in time, around a more magnificent reality; a resurrection of all the true faithful adepts of Enoch-Hermes—the first Instructor and savior of humanity—a *son of God* who triumphantly declared, ‘Oh men, live soberly . . . Win your immortality; I will lead you on to salvation.’ ”

“Many Keepers and adepts of similar authentic Orders around the world watchfully shielded the secrets from the ignorant commoners. Unfortunately, despite all this wariness, the shape of the *true word* has been stolen, corrupted, as we previously informed you. Our mission was to recuperate it, and we have. We’ve told you about the Holy Grail—the true Royal Blood of Jesus Christ. Keep it protected,” Dr. Najem concluded in a firm tone that sounded more like an order.

“We will,” Paul assured him with a nod, so did Nabil, “But tell me, Brother John, do we have any connection with the few other Orders that follow the same line as ours?” he inquired after lighting a cigarette.

“Yes. We have observed the signs with care, and touched bases with them.”

“Great! Where is our Order established, other than Lebanon and Egypt?”

“In the present day our Order is also instituted in Greece, Iraq, Palestine, India, Tibet, Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Mexico, and the New World—USA—discovered by our

ancestors, the Phoenicians, way before Christopher Columbus. In fact, it has remained barely rerouted since ancient times, geographically.

However, only here in Loubnan have we succeeded in completing the circle—the *five-pointed star*, I mean,” he answered with a hint of pride in his confident tone. His eyes glittered briefly, and his face looked younger.

“What do you mean?” Paul urgently asked, wanting to know what lay *behind* Dr. Najem’s edict.

He smiled as if expecting Paul’s probing, “I mean, dear brother,” he stood up, obviously to emphasize what he had to say next, “That we are ready to announce the *word* to the world, as soon as we restore *it* to its bona fide context.”

“Aha, I see,” Paul murmured, uncertain how this could be done. With the back of his hand he dusted a thread off his lap. He knew such a mission would be very difficult for them to undertake. However, he deemed of foremost importance to keep faith in the *word*, and in miracles! He decided to redirect the discussion to what he considered a priority for the time being, “I would love to know more about the Tradition. And . . . what the main difference is between the Phoenician-Egyptian Kabala and the Chaldeo-Hebraic Kabala.”

“Yes, tell us, please!” Nabil urged, and bent forward, his eyes avid.

Dr. Najem gazed at Paul with an exceptional determination. A glimpse at Dr. Bechara and Professor Michel confirmed that same power in them, so incredible for such sober men. Their eyes met and lingered. Paul waited . . . so did Nabil.

“Well,” Dr. Najem took a lungful of air then rubbed his jaw, as if trying to decide how to put his words together, “Let me put it plainly: There are indeed two main intellectual, social and religious Orders in the world today. In fact, both are significantly old, and go back thousands of years. The authentic and older one is the Great White Fraternity that originated with Hermes-Enoch-Taautus himself, the *founder of the First Religion*. It began as a Phoenician-Egyptian Monotheistic Fraternity that sought, with anchored faith, the resurrection of the self to its higher level and into the immortality of the spirit. Monotheism lay at the foundational core of the theological concept of the Great White Fraternity. In Phoenicia, the High Priest—Melki-Sedek, himself a direct adept of Hermes-Enoch—preached the belief in the Universal God Al-Elyon, the Most High. Throughout history people considered Melki-Sedek to be Enoch himself. King Ahiram of Gebel and King Hiram of Tyre profoundly believed in the God ‘Al’, and pledged to Enoch-Taautus. In Egypt, Pharaoh Akhenaton

preached of 'Aton' as the Universal God. His predecessor, Pharaoh Thutmose III, keenly adopted the concept. Both 'Al' and 'Aton' represented the first Light of Creation, symbolized by the Sun." He halted for a thought, perhaps refreshing his memory.

"It is not actually known exactly when Phoenicians started to believe in the One High God 'El'. However, this new concept of Monotheism entered Egypt as a Mystery School with Thutmose III or Thut-Mosis, *Initiate of Thut*, and eventually appeared with Akhenaton as a religious reform. Thutmose III (1505 - 1450 BC) proved to be the most erudite Pharaoh among all Pharaohs who ever ruled in Egypt," Dr. Najem informed with enthusiasm. "He established a great empire in Asia—a name given to the Land of Canaan—which expanded even beyond the Euphrates. During the many expeditions and military campaigns he led through Asia, he acquired a high interest in the Asiatic gods, with a particular focal point in Monotheism—already established in Phoenicia."

"Among the many locations he occupied in Phoenicia, Mt. Carmel presented the most suitable place for *Initiation*. In his annals, he referred to this particular place as the 'Sacred Island'. The name Carmel, as discussed earlier, derives from the Phoenician word, *Krm-el*, the *Generous Vine of El*. It means the *Spiritual offering of El*. Phoenician Priests had built two Temples at the top of Mt. Carmel before: one dedicated to El (Baal) and the other to Ashirai (Anat), the Mother goddess—destroyed later during one of the many invasions of Thutmose III." Dr. Najem seemed to have grieved the historical loss of that Temple, giving the motion with his hand for Professor Michel to continue.

"It was there, on Mt. Carmel," the Professor began, "Where Thutmose III encountered some Phoenician Enochian Priests, direct adepts of Enoch, the seer of Mt. Hermon. After watching them worshipping the One Most High God 'AL', he was incited by the idea of Monotheism, as he weighed it against the over-seven-hundred city-gods worshipped in Egypt. In a spark of genius, he speculated the possibility and benefits of combining all major Egyptian gods into One Supreme Being. In consequence of this revelation, he built a new religious center—a school of Initiation—on the ruins of the Temple of Ashirai (Asherah). This school immediately found ground in Egypt as a Phoenician-Egyptian Monotheistic Fraternity, known some time later as the Great White Fraternity. This relation between Canaan-Phoenicia and Egypt persisted for a long time, and therefore, Memphis and Gebel subsisted as twin religious cities."

“A bit over a hundred years later, Monotheism emerged in Egypt with Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (1370 - 1350 BC)—the religious reformer known as Akhenaton. It surfaced precisely in his religious city: Akhetaton, *Horizon of Aton*. His father, Amenhotep III, was the son of Thutmose IV, who took for spouse the Phoenician Queen *Tia*, a believer in the One God ‘El’. Thutmose IV was the son of Amenhotep II, the offspring of our famous Pharaoh Thutmose III. And so, in the footsteps of his father, Amenhotep III married a Phoenician Queen, *Tiy*, also a believer of the One God ‘El’,” the Professor paused for a moment.

“So . . . the Monotheistic relationship between both Canaan-Phoenicia and Egypt was also a strong religious family tie!” Paul suggested in wonder.

“Apparently so. Hence, during the rule of Akhenaton, their belief led to the laying of the very last stone in the foundation of the Great White Fraternity. As Memphis stood for the religious twin city of Gebel, so did Akhetaton to Mt. Carmel,” Dr. Bechara suggested, his cigar rolling between his fingers.

“Throughout history, many neophytes, adepts, and wise men of the East visited Mt. Carmel, lived inside the big Temple of El (Baal), and conducted some form of Spiritual meditation. Among them was Pythagoras of Sidon, the first Philosopher. After his Initiation in the Sanctuaries of Saydoun (Sidon), Sur (Tyre), and Gebel (Byblos), he journeyed to Mt. Carmel to continue his Initiation inside the Temple.” He added, “Mt. Carmel, the ultimate place for such enlightenment, stood as the most sacred of all mountains, inaccessible to the vulgar. The walls of its Temple illustrated symbols and inscriptions intended for the silent meditation of the neophyte. Questions and talk forbidden, complete silence prevailed but for the thoughts, whispering in the mind of every seeker. Isolated from all the troubles and worries of the profane outside world, Pythagoras spent most of his days and nights like a hermit, meditating on a particular symbol that had attracted his attention upon first entering the Temple. The symbol represented the *Sacred Tau*, the Phoenician Cross, and the last, the twenty-second letter of their sacred language,” he said, halting long enough for a sip of tea and a puff at his cigar.

“Mt. Carmel remained a sacred place for pilgrims seeking to consume the drink of the gods, even during the time of Jesus,” Dr. Bechara resumed. “As we have seen earlier, the Ashaya *healers* smoothly evolved into Christian Hermits, utterly *Initiated* into the great Mysteries of the

God 'El' and his son 'Immanuel'. Accordingly, Mt. Carmel turned into a place for worshipping Mary, the mother of Jesus," he clarified. "Anyway, apart from us, Keepers of the Word, very few were the religions and fraternities in direct affiliation with the Great White Fraternity."

"Like who?" Nabil asked anxiously.

"Like the Hermetists, the Pythagoreans, the Therapeuts of the Egyptian desert, and the Asayas—with their ascetic Nazarene branch of Mt. Carmel and Galilee," Dr. Najem answered. "We also count the Christians, some non-dualist Gnostics, few Alchemists of the Hermetic tradition, several Theosophists, and the Anthroposophists—who believe that Christianity is a unique spiritual system for the evolution of humanity and that—without Christ—humanity might well bring about its own destruction. Adding to them, some Poor Knights of Christ who secretly follow the Hermetic Tradition and consider Christ the Temple of which they are his Knights, some of the Masons who adopt the Temple of Shalim (Šalim) in their Rites and consider that the 3rd Master Degree represents the Resurrection of the Master Christ on the 3rd day, and of course, the Rosicrucians, who seek to accomplish the Great Work by identifying Christ as the Philosopher's Stone."

"I see . . ." Paul said, as his mind thought about the relation the Rosicrucians made between Christ and the Philosopher's Stone. He seemed to have liked the idea. However, there was something that needed explanation. "You have informed us about the authentic and older Tradition—the Great White Fraternity. But what about the other tradition—the Chaldeo-Hebraic Kabala! What is it about? Who are they?" the Historian managed to ask.

"Ha!" Dr. Bechara exclaimed tonelessly, as if gratified by the teaching process, "We'll give you a hint about that in our meeting, later tonight."

"A hint!" Paul muttered under his breath.

"Yes, a hint," Dr. Najem confirmed.

Why just a hint? the question lingered in the stillness of his puzzled mind.

However, the teaching had ended for now, and they all left the Living Room with the promise to meet again at eight thirty, for dinner.

The Kabala
Thursday, November 11, 10:06 PM

After the meeting, Paul had much to mull over, so he didn't find rest in his bedroom. Nature beckoned him through his opened window, and he decided to abide, the idea of a short stroll seemed appealing to him. He walked out the Fortress, and stood for an instant under the Cedar tree. There was something magical about the Lebanese mountains, which grabbed his spirit and soothed his tension. He delighted in the exceptional sensation caused by the blend of scents that nature surrendered in harmony. He breathed deeply, taking in, not only the refreshing air, but also all that he had come to understand back in the Living Room. He thought about the *five-pointed star*, closing the Circle of *Initiates* inside that Order, and he realized that he still needed to figure out their meanings and those of the Kabala. His sunset promenade, which he had assumed had been short, turned out to have taken much longer than he had imagined, as the look at his wristwatch indicated.

The break had ended, and it was almost seven when Paul decided to take advantage of that free time to check some works at the Library. As he browsed among hardcovers and parchments, one volume immediately caught his attention, the *Book of Enoch, the Prophet*. Avid for its contents, he grabbed a chair, and sat perusing the tome. In spite of its Kabbalistic written form, he managed to crack a few of the keys, and read through. Yet, how he had managed it, he did not know.

It narrated the Meeting of Enoch with the Angels of God atop Mt. Hermon—called *Jabal al-sheikh*, the Mountain of the Lord, and known also as the Mountain of Acceptance and of the Meetings—in Phoenicia-Lebanon. The book reported the visions of Enoch throughout the Heavenly realms. Electing him among all the sages of the Earth, the Angels had taught him the Tradition, and asked him to convey it in secrecy, from *mouth to ear*, to a generation of Adepts. That had been his

mission, and he had accomplished it.

“It seems that history repeats itself,” Paul muttered pensively, “For it was on top of Mt. Hermon—and not on Mt. Tabor, as formerly believed—that Jesus’ Transfiguration had occurred, observed by his three disciples: Peter, James, and John. Jesus claimed his divinity there, and Peter recognized him as the Son of God.”

As he held on to that thought for some time, the ringing of the clock on the wall of the Library alerted him that the time had come for dinner. He rushed, and barely had the time to wash his hands. It was 08:42 PM when Paul broke into the dining room, panting for air. They all stared at him with grins of amusement on their faces. A light meal of fish, potatoes, and salad—clear of any alcoholic beverage—had been served, and Paul liked it. He realized that he might be the youngest Keeper among them, but despite the difference in ages, the brothers in the Order treated each other equally. He had come to enjoy the rapport while at the Round Table.

Later, after dinner, the clock on the wall of the Living Room marked 10:06 PM. Dr. Najem had already asked them to convene there, around ten, for a new meeting. Paul waited for everyone to settle into their usual places, before directing his question to Dr. Najem on his right side. “What did the Angels teach Enoch? What is the Tradition, the Kabala?” he sounded eager, but couldn’t help it; he really ached to know.

“The Kabala—*accepted* by the first seer, Enoch-Hermes, at the top of Mt. Hermon—is figuratively represented by the Caduceus that would lead the true Kabalists up, in spiral ascension, along yet beyond the dualistic principles, ultimately reaching the wings of Liberty in the abode of the One,” Dr. Najem advanced without hesitation. “The Tradition is divided into three parts. First, the *Divine Inspiration*, revealed to Enoch-Taautus by the Angels of God—those Exalted Beings or Higher Selves. It contained the *Omnific Word* that was never written, but rather, given in secret from *mouth to ear*. Second, there is the *Emerald Tablet*, written by Henoch on a piece of emerald stone with the purest of Gold. It contained the process of *Alchemy*, which focused on a spiritual enlightenment through a change in the physiology of the body, based on a transmutation of the sexual force. The third part is the *Sacred Alphabet*, which contained the hidden meanings of the *Occult Sciences*, including Astrology and Real Magic,” he took a moment to gather his thoughts, and continued with the explanation, “The *first Initiate into the mystery of the word* concealed these three aspects of the Kabala in the Sacred Alphabet.” He resumed,

“This secret knowledge was to be imparted only to the *Initiates*, who would have to interpret their visions, and discern the true meanings of the Tradition. The Symbols that would engage the *Initiate* hold mystical significance that awakens the unconsciousness into a consciousness of itself. It creates an awakening state of the *intuitive knowledge* of the *Initiate*,” Dr. Najem spelled out clearly.

This thoughtful explanation surprised Paul. He recalled, all of a sudden, the Alchemy that Youmna had worked on before. If he could see her now, he would definitely tell her about the Alchemy in the Kabbalistic Tradition, and would surely make her know the Philosopher’s Stone of the Rosicrucians—*Christ*. She could finally conclude her search. Back to the Living Room, his mind recollected the awful vision of one of the letters he had indeed experienced inside the Mystery Chamber of Gebel, but, obviously, he needed to be fully aware of the Tradition, in order to become an *Initiate*. He had never truly thought that he—the Historian—would be turning into an *Initiate* of a Great Order. That fact perplexed him deeply.

“On the other hand,” Dr. Najem resumed leisurely, “The Jewish tradition of the Kabala roots back, as mentioned earlier, to the time of the Chaldeans, and is essentially related to the Babylonian Talmud,” he paused, fully pensive, “The Hebrew Kabala is not a written tradition, but a purely oral one. It became popular at the time of the *Templars* in the 12th and 13th century AD. It is based on both the *Sepher Yetzirah*, known as the Book of Creation or Formation, and the *Zohar* or *Sefer-ha-Zohar*, known as the Book of Splendor or Lights.” He took a sip of wine.

Professor Michel took up where Dr. Najem had left off, and explained that in the *Zohar*, God is described as Ein-Soph, No-Thing, the endless, infinite, and the all. It stands above the First Sephiroth, Kether, where Yahweh is crowned over the principles of Dualism. However, Yahweh is the God *Iao*, *Iaho*, or *Yaho*; the Chaldean Mystery God of creation, the *breath of life* that generated from an upright *male* and an egg-shaped *female*, which are the principles of Nature. Thus, Ye(a)va, *Jehovah*, or *Yahweh* is the Androgynous Supreme Divinity of the Hebrews, being Ievo-hevah, Adam-Eve, or *Yod-Heva*, thus the Demiurge.

The Jewish Kabala teaches that God projected, from Himself, ten rays of light: the Sephiroth. Originally, there was a unity between God and the world, but that broke apart when evil appeared. The goal of the Jewish Kabbalists is to restore that unity, but a Unity with Ein-Soph cannot occur while worshipping Yod-Heva, and if accomplished, God cannot be

perceived as a negation, or No-Thing. Along with that, the Hebrew Kabala represented a complete system of symbols, angels, demons, and magic, or better said, sorcery. It also included a complex cosmology and the origins of humanity in the scheme of existence.

Furthermore, Jewish Kabalists believe that the Old Testament's language contained coded secrets, so they created an esoteric system of interpretation known as *gematria*, by assigning a number to each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew Alphabet, originally taken from the Phoenician Alphabet. No matter how one goes about it, the Jewish Kabala is a composed element of the Chaldean Kabala, and includes, at the same time, much of the Persian magic, or the dualist principles of Nature. Along with that, it takes into account the main Pythagorean idea of restoring the Unity between God and man, however, the Pythagoreans believed in the Universal Mind as God, and not as a Negation.

After the professor concluded his narration at the Round Table, there was a feeling of expectation in the air, and eagerness made Paul urge for more. With an inviting smile and a hand gesture, Dr. Najem asked the four Keepers to lay their attention on the wooden box in the center of the table.

“Have a clear mind, gentlemen. We are about to begin,” he announced, his eyes glittering, and as they abided in agitated suspense, he opened the box to retrieve a papyrus—rolled and tied with a golden ribbon. Dr. Najem untied the bow, unfolded the manuscript, and placed it in front of Paul's eyes for him to see the golden words. Blushing somewhat at the honor, Paul read aloud:

Cycle I

1. Aleph (א) is the Father, the Creative Force, connected to the Fire element.
2. Bet(h) (ב) is the Hermaphrodite dual-nature of the created Kosmos. It is the Body, or the Temple that holds the Spirit, associated with planet Saturn.
3. Gimel (ג) is the wandering in Nature, connected to planet Jupiter.
4. Dalet(h) (ד) is the Door and Path to the constellation of Taurus (the Bull).
5. He(h) (ה) is the window of Revelation and Inspiration, related to

the Aries constellation (the Ram).

6. Waw (ו) is the material gain and attracting the physical, nailing man to Earth.

7. Zayin (ז) is glory taken by the sword, war, connected to Planet Mars.

8. Chet(h) (ח) is the Sexual Instinct, binding humanity to Gemini (the Twins).

9. Tet(h) (ט) is the Serpent of Foundation. It is the mud; the Organic Earth that blossoms into Life, linked to the Cancer constellation (the Crab).

Cycle II

10. Yod(h) (י) is the Hand, connected to the Water element.

11. Kaph (כ) is the Palm of the Hand, a sensible creator under the Sun.

12. Lamed(h) (ל) is the Teaching and Learning by the power of the Scepter, under the constellation of Leo (the Lion).

13. Mem (מ) is the Water of Intuition and Intelligence ruled by the Virgo constellation (the Virgin).

14. Nun (נ) is the Fish springing out of the Water, like the Child of Prophecy for the continuation of Time, manifested under Libra (the Scales).


15. S(h)amekh (ס) is the Help and Support given to escape the pointed arms of the Scorpio (n).


16. Ayin (ע) is the Eye of Providence and the Source of thinking that protects humanity from the danger of Sagittarius (the Archer).

17. Pe(h) (פ) is the Mouth-uttering Words that make changes under planet Venus.


18. Sadhe (Tsade) (צ) is the other side, *Tsaddi* (ק), the Dark Side, Satan. It would hit like an Arrow, or capture Humanity with a Fishing hook under the power of the Capricorn.

Cycle III

19. Qoph () is the Keeping of secrets inside the Back of the Head, under the constellation of Aquarius (the Water Bearer).

20. Resh () is the Head that lives in Poorness, and challenges Misery for the work of Sacrifice under planet Mercury.

21. Shin () is the abode of Mystery where Secrets are kept close to the Light under the constellation of Pisces.

22. Tau (Taw) () is the Sign of the Cross, the *Initiate*, and the Elected to the great Power, up in the sky, when the light of the Moon fades out.

When Paul finished reading, he looked at them in awe. Their eyes met with his on a higher level of understanding and commitment.

“These letters represent the Alphabet’s Occult Doctrine; the Kabala,” Dr. Najem acknowledged. “They are the secret keys of the Universe and its absolute principles. If you know how to use them by will, since you can now identify their codes, you will be able to obtain wisdom and power.”

He signaled discreetly to Dr. Bechara, who nodded calmly, and proceeded, “The letters are divided as follows: three of them represent the elements: Earth, Water, and Fire, whereas the fourth, the Air element, is considered the link and the mover of the other elements.” He stopped to read the awareness in Paul’s and Nabil’s stares then continued with diligence, “There are also seven planets that influence Earth and its inhabitants: the Sun, the Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, and Mars. They appear in seven letters. The remaining twelve letters are images of the twelve signs of the Zodiac.”

It was around 10:48 PM when suddenly, a beep sounded in alert around the Living Room. Surprised, Paul looked at Dr. Bechara, and followed the direction of his attention. Beneath the painting of the wooden cottage over the fireplace, a red light flashed rapidly and repeatedly.

“A message from Gabriel!” Dr. Najem exclaimed in alert, and jumped out of his erstwhile comfy seat.

“An urgent one,” Dr. Bechara gasped in reply, veering to glance at them.

The antique chandelier swayed. Professor Michel sprinted to the

window and closed it tightly. Dr. Najem pushed the red button, and the beep went silent. Without a second thought, or a word, he turned the television on, switched the cables, grabbed the remote control from the side table, and pressed number six. Five pairs of attentive eyes hooked on the screen.

A live scene unfurled in front of their eyes inside a cafeteria, probably owned by Gabriel, Paul thought in a brief moment. Gabriel stood behind the bar counter, apparently closing for the night, when two men in black suits marched into the place and straight towards him. From the look in his eyes, it appeared that he had never seen them before.

“Sorry, we are closed for tonight,” he dismissed them politely. Yet, anger flashed from their dark eyes. They approached him, getting closer than politeness would warrant. Gabriel stared at one then the other in confusion. Looking pale, he stepped back.

Paul swallowed, trying to dislodge something that seemed to have taken hold of his throat when he’d seen that, and leaned forward, clutching his hands together tightly.

“Don’t move!” The man with the thick moustache snapped dryly. “Cooperate, or you will die.”

“What is this? Some kind of joke?” Gabriel countered, but Paul could sense his hidden fear, the way he felt an invisible iron grip on his own shoulders.

His bravado provoked the intruders. They took out their guns, and aimed at him. He stood still. There was no way out. The door of the cafeteria then opened on a bald, bulky man. Calmly and unconcerned he locked the door behind him, dragged a chair to him, and sat with a Colt on his lap.

“We know who you are,” he barked at Gabriel, and Nabil gasped at Paul’s side. “We have been watching you. Tell us, now, where the other members of the Fraternity are hiding. Tell us, and you shall live.”

Gabriel, the *Guardian of the Chamber*, the man who came from that great lineage of Scribes, was now under a violent threat. He knew well he could not expose the Keepers and their sanctuary. He had to think fast. “Excuse me, gentlemen,” he uttered with an impressive calmness, “I don’t really know what you’re talking about.”

“Your last chance . . .” the man with the moustache edged his gun closer to Gabriel’s forehead. On an impulse, Paul’s heart screamed for help, for he knew he was about to lose the friend who had saved his life, right there—in front of his eyes. Numbness raided his forearms and legs.

He could barely breathe . . . barely swallow. The brothers got on their feet in slow motion, and stood in wait. Paul could not budge, nor could Nabil.

Gabriel must have sensed that his hour had fatally come. *My life or the lives of the Keepers*, he probably thought. It was something he could not bargain with, not now . . . not ever! “I think you are mistaking me for someone else.” The determination in his eyes was unmistakably firm, yet his voice came out downy, as if sending the Keepers a message of reassurance, a pledge of loyalty.

In the cover of the night, a rasping sound shattered the silence with a cry of pain that echoed in Paul’s soul.

Strangled to death, Gabriel fell motionless to the ground. The bald man checked his pulse, sliced his throat with a swift movement of his knife, and then tore his shirt open. With the undaunted coldness of a professional killer, he dipped his fingers—covered with white gloves—in the streaming blood, and marked the letter *Tsaddi* on his victim’s chest, very close to the heart. As if more damages were required for their criminal deed, they turned the place upside down, crashing and smashing everything they had laid their hands on, then they broke open the cash register to simulate a robbery, and left unhurriedly.

