

THE MOTHER OF ALL CONSPIRACIES

Charlotte Ansari, international correspondent for Cambridge Cable News (CCN), has a problem. Her investigation into a clandestine society of assassins has made them very angry. And that's not the most frightening part. Her Asperger's son, who is now the leader of this global murder-for-hire organization, has assigned its top-ranked assassin to take care of the problem.

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SONS OF ZADOK

GARY LINDBERG



Chanhassen, Minnesota

FACT VS. FICTION

As a novel, this story is fiction, of course. But within it are woven many facts and interesting theories about how the world works. In some cases, I've extended the current state of technology by a year or three. Quantum computers, for example, are in development today; I expect we'll see them very soon, even if they are not priced for the masses. The Book of Enoch exists, and in this book all passages from it are accurate, although interpretations about its meaning vary considerably. Göbekli Tepe is a recently discovered archaeological site and all descriptions of it here are accurate, including its age and the stunning menagerie of carved animals discovered there. The megalith in Ireland, including its descriptions and history, are rendered here as accurately as my source material allows. Likewise, the Armenian Monastery of St. George of Goms, except that for obvious reasons I invented the tradition of Enoch's ascension into heaven from this place.

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I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to my longsuffering wife, Gloria, who now claims to recognize me only by the back of my head while I'm seated at the computer working on my novels; and my good friend Eldon Kimball, who provided not only excellent proofreading assistance but was never afraid to express his opinion about problems he saw in my story, opinions that were inevitably right.

Also, many of the intriguing facts and concepts in this story came from other sources that I encountered during my research, so I must acknowledge them here. Helping shape this story were the ideas, theories, calculations, and in some cases anecdotes written or formulated by the following authors, to whom I am deeply indebted: Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas; David Flynn; Chris H. Hardy; Joseph P. Farrell and Scott D. de Hart; Andrew Collins; David Cowan and Chris Arnold. And, of course, the Old Testament patriarch Enoch.

Most importantly, though, I also must acknowledge readers of *The Shekinah Legacy*, the first book in the *Charlotte Ansari Thriller* series. Without my readers, there would be no series. The original book was intended to be a one-off novel. No sequel was planned. But readers insisted on getting more, and after *Legacy* became a bestseller on Amazon, I agreed. Now I don't know how to stop the unfolding story, so there will probably be more Charlotte Ansari thrillers in the future.

**SONS OF
ZADOK**

PROLOGUE

Masada, 73 C.E.

Sarah's head throbs with the incessant beating of the ram on the fortress walls. The blood-chilling shouts and cries from soldiers on the assault ramp frighten and enrage her. These twenty acres of scorched earth atop Masada, now held by the last survivors of the Jewish revolt, is now the only piece of land in all of Judea not under Roman control.

The besieged *Sicarii* are the self-appointed defenders of Judaism. For years they have terrorized the brutal leaders of Rome by covertly assassinating them with a small curved dagger called a *sica*.

Looking back at how these rebels arrived at such a desperate situation, Sarah blames it on the decision to become an organized fighting force—an undefeatable Army of God. But the skilled assassins, accustomed to working alone, never had any real chance of matching centuries of Roman military experience and ingenuity. The *Sicarii* have been ground down to a few hundred men who finally fled with their families to an isolated desert hill they believe is the perfect sanctuary.

Masada's sheer cliffs defy ascent, rising from the floor of the Judean desert to a flat diamond-shaped mesa 1,500 feet above. A tortuous trail on the eastern side leads to a sumptuous palace compound built by Herod the Great, but is far too steep and narrow for a large-scale assault. At the top, casement walls twenty feet high and twelve feet deep surround the entire mesa.

Within these walls Sarah stands on the battlement of one of the compound's thirty-eight towers. The Dead Sea shimmers in the distance, and columns of smoke from the barricades smudge the brilliant azure sky, but Sarah's gaze is drawn to the Roman camps and fortifications below. A small city has been built around the base of Masada by the Roman Tenth Fretensis Legion. A busy supply road snakes through the desert, disappearing into heat vapors at the horizon. Men scurry like

ants below, each busy with the work of preparing a slaughter. Sarah can feel Roman frustration rising like thermals.

