

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF JOHN



BOOK I
THE PAWNS OF PROPHECY
MICHAEL STOPPA

Book I: The Pawns of Prophecy

The Last Temptation of John

**Book I:
The Pawns of Prophecy**

**A Novel By
Michael Stoppa**

Third Edition

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Cover image by Luca Signorelli “Sermon and Deeds of the Antichrist” (1499-1502). It is a work of public domain and we are thrilled to be able to feature it here.

Disclaimer: All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Important

This is Book I of a 3-part trilogy “The Last Temptation of John.”

The titles in this trilogy are:

I: The Pawns of Prophecy

II: The Rise of the Antichrist

III: Golgotha Revisited

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Go Beyond the Text

Be sure to visit The Last Temptation of John Website

For more information about this series as well as for opportunities to go deeper into the story with our reference material, we invite you to visit the website dedicated to this book:

<https://temptationofjohn.com/>

What will you find on the website?

- [Author's Notes](#)
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- And much more...

Author's Notes

WARNING! This book is not for the faint of faith.

Please do not read this book if you are offended by the idea that characters from The Bible may still be alive today. And whether you classify this book as Religious Fantasy, Alternative History, a Character Study, or something else, I ask you to please keep in mind that it is above all else a work of FICTION.

The reason I remind you of this important point now is because inside these pages you'll read about characters from The Bible who are being written about in the *present day*. Sometime they are doing things that you may consider to be outside of their biblical persona. As a result, you might even go so far as to consider this book a heresy.

Although I can't stop you from having that point of view, I would like to say that just because I have written a fictional book about biblical characters or alternative ideas, it does not necessarily mean that I hold those concepts as my beliefs. I would like to think that

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my faith (and yours) is strong enough to be able to consider some of the illusive questions and unsolved mysteries that still shroud The Bible – and it is in that spirit that I wrote this fictional *what-if* book.

I have always been fascinated with The Bible and what happened to all the characters we know and love AFTER the events of The Bible took place. I've often wondered about the nails used to crucify Jesus – surely these precious (*and powerful*) relics must be somewhere, right? But where? And with whom?

Then there are the questions about the fate of all the people that Jesus of Nazareth raised from the dead (most notably Lazarus) – I mean, *if Jesus conquered death for them, how could they ever die again? And if they didn't die then where are they now?*

It was the process of pondering these questions and many others that led me to writing this book. During the course of crafting the story the apostle John quickly became the central figure among the immortals – in fact his voice became so strong that ultimately I changed the book's point of view into John's perspective. Yet that only led to more questions:

1. How would John feel about being an immortal who was trapped inside an old man's body?

2. What did he think about the fact that it has taken Jesus so long to return to fulfill his promises?
3. Is his faith still as strong as always?

In the end, this book became a character study on the Apostle John and the what-if scenario that may surround him if he was still alive today but had lost his faith. If this idea intrigues you as well then I invite you to join me on this journey.

I'll warn you again that inside these pages you'll read about John and other characters from The Bible who are acting a bit differently than when you last read about them. Two thousand years of waiting tends to change a man – sometimes in negative ways. That said, if you will keep an open mind and enjoy the tale for what it is (a biblical adventure story), I believe you will find value in these pages. The wisdom of *Proverbs* and *Psalms* is laced throughout this book and in the end Good does defeat Evil – but perhaps not in the manner you might think.

So come along with me and let's see what some of our old Biblical friends are up to, shall we?

M. C. Stoppa

August, 2014

Introduction

What would you do if you knew you could not die?

Would you celebrate? Take insane risks with your life? Study the cycles of mankind and amass great wealth?

OK, so what if you completed all those tasks and yet STILL went on living?

Year after year... Decade after decade... Century after tireless century...

I invite you to consider the case of John Salom – from all appearances, merely a tired old man in the last stages of what has been a weary life. You’d likely consider him to be nothing special – unless you were lucky enough to learn his little secret...

John Salom is actually the Apostle John – a man who has been blessed with the Gift of Immortality so that he could survive to fight

against the coming of The Antichrist. There's just one problem - over the course of the last 2,000 years, *John has lost his faith.*

Can you appreciate the circumstances of John's life?

He was arguably Jesus's most beloved apostle and the writer of a beautiful gospel about the life of his savior, and yet, (in this story at least), for reasons he did not understand, John became trapped in a worn out husk of a body, always waiting for a death that unmercifully refused to come.

How would you react if you were John? Would you view your situation as a part of some divine plan or would you curse God? It's easy to think that we would all just accept our fate and make the best of it, but would you still feel the same after two thousand years of misery? I honestly wonder how I would react. What about you?

We all face a unique set of challenges in our lives, yet as you will soon see, John eventually allowed his unfulfilled desires to eat away at his heart and to blacken his soul.

This is John's story. And before you dismiss it away as not applicable to the real world I'd caution you to consider – *if the apostle John can fall from grace, what does that mean for us?*

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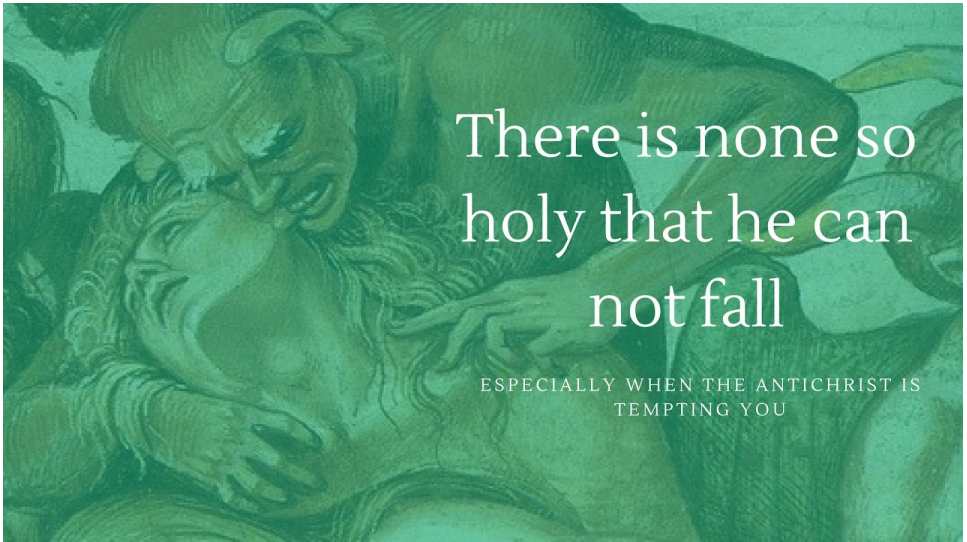
I submit to you that John's journey in this book may well hold the key to YOUR salvation as well -- aren't you curious to find out why?

Meanwhile, I should probably also mention that John's fall couldn't have come at a worse time – because unfortunately for John (and for us) the time of the Antichrist's rising is NOW...

Which begs the question -- can John recover his faith in time to stop Armageddon, or will Satan's Son achieve Ultimate Victory?

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The Pawns of Prophecy



1492 Is Coming For You

(June 7)

Few have seen but a glimpse of Hell, a tatter of Revelation, yet for me it was my Daily Bread; well, that and a good bottle of Jack, and maybe a PBR or two...

My name is John and I've got a major problem – again.

Just a few minutes ago I finally got around to checking the mailbox – although it was after 6 pm, it was still scorching outside. Even the short walk from my porch had caused me to sweat, and I could feel my hair begin to stick in stringy mats to the back of my neck – perfect. Worse yet, as soon as I looked down at my stack of mail, I knew I had a problem because peeking forth from all those damn advertising flyers was an otherwise nondescript piece of airmail -- the sight of which sent me into a coughing fit.

Now I wasn't expecting any letter from overseas and there was no return address, yet even before opening it, I knew who it was from.

“Damn her for doing this to me.” I dropped the rest of the junk mail and proceeded to tear open the small note. As new rivulets of sweat poured down my back, I read the following...

1492 is coming for you – MM.

For a moment, a chilling force gripped me – turning my spine to water and causing me to cower down in fear. Yet, the moment quickly passed and when it did my blood began to boil, “She should know I don’t need this crap.” I spat at the letter, before ripping it to shreds and tossing them into the yard.

When I got back inside, I briefly considered changing clothes – I stunk and I knew it, but since it had only been three days in these overalls I wasn’t about to toss them in the laundry pile just yet. Instead I got a six pack from the fridge and then parked myself once more on the raggedy Laz-E-Boy in my living room. Off in the corner, my turntable was playing a Jim Reeves’ record – the tune *Welcome To My World* was presently on, yet the volume was turned down low so that it didn’t compete with the TV since I was still waiting for the baseball game to start.

I don’t believe in paying for A/C, therefore I had the shades pulled so I could get some measure of relief from the sticky heat that still clung to the evening air. And so, sitting in that hazy darkness, with

only the kitchen lamp behind me competing as a light source with my television, I picked up my copy of *The Williamsport Sun Gazette*. Immediately I tossed aside everything but the sports section – since that was the only part that could tell about my Philadelphia Phillies.

As I read, I took a sip (or three) of my beer – good ol’ Pabst Blue Ribbon -- and settled in to watch the game. But then, just as the local news was about to end, suddenly the station was interrupted by one of those damn *Special Reports*...

“Good evening, friends. We interrupt your local programming to bring you an update on today’s landmark speech by Dr. Ghaz al’ Ridwan Ma’bus,” The anchorman spoke in that silky baritone they all seem to be born with. “*Who is like Ma’bus?* That is the question on everyone’s lips as the world continues to praise perhaps the greatest world leader of our times.”

Now, I could have continued to just ignore the news and focus on my paper instead. Or I suppose I could have changed the channel as well; but let’s not get carried away here – after all, we’re talking about a ’68 Zenith, thus changing the channel required getting up to fiddle with a manual dial, and that’s not for me. Oh don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I still live in the Dark Ages – like everyone else I did have my TV upgraded with a digital box to comply with that

broadcast regulation scam that occurred back in 2009. However I will admit that I still kept my old rabbit ears, proudly displaying those antennae perched on a black box which sat atop that cockamamie digital receiver.

I tried tuning out the TV anchorman, but his voice just kept droning on, “Dr. Ma’bus’ IdentiChip has surely saved our world from a Great Depression, however the United States has yet to adopt Ma’bus’ device.”

“Bah!” I cursed, feeling the wrinkles cut deeper into my face. “Who cares about Ma’bus, tell me about my Phillies!”

<SMASH!> Glass shattered across the kitchen floor behind me, followed by the sound of someone banging against the door.

“What the hell,” I sputtered to get up. “If those Robinson twins are trespassing again...”

Yet even before I could turn around, suddenly rough hands were upon me; and before I knew what was happening, a black-clad intruder pounded a hard right into the side of my face – knocking the Phillies cap from my head and filling my mouth with blood.

“Umpf!” I moaned, even as another blow sent me crashing into the TV, where I became entangled by those god-forsaken rabbit ears.

Unable to stop my attacker from jumping onto me, my efforts to ward off his blows were futile.

“It’s taken me too long to find you, Baron.” My intruder straddled over me. “You may not know me, but you sure as hell know what I’m here for.” And with that, the goon unsheathed a nasty-looking dagger from his belt, “As fish are caught in the cruel net, and the bird taken in by the snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them, eh...*Brother?*”

My eyes lit up for a moment at his quote, not to mention his reference to The Brotherhood, but most of my attention was captured by that blade. Yet I never got a chance to reply, for just then my attacker stabbed me.

Again and again and again the intruder forced his knife into my torso -- seven times in all -- leaving me a mangled mass of blood and pulp.

Death was NOT a fun experience, let me tell you -- *it never is...*



Now, you're just going to have to trust me on this next part as to how I know what I know, but for the time being, just take my word on this, OK?

So after my assailant confirmed I was dead, he held his blade up, watching my crimson-grey blood cascade down the metal. "I wonder..." he brought the knife to his mouth and licked his tongue along the shank. "BLAH! PLUFF! Why, it tastes like... dusty moth balls? Baron, don't tell me you've been crazy enough to experiment on yourself too?"

Yet he didn't stick around for an answer, and I was in no condition to reply. And although the record player hadn't been disturbed by all this commotion and was thus still playing the Jim Reeves Anthology -- now softly sounding *Guilty* through the speakers -- the intruder never noticed this cruel coincidence and instead quickly began the task which he came here to do -- ransacking his way through my home, he pulled down rows of dusty books from built-in shelves, broke open my dilapidated cabinets, and cleared my closets of rummage, whiskey bottles, and even my dirty laundry -- looking anywhere and everywhere for but one specific treasure.

It wasn't cash, or jewels, or anything else which held worldly value -- for I had none of that and my intruder knew it.

Instead it was... *something else*.

(Fool! He has no idea what he's about to do. But, whatever happens, YOU are here to witness that it wasn't my fault, right?)

For a moment the bearded brute paused in thought as he stood among feathers still floating in the air after slashing my mattress (yeah right, like I would hide It in there?). "C'mon, I know it's here somewhere." And he scanned the room, until finally, "Aha -- the TV!"

And in a flash, he bounded back into my living room.

I still lay motionless in an ever-growing pool of blood, yet the murderer paid me no mind as his eyes searched for something specific – for it wasn't really the TV he was after.

When he couldn't readily locate his desire, he took a step back behind the Laz-E-Boy and retraced the steps of his intrusion; throwing a shadow punch or two to mimic his previous assault, and then following along the path of his destruction, finally he came to, "Yes, I've got it!" And he hungrily grabbed the rectangular box which the rabbit ears had previously sat upon.

“Ha, Antennae Stand my ass,” he ogled the smoke-scorched caisse as he took a seat in my chair, caressing the 10x6” black box. “So this is one of The Three, eh? Oh, my lord is going to be so happy with me -- I wonder what kind of reward I’ll get?”

He scanned the sides, trying to see how to open the box. When he located the tiny s-clasp, “What the--? John, you don’t even have this locked?” And flicking off the clasp he then began to open the box “Is that any way to protect one of Jes—“

<Rrraboom-boom-BOOM!>

Thunder shook the house, and the temperature suddenly plummeted – surely sending chills tingling over the man’s body -- yet still he looked into the box.

Color left his face and he was gripped in a cold sweat -- yet still he looked into the box.

His lips began to crack from a sudden parchness and he tried licking them, but by now his tongue must have been as dry as the desert sands -- yet even still he looked into the box, totally captivated by the object inside.

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Minutes turned to hours while the intruder sat motionless, absorbed by what was once my most prized possession. Until at last, the man began to reach a meaty paw into the case...

<RrraBOOM-BOOM-BOOM!>

Yet, even as he gripped the cold relic, he must have realized it was a deadly mistake.

“YAAAWWWPP!” He wailed in agony, flying backwards over the chair. Unable to let go of that which he came for, my murderer’s screams continued for but a moment more, and then he collapsed in a heap, bleeding from ghastly holes in his hands and above his ankles. After only a moment, his shirt began to fill with blood, and I knew that his side had been ripped open as well -- allowing his punctured lungs to let flow their contents. Even his hair became matted from the blood that also pulsed forth from the multitude of tiny punctures that wrapped a picket-fence around his scalp.

Oh, please don’t be surprised by any of this, after all, this is the way it always happened – as another would-be burglar died a death infinitely more gruesome than that which he had inflicted on me.

In fact, I myself could tell you this, for I had witnessed the man’s demise.



Rising from a pool of my own blood – and feeling older than ever -- I frowned as I looked upon the new mess in my living room, “Hrmpf. I suppose I have to clean up another one.”

After taking a quick breath, I hoisted my intruder-turned-corpse over my shoulder and then carried him out through the kitchen door and into my backyard.

I live on the outskirts of Williamsport, PA – the name of the township is actually called ‘Cogan Station’ – I doubt if you’ve even heard of Williamsport and I KNOW you haven’t heard of Cogan Station – and that’s fine by me. I bring it up now just so you can get an idea of my lifestyle.

I prefer to be alone.

I live in the woods and while there are a number of other home sites nearby, I don’t have any neighbors within shouting distance and that’s the way I like it. My place is located about five miles off the main road and it’s a good ways into a wooded glade. I have the land cleared out around my house, but there’s still quite a bit of woods that surround me.

All of which means I get to keep my privacy – usually.

Every so often I get a visitor – someone from a elderly outreach center, or a neighbor who forgets that I don't like to be disturbed, or perhaps a group of courageous kids who are looking for trouble. And sometimes I'll get a visitor like the fellow I got today – which is always a bit of a nuisance.

And so there I was, hefting this goon over my shoulder as I made my way into the yard. If you saw my lands, you noticed that the rear of my ten-acre property has quite a few dirt piles scattered around; to most people these mounds would probably look like mere compost heaps for my garden -- and on the surface they are.

But dig a little deeper and you might be surprised at what you find.

In any event, I spent the next hour and a half going about the task of digging yet another grave, after which I gruffly tossed this night's attacker into, and then finally hauled some compost from another pile to cover this site as well.

"I'm getting too old for this crap." I wiped my forehead with a handkerchief. "God curse your soul, scoundrel. You made me miss my Phillies. Amen!" Then I threw down my shovel and stormed back towards my house. "Maybe I can catch the postgame?"

Then, casually picking up the object which had just recently caused the death of my attacker, I placed the thin piece of black iron back into its case. But just as I was trying to get the TV upright, a new Jim Reeves' song came filtering out of the stereo speakers – *Adios, Amigo* – and I couldn't help but sing along, in good cheer at last, "Adios, Amigo. Adios, my friend. The road we have travelled has come to an end..."

Shepherd and His Flock

(June 7)

Meanwhile, half a world away, another older gentleman was also in a good mood...

(Again, you're gonna just have to take my word on it as to how I know all this. Let's just say, I have *visions* – oh you can call them *revelations* if you like but to be honest I'm a bit tired of that term. In any case, I'll explain more in a bit, but for now, it will be easier for both of us if you would simply let it be and trust me that I am telling you the truth).