The Keepers stepped back, and bowed their heads for a long moment, out of respect for Gabriel’s valiant sacrifice. When they lifted their heads, their eyes conveyed a tumult of shock, grief, anger, and determination. Thunderstruck, Paul gawked at them. Cold and heat fought inside of him. The collar of his shirt felt soggy on his neck, just as it did in his armpits and back. The screen went blank . . .

Moved by a mute general need, they finally stood up and firmly, after exerting an extraordinary effort, headed slowly to the Round Table, and took their respective places. One thought dwelt in Paul’s mind at first. Everything had been recorded, a smart last move from Gabriel, activating the hidden camera the moment the three men in black had entered the cafeteria.

“Gabriel is gone,” uttered Dr. Najem, his voice leaden. “He has sacrificed himself for the sake of the Fraternity.” Tears ran down his cheeks like a waterfall.

Dr. Bechara emitted a hoarse moan, clearing his throat, or perhaps trying to swallow his tears. In fact, the pressure heightened, as a profound grief took hold of the circle of five. Dr. Najem gave in. He stood up, and walked out, broken. The remaining four heard the door of the Fortress opening and closing, and then the sound of his heavy steps faded

away. Professor Michel looked suddenly older, withdrawn, his features sagged. He removed his eyeglasses, brought his handkerchief to his eyes, and left it there for a long moment, hiding his weakness and pain in silence. Paul glanced at Nabil's head, bent over his crossed arms on the table. His shoulders trembled. Paul knew him to be weeping in stillness, so he veered to the window. The dark night outside induced a mood—for mourning the *Guardian of the Chamber*. Suddenly he saw Mariam, the beautiful woman, her head swathed by a blue veil of dignity. He saw her tender smile and kind gestures towards the husband she had loved so much. His eyes burned painfully. How would the poor woman handle the terrible loss?

The vision of Mariam faded, giving way to the intense blaze of *Tsaddi*, the eighteenth letter, whirling and storming forcefully into his mind. *Tsaddi: the other side . . . the dark side, darting like an arrow and striking lethally . . . the habitat of Satan had ensnared Gabriel with the hook of the powerful Capricorn constellation.*

Paul remembered the two men in black who had pursued him in Montreux, during his escape to Munich. He recalled the Architect and the Archaeologist. *Seth Servitors had struck again*, he thought in dread. *They were very close this time*, he reasoned, aching for fresh air, away from the unbearable mood of the Living Room. He, therefore, walked to the door, turned to look at the broken stance of his Brothers, and with a deep sigh walked away wordless, out of the Fortress. His instincts led him straight to the garden and right to the Cedar tree, shadowing a wooden bench where Dr. Najem sat motionless. The eyes that met his for a brief moment conveyed an immense sadness. Paul drooped at his side without a word, and thus remained, until Dr. Najem decided to talk.

“The Dark Side has just launched a wider operation to reach us,” he said. “Satan has decided to hit again, and hunt us down . . . all of us. His servants have just delivered a clear-cut message, but they shall not terrorize us . . . ever!”

“I'm sorry for Gabriel,” Paul offered genuinely, trying to console him, and ease his pain. At his lack of response, Paul asked him in an anxious tone, “Do they know about us? I mean, do you think they know where we are?”

A couple of minutes passed before Brother John looked at Paul, and the latter sensed something strange in his eyes, as if a bright line of energy had shot through them. “Gabriel is a martyr. He sacrificed himself for the Fraternity,” he stated. “We should all remember his sacrifice, but

do not worry, they know nothing. He kept the Secret—the *word*—in the abode of Mystery, close to his heart and close to the Light . . . He was a true Keeper, never forget that!” He stood up, looked at Paul, and smiled through his tears.

Now Paul fully understood. The heart is the place where the word should reside, even at the cost of sacrifice.

Silent was the night . . .

- Part V -

The Babylonian Brotherhood
Friday, November 12, 09:28 AM

Early the next morning, they sat for breakfast in a sad mood, of course, at the tragic loss that befell them with the assassination of their Brother. Paul felt personally involved in this forfeit. Gabriel had saved him before, and had taken care of him in his house until he'd been fully recovered. Now, once again, his personal sacrifice for the Fraternity had saved Paul! The thought of his brutal murder killed his appetite. He pushed aside his omelet in disgust, and forced the fresh orange juice down his throat.

"We will rest for the day," Dr. Najem proposed hoarsely, and Paul noted his intact meal and the ones barely consumed of the others. "Under such dire circumstances, we must meet tomorrow in the afternoon and reveal to you, Brother Paul, some basic information you may need to know about the Babylonian Brotherhood."

"The Babylonian Brotherhood," he muttered under his breath. He truly needed that. He recalled Padre Joseph telling him, on his return from Montreux, that he would tell him everything he needed to know about them later on. He had only informed him that the 'BB' wasn't simply a club for money and enjoyment, as most people around the world thought. That they could be very stern and cunning and that, in fact, nothing would stop them from carrying out their plans if they deemed it necessary.

"The Babylonian Brotherhood . . ." Nabil repeated thoughtfully.

"Yes," Dr. Najem confirmed, looking straight at them both, "The main documented information cannot be found here. It was stolen before we moved to this Fortress, some seven years ago, unfortunately. However, we've kept it orally . . ."

Before Dr. Najem could continue what he was saying, Paul interrupted him with a question, "How did it happen? I mean, how was it stolen?"

"We had an intruder in our previous haven," he replied with

seriousness. “And, as a matter of fact, Paul, we will need you to travel to Iraq, and retrieve the missing information.”

“Iraq!” Paul exclaimed, a sudden energy sprinting through his veins.

“Yes, Paul,” Professor Michel interrupted, “This would be of great help to us in our efforts to protect ourselves against further attacks. However, it is not a matter of simply booking a flight and going to the airport. We think . . . ah! No, no! It is way too dangerous!” he then said, his eyes widening in alarm. “You’ll be taking the private exit route from here, I mean, from behind the Fortress. We simply cannot risk letting you go to the airport by taking the main road off the iron gate!”

“A private exit route to the airport!?” Paul exclaimed.

“We believe Seth Servitors might be looking for you and may detect any activity you engage in,” Dr. Bechara clarified, in all seriousness, with a deep frown on his face. He turned his attention to Paul, and warned him, “If they ever caught you, you might expose the Fraternity, and besides that, we simply cannot afford losing another Keeper—especially the fifth element. The private route is safe. Nobody knows about it.”

All the other eyes turned to Paul. A frightening silence fell on him.

“Until tomorrow’s meeting, everyone, please stay focused, mainly you, Paul,” Dr. Najem suggested. At Paul’s nod of agreement, he commented in a broken voice, “It is indeed a day of sorrow, and in observance of it, we shall remain silent, the way we always do when we lose a Keeper.”

Time passed . . .

On the second day, Saturday the 13th, at five, they assembled in the Living Room. Paul had never felt as anxious as on that day. His normal life as a man, specialized in ‘Ancient History & Religion’, had turned into a dangerous adventure he had not anticipated coming his way in such an engaging manner. He had to stay composed.

“Here it goes. At the time of the Persian Empire’s expansion,” Dr. Najem began, “the adjacent city of Babylon fell into the hands of the Persian King Cyrus II, around the year 539 BC, and became a province of the Great Persian Empire. The Persians, like the Assyrians before them, exercised a relocation program—for the subjugated populace—from one occupied land to another. After several years of controlling Babylon, Cyrus II and some Chaldean Priests *might have* established the Babylonian Brotherhood. In fact, Cyrus issued an edict: ordering the transfer of a group—composed of Chaldean priests and families, belonging to the Brotherhood—from Babylon to the *Promised Land*,” he said, and paused for a moment, adjusting his seating position.

“The Persians!” Paul exclaimed. “You mean to the Land of Canaan, as mentioned in the Old Testament,” Paul emphasized with an evocative glimpse at Nabil, who appeared stunned, his shoulders up drawn. Apparently, Paul had not taken this piece of information as smoothly as Nabil. Professor Michel came to sit by his side, and Dr. Bechara relaxed back on his chair, calm and absorbed, within the cloud of smoke formed by his cigar. For them, that statement stood for a certainty.

“Exactly. The Promise made by Cyrus II had a hidden agenda of some sort. It was a historical declaration, which stated that the power of the Persian Empire should not be comprised by any geographical boundary. The Persians reached the southern part of the land of Canaan-Phoenicia, including Jerusalem, and controlled it a few years later, after being in command of Babylon,” he explained. “Later—in 525 BC, under Cambyses II, the son and successor of Cyrus II—the Persians attacked Egypt, known traditionally as the land of Ham, and destroyed all its religious monuments. In time, Cyrus controlled most of western Asia,” he informed, taking a sip of his tea.

“We find a notable connotation for this action, in the Old Testament.” The Professor added, “We read in Ezra 1:1-2, ‘. . . The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus King of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing . . . Thus saith Cyrus King of Persia, the Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah,’ ” he looked at Paul with keen eyes. “Even in Isaiah 45:1, the book that was manipulated to appear Jewish, we read, ‘Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before me . . .’ ” he ended.

“How strange,” Paul murmured pensively, “I mean, for the Hebrews, at the time, to write that their Lord God stirred up the spirit of a Persian, even anointing him to become a kind of Messiah, a savior!”

“We found that strange too, at first,” answered the Professor with a grin. “But in time, we succeeded in grasping what lingers behind that statement in the Old Testament.”

“Really!” he looked at the Professor then at Dr. Najem and Dr. Bechara, lifting his eyebrows in disbelief, “I find this impossible to believe. I mean, how come they would recognize a Persian—a non-Jew—to be their savior, especially since we know that they considered only themselves as the Chosen people!” Paul questioned, still in confusion.

Dr. Bechara, with a stern look that seemed permanent in him,

illustrating the perfect traditional figure of a Psychiatrist, rolled his cigar between his fingers, and—with somber black eyes that inspired respect—gave a quick look at Dr. Najem then at the Professor. “Well, that’s precisely it, the master plan of the Babylonian Brotherhood,” he said in a strict posture.

“Having said that . . .” Professor Michel interfered, as he walked towards the window, gazing back at Dr. Bechara. He paused for an instant of inward reflection, leaning on the window. The sunrays outlined his silhouette and shadowed his façade, as if he stood as mediator between the Sun and Paul—the neophyte the Fraternity had chosen with much delicacy. Continuing, he said, “The man who first led the people—known as the *Aebirou-al-naher* or the Hebrews who *crossed the river*, in constant waves, was called Zoro-Babel. That began with him, under Cyrus II. He was an eminent member of the Babylonian Brotherhood. This occurred when they had just thought of building a Temple in Jerusalem.”

“Zoro-Babel!” Paul wondered aloud, “I remember reading this name in the Old Testament . . . Wasn’t he the Hebrew leader who brought the ancient Jews out of their exile and into Jerusalem?” He looked at them in perplexity, and added, “He was the Prince of Judea, of Davidic lineage! Wasn’t he?” he questioned.

“Not exactly true . . .” Dr. Najem answered him in a firm tone, “That’s only what the Scribes of the Old Testament wanted the whole world to believe in their narration. Truth be said, Zoro-Babel means the son or seed of Babel!” he clarified, always remaining gracious and agreeable in his answers.

Paul was stunned after having heard all this information, concerning the Brotherhood that tried to finish him off in Montreux, simply because he rejected—as a Historian—the historicity of the Temple of Solomon. He had just realized how lucky he’d been to escape, with the help of Mr. Thomas Lampson and the German students—Mr. Lukas Steiner and Ms. Alycia Schiffer—who had driven him to Munich.

He had finally come to understand the organic link between the ‘BB’ and the Temple. His heartbeat increased, time had come for him to face what fate and the future held in store for him. His trip to Iraq must take place, and there was no way for him to back out now. Yet, he didn’t know where to start. As he was entertaining these thoughts, he looked at Nabil then at the three Keepers around him, waiting for them to continue the explanation.

Professor Michel, his grey eyes smiling behind his rimless eyeglasses,

grinned at Paul. In fact, he seemed to be smiling most of the time, even when he wasn't. "You've been scheduled to leave Beirut by Monday at 12:50 PM, and arrive in Baghdad at around 2:20 PM," the Professor said. "Everything is set for your Journey. Don't worry," he added, reassuring him. "A person by the name of Mikhail Al Malkoye will be waiting for you at the Baghdad Al Muthana Airport. He is our friend in Iraq."

Paul didn't utter a word. He just lingered in silence, waiting for them to explain to him exactly what his mission would be. Dr. Najem had already conveyed that the information they had now was oral, having lost the written documents, as they had been stolen some seven years ago, before the move to this Fortress. His mission in Iraq was to repossess the missing documents.

"Allow me to ask the question that has been turning in my mind ever since you mentioned my trip to Iraq," Paul said with his eyes on the Keepers, one after the other. "How could the missing documents, if found, help in the efforts to protect ourselves against further attacks?"

"That's a vital question, Paul," replied Dr. Bechara. "The information we need will surely expose the Brotherhood to the world. When this is done, they won't be able to strike back. They'll be totally paralyzed." He held on to that thought, before he added, "The original idea was to expose them seven years ago—with indubitable proof and evidence—but the intruder that infiltrated our previous sanctuary stole the parchments, and rendered us open to them. It was then that we secretly moved to the Fortress, and made it our new haven," he explained.

A moment of silence passed in which Paul began to assess the situation, and think of the seriousness of the mission he had been entrusted with—by an ancient Order he had never even known existed in the first place. Now, the Order—which went back many thousands of years—needed his assistance to continue working in safety, to continue the Tradition. Being the fifth element of the Lebanese branch was certainly not an entertaining prospect, but rather a duty to fulfill at any cost.

"I see," Paul said in a serious tone, breaking the silence that took hold of his mind for a minute, "How can Mikhail help me find the secret documents?"

"Good point," the Professor replied with a smile. "Once you arrive in Baghdad, Mikhail will give you shelter in his house for the night. On the second day, he will take you to Ur—where it all started."

"You mean the ancient city of Ur of the Chaldeans?" Paul questioned.

“Yes,” The Professor nodded.

“But . . .” Paul rushed to interrupt him; “Dr. Najem spoke about the Chaldean-Hebrew priests and families transferred from Babylon to the Land of Canaan, which the Persian King had promised them. Why not search in Babylon for the missing information instead of Ur?”

“Good thinking,” said Dr. Najem with a wide smile. “The city of Ur is mentioned several times in the Old Testament as Ur of the Chaldeans and as the birthplace of the First Hebrew Patriarch, Abraham. According to Judeo-Christian historians, Abraham could well have existed around 2000 years BC, whereas credible accounts of History state that Chaldeans settled in Iraq sometime around 800 BC, maybe a bit before, but not that long before. Therefore, in simple calculation, there is a difference of about 1200 years. No matter what else we might think, Ur stands as the primary point of foundation for the Hebrews at the time of Cyrus II, and it is then and there that things started happening,” he explained, and then added, “Mikhail will tell you everything you need to know when you get there.”

“Is he an *Initiate* of our Order?” Paul wondered.

“He knows some important historical facts about that area of great interest to our Order, and yes, he is one of us,” he replied.

“At any rate,” Dr. Bechara uttered, with eyes focused on Paul, “Be very careful on your endeavor in Iraq. Do as Mikhail tells you, and don’t venture out on your own. He knows where the secret agents of the Brotherhood are lurking,” he advised, before he ended with, “Good Luck!”

“Come safely back to us,” Professor Michel added in a sympathetic tone.

“You’re scheduled to return a week from now but—should you find it necessary—you may stay longer, until the mission is accomplished,” Dr. Najem said in a soothing yet determined voice. “The Society of Keepers truly counts on you,” he concluded with a smile.

Paul nodded, “I will not fail you, Brothers in Truth.”

“Here’s your passport and your ticket,” Nabil said, “I wish I could be going with you. It would be an honor,” he smiled, “Maybe some other time.”

“Yes, maybe . . .” Paul rejoined calmly.

The meeting had ended when the clock on the wall marked 06:39 PM. After they had all left the Living Room, expecting to meet for dinner at 08:30, Paul sank deep into his thoughts. He imagined many things

happening to him in Iraq—a country that had not been stable since the multinational coalition war, in 2003, to oust the Iraqi regime, led by the fierce dictator: Saddam Hussein.

What could be more dangerous than that to Paul, except, of course, for the Babylonian Brotherhood's secret agents! Even so, his mind needed to be clear by the next day, Sunday. Set like the sun, lining the Horizon, he was ready to leave the Fortress on the morrow and journey into a land of uncertain promises.

The night fell too quickly on him, taking him by surprise.

Baghdad

Monday, November 15, 02:25 PM

The jet flight to Baghdad arrived as scheduled. The flight details—displayed on the monitors at the Airport terminal—were being observed by a man of middle height, standing in front of them, waiting. He was around his early fifties, with short hair and a beard adorning his face. The word ‘Arrived’, for the *ME322* flight, coming from Beirut, flashed in red in front of his big brown eyes. He extracted a photograph from his beige jacket, paced the floor of the Airport, and stood searching for the man in the photo, Mr. Khoury, to show up in the section designated to MEA—Middle East Airlines.

Standing in front of the customs cubicle, with his garment bag in one hand and his laptop’s case slung over his shoulder, Paul waited for the man in the olive-colored military suit to finish scrutinizing his passport, photo, and the authenticity of his visa. Five minutes later, he lifted his gaze, and gave Paul a fierce look. “What is your purpose in Iraq?” he asked in a rusty voice.

“I’m a Historian,” Paul replied quickly, “I came here only to visit a couple of beautiful archaeological sites in your country. You have a great history, I believe,” he smiled. His answer had been courteous and diplomatic, though Paul had really been more involved in Phoenician and Egyptian History.

“Very well,” the military man said, giving Paul a piercing look. “Can I see your University ID?”

To his luck, Paul always kept his Historian’s tag from the University with him, wherever he went. He remembered he had kept it in the laptop bag, so he unzipped it, took the card out from one of the pouches, and with a wide grin handed it to the military man. After looking at it for a couple of minutes, he stamped the arrival notice of the Baghdad Airport on Paul’s passport. “Welcome to Baghdad, Mr. Khoury,” he said,

examining him one more time. “I gave you 10 days, no more, just be careful where you go.” Although strict in his consent, he finally showed a courteous conduct, or was it a warning? Paul couldn’t tell.

“I will, thank you,” Paul answered with a smile, and walked to the arrival gate of the flight he had un-boarded half an hour ago. Looking above and beyond the heads of the other passengers, walking ahead of him, he searched for Mikhail Al Malkoye—the person who would be waiting for him. In fact, he didn’t know what the man looked like, but speculated that Mikhail would find him first. Although they would be total strangers, Paul believed he should trust Mikhail, after all, the Keepers had said to him: *He is one of us*. Paul remembered this as he walked, when suddenly; he felt a hand on his right shoulder. He instantly turned straight into the soothing gaze of a man of middle height. He knew it was Mikhail.

“You must be Mr. Khoury,” said the man in a tranquil voice to Paul, who nodded. “I’m Mikhail, please, come with me,” he smiled.

The trip in the white nineties-vintage Toyota Corona, out of the Airport and into Baghdad, was pleasant to Paul. Here was a country he never would’ve imagined visiting one day, except perhaps for archaeological or historical reasons, and that, now that he thought of it, was precisely what had brought him here today. It might end up being a dangerous trip, for Paul was not here as a tourist or historian, looking for plain historical records. What Paul was doing here was: representing an ancient Fraternity—as one of its eminent members—and questing for some missing information, related to the Chaldean-Hebrew priests and families that had been transferred from Babylon to the Land of Canaan, on an edict made by the Persian King, Cyrus II.

Mikhail will tell you everything you need to know when you get there, he remembered Dr. Najem’s words, and remembered also how he had wondered about the possibility of finding the missing documents in Babylon instead of Ur. Paul decided not to tackle that issue now, perhaps later on, at dinner.

“Ur had once been a coastal city, near the entrance of the Euphrates River, on the Gulf of Persia,” Mikhail suddenly said, giving Paul a quick look, as if reading his mind, and then back at the steering wheel in front of him. It seemed he didn’t have any time to waste. Things were on the move. “Nowadays it is well inland, located at the site of modern Tell el-Muqayyar, south of the Euphrates, on its right bank, almost 16 km from Nasiriyah and about 365 km south of Baghdad,” he informed in a

rigorous tenor, took out a pack of cigarettes from his blue shirt pocket, lit one, offered another to Paul, and opened the window.

“You see,” he resumed, giving another quick stare at Paul, “Ur was one of the most vital cities of ancient Iraq. It dates back to maybe four thousand years BC. After the Chaldeans were well established in Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar II began a new period of building activity in Ur, pretty much as Solomon did in Jerusalem, and that, my friend, if we’re going to believe the Old Testament.” He chuckled, “The last of the Babylonian Kings—Nabonidus, who ruled between 556 and 539 BC—adorned the Temples, and completely refashioned the Ziggurat of Nanna—the ancient moon god of the Sumerians, recognized as Sin by the Babylonians—making it great, by raising it seven stages,” he added.

Paul didn’t comment. He just listened to what Mikhail said and how he said it. *He’s a friendly person*, he thought, as he smoked his cigarette, and enjoyed the trip from the Airport to wherever their destination was.

“When the Persian Empire took control of Babylon, around 539 BC, under Cyrus II,” Mikhail continued, “The city of Ur gradually began to decline, and by the 4th century BC it was almost forgotten, some say, due to a shift in the course of the Euphrates River,” he stated in a doubtful voice.

“You sound as if you’re not convinced by this theory,” Paul said, finally breaking his silence, and deciding to communicate with the person driving the car—a man he had met no more than an hour ago, and was about to have an adventure with, in an unknown world. “What do you think the truth was?” he asked.

Mikhail took one last drag at his cigarette, smothered it in the car’s ashtray, and turned his head towards Paul, “I’ll tell you once we get home.” He smiled, “It’s only fifteen minutes from here.”

The drive through the streets of Baghdad reminded Paul of some of the streets in Lebanon. “The third world,” he murmured under his breath. Minutes later, Mikhail turned left and then right, entering al-Karada street on the Tigris riverfront, and reaching a two-story building of modern architecture, not too modern, of course. Then he parked the car under a tree, and invited Paul to his house. “It’s on the second floor,” he uttered with a grin. “We have to walk up,” he then said.

Upon entering Mikhail’s house, Paul breathed a sigh of relief, for he was extremely exhausted from the flight and the drive from the airport. Sensing his guest was weary, Mikhail pointed at a brown sofa to lie down. “You can have some rest now, while I prepare something to eat,” he said

with a smile.

Paul nodded.

While making lunch, Mikhail briefed Paul on Baghdad. Its population exceeded the 7 million mark, consisting of: a majority of Arab Muslims, mostly Shiite and Sunni; Christians, constituting the second largest portion of the population; and Jews, the minority. Baghdad stood as the largest city in Iraq, and the second largest in all the Arab World—Cairo, in Egypt, being the first. The name Baghdad could well be a composed Kurdish and Turkish term for Bag-dad, meaning, ‘The Fair Garden’. However, there is a diverse explanation that suggests the name having Persian roots: Bad-dad, which means ‘God’s Gift’.

Located along the Tigris River that cuts it in two, the city was founded around 762 AD by the Caliph, Al Mansur, becoming the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate. It soon evolved into an essential cultural, commercial, and intellectual center for the Islamic World, with key academic institutions like the Grand Library of Baghdad, better known as the House of Wisdom. Baghdad’s massive destruction by the Mongols, around 1258 AD, resulted in a serious decline, and it remained that way through many centuries.

Iraq was recognized as an independent state by the British mandate of Mesopotamia in 1932, and that allowed it to regain some of its former fame as a major center of Arabic Culture. Although Iraq experienced some form of growth during the era of Saddam Hussein, it was not very favorable to the aspirations of the Iraqi people, who considered him a dictator. After the US led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and the continuous state of war that continued for seven years, Iraq once again became an unstable country, open to many activities and attacks of a terrorist nature from some of the adjacent countries.

They sat for a lunch, consisting of fried freshwater fish and a tossed salad half an hour later, and Mikhail looked fixedly at Paul. “Almost a month after the multinational invasion led by the US, some kind of systematic looting began at the Iraqi National Museum,” he started, his face showing resentment. “It was, in fact, one of the most controversial moments of the war. US soldiers—who were sent in to dispose of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath regime, led by Saddam Hussein, and to secure the city in its aftermath—apparently had no orders to protect the museum or any other cultural institute here,” he paused, sighing for a moment. He then continued, “In the confusion that ensued, lots of invaluable pieces of Iraq’s ancient history were sacked out, and institutes were burned.”