The Sicarii, she knows, had seriously underestimated Flavius Silva, the Roman field commander. Over many months, the Roman army under his leadership has moved thousands of tons of earth and stone to construct a monumental ramp that abuts the casement wall on the western approach. Three weeks ago, using formidable siege weapons, the Romans began raking the stronghold's walls with heavy rocks and catapult fire while Roman legionnaires, shielded by a giant iron-plated tower, relentlessly barraged Sicarii fighters with javelins and stones.

This very afternoon Silva had brought up a massive battering ram to administer the coup de grâce, but the Sicarii had cleverly countered by buttressing the casement wall with heavy timbers to absorb the bone-rattling blows. Then, just hours ago, Roman troops had flung torches over the wall, setting ablaze the reinforcing timbers. When these supports collapse, the ram will easily break through the wall and the massacre will begin.

Eleazar ben Ya'ir, Sarah's brother and the Sicarii commander, stands next to her on the tower. "I'm going down to be with the men," he says. "The Romans will be upon us soon. You should be with the women and children."

"I'm frightened. What if they capture us—the women—and instead of killing us ...?" She looks at her feet, unable to say the word *rape*.

He takes her hand and places in it his precious sica. "Then use this."

Sarah looks up, even more terrified. "Suicide? Eleazar, God will not forgive such a thing!"

"I meant that you should use it on the others."

He sadly kisses her forehead and runs down the stairs.

She takes one last look at the smoke ascending toward heaven like the smoke of a sacrifice and notices something peculiar. The smoke has changed direction. She can feel the wind at her back, stronger than before. Looking down she sees the blazing timbers starting to crumble, and yet the flames and cinders are now blowing back at the Romans, threatening their siege weapons.

The ram's relentless cadence suddenly stops and the Romans grow silent. Teams of legionnaires begin moving back to protect their wooden armaments as a horn blast calls the rest of them back to camp.

Sarah can hear a Sicarii warrior shouting at Eleazar. "Has God delivered us?"

"They will come for us in the morning!" Eleazar shouts back.



Before daybreak, Eleazar awakens everyone, calling them to the fallen timbers, an ironic symbol of their defeated cause. Some of the children are shivering in the morning's first breath. Mothers wrap them in shawls.

Nearly a thousand men, women and children gather near Eleazar as he delivers a message more chilling than the morning air. Very soon, he promises, the enemy will attack with malice in their hearts and swords in their hands.

"They will come to murder, rape, and enslave," he says. "But we can prevent these atrocities."

The crowd presses in around him, wondering what miracle he has conjured.

"Let our wives die before they are abused," he says, "and our children before they have tasted of slavery. And after we have slain our families, let us men bestow that glorious benefit upon one another."

Stunned silence greets him. This is no miracle! Some of the women and children begin to shiver again, though not from the cold. But then heads start nodding. As the full meaning of this gruesome alternative becomes apparent, many tremble and whimper, but only one speaks.

"Eleazar, is this God's will for us?"

The voice is Eleazar's best friend, Matthias, whose mother and daughter are tucked into his broad reach.

Eleazar has heard no voice from God, received no tablets of stone, yet he is convinced of the rightness of this choice. Over the previous dark hours he has agonized over it. Perhaps it is blasphemy to put his words into God's mouth, but it can be persuasive.

"It is God's will," he says.

There is a collective sigh, the unburdening of doubt. Eleazar instructs them to go and be together as families for a few more precious minutes before the final acts of mercy.

Eleazar reaches out for his sister's hand and she nods submissively, expecting to accompany him to the place of her slaying. But he says to her, "We must have some who survive to tell our story."

Sarah looks at her brother grimly. "I will not do what the others cannot!"

"You have a final act to perform," Eleazar explains. "Hear me out. Soon the men will cast lots to select ten who will sacrifice the others. Then one of those will slay the rest. But that last man must not be required to kill himself."

"I see," Sarah says. "So that is my lot? To kill the last man?"

"Listen to me, Sarah, there is more. Your cousin Ruth and her five children are descendants of Judas of Galilee and must be spared. Find them now, and hide them in the large cistern, then return here. Will you do these things?"

Sarah wants only to end her anguish, not prolong it.