I watched as Joseph Alois Ratzinger was nearing the end of a rare public appearance. Do you know him?

Although ol' Joe had officially retired in 2013, I knew he had actually tried to get out of the rat race long before then – in fact even before he had stepped down from the 'big chair' Joe often told me all he really desired was to “rest, maybe write a bit, and perhaps enjoy his old age.”

The fact is, Joe had never wanted to rise to the top of his profession in the first place and, prior to attaining that rank, he'd actually gone so far as to submit his formal resignation on three separate occasions -- yet each time his prior boss had talked him out of it.

I told him countless time to just quit and be done with it all, but he didn't listen to me and in the end, Joe had remained obedient to his superior's wishes eventually he became The Big Boss himself.

Even still, it's common knowledge that Joe's allegiance to his company has done nothing to help his health concerns. His past and present conditions read like a laundry list of serious medical dilemmas:

- hemorrhagic stroke in 1991;
- serious fall and head trauma in 1992 (I can relate to that one!);
- another stroke in 2004;
- chronic heart palpitations and a case of serious bronchitis in 2006;
- a broken ankle in 2009 (and when you're 81 years old that's a big deal);
- he was living now with a pacemaker and chronic high blood pressure;
- and the list went on and on - poor Joe!

All of these aches and pains lead to his formal resignation in early 2013 – and while it's not newsworthy when most people retire, for my friend it was a big deal – because Joseph Ratzinger (perhaps better known to you as *Benedict XVI* – Pope Emeritus of the Catholic Church) was the first pope to step down since the year 1415 (BTW, that was Pope Gregory XII and it was was a *really* big deal back then – trust me, I was there).

Knowing he only had a short time left in this world, I knew how much Joe despised wasting any of it on personal interviews like the one he was presently enduring – *that's what the new guy Francis was supposed to be for*. Yet somehow Joe had apparently agreed to do this appearance and thus here he was, trying to maintain a happy face.

“Do you have any final words for the people of America, Your Eminency?” The interviewer asked. “Many in the US still fear Dr Ma’bus’ desire to install a ‘one-world’ currency. Do you favor this or oppose it?”

Realizing that this was the final question from his prep list, my friend rose up and exhibited the charisma which had undoubtedly been the reason why he had been elevated to his present position,

“My children, if we let Christ fully enter our lives, are we not afraid that he might take something away from us too?”

And after a pause, Joe answered his own question, “No! Don’t you see, if we let Christ in, we lose absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful, and great! Instead, only in this friendship with Him do we experience liberation. When we give ourselves to Him, we receive back a hundredfold in return! Yes, I say open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life. We are all ONE people. ONE Body in our Lord Jesus Christ. If this is true, why not have ONE currency? Nay, even ONE world government?! My Children, there is nothing to fear and only peace and freedom for ALL to gain...”



Less than an hour later, I watched the Pope as he was finally back in his private rooms. (BTW, I’m still going to call Joe “The Pope” because, as you’ll soon learn, he’s still pulling the strings in The Vatican and thus the figurehead that is Pope Francis is barely in this story).

Gone were his formal papal garments – his red satin mozzetta, wide-brimmed saturno, and yes, even those neo-traditional red papal shoes that everyone thinks he fancies. Oh those colorful

shoes! I remember how he had worked hard to bring them back to popularity (with the help of Prada and a sizable “donation” to Joe’s personal rainy-day fund!), yet each time he wore them now, I knew that he bitterly despised them – for he always complained how they were so uncomfortable. (I kept telling him to try them on before he endorsed them, but once again he didn’t listen to me.)

Nonetheless, now that he was alone again, The Pope was dressed in a luxurious silk robe, whilst plush slippers caressed his overworked feet. Letting the cares of the outside world melt away, I watched Joe traipse over to his wet bar and pour himself a tall glass of a German honey-flavored liqueur called *Barenjager*.

(Personally, I’m not a fan of German liqueurs, I like the harder stuff – Jack, Wild Turkey, a good grain alcohol, any of those and some ice will do the trick for me – but Joseph was always a connoisseur. In terms of this present liqueur, he previously explained to me that most Barenjagers that were exported from Germany were between 60-90 proof, however, given his position, Joseph now had access to a private label reserve from *Teucke & Koenig*, and as such, his version – called *Barenfang* – was actually a 95 proof product – much to his delight).

As he took a big sip of the drink, Joe smiled as he looked upon the label on his bottle – a cartoon of a bear trapping a fur trader – the

exact opposite of the depiction on most of the commercial bottles of Barenjager (which showed the fur trapper catching the bear).

“Give me neither poverty nor riches, but only my daily bread.” As he finished the smooth spirit and poured himself another, “Ah, and a little of this stuff too, neh?”

Strolling over to the corner of his living room, he sat down at his Fazioli grand piano. Immediately no less than three of his feline friends scampered to join him.

(Yuck -- I absolutely hate cats! But Joseph had long had an affinity for them and as such the Vatican had become quite infested with them since he rose to power. Francis tried to quell the tide but so far had been unsuccessful – the cats still ruled).

“Amadeus, come here.... Adolf, you rascal! Ah, and, Deter, my love.” He happily nuzzled all three. (Deter was always his favorite, but don’t ask me why – they all look the same to me). “OK, boys, let me play for you, please.”

And after taking another sip of his Barenfang, I watched as my friend proceeded to lose himself in his music – whilst his cats curled up against him and purred contentedly.

Yet suddenly one of the cats hissed, causing the other two to bound off in fright. “What is it, Deter?” Joseph stopped playing and looked down at his friend, seeing the cat’s entire body bowed up.

“I believe that’s Mozart’s Piano Concerto Number 21.” Said an unexpected voice that I didn’t recognize.

"His music is by no means just entertainment," Joseph replied, without turning around. "It contains the whole tragedy of human existence." For a brief moment, his body tensed at the intrusion, whilst he whispered, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do..."

And yet, outwardly, he refused to let his surprise show; instead he took another long sip of his drink, placed Deter on the floor so his friend could scamper away to safety, and then smiled as finally he turned around to face his visitor.

“Ah, I see there are two of you this time?” The Pope commented dryly, observing his guests.

Both men were dressed in black robes – although I knew that neither was a member of the clergy or on staff at the Vatican. Their ebon garments clashed terribly with the stark whiteness of their skin, their fair hair, and their light eyes. Stoic and stiff, they might

well have been twins for all that they looked so much alike, and yet, like me, Joseph knew they were not.

“Hello...Your Grace.” One of the men stepped forward.

The Pope did not reply. Instead he followed protocol, rose up to stand before the intruders, and then proceeded to offer his hand in formal greeting.

Each of the men took the Pope’s hand and shook it, being sure to allow their middle finger to entwine with his during the shake in order to verify their identity.

“The Viper coils...” One of the men said.

“And its strike is deadly...” Added the second.

“To the uninitiated.” The first man finished the greeting.

“Bruders.” Joseph smiled slyly, “Welcome. I was expecting you.”



My vision of the Pope and his ‘friends’ continued, and an hour quickly passed while the conspirators conversed. German was the language spoken at this meeting – native to all three -- but I had no trouble following along.

“The date, Your Grace?” Asked one of the men.

“Ah, that’s the beauty of it.” Joseph smiled. “I assume you know about the meeting at Mount Moriah?”

“You mean Har haBáyit – The Temple Mount?” The other Brother questioned.

“I’m surprised that you would know the *Hebrew* word,” Joseph snickered. And before either of the men could reply, he continued. “December 21st. That is the date. And the mosque at al-Aqsa there on the mount is the site.”

(Please understand I had no idea what they were plotting so this was all news to me. Sure, I get these *revelations* but to be honest they are not all that *revealing* if you ask me. It’s not something over which I have any control – whatever He chooses to send me is what I get. Also I am not omnipotent or anything. Hell, I don’t even have control of when the visions appear! And when I’m watching, although I can see the people pretty good and hear what they are

saying, I can't read their minds or anything so I don't know what they are really thinking. Thus, I had no idea what Joe was up to).

"You are certain?" the second assassin slithered. "There can be no mistake. If Ma'bus is really The One, then he must be there."

"Fool." Joseph replied. "You need not worry about my intelligence findings. Marrollo has assured me that Ma'bus will be there. And yes, Ma'bus IS the key figure. After all, it is his blood which will complete the... ah... Grand Ritual."

(Hmmm. Was I watching a plot to assassinate one of the most beloved leaders in the world? And with the old pontiff at the head? Yes, it was interesting, in a passing fancy sort of way. Had I been much younger, I might have actually still cared about the implications of what they were discussing. However, as it was, whether Joe and his buddies killed one man or a hundred, that was their business. Who is Ma'bus to me? He can't give me what I really want – it seems that nobody can – so what do I care what happens to him?)

"The whole world loves Ma'bus." The first assassin mocked. "Why he might as well be The Second Coming for all the praise he is getting."

“They will grow to dread him soon enough.” Joseph replied.

“Remember -- though the wicked spring up like grass, they will be forever destroyed in the end. When our plans are completed, Dr. Ma’bus will be reviled for the villain he truly is.”

“And the Jews are on board with all this?” The first man laughed, his loose tongue perhaps showing some of the effects of the Barenfang.

“That’s the beauty of Marrollo’s foreign planning.” Joseph explained, taking the other’s glass away from him and setting it down. Yet, after thinking twice, he picked the drink back up and downed it himself. (That’s my boy!) “That’s too good to go to waste.” He smiled, before getting serious again. “Chief Rabbi Metzger believes he is really the one responsible for setting up the December 21st event. It’s all part of his *Interfaith Dialogue* mission. Why he’s already erected an altar on Temple Mount to mark the new holiday that will be created.”

“And you will be there too, Your Excellency?” the first man was salivating in his excitement.

“Naturally, for Metzger has asked Ma’bus and I to join him in consecrating the grand altar to The One True God that we all serve. After all, you don’t think I would miss the Day of Delivery do you?”

“Glory be! I can’t wait to see Ma’bus *delivered* there upon the altar.”

“Evil comes to him who searches for it.” The Pope let the thought hang ominously, even as all three conspirators nodded to one another and smiled.

(Just then my vision ended. Interesting? Yes, but like I said, had I cared, I probably would have made arrangements to visit with Joe and get the scoop. As it was I was just thankful when the vision ended so I could get some sleep.)

Flotsam and Jetsam

(June 7)

OK, let me stop for a minute here because I can see that you are having a bit of a problem. So go ahead, let's get it out on the table – ask me your questions...

Who am I?

Well, I told you, I'm John -- John Salom.

How do I get these revelations?

Again, I just told you the answer to that too – I don't have any control over my visions, I get whatever He sends me. Apparently He still thinks I care.

How do the revelations work?

I'm not really sure, except to say that I have received them both during the day while awake – kind of like a daydream – and at night

while sleeping. Nonetheless, while hours or days could pass during a vision, when I return to MY reality, it's as if only the blink of an eye has passed.

Who is He?

I was waiting for you to ask me that. Would you think I'm crazy if I said that "He" is *Jesus of Nazareth*? Oh, so you DO think I'm just a crazy old man, huh? That's fine – it means that we finally agree.

What's my mission?

Actually it's called *The Commission*, but from my perspective I don't have a mission anymore because I am long past caring.

Well what WAS The Commission?

Hmm. You're not ready for that answer yet.

Why am I telling you all this?

Well, let's just say I am doing a good deed as part of my *penance* – why He couldn't have just let me say 1,000 *Hail Mary's* and *Our Father's*, I don't know, but this is what He came up with – said it

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would be ‘a good use of my talents again.’ I guess YOU will have to be the judge of that.

Where am I at right now?

Ha -- you’re definitely not ready for that!

OK, enough with the questions. Gee whiz, we’ll be here all night if we don’t keep moving on.

So anyway, where was I?

Oh yeah...

The Lion and The Lamb

(June 8)

The very next day, I was lucky enough to get yet another vision – oh joy.

This time I witnessed a very different scene taking shape – yet one which posed no less of a threat to its players...

With the evening meal over, a pleasant fire now crackled inside the professor's lounge of Bucharest University. Appointed with a host of overstuffed leather chairs, polished hardwood floors, and with walls of the finest Brasovian oak, I personally thought the lounge looked rather stuffy, but I guess these staunch academic types felt otherwise.

“Professor, you never cease to amaze me,” a twenty-something woman said to her friend as the pair sat in a corner of the dons' sanctuary.

“What makes you say that, Teri?” The man chuckled softly.

(While I didn't know the woman, I immediately recognized my friend Laz -- , er, He'd probably want me to tell you his name was *Alan... Zarus*).

"It's been two months now since we started our venture," The woman coyly pestered, as she took another sip of her plum brandy *Bugle*, "perhaps others still view me as simply *Teri Abbracciavento*, *the visiting lecturer from Rome*, but I am YOUR *Conferentiari* now and I think the least you can do is know how to spell my name"

"Nonsense," Alan took a puff on his pipe, then smiled winsomely, "Your last name is no mystery to me."

Teri seemingly melted under Alan's smile – as, I knew, had many of his students. If you looked at Alan, you'd guess that he was only in his early 40's. Taller than me, he stood perhaps an inch or two over six feet, and unlike me Alan was still in perfect shape. Blessed with a ridiculously perfect olive complexion, he had a feathery blonde coif and one of those superman jaw lines that apparently drive women wild. And although Alan had some rather cliché ocean blues, the depth of his gaze could captivate men and women alike. In short, he had a face that would make even a man jealous!

Even still, I had eyes for his partner – for Teri curvy like a renaissance statue, with the silky hair of a raven, dark eyebrows, and endlessly full lips. Although dressed in a scarlet business suit and wearing horn-rimmed glasses, even these professional accoutrements could not hide her alluring beauty. (Hey, I may be an old man, but I know a looker when I see one.)

With total confidence, Alan gamely ventured, “I know how to spell your name. It’s A-B-B-R-A-C-I-A-V-E-N-T-O.”

If she had butterflies in her stomach from Alan’s gaze, Teri didn’t let them show, “Sorry, Alan, but you’re mistaken. There are TWO *C*’s in *Abbracciavento*!” And giggling, she poured herself another drink, while filling a new glass for Alan as well.

“Touche.” Alan submitted, picking up the snifter.

“All right, so getting back to business,” Teri put her spectacles back on, “So, are you in agreement with the popular theory that Romania’s culture was indelibly changed after the Battle of Sarmizegetusa in 106 AD? Or do you agree with me that even if Trajan had not completed his conquest, Roman culture would still have dominated this land?”

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Alan drew two long puffs on his pipe, “Well, there’s no doubt some Roman ideology would have permeated this land, but I can’t overlook the potential for a subsequent domination by later Eurasian influences. How does your theory account for that?”

And so did the professional banter drift on. The Bucharest Bugles continued and the pair relaxed further. Hours lazily waned by, even as other professors retired for the night. Eventually, just the two of them remained and then it was that Teri leaned close, “Alan, can I trust you?”

(Ah, perhaps we’re finally getting somewhere with this vision?)

Alan however held up a hand to pre-empt her apparent advance.

(Despite his looks, sadly Alan never made use of his *talents*. In fact I watched him turn off many a woman over the years. Fool.)

Standing up, he said stiffly, “Teri, if I’ve led you on in any way, I apol—“

“No, it’s not like that. This is important. Sit down. Please.”

Yet when Alan remained standing, Teri grabbed his arm and said desperately, “Alan, what do you know about...the *Antichrist*?”

(Bingo! There it is.)



As my dream wore on, I watched as Alan's eyes narrowed at his associate's unusual question. Through thin lips he replied, "Is this some sort of joke? I am a Professor of Antiquities, why are you asking me?"

"Come off it, we both know your specialize in *religious* antiquities." Teri argued. "Master Alan Zarus – presently the *Sef de Catadre* of Bucharest's History Department -- a post you have held for over a decade. Prior to that, the Dean for Antioch's Historical Society. Before that, Jerusa--"

(Uh oh, Alan's not going to like where she's going...)

"Enough!" Alan slammed his hand down on the coffee table. (See, I told you). "Tell me what's going on, or I'll have you removed from University grounds immediately."

"I think the Antichrist is alive today -- and I know who it is!"

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For the briefest of moments, I watched a flicker of whiteness cascade down Alan's face, yet just as quickly it passed and he covered it up by playing along, "Ah, I see. And who might this Antichrist of yours be?"

"The Antichrist is..." Teri hesitated, "Ghaz Ma'bus."

Alan immediately let out a guffaw and made a show of clapping his hands, "Bravo, Teri. For a moment I thought you were serious, now I see you've just had a few too many Bugles, neh?" And he smiled as he raised his glass.

Teri pulled Alan's glass back down. "I'm serious."

Alan raised an eyebrow, "Why that's absurd -- Dr. Ma'bus is literally on fire for World Peace, surely you've see his talks on the internet."

"It's well accepted that the Antichrist will be a mesmerizing speaker."

"Well, if that's the case, then are you also condemning Pope Francis? President Trump? Even Tony Robbins? These are inspiring speakers too. Come now, what are your real marks are against Dr. Ma'bus? That he's the Chairman of a Muslim

nation-state? Surely, this doesn't qualify him as The Antichrist, Teri."

"Haven't you ever found it odd that Ma'bus looks like everyman...and yet no man? He is the very definition of *worldly* -- seemingly able morph his appearance at will -- thus allowing him to fit in anywhere, to influence anyone, to lead everyone."

"I'm sensing some bigotry here, Ms. Abbracciavento. This is not what I expected of you."

"*Ghaz al Ridwan Ma'bus* -- that's his full name." Teri forged ahead.

"And?"

"Each section of his name has 6 letters. 6-6-6!"

"The number of The Beast." Alan's face went pale, (and even I felt a shiver run down my spine), yet Alan recovered quickly and I watched as he wrote out Ma'bus' full name, "Each section equals 6-6-6 only if you consider the *al* to be a part of the first name and only if you count the apostrophe in *Ma'bus*. That's bad science in my book. Please tell me you have more."