“How many?” Paul asked in bewilderment.

“Well, the initial report talked about 170,000 items, stolen or destroyed, but this number is far-fetched. Although the museum might have contained about a half a million objects, the real number of missing artifacts from the theft that took place in 2 days, from April 12 to April 14, could well be around 15,000.”

“15,000 pieces!” Paul exclaimed. “That’s a huge number,” he concluded.

“Yes, it is, and it took place as US troops stood by and watched, while others were busy guarding the oil ministry,” he said with disdain. “This museum had contained an enormous and unbroken collection of human history, recording more than six thousand years of the ancient Mesopotamian civilization, including Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians. This loss is a real tragedy that has only one parallel in world history: the blazing of the Royal Library of Alexandria in Egypt,” Mikhail explained, turning to his plate in silence.

Although Paul thought he should respect the silence Mikhail had imposed at the table, he felt a great urge to know more about this robbery-of-the-century. He had heard of it before but without all the important details Mikhail had so far provided, and could provide in the coming few hours, perhaps days. *This cannot wait any longer*, he thought. His eyes fixed on Mikhail.

“Did the museum get anything back?” he managed to ask, minutes later.

“Yeah, of course,” answered the Iraqi. “Nullifying the damage has been a laborious task though, only half of what was stolen, maybe less, has been returned by the efforts of the Iraqi Government and the help of American and Italian officials, in addition to the police and customs worldwide.”

“And . . . where have the objects been found?” Paul asked; his curiosity stamped in his inquiring eyes.

“Ever since the looting took place, an investigation began—just like the ones in detective novels or American movies.” Mikhail smiled, his eyes fixed on his guest, as he added, “The recovery of the major pieces was managed through an international ploy, and the investigation led them to many countries around the world, including: Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Germany, Italy, Holland, Sweden, and the United States,” he ended.

“Interesting! What were the stolen objects, if I may ask?” the

Historian engagingly questioned.

“Many priceless objects of different kinds, which are still missing, like the Sacred Vase of Warka and the Mask of Warka, Sumerian pieces from around 3000 BC. The fabulous Treasure of Nimrud is still lost.

Thousands of pieces of gold, crowns, necklaces, rosettes, bracelets, and precious stones from the eighth century BC are missing too.” He paused for a moment in recollection. “But many have been recovered, like the headless statue of a Sumerian king, a basalt statue of the Assyrian King, Entemena—who ruled around 2400 BC, some golden necklaces, daggers, clay statues, pots, and other artifacts, along with a few cuneiform stone tablets and tiny cylinder seals,” he recounted.

They finished lunch some ten minutes later. The watch in Paul’s wrist marked 04:45 PM. More than two hours had passed since he had arrived in Baghdad, and he already liked it here. The information conveyed by Mikhail sounded very stimulating to Paul, and he knew it would lead to something more important.

After the ‘Mann wa Salwa’, Iraqi’s favorite dessert, had been offered and consumed at the table, Mikhail invited Paul to sit with him on the balcony for coffee. On a table, next to the balcony door, rested a framed picture of an elegant woman. Paul came closer to look at it.

“My wife, Theresa,” said Mikhail in a sore voice, from behind him. “She was murdered two years after the war—in a terrorist explosion—on her way out of church.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Paul said immediately. “I’m sure you miss her,” he said, and then regretted having said it. He didn’t mean to open wounds that might have been well healed after more than five years.

Mikhail did not speak for a couple of minutes. He stood still, in reverie, perhaps of the most beautiful moments he had spent with his lovely wife. “I’m sure she is in the good hands of God,” he sighed then smiled.

While the smell of coffee being prepared pervaded the house, Mikhail explained to Paul that Christians had inhabited Iraq since the early times of Christianity, and those still living in Iraq today were mainly adherents of three different Churches—the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the Assyrian Church of the East—aside from the Christian Armenians. He, Mikhail, belonged to the Syriac Orthodox Church, and Syriac is a dialect of the Aramaic—spoken by Jesus and his Apostles.

Five minutes later they were having coffee in the veranda. Although it

was mid-November, the weather was still very hot. Somehow, Paul managed to disregard it, and enjoyed the view of the Tigris from the balcony. Looking at the river made him remember something. He turned to Mikhail.

“When we were in the car, on the way here, you said you would convey to me what you thought was the truth, concerning the decline of the city of Ur,” Paul said; his eyebrows lifted in anticipation.

Mikhail lit a cigarette, took the first drag, and turned to face Paul, “Well, I believe that things happened because the Persian Empire decided to shift the importance of historical facts from Ur to Babylon, and then to Jerusalem,” he said, with a piercing stare at the Tigris.

“Aha . . . It seems the Persians had a greater plan than I thought,” Paul said. “I’m excited to know more.”

Mikhail gave his eager guest a wide grin, before he replied; “Dr. George Hanna will explain everything to you on Wednesday. He was the head of Iraqi museums, based in the National Museum in Baghdad, before and a bit after the war in 2003.”

“Where are we going to meet him?” Paul asked in excitement.

“In Ur,” replied Mikhail at once. “As for now, try to enjoy your coffee.”

The city of Ur
Wednesday, November 17, 10:25 PM

A short, muscular man, Dr. George Hanna had a white-haired moustache that accentuated his round-shaped face. Perhaps around his mid-seventies, he was almost completely bald with little hair left on the sides, neatly trimmed at ear length. Thick eyeglasses covered his brown-colored eyes. With a wide grin, he received Mikhail and Paul inside his small house on the outskirts of Ur.

“*Ahlan wa sahlan,*” said Dr. Hanna, welcoming them in an Arabic accent that sounded a bit peculiar to Paul.

After the introduction between Paul and Dr. Hanna had been made, both men smiled at each other. Then, a few seconds later, Paul rushed to say, “I’m very pleased to meet a person with your degree of expertise. Well, in fact . . .” he sounded hesitant, “I have an urgent matter that’s been lingering in my mind since Monday, and I would like for you to clarify it for me, if you may.”

An Iraqi Christian of the same denomination as Mikhail, Dr. Hanna also had a Master’s degree in classical antiquities from Berlin University. He looked at Paul with determination in his eyes. “What is it?” he asked.

“Since you were the head of Iraqi museums in 2003, how did you find the US troop’s indifference at the sacking and looting of the National Museum that took place while you held office there?” Paul asked.

“Aha, that is an important question. I will try to answer you adequately. Now, why the museum had not been protected, cannot be elucidated at all,” he looked at Paul and then at Mikhail, “The US military officers have tried to justify their carelessness, by claiming that Saddam Hussein’s loyal band was already in the Museum when looters rushed inside, creating additional chaos that prevented them from taking any action.” He smiled ironically before he added, “Nonsense. I still feel resentful, even today, that they did not guard the National Museum’s

treasure of ancient relics and art, which preserves Human History. I blamed the US forces, and I still do now,” he said, and walked towards the window. “I remember there was a tank, very close to the entrance gate, and one of my assistants ran to them, and pleaded for them to do something, but they would not budge. ‘We have no orders to stop the looters,’ they said.”

“But were they really inside? I mean, Saddam’s band?” Paul asked hastily.

“I’m not of Saddam’s band, but I’m an Iraqi,” he answered, just as hastily. “As the head of the National Museum, I felt obliged to do my job. I had, in fact, ordered a few of my most trusted staff members to move the most valuable items into storehouses and other secret locations around Iraq, only 2 weeks before the war. Thousands of ancient books and other Islamic manuscripts and scrolls had been totally secured.” He sighed before he added, “Every Iraqi man and woman, including myself, deep down, was happy that Saddam’s Ba’ath regime had fallen apart with the help of the United States. We’re definitely grateful for that.” He paused for a thought, “And yet, the uncontrolled situation that ensued was bad, terribly bad. It makes you wonder about the consequences in the aftermath.” He took a sip at his coffee. “Look at Iraq now . . .” His eyes watered.

“So . . . excuse my enthusiastic curiosity, Doctor, but do you really think the US military forces and other arts-and-antiquities global crooks had been acting in concurrence?” Paul inquired with eyes gone wide open, “I mean; it seems as if raiders were allowed to roam the city freely after the fall of Baghdad, in search for anything of value.”

Dr. Hanna turned his head towards Mikhail then Paul, “I have been asked that question many times before. I don’t just think they were involved, I believe so. Yes, I believe there was some kind of cooperation going on. It is ludicrous to think they received no orders to protect world history—humanity’s heritage by rights—when they say they were here in Iraq to bring democracy and security to the country. Well, if you cannot secure a country’s history, how can you secure its present and future? I’ve often wondered,” he said, as he returned to his seat, and sipped at his coffee, still hot. He seemed sunk in his past memories.

Paul looked at the old man in front of him. Dr. Hanna was knowledgeable about governments and how they worked, an erudite man, certainly nothing could escape him.

“I recall some of the damage done to a few Galleries and stockrooms,”

he added. “Heinous, don’t you think?” he turned to his guests. “Yet, over the two months that followed the robbery, things became steadily clearer that most of the items, which had been exhibited in the Museum, had been removed well before the war had started. It’s true that the operation had been orchestrated by the US military and global mafia outside Iraq, nevertheless, most of the serious looting had been organized by-and-with insiders,” he added in disgrace.

“Insiders!” Paul exclaimed. Mikhail nodded.

“Yes. In truth, the inspection showed that there were two separate—and perhaps coordinated—thefts,” Dr. Hanna rejoined with great concern. “The first one was an inside job, where very few employees and Iraqi militaries took up the opportunity to become rich by smuggling ancient artifacts, and selling ancient scrolls to the big players—the International Mafia. The second was definitely the work of professionals, who were only seeking the great and secret knowledge these scrolls contained,” he informed, as his eyes veered to look through the window, in remembrance, or maybe for security reasons.

“It’s true, the United States aided in recuperating some stolen artifacts, but that doesn’t mean they were innocent,” he added, regaining some courage at this point. “Why the situation was not controlled remains a mystery. During the occurrence of the theft, three of the Museum employees had been killed, and one of them was an Iraqi Archaeologist,” he said.

“An Archaeologist!” Paul snapped out in disbelief.

Anguished moments passed through his mind, as he remembered the three men recently killed in his homeland. Hiram Melki—the famous Architect—found dead in his house in Tyre. Dr. Hamid Saab—former Professor of Archaeology at the AUB and head of the Archaeological Research at Mount Hermon—found dead in his house in Beirut. Gabriel—the *Guardian of the Chamber*, the man who came from that great lineage of Scribes—murdered in his cafeteria in Gebel.

All three victims had been eliminated by an extremely dangerous secret group known as ‘Seth Servitors’—the ‘BB’. They had been killed in the same manner, strangled to death, throats sliced with a swift movement of a sharp knife, and having the 18th letter *Tsaddi* imprinted on their chests, close to the heart. It had been determined that the three deaths were connected to historical research related to Phoenician Mysteries of the city of Gebel: the sarcophagus of King Ahiiram, the Seven-Pillared Temple, and the Cup of Life that held the blood of Jesus

Christ.

Paul looked at Mikhail then back at Dr. Hanna in wait for some answers, concerning the deaths of the Iraqi Archaeologist and the other two Museum employees.

“It has all been masterminded by the Babylonian Brotherhood from the beginning,” said Mikhail with a pointed gaze on Paul. “I would like to bring to your attention something of great significance that you may have missed during our conversation, back in my house in Baghdad.” He took a deep breath. Paul sat still, waiting. “The looting was not only planned to grab hold of some works of art, but has stretched hands to retrieve ancient tablets and scrolls,” he halted for a moment, in which he sipped at his last bit of coffee, and continued, “We wondered, at the time, why some scrolls, cuneiform stone tablets, and tiny cylinder seals had been ransacked at all. If the sole purpose of pillaging Iraq of its ancient history were, in fact, monetary gain then those tablets and seals would not fill robbers’ ambitions. Not at all, we guessed. The International mafia has no interest in history, and the tablets would certainly sell for a much lesser value than any of the many-thousand-years-old statues,” he said, seemingly done with his observation, his eyes on Dr. Hanna.

“After we realized that,” Dr. Hanna joined in, to continue where Mikhail had left off, “This imperative issue took on new relevance. We wondered why and how such scrolls, tablets, and seals had found their way to Switzerland, and ended up in the possession of a powerful Swiss Governmental body, one bank in particular,” he informed.

“A bank!” Paul exclaimed. “I see . . .” he said firmly, as if he remembered one of the conversations he’d had with the Keepers, regarding Rashi’s Templars and their world banking strategy. “What bank was it?” he asked, filled with curiosity and anxiety.

“The Crown Temple Bank in Basel, Switzerland,” Mikhail replied, and then added, “He who has the power of Gold, rules the world. In fact, the UBS—known as the Union Bank of Switzerland—is perhaps the largest bank in all of Europe. It has a three-keyed logo in the form of the Star of David. It is, indeed, the financial emblem of the Babylonian Brotherhood.”

“He who has the power of *Knowledge*, rules the world,” Dr. Hanna said, looking at Mikhail with a smile.

“What is in those tablets and scrolls, of such vital importance that it would make the Babylonian Brotherhood keep them locked in their bank?” Paul hastened to ask, holding his breath for a moment.

“Exactly!” Dr. Hanna replied firmly. “Your question, which we have asked ourselves many times before, reveals the wary nature of this entire theft operation. In truth, the global media has only given a small bit of attention and focus to the story, mainly at the outset. Of course, with all those stolen artifacts, how couldn’t they? However, they made no effort to consider the genuine story, which, I believe, hides what lays behind the looting of the ancient tablets and scrolls.” He paused for a thought, looked around him and then through the window, before he added, “They didn’t care about the potential knowledge these tablets and scrolls may hold, and they haven’t wondered a bit, outside the typical investigative report, about who might actually have been behind the larceny itself,” he stated.

“Of course, the media won’t do that . . .” Mikhail said. “It won’t stress the notion of such an important story. We all know who’s behind the majority of the media outlets.”

“Yes, but with the coming of new technology, say, the Internet, I believe this has changed enormously,” Paul suggested. “A monopoly over the media is impossible nowadays.”

“Right!” answered the former head of Iraqi museums. “With the retrieval of the stolen artifacts—a process that took many years—people began to forget about the old scrolls and cuneiform tablets. There were perhaps hundreds of tablets in the National Museum in Baghdad, which have not been examined, translated, or even cataloged,” he said with great sorrow, as his mind weighed the calamity of such a historical loss.

“Truth be told,” Dr. Hanna said, “what makes the theft all the more dubious was, and still is, the rejection of the powerful Swiss Governmental body—the Union Bank of Switzerland—and others, especially the US and Israel, to return the scrolls and tablets to the Iraqi Government, saying that Iraq had not delivered official proof of their theft.” He paused for a thought, “Total nonsense!” he began, “It’s quite obvious that the Babylonian Brotherhood has only one goal: to possess the ancient scrolls and tablets in order to monopolize the viable *knowledge* in them,” he concluded.

“True!” Mikhail said abruptly. “We’ve discussed the issue many times, and we’ve seen how things were carefully manipulated. This all means one thing: someone, somewhere—and we know who and where—was not, in fact, looking for artifacts and antiquities, but rather, for *knowledge*, and this is what makes the theft more clinical than we had ever imagined.”

“If you’re both right, and it seems you are,” Paul joined in, “Then I can see this whole theft operation as nothing more than a deliberate act.”

They both nodded.

“As we all know, Jewish history is very much related to ancient Iraq,” Mikhail said. “It is written in the Old Testament that Abraham had come from the city of Ur. Whether we believe this story to be a true historical account of the first Hebrew Patriarch or not—and we definitely don’t—we can’t deny the important ties that exist between the two, hence the Iraqi-Jewish heritage is a very delicate issue.”

“Correct!” added Dr. Hanna. “We have to carefully consider the fact that since the US invasion, in 2003, many of the Iraqi-Jewish archives have been transported to Washington for preservation, on the claim that they had been damaged during the war. However, these scrolls and tablets are still held by the National Archives and Records Administration in the United States. Others faced an uncertain future for some time, they were sent directly to Israel—after they had been refurbished—not to Iraq,” he explained.

“Like what?” Paul asked in confusion.

“A collection of antique Torahs,” he replied at once. “The Iraqi Government and I, as head of the Baghdad National Museum, have demanded from US officials, time and again, to return the Jewish-Iraqi documents that were taken prior to and after the invasion. We believe that an antique Torah scroll was also smuggled into Israel in the early fifties. Yet, nothing happened,” he said in a sharp tone, and then lit a cigarette.

“You know how it is,” interfered Mikhail. “Jewish groups in America and Israel, AIPAC for example, start questioning and raising all manner of concerns about the safety of the documents, were they to be returned to Iraq. ‘We fear that Jewish history might be lost forever,’ they say. However, we strongly believe they are trying by any-and-all means to hide a truth that would expose them . . .” he said.

“And what is this truth that they’re trying to hide?” Paul questioned, his eyebrows lifted. For a minute, he began to think of Dr. George Hanna, not only as head of the Iraqi museums, with a Master’s degree in classical antiquities from Berlin University, but also, as an erudite member, a brother in the Society of Keepers. He looked at him with renewed respect.

“You know the truth already, Paul, but a trip down the crypt—inside the Ziggurat—will enlighten you further,” Dr. Hanna said. “As for now, let’s have lunch.”

Time had passed so quickly for Paul that he hadn't believed his watch when he saw it marking just after two in the afternoon. With a gentle smile, he accompanied them to the table in the dining room.

The Great Ziggurat of Ur
Thursday, November 18, 04:25 PM

The city of Ur has been reputed as the main sanctuary of worship to the Sumerian god ‘Nanna’, known as ‘Sin’ to the Babylonians. The most remarkable construction in the area—one of the best preserved in all of Iraq and perhaps one of the very few, famous historical monuments of the ancient world—is the huge and imposing citadel, dedicated to this deity, known as the Great Ziggurat of Ur. Standing around 21 meters above the desert, most of the walls that form the Ziggurat hold cuneiform writing, identified by historians as a Sumerian form of scripture, stamped into mud-bricks. The inscriptions are often difficult to read, but not as hard as Paul had initially thought, under the trained eyes of Dr. Hanna.

Walking inside the Ziggurat, Paul noticed that everywhere he stepped there were colorfully painted pottery pieces, probably covering the entire historical site. The renowned Royal tombs were situated in a corner of the wall, surrounding the city, to the southeastern side of the Great Ziggurat. It was there, where Dr. Hanna, Mikhail, and Paul stood in observation.

“The tombs are empty,” Dr. Hanna said suddenly. “A small number of them are accessible, but most of them have been closed.” He looked around him for a couple of minutes. No one was there. “I know the way in,” he added in a low voice. “It is there, down the tomb crypt, where I made a few of my loyal staff hide some of the most valuable items, a couple of weeks before the war started. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of ancient books, cuneiform tablets, and scrolls that had not been examined, translated, or catalogued—I had them all stored in here,” he proudly stated with a wide grin.

“How?” Paul asked in confusion.

“Follow me!” Dr. Hanna replied in haste. Although his word sounded cordial, his stern eyes, fixed on Paul, gave the impression that he was giving an order to be executed at once.

Dr. George Hanna led the way in a slow walk. They followed his pace. They crawled down a dim hidden stairway towards the underground chamber, where the graves were located. A great metal door stood ahead of them, with a huge key that Dr. Hanna had in his pocket, he unlocked it, took one small step inside, stretched his hand to the right of the interior wall, and turned on the switch.

There were more than a dozen huge wooden crates assembled in the chamber, with a label attached to each one of them. Paul looked in wonder at the boxes in front of him. *What could they contain that would enlighten me even more?* he asked himself. Mikhail didn't react to the scene of the crates, amassed in front of him. He just kept silent, seemingly knowing what there was inside each one of them, or at least speculating.

"I had them all stored in here," Dr. Hanna repeated with the pride of an antiquities' collector. "Not only that, but I also had some of them examined, translated, and catalogued," he turned to them with a wide grin.

Paul exhaled noisily, and waited with great anticipation for the revelation that would rise from these boxes.

"Help me open this one," Dr. Hanna demanded.

Mikhail and Paul helped him crack open the one he pointed at, having a golden label of 'Aebirou-al-naher' fixed to it. He peered inside first; they followed his eyes, and, collectively, breathed a sigh of astonishment and relief. "Babylon is situated between two rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris," Dr. Hanna began, "Here is the story I want to share with you."

"The *Aebirou-al-naher*—better known as the Hebrew priests and families, *who crossed the river* at the time of Cyrus II—were Chaldean-Babylonians. They lived, prospered, and multiplied in what is now called Iraq," he said, reiterating this piece of information that he had previously cited. "Ur—of Sumerian origin and later Akkadian, which means 'city' in these two languages—was an important city-state in ancient Sumer, chiefly, the capital of the ancient civilization of Sumer. Today, it is still considered one of the most impressive ancient sites in Iraq."

The narration continued in slow frames, as Dr. Hanna's memory recollected the ancient tale . . .

Supported by the Persian King Cyrus, the Babylonian Brotherhood brought—along with their religious and intellectual systems—not the authentic Tradition, of course, but their own distorted version of it: the

Chaldeo-Hebraic Kabala, into the land of Canaan. They have altered it to match their new culture, becoming the esoteric and symbolic interpretation of the Old Testament, with the Zohar as the classical form.

The natives of the Land of Canaan-Phoenicia called these newcomers: the Aebirou-al-naher or those who crossed the river, Ebraniyine, later known—under the leadership of Ezra—as the Hebrews. In their venture to settle down, the Hebrews encountered great difficulties and local resistance, against their many attempts to build the Temple, and control the Land, as mentioned in the Old Testament in both Ezra 4 and Nehemiah 2.

“In Ezra 4,” Dr. Hanna explained, reading from one of the parchments, “Now when the adversaries (the people of the land) of Judas and Benjamin (the Ebraniyine), heard that the children of captivity built the Temple unto the Lord God of Israel; then they came to Zerubbabel and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, ‘Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him. . . .’ But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the chiefs . . . said unto them, ‘ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.’ ”

“Wait!” Paul snapped out. “I didn’t quite get that. Why would the people of the land want to share with the *Ebraniyine*, the building of a Temple to the God of Israel?” he asked with significant curiosity.

“Well, a misinterpretation of language occurred here,” replied Dr. Hanna. “The word ‘Israel’ meant, to the *Ebraniyine*, *Striving against El*, which translates into *Striving against God*. Whereas to the Phoenicians, ‘Israel’ meant *Ashirat-El* or *Israt-El*, which signifies the *Religious Family of El*. Therefore, a Temple to the God of Israel—for the Phoenicians meant: a Temple to ‘El’, constructed by his loving family of Priests. However, a Temple to the God of Israel—for the Hebrews insinuated: a Temple to the Babylonian God, ‘Iao’, ‘Yahve’, built by the people who *strove against El* . . . and his Land.” He paused for a thought, before he added, “Within that context, we could refer to the tale in the Old Testament about Jacob, who strove against the God ‘Al’, defeated him, changed his name into ‘Israel’, and became the Hebrew founder of the state of Israel. In fact, they could have stated, more truthfully, that they intended to build a Temple to the God of *Israyhwh*, for they were *Isra-*

Iao or *Ashiratyahweh*—the children and family of Yahweh.”

“Indeed, they could have done so,” Mikhail approved in support. “Striving against the God ‘El’ was their biggest concern, as written in the Old Testament and Scrolls,” he pointed out edgily. “It was, indeed, the main issue. The People of the Land—the Phoenicians who believed themselves to be ‘Israel’, the Religious Family of El—rejected the project of the *Ebraniyine*, people of Judah, as soon as they realized that these foreigners were, in fact, striving against their God, El.”

“Aha!” Paul burst out all of a sudden. Mikhail and Dr. Hanna quickly turned their heads in his direction. “That explains why the Hebrews rejected the son of ‘El’, Immanuel, *Jesus Christ*, later on!”

Dr. Hanna smiled briefly, and replied assertively, “That’s absolutely right. And so, in Ezra 6, we read, ‘And the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through . . . and they built, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, Darius, (and Artaxerxes, king of Persia). And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar (March), which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king,’ ” he ended the quote from the parchment in his hand, which closely resembled what came in the Old Testament, and explained that Darius II—King of Persia from 424 to 404 BC—was the son of Artaxerxes I, who reigned between 465 and 424 BC.

“Accordingly, they would then have erected the Temple in the year 418 BC,” Paul rationalized, “That would be six years after 424 BC, and not around the years 520-515 BC, under Darius I, as mentioned in the Old Testament itself!”

“Correct!” Mikhail said matter-of-factly.