"Please, Eleazar, take your knife and..." She raises his hand to her chest, showing where his blade should penetrate.

“I beg you, Sarah! It cannot be God’s will that our cause ends here. Now go, gather the six, and trust in God.”



In the bathhouse where Matthias has made camp, he takes the hands of his mother and eight-year-old daughter, weeping.

“I cannot do this,” he confesses. “We must find another way.”

His mother drops to her knees and prayerfully lowers her head. To face him now would be to show her fear. His daughter Esther mimics the elderly woman, lowering herself into a prayerful posture.

“Do it quickly, father, so we don’t suffer.” Esther’s thin, quivering voice reaches out to Matthias.

Do it quickly. It is the will of God.

He grasps the sica, steps forward to his daughter and puts his left hand on the back of her neck.

“I love you so,” he whispers, then slips the blade between two ribs in the practiced motion of a Sicarii assassin. He listens for Esther’s gentle sigh as the blade pushes in. It is nearly painless, he has been told, just the sensation of an icy finger entering the chest, and then a great succumbing to the black waters of sleep.

Matthias’s pain is far more intense as he lowers his daughter’s body gently to the floor and steps to his mother who is trembling, she who gave him life and now huddles before him as a sheep at the sacrifice.



The horizon is blood red as the sun begins to show itself to Eleazar. For a short time there is only silence, interrupted occasionally by sobs and muffled screams.

After thirty minutes Eleazar calls the men back to the fallen timbers where they cast lots to identify ten executioners. Those not chosen form ten columns of about forty warriors, each column facing Eleazar.

In this orderly slaughterhouse, the chosen ten start at the rear and solemnly work their way forward, precisely inserting the curved blade as Sicarii knifecraft dictates. The men fall like dominos, lifelessly crumpling into the waiting arms of their executioners who lower them sadly, tenderly onto the bodies behind. Three men collapse before receiving the knife but are slain in turn. It takes twenty minutes. At last four hundred Sicarii warriors lie in a field of death.

Nine of the living, with Eleazar at the front, form themselves into a single column.

“Sarah!” Eleazar calls.

She appears now from a shadow, horrified by the carnage.

“Prepare yourself, Sarah. It is almost time.”

Matthias, the lone executioner, now walks to the rear of the last column. It has become a sacred ritual, a sacrament, this repetitive thrusting of the sica into fellow warriors. It is how Matthias can bear this unbearable duty. When he comes finally to the last of the line, Eleazar, he whispers, “I cannot do this, my friend.”

“You must—quickly.”

Matthias steps in front of Eleazar, holding out his sica. “Please,” he begs, “I have killed my mother, my daughter, fifty of my friends. Is that not enough for God?”

Eleazar touches the man’s shoulder and nods. “Yes, it is enough.”

Taking the dagger, he turns Matthias around and embraces him. With his right hand, he inserts the sharp blade.

Matthias twitches, as if bitten by an insect, then smiles—*it is not so bad, just very cold*. He is relieved that his mother and daughter had suffered so little.

Eleazar lowers his friend to the ground and turns to Sarah. He holds out the sica, but she has one.

Sarah slowly approaches her brother and he kisses her, then turns, submitting himself to the blade. Placing her flat palm lovingly on his back, she feels the heat of fear, the muscles quaking, his breath quickening.

“When it is finished, join Ruth and the children,” Eleazar says.

She nods, though he can’t see her. Holding the sica at her chest, point forward, she leans toward her brother, bringing them closer together, pushing the blade in as gently as she can.

The blade nicks a rib.

And that is when Sarah screams, as if the morning’s blood and horror and the world’s misery had been heaped upon her all at once.

Eleazar collapses and she falls onto his body, the full realization of what she has done suddenly, terrifying clear.

It is finished.



In camp, the legionnaires are confused but joyous. Not a Roman was lost in this great victory! Thinking it a mass suicide, some say it proved the cowardice of the Sicarii. Others say nothing, haunted by a grim spectacle the likes of which had never been witnessed before...

The silent, lifeless army of Sicarii had instantly subdued the bloodlust of the Roman attack force. When two women and five children had been discovered alive in a cistern, no legionnaire could muster the will to kill or abuse them.