Teri didn't miss a beat, "The name 'Ghaz' means 'conqueror.' And 'Ridwan' means 'Keeper of the Gates of Heaven.' And 'Mabus' is an ancient Arabic word for 'Lion'. *The Beast who conquers the gates of Heaven!*"

"I could argue that his name means *The Noble Lion, Defender of Heaven*. After all, Ma'bus actions have HELPED the world, not harmed it. What Antichrist would do that?"

"You're only being difficult! The seer Nostradamus predicted the Antichrist's name to be *Ma'bus* -- It's a perfect match."

(Nostradamus? What a charlatan. Don't listen to what that fool says).

"A coincidence." Alan replied. "Nostradamus' visions have been rehashed to fit nearly every world event in the last two centuries. I don't know any credible scholar who considers them to be anything but worthless."

Teri sat back in her chair – frustrated. After a pause, she tried again, "Not only are his Tri-Marks now the preferred world currency, but Ma'bus is requiring UMAN citizens to be marked with IdentiChips. And the idea is spreading throughout the globe at a faster rate than even Bitcoin and the other cryptocurrencies did.

‘And he forced everyone to receive a mark, so that none could buy or sell unless he had the mark...of the beast.’ *Revelations* Chapter 13, Verse 16-17.”

(Interesting -- you could say I am a bit familiar with that work....)

“Such an advancement has been years in the making. Why, if the EU approves, I might even get one – after all, it would be very convenient to not have to carry Euro’s anymore.”

“Alan, suppose for just a moment that Ma’bus IS the Antichrist. Don’t you see, whether you use a Tri-Mark – which has his name and image on it – or the IdentiChip – which has the bi-numeric version of his name embedded as a security code – either way, you WILL be carrying the mark of the beast.”

Alan didn’t reply.

“How does a no-name economist at the World Bank unite the most war-torn region on the planet into one nation-state?” Teri interrupted, “How does he turn his new country into the most prosperous nation on earth? And most of all, how does he accomplish all of this in just a few years? Such things are just not possible.”

“I’ll grant you that what he was able to accomplish so quickly IS mind-boggling, but again, NOT impossible. After all, we live in a fast-paced world -- companies and countries that existed for decades can fall overnight. So why couldn’t someone like Ma’bus rise up just as quickly?”

“I say again that there’s no way someone with no political experience could emerge from the shadows and change the world like Ma’bus has done. Unless he had help. And there’s only one group with this kind of power -- *The Brotherhood of the Earth*. I believe The Brotherhood used America’s war on oil to get Saddam Hussein dethroned so that Ma’bus could fill the vacuum of power in Baghdad -- the prophesied location of the Antichr--.”

“Just a moment -- what’s this about a mysterious Brotherhood? Are you turning into a conspiracy theorist on me, Teri?”

(There’s another mention of *The Brotherhood*. I guess I will need to tell you about them, huh?)

“DON’T go there on The Brotherhood, Alan.”

There was something in the way that Teri spoke that caused Alan to be taken aback, as a result, he stopped joking and instead mumbled,

“Er, so back to Ma’bus -- I say he is a genius, not someone to be feared.”

“*And the world will love him.*” Teri cautioned. “We both know that the Antichrist will NOT be feared...at first. But these are dangerous times -- the world is still in turmoil. Economies have not really recovered – despite Ma’bus’ great ideas and for which he has already been praised. The standard of living is going DOWN across the globe – for all but UMAN citizens. People in other countries are growing restless when they see how the UMAN citizens are enjoying prosperity under Ma’bus, yet their own leaders can’t provide the same. Look at the German Revolt last year. And the problems in Japan this year. The time is ripe for ONE person to step up and draw the world together. Did you know there’s a movement at the UN to elect Ma’bus as World President?”

“President Trump would never allow that.”

“You’re blind like so many others, Alan. You missed the Big Coup that Ma’bus has *already* completed. How do you think that the US averted economic disaster back in ’09?”

“They took Ma’bus’ advice and restructured their debt, revised multinational loan guarantee practices, and engineered a semi-nationalized banking system. And then President Trump’s

hard line trade policies helped bring the country back to prominence. ”

“Apparently you fail to understand who was backing all these measures -- Ma’bus used the limitless wealth of the UMAN league’s oil supply to finance these bailouts – thus he effectively ‘bought out’ the US and the World Bank. Mr. Trump’s policies were just window dressing - surely you know that. And I’m guessing you also that that if the citizens of the US and those other countries truly understood how their presidents sold them out, there would have been a revolt.”

“Why? Everything worked out. The economic crisis was averted. President Trump has the US riding high again. Who cares if UMAN owns a large stake in the US and other countries? Japan did the same thing in the 1980’s and ‘90’s. Look where it got them?”

“Not to the level which Ma’bus did.” Teri cautioned. “And not the same way. Because all Ma’bus has to do is to call in his loans and he will effectively bankrupt the World Bank and thereby destroy any nation – even the US – *all without firing a single bomb.*”



Unable to wake up, I was forced to keep watching as Alan continued his discussion with Teri. All this talk about Dr. Ma'bus taking over the world was a bit much. The fact of the matter is that so long as I can keep watching my Phillies play, I don't really care who runs the world.

"And yet Ma'bus' political practices have been nothing but peaceful," Alan said. "Hell, he's even satisfied the Israeli's. Did you know that the Grand Rabbi's have invited him to enter The Great Temple at a special ceremony later this year? Furthermore, I happen to know that Dr. Ma'bus, Pope Francis, and Pope Benedict have taken strides to re-unite their faiths as well."

"It's not true!" Teri burst out. "Francis is clueless on this issue and Benedict does so only for show. It's a case of keeping your enemies closer. Oh, if you only knew what I know."

"So tell me!"

"Ma'bus has an army of over 200,000 *Fire and Brimstone* tanks."

"I've heard of no such thing."

"He has four primary military commanders -- he calls them the *Four Horsemen*."

“*Of the Apocalypse?*” Alan laughed. “Come, come, this is hearsay. Surely these tidbits would be newsworthy if they were true.”

“The Brotherhood controls the news media. Nothing negative about Ma’bus ever gets out.”

“I see -- again with the conspiracies?”

“Why are you being difficult?” Teri grabbed his hand. “You KNOW this fits. Ma’bus IS the Antichrist!”

“Is that all?” Alan pulled his hand back.

At last, Teri went for broke (and surprised even me with what she said next), “Dr. Ma’bus has the seven *Chairs of Woe* in his palace -- that means he controls the *Armageddon Clock*.”

Alan remained calm, yet long moments passed as he stared hard at his assistant. Finally he asked, “Teri, how do YOU know all this?”

“My father was Reverend Antonio Abbracciavento – renowned for his knowledge of one particular book...”

“*Revelations*,” Alan filled in the blank. “Yes, I was sorry to hear about his passing last year.”

“Thank you. He was a good man.” Teri bowed her head. Then after a pause, she admitted. “I’m not really a Professor of Antiquities.”

“I know.” Alan smiled.

“What? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I figured Benedict has a message for me?”

“He does!”

“Go on.”

“Being a Professor is just a cover; I am a member of The Vatican’s Secret Police – the Personal Attaché for Benedict. The public may think Francis is the chief now that Benedict’s retired, but I’m sure you know the truth – Benedict stepped down so that he could focus exclusively upon his life’s mission. And his mission is now my mission too -- *to find and stop The Antichrist.*”

“I don’t envy you. That’s a tough draw.”

“Come on, Alan. You know I’ve been groomed for it since birth.” Teri said, shoulders back, chin high. Then, pulling a scroll from her baggy purse, “In any case, here is a letter from Pope Benedict XVI. As you can see, the papal seal is still intact. Even I haven’t read its contents.”

“I’m sure.” Alan smirked as he took the missive. Yet before opening it, he tested her once more, “But, why me, Teri? What can I do to help?”

“Alan, don’t play me for a fool. Who else has published the papers on ancient religions and recurring Armageddon’s than you have? I know it’s hard to believe that Ma’bus is really the Antichrist, but I tell you that Benedict IS convinced. You must talk to him.”

“I see.” Alan said, non-committedly.

“Look here. Is it possible that Benedict and I are wrong about Ma’bus? YES. Hell, Alan, we HOPE we are wrong. But, what if Ma’bus IS indeed Satan’s son? Don’t you see, we need your knowledge -- you may be the only man who can stop him. That’s why Benedict specifically told me to find YOU.”

Alan remained silent for long moments, before saying, “Well it would seem that you do know quite a bit about The Antichrist. And

Dr. Ma'bus. Now whether these are the same person, I cannot say.” Before Teri could interrupt, he continued, “But, it would seem that Ma'bus MIGHT fit the profile, neh? So what do you propose?”

“Read the letter. Benedict wants you to come to Rome.”

“Ah, but I thought you hadn't read the letter?”

Teri blushed, “I was truthful when I said I didn't read it, but that doesn't mean I can't guess what it says.”

Alan rolled the scroll over -- it did indeed carry Benedict's imprimatur. Breaking the wax, he proceeded to read the short message. “You are correct. Benedict requests my presence in Rome. And yet, he does NOT say anything about Ma'bus being the Antichrist.”

“You know he could never put something like that in writing under his papal seal!”

“So I am to take your word for it all then?” Alan smiled.

Teri's jaw jutted out, “What are you going to do?”

“Do I have a choice? Of course I'm going to Rome.”

“Really?” Teri’s face lit up.

At last Alan smiled warmly again. “It was not my intention to give you a hard time, Teri. I can see that you really do believe what you say. That DOES mean something to me.”

Relaxing at last, Teri smiled, “I know it’s late, but why don’t we go to Karl’s Café and enjoy a Bugle to release all this pressure? After all, your time here in Bucharest is obviously over, so let me buy you one last drink.”

Although Alan remained silent, he did not decline. “Oh Hell, why not? But just one, OK?”

“You have my word, Professor.” Teri smiled.

(Somehow I knew she was lying).



Now, in my opinion, a man can do nothing better than to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in his work. Therefore, I was not surprised to see Alan and Teri leave the University and head for Karl’s Café – a local pub frequented by the elite of the University crowd.

Earlier he and Teri had clearly vexed one another during their debate about the Antichrist, yet all of that seemed to be behind them now. Hours soon passed and they shared more than a few drinks together, until...

<<RING! DING!> The bartender gave the last call.

“Whoa!” Alan raised his hands to steady himself at the bar. “Clearly all these Bugles have gotten the better of me, eh, Ter?” And he smiled as he laid his head on her shoulder.

“Oh, Alan, tomorrow is so unknown. I’m happy we shared this time, but what will happen now?”

Alan smiled back through a misty haze and sighed, “Yes, I wish this night would never end.”

At that, Teri placed her hand softly on Alan’s knee and whispered into his ear, “It doesn’t have to end yet...”

With Teri’s allure racing through his veins, Alan apparently found himself unable to resist her offer.

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(Now, as I told you before, I have no control over these visions and it's not like a TV where I can change the channel. I get what I get. In this case, it appeared that I was about to see my friend get intimate with his work partner. Gee, I'm not sure the University would approve, Alan.)

Less than twenty minutes later, the pair were in Teri's cramped apartment, on her bed, undressing one another between passionate kisses.

"Oh, Alan," Teri gasped, ripping off her blouse to reveal a purple brazier, "I've wanted this since the first moment I saw you."

Pulling her close, he kissed her deeply, "You're lips taste like honey." But then I saw him pause – just for a moment, and although I could not read his thoughts, I knew him well enough to make an educated guess about what just happened – he'd seen a vision of another woman!

(If so, I knew who it was. For now let's just call her a *beautiful brunette of Hebrew descent* and what you need to know is that this person was Alan's dream girl).

I watched Alan struggle as his mind was playing tricks on him – perhaps making him believe this other woman was calling out to

him, reaching for him at last. For a moment, I knew that Alan's heart leapt at the thought...

Yet, just as quickly I could see his soul sink – for if he did get a flash of his lost love, then I knew that seeing this other woman would only cause an old wound to be ripped open.

In the end, it was Teri who broke the spell, kissing Alan on the neck and bringing him back to the present moment. Apparently this worked, because Alan refocused his attention on the beautiful woman before him, growling hungrily as he kissed her back, "I've never seen a beauty like you."

"Let me show you more, Professor," she said in a husky voice, pulling Alan down to her.

As their final garments were removed, Teri sighed, "My well runs deep, let's drink of love till morning..."

(Whoa, hold on there, Alan, did you hear what she just quoted?)

Suddenly Alan pulled back from the point of no return, "What did you say?!?"

Shocked at the break in their passions, Teri struggled to take in Alan's retreat. "What? I don't know." Then, kissing him and attempting to pull him back, "Come, lover, come to—"

But Alan remained apart. I don't know if he realized what Teri just quoted from or if instead he felt guilty due to a flood of images of that Hebrew woman, but regardless I heard him say, "I'm sorry, Teri. I can't do this. It's wrong for me to disrespect you like this. I'm so sorry." And he hurriedly gathered up his things.

For a moment, I thought Teri would try to stop him, yet interestingly enough, she did not. And even as Alan hastily threw on his clothes and continued to apologize, Teri remained uncovered on her bed.

As Alan opened the door to leave, Teri merely slithered, "See you in Rome, Love."



Unfortunately for me, my marathon vision was still continuing.

Unfortunately for Alan, although it was but a short walk to his own apartment building, I could see that his distress was only growing worse.

“Come off it, man!” He scourged himself. “You heard her clear enough. She spoke straight out of *Proverbs* and I’d be a fool if I didn’t know the REST of the story -- *For the lips on an adulteress drip honey, but in the end, she is bitter as gall. Her feet go down to death, and her steps lead straight to the grave.*”

(Ah, I see that he DID get the quote I was referencing. Well done.)

“Bah.” He replied, taking up both sides of his self-dialogue. “You read too far into this. It was merely a coincidence. She’s not married and neither are you. Don’t be so afraid to LIVE, man! No, no, tomorrow we’ll see her and make it up to her.”

“Absolutely not. Can a man scoop fire into his lap without being burned?”

“Ugh!” He grasped his head, “What about...Miriam?”

(Oops -- I guess that cat’s out of the bag, eh? In case you didn’t know, *Miriam* is the Hebrew woman who is Alan’s long lost love. It’s really quite a pitiful story – remind me to tell you about it sometime.)

“Ha, that’s always been a lost cause. I haven’t seen her in decades. I don’t owe her anything. I’m free to be with Teri if I so choose, right?”

Thus did he continue arguing with himself, on the one hand, trying to excuse his actions with Teri, and on the other, spouting off the wisdom of the Bible as justification for his abrupt departure. And all the while seemingly trying to assure himself that he had no feelings for Miriam.

At last, as he made his way inside the door of his flat, and there his self-argument ended; for as he looked down at the pile of mail, his eyes immediately fixed themselves on a small piece of airmail that sat atop the others.

(Well at least I am not the only one that she’s torturing).

Ripping it open, I was not surprised to see him read the following
“1492 is coming for you – MM.”

Blood drained from Alan’s face, “My God, she knows.”

(Poppycrack. Miriam doesn’t get revelations like I do, so she would have no way of knowing what’s going on here. Oh, it’s true that she

does have another source for her information, but I doubt that Gabriel would be talking to her of Alan's escapades with an intern).

As if he didn't have enough drama already, I saw that Alan also now realized something else -- he had to leave -- immediately.

"Can I risk going to Rome now?" He wondered. "Perhaps Benedict will have to wait?"

Racing to the bathroom, he splashed his face with cool water. Then, looking in the mirror, "My God, what if Benedict is in danger, too?

"Is Teri mixed up in this? Is she a part of some mad plot to assassinate Ma'bus? Or Benedict? Or, God forbid -- both of them?"

And, after looking at himself for a long while, "And where does Miriam fit in? Or The Brotherhood?"

Knowing there were no answers to his questions, Alan merely resolved to do that which was in his power, "I know not where Miriam may be now, but one thing I do know -- I WILL see Benedict."

Quickly then, he prepared to leave. Thankfully, this was made all the easier by his advance preparations -- for this was not the first

time that “Alan Zarus” had been required to abandon his life in a rush. Trying to remain calm, I watched as he flipped a switch in the rear of his closet that triggered a secret access panel which opened to reveal a small hideaway.

(Alan always was into the whole cloak and dagger scene. I actually think he fancied himself as James Bond or something. After all, Alan was suave, debonair, and into the finer things in life. BUT, and this is a BIG but, Alan never had much of a way with women – as you have just witnessed – and he was quite a pansy when it came to violence, so I think Mr. Bond is pretty safe – he doesn’t have much competition from my friend Alan).

Reaching inside the hideaway, Alan pulled forth a pre-packed leather carryall which was filled with all the essentials he would need to retreat into hiding -- until it would be safe for him to resurface elsewhere, under a new identity.

After making his way back out of the apartment, there was then only one more stop that I knew he had to make before he could truly escape the danger that was chasing him (again)...



In my dream world with Alan Zarus, it was now past 3 am; yet I knew that my friend had no choice but to tarry to the downtown sector and visit *Casa de Economii si Consemnatiuni* – that's the local CEC Bank, whose impressive palace on Calea Victoriei in Bucharest held Alan's most prized possession.

Luckily for him, Alan had long ago arranged for Elitist status and thus had been given his own access code which allowed him round-the-clock access to a private, backdoor entrance from which he could gain admittance to the *Unknown Catacombs*.

Now let's understand something – Alan could not simply walk up to the back of the CEC, insert a simple key card, and then enter the secret vaults. Nor did he have to walk down some back alley and give a clandestine password to a pair of eyes belonging to an unknown bouncer behind a nondescript door slot. In point of fact, to anyone observing Alan on this night, it did not appear that he was actually attempting to gain access to the CEC at all; for in reality, Alan never approached the bank building, but instead entered into a seemingly normal row house about a block away.