“So, if I understood you correctly . . .” Paul stated; his eyebrows lifted, “the Hebrews ultimately managed to settle in the Land of Canaan with the support of the Persians,” he concluded.

“That’s true, and it is absolutely evident in the Old Testament’s narration. Today, Historical and Archaeological studies undeniably sustain this statement. Moreover, Jewish history began with both Ezra and Nehemiah,” Mikhail clarified, and added, “Consequently, the history of many surrounding Nations was blemished. And . . .” he paused to stare at Paul with a witty smirk, “Guess what?”

“Say it!” Paul urged him in a loud voice, which made Dr. Hanna grin at his eagerness.

“In contradiction with what the Old Testament says; Ezra and

Nehemiah were not Jewish, but rather, Persian scribes, and members of the Babylonian Brotherhood.” He stared at Paul, emphasizing the point. “The real name of Ezra was Esdras. They, in fact, started falsifying history, ever since the Persian Empire took control of the vast territories—especially Phoenicia and Egypt. To confiscate the documents of these nations, and alter Historical Truth, held no difficulty for them, for they did not change the original, instead, they smartly and efficiently created new legends of Babylonian-Hebraic myths, which they deceitfully dated back to thousands of years BC. These writings became known, all over the world, as the legendary Old Testament.”

Paul should have been shocked at this point, but he did not feel that way. In fact, he saw it coming, through the many historical facts he’d heard up to now. He took this final statement with tranquility, although its magnitude was large enough for him not to disregard its consequences. He stretched out his feet, after finding a seat on one of the wooden crates, then crossed them at the ankles, and addressed Dr. Hanna at his side, “And thus?” Paul invited him to proceed, ready for more truth, at any cost.

“And thus,” he abided at once, “Judaism surged from Babylon to serve, in fact, the purposes of the ruling Persians! Judaism is Persian propaganda! The secret societies that followed that same Order were: the Chaldean and Hebrew Kabalists, the dualist Gnostics, the Priory of Zion, the Templars who follow the teachings of Rashi, the Scottish and York Rites Freemasons in some additional degrees, some of the Alchemists, the Illuminati, the Jehovah witnesses, and a few others, like the Elders of Zion or Zionists.” He stopped and gazed at a small window on the right side of the underground chamber’s ceiling.

Paul followed the direction of his gaze. The Sun shone still, it somehow strengthened the confidence and friendship among them. The Order to which he now belonged was as ancient as Enoch-Hermes, and as authentic as Kadmus. Many things, which had previously puzzled him in his life, had just disclosed their mystery . . . starting inside the Fortress in Gebel, and now, here, inside the Iraqi crypt in the city of Ur. *What next? Where next?* he wondered within the confines of his mind. And yet, many facts remained out of his reach. *However, time is on my side*, he speculated with optimism. Perseverance and patience would be his faithful allies in this journey of knowledge.

His eyes met those of Mikhail, who nodded slowly in confirmation to what Dr. Hanna had just conveyed, and said, “Those secret societies have

adhered to the same Babylonian-Hebraic doctrine to this day. Their supreme God was, and has remained, the Chaldean God *Iao*. However, before that era, Iao or Yaho was a Phoenician minor god, probably a lunar god. Yaho appeared in the desert of Egypt, as a minor god as well. To the Babylonian Brotherhood, on the other hand, Iao was the Mystery God of creation—the breath of life. They identified Iao or Yaho as a combination of an upright *male* and an egg-shaped *female*—the dual principles of Nature.” He paused for a moment, his mind in thought, “Thus, Ye(a)va, Jehovah, and Yahweh are, in fact, other pronunciations of the same name ‘Iao’. Yahweh became the androgynous Supreme Divinity of the Hebrews. He/She was Ievo-hevah, Adam-Eve, or Yod-Heva—the Demiurge—whom they considered their national power of salvation.”

“Aha . . . well, after all, there is a huge theological difference between the Great White Fraternity and the Babylonian Brotherhood,” Paul rationalized. “The first belief system is Monotheistic, the second is dualistic.”

“True,” he replied, “Yod is Adam—the Kabbalistic Phallus—and Heva is Eve—the Kabbalistic grail; the Mary Magdalene of Rashi’s Templars. Both Yod and Heva formed the name Jehovah, the earthly—not divine—Tetragram. However, before the dawn of Phoenician-Egyptian Monotheism, most ancient Religions, well before the Hebrews, had embraced some form of Polytheism, Henotheism, and Dualism. Dualism is naught but a form of anthropomorphism of the gods of creation, a confusion of the Divine Unity . . . of God,” he explained.

Dr. Hanna paused for an instant of inward reflection, but before he could add more to this historical and theological account of the ancient world, a sound broke into his thoughts, and put him on alert. He immediately covered the box they had opened, walked slowly towards the door, opened it slightly, and attentively searched for the source of the sound. All he could hear at first was the harsh sound of Iraqi soldiers, or that’s who he had assumed they were, for, moments later, his eyes detected someone else: six men in black, scurrying in through the tunnels, under the Great Ziggurat of Ur.

At sight of that, he closed the door gently, carefully locked it from the inside, and turned back. His eyes met the worried expressions on Mikhail’s and Paul’s faces. “There is nothing to worry about,” he said with confidence. “I have it all arranged.”

“Who was there?” Paul rushed to ask in an anxious tone.

“The Pharisees . . .” replied the former head of Iraqi museums.

“The Pharisees!” wondered Paul.

“Yes,” Mikhail confirmed in a stern voice. “This is another name for the Babylonian Brotherhood. We have to leave at once.”

What the three men in the chamber didn’t know was that the six men in the tunnels had noticed movement in that chamber, using infrared and heat-detection machineguns. They were ready to shoot at anything that moved. The squad moved closer to the great metal door, and stood in front of it. One of them tried to open it, but failed, the door was locked, and naturally, they opted for the other choice: blow it up!

Inside, Paul’s adrenaline skyrocketed, as he remembered his escapade in Montreux, but it was a different case down here. Locked inside the chamber, he presumed there was no way out, other than the door ahead of him. He marveled at the exceptional tranquility embracing both Mikhail and Dr. Hanna, in spite of the perilous circumstances.

By the time the leader of the squad ordered to detonate the door, Dr. Hanna had already cracked open an aperture in the floor, into which they escaped from the terror creeping close to them. Paul heaved a sigh of relief at this small spark of hope. *I will survive!* the beautiful thought flashed through his mind. As they sunk into the hole, one after the other, a tactical explosion broke down the great door, followed by a throng of gunfire . . .

Seizing the chamber, the men in black noticed the opening in the floor; Dr. Hanna hadn’t had time to close it behind them, as the blasts of fire had begun. Without delay, they poured into that hole, as the pursuit continued in the midst of darkness, down in the crypt, through yet another layer of tunnels.

Gunshots echoed all through the tunnels they rapidly crossed, and the red lights of gunfire pinpointed the location of the shooters. A daunting obscurity surrounded them, and they had to rely on the fading light of the flashlights Dr. Hanna had provided for them, as they had entered the great city of Ur. It was paramount that he knew the layout of the Sumerian fortress very well, or they would end up among the dead.

Almost half an hour later, zigzagging through the tunnels—a tactic he’d learned and put to practice—puzzled the screaming chasers, and made them lose direction in their own labyrinth—a maze that the Babylonian Brotherhood had built thousands of years ago. One of the tunnels the three men entered had a secret door encrusted into the wall, and Dr. Hanna was one of the very few men alive who knew about it. As he carefully followed the concealed signs stamped into the wall, he

managed to open it at last, walking into a vast *Secret Room* that led their way out of the Ziggurat and, ultimately, out of the city of Ur.

“That Secret Room had been the Rallying Room of the chiefs of the Babylonian Brotherhood,” Dr. Hanna informed them, sitting beside Mikhail, speeding up the road in his Toyota Corona. “They were the Chaldean-Babylonian priests, who used to confer meetings with Persian officials at the time of Cyrus II, and later, after him—during the reign of Darius II—when the final wave of migration of the *Aebirou-al-naher* occurred.”

Sitting in the back seat, still feeling nervous, Paul listened attentively to what was being said by Dr. Hanna. A question he deemed important still lingered in his mind. He looked at Dr. Hanna, and addressed him, “I just thought about the bizarre name you gave the Babylonian Brotherhood. You called them the Pharisees! Why?”

Dr. Hanna turned his head back to face Paul. His sharp brown eyes, covered by thick eyeglasses, glittered. “You will know the answer to that question in Washington DC,” he stated through a witty smile on his round face. The small amount of hair remaining on his almost bald head flew around with every blow of air coming through the window of the car . . . racing against time.

Lebanon, New Jersey
Wednesday, November 24, 05:17 PM

On the way back to Dr. Hanna's house on the outskirts of the city of Ur, the three men exhaled a sigh of relief, at last. They then inhaled deeply; they were safe. When asked about the tragic fate, bestowed upon the wooden crates collected in the chamber—holding thousands of ancient historical books, cuneiform tablets, and scrolls—Dr. Hanna turned his eyes to Paul.

“I have them all saved on computer disks,” he smiled.

The trip to the United States, four days later, had a particular meaning to Paul. He had been there almost five years ago, on a book-signing tour for his work on Phoenician History. He had enjoyed his time, journeying through the East Coast, where he had met Lebanese-Americans and Americans, whom he had come to greatly admire during his stay, which lasted two months.

He had left the Iraqi territory on Monday afternoon after three, taking flight *ME323* to Beirut's International Airport, reaching it just before five. He had a one-hour layover before his second flight, and he planned to meet Maya at the Airport cafeteria for half an hour. During that brief meeting he had asked her to visit Padre Joseph, on account of an urgent matter. She knew this was important, and Paul couldn't say much, besides checking on her and the rest of the team. They were all doing ok; she had informed him with a smile. The 'BB's secret agents hadn't gotten to them, and they figured they'd been lucky. His second flight on Jordan Air *RJ406* took off prior to six, reaching Amman almost an hour later. His five-hour layover was a bit boring and tiring, as he waited for flight *DL33* to New York's JFK Airport, arriving on Tuesday morning around 05:30 AM.

Dr. George Hanna had informed him where to go, in the US, to find the answer to his query, regarding the Pharisees. He had given him a

reference to initiate contact with Mr. Edward Gibson, a scholarly member in the Society of Keepers—instituted thousands of years ago in the New World, when the Phoenicians had discovered it. Mr. Gibson had been a former Freemason at the Grand Lodge of Arkansas, and—for reasons only known to him and to his brothers in the Society of Keepers—had left the Brotherhood and disappeared for personal security reasons. The secrets he had unearthed about Freemasonry were kept hidden in his secret shelter in Lebanon, New Jersey.

The encounter between the two men took place in the afternoon, the next day, Wednesday, at Mr. Gibson's wooden cottage near a beautiful lake. Paul had contacted him the day before, and introduced himself as a brother of the Society of Keepers, informing him about his quest on the Pharisees and his long-time interest in freemasonic secrets.

From behind his small brown desk, something in the bookcase cracked with an odd sound that caught Paul's attention. Mr. Gibson had just opened a drawer, taking out an old book. With a swift blow, he cleared the dust away. Underneath the dust, some bizarre shapes and inscriptions took form. He sat behind his desk, and opened the book in front of him. Paul gave him his undivided attention.

With the pleasant aroma of green tea spreading through the office, Mr. Gibson began, "The Old Testament reveals that inside the Temple of Solomon, the altar carried the Ark of the Covenant, religiously known as the 'agreement between the God Yahweh and his chosen people.'" His blue eyes, under thick eyebrows, shone with power. Mr. Gibson had a strong physique, a round-shaped face, and wore his hair long, neatly arranged in a ponytail. "On the other hand, in a Freemasonic Lodge, the altar held a Sacred Book; close to it, an important symbol of the Brotherhood, the alphabetical letter 'G', engraved between a compass at the top and a square at the bottom," he paused for a sip of tea.

Could the letter 'G' stand for the city of Gebel; the German word Gott; or yet the English word God? What could the compass and the square really represent, anyway? Paul pondered over the matter. *The Compass . . . the Square . . . the Sacred Book!* They would probably stand for the three main elements of freemasonry, known as the 'Three Great Lights of Masonry,' he reasoned.

Reassured by the privacy of this deserted calm lake when the sun was going down, Mr. Gibson allowed himself to deliberate aloud, "The Sacred Book of the western lodges could be no other than the so called Holy Bible; the Old and New Testament combined together. Freemasonry is,

after all, a Judeo-Christian organization,” he confirmed, and continued, “Other lodges around the world refer to any book they identify as holy, such as the Qur’an in the Muslim world.”

Understanding that, Paul shifted his focus to the symbols in his mind for a moment. “The Compass would serve to draw a circle,” he muttered under his breath, and continued his analysis in a low voice, “The Square would measure right angles, and produce perfect lines. In this context, the letter ‘G’ could only mean . . . the science of Geometry!” He directed his eyes towards Mr. Gibson, who seemed to have heard what his guest was mumbling.

“Very well,” Mr. Gibson said with a grin. “Now, if you join the Compass to the Square, it would symbolize the necessity for the neophytes, adhering to that secret society, to keep their life in *square* as they expand, using the compass—their relationship with the brothers of the Craft. The square could also represent the material world, the compass—the spiritual world, while the letter ‘G’ could only mean God.” He halted for a thought before he added, “Following that line of thought, the square symbolizes the female, while the compass—the male.” He took a sip of his tea, and looked at Paul squarely in the eyes, “What could be the meaning or, let’s say, the linking role of the letter ‘G’ in such a context?”

That was a serious riddle for Paul to uncover; he remained silent. His mind was at work.

“Each of the two pillars of Solomon in Scottish Freemasonry carried a globe; one representing the Sun, the other, the Moon,” Mr. Gibson explained. “In British (English) Freemasonry, on the other hand, the sun and the moon disappeared and are thus replaced by a world map, represented by the globe of the Earth, and another globe depicting the map of the Heavens or the Universe.”

While Mr. Gibson laid his cup of tea back on the desk, Paul forced himself to find an answer. Although Paul had majored in ‘Ancient History & Religion’ at the Lebanese University, and had always been in love with great civilizations such as the Egyptian’s and the Phoenician’s; he had never turned away from *knowledge*, his inquisitive mind wanted to learn about secret organizations, and especially about Freemasonry. And now . . . relaxing inside that warm wooden cottage, enjoying the view of the calm lake outside, he began recollecting what he had found in his extensive research.

“The Sun and Moon—the two luminaries of day and night—

respectively represent the white and black pillars, standing at the entrance door of the Temple of Solomon,” he said, finding courage to express his knowledge. “In addition, a white and black checkered pattern decorates the ground floor of the lodge, and the twin pillars depict sculptures of Pomegranates!” he mumbled, more to himself than to Mr. Gibson, as he tried to put the clues together.

Again, the differences between the authentic Pillars and these replicas of freemasonry remained a major component of the construction itself. The original ones of the Great Temple of Baal-Melkart, in Tyre, stood out for the use of precious materials: one, built from Hajjar al Urjouwan—the Purple stone—the other, from Pure Gold—shining like Crystal! In fact, these Pillars seemed precisely like the ones found in the Mystery Chamber in the city of Gebel! Purple . . . Crystal . . . As he probed the new correlation, he remembered that the Left Pillar was topped with a golden stone and had an ear of wheat, while the Right Pillar was crowned with a purple stone and had the vine. Wheat and Vine instead of Pomegranates. Such a fact confirmed the strong connection between the two Phoenician cities of Gebel and Tyre. Yet, the historical and symbolical relation with the Temple of Jerusalem—mentioned in the Old Testament, and later, in freemasonic history—hung about unproven or improbable.

“Jews and freemasons knew the right pillar as Joachim, or Jachin—the first high priest of the Temple. The left one was called Boaz, in reference to the great grandfather of Solomon—King of Israel,” Mr. Gibson expounded. “Legend has it that King Solomon had wanted to pay homage to his ancestors, so he chose the colors, the decorations, and the names of the two Pillars.”

“To freemasons,” Paul uttered calmly, recalling from memory, “Joachim stands for ‘Righteousness’, whereas Boaz represents ‘Judgment’—two essential traits, which every higher-degreed freemason must have in order to *rule and reign*. Fine . . . but why black and white pillars? Why the Pomegranates?” his words sounded more like self-questioning than a question directed to his host. *Pomegranates* . . . he thought deeply. His eyebrows lifted.

Mr. Gibson didn’t answer, he simply looked at his guest with a wide smile on his face, somehow confident he would reach an answer, if given a valid clue. Although an educated man, Paul could never know the fundamental secrets of freemasonry, and how could he, if he had not been *Initiated* into the Craft? Mr. Gibson thought. Repositioning himself on his seat, he said, “The Pomegranates are basically linked to the planet

Venus.”

Still perplexed, Paul stayed there, waiting for his thoughts to align, like the final thread of the falling sun on the horizon he could see through the window. Then, it all dawned on him.

“Aha!” he exclaimed, loud enough to be heard by the water on the lake. “This fruit refers to planet Venus, and is mostly associated with sexual relationships. A sexual fruit . . . hmmm . . . yes, of course. The Sun represents the male, whereas the Moon symbolizes the female, and hence, the engraved *Pomegranates* reflect the basic notion of a sexual relationship between the two opposite genders,” he paused for a breath. “That was exactly what King Solomon was trying to accomplish by his union with the Queen of Sheba; a sexual ritual like that of the two pillars, the King and Queen who keep the door of the Temple protected, the door that leads to the Holy of Holies, where Yahweh resides!”

Paul smirked at the idea, and continued, “The concept of dualism—Good and Evil, White and Black, Male and Female—is quite evident here, as a Judeo-Freemasonic belief. Other organized religions, like Christianity and Islam, support the concept of dualism as well. It was clearly mentioned in their religious texts, albeit only to a certain extent. In fact, Solomon, as pictured in the Old Testament, had hundreds of mistresses and sexual relationships. Hence, he did not at all conduct an ascetic and celibate life. Asceticism and celibacy definitely were, and still are, the path for every true prophet, the *way of the saint*, seeking entrance into the Spiritual Temple of God,” he ended his deduction with a nod of satisfaction.

Mr. Gibson looked at his watch; the time had come for him to take a walk by the lake, smoke a cigarette, and enjoy the breeze that always blew with the coming of the night. They decided not to delay any longer, and stepped outside the wooden cottage, onto the path by the lake, surrounded by beautiful trees, displaying a mixture of red and orange colors. A strange light appeared, floating in the middle of a soft mist that enveloped them.

“Life in the Cosmos and, precisely here, on the physical plane—Earth,” Mr. Gibson murmured calmly to the lake breeze, like a philosopher, “It is bound to the concept of dualism. However, within all the creatures that lived, evolved, and prospered on Earth, Humanity is currently the most qualified to escape this duality, the way it happened in both the Egyptian and Phoenician religions.” He lit his cigarette, smoked, and continued, “Egyptians had Horus—born from Osiris and Isis, whereas Phoenicians

had Adonis—begotten from Al and Anat. Their synthesis—the son and holder of the germ of duality—died, to sacrifice dualism within him, and then, resurrected into a new life, to become a savior—a son of God, after, of course, achieving Oneness with the Supreme God. Indeed, Christianity generated from these twin systems: Egyptian's and Phoenician's. By dying on the cross, Jesus had renounced the duality in him, and achieved Resurrection into the realm of the One—Abba—the *Father*,” he explained eloquently.

“Wonderful!” Paul reacted directly. “That was definitely a much-more-evolved theological system than the ones other nations had endorsed at the time,” he suggested, fascinated by the details.

“Absolutely true!” Mr. Gibson said in approval. “On the other hand, the Brotherhood believes that Unity (One) is only manifested by means of the Binary (Two). Hence, in their mind, the natural and human unity could only be completed by the union of the male and female—the black and white squares that decorate the floor of a lodge—the left and right dual bronze towers of the alleged Temple of Solomon, or the twin columns that stand in the Freemasonic lodges.”

“Joachim and Boaz . . .” Paul suggested in a murmur.

“Yes! And do you know what some Scottish and York Rites Freemasons in some additional degrees secretly call the two pillars?” he asked his guest with a witty smile on his face.

Paul gave his host a quizzical stare, shook his head, and then, looked at the water of the lake beneath him, in an attempt to clear his mind for a wild guess.

“Alright . . . alright,” said Mr. Gibson, obviously amused. “I’ll give you a small hint. The letter ‘J’ in Joachim stands for Jerusalem . . . so the ‘B’ in Boaz stands for . . .?” he winked at Paul.

“Babel!” he exclaimed in a sharp-pitched tone.

“That’s right!” Mr. Gibson replied. “The BBB, the Babylonian Brotherhood Bloodline. The Brotherhood invented all these tales, in order to relate their origin to Egypt; hence, they considered themselves the *chosen people* who would one day live in the new Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers, the new land *to them*—the Land of Canaan-Phoenicia, situated between the Euphrates River and the Nile River! They’ve always wanted, and still aspire, to take the entirety of the Land—in defiance to the British mandate of the Balfour declaration—and change it into *Eretz Israel*, the Greater land of Israel, often mentioned by David Ben Gurion—the first Israeli Prime Minister—known as the Armed

Prophet!” he declared.

Paul stood speechless under a tree, as Mr. Gibson moved farther ahead towards the lake, and said, “In the 26th degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, a degree known as the Prince of Mercy or the Scottish Trinitarian, the Senior Warden asks a Junior Warden questions about the Triple Covenant. What is the second of the three Covenants? Naturally, the answer comes from Genesis 17:1-8, ‘That which God made to Abraham; when he said, “I am the Absolute Uncreated God. I will make my Covenant between Me and thee, and thou shalt be the Father of Many Nations, and Kings shall come from thy loins. I will establish My covenant between Me and thee, and thy descendants after thee, to the remotest generations, for an everlasting Covenant; and I will be thy God and their God, and will give thee all the Land of Canaan (not only Palestine) for an everlasting possession.’ ”

Paul made a gesture of dismissal with his hand at the colonial mentality the Brotherhood displayed.

“You are undoubtedly aware that Abraham—the first Hebrew Patriarch, mentioned in the Old Testament—was a native of the Chaldean city of Ur. He is said to have *crossed the river* to the Land of Canaan. Yet, historical facts state that the Chaldeans were in Babylon sometime between the 7th and 6th century BC, and consequently, the Biblical Chaldean Abraham of around 2000 years BC could be nothing but a false historical figure.”

Paul nodded.

“And in concordance with that period,” Mr. Gibson added, “The famous edict—issued by the Persian Emperor, Cyrus II, in the 6th century—is a valid historical fact; an edict in which he gave the promise, to a few *chosen Babylonian people*, of a homeland in the Land of Canaan.”

The Old Testament’s promise of God was, in fact, that of Cyrus . . . Paul gasped inwardly at the immensity of such a blunder.

“In addition,” Mr. Gibson resumed, “The Temple of Solomon had never occupied the first place in the Scottish and York Rites Freemasonic Order that follows Rashi’s Templars. The tradition spoke of another Temple, highly related to the Temple of Jerusalem.”

“What?” Paul exclaimed, intrigued. He knew Mr. Gibson could not be referring to Phoenician Temples.

Mr. Gibson inhaled the last puff from his cigarette, nodded, and testified evenly, “Truth be told, in one of the earliest Freemasonic texts, known as the *Old Charges*, we find a document called the *Regius*

document. It declares that the original Heroes were not King Solomon and his Temple in Jerusalem, but rather, King Nimrod and his Tower in Babel.”

That was another surprise for Paul, and Mr. Gibson conveyed the reality of it with a hint of irony. In fact, every historian and theologian knows the allegory behind the story of Nimrod and his Tower in the Old Testament, and doesn't bother wondering why the story is found in the Hebraic Bible in the first place. At any rate, the Old Testament narrates that King Nimrod ordered his people to build the Tower exceptionally high, assuming that he could shoot God with an arrow! As a response, God knocked him and his followers down, so hard; that everyone started to talk in a different language the others could not understand.

Shooting God with an arrow . . . Israel . . . striving against El and against his son, Emmanuel! Paul thought.

“Anyway!” Mr. Gibson said, “The many secret societies of the Babylonian Brotherhood succeeded in circulating many cover-up stories, in order to delude the world they wished to control. Secrecy and manipulated propaganda were at the core of the *modus operandi* of the Brotherhood. Logically—in order to *divide and rule*—devious creativity became a must in the administration of the world's conflicts, creating a New World Order. The Brotherhood invented countless tales on many different yet related issues, often orchestrated to contradict each other. In their aim to rule the world effortlessly, sensitive topics like religion, history, economics, and politics turned into schisms, under their exploitation.”