On the third day after her capture, Sarah is escorted to a richly appointed tent where she is instructed to await a visitor. Moments later an elderly man with a bejeweled walking stick and stately attire throws back the entrance drape and enters, motioning for Sarah to be seated on a silk cushion.

“Your name is Sarah, I understand.”

She nods.

“Your brother was Eleazar, the commander?”

She is not sure she should confirm this.

“Come now,” the man says. “You can be honest with me. I am not a Roman. I am something else entirely. Eleazar was your brother?”

“Yes.”

“And the other captives are, I would hope, descendants of Judas of Galilee?”

She nods slowly, wondering how this man could know.

“What I am about to tell you, Sarah, you must remember forever. And you must pass it down to the next generation, and ensure that it passes down to the one following, and so on, until there are no more generations. Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

“You must *absolutely* understand, Sarah. Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Then listen carefully. I will make sure that you and the other six are not harmed. Eventually you will be freed, but your responsibilities will just then be starting. It is your duty to see that Sicarii knowledge and skills are not forgotten. Is that clear?”

“Does that mean you want me to raise the children as Sicarii?”

“Yes. Train them in the Sicarii crafts. And educate them in the ways of God according to the Book of Enoch and Judas of Galilee. There is a purpose for the Sicarii, you see—one that your brother had forgotten, or perhaps had set aside for goals that were petty by comparison. Now here is the important part.”

He sits beside her now, leans closer so that he can speak more quietly.

“The Sicarii have a most important role to play in the ultimate outcome of this world. You will become the invisible army and protectors of a council of wise men who shall also remain invisible, even to you, but to whom you must pledge absolute obedience and loyalty. These men, whom I represent, have assumed the most holy responsibility of bringing about the Divine plan.”

“But I thought that’s what we Sicarii were trying to do.”

“You are a small but pivotal part of a great plan that began over three thousand years ago. For this plan to succeed will take even more time. Perhaps thousands of years. If the Sicarii fail to do their part, the plan will suffer a terrible setback. We are all God’s agents, you see. But you are the enforcers, helping us to clear the way, shape events, and separate the wheat from the chaff.”

“You prize our skill in assassination.”

“Of course. You are the tip of God’s spear. In this great plan, Sarah, you are the first woman. You are Eve. And among the five children you saved is an infant boy, a direct descendant who was born in the year of the Shekinah, the light and glory of God. This child will become the first Divine Light, the male leader of the Sicarii, and from his line will come the re-unification of the forces necessary for achieving our goals.”

“When will this happen?”

“This *coming together*? According to the stars, almost two thousand years from now.”

“That’s a very long time.”

“We are patient. You will see that there is much to do. Over the years you will hear from us, and you must unquestioningly do as we ask. But you must always stay invisible as the wind, which is known only by its actions.”

The man rises and heads for the entrance.

“Wait,” Sarah says. “What if I say *no*?”

The man smiles. “Then don’t tell me. Tell God.”

And he is gone.

CHAPTER 1

Santa Barbara, 2012 C.E.

In the mirror he sees the reflection of a man not yet thirty fastening a stiffly starched Roman collar to his black clerical shirt. The man's face is flushed from exertion, or guilt, or both. His fingers, though well-practiced in this routine, fumble with the metal studs until a woman's slender fingers replace them and delicately, lovingly, complete the fastening.

A woman's voice like wind-chimes softly rings out: "Must I go?"

His eyes make contact with the man in the mirror and suddenly a shiver of recognition overtakes him. He is looking at himself. And then he turns to see the woman—no, just a girl, maybe fourteen—closing her eyes, then nuzzling his neck and purring with contentment.

"Just a few more minutes, please." Wind chimes again.

He cannot look her in the eye, can't utter a word. *Lord Jesus, I am sorry for my sins*, he silently prays, *I renounce Satan and all his works...*

His arms are reaching out now, his hands holding the girl's shoulders, moving her away, turning her toward the closed sacristy door.

"All right, Father." The music in her voice is gone.

The girl is so beautiful, so precious, that he wants to pull her back. With a fierce determination he lets her go. As she opens the door to the sanctuary, he finally speaks.

"Mandy."

She turns hopefully, but the sweetness of her child's face unleashes in him a surge of guilt and he turns his back.