Once inside, he made his way to apartment 1G, inserted his key, and opened the door to a fully furnished, yet ever unoccupied unit. After locking the door, he went immediately to the guest bedroom, opened the closet door and parted a mass of clothes to reveal yet

another hidden doorway. This portal did in fact require Alan to enter his access code, and then submit to a fingerprint scan. Once he passed these two tests, he had to speak his name so that the security system could also verify his voice identity. The system then ran one additional check – confirming that no other occupants were presently engaged inside its vaults -- and then after successfully completing all this, at last the door opened -- revealing a well-lit passageway.

(I told you Alan liked that ‘secret agent’ stuff!)

I watched Alan trudge along a secret walkway that led beneath the streets of Bucharest and down into the CEC’s Catacombs. Just how long the catacombs had been in existence, I couldn’t guess, but I do recall Alan telling me the CEC had been using the former death chambers for more than a century -- having converted the various crypts into impenetrable treasure troves for lease to those individuals like himself who could afford to pay the exorbitant rates required to gain the privilege of storing their most secret items in such a place.

Like any of the other magnates who used these unusual deposit boxes, I knew that Alan could only gain access to his own storage location – for only one person was allowed inside the catacombs at a time and while that individual was there, a host of state of the art

security measures were in place to ensure that all other crypt-cases were made off limits to the intruder.

And so, after successfully completing a few more security checkpoints, at last Alan arrived at the cache which held his own belongings. Here he paused to catch his breath – for the night was already long, and he was exhausted, yet I’m sure he knew that this was only the beginning of his flight.

Each security cadre in the CEC’s Catacombs had but one and only one key. Not even the bank personnel, at any level, had a copy of the unique skeletons which were required to open the final locks that secured these deposit boxes. Like the others who used these vaults, Alan knew what this meant -- *if he ever lost his key, whatever he had placed in his hidden tomb would be lost forever*. Luckily for him, Alan never lost his key – despite having had it for decades – and he used it now to open his crypt’s portal.

The stone barrier was removed and a muted light was triggered, revealing the lone item inside – a small wooden caisse about one foot long and one-half foot wide. (Sound familiar?) Alan gingerly reached inside and withdrew the smoke-scorched box. Although he had held this small coffin countless times, I saw that Alan was again moved by the magnitude of his most-prized possession.

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After more than a few deep breaths, Alan gained the courage required to flip the s-clasp and open the container, “Though they confront us on the Day of Disaster, the Lord will turn our darkness into light!” He prayed, before gasping involuntarily as he gazed at the thin piece of pockmarked iron inside. “Ooohhh....It’s so beautiful.”

(Now here I would have to disagree. You’ve seen this thing -- does it look beautiful to you? When that murderer came into my home and then met his own untimely demise when he touched my *treasure*, was that a beautiful sight? No! So what is Alan talking about?)

Moments passed, but Alan quickly remembered why he was here, thus he closed the casket and placed the box into his leather carryall. Then he proceeded to carefully place his crypt-key inside the storage box and shut the tomb’s portal – effectively rendering this now-locked catacomb forever useless.

After which, Alan retraced his steps out of the Catacombs, and eventually re-emerged into Apartment 1G. The portal closed behind him and he moved the closet clothes back into place, before making his way back to the front door of the flat.

Finally ready to get on with his escape into oblivion, Alan opened the apartment door – only to reveal three murderous men waiting for him!

Gratitude Is An Art

(June 9)

At long last I awoke -- it was nearly 10am my time and a cardinal was chirp, chirp, chirping just outside my bedroom window.

“SHUT UP!” I screamed at the red-smocked bird, before pulling a pillow down over my head – to no avail. “Ah, hell, it’s time to get up anyway.” And I reached a hand over the side of my bed and searched for the bottle of Jim Beam that was usually rolling around on the floor.

I thought about Alan – clearly he was in dire straits. And yet, despite that recent cavalcade of visions about him, I was left with nothing but questions.

Now, let’s be clear here – I’m no sucker. You know as well as I that He is trying to peak my interest and draw me back into The Commission. But what He doesn’t seem to realize is – I DON’T CARE! I keep trying to tell Him that but He doesn’t listen. All my life He’s been force-feeding me these visions. Oh, I’ve fallen for His

games in the past. I've tried to do *His Will* – but it never gets me anywhere. It's a damn waste of time, I tell you.

You understand that don't you? Please, if you learn one thing from me, learn this – *don't fall for His tricks*.

So Alan's in trouble, huh?

And now I suppose He wants me to go and save him?

Sorry, not going to happen.

Oh sure, Alan is my friend, but let's face it, he's a big boy. He knows what's at stake for holding one of the Three. And, really now, what's going to happen to Alan anyway? You know as well as I that they can't kill him, so what can they do to him? Nothing. That's right, nothing! So, why did He even bother to waste my time showing me those visions anyway?

As YOU are my witness, I'll say it again – GOD, please leave me alone!!

Now, where's that damn bottle?

Men of Renown

(June 10)

Naturally, I didn't get my wish -- yup, the next night too He forced another dream upon me...

And so it was that Hope and Hopelessness continued their eternal struggle – in the forms of the prophets Elijah and Enoch.

(Oh boy, whenever I get a vision of these two, it's always a bit melodramatic – sorry. Just remember, I have no control here...)

“Our captor is The Great Deceiver.” Wailed Elijah, sitting in a pool of his own filth. “The Brother I warned the world about. Yes, it is Him.”

“He is not whom the world believes him to be.” Enoch replied stoically.

Now, as you might know, Elijah and Enoch were once men of renown, blessed amongst all. In fact, if you've read your Bible, then you know that when they had walked upon the earth, neither of them had tasted death, but instead both had been taken up to Heaven without ever experiencing the grave.

Even after they had passed from this world, many tales were told about their greatness and the memory of each had inspired believers for thousands of years – and all the while, both Elijah and Enoch had enjoyed the splendor of the afterlife.

But then, some three years ago, I began to get visions of how both were sent back to Earth, and instructed to fulfill a new mission – *to prepare the world for the great and dreadful coming of the Lord.*

Despite their previous experience with such heavenly assignments, when they returned again to this world, I could immediately see that both men quickly discovered that the peoples of this age were much different than those they had influenced in the past.

The two prophets floundered.

For over a year, I had watched as they were unable to find anyone willing to place faith in what they had to say -- and so the world missed out on much of the prophecies they first spoke.

(It wasn't really that important anyway, trust me. Also, in defense of the rest of the world, Elijah and Enoch both looked like just a couple of bums panhandling for money -- rather than divine prophets proclaiming the coming Revelation. How Elijah ended up in the hill country of Romania, or Enoch in Southeast Asia, I'll never know -- and I'm sure they didn't either -- nonetheless, both men wandered around, trying to find disciples to heed their words. It also didn't help that the prophets clung to the former hygiene habits of the Old Testament, nor that they spoke ancient dialects which the people of the lands they travelled in could not understand. I guess He didn't think ahead on that, huh?).

In addition, I could see that both prophets were not reacting well to their visionary experience -- specifically whenever they got a vision it clearly incapacitated them. I watch them try to resist when the visions hit them -- yet their efforts were futile and they had no choice but to accept what He sent them -- powerful images force fed into their minds, an unwelcome miasma which they had no choice but to regurgitate to any who would listen...yet few ever did.

But then, some two years ago, I was intrigued to see that each of them was discovered. Both were taken in by a mysterious man whose identity I could never quite make out, yet it was clear that he had correctly identified the seers as heavenly witnesses. Yet this

new acquaintance was clearly no friend to the prophets – for he put them in shackles in a secret location. Worse yet, he blinded them – gouging out their eyes! -- and dressed them in sackcloth, forcing them to live in filth and squalor.

Yet still they prophesied – for they had no choice.

And so, as it now stood for the prophets, today was no different than yesterday, and promised no hope for tomorrow. (In that regard I felt akin to them).

As I looked upon them today, I saw them huddled next to one another on the cold stone floor of the dank cave that held them. Yes, although prophets, they were prisoners. After many months in this place both men were frail and gaunt, yet still they did not protest their conditions.

For I knew that neither had a mind made for this world – *instead their only purpose was to speak about the knowledge of what was to come* – and in this capacity, there were none on earth who could match their tales. (No, not even me).

Unfortunately for the world, no one recognized their talents until it was too late. Correction -- their captor did – for it was he who had arranged to have cameras record their every action and word. Thus,

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whilst Elijah and Enoch continued to speak about that which they saw in their mind's eye, what they did not know was that they were involuntarily spewing forth God's wisdom to a man whom these divine messages were never intended for.

“He holds the Seven Stars captive.” Elijah bellowed.

“Even Smyrna and Philadelphia?” Enoch asked.

“All Seven are his.”

“Then He will rule over the nations with an iron scepter.” Enoch pulled downwards on his face, stretching open the barren caves of his missing eyes.

Elijah writhed on the floor, “Any who oppose him will be dashed like pottery.”

Enoch rose up and began to twirl, “A Great Battle is coming!”

“It has already begun!” Elijah tore at his skin as if to cast off a burning blanket.

And still their torturous visions continued...(But thankfully, mine ended).

The Girl Who Cried Wolf

(June 11)

Which brings us now to Mary...

Oh, where should I start? Well, to begin with, I guess I should tell you that she is currently calling herself *Miriam Magdala*. I suppose that is adequate since she is originally from Magdala.

Are we friends?

Well, let's just say she is a long time business associate.

OK, to be truthful, at one time she, Alan, and I were inseparable. We all had the same mission to work on, we were all very gung-ho, and of course, we were all blessed with the same...condition.

What do I think about Miriam?

I can tolerate her – when she doesn't get all high and mighty on me. You see, the problem is that Miriam is very passionate about The

Commission – still. She has no other real interests; everything she does is about The Commission – even after all these many years, and all our failures. Don't you find that a bit odd? I did. And I got tired of all her badgering. That's the main reason why I left her and Alan.

Since then I have lived all over the world, but I migrated to my present home in Williamsport, PA, oh I'd say about fifty years back – give or take a decade. Alan has lived all over Eurasia and given that he is a scholar and I fancy myself as a scientist, we've always maintained at least a professional association. As for Miriam, I really haven't kept track of her these past couple centuries; oh, I've seen her time and again, but it was always work-related *and always with negative results*. I remember her telling me previously that she'd spent most of her time in the Far East and I know she said something about "being a student of world religions," but I didn't really pay much attention – so long as she had something to occupy her other than MY whereabouts then that was fine by me.

Which brings us to today -- June 11.

To be honest, I was not that surprised to see Miriam in my visions – once I saw that Benedict was up to something, and that Alan was in trouble, well, I figured that news of Miriam would pop up next.

I was correct.

And wouldn't you know it – I caught her writing another one of those damn secret notes!

(Boy, she really knows how to make me steam).

1492 is coming for you – MM.

“Please do something, John.” Miriam whispered, even though she was alone and her intended receiver (*me*) was on the other side of the globe. “I know you feel like a prodigal son, but it doesn't have to be like that. Acknowledge The Lord and He will make your paths straight again, John. Stop doubting Him and believe once more.”

(What the hell -- why can't she just leave me alone?)

I then watched as Miriam fell back into her chair and allowed the tears to take over. (She always one for the dramatics). She cried as quietly as she could – apparently trying not to be heard through the paper thin walls of the palace. (Yes, *palace* – don't worry, I'll get to that).

“None of us can do it alone, John.” She continued to talk under her breath, at prayer level. “Only we three can defeat him, but we must

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act together -- though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves, a cord of three strands is not easily broken. Don't you see, we need you? Please believe again – you may be immortal, but you are not invincible.”

(Oh, so you caught that?)

Immortality -- Ugh

(June 11)

OK, out with it – let’s hear your questions. I can tell you won’t let me move on, unless I fill you in a bit.

Am I immortal?

Yes. Alan, Miriam, and I are all immortal – we have been since He made us that way – nearly two thousand years ago. It’s a bitch. Trust me.

Take today for instance – here I am just sitting in my bed trying to get some sleep and shake this drunken haze. Yet I can’t get any peace because He keeps sending me more revelations. Enough already!

Being immortal is just not all it’s cracked up to be. I know Alan and Miriam may feel different, but what do they know?

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Oh sure, there was a time when I had a different opinion, but those days were long gone -- two thousand years on this planet will do that to a guy.

Well, now that the cat's out of the bag, I suppose I'll have to tell you a few more things to keep you from bombarding me with questions. Here's a few more tidbits about my life – take them for what you will.

Obviously I haven't always lived in upstate Pennsylvania; I was actually born half a world away and some two millennia past. And although I'm a persona unknown to most of the world now, long ago I was actually rather famous. Let's see how quickly you can figure it out...

My father's name was Zebedee and my mom was Salome. My family was Jewish and originally lived in the region around the Lake of Gennesaret in what is now modern day Israel. My mother was actually a sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth – yes, that means I was Jesus's cousin. I also had a rather famous brother too – a man who later became known as *Saint James The Greater*.

Back in the day my dad had a fishing business that James and I helped him with – it was profitable enough to allow me to afford my own house and it even gave me a bit of status (I was a personal

friend of the Jewish high priest at the time – hey, if you give anyone enough money, they’ll be your friend, right?).

Now Jesus and I were also cousins of another famous preacher – the legendary Jewish apocalypticist known as *John The Baptist*. The Baptizer was the first great speaker I had ever met and I actually found myself captivated by all his talk about how “the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand” and what it meant for me and my fellow Jews. (I wouldn’t fall for all that talk now, mind you, but back then it sounded rather good). In any case, at the time Jesus and I were both looking for something meaningful to do with our lives (fishing just wasn’t exciting enough) so we decided to follow The Baptizer around for awhile.

Eventually Jesus became a pretty hardcore apocalypticist himself and he too began evangelizing. Since I was closer to Jesus, I left The Baptizer’s group and followed Jesus around for a bit. But soon enough Jesus’s group ran out of money and reality set in, so we had to give it up -- I went back home to my boring life in the fishing business, while Jesus wandered off into the desert to find himself.

However, about a year later, Jesus came back home – and he was now a changed man. He claimed he had a revelation that he was *the Son of God*.

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Perhaps just as importantly, he also had a new plan for his evangelical work: *expansion via recruitment*.

He asked me and my brother to join him and leave our fishing business to instead become “Fishers of Men.”

We took the bait and helped Jesus find more recruits. It was a wild success – we travelled around like rock stars for awhile and after that I was pretty much by Jesus’ side from there on out – until Jesus was crucified that is. It was quite an ordeal – and events certainly didn’t work out as I thought they were going to when Jesus first roped me into the experience.

Nonetheless, even after Jesus passed away, I was still on fire for his message and so took it upon myself to continue his mission. In fact, I later wrote about my time with Jesus in a book called *The Gospel of John*.

Looking back now I regret the decision to get caught up with Jesus -- it was all just a crazy idea. Back then I was young and stupid. Oh sure there was something charismatic about Jesus – even more so than The Baptizer. *But Jesus clearly said that he would return*. And he said that he was going to do so during our lifetimes back then.

So where the hell is he? And what’s taking him so damn long?

Now as you know, my gospel wasn't the only book I wrote. I was also the author of numerous others -- including *The Epistles of John* and the *Book of Revelations*. In fact, I actually wrote quite a few other books over the past two thousand years (under different pen names of course), but most of those are tomes that I now want to forget.

And although I was once known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," that's a moniker I despise now -- for Jesus died nearly two thousand years ago and I can't understand how I could be so beloved to him and yet still be left here to rot.

All this thinking is making me tired.

Where's my bible?

Have you ever read the *Book of Job*, Chapter 3: 20-26? It goes like this, "Why is light given to those in misery, And life to the bitter of soul, To those who long for death that does not come, Who search for it more than for hidden treasure...? For...my groans pour out like water...What I fear has come upon me...I have no peace, no quietness, no rest, but only turmoil."

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Whenever I read those verses, bitter tears trickle down my cheeks – for I know that my dreams of death will elude me today once again – as they have for the last two thousand years.

For I am a man without hope.

All my dreams ended the day He made me this way.

As is my wont at times like this, I can't help but engage in a bit of morbid self-pity. So I flipped the pages of my bible to my own gospel, and read from Chapter 21: 22, "...And Jesus answered, 'If I want [John] to remain alive until I return what is that to you?'"

Now let's be clear on something here, when I wrote that verse, I had no idea that Jesus had *already* made me immortal. Yet the rumor was out there by the time my gospel first appeared on the scene and the stubborn legend only grew over time.

As you may know, other books have been written about the subject too – even after I (or at least my original identity) had long since been lost to history.

Are you familiar with what *The Book of Mormon* said in Chapter 28: 4-7? Or what about *The Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 7: 1-3? Both of those support my immortality myth. And yet, as I think

about those other books I can't help but wonder, "So Jesus read my mind, eh? And I actually told him that it was my desire *that I may live forever*, huh? How could those charlatans know what I really said or felt? It's not true."

OK, to be honest, I'm not really sure anymore what I said or did two thousand years ago, but at least I don't remember it quite like that.

I just wanted to live until Jesus returned.

He was giving us all the impression that his Second Coming would be happening pretty quickly, so you can imagine that I would want to be alive to see that big event, right?

Believe me, there is no way I would have asked to be cursed with immortality! Who would be so stupid? It's terrible.

Yet immortality is my fate now – as it had been then.

As for the rest of my story, after Jesus left us, my brother James, Simon Peter, myself, and a few others worked hard in the Judean region for about a decade or so – trying to establish a new branch of Judaism we called "The Way."

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Eventually our sect would classify itself as the new religion of *Christianity* but back then my friends and I never intended to start a new religion – we simply wanted to perfect our Jewish faith. For I was born a Jew and I had intended to die as one. The problem for myself and the rest of Jesus’s Jewish followers was that, unlike most Jews, we believed (back then at least) that Jesus was our long-promised *Messiah* and that the End of the World was close at hand – mainly because that’s what Jesus told us to believe.