On their way back to the wooden cottage, a few minutes later, Paul told Mr. Gibson that the information he had received, regarding freemasonic secrets, was extremely beneficial to him, and that the time had truly come for him to know about the Pharisees.

“Aha . . .” Mr. Gibson uttered, “You never miss a beat, do you? So resolute is your mind.” He smiled. “You will find the answer to your quest in Washington D.C., Home of the Supreme Council.”

Antonine Order, Jerusalem
Sunday, November 28, 07:32 PM

En route to the House of Priests, where Padre Joseph waited in his office, Maya thought about the quick meeting she'd had with Paul for half an hour at the Beirut International Airport, where they'd had coffee, and a little chat. She still wondered, though, why a meeting with the Padre was of urgent necessity, and why now. *What's going on?* she thought, as she moved a strand of her long light-brown hair behind her ear. Paul had been very discreet, and that perplexed her. Her silken face showed a strange expression of anxiety.

With his jovial disposition, Padre Joseph welcomed Maya in his office on Friday, November 26th. The clock on the wall marked 10:14 AM. Sitting behind his large brown desk, the Padre seemed excited about the news he was about to tell his guest, as he dropped his eyeglasses on the desk. This motion often predicted something of great importance the Padre had in mind. Maya thought he looked a bit anxious.

"Paul contacted me almost a week ago," the Padre started. "He informed me about a collection of antique Torahs that had been stolen from Iraq and taken to Israel—prior to the war in 2003—and a few others to the US, afterwards. The Iraqi government has, so far, failed to convince US officials to return the Jewish-Iraqi documents." He paused for a thought then added, "The American-Jewish lobby has been putting much pressure on US officials, questioning them to find out if they are going to be returned to Iraq, and expressing their deep concern for the safety of the Torah scrolls. They believe this may cause an irrevocable loss of Jewish history, and hence, they proclaim that the documents should instead be returned to Israel."

"Aha . . ." Maya said, in even greater perplexity than before.

"Paul believes they are trying by any-and-all means to hide secretive parts of their historical and religious truth away from Academics and

people. It's highly likely that they are afraid of being exposed, if the truth is ever revealed . . ." the Padre conveyed, as he procured a pack of cigarettes from his drawer, and lit his first one of the today.

"And you Padre, what do you think about that?" Maya managed to ask.

"I'm in complete accord with Paul," the Padre said with a grin, and smoked his cigarette. "Do you know why we asked for your presence here so urgently?" he asked.

"No idea at all," she replied with a twist of the head. "Isn't it because of the vital information you just revealed?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes, of course," answered the Padre, "We have a mission for you," he added in a worried tone that Maya felt again.

"A new mission?" she wondered, her attentive eyes showed astonishment. "What to do now and where to go? I thought we decided to keep a low profile, ever since the Professor, Dr. Hamid Saab was found strangled." She looked at him, "I remember your words clearly, concerning the safety of the team: 'Stay away from the eyes of the Big Brother,' you told us."

Padre Joseph looked out through the window, and then straight into Maya's eyes. "Of course, dear Maya, and I still tell you the same thing now, but, to be honest, we can't think of anyone else, trustful enough, to do this particular job," he explained.

A moment passed in which Maya tried to assimilate, in silence, the importance of the faith that had been posited on her. "What is the job, Padre?"

"Very well," he said, eyes still focused on her. "You have to go to Israel," he spoke with firmness, and the worried tone that she had felt before in his voice had completely vanished. "I have arranged everything for you."

"Israel!" Maya snapped out, an instant later, just realizing where her destination would be. A shudder ran through her spine, and with a trembling voice, she asked, "Is it that vital, to jeopardize the life I'm enjoying?"

The Padre nodded. "You'll be safe," he assured her. "Your mission is to gather anything of importance you might find about the collection of antique Torahs the Israeli government is trying to hide."

"But . . . I . . . I can't go to Israel," she sputtered, realizing the difficulties such a trip held for a Lebanese, her thoughts lingered in bafflement.

“You will travel as a Nun,” the Padre replied with a smile. “Don’t worry; I have everything arranged, as I told you.”

“When shall I leave?” Maya asked, her voice shaky, perhaps still weighing the pressure Padre Joseph had put on her.

“In a couple of days . . . this coming Sunday,” he replied. “Sister Nada will come along with you on your trip to Amman, and then into the Israeli territories, where she will welcome you inside the Antonine Convent at the Old City of Jerusalem.”

On the day of the Sun, Sunday the 28th of November, as Maya arrived in Israel, disguised as a Nun, at eventide, Paul was still in Lebanon, New Jersey, a guest at Mr. Gibson’s wooden cottage by the lake. His trip to Washington D.C. was already scheduled for Wednesday, December 1st.

It was noon in New Jersey, and Mr. Gibson had just finished preparing some delicious beefsteaks for his visitor on his final day there. He served red wine, which was well suited for such a meal. A luscious aroma filled the room, as they slowly began eating.

The few details of freemasonry that Mr. Gibson had communicated to Paul during his five-day stay were of great significance to the Historian’s quest on the Brotherhood. The answers he sought with regard to the Pharisees would have to wait until he got to the Home of the Supreme Council in Washington. Looking at Mr. Gibson now, he was reminded of something odd he had learned about the Brotherhood back in Gebel. It still bothered him.

“What’s the story on Mary Magdalene and Jesus?” he asked Mr. Gibson.

“Oh . . . that story,” Mr. Gibson replied at once. “It is one of the many stories Rashi’s Templars have spread around the world,” he stated. “Claiming Mary Magdalene to be the sexual Initiator of Jesus, and the goddess/priestess that had bestowed wisdom upon him, is total nonsense, of course. Their tale went as far as stating that Jesus Christ took the particular role of Messiah and savior from John the Baptist, the true priest of ‘Sophia’—the feminine principle of divinity—symbolized by Mary Magdalene!” he halted for a moment. “Mentioning that now, brought back some thoughts, concerning the Johannite sect of the East!” he then added.

“The Mandaeans!” Paul guessed aloud. He had made the connection very well, and he seemed to recall having read about them and their great influence on Rashi’s Templars from a famous story presented by the freemasons.

“Right,” Mr. Gibson agreed with a smile. “However, there is a fine distinction, and we’ll come to that in a bit. At any rate, this peculiar tale reported that a certain enigmatical man by the name of Theoclet(es) appeared in Jerusalem, to *Initiate* Hughes de Payens—one of the nine founding brothers of the Templars—into the mysteries. Theoclet was the Grand-Pontiff of the Order of the Temple, a high priest of the Johannite sect, who ascribed to St. John the Baptist the foundation of their Secret Church. The Johannite Pontiff, assuming the title of *anointed*, claimed having achieved other pontifical powers too, directly from St. John the Baptist. He, therefore, taught Hughes a discipline—different from that of the Catholic Church—and revealed to him a dissimilar version of the history of Jesus and the early Christians!” he paused taking a sip of wine. Paul waited.

“The tale said,” he continued, “That Christ was not the true prophet but an unfaithful brother—a usurper of John the Baptist—the ‘true and only’ Patron. They averred, based on the Nazarene codex, that Jesus or Joshua was a bastardized son of Panthera or Pandera—a roman soldier, and Myriam—a virgin—originally betrothed to a young man by the name of Yohanan!”

“Oh . . . not again!” Paul snapped aloud. “This is yet another parallel story to the Talmudic *Sepher-Toledoth-Yeshu*!” he commented in disgust.

“Exactly!” Mr. Gibson replied with the same disgusted feeling. “They even alleged that Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene believed sexual relationships were at the highest point of spiritual awareness, leading to a sublime realization of the Great Mystery; the Great Work of Alchemy!” he explained. “Therefore, Jesus Christ—accused of being a bastard, a false prophet, and a sorcerer powered by Beelzebub—would surely need the baptism from John to wash away all those sinful attributes.”

“What a hateful and ridiculous story!” Paul fussed in indignation. “But, did the sect really exist? I mean . . . who were they?” he asked.

Mr. Gibson put down his fork and knife slowly on the plate, before he answered, “Whether or not the Johannite Pontiff truly existed and was the true instigator of that sick story, it still parallels the teachings of Solomon Ben Isaac himself. Do you know who he was?” he asked Paul, looking directly into his eyes.

“Rashi, right?”

“Correct. I only wanted to make sure you were focusing on the teachings of the Fraternity,” Mr. Gibson said, smiling.

“Of course I am,” Paul grinned back.

“Great. I am pleased that you are,” he said. “Many different theories have come about, concerning the Mandaeans,” he added, “The one I’m about to tell you now is the closest one to reality. Listen . . .”

The narration continued . . .

History tells that in the seventeenth century, the Jesuits discovered, in Iraq, a group of people who called themselves *St. John Christians*. They lived between the two rivers in the Al-Khaur area, watered by both the Euphrates and the Tigris. Nowadays, they still exist in smaller numbers in Basra, southern Iraq (Babylon) and along the land of Karun and Harran, southwest Iran (Persia). They asserted that their religion had emerged with the Egyptians, settling in Tura d’Madai, a mountainous region that had formed their first habitat. In truth, their religion had nothing to do with the Egyptian’s. The name Mandaiia, or Mandaeans, could well have originated from the word Manda, and meant Gnosis; hence, the Mandeans are dualist Gnostics. They speak a dialect of Aramaic, very close to Hebrew. The Arabs and Muslims have identified them as *the people of the book*, labeled them Sabiya or Sabians, and protected them as such.

Their principal sacred books are known as the Ginza (Treasure), the Sidra Yahya (the John-Book), and the Haran Gawaita (the history of the sect), and date back a few centuries AD. Their religious ideas and sacred books present a mixture of Babylonian, Judaism, Persian concepts of dualism, and Gnosticism. The influence of these religious doctrines on this group is definite. The Babylonians venerated the goddess Ishtar, whereas the Mandaeans cited the same prayers to a similar goddess by the name of Libat, known as Venus; she is the Mary Magdalene of Rashi’s Templars. Additionally, many of their tales illustrate a link between Jerusalem and the region of the Euphrates. Their texts include various fragments of the Old Testament and many Talmudic ideas. They considered Adam and Hawa—the Kabalistic Yod-Heva or Yahweh—as their parents; and hence, celibacy would be a sin against the image of their parents. The Sidra Yahya could also imply the Sidra Yahwh, the Yahweh Book! Mandaeans—like the non-Christian dualist Gnostics of the Samaritan Simonians (from Simon Magus), the Dositheans (from Dositheus), the Manicheans (from Mani), and a few others—believed in a creation based on Dualism and in a Dualist Law on Earth.

The concept of Dualism held the same level of importance to such groups as it does to the Persians, the Babylonians, and the Hebrews. Monotheism does not appear in the texts or in the sacred pages of those

groups. Although the rites of the Mandaeans focused on Baptism, it is extremely inappropriate to name them Johannites. They, in fact, declared they're not, when they considered John as just one of their few great leaders, and said that they had existed long before him.

“To claim that John was married to a woman called Anhar is but a cheap attempt to alter the Truth, and discredit his vow of Chastity and consecration to God, as a good Nazarene, or *Nazorean*,” Mr. Gibson elucidated. “The Mandaeans were not Nazorean in any way, shape, or form, as some have tried—and are still trying—to claim. They cannot be called Christians either, simply because they do not believe in Jesus Christ. Their views on Jesus are very similar to what the Talmud declares, and match the stance of the Jews towards Jesus in the New Testament. They deem him a liar, a deceiver and an evil sorcerer!” he stopped for a long sip of wine.

The silence in the dining room was so absolute that Paul could hear his host swallowing. Mr. Gibson dried his mouth with a white napkin, and took up the narrative that held Paul in reverence.

At any rate, at the time of the Templars, the Mandaeans were not living in Palestine. They related having migrated to Iraq, as early as the first century AD. History reveals that after the death of John, and even before that, many of his disciples joined Jesus. However, very few of them, mostly Judeans, refused to follow Jesus; they left at once. They are best described as the Babylonian-Judaic people, an offshoot of those who had *crossed the river* from Babylon (modern day Iraq) to Palestine. Their Baptism, or better said, their frequent *submersion* in the waters of the rivers of Iraq is, for them, an important act of remembrance of this historical *river crossing* and to the allegorical baptism, in which they had changed their name from Babylonians to Hebrews.

At the early beginnings of Christianity, they adopted the baptism of John, as a cover-up to survive amidst the New Faith. They also endorsed and adopted the ways and means of the sect of the Asayas of Galilee, where John and Jesus were prominent members. The Asayas, *healers*, wore white outfits, prayed on Sundays—which were their holy days—and performed ritual handshakes as a sign of the power of the hand in the healing process. Even though the Mandaeans succeeded in imitating the Asayas in their ways, their strategy to survive went amiss. After the semi-destruction of the Temple of Herod in 70 AD by Titus, and the downfall of the city of Jerusalem by the Romans, they left Palestine with their dreams vanishing in the mists of time. The Temple of Herod represented for

them a symbolic reminder of the one Zoro-Babel had intended to build in Jerusalem after the *crossing*. With the Temple destroyed, they were left with no other choice but to cross back the river to Babel.

“In fact, the true adepts of John are the Knights of St. John,” Mr. Gibson added. “They were born in 1080 AD with Brother Gerard, and came to be known as the Order of the Knights Hospitaller. The name changed later into the Knights of Rhodes, and today, the Knights of Malta. They deem St. John the Baptist as the most important prophet of the mission of Jesus, and are strongly related to the Vatican, the same way Jesus and John are related to each other in the New Testament, as we read in Luke 7:26-28,” he paused for the last sip of his wine.

“At any rate, and contrary to what phony secret societies have claimed, neither John the Baptist nor Jesus Christ had anything to do with any sexual *Initiation* by Mary Magdalene. In fact, they both lived ascetic and celibate lives. Jesus Christ never fell in love with any particular woman, for his Love was spiritual and universal to all, men and women alike, since he perceived the whole existence as *Unitas*.” He paused in contemplation, and Paul could’ve sworn he saw a great light in his eyes, so majestic that it sparkled like stars in the sky. “Neither one was a Jew, they were Nazarenes or Nazoreans—a name held by the ascetic *Ashayan* branch of Galilee. I believe you know that already, Paul,” he said, as he looked at his alert guest, sharing with him the elixir of this superb wine and the flavorful beefsteak at the table. “The word *Nazar* indicates a person chosen to Keep the Word, who would later be elected to be the *son of man—son of God*. In the Judaic tradition, however, celibacy was deemed, and still is, dreadful and sinful!”

Keepers of the Word . . . Paul repeated the words a few times before he said, “Well, that would be an additional evidence that Jesus was not a Jew. A Rabbi must marry, but Jesus lived a celibate life for he was a Nazar—an elected *Son of God!*”

“That is absolutely correct,” he replied, smiling. “The *Asayas*—the *Healers* who lived at Mt. Carmel—were somewhat Pythagoreans in their way of life, thus, perfectly relating to the Great White Fraternity; the Phoenician-Egyptian Monotheistic Fraternity of Hermes. Like the Pythagoreans, the *Ashayas*—probably influenced by Buddhist missionaries—shared their goods, prayed at sunrise, practiced silence, wore white-linen tunics, and kept the mysteries. The Nazoreans, like the Therapeuts in the desert of Egypt, lived like hermits within a secluded group, similar to the Pythagoreans.”

“Siddhartha left everything behind, including his wife and child, in order to continue his quest for a spiritual life. His journey made him reach illumination. He became the Buddha, after finding the four noble paths of the Truth (The Four Noble Truths) that would lead humanity out of pain and suffering. Pythagoras, alternatively—instructed from an early age into the mysteries of Phoenicia and Egypt—became an *Initiate* of Sophia, *wisdom*, and the first Philosopher ever known in history. After achieving Oneness, and establishing a school of *Initiation* in Crotona, Italy, his mission ended,” he explained.

Paul fully comprehended what this man had taught him in the few days he had stayed here with him. And he hoped that his visit to Washington would clarify even more secrets that he needed to know, before going back to Lebanon and convening with the Keepers of the Word—waiting for him in the Fortress of Gebel. He had a lot to inform them, and many more things to inform the Padre, as well.

Mr. Gibson, who had finished his narration, seemed to have something he wanted to add. He looked at Paul with smiling eyes, “I have arranged everything for your meeting with Mr. Jackson on Wednesday. Just be sure you understand my instructions well. The trip may be dangerous!” He stood up, and walked towards the window.

Although his voice sounded alarming, Paul seemed ready for more.

*Meeting Mr. Jackson, Washington
Wednesday, December 1, 03:15 PM*

The trip to Washington D.C. from Lebanon, New Jersey was smooth. Paul had taken the bus in the morning, and arrived almost three hours later with no feelings of weariness at all. His meeting with Mr. Jackson had been scheduled to take place at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, around three in the afternoon. While touring the vast museum, and enjoying the view of the ancient creatures that had walked the Earth millions of years ago, before evolving into the creatures of today, Paul heard a husky voice coming from behind him.

“Hello, Mr. Khoury,” said the tall black man with an elegant white Stetson hat on his head.

“Hello!” replied Paul with a puzzled smile on his face. “I’m surprised you recognized me amidst the crowd. I was waiting for your call.”

“I know, but you described yourself very well on the phone. I’m a good observer,” Mr. Jackson avowed with satisfaction, “Shall we walk?”

“Sure.”

“Good. Mr. Gibson informed me that you’re interested in knowing about the Pharisees. Right?”

“Yeah, of course,” replied Paul. “I read about them in the New Testament as the main Hebrew Rabbis, in perpetual conflict with Jesus. Now I know why; he was not one of them.” Paul smiled with confidence. “But, when I was in Iraq just recently, Dr. Hanna, former head of Iraqi museums, used this name as an alternative term for the Babylonian Brotherhood. I just wonder why!”

“You will know that soon, very soon,” Mr. Jackson said seriously, and invited Paul to sit on a bench nearby. Paul complied automatically.

A few moments passed . . .

“Let me tell you a few things concerning the Babylonian Brotherhood,” Mr. Jackson began. “The basic strategy they have adopted

has been a remarkable plot, designed to weaken the Great White Fraternity, and strengthen the Brotherhood instead.” He fixed his hat, and added, “While they professed to be followers of the ancient Hermetic Tradition, they arrogantly declared—at their higher degrees—that the Mysteries taught in the different countries of the ancient world: in the Pyramids of Egypt, in the Temples of Phoenicia and Greece, in the school of Pythagoras, and others, were no longer sources of knowledge and wisdom to man.”

“What a strange contradiction!” Paul countered in surprise. “Why would they say such a thing?”

“It’s not a contradiction, Paul, but a tactic to discredit the reputation of these Ancient Mystery schools, and impose Scottish and York Rites Freemasonry in some additional degrees instead,” he asserted in reply.

“Hmm . . . I see.”

“They also say that it is a fantasy of poets, philosophers, and dreamers to believe that a redeemer—whether coming from the infinite Heaven, or not—is capable of solving the problem of evil and destroying hell, simply by doing Good and giving Love,” he shook his head to show his refusal of the claim.

“So . . . to them, there is no true salvation!” Paul charged in exasperation.

“Follow my thoughts on this one!” Mr. Jackson enjoined in a tone of annoyance. “Their law recognizes only the second dimension as true—the one of matter. From their point of view, all *manifested dualities* produce the *divine one*, for they deem that the one is already two. The Babylonian Brotherhood believes in the two principles: Good and Evil. They say, as long as there is light, there is always darkness.”

“So,” Paul interfered. “To them, there is nothing true by itself, without its contradiction!” he deduced.

“Exactly, this is their uppermost law, taught in their highest degrees, and they call it the *universal equilibrium* or the *mystery of the balance*. This would be the immutable law of nature, and thus, the eternal will of Justice, which is God.”

“But we know and believe that God is Good and cannot be evil!” Paul protested in discomfort.

“Well, as conscious human beings, we definitely agree with that, but to them, God is not only evil . . . God is both good and evil!”

“What rubbish that is!” Paul dissented dryly. “It could be translated into: let us make peace—but since peace cannot exist without a balanced

parallel and contrary movement to it—then let there be war,” he analyzed out loud, and shuddered at the simple thought of it. “Come on, this is a very dangerous concept . . . the product of a completely ignorant mind!”

“True. They assert that their law of Good and Evil—Light and Darkness—is the work of infinite wisdom and endless love! They go as far as to contend that the rebellious sprite of evil and darkness does not co-exist in eternal controversy with God, and that it is mainly by faith and understanding of that equilibrium that they could realize the harmony between the existence of evil; sin; suffering; and sorrow, and infinite goodness; blessings; and happiness.”

“What kind of schizophrenic and mentally unbalanced philosophical faith is this, they endorse?” Paul interjected irately, leaping to his feet at the absurdity of such a concept. His tirade made Mr. Jackson smile bleakly, he didn’t respond though, and an instant later, Paul felt the need to work out his irritation. He walked over to where the dinosaurs were exhibited, without real interest in them, and turned on his feet, pacing back and forth silently.

“As you may have comprehended by now,” Mr. Jackson addressed him in a tone of authority that made Paul stop in attention, and face him. “The Compass represents the male, Adam or Yod, with two opened legs; same as the female, Heva or Eve, with widely open legs—the Square, having the letter ‘G’ inscribed in the middle. It is an incomplete mirror of the Star of David, better known as the Seal of Solomon. The interlaced dual triangles—forming the star with six pointed peaks—correspond to the male and the female. Veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols, the Seal of Solomon shall only be completed with the final execution of the Temple!”

The compass . . . the square . . . the letter ‘G’ in the center. Paul arranged the symbols together in his mind, heaved a deep sigh of awareness, and yet . . .

“What about the letter ‘G’?” he asked.

“Well, the letter ‘G’ surely does not stand for God, at least not the one we know. It doesn’t signify Geometry either, but rather, the god they strongly worship—the androgynous Yod-Heva, for ‘G’ is *Gamos*, Hieros Gamos or sacred marriage, in other words: Ritual Sexuality. And all of this with the goal of keeping the Babylonian Brotherhood Bloodline pumping through the veins of the chosen people.”

“Wow!” Paul exclaimed, as he sighed deeply, attempting to absorb all the knowledge he had just obtained. That was all news to him.

Paul shook his head to clear away the astonishment that held him motionless for a minute or two, and went to sit by his side on the bench. “All the members of the Great White Fraternity, including you, always refer to Scottish Freemasons as direct descendants of Rashi’s Templars,” Paul recalled the discussions he’d had with the Keepers, back in Gebel. “What about the British Freemasons? Are there any differences?” he asked.

“There may be. Since Freemasonry has been defined by its own historians as ‘a science of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols’, then it might just be the case for English Freemasonry . . .” Contemplating what he’d just said, he added, “In fact, English Freemasonry is absolutely different from the Scottish and York Rites Freemasonry in some additional degrees, but not from Scottish Freemasonry. In 1717 AD, the Grand Lodge of England was established in London, on John the Baptist’s Day, June 24th. Since St. John the Evangelist is the patron saint of British Freemasonry, it would then be important for them to conduct a conscious, intelligent Lodge, where the New Testament lays open on the first chapter of the Gospel of St. John. The candidate, in his continual search for the *lost word*, could finally open his *blind* eyes and read, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.’ ”

Keepers of the Word . . . Paul thought to himself. *Keepers of the word . . .* his mind repeated.

“British Freemasonry has only endorsed, within its chapters, the first three degrees of the Craft, or what is called by Blue Lodge Masonry: the Entered Apprentice Degree, the Fellow Craft Degree, and the Master Mason Degree—consecrated to Hiram Abiff, the Master Architect.” Mr. Jackson added, “Hiram sounds similar to Hermes, and, in the Phoenician language, the word Hiram could mean the *enlightened one* or *divine messenger and teacher*, or it could derive from the word Khur-Um, which means *lifted up to life*.”

Paul’s eyes were intent on Mr. Jackson’s. There was a certain spark of hope in Paul’s eyes, for he felt proud of being a descendant of the Phoenicians.

“The legend of the Architect, Hiram Abiff—and his assassination by three brothers—was first incorporated into the freemasonic rituals by the

English Grand Lodge. The ritual bestowed the names: Jubela, Jubelo, and Jubelum on the killers of Hiram Abiff, known collectively as the *Juwes*! Sometimes, Hiram Abiff is shown as an allegorical Jesus Christ, killed, so *to speak*, by Judas, Caiaphas, and Pilate,” Mr. Jackson explained.

“However, when Pilate, as mentioned in Matthew 27:24-25, saw that nothing was being gained, but that a disturbance had started instead, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this righteous person. You see to it. All the people answered, ‘May his blood be on us, and on our children!’ Henceforth . . . Annas—the father-in-law of Caiaphas—should be the third man, not Pilate; for Judas, Caiaphas, and Annas were, in fact, the three Jewish men that masterminded his arrest, as mentioned in the New Testament. That was what led to his Crucifixion by the Romans, and his Resurrection three days after that.”

The secret knowledge Paul had just received was of great importance, as Mr. Jackson continued his precise explanation, revealing that in the third degree the Fellow Mason would undertake a ritual of resurrection into a Master Mason, thus, perfectly mirroring the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the third day. ‘For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection,’ St. Paul had declared in his Epistle to the Romans, 6:5. Therefore, if the Temple of Solomon was not completed in Freemasonry, it was simply because Jesus Christ is the Temple of God in its Completion.

Mr. Jackson paused for a brief moment, to glance at his attentive guest then nodded, and commented, “Didn’t he say, in John 2:19, that if they destroy this Temple, *Him*, he will raise it up—*his body*—in three days?”

“Yes he did, that’s true,” Paul agreed, totally convinced.

Indeed! However, some deviant British Freemasons endorsed an additional system of continually higher degrees, of which, the best known was the Royal Arch degree. This one followed the direction of the Grand Lodge of the Royal Arc, also known as, the Holy Royal Arch of Jerusalem. It had incorporated Jewish myths and history by going as far back as King Cyrus II of Persia, the Babylonian Zoro-Babel—prince of the people, and others! In the Royal Arch Degree, the mason candidate would logically become higher than a Master (the known Third Degree), whereby he would encounter the *Essence of the Philosophical Masonry*, and, as shown in the Torah, this would allow him to discover the real name of God—the *ineffable name* YHWH!

“Ah . . . I see,” Paul uttered, “So the Royal Arch is concordant with Scottish and York Rites Freemasonry in some additional degrees.”

“Absolutely! And, it is also in concordance with French Rite Freemasonry,” Mr. Jackson clarified. “However, the mainstream Freemasonry of today is that of the Grand Lodge of England, which does not act as a *true* secret society, but more as a semi-public prestigious banquet club and an organization for mutual aid and advancement, or at best, a philosophical and scientific society like the Royal Society. Authentic British Freemasons refused to be related, in any way whatsoever, with Scottish and York Rites Freemasons in some additional degrees as well as French Rite Freemasons—the underground branches!” he concluded, adjusted his neat white Stetson, and gave Paul a serious look.

Moments later, after Paul took some time to reflect, they decided to leave the Museum, heading towards a nice cafeteria that Mr. Jackson had suggested. They picked a cozy-looking table by the window, and sat, silently enjoying the taste and aroma of the fine coffee imported from Brazil.

“So,” Paul broke the silence that had endured for a few minutes, “Who are the Pharisees?” he inquired of Mr. Jackson.

“The answer to your question will be revealed on Sunday, when we visit the House of the Temple,” he revealed.

The House of the Temple? Paul thought, and then murmured to himself in a low voice, high enough for Mr. Jackson to hear him.

“Yes. Home of the Supreme Council,” he confirmed in a serious tone. “It’s the main Temple of the Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry,” he smiled.

Paul stayed silent for a minute or two, trying to assimilate the uncertain implications of such a visit. Looking at Mr. Jackson in the eyes, he questioned, “How are we going to do that? Isn’t it dangerous for us?”

“Don’t worry,” Mr. Jackson replied confidently, assuring the man by his side, “Everything is under control.”

The billowing smoke of the cigar ascended from his muscled fingers to the sharp features of his face, enveloping him in a mystical aura, and adding more power to the black man facing Paul. He had the look of a Secret Agent; a man who had been around for a long time, probably seen a lot, and his demeanor seemed to say: *I’m in control.*

He was not just a learned member of the Society of Keepers, but a secret one too, Paul thought.

He then lit his cigarette, and waited for the next move.

*House of the Temple, Washington, D.C.
Sunday, December 5, 04:00 PM*

Standing still, in front of the House of the Temple—located at 1733 16th Street, N.W. in the Dupont Circle neighborhood—Paul’s eyes were in awe of the monument ahead. He had never expected it to be of such architectural beauty, it had given him goose bumps. It was divided into three stages in a quasi-pyramidal shape; about thirty-six Pillars bound the second stage from the four sides. It was built entirely of white granite, and the stairs leading to its massive, fortified iron black door were flanked by two American flags, and watched over by two statues of a strange creature that looked like the Egyptian Sphinx.

His mind immediately took him back to Gebel, where he recalled the two Sphinxes that guarded the Cedar-wood entrance door of the Fortress, where the Keepers resided. He wondered at once about such similarities, for he knew very well that the two Ordinances had nothing in common, either in character or in principle.

Mr. Jackson explained that the cornerstone of the House of the Temple had been laid, in October 1911, by the Grand Master J. Claude Keiper—of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia. It was designed by the architect, John Russell Pope, who planned it after the tomb of Mausolus at Halicarnassus, considered as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Dedicated four years later, the House of the Temple is one of the main Masonic Temples in the United States. It stands as the center of operations for the Scottish Rite Freemasonry, and is formally recognized as ‘Home of the Supreme Council, 33^o, Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry.’ Its full name is: ‘The Supreme Council, or Mother Council of the World, of the Inspectors General Knights Commander of the House of the Temple of Solomon of the thirty-third degree of Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry of the Southern Jurisdiction

of the United States of America.’

“Shall we go in,” Mr. Jackson invited Paul with a gesture of his hand. “The Temple holds some important materials related to Scottish Rite Freemason writers and poets in its library,” he informed.

“I thought the entrance was forbidden to non-masons,” Paul said with a hint of surprise.

“It’s not a lodge, Paul,” he replied. “Haven’t you noticed the inscription on the wall?” he lifted his eyebrows.

In fact, Paul hadn’t noticed it. He had been enthralled by the antique work of architecture used on the monument, its history, and function. At any rate, he now examined what was written on the wall to the left of the iron door. It read, ‘Scottish Rite of Freemasonry—Supreme Council 33°—Museum/Library.’

“This was the first public library in Washington D.C.,” Mr. Jackson explained. “Please, follow me.”

The slow climb along the 24 steps of the stair had been accompanied by the useful words of Mr. Jackson who said, “What you need to see here is the work attributed to Mr. Albert Pike, the Sovereign Grand Commander of the Supreme Council 33° of the Scottish Rite.”

“Albert Pike?” asked Paul, and, still in confusion, added, “How can this help me know who the Pharisees were?”

“It’s in his work,” was Mr. Jackson’s reply. “Let me first brief you on who he was. Mr. Pike became a Freemason in 1850 at the age of forty-one. Engrossed in Freemasonic law, he greatly contributed to its Jurisprudence. Undoubtedly, Freemasonic Philosophy and Symbolism significantly inspired him, and led him to learn ancient alphabets and languages; some of them were Hebrew and Sanskrit. A very smart man, Pike soon began translating and commenting on the ancient writings he laid hands on.” Mr. Jackson paused on the first landing, before he continued his narration, “Pike made a thorough re-writing of the rituals and ceremonies of the Craft, after an in-depth study of the fragmented writings he found. The notable studies he made helped him become Confederate General and Sovereign Grand Commander of the Order in 1859, and later on, in 1871, he wrote his famous book, *‘Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry’*.” Mr. Jackson halted for a thought then added, “Meant only for the brothers within the Craft, Pike described in scrupulous detail the 33 ranks of Scottish Rite Freemasonry; the tales, teachings, and rituals connected to each rank, along with other lodge descriptions. He died in 1891, while still

holding office. In 1944, his remains were moved from Oak Hill Cemetery to a restricted crypt here, in the House of the Temple, and this was certified by an Act of Congress.” Mr. Jackson gave Paul a solemn look, and nodded in indication of just how powerful Pike had been. It was not a simple matter for mortal remains to receive such an authorization from the Congress . . . or was it Freemasonry that controlled Congress?

“Anyway, his published works and unpublished manuscripts, his personal notes and letters, and a few other belongings are conserved and exhibited in a dedicated Chamber,” Mr. Jackson informed as they walked inside. “Let’s pay him a visit.”

* * *

A few days earlier, in Israel, Sister Nada—informed of Maya’s secret mission by Padre Joseph—had introduced her to the Israeli Archaeologist by the name of Dr. Achiram Fröhlich. She had told her that if there were anything important the Padre needed for her to find, it would have to be done through the assistance of Dr. Fröhlich, known for his scientific integrity. In fact, the Archaeologist had been working for many years now all over Israel, in search of scientific proof that would match the tales narrated in the Old Testament. To his disappointment, he had found none.

At his bureau in Jerusalem, Dr. Fröhlich made a particular exception, and welcomed Sister Maya one early Sunday morning, December 5th. Of course, he had no clue as to her true profession, an Archeologist.

“So, Dr. Fröhlich, if I may,” Maya intervened, after he had expressed his aggravation, concerning his work. “What do you think? Do you truly believe this lack of scientific evidence will jeopardize the faith in the Old Testament?”

“I’m a man of science, and don’t much care about matters of faith,” Dr. Fröhlich replied. “I’m afraid, however, that this lack of archaeological data will more than likely uncover the myths behind the historical narrations.”

“Praise the Lord,” Maya said softly. “Sister Nada informed me about a collection of antique Torahs that has entered Israel through Iraq, prior to and after the war in 2003,” she gazed at him. “I was told that some of them, which had been stolen after the war, had entered the US, and I heard that the Iraqi Government had failed, so far, to convince US officials to return them to Iraq.” She paused for a thought, or maybe just

to weigh his reaction. He had none. She continued, “The Church knows that the Jewish-American lobby has been pressing US officials, and questioning them about the safety of the Torah scrolls, should they be returned to the Iraqis. They think this may cause an invaluable loss of Jewish history, and so, the best solution would be to bring the scrolls here, to Israel.”

“Aha . . .” Dr. Fröhlich said; his face in greater confusion than his reaction had been when he had told her about the shortage of archaeological proofs.

“What do these scrolls contain, anyway?” she asked with apparent curiosity. “Do they support the historical and religious Old Testament tales?” she asked in a soft, caring tone that showed special interest in the matter, which Dr. Fröhlich found authentic.

The Archaeologist grabbed a pack of cigarettes from his drawer, and lit one, his eyes focused on Sister Maya. “I feel I should be honest with you,” he began, “I knew about the scrolls, but haven’t had the chance to look at them. It was strictly forbidden for me to examine them.” He took a deep breath. “You know, I honor my profession dearly, and don’t allow myself to compromise knowledge and scientific findings on account of my national identity.” He slowly took a drag from his cigarette. “Pro-Israel Scholars are very much aware of my opinion on the matter, and know very well I’m not a log of wood they can easily break,” he looked out the window for a few moments.

“Anyway,” he resumed, “The basic History of the Biblical Israel is naught but a bunch of fabricated tales, based on ancient Iraqi history. It’s a fact no one can deny, and well . . .” he paused, uncertain if he should reveal what was in his mind to a total stranger, but—with a rebellious attitude that seemed to say: *what-the-hell*, which Maya read in his eyes—he seemed to finally make up his mind. “There is a strong connection between the Parsees and Biblical Israel,” he confided.

“The Parsees!” Maya exclaimed, totally surprised.

Dr. Fröhlich remained silent. He just looked at his watch. It was almost 11:16 AM. *Time to leave the office and join the family*, Maya thought. She understood his feelings, and without further ado, she thanked him for his time, and excused herself to leave. He stopped her at once, and with a hesitant look on his face, handed her a red package. “This is for you, Sister,” he declared. “Confidential! Keep it in a safe place.”

She smiled, nodded, and left the office. In fact, from the information

he had revealed, Maya had grasped that the situation for Israeli history was critical. *Everything could succumb*, she thought on her way to the Antonine Convent in the Old City.

Her slow walk along the narrow crowded alleys gave her the feeling that she was being followed. She kept turning her head back as she walked, trying to disprove what her instincts kept telling her to be true. She could not distinguish anyone particularly suspicious at the moment, and so, she continued walking a bit more leisurely.

As she was approaching the Wailing Wall Square, her instincts took over, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up in alert of considerable danger. She turned her head left then right, and noticed two men in black suits, scrutinizing her with wary eyes. Her heart began to beat faster. A large dose of adrenaline rushed into her bloodstream, as she paced the ground with quicker steps. They followed her . . .

With fear invading her soul, Maya started to run across the tight alleys until, perhaps ten minutes later, she neared the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, where sounds of prayers reverberated all through the place. Without wasting a second, she took a step inside, before they could catch up with her, and joined the dedicated Christian Community attending church for Sunday mass.

Sitting on the wooden bench, relaxed now, her heartbeats back to normal, she breathed deeply, and heaved a sigh of relief. *I'm safe*, she thought. "Praise the Lord," she mumbled underneath her breath.

Moments later, countless thoughts began to shuffle through her mind, as she wondered why the two men in black had pursued her. Was it because she'd had a meeting with the maverick Archaeologist? Had she been under their surveillance ever since she had set foot in Israel? Or . . . was it because she left the Archaeologist's office with a red package in her hands?

"What's inside?" she muttered in marvel.

Her Archaeologist's inquisitive mind couldn't wait any longer. She had to open the red package right now. She untied the ribbon, and opened the file. It had a couple of introductory pages, a development plot, and few pictures of an ancient cave-like church in ruins, taken by Dr. Fröhlich's team. Built in the first century AD, it was perhaps the first Christian church in the area. It had been completely erased by Israeli troops, who had constructed a highway over it, this, undoubtedly done for political and religious reasons. Not far from the ruins, on the Northeastern foot of Mt. Carmel, the file showed pictures of a cave related to the Asayas, with

a caption underneath that said:

*This is the true Bet-Lahem, House of Bread.
It is the genuine spot where the Christian Master has been born.
This is the real Church of Nativity.*

To her sudden shock, Maya swiftly closed the file on her lap. She couldn't believe the words she had just read. *Impossible!* she thought to herself. Although acquainted with Padre Joseph's thesis on the matter—from his revelatory book, *the Messiah was born in Lebanon, not in Judea*, published in 1999—she found this theory very hard to accept, as easily as the Padre had suggested. And right now she couldn't conceive of the idea that an Israeli Archaeologist would reveal the same mind-blowing discovery. *He is truly professional*, she marveled at the idea, and valued his scientific integrity.

The meticulous work Dr. Fröhlich presented, in the classified file, revealed with unequivocal proof that the Galilean Bet-Lahem, situated almost 6 km away from Nazareth, was the true cradle of Jesus Christ. From the Archaeological point of view, there were no traces of habitation in the Judean Bethlehem at the time of Jesus Christ. In fact, Bethlehem of Judea had been founded at a later period, in the fourth century AD, under the reign of Constantine—the Roman Emperor who built a basilica in this location, to support the claim decreed by the Church Authority and approved by his mother Helena. Truth be told, the place where the Church alleged Jesus was born had been a public cemetery for ages; hence, there would be no historical logic to what the Church claimed, for it couldn't have been for Jesus Christ, or for any other person, to be delivered in a cemetery. Dr. Fröhlich added that the authors of the New Testament had substituted the true Bet-Lahem with the Judean Bethlehem, because people believed the Messiah would come from the house of David.

Maya smiled at the important information Dr. Fröhlich had given her. The trip back to Lebanon should be carefully prepared, and judiciously carried out, so that the material could be delivered to Padre Joseph, forthwith, as additional evidence for his great theory. “Not a theory anymore,” she mumbled under her breath. “It's a fact,” she gently whispered in the air at the same time the bells started to toll. The mass at the alleged Church of Nativity had ended. The time to pray in the true cradle of the Prince of Peace had to wait yet.

Accompanied by the Sisters, she walked outside.

The Crypt underground
Sunday, December 5, 05:26 PM

It was going on five in the afternoon, Washington time, when Paul trailed the firm footsteps of Mr. Jackson into the House of the Temple. Once inside, something came rushing back into Paul's mind—a concept that had stayed with him during his first meeting with Mr. Jackson.

“I've been thinking about the freemasonic symbol of the Compass, representing the male—Adam or Yod, with opened legs—uniting with the female—Heva or Eve, with widely open legs—symbolizing the Square, and the letter 'G' decked in the middle,” Paul said with eyes fixed on the icon hanging on the walls. “You have explained that it is an incomplete mirror to the Star of David or Seal of Solomon, the interlaced dual triangles forming the six-pointed star.” He paused for a moment, gazing at Mr. Jackson, “Then you said: veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols, the seal of Solomon shall only be completed with the final execution of the Temple!” He stopped walking, before he asked, “What did you mean by that?”

Mr. Jackson stopped walking too, and turned to face Paul. “Where do you see the Seal of Solomon, other than here?” he asked.

Paul seemed confused by the question, trying to concentrate, so he could remember where else the Seal had been extolled, other than by its incomplete mirroring in the freemasonic icon. A few moments passed, before it dawned on him like a thunderbolt. “The Israeli flag. Right?” he answered, and asked.

“Right,” answered Mr. Jackson with a grin. “The Seal of Solomon is clearly shown at the center of the Israeli flag, between two horizontal blue stripes that certainly represent the two rivers.”

“The two Rivers!” Paul exclaimed.

“Of course.” Mr. Jackson confirmed, as he looked at a framed picture of a bearded man with long hair in all his grandeur. “This is Mr. Albert

Pike, the Grand Commander,” he said, turning a quick glance at Paul, “And this door, here, leads to the chamber dedicated to him, where his work is being displayed for all freemasons to admire, and others to watch,” he clarified. “However,” he lowered his voice a bit, “The answer to your questions lies not here, but with his remains in the classified crypt underneath this chamber.”

A moment, long as eternity, stretched before Paul, as Mr. Jackson led the way inside the chamber.

“But . . . how do we get into the crypt?” Paul asked in a whisper. His voice echoed in Mr. Jackson’s ears.

“I have the code to the secret door,” he whispered back to Paul.

As Mr. Jackson had informed, the chamber contained Albert Pike’s published works, his unpublished manuscripts, notes, letters, tokens, portraits, and other belongings. Paul was in awe at the variety and number of subjects Mr. Pike had undertaken during his life.

“A very interesting man,” he announced, with a quick look at Mr. Jackson, and a glance combined with a grin at a couple of people there, visiting. They smiled back at him. One of them, more of a sociable creature than the others, approached Paul, perhaps in an attempt to initiate a conversation, but Mr. Jackson was quick enough to strategically come between them, and began talking. Paul didn’t understand his awkward behavior at once, yet he soon realized that Mr. Jackson had done that to prevent Paul from being unable to answer to any freemasonic idioms or signals the man might have used.

Like Mr. Gibson—a former Freemason at the Grand Lodge of Arkansas, who left the Craft, and joined the Society of Keepers at a later stage in his life—Mr. Jackson seemed likely to have once been a Freemason, as well. In fact, how could he have known the code to the secret door that lead to the underground crypt, had he not at some point been one, an important one, at that, unless there had been a snitch who had told him about it. Mr. Jackson sounded at least as knowledgeable as Mr. Gibson, if not more, on the secrets of Freemasonry. *More adventurous too*, Paul realized.

Half an hour later, when the last visitors had ended their tour of the chamber, Mr. Jackson didn’t waste another moment. He shut the door steadily behind them, and walked directly to a door that lay cleverly hidden behind the life-size portrait of Mr. Pike. A blue plaque with numbers and letters, in the form of the Seal of Solomon, became visible on the wall. With fervor, Mr. Jackson typed a certain combination of

numbers, followed by another combination of letters.

From behind them, in the chamber of the House of the Temple, something cracked with an odd sound that brought Paul to the present moment. He immediately veered in the direction of the sound, and saw that underneath a few bizarre shapes and freemasonic inscriptions, which had not been there before, a flat black-and-white stone—carved with the serious face of the Grand Commander, Albert Pike—was opening slowly from the middle.

“Hurry,” ordered Mr. Jackson, instantly.

Stunned by the mysterious turn of events, Paul followed Mr. Jackson without questions through the chamber, and towards the opened door.

“We have 18 seconds, before the door shuts again,” he said.

Paul abided. The door instantly closed behind them. Darkness invaded them for a few seconds, before the few lanterns—hanging on both sides of the wall, of what looked to be a rounded stairway heading underground—were automatically ignited.

They toddled down the stairway for perhaps a minute or two, until they finally reached the crypt, where the remains of Mr. Pike had been preserved in a royal Sarcophagus.

“At last,” Paul muttered under his breath, approaching the Sarcophagus. *What is the secret this man has been keeping?* Paul thought, before Mr. Jackson pointed out at a red book, preserved in a locked glass container, placed on an altar-like table between two pillars, and positioned ahead of the Sarcophagus.

Paul watched it in bafflement. “What’s this?” he finally managed to ask.

“This is the book that will perhaps answer all of your questions,” Mr. Jackson wisely replied.

Paul came nearer, and looked through the solid glass. The book had no title, no author’s name, nothing. It was just a thick red book, posed on an iron stand inside the glass urn. “How do we access it without breaking the glass?” he asked.

“No need to break it,” Mr. Jackson answered resolutely, as he picked up a necklace he held around his neck, inside his shirt. It had a golden key. Paul watched, as the man with the elegant white Stetson hat inserted it inside the lock that opened the lid. With a broad smile on his face, Mr. Jackson got hold of the book.

A moment of trepidation ran its course for Paul, as the enigmatic man began to turn the pages. What the two men hadn’t known was that, the

moment they had opened the lid of the glass box, a red light had begun to flash in the surveillance screening room, situated on the third floor of the House of the Temple.

“Aha . . . here it is,” Mr. Jackson uttered, pointing his finger at one of the paragraphs that read, “Let it be known to fellow brothers of the Craft that the Religious sacerdotal body of the Jews, known as the Pharisees, have taken their name from the Parsees, ’ ” he was prevented from quoting any further by Paul’s interruption.

“The Parsees!” he snapped aloud, as he seemed to recall the secret teachings given by the Keepers, in the Fortress of Gebel, instructing him of the great link that had existed between King Cyrus II and the *Aebirou-al-naher*— the Chaldean-Babylonian-Hebrew priests and families—*who crossed the river* towards the Land of Canaan. Yet, Paul had never thought about that. Entirely in shock, he had failed to make the connection, before now, of the similarity between both names: Pharisees and Parsees. “I just can’t believe it’s that obvious!” he stated.

Mr. Jackson smiled, fixed his eyes back on the book, and quoted again, “The Jewish religion is based principally on the ancient Persian religion, on that of Zarathustra—who came later in Persian history—and on Babylonian doctrines, as well.’ ” He looked into Paul’s eyes, and added an explanation, saying that the *six-pointed star* symbolizes the procreative sexual operation of the Babylonian Brotherhood Bloodline. The geographical area where this operation had first started was the city of Babylon in Mesopotamia—modern day Iraq—known as the land between the two rivers: the Tigris and the Euphrates.

“The Israeli Flag . . .” Paul muttered under his breath.

Meanwhile, frenzied sounds emerged from Albert Pike’s chamber, reaching the crypt below, where Paul and Mr. Jackson had been inspecting the red book.

“We have an intruder,” said one voice.

“Down in the crypt,” informed another.

Immediately realizing the time had come for him and Paul to escape the crypt, Mr. Jackson moved to plan ‘D’. The secret information he’d gotten about the crypt had not been as precise as he’d expected. He’d thought he’d be able to find the red book, and get out without problems. Plan ‘D’ would allow them an escape route from the crypt, through a tunnel built underneath the Sarcophagus. To access it, Mr. Jackson had to find a green button on the left pillar. He fervently hoped that at least this information would be accurate. If not, their destiny would be

unknown.

“Help me find a green button on the left pillar, Paul,” he ordered in a shaky voice, before he added, “It’s our only way out!”

According to Rashi’s Templars and Freemasons, the left pillar was called Boaz, in reference to Solomon’s great grandfather and King of Israel. Paul recalled the conversation he’d had with Mr. Gibson on that matter. *It also meant Babel*, he thought to himself.

Time was running out when Paul suddenly touched upon a green raised surface, and, without a second thought, firmly pressed on it, activating an automated pulley system that slowly began moving the Sarcophagus from its base. Footsteps running down the stairs towards the crypt were heard, louder and louder, as they approached.

“Hurry . . . Hurry . . .” shouted Mr. Jackson, his elegant white Stetson fell to the ground.

As Paul descended through the tunnel, followed by Mr. Jackson, shots of gunfire echoed inside the crypt. He heard a grunt of pain behind him, and immediately turned to look at Mr. Jackson. He was holding tightly his left arm, and Paul could see the blood, seeping through the palm of his right hand.

“You’ve been shot!” Paul grunted in dismay.

“Just a . . . a . . . shot, I’m fine . . .” he answered spasmodically. “Don’t stop, Paul. I’ll cover you . . . Go!”

“What are you talking about? I can’t leave you here,” Paul said, looking at the man who’d just offered his own life for his survival.