Unfortunately for us, The End never arrived and Jesus himself never came back.

Worse yet, me and my friends had soon caused such a stir in Jerusalem that the Jewish leader at the time -- Herod Agrippa – began to persecute us to such an extent that we had no choice but to scatter to the four winds.

I left home and travelled throughout Asia Minor – still continuing to preach Jesus’ apocalyptic message. Eventually I ended up in Rome, but the authorities there didn’t take too kindly to the “End of the World is Nigh” fodder that Peter, Paul, and I were spreading, and over time we were all arrested. They murdered Peter and Paul, and I was supposed to be executed in Rome too.

One day they plunged me into a vat of burning oil, right there in the Coliseum -- but when I didn't suffer a scratch, two things happened: first off, I knew that Jesus really did make me immortal; secondly, the entire crowd at the Coliseum converted to Christianity!

At the time, I thought the last laugh was on Emperor Domitian, I snickered sarcastically as I thought back to that fateful day. But soon enough, I realized the joke was on me.

After the failed execution, Domitian had me banished to the Island of Patmos. It was there that I wrote *The Book of Revelations* – a tale I penned after discovering the island's supply of coca leaves and getting rather addicted to their mind-altering effects, which may explain the book's hallucinogenic undertones.

“Oh to have a few coca leaves with me now.” I sighed. Yet I knew that drugs were not a true escape – I've already tried them all, without success.

Two thousand years.

And a host of identities.

The truth is that the original Apostle John did not die. Oh, I had a tomb (located in Ephesus), but the body there is not mine. Instead,

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after Patmos, I simply disappeared from society as “John the Apostle” and became an assortment of different characters.

In the beginning, I thought I was the only one who was immortal. Eventually Lazarus and Mary of Magdala found me. And that’s when my life got a LOT more difficult.

Book Of Life

(June 11)

<Ting-ting-ttaling, Ting-ting-ttaling> The bells signaling the mid-day meal softly sounded.

(Gee whiz, why did you sidetrack me like that? Now where were we? Oh yeah, Miriam was whining again about how I never help her).

As I refocused on my vision, I saw Miriam, her eyes closed, hands in her lap, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock, and my Redeemer.” Miriam opened her eyes. Even still, she did not venture out of for lunch. (She’s probably fasting -- that’s Saint Miriam for you).

She moved her chair closer towards her desk. Although a simple secretary table, her desk was hand-carved from chapa wood and like most of the articles in this Tibetan palace it was ornately worked – in this case, the legs were covered with scroll-work and

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the desk panel itself had a border of miscellaneous Buddhist symbols outside the main writing area. Few items sat atop Miriam's workstation – a small stack of airmail stationary, a single pen, and one large leather-bound book.

It was this last item that Miriam now reached for, pulling the heavy tome towards her. Once positioned, she reached a hand up to her neck and then from inside her pale green robe she withdrew a chain that held a tiny key. Taking the chain from around her neck, she inserted the key into the lock that held fast the book. With a soft <click> the massive tome gave up its security and Miriam was free to open it as she pleased.

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.” She said as she fearfully opened the book. Then quickly she sought to find her bookmark -- which was in the last quarter of this omnibus -- yet, upon locating it, I saw the color drain from her face, for the page was blank. (I could have told you that, Miriam). Knowing that all the pages after it would also be blank, Miriam steeled herself as she flipped backwards to an earlier page.

“Blank, as well.” She gasped, looking as if a knife stabbed her heart. (Again with the dramatics).

The tears returning, Miriam continued to slowly leaf backwards -- going three full pages until she finally found names again. "And so, the number is now down to 182,107." She sobbed. And then, as a fountain of anger rose up within her, "Why, Lord -- why must it only be 144,000? How can you do nothing and allow so many to be lost? Don't you care? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? Arise, O Lord! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless!"

(Now, I have told her for centuries that He is no longer listening to us and that He doesn't care. I also told her that *there can only be 144,000*. I know Gabriel has told her the same thing time and again. But Miriam doesn't listen. Ha -- just like any other woman!)

After a short time, Miriam gave up, knowing full well that nothing she could do would change a future that was already predetermined. And so, closing the book for another day, Miriam sighed, "The crucible for silver and gold, but the Lord tests the heart. As always, I will be still and know that He is God."

Once more she locked up her book, and then moved it back to its place on her desk. After which she arose and readied herself for midday prayers with the rest of the palace. (And then my vision ended. And once again I learned nothing new -- another waste of my time.)

The Grandmaster

(June 12)

The smell of Boswellian incense embraced Pope Benedict's robes as he tarried back to his private quarters. (No, I don't have a sense of smell in my visions, hold on and you'll see how I knew this fact).

<Ah-choo!> Benedict sneezed again. (Understand now?)

(Another day, another vision. I usually don't get pummeled like this unless something big is afoot. This is not a good sign.)

"Hurensohn!" Benedict swore in his native dialect. "Why do we use such strong ash?" And he rubbed hard at his nose with a handkerchief. "Ach, Father, forgive me, but if Cardinal Renoit waves his censor in my direction next time, I'll excommunicate the toifel!"

Later that evening, after Benedict was able to shower, I watched as he once more engaged with some fellow conspirators. This time his

visitors were not two men who looked like a pair of Hitler's Aryan army, but instead a young woman and an older gentleman.

The woman was a gorgeous brunette whose silky hair covered her face yet could not obscure her beauty. Although I couldn't tell for sure, I was guessing that this was none other than Ms. Teri Abbracciavento.

Interestingly enough, the woman bore a striking resemblance to the older man who sat beside her. The scholarly type, he looked like the classic, European university professor – bushy grey eyebrows, a bulbous Italian nose, shaggy grey hair, and one of those tweed suits with patched elbows that made him a living cliché.

I noticed Benedict snickering to himself, and I wondered if he was amused at the same thing I was – (assuming this really was Teri A.), did her father know what his daughter had been up to lately?

“Blessed is the man whose sin the lord does not count against him... So how is death treating you, Antonio?” Benedict quipped as he scratched Deter behind the ears.

“Pah, Death is quite inconvenient,” The oldster replied. “Were you aware that I can't get a IdentiChip? Apparently my fingerprints

prove I'm dead. How am I supposed to buy anything once hard currency goes away?"

"Father, I told you that you'd have nothing to worry about." The woman reached over to pat his hand. "Your *death* was necessary. We've already discussed this. You can still use your Bitcoin. Meanwhile, Benedict's people will see to all your needs – just as they have always done. Correct?"

"Teri is correct." Benedict agreed (Bingo! I was right – again). "You have no need to worry, Antonio. Your mind is too valuable to have you waste it on such trifles. Bitcoin still works but if you really want an IdentiChip, we'll get you one."

"I should hope so." Antonio Abbracciavento nodded. "Bitcoin still scares me, there's nothing backing it. I'd much rather have the IdentiChip Dr. Ma'bus guarantees with the UMAN League's Tri-Marks that are in turn backed up by the country's massive gold reserves."

The pope smiled knowingly to himself, "Ma'bus' gold reserves may not be as big as--"

“Father sometimes invents things to worry about.” Teri interrupted. “If his mind is not always at work, he gets frustrated, so he is always thinking of new conspiracies.”

“Figlia mine, I do no such—“ Antonio began.

“In any case,” Benedict glanced down at his watch. “I’ve read your briefing about Lazarus. What is his current status?”

(Hmmm. So Joe was involved with Alan’s recent troubles?)

Teri smiled slyly, “Ah yes, Alan was a nice assignment. Although I didn’t get to consumma-” yet here she glanced at her father. “Well, the important thing is that we have him secured.”

“Does he suspect anything about me?” Benedict inquired, whilst Deter pawed at him.

“No, he believes you to still be as innocent as a baby goat.”

“Two millennia is a long time to live for anyone. I’m sure that Bruder Lazarus will thank us for helping him get to the afterlife.”

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(Joe, if I thought you could really end our lives, I'd be the first one at your door. But, you can't do it. So whatever you are planning, it won't work).

"So long as I get his immortal seed first." Teri reminded.

"Putta!" Antonio could stand it no more. "Enough of such talk before I smack you!"

"I am what I am." Teri said defiantly to her father. "Of all people, YOU should know that much."

"My friends." Benedict played peace maker. "Let's keep our eye on the prize. Antonio, the time is near. The End Game is brewing and the first check is about to occur. What is the latest from The Prophets?"

"I have read the transcripts and viewed their tapes. Elijah and Enoch continue to deteriorate. It's a sad sight to see such great men destroyed -- as if History is being reversed."

(Hmm, so this Antonio is in league with the mystery man who captured the prophets? Is Joe *that* man? If so, I didn't see that twist coming.)

“I prefer to say *corrected*.” Benedict smiled.

“Eh?” Antonio was confused (and me as well).

“*History is being corrected*. Elijah and Enoch were certainly extraordinary men; but, they have had their time. They were taken up body and soul to heaven and then preserved for this very mission. They knew what they were getting into. Nothing in His Universe is free and even WE will have to earn our fare before this ride is over.”

“Well, I should hope my work has been enough to stamp my ticket into the kingdom.” The professor grumbled. “And my daughter’s as well.”

“We shall see. But, who knows what tomorrow may bring.” Benedict shrugged. “In any case, please continue. Has there been a new prophecy?”

“Hmm. Well, it seems...”

“Yes?” Benedict pressed, hungry for news.

The color drained from Antonio’s face, “The Seventh Seal will soon... be broken.”

“And so it continues.” Benedict nodded, although he too shuddered at the teacher’s words. “There is no going back now.”

(Actually this news IS a big deal. Trust me).



My vision of Benedict and his conspirators continued. After the professor’s revelation about The Seventh Seal, all three of them turned inward -- examining their thoughts.

Antonio seemed to realize that the subject that he had devoted his life to was unfolding before his very eyes – although now it appeared he didn’t have the stomach for it. (Be careful what you wish for, eh?). Meanwhile Teri seemed to be relishing every moment. And as for Benedict, well it was obvious that he still had a major part to play before he could finally retire to that much desired rest, (but I couldn’t help thinking of the proverb: *He who digs a hole, falls into his own pit*).

Eventually Antonio spoke further about the terrible implications of the Seventh Seal. (And for the most part, he explained my work quite well). Yet, it was all he could do to hold himself together and he noticeably shook during his monologue.

For his part Benedict listened stoically, detaching himself from the grim horrors that the professor described. Once Antonio finished, The Pope added his thoughts, “Dreadful? Yes. Necessary? Absolutely. After all, we must remember -- the sheep were made to be shorn. It is their role in The Great Play.”

“All things work together for The Good.” Antonio patted his daughter’s hand as if to console her, yet I knew he was trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

“You are not responsible for this, Antonio.” Benedict advised. “Just because you have the foreknowledge of the crime doesn’t make you guilty of it.” The oldster was about to reply, but got tongue-tied instead and the Pope sensed his fear, “Sharing what you know with the world will NOT stop the events from happening. Do not even think of such a foolish act.”

Teri looked at her father in horror. “Papa! You were not contemplating this were you?”

Again, Antonio stuttered – further convicting himself.

(Fool. Don’t you realize that God has a plan and things will happen in His time and His time alone. We are all just the pawns of

prophecy – *whether we act or not*. That’s why I don’t care anymore – after all, it doesn’t matter what Antonio, me, or any of us do -- He already knows how it will all turn out!)

“Get control of yourself, Abbracciavento.” The Pope grated. “You’d be a fool to reveal such knowledge to the world. No one would believe you. More importantly, The Wheel of Time WILL turn and December 21st will arrive regardless of what you do.”

“Father will do no such thing.” Teri quickly changed the subject. “And speaking of December 21st, wouldn’t you like to hear about Ma’bus?”

“The rascal is proving to be quite a genius, eh?” Pope Benedict said.

“Indeed. He is becoming a power by literally buying the world.”

“Everybody wants the Tri-mark, eh?”

“Did you know many nations have stopped accepting trade unless they are paid in Tri-marks? Nobody has confidence in the financial backing of ANY country – except Ma’bus’ UMAN league. That’s why people are so desperate to be implanted with an IdentiChip and why UN is recommending it.”

“So, Ma’bus has the world by the balls and now the UN wants to sell our souls to Ma’bus?” Benedict summarized. “And yet I say -- *what the wicked dread will overtake them.*”

“Your Grace, what will happen now?”

“I would bet Ma’bus’s going to have Ban Ki-Moon removed - soon.”

“Assassination of The Secretary General?” Antonio gasped.

“Father, don’t interrupt.” Teri hushed him.

“That would be the next logical move.” The Pope explained, making the motion to wash his hands of the matter. “And there’s not much we can do to stop it – as I said, the Wheel of Time will move forward of its own accord. Once Ki-Moon is out of the way, the picture becomes much clearer for our adversary.”

“Ma’bus will be elevated to power – just in time for the Great Ceremony.” Teri smiled.

“Ah, my children,” The professor interrupted. “I’m afraid you are mistaken. For Ma’bus has already declined such a position. Even if he wanted it, surely Presidents Trump and Putin would block such a move.”

“Ma’bus as Secretary General is inevitable.” Benedict re-affirmed. “I’m surprised you didn’t see this, Antonio -- the world is in turmoil, it needs ONE person to step up and draw us together under the banner of peace and safety. Who else could it be but, Ma’bus? Sure he makes a pretense of resisting, but in reality only because his time has not yet come. He will accept the post when it is laid at his feet – when the world begs him to take over - with the pawns Trump and Putin leading the way.”

“Father, I’ve already told you The Brotherhood has been pumping Ma’bus up quite overtly throughout Africa.” Teri reminded. “They’re also building anti-Asian sentiment against Ki-Moon amongst the radical factions of Europe. Additionally both Trump and Putin are playing their parts. It’s all going according to plan. Plu, you know this already. Why are you being so difficult?

(I would have known that too -- had I been to any of the recent Brotherhood meeting).

“But, how does that help our cause?” Antonio asked. “I thought we were trying to destroy Ma’bus, not give him even more power.”

“Have you ever played Karpov?” Benedict asked.

“In chess?” Antonio returned the question. “Are you asking if I have played the Grandmaster Anatoly Karpov?”

“Yes.”

“Why would Karpov waste his time with me? I’m no master.”

“I have played Karpov - once.” Benedict reminisced. “1984. You may not know this but I actually did hold *Master* rank during my youth— although it was unofficial, given my religious position. In any case, the Grandmaster taught me quite a lesson – for Karpov's intentions became understandable to his opponents only when salvation was no longer possible. That is what happened to me too -- he drew me in, allowed me to rise to a position of power, and then ruthlessly crucified me. Once he decided to make his move, his drive to mate was inevitable *and certain*. Mind you, at the very point when I felt that I was on the verge of setting up my mate of him -- when I felt most secure and actually stole a breath! -- the very next instant, he turned the tables on me, and his every successive move led to victory. He was inexorable.”

“And that is what we shall do to Ma’bus, father.” Teri giggled.

“Check and mate.” Antonio agreed.

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“Indeed.” Benedict smiled. “We’ll give Ma’bus what he wants – we’ll give him the world. For that is HIS destiny. But in the end, I’ll take it back – for that is MY destiny.”

(I’ve got to say, although I’m done with The Commission, this vision WAS interesting – even for me. Hey, if The End of Days really are coming, then that’s fine by me – perhaps that will finally stop the insanity!)

The Great Harvest

(June 17)

It was five days before I got a new prophecy – unfortunately it was about Miriam again.

“It is as you say.” Miriam’s visitor advised – the man’s garments gleaming with a Whiteness so bright as to be... *other-worldly*.

“Will he survive?” Miriam asked.

“Who can say? The Scriptures will be fulfilled -- you know this.”

The pair was conversing in a secluded garden within the grounds of *Norbulingka* -- for Miriam was a guest of The Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, and had been for nearly twenty years.

Even now I still wondered why a Buddhist leader like The Lama would have opened his home for a Bible-pusher like Miriam in the first place? The only answer I can come up with leads back to

Miriam herself – she has quite a way with people -- in fact, she has a little mental telepathy trick she does that allows her to be quite manipulative. Of course, if you prefer a less sinister explanation, then I suppose it's only fair to surmise that Miriam probably didn't ask for much – after all, she only needed one small room – easy enough for Tenzin to provide since he had multiple palaces – and the opportunity to reside in seclusion from the world – again, not very difficult for The Lama to assist with, since he himself was also an exile.

Yet on this day, Miriam was not talking with her friend Tenzin, for while her visitor today was no less of a spiritual person than The Lama, he was far more powerful. For this was no mere man, but instead an Angel of The Lord – Archangel Gabriel to be exact.

(Remember, I told you that Miriam had another source for her knowledge? It's true, while I am blessed with *The Sight*, and Alan has his book knowledge, Miriam always got her information from Gabriel. Don't ask me why, that's just how it is).

“You must leave here soon, Mary,” Gabriel advised.

“My name is *Miriam* now.”

“As you wish. But the fact remains that you will need to leave.” And after a pause, “I never understood why you came HERE in the first place.” (That makes two of us).

“The Lord said ‘Preach the Good News to ALL the world.’”

“Call me old fashioned, but I still prefer The Covenant People. In any case, you did well to assist The Virgin at Fatima, Guadalupe, and Lourdes,” The angel praised her. “And even Medjugorje and Conyers were a success in feeding the Shepherd’s flock. Yet ever since you’ve tried to gather souls from outside the Family, it’s not been the same. *It is not right to take the children’s bread and feed it to the dogs.*”

“Are we quoting from Scripture again, Gabriel?” Miriam practically snarled. “Don’t forget the reply -- *even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from the master’s table.* And while I enjoyed helping the savior’s mother minister to Christians, don’t forget that I was sent to minister to others too. So many religions in this mixed-up world -- I may only be a voice of one calling in the desert, but at least I can try.”

“Prepare the way for the Lord? Is that it? And where The Crusaders failed with violent force, you use mere words, eh?” Gabriel bantered – as if he actually enjoyed getting Miriam riled up about her

self-commissioned quest. (At last, a vision I was actually enjoying!)
“But, Ma-, er, *Miriam*, what if these people don’t want to give up their beliefs?”

“I never tell them that they must give up what they believe. I seek to understand them. I listen to them. And then, after I have earned the right, I share my own testimony, and thereby hope to inspire them to willingly choose our path.”

“And just how many have you converted?” Gabriel baited. (Ooh. That’s a low blow!)

Miriam blushed, “I am a Sower. My job is to plant seeds; another after me, I don’t know who, will Reap. Perhaps even My Lord.”

“And so we come to the real matter again.”

“Yes we do. But you know I cannot do it alone. I need John and Alan to do their part. And I need YOU -- that’s why I called.”

“Miriam, we have our own battles on The Other Front. The situation looks grim for us as well, but we rely on The Word and thus know that we will prevail in the end. I’m afraid you must figure this out on your own.”

“But, The Beast already has Alan. And John is avoiding me.” Tears began to well up in Miriam’s eyes as she lamented. “I pour out my soul to The Lord and yet still I cannot understand!” Reaching over on her desk, she hefted up a large, black leather tome, “Have you seen The Book of Life lately -- it’s now down to 173,201 names!”

“Miriam,” The angel replied softly, “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way. You know as well as I that only 144,000 will experience The Rapture.”

“But why only 144,000? How can God allow so many to be lost?”

“When the sculptor carves a masterpiece, how much of the original stone is discarded?”

“Who cares about the remnants from a block of stone? I’m talking about the souls of good people!”

“Are they really so *good*?”

“They could be if they had the opportunity to know our Lord.”

“How do you know they didn’t have the chance already?”

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“You know they never had a real chance! It’s all been predetermined.” And opening up the book to one of the later pages that still had names on it, Miriam continued, “I can turn to this page and read these names and KNOW that none of them will be saved. Look -- all of these people, these sheep, will be lost! Where is the Good Shepherd who will save them? I just don’t see how this can be right?”

“Miriam, we both know you know the answer. Speak the words for yourself and let’s move on from this tedium.”

Miriam turned away instead, “I don’t want to.” And she made an effort to busy herself by closing The Book of Life and placing it back into position on her desk.

Gabriel gently pulled her back by the arm, however he did not speak so softly this time, “Say the truth, Mary!”

Unable to resist the arch-angel’s command, Miriam finally replied, “Ach, because...of Adam and Eve. It’s all because of the Original Sin!”



My vision continued as I watched Miriam break away from Gabriel again, “But, why must people a thousand generations or more removed from Adam still have to suffer for his sin? Is God such a begrudging lord?”

(Sing it, Sister! Finally she says something intelligent.)

“Miriam, why must we debate this so often?” Gabriel replied. “You know the difference -- the sacrifice of The Christ provided for the ultimate forgiveness of all men’s sins. HOWEVER, the Lord has not taken away Free Will. And despite forgiveness, there will always be consequences for sin.” And before Miriam could interrupt, “This is not to say that ONLY 144,000 will enter The Kingdom and that the others will be barred forever, just that only those few will be raptured without pain; while the rest will be disciplined for their transgressions. It is a discipline given out of love, in an effort to teach the wayward about the Righteous Path.”

(I’ve heard that argument before. In the past I used to buy in to it, now I call it hogwash).

“Not everyone will make it.” Miriam stated. “Because not all will repent and accept, will they?”

“Ah, even I do not know the answer to that. Yet understand that The Story of Redemption goes beyond just this planet. For our God is the Lord of ALL the Universe -- *every universe*. And whilst each universe may have differences, in the end the Lord’s goal is the same: *to glory in the creation of ever more souls made Holy as a result of Free Will* – for whenever a soul freely chooses to worship The Lord, all of Heaven rejoices!”

(OK, I realize this is pretty deep. If you understand, great, if not, just don’t worry about it for now. After all, when are YOU going to be travelling to another universe? Just worry about yourself, cupcake, that’s hard enough).

“And now the Time of Truth has come for Earth.” Miriam concluded.

“This is the day the lord has made, let us be glad and rejoice!” Gabriel praised. “Indeed, millennia ago, your world was sown and cared for. When The Christ came, he began the process of pruning. And now, The Earth is finally ready – *for only with the pains of harvest can the crops finally be served* – which is their true purpose. Such is the case for souls everywhere – none can reach The Lord without The Great Harvest.”

“And this happens on every world?”

“Not every world goes through the same life cycle. Oh, be certain that Lucifer and his minions are active in every location, however not always with the same results. Some worlds never know the stain of Original Sin – for the souls there rejected Lucifer from the onset – when it was the easiest to resist – and thus they have been in Harmony with God for all of their existence. Oh how these worlds shine! Yet, just the same, there are other worlds in which Lucifer’s allure was apparently irresistible, and upon those locales, nearly all of the souls have been lost. These are horror filled, forsaken places...” Here the angel paused.

Miriam too shuddered at the thought of such hell-worlds.

Eventually Gabriel found his voice again, “And yet, it is worlds like your Earth that The Lord takes the most pleasure in -- for the balance of power between Good and Evil is ever changing, and the final outcome is uncertain – *which makes the Battle here all the more important.*” And fixing his gaze ominously upon Miriam, “Do not underestimate the significance of what is happening here. And, do not underestimate the part that YOU are playing. The Heavenly Host needs YOU. Succeed in your mission -- help Mankind make the right choice.”

“But how? I don’t have the worldly prestige to influence so many, and time is running out.”

“Commit to the Lord whatever you do and your plans will succeed, Miriam.” The angel reminded. “Don’t allow The Beast to reveal himself to the world – for if he gets the opportunity to glorify himself on the world stage, his allure will be nearly irresistible, and I fear that your Earth may be lost forever. If that happens, then you won’t be complaining about only 144,000 being saved – we’ll be lucky to even harvest 4,000.”

“Oh my -- save us, Lord!” Miriam clutched her Book of Life, sheltering the names inside. “But, Gabriel, even if we do stop The Beast, what will it mean in the grand scheme of things – beyond just our world?”

“In the end, what happens on this planet will mimic The Ultimate Story of Redemption only if Man realizes the error of his ways and freely chooses Life with God -- for only then will you be able to reconnect with your true purpose in life – to serve God. Whether they know it or not, it is this Redemption that ALL of Creation is seeking – even...The Dark One.”

“Satan.”

(Yes, there IS a Force of Darkness. Call him ‘the devil,’ or ‘Lucifer,’ or whatever you want, but He does exist. If you don’t believe me, then it’s YOU who are the fool).

“Indeed. On a grand scale, Mankind’s tale is a microcosm of Lucifer’s – for the end goal of the Ultimate Revelation is not the destruction of man, and especially NOT of Lucifer, but instead, The Lord seeks to purge Lucifer’s evil nature away in the hopes that he will repent of his sins and eventually reunite with God Himself. For only when such an event occurs can Creation truly be made whole again...Yet, whether or when this will happen, who can say?”

“Oh, but this all goes so far beyond me.” Miriam lamented. “What do my efforts really matter?”

“Can you fathom the mysteries of God? You are a part of Creation. A member of the Great Play. Your part IS critical.”

“What if I can’t fulfill my duty?”

“What if you never try?” Gabriel softened his tone again. “When you come to the end of all the Light you have, Faith is knowing that when you take the next step either you’ll land on something solid or else you’ll learn how to fly.”

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(He did NOT just make that up. I've heard that quote before – I think it was coined by a fellow named Edward Teller).

“For you, O God, tested us.” Miriam prayed. “You refined us like silver. But you brought us to a place of abundance.” And yet, still she hesitated. (Typical Miriam).

At last the Angel could take it no more. And so, rising up to his full height, he unveiled his awesome wings and roared, “Enough! Now is the time. I command you -- Fly, Miriam, FLY!” Gabriel's words thundered so loud that even I was taken aback by the <POWER> they held.

(Thankfully my vision ended on that note and I was given a measure of peace. Needless to say, I immediately went to get a strong drink!)

American Idol

(June 20; And a Time Long Past)

Somebody's needin' somebody the way I do. Somebody's wantin' somebody they can hold on to. To be loved by somebody that's the way it should be. Oh, there's got to be somebody somewhere waitin' for me.

A few days later, I was sitting in a rocking chair on my back porch listening to Conway Twitty on my radio. It was another scorcher of a day and I conspired against the heat by sipping on an ice cold lager – *Beck's* to be exact – crisp, clean, and refreshing.

(Why are you so appalled that I drink so much? Don't you know the saying "Let them drink and forget their worries?" Hey, I'm not making this stuff up – it's in The Bible, read it for yourself).

Although nearly two weeks had passed, I still hadn't replaced the TV that was damaged during the break-in. As a result, I was forced to listen to my Phillies games over the radio. Since the game wasn't

on for another hour, I was whiling away the time listening to some music – naturally I sang along.

“...Hurtin’ inside, going through emotions,” I bellowed out, terribly off-key, “It’s so hard to live. So many feelings, so lonely, when they got so much to give...” Closing my eye as the tune came to a close, I raised my glass, “To be loved by somebody, that’s the way it should be. Oh there’s got to be somebody waitin’ for me...”

“But, why ain’t there no one waitin’ for ME?” I lamented after the song ended and suddenly I flew into a rage, “Why is life given to the bitter of soul? For my sin is always before me and You leave me covered in disgrace!” I knew I was being overly dramatic, but I didn’t care. “You make me eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears. My days are like the evening shadow. I am alone -- because of Your great wrath. Why?”

A <force> pulled gently against me, but I resisted, “No -- I will not repent! And I will NOT be silent!” I condemned myself. “I will complain at the bitterness of my soul. Why did You, the God of all creation, credit Job’s words as Faith when he raged against You, yet I remain despised?”

Getting more frustrated, “Damn it all to Hell! Damn all of you; especially you, Mary -- it’s all your fault!”

And in a flash, I was lost in memories – unwanted memories from nearly two thousand years ago...



“Damn rain.” I growled, pulling the shutters closed against the cold. In my mind’s eye I was back in the upper room of a rundown apartment building where me and my friends were planning to celebrate the Passover Feast later that evening. (I was speaking in Aramaic but for our purposes I’ll translate). Turning to the group, I continued, “It’s the month of Nissan for Yahweh’s sake! Why’s it gotta be so damn cold? I thought we were coming to Jerusalem to be able to enjoy ourselves, but after our *triumphal entry* just a few days ago, since then it’s been pretty rotten.”

There was a large table in the middle of the room and around this Peter, my brother James, and a few other men continued preparing the board for our approaching feast. Even still, Peter took the time to reply, “John, I feel your pain. But calm down, you know as well as I that The Master could tell the winds to cease and the Sun to shine if he so desired.”

“Then why doesn’t he?” I opened the shutters again and looked at the dusty streets below – yearning in anticipation.

“Don’t worry, He’ll be here.” Another man walked over and placed his hand on my shoulder as I continued searching. “He wouldn’t have us do all this and not show up, right?”

“Who knows anymore, Matthew?” I pulled the shutters closed again with a bang. “Ever since Magdala started traveling with us, it seems like SHE is calling the shots now. Does He have to always listen to her advice?”

(Looking back, I guess you could say that I never really liked Mary. Oh well).

“She does seem to always know the right thing to do.” Matthew replied. “Look how the people have responded lately. Why, even the Sadducees are afraid to touch us!”

“But why? How?” I countered. “I know that He dispelled those seven demons from her, but what makes Mary so different from the countless other peons that He did miracles for? She’s just a girl from Magdala for Moses’ sake! Why is she allowed to travel with us, when He always told others to go their own way after He healed them?”

“Because Mary continues to prophecy.” Advised a large man who joined in our conversation. “Only now, rather than speak in the demon tongue, Jesus believes Mary is speaking the words of Yahweh Himself.”

(Funny, I forgot about that. Back then, I was NOT the one with the visions – it was Mary. I never did understand why that all changed?)

“Andrew is right, John. And so far you can’t argue with her results.” Matthew smiled at me. “After all, Mary IS often correct in what she sees. I mean, here we are in Jerusalem, man! Celebrating the Passover in a place that the Pharisees said we would never be able to come back to. And all because Mary told The Master about Bartimaeus’ blindness and that man’s parents were so grateful when The Master cured him that they let us use one of their rental rooms for our Meal this evening...for free – even though this town is packed with pilgrims, and Bartimaeus’ parents could have rented this room for some big coin. Surely that is amazing, neh?”

“Don’t the rest of us count for something?” I retorted. “After all, most of us have been with him for three years or more, yet she’s been around for less than a year. I asked to sit at his right and James at his left -- the rest of you practically crucified us for that --

and he denied us anyway. Yet Magdala does whatever she pleases and none of you care.”

“Come on, she’s not that bad.” Matthew replied. “Look at me -- Mister Former Tax Collector -- yet here I am as one of the Chosen. Mark my words, John, I’m going to write a book about this one day!”

“Whatever, Matthew, you do that. But I’m serious -- what IS going on with her?”

“Do you think there’s a romantic connection?” Andrew asked.

“Unthinkable!” I was quick to reply, *not wanting to believe what I most feared.*

“Would it be so bad if Jesus and Magdala did unite?” Matthew asked.

“Surely it would diminish our ministry.” Peter surmised.

“I’m not so sure.” Matthew countered. “Think about this, friend -- we have come a long way under His direction, but as Judas says, now is the time for action. The people thirst for change. And with Mary’s vision and Jesus’ inspired oration, we could move forward

with *The Messiah Mission* and finally wrest power from the current usurpers.”

“Think of the glory we would all share in,” Peter agreed, “if OUR faction ruled Jerusalem.”

“As good as that sounds,” James spoke up, “I have to agree with my brother. We all know that Jesus is The Son of Yahweh – the Divine Incarnate. There can be no way that he would allow himself to be defiled by a woman.”

(As far as I know, Jesus never did anything untoward with Mary - thankfully. But I still say that she was his downfall with all her mind games.)

“But he is also a man.” Andrew replied. “Surely his flesh has needs.”

“He is a man in appearance only.” Peter rebutted. “He is without sin. He has been tempted by Satan himself – remember what he told us – he was tempted worse than we could ever imagine for forty days in the desert – without faltering. No, friends, I tell you the truth, our Jesus cannot be defiled by anything or anyone in this world.”

“But Mary has been purified by The Master.” Andrew reasoned. “Perhaps this makes her acceptable to him.”

“Who knows? Perhaps you are correct.” Peter replied. “But I believe even if Jesus purified Magdala when he cast out those demons, nonetheless, she is still a human like the rest of us and thus she will always carry Adam’s stain on her. Yet The Master is different – he is pure, he was born without Sin -- always has been, always will be.”

(Ha, hear that, Mary? You could never be good enough for Him).

Silence reigned as we all pondered what would become of our club now that Mary of Magdala was gaining more influence within the group and threatening to take our Master away from us.

“What you say makes sense, Peter.” Matthew agreed. “But how can we be sure?”

“Why can’t John ask him?” Andrew offered.

“What? Why me?” I resisted.

“Come on, John.” My brother James coaxed. “You know he loves you best. He tells you everything.”

“Not anymore!” I snapped. “Now she’s his confidante. But this is nothing new because for a while it was Judas too, remember? And speaking of Judas -- what’s going on with him? Even though he’s still with us, he’s not been too engaged with our plans lately.”

(Wow! Guess I was correct in that assessment, huh?)

“Yeah, I’m worried about Judas too.” Matthew said softly. “Maybe we should find out what’s bothering him? Perhaps I’ll sit beside him at dinner tonight and ask him.”

“It won’t help, Matthew. Remember, Judas is a Zealot.” Peter reminded them. “He wants Jesus to take power by force, but I get the feeling that’s just not going to happen.”

“Then what are we all doing here in Jerusalem?” Andrew asked. “Waiting for the Pharisees to come and arrest us? I mean, did you see that performance in the Temple today? If Jesus keeps insulting them, they’ll have all of our heads!”

“Let them come and try it!” I grumbled while my brother got riled up as well.

“Be that as it may, brothers,” Peter stopped us in our tracks. “Back to our problem -- is there anything else we can do to perhaps minimize Mary’s influence?”

“Lazarus likes Mary.” Matthew tittered. “Perhaps we could get those two to spend more time together?”

(If only Lazarus hadn’t been such a bumbling fool and tried to play Mr. Cool by keeping a secret from Mary, he would have taken her off our hands way back then and maybe things would have been different. Oh, you don’t know that story, yet? Don’t worry, we’ll get to that, too).

“Really?” Andrew asked. “How do you know?”

“Have you seen the way Lazarus is around Magdala?” Matthew replied. “He’s practically a Bar Mitzvah Boy – all wide-eyed and ready to showcase his manhood.”

“Yes, but Mary was there when Lazarus was raised back to life,” Andrew added. “I think it was rather unsettling for her, so I don’t see the two of them getting together.”

“If nothing else, it can’t hurt to include Lazarus more in our affairs.” Peter concluded. “At least, Lazarus might take up some of Mary’s

time and leave The Master more with us – so things can get back to normal. After all, if Jesus really is not going to accept Mary’s advances, surely she won’t wait around forever, right?”



And with that my vision snapped back to the present...

“Ha! ‘Surely she won’t wait around forever?’ Eh, Peter?” I quipped to myself as I took another sip of my iced tea. “It seems we were wrong about that!”