“Listen to me,” ordered Mr. Jackson, his eyes on Paul’s. “If I let them catch me now . . . they will certainly stop running after you . . . They’ll think I’m alone,” he explained in a firm and steady voice that belied the pain coursing through him.

“But . . . I really can’t do that,” Paul retorted, sick at the idea of Mr. Jackson’s fate, if left to the mercy of the Babylonian Brotherhood.

“No! This is an order, Paul! Things—more important than my life—are at stake here. Keep to the right. Now run!”

These were the final words Mr. Jackson uttered, before five men in black appeared through the tunnel in pursuit of the intruders. Paul had understood Mr. Jackson’s words, and started running at once, as fast as he could. He followed the trail, turning right, for about an hour, before he ultimately reached an opening behind a wall that led to a public garden.

“I’m safe,” he said to himself.

The thought of Mr. Jackson and what might be happening to him at

this very moment urged him to go back, and try to save him. But the rational part of Paul's mind reminded him of Mr. Jackson's last words, and of the fact that it was impossible for him to do that, in any case, on his own. The Red Book was in his possession, and he couldn't allow the risk of losing it, not now, not with the sacrifice that had been offered in its stead. The secrets contained therein should—and would—be revealed to the world.

Inside the tunnel, the five men in black caught Mr. Jackson, and took him back inside the House of the Temple and upstairs into a small room, where they imprisoned him for investigation. Mr. Jackson had complied with them, all the way up, without resistance. Although in pain from the deep injury in his arm, he seemed in a state of inner peace.

My mission has ended, he thought to himself, as he sat alone in the tiny room where they'd locked him. *The Red Book is in good hands now. The world shall know the truth*, he smiled.

Pacing the packed streets of Washington D.C., Paul thought of taking the train back to Lebanon, New Jersey, show the book to Mr. Gibson, and stay a couple of days, before travelling back to Lebanon, and convening with the Keepers and the Padre. His life was too precious to waste now.

Suddenly he stopped, and turned pale at sight of what he'd imagined to be a ghost or an apparition of some sort, amidst the falling night. Upon closer inspection, what he'd thought he'd seen turned out to be something different. A bronze statue of the Grand Commander—Albert Pike—stood in the triangle, opposite to the Municipality Building.

Paul heaved a sigh of relief at seeing the statue standing still, inside the triangle. "Statues can't walk," he mumbled under his breath, and smiled, reassured.

The trip to New Jersey had been arranged an hour and a half later. It was around ten when the train left the US capital, heading north.

The Star Chamber
Sunday, December 12, 04:05 PM

The joyful reunion—early Sunday morning, with the Keepers at the Fortress of Gebel—happened a week after his escapade from the House of the Temple. Paul had stayed a few days at Mr. Gibson’s little cottage by the lake, as it would’ve been extremely dangerous to take a flight back to Lebanon, immediately after having gotten a hold of the ‘Red Book’. Mr. Gibson had informed his guest that the ‘BB’s secret agents would be on a heightened state of alert and vigilance, closely watching all ports of entry, especially airports, for a likely accomplice to Mr. Jackson.

Holding the Red Book in his hands, Dr. Najem revealed a smile of triumph. “Good job, Paul. Good job!” he said, as he handed the book to the other Keepers, Professor Michel first, then Dr. Bechara, and finally Nabil, who took it to the Library, where he placed it in a special section dedicated to the Persians, the Chaldean-Babylonian-Hebrews, as well as to Rashi’s Templars, and the Freemasons that follow that line.

“You must be tired now, Paul,” Dr. Najem broke the silence, and added, “I believe you should rest for the day,” he proposed. “However, we will show you, later tonight, the secret passage that leads you to the Mystery Chamber of Gebel.”

“A secret passage to the Mystery Chamber?” Paul exclaimed, a sudden energy sprinting through his veins. “What now?” he asked.

“You simply cannot enter the Mystery Chamber from the Archaeological site, Paul. We think . . .” Professor Michel interrupted, his eyes widening in alarm. “Well, you’ll be taking the secret passage from here, because we cannot let you go openly to Gebel!”

“We believe Seth Servitors might still be watching the secret entry to the Mystery Chamber from the site,” Dr. Bechara explained with a serious tone and a deep frown. He turned his attention to Paul, and warned him, “If they catch you now, especially now, after they’ve lost their ‘Red Book’,

it would be your end and perhaps the end of our Fraternity. We trust the secret passage is safe. No one knows about it.”

All eyes turned to Paul. A frightening silence weighed on him.

“To answer your question ‘what now?’ we shall meet at eleven o’clock in the evening on the doorstep of the ‘Star Chamber’ for your final ritual,” Dr. Najem informed.

“My final ritual?” Paul wondered aloud.

“Yes. Every Keeper of the Word has gone through it, and so will you,” he explained.

At Paul’s nod of agreement, they all smiled.

Standing in front of the door of the Star Chamber later at night, he felt the quickened beats of his heart. He couldn’t stabilize it, or ignore its reverberations clutching his stomach. *The last ritual would take place anytime now*, he thought.

“Calm down,” whispered Nabil in reassuring tones, “Everything will be alright.”

Paul nodded, unable to match his confidence.

Dr. Najem opened the heavy wooden door, and led the way. They followed him, one after the other. At once, the cool air in the Chamber enfolded Paul—his mind and body. Pure and uplifting, it permeated through his pores, and imbued his heart.

All in white, from head to toe, the four Keepers cheerfully welcomed Paul into the Star Chamber, and congratulated him for reaching so far in his *Initiation*. They explained to him how the *man in white*, Jesus, had firmly stepped into the Temple of Shalim, after the Hebrews had made it imperfect, when they’d turned it into the Temple of Shlomo, Solomon. With great, fascinating authority Jesus had shoved out the impious traders and money dealers from the Temple, saying, “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers! You’ve made it imperfect!” His words, written in the New Testament, had reached Paul, clearly still, from the back of his mind. He recalled the Padre’s commentary of that powerful scene, which he had uttered with a smile in a sweet tone of voice, “The true battle of survival in this world, Paul, is not material . . . not for or by money, but by prayers, compassion, love, and peace—a spiritual victory. The road is awkward and long, but don’t be afraid, Truth shall always prevail.”

Paul’s heart took courage again, remembering these particular words, as he carefully listened to the Keepers—pointing out that he had still fallen short of success in his battle against Satan. The *Air of Freedom*—he

had lost it, but should he prevail in his next attempt, he would then be apt to move to the final element—the fifth. Despite the dread and thrill of the moment, he felt ready for it. He filled his lungs with fresh air, in a deep and plentiful breath that widened his thorax, straightened his shoulders, and brought his head up.

The light—diffused from the torches of the ten golden statues in the Star Chamber—enveloped him. Circling a *Five-Pointed Star* drawn in the middle of the marble floor, they appeared to him to be majestic guardians in a stance against the powers of evil. A distinctive statue majestically stood over the central point of the Star. Paul looked in awe at this eleventh statue that personified a Magician in white. In his left hand, a Scepter—the *Caduceus of Enoch-Hermes*—with two serpents coiled around it. The serpent's heads joined a little below the rim of the Caduceus's crest, which extended out in the form of the fluttering wings of a Phoenix. A golden crown on his head, the Magician carried a rolled papyrus, tied with a golden ribbon, in his right hand.

The serious voice of Dr. Najem rose from the right corner, reverberating through the Chamber. “The White Robe signifies the Purity in man,” he began. “The Scepter shows his Mastership over the basic elements of Nature, and the Golden Crown means the individual will—in unison with the Universal Light: God—for the manifestation of Truth and Justice,” he paused, adding, “It will be directly involved, in participation with Divine Power, over existential life. It is an eternal gift to the free spirits.

“Let me explain the meaning behind the Caduceus of Hermes, the Great seer of ancient times,” he resumed, “He was Thot—the Egyptian, Ibis-headed god—lawgiver, divider of time, and counter of the stars. Curious and strange as it may sound, the Caduceus resembles the double helix structure of the DNA! Could it be possible that the ancient seer had discerned it?” he halted, and continued, “In the ninth vision of the Sacred Alphabet, *Tet(h)*: the Old Serpent—which the seer saw coiled around the Tree of life, known also as the Shaft of the Shepherd—is our unconscious, a reminder of who we are, and who we would become.” He gazed at Paul, “Toth or Teth is the awakening of our memory, long hence latent—ever since we lost contact with our true nature. It is the Serpent who laid the foundation for our godhead lotus to blossom, lifting us upwards from the mud that constitutes our material, organic life, and into immortality. Like a Hierophant to a neophyte, it whispers divine words from *mouth to ear*. It is our revealed DNA, our hidden memory . . . our cultural-genetic

rhythm of Truth, long fallen short from its divine archetype.

“The Serpent around the Rod of Enoch was known in almost all Religions of the ancient civilizations as the symbol of wisdom and immortality,” Dr. Najem carried on. “The eternal cycle of death and rebirth was represented by a serpent biting its tail: the *Ouroboros*. We ignore why the Church has associated it with the Devil in the first place. Some assume that it is because of its correlation with the cycle of death and rebirth, as being the cycle of pain and entrance into matter, where temptation and sexual desires are always in active states,” he seemed to be done speaking, and looked at the Professor.

“In the Hindu system of Yoga, for instance, the Kundalini Serpent stands upward along the human spinal cord, having Seven Centers of Energy,” Professor Michel proposed, continuing the teachings where Dr. Najem had stopped. “Two currents of Energy—one positive and one negative—in the shape of two serpents traveling upwards, crisscrossing around the Seven Centers, known by the name of Chakras.” He halted for a moment of reflection, and added, “The Spaces and loops the two serpents form around the Caduceus of Thot are just like those of the Chakra system, described in Yoga. In addition, Esoteric Physiology—a secret system found in ancient Egypt—shows some likeness in its portrayal of the force centers in the human body.”

“The intertwined dual serpents also represent the process of evolution and involution in esoteric sciences.” He looked at Paul as he spoke, capturing his attention, “It simply indicates the spirit descending into matter, and then, rising back again to enlightenment in the spiritual dimension. In fact, it is through the wings of the Phoenix, flapping vigorously over the heads of the serpents that liberation from the unconscious limitations of the mind could occur. Then, a new dawn of self-consciousness would rise.”

The Professor then elaborated on the Doctrine of Hermes, explaining that it is essentially based on the unity of all things. God is all, and God is within. Thus, God is ‘One’, and humanity can be one with God through spiritual awareness. Hermes—also called Hermes Trismegistos, or Thrice Greatest—is identified as the Earthly Agent of the Divine Creator. Certainly, he was the inventor of speech and of the Phonetic Alphabet, being ‘Thor-Theut’ himself—the wise physician and magician mentioned in the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

His Caduceus is held by the ‘Shepherd of Men’, who guides humanity to repent, to get rid of the darkness within, and to grasp the inner light.

He would also lead humanity to forsake corruption, and partake of immortality. Every *Initiate* is required to have some sort of self-discipline, and to experience certain forms of asceticism. Silent Meditation gives the *Initiate* the ability to see the Great Vision and perceive its depth, by suppressing all senses that fall within the boundaries of Dualism.

Hermes revealed that man on Earth is a mortal god, and that God in the abode of Heaven is an immortal Man. His famous axiom ‘*As above so below*’ is but an invitation for man to come nearer to God, for God is always in the heart of man. Therefore, it is a solemn call for man to become a god—*son of God*, for in truth, God has uttered the *Word* that came to dwell among us in the form of a man.

“Christianity preaches that Jesus is the son of man, or woman, so to speak,” the Professor suggested with a smile, “But the concept of *son of God* would not be fully understood without the spiritual revelation of Hermes-Enoch-Taautus. Jesus—entrapped like us, humans, inside the cycle of death and rebirth, in duality—succeeded, after all, in conquering this cycle, by reaching fulfillment in the oneness with God, and becoming what he was in reality: the *son of God*,” he said in eloquent conclusion.

“We have to close the Circle . . . now,” Dr. Bechara invited, surprising them all. “Or I should say, close the lines of the Star, and initiate the energy of the Five Points of Fellowship!”

“What do you mean?” Paul asked, perplexed.

“Come along . . . follow me.”

Dr. Najem sat crossed-legged at the apex of the Star on the Eastern side; right beneath the image of a Rising Sun. Everyone else took their position on the remaining four points. Professor Michel sat on the left, the Northern side, as Dr. Bechara sat on the right, the Southern point. Nabil and Paul hesitated for a moment then randomly chose the two remaining points, directed towards the West.

“The five-pointed star of Pythagoras,” Dr. Bechara remarked, “known also as the *Pentagram*, means ‘death to reveal’ in the Secret Occult language of the authentic Tradition. Each of its lines intersects with the others in Macro to Micro proportions. Therefore, if correctly drawn inside the Circle, as it is the case here, the Star would then hold the power to exorcise the bad daemons. So let’s start!”

The meditation began . . . and the Buddhist mantra AUM echoed . . .

They were deeply engrossed in meditation when a sudden rush of energy darted along the five lines of the Star, whooshed from one point to

another, lit them all up at once, and stayed that way for some time, before an abrupt cut-off took place, astonishing Paul. Immediately after, a sense of order settled in, and a great peace—harmonious in nature—flooded the air.

“O Thot-Hermes, the Ibis-Headed god at the ‘Great Hall of Justice’, the divine lawgiver, you, who record the assessment of the heart of the deceased against the *feather of truth*. Open the way . . .” Dr. Najem invoked the spirit of Thor.

From the top of the Caduceus, something akin a crystal ball, shone with an intense, transparent light. Paul kept focusing. The wings seemed to have come to life, fluttering noiselessly up and down, right and left, transporting the light from the middle point, and diffusing its glorious radiance all around. Within the spiral-elliptical movement of the light, an image that seemed to have crossed time and space hovered in the air, a few meters above their heads. It was the sacred letter *Aleph*, miraculously beaming amidst the mystical circle.

A sense of deep serenity inhabited Paul’s mind.

“In the Spiritual world,” Dr. Najem began, “The letter *Aleph* symbolizes the Absolute Being from whom all life sprung. In the mental world it denotes Unity—the Equilibrium of life; whereas on the physical plane it means the Microcosmic man, who—by expanding his occult faculties—would elevate himself into the spheres of the infinite Macrocosm, God,” and pausing briefly, he added, “What is God?”

“It is impossible for the human intellect to rightly conceive what God is,” answered Professor Michel. “One cannot describe with physical concepts that which is immaterial and eternal.”

“Indeed, the eternal is an actual perception of the spirit, the other is not,” Dr. Bechara carefully continued, “That which can be perceived by our senses, can be described by our words; but that which is incorporeal, invisible, and without form cannot be realized through our ordinary senses.”

“I understand thus, O Thot, I understand that God is *ineffable*,” Nabil uttered cogently, and signaled for Paul to repeat his words.

Paul abided at once, with a sideways glance in his direction, “O Hermes, I understand that God is ineffable.”

A moment of sacred silence ensued . . .

“Please,” Dr. Najem then urged in a gentle tone, “Please, repeat after me the Glorious Hymn that Hermes taught his direct disciples, and then, unto us through a succession of Keepers of the Word.” He took a deep

breath, and with a voice full of reverence he intoned, “Holy is God the Father of all beings . . .”

“Holy is God the Father of all beings,” Paul repeated with the same zeal.

“Holy is God, whose wisdom is carried out into execution by his own Powers . . . Holy art Thou, who through the *Word* created all,” they all continued in unison, and Paul followed.

“Hence, keep in mind not to speak of God without Light, for God is the True Light. Accept ‘It’ with a free spirit,” Dr. Najem advised with authority.

“I believe in Thee, and vow to live freely the Life I’ve obtained, I shall work hard to perceive the Light,” they chanted in a melodious prayer.

“Although God is ineffable,” Dr. Najem resumed in an earnest tone, “the most appropriate names given to God all start with the letter *Aleph*. I name: Al-El, the Phoenician God, the Most High; Aton, the Egyptian Monotheistic God of Akhenaton; Al-Apollo, the Pythagorean God; Abba, the Father of all, preached by Jesus Christ; and Allah, the Muslim God of the Sufis.”

To Paul’s dismay, Dr. Najem addressed him, saying, “The door to the other world is now open for you to continue the Journey. We are going to leave you now by yourself. Alone, you will have to meditate on the meanings of the words you will find in the papyrus of the Magician. It is the Emerald Tablet of Hermes, the Sacred Tablet of the Shepherd.”

Paul gawked at him in a moment of dread then swallowed with difficulty. His time had come much sooner than he had expected. He glanced at the others, their eyes conveyed warmth and encouragement. Professor Michel held Paul’s eyes for a moment, before he uttered an explanation, “Tradition has it that an *Initiate* of the Great White Fraternity found the Tablet on the dead body of Hermes, in the land of the Kabirim—the ancient land of Phoenicia,” he paused for an instant. He then continued, after a profound reflection, “For centuries, the Hierophants of Hermes have whispered the words herein, into the ears of new adepts during their *Initiation*. It contains the essence of the Enochian wisdom.”

“Now,” he added, “After you read the words inscribed on the papyrus, you will have to open the secret door that leads you all the way to the Mystery Chamber.”

“Where is it? How can I open it?” Paul rushed his questions, feeling a bit lost and confused.

Dr. Bechara came to his rescue, “All you have to do is turn the head of the Phoenix, at the top of the Caduceus, to the right. Go on my brother, and . . . rejoice in the Wisdom of the Ages.”

His words and the mystical power his eyes conveyed shook Paul’s being and unhinged him in a way he could not fully understand. But the Keepers of the Word, as it turned out, truly held a great knowledge of the secrets—the secrets of life.

The Wisdom of the Ages
Wednesday, December 15, 01:07 AM

Paul watched them disappearing, one after the other, behind the door that bolted close with a dreadful sound. He felt trapped for a moment, alone with his thoughts, as he prepared himself to meet with destiny. Time had escaped him, or so he reasoned in his solitude. Were they minutes, hours, or perhaps days, he couldn't tell. Yet, when he stood, to walk the distance separating him from the Magician, his feet felt unexpectedly light. He stood in front of the statue of Hermes in a paramount moment of reverence, retrieved the papyrus from his hand, and took a sitting position in the middle of the *five-pointed star*, where the statue stood. With trembling hands, he untied the golden ribbon, unrolled the old paper, and read in a murmur:

The Emerald Tablet of Hermes
The Sacred Tablet of the Shepherd

What I speak is True, without error, true and most certain:

1- What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is similar to that which is below, to perform the miracles of the one thing, the *Unitas*.

2- As all things were produced by the mediation of one being, so all things arose from this one thing by adaptation.

3- Its father is the Sun; its mother is the Moon, while the Wind carried it in its bosom, the Earth nursed it.

4- Its Father is that of all perfection, dispersing throughout the whole world.

5- Its power is vital if changed into Earth.

6- Separate the Fire from the Earth, the subtle from the gross, gently and with a good deal of sagacity.

7- It ascends from Earth to Heaven and again descends to Earth, and revives the strength and unites the power of things, superior and inferior, *God and Man*.

8- Thus, you will possess the light and the glory of the whole world, therefore, all obscurity will flee from you.

9- This is the strong fortitude of all fortitudes, for it overcomes every subtle thing, and penetrates every solid thing.

10- This is how the world was created . . .

Hence, all wonderful adaptations were of this manner, therefore, I am called Thrice Great Hermes, possessing the three parts of the Philosophy of the whole world, and that which I have written is achieved through the Operations of the One.

Paul took the necessary time to meditate upon every word until a strange feeling of Unity inhabited his mind at last. He inhaled the mysterious, universal, magical agent, and exhaled all darkness. The Akasa, Akasha—the Astral light—began its circulation inside him, while the correlations of its *Forces* endowed him with the Philosopher’s Stone and the elixir of life.

He was now ready to receive the *Wisdom of the Ages*.

Full of renewed confidence and determination, he grabbed the Head of the Phoenix with both hands and spun it to the right, effortlessly. A click, followed by a splinting sound, echoed all around the Star Chamber. The floor beneath him slid open in a flash. Darkness swallowed him speedily, down a narrow tunnel and into the underworld. When his feet met solid ground again, he found himself standing inside a corridor. He looked straight ahead.

Hung on yellowish cracked walls of stone, some iron torches illuminated the long corridor, stretching out in front of him from both sides. He took a deep, long breath before courageously departing into the unknown, walking with firm steps between the ancient walls. Their moldy condition and rancid smell bespoke of antiquity and underground conditions. He could tell from what he saw and smelled that it belonged to a period equivalent to that of the city of Gebel and the Mystery Chamber itself.

The air turned gradually chillier, as he advanced farther into the past. Finding warmth in the intense light of the torches, he surprised himself smiling in defiance. The path was rendered enjoyable albeit enigmatic, and the long march enthralled him with the vivid memory of the Ancients. As he reached a small cedar-wood door within a stone arcade, he felt the reminiscences of all those who had halted there before him.

Paul stood still for a few minutes. *This door takes me inside the Mystery Chamber*, he thought then visualized the countless dangers the Ancients might have encountered along their historical and spiritual trail—the trail that had led him to the secrets of the Fraternity, the Keepers of the Word.

“Kadmus!” he invoked out loud, but the door did not open. He

frowned, glanced over his shoulder then back at the door, mulling over a clue. “Thor!” he let out in sudden intuition. A swishing sound resonated, as if coming from the past . . . and the door unbolted open.

Inside the Mystery Chamber of Gebel he paused, mesmerized once again, in front of the beautiful Great Altar. A few seconds later, the Alphabet rose from its slumber in great glory.

His eyes opened . . .

Shining above the crescent moon, the Sun reached over the darkest regions of planet Earth. Something, however, appeared to have radically changed. The Sun stood like a King in the center, amidst the Heavenly bodies—moving in circular motion across time and space and all around it.

Great Temples—dedicated to the Sun—rose on top of High Mountains. The moon had vanished. No more illusions, no more false religious ceremonies and rituals to non-existing gods, and no more bloody sacrifices to *any* god.

Before that time, people who were guided by the so-called religious men of all nations did not raise their minds and hearts in prayers to whatever resided beyond the *visible heaven*. They followed not the true *invisible* light, but rather, the luminous bodies that blazed in the firmament. They had ascribed divinity to the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars! And the drama continued, as religions—false religions—haunted the minds of people, the king-priests declared the *Jus Divinum* doctrine by which they led their flocks, blinded by imagination.

However, only a few *Initiates* had conceived a clear and different vision. Blindness took no part in their choice of visualizing the world beyond the physical. Into the Mysteries they had entered, and sought the Truth, in order to open their eyes to the True Light. And inside, in the deepest sanctuary of God, the new adepts met with *Man* and his odyssey in life. The Secrets, therefore, became knowable. What was concealed to the profane revealed now to the eyes of the *Initiate*. The door, shut in the face of the weak and naive, opened wide to those who dared to knock. The veil of *Isis*—the holder of the *Secret Doctrine*—lifted up, and the rays of *Osiris* shone over him, the newborn son, *Horus* the *Initiate*.

The Mysteries somehow resembled each other, not only in Egypt and Phoenicia but almost everywhere across the ancient world: in India, Greece, Mexico, United Kingdom, and Germany, among others. However, the Truth had remained one. Very rare were those who could see it, and preserve it. Paul was among those who had received the honor, and had

been allowed access to the Mysteries. With great awe, he had entered the domain of the *Secret Order*. There—in front of the Great Altar—stood the Hierophant, clad in his bright white tunic. A purple robe draped over his shoulder added to the sense of mysticism in his countenance.

His voice rose, loud and clear in Paul's ears, "The Stars, the Sun, and the Moon—which ornament the ceiling: the sky above our heads—are neither objects of worship nor are they personified images of the Deity, as the vulgar think. They are only symbols . . . allegories to *Higher Truths*. Shamash—the Sun—shines during the day, and dives into the ocean later at night. It is Aton—Osiris—whom Typhon killed. However, on the third day he rises sublime and powerful again, akin to a god. The same thing happened to Adonis. And when, later at night, the Sun gave its place to the Moon, Isis—to shine, and persist in guiding people throughout the dark moments—this second luminary became a goddess too.

"It is because of that . . . because Light wins over the Darkness, that people considered them divinities and worshipped them. Planets, stars, and the Zodiac also played an important role in the theology of the ancients. Now, here in the abode of Mysteries, in the Temple of the 'One', the celestial objects mentioned above, fall . . . they just fall. So, beware the illusions! Here, in the domain of the *Secret Order*, we do not worship anything from the visible world as true divinities, but only as reflections or manifestations of an invisible Truth—the *Word*, the Word uttered by God—the Universal Mind that diffuses in everything, our *Father who art in heaven*.