Still on my porch, I snickered to myself with chagrin – for it seemed that nobody got what they wanted:

- Lazarus never did get Mary.
- Jesus never accepted Mary’s advances.
- I’m still here rotting in this worn out husk of a body.
- *All of our dreams have been dashed.*

“Why have you cursed us like this, Lord?” And I threw my glass down on the porch – watching it smash into countless pieces, even as the remaining liquid quickly seeped through the floorboards. Overwhelmed with shame, I cried, “I am worn out calling for help, God. Will my life never end? Even if I end up in the land of gloom

and shadow – even still I will go if it means I can only escape this so-called life!”

As if on cue, I noticed the radio was playing yet another one of my favorite songs – the Jim Reeves classic, “Am I that Easy to Forget?”

Guess I could find somebody, too. But I don't want no one but you. How could you leave without regret? Am I that easy to forget?

I was about to let myself be drawn deeper into the song, when...

“We interrupt this broadcast,” came the urgent words of the announcer, “with a special report about the assassination of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon...”

“NO, not again – what about my Phillies game?”

I stewed as the Special Report was delivered -- no less than thirty minutes of rigmarole about how, as yet, no one knew who had assassinated Ki-Moon (although I had a pretty good idea); that an emergency meeting of the UN had already taken place; and that Ghaz al Ridwan Ma'bus (Bingo!) had already been elected as *interim* Secretary General -- with only the United States, Great Britain, and Russia casting negative votes (as we know this was obviously only for appearances sake).

After this, there was a short audio clip from Ma'bus' acceptance speech in which the beloved world leader explained that while his first inclination was to advise he was not worthy of such an honor, in fact he agreed to accept the nomination – at least on a short term basis – because he realized that the world needed him, and therefore he promised to do his best to lead the planet to prosperity.

Now as odd as this might sound, during the initial newscast I was quite dour, yet while the Ma'bus clip was playing, I actually found myself getting inspired (just a bit) by Dr. Ma'bus' passion? It was a contagious sensation that I could not shake and soon enough a smile began to form beneath the scraggly curls of my beard the more I listened to Ghaz al-Ridwan Ma'bus' smooth voice.

Again, that <force> beckoned me.

And then, as if the shackles of two thousand years of lethargy were suddenly released, I jumped up and looked to the Heavens. “Could this really be The Time?” I was actually hopeful. And in spite of myself, I began to praise, “When my soul is downcast within me, I will remember you. O Lord, have you returned to us in the person of Ma'bus?”

Meanwhile, Ma'bus continued to talk – encouraging the world to unite in brotherly love -- and my Hope sprang even higher!

“Lord, are you him?” I desperately clutched my radio, hanging on Ma’bus’ next words.

But then it happened, for as the applause from the crowd became so overwhelming, Ma’bus himself could no longer be heard.

“Nooooooooo!” I collapsed in despair. “Don’t desert me again!”

Yet, my protests were to no avail. And when the regular newsman’s voice came back over the speaker, my newfound inspiration evaporated; once more I felt as if I was nothing more than a worthless sinner who had yet again been forgotten and abandoned.

(Pity? I don’t want your pity. You can stuff your sorries in a sack!)

If there were any last vestiges of hope, I quickly beat them down. And even when a small, still voice inside me seemed to say “John, John, why do you forsake me?” even then I refused to listen. Instead I simply reached towards my radio, and clicked the dial <off>.

A lone tear trickled down my cheek, as I resolved to go inside and get into bed – to put an end to another miserable day.

“As for me, it’s always the same - I am scorned and disgraced. Shame has broken my heart and left me helpless. Why do You forsake me so?”

And trudging along the porch, “Let the world take care of itself. Or let Ma’bus do it. He doesn’t need me. You don’t need me, Lord. Nobody needs ME anymore.”

And with that, I went inside and closed the door – leaving even my Phillies to fend for themselves.

(Bummer, huh?)

Bad Rap

(June 22)

I pouted for a couple days -- tinkering around in the garage working on my... *project*.

If you're wondering what there is to do in Williamsport, let me answer you – not much. I migrated here over fifty years ago because I wanted to live in a secluded town where I wouldn't be bothered. For the most part, that's still the case.

The city (if you can call it that) is located in the northern part of Pennsylvania, a little east of center. When I moved here back in the 1950's it was still a pretty small town, but since then it has grown to about 30,000 or so – most of that due to an influx of supposedly rehabbing criminals that have been continually shipped here from Philly for the last couple decades. To encourage Williamsport to accept these fine new citizens, the state paid the city a bunch of money for so-called *community projects*; it wasn't a fair exchange – this place used to be a decent country village with respectable

people, but now I don't travel much into the city-proper because of all the riff-raff. Sure, Philadelphia is good for being the home of my Phillies and I can never have too many *Gino's* cheese steaks, but keep your criminals there please!

Hey, did you know that in the late 1800s Williamsport was actually known as *The Lumber Capital of the World*? Or that Williamsport once had more millionaires per-capita than anywhere in the United States at the time?

I doubt you know any of this or even care. In fact, if you've heard of this town at all, it's likely because it's the home of the *Little League World Series*. Now if you know anything about me at all, you know I love baseball, and while I never played (the game didn't even exist when I was in my youth), for whatever reason I can't get enough of watching this pastime now. Sure my favorite team is the Phillies, but being that they are three-plus hours away by car, I rarely get to their games. Nonetheless, if I want to see some live ball, I have a couple options – I can drive into town and watch the local minor league affiliate of the Phillies called the *Williamsport Crosscutters*, or I can go to any number of local Little League games and see the sport in its purest form.

In addition to going to the little league series every August, for a long time I also helped as a volunteer assistant coach with some of

the local little leagues in the 1970's and 80's – usually at the *Brandon Little League* which was located in a community park across the street from my friend Frank Stoppa (yes I actually did have a few people I considered friends).

I enjoyed my time there and was a stalwart for over two decades. Unfortunately, in the late 80's, I started to feel under-appreciated by some of the parents, and later on I started to get questioned as to why an old geezer like me was so interested in helping out with young boys and girls who were not related to me. Eventually it just wasn't worth the trouble anymore. (Gee whiz, it's not like I was recruiting some kid to be my catamite. I simply loved the game – is that such a crime?).

As for my friend Frankie, he was quite a pal. With a shock of black hair ever-filled with Brylcreem, he was a greasy-haired Italian-Pollock who was one of the few people in the world I've ever met who truly got it. It was Frankie who introduced me to my faithful friends Jim and Jack (*Reeves* and *Daniels* that is), as well as to such beer classics as *PBR*, *Genesee*, and *Yuengling*. And it was Frankie who also turned me on to country music. Many a night it was that the two of us would put away a case of beer or a few fifths of whiskey listening to Jim Reeves, Conway Twitty, or Hank Williams. Yes, Frankie understood that life was pretty much pointless unless you could find some way to enjoy it; he was quite a

character – as gregarious as I am quiet – and for over forty years we made quite a team.

Unfortunately for me, Frank passed away back in 2009 and things haven't been the same since. He was my last real friend. He knew my secrets – and he took them to the grave. Funny enough, I was there at his funeral mass when his grandson gave what I consider the most fitting eulogy of all time – not only was the talk filled with humorous stories about Frankie's life, but at the very end, (right there in a Catholic Church mind you), his grandson cracked open a can of *Pabst* and sent Frankie off with a toast of 'one for the road!' Now, that's the way to go, huh?

And yet, I don't have such a luxury -- I'm stuck here. Despite the fact that I still enjoy my baseball, and my booze, and my music, I'd gladly give it all away if I could only die like my friend Frankie.

I'm just oh so tired of being alive. Can you understand that? I doubt it.

There's a section of King Solomon's *Book of Ecclesiastes* (Chapter 12) which comes close to what I'm feeling. Let me read it to you, "...The years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them.' When the sun and the moon and the stars grow dark. When old men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint.

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When even the grasshopper drags himself along -- for desire is no longer stirred. Then shall the dust shall return to the ground it came from, and the spirit to the God who gave it. [But for me] Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!"

If you open your Bible and read that book, you'll notice that I did NOT add that last section about Life being "meaningless" – Solomon himself wrote those words and he was supposed to be the wisest man who ever lived so if you got a problem, take it up with him. In any case, his words sure as hell apply to me.

But, what more can I do?

I can't die, and yet I don't want to keep on living. And so, I am forced to suffer a meaningless existence – unless I can figure out a way to change my fate -- that's what my Project is all about.

(I'd love to finally tell you about something IMPORTANT – like my Project – but alas, right now I'm supposed to talk about my visions... again.)



Today I got MULTIPLE visions, abo--

Eh, what's that -- you have more questions? But don't you want to hear about my vision? Oh, all right, go ahead, ask away...

If we are all immortal, why are Miriam and Alan so much younger than me?

That's a damn good question -- one that I have often asked over the years. Why in hell did Miriam and Alan get to remain so young and good looking while I had to grow old and haggard? Ha, if only I knew the answer. Again, I go back to me supposedly being Jesus' beloved and yet this is how he blesses me? Sounds like a pretty raw deal.

Was it Jesus who gave immortality to all three of us?

Yes.

When did he make Alan immortal and why?

As for the *When* – here's another opportunity for you to read that great book I was telling you about – *The Gospel of John*. Open it up to Chapter 11 and you'll see when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. As for the *Why*, I would have to say for two reasons: first off, Lazarus was very dear to Jesus. We all liked Lazarus and his two

sisters and they were always kind to us whenever we stopped by. Lazarus even travelled around with us for awhile. But probably the real reason is that Jesus wanted Lazarus to help Mary and I with The Commission and I guess Jesus figured Lazarus would be the brain power behind the operation. If that's not correct, then your guess is as good as mine.

When did he make Miriam immortal and why?

Gee, let's not get too obvious with our questions, huh? Well, this one is a bit trickier – at least for me – because, like I said before, Mary and I were never all that close -- despite the many centuries we have known each other. I'm sure she told me her story many times, but for whatever reason I just can't recall it now. (Hey, I'm an old man, we're allowed to have selective memory, right?).

Was there ever something romantic between Jesus and Miriam?

Honestly, I don't know. Even though He did spend a lot of time with her (especially at the end), Jesus never gave us ANY indication that He was nothing but a perfect gentleman. In spite of my personal grievances against our Lord, I still believe He was 100% a man without sin and that, even if He was tempted, He never succumbed.

Was Mary of Magdala a prostitute or the adulteress whom Jesus saved from stoning?

OK, I guess now I DO feel a little sorry for Mary on that account, because she really has gotten her name muddled up over the years.

Here are the FACTS: The woman you likely know as *Mary Magdalene* was a person whom Jesus did cast out seven demons from. She came from the village of Magdala (a city on the southwest coast of the Sea of Galilee). After Jesus exorcised her demons, Mary followed us around – however, unlike most of those He cured who eventually left our group, Mary continued to stay on and got more involved.

As for her reputation as a *woman of ill repute*, I know the stories as well as you. She was associated with ‘the woman in the city who was a sinner’ (*Luke*: Chapter 7), and even more so, many people still believe that she is the adulteress whom Jesus saved from stoning in my gospel (*John*: Chapter 8). In point of fact, Mary is NOT either of those women and there really isn’t any evidence in The Bible to support those associations.

So how did Mary get such a bad rap?

Well, here I must confess that I am partly to blame – along with James and Peter. We were the early leaders of a new religious sect called *The Way* and it was pretty chaotic after Jesus left us. We did the best we could trying to keep things organized as we spread *The Good News* and gained more followers, but Mary had her own designs – no, let me correct that statement, she wanted to be our new leader!

Ah, heeeeeellll, no -- I'm not following some upstart woman! And the rest of the apostles agreed.

But Mary wouldn't listen. She went off and recruited her own disciples. She even went so far as to write her own Gospel!

What could we do? We had to stop her.

So we came up with some rumors to discredit her. After all, the city of Magdala was a hotbed for prostitution back in our day, so if Mary became guilty by association, well, it just made our job all the easier.

Unfair or not, our plan DID work and Mary was discredited. But look here, the end justifies the means in my book – after all, *The Way* turned into Christianity and thereby did we spread Jesus' message to the world.

Do I feel bad?

Not really.

Just to set the record straight, I will say a few more GOOD things about Mary to show you that I can be fair and balanced. In fact, Mary was one of the few who stayed around to witness most of the events of Jesus' last days – especially his passion and crucifixion. She was there at the mock trial, she heard Pontius Pilate agree to the death sentence, she saw our Lord beaten and humiliated by the soldiers and the crowd, and (along with me and Jesus' mother), Mary stood on Golgotha to try to comfort Jesus while he was dying on that cross – even whilst all the other disciples fled for their own safety.

Furthermore, Mary was actually the first person to witness the resurrection of Jesus and it was she who came back to tell me and Peter about it. In addition, I will admit here and now that Mary was also present when the Holy Spirit descended upon us all at Pentecost – so it's pretty safe to say that Mary was one of the Chosen. And if she just didn't cause so much trouble, then perhaps things could have gone better for her.

But, as you know by now, Mary is not one to keep her opinions to herself. Oh well.

OK, that's enough questions for now. Let's get back to our reason for being here – He's going to be very angry with me if I don't tell you about these prophecies. Pay attention, please.



Like I was trying to tell you, today I received not one, but *two* new visions. Well, one was more of a memory and the other was a revelation...

At first, I was transported back in time to witness a conversation between Mary and Jesus – it must have been shortly before his death. By the look of the surroundings it appeared they were in a secluded section of the *Garden of Gethsemane*.

“Why do you always talk of leaving us?” Mary asked. “Ever since we reached Jerusalem, the only thing you talk about is your death!”

(Hey, I'll bet this was that same Passover day I just thought about. Yeah, I remember now, it was about mid-day when Jesus and Mary went off; Judas was away buying provisions, and the rest of us were

preparing the room. How ironic – I was just thinking about that day, huh?)

“This is what Father has planned.” Jesus said. “It is my destiny.”

“But, what about me? Us?” Mary buried her face in his chest. “Stay with me. Together we can lead your flocks to salvation. Isn’t that what you want?” (See, I told you she wanted to be a leader).

“You will indeed have a hand in helping the world find salvation.” Jesus held her close. “But your destiny is not with me. I must be about my Father’s business.”

“You must die?!” Mary pulled back. “Your Father wants you to die? Why would he let Evil triumph over you? It doesn’t make sense!”

“Much of life doesn’t make sense while it is happening.” Jesus wiped Mary’s tears. “This is not The End. Once it is finished, you will understand.”

“So you are just going to let The Pharisees... kill you? You’re going to desert your disciples? Desert me? Desert the world you came to save?”

“It is the only way.” Jesus laid a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s not!” Mary pushed his hand away. “It’s not the *only* way. It’s YOUR way. I don’t agree!” (Ah, Mary, always the Drama Queen).

“It doesn’t matter what I want.” And more softly still. “Or what you want, Mary. The Son of Man must obey his Father’s will. You KNOW this is the case – Gabriel told you so.”

“Don’t tell me what The Angel said! Those visions are my own; given to me so that... so that... I can change the future if need be!”

“This is not one of those times, Mary.” Jesus cautioned. “Gabriel’s words are a gift. And later I will bless you with another gift. You will use them in the future to help this world. But, on this occasion, there is no action for you to take. What will be, will be.”

Mary’s shoulders slumped; even I could tell her heart was breaking.

“Please don’t leave me in my time of need, Mary.” Jesus extended a hand out to her. “I DO need you.”

The pain was evident in Jesus’ eyes as Mary looked at him. I watched as she began to reach out to take his hand, but then...

I would guess that here Mary realized that no matter what she did, it would not stop Jesus' death and the thought of him being crucified was apparently too much for her to bear – for Mary suddenly cried out in agony and ran off – racing to escape her sorrow.

Jesus did not chase her.

As it turned out, Mary would not see Jesus again until he was captured and crucified – but by then it was too late.

(Suddenly I wondered – did she ever forgive herself for deserting her Lord? For a brief moment I actually felt sorry for Mary).



As for my second – and much more interesting – vision, it was pretty deep -- think *Book of Revelations*...

As best I could make out, I was witnessing a FUTURE event—for I was looking upon The Altar of The One True God at The Temple of Jerusalem and immediately I spied Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger, Pope Benedict XVI, and Dr. Ghaz al' Ridwan Ma'bus -- *all together*.

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Given the hordes of people covering the hillsides, I surmised that this was the much publicized ceremony that Rabbi Metzger was organizing to unite their religions in a new era of brotherly love. (Hogwash in my opinion, but who am I to object?)

My vision blurred for a moment, and when it returned, the entire mood had shifted; something was off – for the rabbi was now laying motionless upon The Altar -- and peering closer I could see he was dead. Looking around, I also noticed three crosses in the background -- they had an eerie resemblance to the ones back on Golgotha – especially since I saw figures on those crosses – crucified!

I strained my eyes to identify the victims – only to get a major shock – for the first body hanging limply on a cross was Lazarus!

I turned to the second cross – only to see Mary.

(Can you guess who was nailed to the third?)

Yes, it's always unnerving to see yourself as a bloody corpse, but over the years, I've been stabbed, shot, and killed in so many ways that it doesn't affect me much anymore. Instead what excited me about this vision was that, perhaps, just perhaps, this death would really take. For if this prophecy was true, it seemed I was looking

upon the event which I had been waiting nearly two thousand years for – *my own death!*

Whoopee!!

Now as I told you before, Mary, Lazarus, and I had all been made immortal so that we could stop the coming of The Antichrist. This was our Commission and if successful, we'd be assisting Jesus in his glorious return – unfortunately, it was a job at which we had failed miserably – many times.

For nearly two thousand years, we'd been on guard. At various times in the past, my friends and I thought The End Times were approaching and that the Antichrist walked the earth – yet upon every occasion we were wrong.

Now, however, it appeared that I was finally seeing a different vision – for it was the first which showed the deaths of The Immortals – which I always knew was a key to The End. Unfortunately for the sake of The Commission, again it seemed that my friends and I had failed – for in my vision The Beast was very much alive, while we three were clearly dead. (Oops!)