"There is a spark of God in each of us, embedded inside, deep within our minds—the only bridge between Heaven and Earth, or shall I say, between Spirit and Body. Man is a tri-une being, set in disorder most of the time. Lost between two worlds, and sunk in duality, *man* remains a wanderer inside a labyrinth of error. Let the mind be conscious of itself, as *holder and keeper of the word*, so that it can connect the body and spirit in one *Unity Point* of Truth. Accordingly, creation of *Harmony* will occur, and *Order* will be established."

Silence echoed in the Chamber for a few seconds.

The Hierophant moved towards the altar, and stood majestically behind it. The sign of Pisces appeared, inscribed on the visible side of the altar. He took a cup of wine in his hand, raised it, and uttered mystically, "The cup of wine is the spirit, and the piece of bread is the body." He paused, as Paul watched him in silent admiration, not knowing if he had appeared from the world of visions or the world of realities.

Then it dawned on him. He was the Priest of the Most High . . . *he was Melki-Sedek!*

A melodious susurrus slowly started to become audible, and it seemed to be emanating from the two beautiful Pillars by the sides of the Great Altar. The golden stone on the left Pillar twinkled. Its light grew steadily, ever more intensely. At the same time, the purple stone—on the peak of the right Pillar—beamed softly, and filled the room with exquisite colors.

“The Pillars are alive!” Paul whispered in wonder.

The wheat—engraved on the left golden Pillar—shone vividly, and changed into bread. Meanwhile, the vine—ascending along the purple right Pillar—gleamed with a bloody red light, and turned into wine. The powerful words of Melki-Sedek had brought life to the Pillars, and the light emerging from the Stones had fused into one, at the point where the sign of Pisces shone on the Great Altar . . . and the two fishes merged into one!

Magically, on the ancient wall behind the Great Altar, the painting of the most sacred rite of all times—that of ‘bread and wine’—regenerated gradually into a new one, as the few pieces of the puzzle found their hidden yet determined places, forming a complete image of the Last Supper. There, at the table, Jesus Christ and his disciples shared the bread and wine.

Most certainly, it was not the painting described in The Da Vinci Code! Paul thought.

“I elevate the loaf of bread and the cup of wine to you, Abba, so you can bless the people of Earth, and unify them with you, Oh, Universal Mind,” the High Priest intoned. He then ate and drank in a ritual of unification, and asked Paul to do the same in *real life*. A great sense of sacred presence overwhelmed Paul, as he recognized the Truth in the High Priest’s words, which entered into his very realm, like the very first rays of Sun—the Son—that shine over the darkened world.

“The cup of wine is the remembrance of the Spirit that inhabits us all, and leaves us at the moment of death.” He took a moment, and then said, “The piece of bread is the assurance, which the Body gives to life,” he continued softly. “Death and Life—the great riddle of the human mind—will no longer be an enigma to you, brother, but rather, an answer to your query.”

“Know that death is not a complete breakdown of the human being. It is not the end. It is just death in the Body, and life in the eternal Spirit. That God has resurrected, be it Osiris or Adonis does not matter

anymore. What matters is you, my brother! Understand that you too will resurrect one day above the cycle of generation. It will happen when the light of the dawn of time shines upon you, and lifts you up in a final resurrection, out of the *circle of necessity* and into the abode of the Father.” He waited in silence, and added, “Let *Justice and Mercy* be the eternal lights that guide you through the refinement of your spirit and the perfection of your Body. Henceforth, under the Eye of Providence and with perpetual effort, I, Melki-Sedek, bid you to live by the virtues and moralities, as a true witness to the *Secret Order*. You are the true Keeper of the Word!”

“Along the great history of the Mysteries, Keepers have always been the announcers of the coming of the *son of man*, who will whisper the eternal dictum of ‘Universal Love and Peace’ into human ears. He will awaken the Divine Truth in the human *Mind*. He will do all that before leaving the Planet Earth, *the Sphere of Generation*, to finally merge with the ultimate Truth, as a *Son of God*, in the realm of the One,” Melki-Sedek concluded eloquently.

Hearing that, Paul looked at the Hierophant of God, the Most High, ‘El-Alyon’, with great respect, honor, and a feeling of commitment. He was one of the few true Keepers of the Word, yearning and waiting for the great coming of the *Kosmic Man*!

Immediately after that—from the carving of the fish on the Great Altar—a Cross—the Sacred *Tau*—appeared in all its glorious light. It was the final letter of the Sacred Alphabet. Smoothly but energetically the Divine Sign—bathed in the Eternal Light of *Abba*—entered Paul’s eyes, conveying His essence into the closing realm of visions.

Tau
An Eternal Moment

Through the mist *he* appeared, walking along the field, sure of his deed, fearless of the end and of his adversaries—scurrying and raging behind him. They had felt threatened by his constant message of *Love and Peace*, and had refused to perceive the *Light*. He had come to the world from a *Superior Order*, and so, with slow and steady steps, his destination clear, he continuously marched without turning back. His long white-linen tunic, torn by excessive use, edged his papyrus sandals—worn out by his long journey through the awkward and hard path of Truth.

Paul was there, watching and wondering about him. His enemies cursed him, and threw stones at him, but he never answered back. They ran after him, spitting and howling out his death like mad dogs, thunder in the midst of a storm, but he kept impressively silent. His power of control amazed Paul. When he passed by Paul, he smiled with an *ineffable* tenderness. Loving warmth emitted *Beauty* from his eyes, and communicated with Paul's dazzled mind. Paul followed the *man in white* without hesitation. A soft breeze escorted him along the way.

A small hill stood just ahead. He advanced, getting closer. Stains of blood appeared on his white robe. Surrounded by a few mountains and plains, the hill appeared, as if in the heart of the world. A beautiful old tree rose on the top. Despite his injuries, he approached his destination with unnoticeable effort. Very few men and women followed him with sad faces, weeping. They were probably members of his family and some friends. Compassion towards that mysterious man overwhelmed Paul. He wanted to help, but courage seemed to have escaped him, as it had escaped his relatives and friends—who seemed unable to assist the man walking towards the hill.

Reaching the tree on the top of that hill, he greeted it, and turned back to face those who considered him an enemy. He, on the other hand, held

no such feelings of resentment towards them or towards anyone! He raised his hands up to the sky, and whispered in a silent zephyr—a soundless moment in which hundreds of arrows, perhaps even more, launched with mighty hatred yet by shaky hands, swished across the air and struck his body. The strength of the strikes pierced him, crucified on the tree of life and death. His eyes blinked. A nail perforated his right wrist, another caught painfully on his other wrist, and then another across his feet. He strove for a mouthful of air.

They had just elevated a cross on that hill . . . in the heart of the world. He looked down at the people, and smiled with the same warm and loving eyes. They wept and wept again. In spite of all the suffering and pain that invaded his realm, he only murmured a faint sound, a sound only the *Eternal* could hear.

His blood dripped to the ground—a witness, or rather, an *insignia* in the memory of life—marking his sacrifice on the *Altar of Humanity*. Whether on the cross or on the tree, it didn't matter at all. Everywhere *he* existed, *he* appeared powerful, standing in the center, a Master, intimidating the flesh, and shining with divine charm.

With great emotion, the faithful few who had come to that place looked at him, thought about him, hoped and asked for a miracle—for a way for him to save himself. From above, however, he kept watching them. In the fullness of time, he knew he would not fulfill their wishes, but rather, accomplish his mission, written by Divine Words. Paul drew nearer to the cross. Somebody there filled a Grail with *his* shedding blood. *Joseph of Rameh!* Paul gasped in recognition.

The murderers, conversely, waited for him to die, debating whether or not he could save himself. A frightening feeling appeared to have taken over them, and an anxiety subdued the remnants of their thoughts. Time elapsed slowly for the dying, but too quickly for the caring ones. The Sun had not yet disappeared in the ocean, but darkness had crept up that hill like a spy. He gazed at them, then towards the sky above, and talked to his Father, saying, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

Time stood still.

As *Keeper of the Word*, Paul knew by then that the man of the white-linen garment was, in truth, the *Kosmic Man*. His great power of compassion and his aptitude to forgive—even those who had greater sin than Pilate—left Paul awestruck. Suddenly the air changed, and the wind blew all around. It struck *him* hard, diffusing the coldness of death into

his blood. In a mystical whisper he chanted to God, his Father, “*Eli, Eloi . . .*” The call held no request for help, but rather, for guidance along the final path of his conscious spirit. “It is finished,” he imparted, as his spirit floated away from his body like a note of melody from a musical chord.

The Sun sunk into the ocean at once. Massive black clouds clothed the hill and its surroundings. They hastily moved in all directions, changing forms, eventually hovering like circles in the sky. The air became cold, very cold. The Earth rocked and quaked. Every existing atom, whether blind or intelligent, trembled inside. Animals drifted in weird movements, loosing direction, crying and howling in fear. Birds lost control of their flight, and the fish plunged into the abyss. Flowers trembled in the breeze, and trees swayed in the darkening tempest.

The walls of each fake Temple and house shook to their very foundations. People became clumsy, as they lost their perception of things. Chaos replaced the orderly rhythm of life. Night invaded from all directions. Alone, abandoned in an obscured and unknown place, they felt unsafe, searching for a probable answer to their mislaid feelings.

Abruptly, the erratic hysteria of nature came to a halt. *What was it?* Paul marveled. He turned to watch the faithful, lowering the body, very gently, from the cross. The tree breathed. His enemies departed, rejoicing in their victory and relief. His mother, family, and friends took the body away, to bury it in the Sarcophagus—inside a new tomb that Joseph of Rameh, his Great uncle, had carved in the rock of his garden. Paul went with them.

From afar, their eyes perceived twinkles of light. The more they walked towards that light, the more their fear of darkness and their anxious loneliness faded away. Then, the sound of drums echoed all around. The sky cleared for the stars to shine like diamonds on the dark-blue dress of an Ancient Goddess—the Queen of Heaven. The road led them inside a forest of Oak and Cedar trees. Its beauty enchanted them. The fragrance of *tears*—the ‘golden amber’, leaking down from the trees—seeped into their minds.

Time elapsed without a trace. Clouds ran across the sky. Days followed nights, and nights followed days. The sky danced. On the third day, when the moonlight dimmed, a faint whisper came from afar—far away like the wailing of some lost spirit. Within seconds, the faint wail surged into a steady voice. A voice, sweet as amber, vibrated inside the walls of the Mystery Chamber, where the body rested.

“Let God—the Most High, the Father—illuminate you, and lead you out from the wilderness of pain and illusions into the *Realm of Light!*”

Words of mystery indeed, strong and meaningful, entered their ears like the sound of waterfalls, thundering down from a High Mountain. Then they watched, as the body took life again! They trembled inside, and followed the light within.

“Fire in the East is shining over water in the West. Life is conquering death. Behold the resurrection of Man!” the voice continued.

From within their inner realm they saw *him*, standing in front of them, on the top of the High Mountain. His arms stretched upwards, his feet parted. A crown of red roses ornamented his head, and his hair glittered under the rays of the Sun, draping his shoulders. His glorious pink aura calmed down their fright. A *five-pointed star* shone on his chest, revealing the emanation of Heaven in his being.

He was the *Initiate* of the First Order. A *microcosm of the macrocosm*. An elected to the Great Power. He was Keeper of Justice, Wisdom, and the Mercy of God throughout the *Eternal Truth*. Wearing his new white-linen garment, he appeared pure as an Angel, a god. With a glorious smile he whispered aloud, “I’m Hermes-Enoch-Taautus, Adonis, Horus-Osiris, Krishna, Pythagoras, Buddha . . . I’m Jesus Christ, son of man, son of God, every man, in the process of becoming—a Kosmic Man.” Silence, and then, “I stand as a Metatron between the Spirit and the Body, redeeming the body—by its regeneration below, and the spirit—by its jubilation above, giving Humanity the *will* to walk once more with God. I am the son of the everlasting Light.” And before it was all concluded, he said, “I am now leaving Earth—my mother, and will rejoin my Kingdom, where my Father lives eternally.”

He opened his arms up high, and soared like a flame towards Heaven. Along his final resurrection, he uttered loudly, “I am the Aleph and the Tau, the beginning and the end.”

His last words vibrated all over the Kosmos.

Up in Heaven, he would become a creature of Light, free at last from the tyranny of matter and the aspirations of the spirit of bondage.

Epilogue

*34 AD
Mystery Chamber, Gebel
Early Morning*

No more than a few days after the Resurrection, Joseph of Rameh—the Great uncle of Jesus and one of his most faithful followers—joined his niece, Mariam, at the kitchen table in her small house in the village of Kana. They intoned a thanksgiving prayer to their God, the Most High ‘El’ and to his son ‘Immanuel’.

A few other friends and members of the family congregated with them to share their meal in remembrance of the death of Jesus, and his resurrection up to the Father—the King of the Kingdom of Heaven. Quietness reigned on the Family reunion. They rarely sobbed at their loss, for they were heartened by the beginning of a new era, with the fulfillment of a prophecy to the people of Galilee in the region of Phoenicia. A savior had been announced.

“Our Father who art in Heaven is a God of Love and Peace,” Mariam suddenly proclaimed, breaking the silence. “He often asked Anat, the Mother Goddess, Queen of Heaven, to plant the soil with love, to pour peace in the bosom of Earth, and to multiply love in the heart of the fields. She listened to him, and delivered Adonis. It happened, again and again, and I listened. We all did, didn’t we?” The question held no hint of doubt, but merely a public confirmation of what they all believed in the silence of their hearts. “Jesus didn’t suffer, die, and resurrect only for us, the people of Galilee and Phoenicia. Every drop of his blood that fell to the ground should be a reminder of the message of Love and Peace, which he brought to the whole world,” she ended her statement, and waited calmly for a response.

It came at once, in the form of loving smiles from Joseph—her uncle,

Mary Magdalene, John the Beloved, Philip, Simon-Peter and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John, Simon the Canaanite, Matthew, Paul—the ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes, and a few others around her. They believed in what Mariam had just declared. They knew and understood. She smiled back.

“Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, *Abba*, Father,” Paul, the most learned of the disciples of Jesus, affirmed with supreme faith in his voice. “The ritual of ‘bread and wine’ should continue, and spread all over the world, for Jesus was like Melki-Sedek, a High Priest of ‘El’, a one spiritual priesthood.”

“Indeed, it should,” Joseph agreed instantly. “I’ll be leaving on a holy trip to the Sacred Land of ‘El’—Gebel, in a couple of days. Then, on my return from there, I shall sail west to the Land of Tin, Bar-Tanak, and spread the *word* there.”

Reassured from what she had just heard, Mariam stated, “How many times did Jesus try to preach the Kingdom of the Father to the Jews, our neighbors in Judea, and how many were the times they refused to listen to him? I tell you now, forget about them, and let’s spread the *word* all over the world. Go to Alexandria, Antioch, and Greece . . . There, people will listen to you.”

They all nodded in agreement. Paul, however, informed Mariam of his wish, to try preaching to the Jews once more.

“You can try if you want . . . you can try,” she replied softly.

In the very few moments that passed, everybody made their plans, and determined the destination they would take, to spread the message; a mission entrusted to them to fulfill. John decided to accompany Joseph on his holy trip to Gebel.

Around midday, perhaps four days later, clad in white tunics, they rode their mules through the gates of the city of Gebel like two messengers of God. The citizens recognized them at once as members of the Asaya Fraternity—the *healers*. The news about their arrival reached the ears of the High Priest of Gebel, who ran to meet and welcome them into the holy city.

“Shalam El likum . . .” the High Priest greeted them joyfully with open arms. “I’m Adonisedek, the Priest of Gebel.”

“Shalam,” they both replied at once, and introduced themselves.

“We come from the house of Mariam in Kana, carrying with us the Holy Blood in the Holy Grail,” Joseph declared devotedly, a moment

later.

“The Holy Grail!” The High Priest exclaimed in surprise. He then fearfully looked around him, came closer to them, and whispered, “You mean the blood of our savior Immanuel?”

“Yes,” replied Joseph, sternly. “And we wish to hide it here, in the Great Phoenician Temple of Gebel.”

“Oh . . . but it’s an honor for us to keep the blood of the Son, protected in the Holy Land of the Father! Uh . . . please follow me. I know the best place to hide it.”

Joseph, John, and Adonisedek walked side by side between the ruins of the Great Temple. Some of the pillars were still standing. A few steps ahead they turned right, and walked a bit farther then turned to the right again until they finally reached an ancient door in the wall. Adonisedek looked carefully over his shoulder then opened it quickly for the three men to rush inside. The High Priest lit the torch, hanging from one of the walls of the Chamber. At once, the torches on all the other walls lit systematically. A beautiful ancient Sarcophagus stood in front of them.

“This is the Sarcophagus of our Great King of Gebel, Ahiram,” the High Priest uttered respectfully.

“Do you intend to hide the Grail inside the Sarcophagus?” John asked with some reservation.

“No, not here, but in the next Chamber . . . the Mystery Chamber.”

Adonisedek moved a few steps behind the Sarcophagus, and unbolted a secret door. Joseph and John followed him inside the room, and stopped in awe at the beautiful sight that met their eyes. The lit torches shed their light on the colorful mosaics on the floor; the Great Altar surrounded by twin Pillars, and the paintings on the walls, one of which attracted their attention in particular. Standing clear behind the Great Altar, it depicted the ritual of *bread and wine*. John whispered in respect, “The Mystery Chamber.”

The High Priest moved to the Great Altar, and performed a salutation rite to ‘El’. John and Joseph followed suit. On the Great Altar rested a fine wooden box. Adonisedek carefully opened it, and immediately, a mesmerizing Cedar fragrance emerged, filling the air, and refreshing them.

“This box is very ancient,” the High Priest explained. “It was made by Enoch—the ancient seer of Mt. Hermon—after he descended to Gebel, to proclaim it as the Holy Land of ‘El’. The box has great magical potency and strong powers of preservation. It can surely keep the *blood*

rejuvenating throughout the eternal cycle.”

Joseph and John smiled, for they already knew about the Tradition—the Tradition of the Great White Fraternity. Joseph stood in front of the Great Altar, took the Sacred Cup out of the leather sack he carried on his shoulder, and held it high in his hands.

“In the beginning was The Word,” proclaimed John, solemnly. “And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. The *word* was made flesh, and has dwelt among us. It lived in the very few *Initiates* who suffered, died, and resurrected. The peace of the world depends on the ultimate realization of man, the resurrection of the *Kosmic Man*.”

On the Sacred Cup—the Holy Grail—Joseph had earlier inscribed, in gold, the two most important letters of the Sacred Alphabet: the *Aleph* and the *Tau*, the beginning and the end. He did that in reverence to the last words of Jesus in his glorious moment of Resurrection.

“The Kosmos, stars, planets, Earth—and its living creatures—are all letters of the Alphabet,” he attested solemnly. “All are the Alphabet that communicates itself to us, and informs us of the will and the law of the Most High God ‘El’—the Universal Mind.”

After completing the ritual, Joseph carefully placed the Holy Grail inside the Cedar box that shut down instantly. The two precious stones, resting on the Pillars, twinkled with a bright light that peacefully diffused over the entire Mystery Chamber. Joseph had already made an exact replica of the Holy Grail. He would later take it to the Land of Tin—Britain.

* * *

Paul woke up, on the morning of December 25th, in his bed, at home, in the Mountains of Eden. After a copious breakfast and a cold shower, he drove up towards the Chapel of the Lady of the Fortress, seeking peace of mind. Winter had started . . .

He had contacted Padre Joseph to check on him, and had delighted at the cheerful sound of his voice and at the news he’d had. The Police had finally discovered the criminals, and raided their headquarters. The Padre had told Paul that he, and the rest of the team that had worked at the Archaeological site in Gebel, were now free to move about without

fear of persecution. Now, after winning over the dark-side, nothing could ever frighten Paul, or even endanger the Great Fraternity of the Keepers of the Word. The 'BB's secret agents—Seth Servitors—simply couldn't harm the Society any more. Paul felt protected by the sign of the cross, the Sacred Tau—his secret and revealed sign.

In fact, the *word* of the Master had not been lost, but rather, stolen, and now it had been found. *It is EL-ELyon, Eli-Eloi, Elim . . . It is LOVE . . . It is Abba, our Father.*

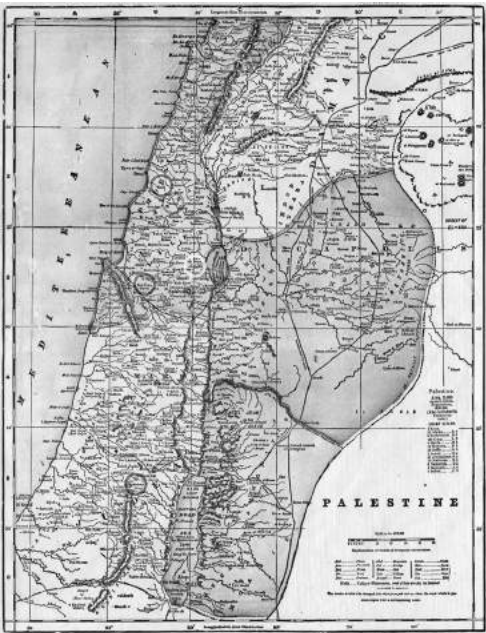
Watching the Cedar trees, spread all over the Mountains of Eden, Paul ended his call with the Padre with a holy wish. "Merry Christmas," he said with a smile.

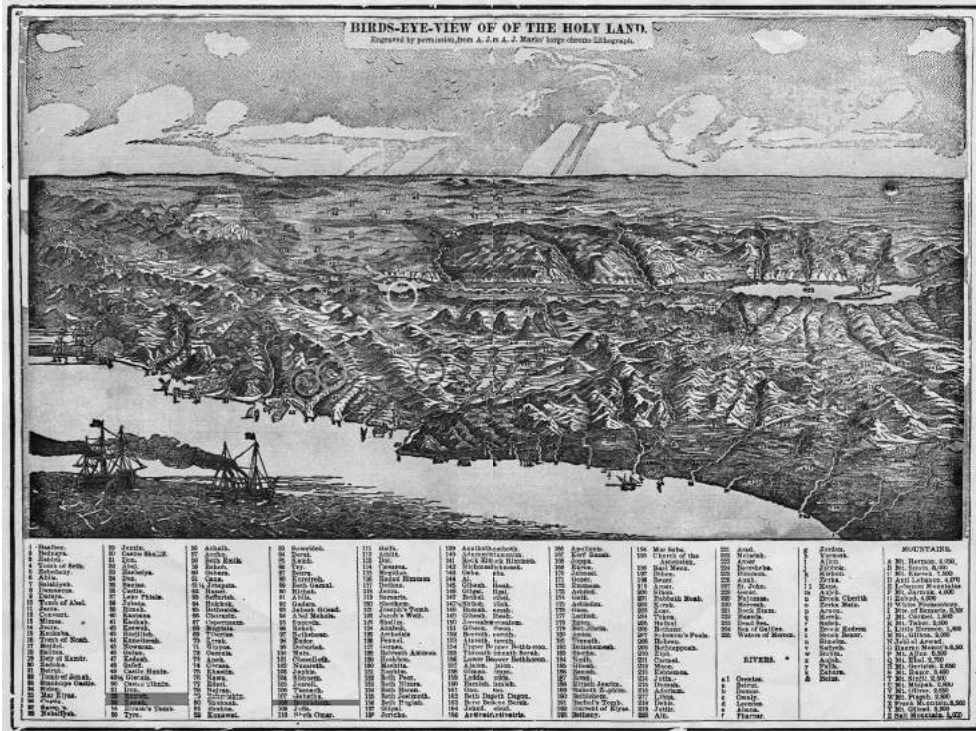
Later, somewhere in the midst of the night, his eyes met with the clear blue sky. It was unbelievable! Millions of stars floated harmoniously in the celestial ocean. *High spirits prevail over Eden*, he believed. With great faith and hope in *Love and Peace*, he took an oath to keep the sacred *word*, secret from the ears of the profane, and waited . . .

Upon the blue field of the firmament, divine farmers walked along, to reap what had been sowed.

Authentic Maps of the Phoenician Bethlehem

Bet(h)-Lahem (House of Bread)





The Arabic writing on the map above is translated into English as follows: “This is the first scientific map of Syria (meaning Phoenicia). It was drawn by the geographer ‘Ptolemy’ around 150 AD, basing it on the work of ‘Eratosthenes (of Cyrene)’ and ‘Marinos’ of Tyre. Ptolemy lived in Alexandria. Arab geographers kept his work secret for about six centuries until Europeans scribes copied it in the fifteenth century. The illustrated copy above is taken from ‘Ptolemy’ and was printed in Venice around 1590.”

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* Receiver of two Official Citations for the first
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