Once more my vision got hazy. When next it cleared, I found myself riveted back to the altar – someone was standing there. It was a

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man who looks like everyman, yet no man. He was wearing a crown of thorns and blood was raining from his head. For a moment I thought it was Jesus, but suddenly I realized it was another – Dr. Ghaz al' Ridwan Ma'bus.

Or was it? For his face shifted, and I was left to wonder, *Is it you, Lord? Are you Ma'bus?*

Yet there was no time to be sure, for now there was more activity over at the crosses. Something was being done to defile us -- a figure in white was pushing a spear into the sides of our bodies.

That's when I realized Lazarus and Mary were NOT dead after all – for I heard them scream as they got impaled. (Did that finally kill them?) And yet, I had no time to ponder further, for now the mysterious murderer came over to me.

Entering my own body in my vision, I looked down upon my murderer, yet before I could make out his face, he pierced me too! “YAAAWWWWWP!!!!” I wailed and even though it was a vision, it hurt like Hell!

To my horror I realized just what we had been speared by -- our Nails... *Jesus' Nails!*

Immediately my soul began to separate from my body and I was floating away to... to?

As I felt my true self being torn from this world, my vision shifted back to The Altar. Dr Ma'bus was there and the figure in white was approaching him from behind. Finally I could see his face clearly -- it was none other than Joseph Ratzinger -- Pope Benedict XVI!

Then it was that I made a shocking observation: Joseph was actually *carrying* The Nails – something no mortal had ever done and lived to tell about it. Yet the pope was doing it -- carefully he took each one and installed them in a glowing new crown – even as Ma'bus was removing his own crown of thorns.

His face a picture of <POWER!>, Ma'bus was glowing with Victory. Meanwhile, Joseph face showed a sly smile as he lowered the crown filled with our Nails down upon Ma'bus' head...

<A Blinding Light from Above!>

And the vision expired.

Breathless, I was left with but one thought..

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*Can it really be true? My God, Pope Benedict will be responsible
for the death of Dr. Ma'bus!*

But which one is The Antichrist?!?

Many Questions

(June 23)

That very same day, I got yet another vision, but instead of giving me some answers, it only added to my confusion.

Tell me what YOU think...

<CLANG! BANG!> The thundering sound caused a man strapped to a bed to wake up – it was Alan.

But just where was he? I could tell that Alan had no clue and I was unable to make out much from his lonely surroundings. The last thing I remember about Alan was that he was on his way to see Joseph – but he got jumped by a bunch of goons. After that I didn't see him again – until now.

“Ah, finally you've decided to join us,” a metallic voice blared through a loudspeaker affixed to a nearby wall. “I trust your stay has been pleasant? No? Oh well, please feel free to take it up with

management. Oh yes, that's me. Well, your complaint has been duly noted. Thank you."

(Now who the hell is this joker?)

"Wha--?" Alan began. "Who are you? Is this The Vatican?"

"Please save all your questions till the end of the tour." The voice continued. "Now, if you don't mind, let's begin."

Alan tried to sit up – only to discover that he was bound to his bed.

"Oh, did I forget to mention that?" The voice said. "Well, that's merely a precaution – for your own safety. And no this is not The Vatican."

Although he was a prisoner, I could tell that Alan was more annoyed than frightened. Did he remember the conspiracy theories he and Teri had been discussing back in Bucharest? Was he worried about the personal safety of his friend Pope Benedict? I don't know the answers to those questions, but I could see he was no mood to banter with some halfwit captor.

"What do you want with me?" Alan asked.

“Master Alan Zarus, until recently, the *Sef de Catadre* of Bucharest University’s History Department. Prior that, you were at Antioch. And before that, Jerusalem – serving 15 years there. Then let’s see, oh yes, before that you were in the New World – at UCLA, Loyola of Chicago, and Saint Bonaventure. Nearly a decade at each – hmm, very interesting.”

Alan remained silent. (I knew he wasn’t liking where this was going).

“What I don’t understand is the timeline.” The voice replied slyly. “I’ve just rattled off a period of no less than seventy-five years – seventy-five! -- yet, you don’t look a day past forty. What’s your secret, man? Are you using a mountain of *Oil of Olay*? Have you discovered the Fountain of Youth? No, I’ve got it -- you must have the Holy Grail!”

“Clearly you have me confused with someone else.” Alan replied without emotion. “I was only an intern at Jerusalem and prior to that had no professional history.”

“Oh yes, and *I am a retired investor on a pension, living here as a Jew in the twilight of my life.*” The speaker quipped (are we quoting movies now?), “Come off it, man. We both know that’s a lie. If you hadn’t been so damned overconfident you would have changed your

identity. You didn't -- you simply changed your locale. Did you really think we wouldn't find you, Laz—ah, perhaps I'll save that."

Alan flinched, but did not reply.

"I DID see that, by the way." The voice slithered. "But, I didn't need that to confirm anything." (Obviously his captor knew Alan was Lazarus. Oops, hope I didn't just ruin the suspense for you).

"What do you want?"

"We're not there yet. I'm having too much fun. Now where was I? Oh yes, this impresses me – you're quite the secret society buff; and I'm not just talking research, you're active! Let's name just a few, shall we... first there's the prestigious *Club of Rome* – ooh. And let's not forget *The Committee of 300* – very selective. I'm impressed -- especially since I was active in those too. But, by now, you knew that right, *Brother?*"

(There's that damn Brotherhood again -- don't worry, I'll get to that).

Alan sighed. "I can see you have quite an imagination."

"Is that so? Then, I'm sure you won't have any concerns about this."

On cue, the door to Alan's room opened. In walked an otherwise non-descript middle-eastern man, clothed in a simple black robe. Standing silently, he held a silver platter, while looking vacantly at the far wall.

Alan's eyes went to the object on the tray – a wooden caisse about a foot long. (I'll bet you know what that is. This is not a good sign).

Alan struggled to break free, "Damn you!"

"Ah, something finally has registered." The speaker jeered. "Come now, did you really think I didn't know about It?" Then instructing the attendant, "Go ahead, Iffat, open the case." (Ah, that's a BIG mistake).

"NO!" Alan urged. "Don't do it, man. It's a death sentence."

Iffat didn't heed Alan's warning, instead he opened the black coffin, revealing the lone object inside – an iron rod nestled amidst red velvet.

At this point, the speaker advised, "All right, Iffat, you can close the box." (Wise move).

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The servant did as commanded and then left the room – despite his protests Alan was powerless to stop him. Yet the interrogator laughed, “Don’t worry, my men won’t touch the Nail – they know better... now. I just wanted you to know your prize was safe. Soon, I’ll have the two held by your friends... And YOU will help me get them.”

(So he wants my Nail too? Fine by me. Come and get it).

Yet Alan didn’t agree, “NEVER! I’ll never help you!”

Harsh laughter boomed from the speaker in reply.

Alan screamed, “What do you want?”

Still no answer came forth.

“Who are you?” Alan tried again.

Finally, the voice replied, “You know who I am, Brother Lazarus.”

Showing no emotion or further surprise, Alan closed his eyes and simply stated, “You are The Beast.”

At that, the door opened, and in walked...

(Damn. The vision ended... BEFORE I could get a look at The Beast's face! Who was it? Could it really be... Joseph?)



My vision about Alan did not end – instead it was *interrupted* – by another view of the Two Witnesses.

(Want to learn more about them? Read *Revelations* – Chapter 11. It's good writing if nothing else).

“The first seal has passed.” Elijah said, his body apparently free from visions for a moment, leaving him the opportunity to relax a bit.

“The Rider on a White horse.” Enoch sighed, also calm.

“He has deceived many and inaugurated the Great Tribulation.”

“No angel of light is he.”

“The fiery Red horse and its rider also has come and gone.”

“And with him open warfare and civil unrest.”

But then Elijah’s agony suddenly returned, “Now is the time for the Black Horse!”

“Can they resist?” Enoch raised his hands, as if to ward off a blow.

“No one can resist The Third Seal!” Elijah fell back, unconscious.

(Actually that’s true – The Third Seal is a bitch!)



Just as quickly as the Witnesses came, they were gone; once more I was looking back at Alan – and his new visitor...

So who was it that entered Alan’s room?

I’ve got to say, I was a bit shocked myself when I saw none other than Ghaz al’ Ridwan Ma’bus!

I mean, even though I hate the News, and believe that President Trump is right when he says that most of it is just ‘fake news’, even I know enough about current events to know that Ma’bus is the most

beloved world leader of our day. And of course, it didn't help matters to recall that I had actually let myself believe that Ma'bus might actually be The Sav— Arg, enough of that.

"You are The Beast." Alan repeated.

"Call me *Ishmael*." Ma'bus quipped. "Or call me *Irresistible*. It matters not to me, Lazarus."

"Well, this is certainly a break from your impeccable image, Dr. Ma'bus. What would the rest of the world think of you torturing me?"

"Torturing you? I have done no such thing. We are merely holding you for your own good. I'd say that's pretty altruistic. And as for my image, apparently the world likes me quite a bit. After all, the U.N. just elected me Secretary General." Upon seeing Alan's surprised look, Ma'bus added, "Oh, that's right. You didn't hear the news. Well, allow me to fill you in: Ki-Moon is dead – don't ask me how, I'm sure your friend Benedict had something to do with it. In any case, I am the new Secretary General. As usual, I gave an impassioned speech at my coronation. It was a lovely ceremony. But more importantly, I pretty much control the world now."

"But...but...?"

(At this point, I couldn't help thinking back to Teri's words... "Ma'bus is the very definition of worldly. He can fit in anywhere, influence anyone, lead everyone." So, IS Ma'bus The Beast? I've got to admit, I'm as confused as you are).

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" Ma'bus teased.

"What do you need ME for? In your own words you already said you control the world. What else is there?"

"I want souls, dear Brother, SOULS..."

(The way Ma'bus said his last comment caused me to feel a terrible chill – as if his <presence> was emanating malevolence. Sorry, Alan, but immortal or not, I'm glad you're there and not me).

Fighting against this, Alan cried out, "There's nothing you could do to make me help you! I don't care if The Brotherhood did help you get control of the UMAN territory – clearly we underestimated you, but you're still nothing more than a glorified economist. You've already been given more than you deserve and when I get out of here, I'll personally see to it that you are finished. You can't harm me and you know it."

“I may not be able to kill you, but I have ways to influence you.”

“Such as?”

“Well, rather than have me tell you, why don’t I SHOW you, eh?”

And calling back through the doorway, “Iffat, enter.”

His servant dutifully entered -- head down, awaiting his instructions.

“Iffat, kindly arrange it so that our guest can go on a little tour,”

Ma’bus commanded. Then to Alan he added, “To the Life Labs.”

(Now why doesn’t that sound like a GOOD thing?)



For a moment, even Iffat froze at Ma’bus’ last comment, causing Alan to shudder against his will. But Iffat quickly recovered and got to work; after further securing Alan to the bed’s frame, he adjusted the bed in such a way that Alan was raised fully upright. Then, after unlocking the wheels, Alan’s movable prison was ready to go.

Ma’bus nodded, “All set? Good. Iffat lead the way.”

Book I: The Pawns of Prophecy

I watched as they guided Alan through stark hallways, devoid of activity. Finally, after descending multiple levels, at last they stopped before an otherwise non-descript room – its only detail of note being the numbers on the door, which read *Room 101*.

(Hmm, makes me think of an Orwellian book I once read. Oh, sorry, guess I'm getting off track).

Ma'bus moved ahead to provide the security codes required to enter. Once finished, he opened the door, "Go ahead, Iffat."

When his servant hesitated, Ma'bus chuckled, "Don't worry, Iffat, YOU will be exiting again."

Still frightened, Iffat cautiously pushed Alan's bed forward.

Torch fires burned in sconces on the walls, swathing everything in stark brightness – an evil paradox to the deadly pall emanating from Room 101.

"One of my Life Lab rooms." Ma'bus proudly stated. "It's where I ply the task given to me by my father."

"Which is?" Alan could not resist.

“Why, that of attempting to unlock the mysteries of *Life, The Universe, and Everything*.” Ma’bus replied in a deadpan tone.

I looked around. Against the rear wall I noted a steel cage – understanding at once that anyone who found himself in that cell would be facing a grim future indeed. For in the center of the room were three cold-looking, metal tables; beside each was a little push cart, filled with a plethora of cutting tools – flaying knives, bone saws, and hooks – as well as situational instruments like forceps, clamps and vices. Wash stands too stood at the head of each work area. And each table had raised edges on all but one side.

Seeing Alan also looking around, Ma’bus smiled, “Ah, you’ve noticed my work stations. You’re probably wondering why the sides are mismatched? It’s simple really -- whenever I have one of my subjects exposed on the cutting board, with their blood flowing freely – and it always does – well, I just can’t stand to lose even a drop. But with my tables crafted in this manner, I can ensure that my participant’s life-force will flow down the slope of the table, to run off into tiny troughs waiting below to collect that precious liquid. Clever, huh?”

Alan’s knees buckled, “Why are you showing me all this? It doesn’t matter what you do to me. I’ll never help you.”

Book I: The Pawns of Prophecy

Ma'bus overlooked that, "Prior to our tour, you asked how I planned to influence you." And striding casually around the room, he explained, "Surely you were around during the so-called Dark Ages, right? Alas, how I miss those days. Yet, I digress. You will make a great candidate for Nail Removal. Perhaps I'll pull off a few of your toes too. Of course, you can be sure that I won't overlook my favorite method of all – Flaying." And he demonstrated his delicate technique in the air with one of his knives.

Seeing his words hit home, Ma'bus added, "You see, that's the beauty of it all -- you CAN'T die! I torture you forever – until you break. And you WILL break, Lazarus."

Alan gritted, "You can break my bones, but you'll never break my spirit. My Lord will protect that much."

"Even your master broke in the end."

"Preposterous!"

"Search your feelings and you know I'm correct. We had Jesus on the brink, ready to give up. You know he felt forsaken on that cross. It was his moment of truth and when he finally realized his own father abandoned him, you know what he wailed..."

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,” Alan whispered.

“My God, why have you forsaken me.” Ma’bus translated in delight. “It’s true -- your Master doubted himself and all he THOUGHT he was.”

“But in the end, God DID save his son.” Alan fought Ma’bus’ logic.

“Your God broke his promise to my father! The deal was that we could tempt Jesus WITHOUT him getting assistance from Above.”

Alan did not reply.

(OK, I’ll admit, this was all news to me. Even though I said I don’t care, I’m not all that keen on doubting the power of God. I mean, it’s one thing for a child to complain about his parents, but the kid doesn’t usually like it when an outsider is doing the insulting, right? That’s kind of how I felt. Ma’bus was really starting to get my goat).

“Nonetheless,” Ma’bus calmed himself, “We are patient. My Father and I know the treacherous ways of The Cursed One. After Jesus’ death, when he descended to us, we had three good days with him – but there again your God broke his promise and forced us to give up his pitiful son.”

“This is insane. Jesus descended to Hell, overcame death, and rose again in victory within three days – just as The Scriptures said.”

“Documents written by men AFTER the fact prove nothing. Talk about Revisionist History.” (OK, so he might have a point there, but when else could we have written them?)

“That’s not even worth a reply.”

“Believe what you will. But my point is this -- your Christ did NOT defeat Death. And he certainly did not defeat my father. If so, why is this war not over? No, the FACT is that we let Jesus go.”

“You’re mad.”

“Perhaps. Even still, I speak the truth. After all, in your own Scriptures, didn’t Jesus repeatedly say that your own generation would not pass away before his second coming? Yet where is he?”

(Now this was hitting too close to home. If I had any power to end my visions, this would have been one I sacked. But alas, I was locked in and, like Alan, forced to keep listening to this madman).

“I tell you the real truth!” Ma’bus said. “Your Messiah is a coward.”

Alan changed the subject, “I will endure anything you throw at me. And my Lord will give me all the strength I need.”

“I figured you’d say that. Which is why my plan is not really to torture you indefinitely, just to give you a taste of what your friends will feel.”

“What do you mean? Have you done something with Benedict?”

“Don’t worry about Joseph – evil men are snared by their own sin.”

“Then who are you talking about?” Alan played dumb. “What are you really after, Ma’bus?”

“Surely you know that I need all THREE Nails. And as to what I want, you know that too, Brother -- I want to destroy your master.”

OK, I have to admit, by this point I actually pissed my pants – and saying that was because I’m an old man is not really true – I was scared! Thankfully, my vision finally ended, and I could get back to my bottles of Jack -- yes, I said *bottles* – it was the only way I knew I could escape my fate... or so I hoped).

End of Book I

END of Book I

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~Michael

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, I'm Michael Stoppa. I was raised in an Italian Catholic family in what was once the small town of Williamsport, PA – where I lived until the age of 18. The matriarch of my family was my grandmother – Pauline Taddeo-Stoppa, aka “Saint Pauline” — and it was she who introduced me to my faith.



Why Did I Write This Book?

[*The Last Temptation of John*](#) is my attempt to share the Bible's wisdom with the world. I believe God intends for ALL the world to be saved, and that's our responsibility to share God's Love...

As Jesus said: “I am the Vine, you are the branches... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.... And my command to you is Love One Another.”

I hope you enjoy the book and that your faith is strengthened because of it.

Did You Know?

For years now I've been sharing practical tips and making personal wisdom videos for my sons Jax, JeeHo, and others. My primary website is [That Helpful Dad's Wisdom](#) and I encourage you to interact with me there too. The goal on my site is to share practical solutions to real life problems – this includes numerous life lessons that feature [The Wisdom of Solomon](#).

I've written other books on diverse topics but all have the same goal – **to share wisdom that you can easily understand and apply to your own life so that you can make the world a better place**. Visit the [book page on my blog](#) to learn about...

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You can also find me YouTube at: [The Helpful Dad](#)

And on LinkedIn at: [Michael Stoppa's LinkedIn Page](#)

Thanks for taking the read my books. Let's talk again soon.

~Michael