The sound of a door opening and closing. A pathetic, strangled whimper. And then deep sobs like the wailing of the damned.

In the mirror, he sees the reflection of a man who has lost his soul.



“Tommy!” Hands shake the convulsing body of Thompson Walker who bolts upright in bed, blinking back tears.”

The woman next to him asks, “Mandy again?”

He looks around the room and gathers his wits. “She haunts me. It’s my penance.”

Thompson stumbles out of bed and staggers into the hotel bathroom. In the mirror he sees the sagging face of a 78-year-old man with patches of white hair sprouting like weeds and eyes red with grief. He turns away in disgust and sees through the open doorway a woman in bed. She reclines on one elbow and stares back at him.

“I’m sorry, Miriam.”

“It’s all right, Tommy. It’s time to get up anyway.”

Miriam is the woman he loves—has *always* loved. She’s his wife of forty-four years, though only a few of them had been spent together before the day that she had vanished. Not really vanished, just gone away to do God’s work, as she explained to him thirty years later. “The mission,” she called it.

A cell phone chirps and Miriam—still a fit, beautiful woman at sixty-six—rolls over to fetch it from the night stand. Watching the supple movements of her body gives Thompson enormous pleasure. As she turns back, phone to ear, Miriam sees Thompson’s admiring stare and self-consciously waves him off.

He showers and shaves, then walks to the deck overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He loves Santa Barbara and the calmness of the sea. The Mandy nightmare is only a shadow now.

Breakfast arrives and Miriam switches on the TV before sitting down with Thompson for a breakfast of poached eggs, fruit, and tea. She gently pats his hand and smiles at him as CCN—Cambridge Cable News—opens its morning *State of the World* program with a special report on developments in Iran by Senior International Correspondent Charlotte Ansari.

Thompson watches the reporter’s commanding performance in detailing yet another assassination of an Iranian nuclear scientist. Her signature long black hair cascades over her shoulders.

“She’s wonderful isn’t she, our daughter?”

“Always is,” Thompson agrees.

“She still won’t talk to you?”

“Not since she left me stranded on a road in Delhi five years ago.”

“It was all *my* fault, of course. She wouldn’t talk to you for thirty years because she thought you were responsible for my sudden disappearance. And then, when

she learned you weren't at fault, she blamed you for her son leaving. But there was nothing you could do about that, Tommy."

"Not if I ever wanted to see you again."

"You've always paid the price for others."

"But I still haven't paid the price for myself." The specter of Mandy whisks in and out of his mind.

"I have to leave in an hour, Tommy. Let's leave that poor girl behind."

A sadness overtakes him. He hates what Miriam has become, but when they are together he can forget all that. They can be husband and wife again. For one month every year he has Miriam to himself. That was the bargain he had struck for helping her organization half-a-decade ago. One month out of every twelve he can be a married man again. Better than nothing, he has always told himself. For the past four years, each of those designated months has been perfect, at least in his memory, until the final day.

Today is the separation day of year number five, and he is facing the inevitability that he will be alone for the next eleven months. No wife, no daughter, no grandson. Just alone with his thoughts.

And his sins.

Thompson and Miriam fill their awkward final minutes with talk about trivialities. Thompson knows not to ask about his grandson, Greg, or his wife's role in the Iranian assassination. He has learned there is no point trying to renegotiate the spare terms of his cohabitation agreement with Miriam.

God, how he hates the last day of these annual visits.

She approaches Thompson, wraps her arms around him, and nearly suffocates him with a kiss. "I do love you, Tommy," she says.

"I know."



A man seated in the hotel lobby looks up slowly at Miriam, carrying only a purse and a small carry-on bag to the front desk. Miriam is his target. The man has studied this spry woman. He knows that she travels light, except for some personal items. She buys what she needs at each destination and leaves the purchased articles behind, allowing her to pack and leave in a hurry. She also will take public transportation when possible; this makes her conveyance less predictable and harder to monitor.

The man's eyes are partially shaded by the bill of a Greek fisherman's cap and his slouching posture emphasizes a rotund belly that appears to pin him like a paperweight to the sofa. He scratches a bushy gray beard and begins to surreptitiously scan the lobby. Only five others are present, including the front desk clerk

and concierge. None appears to have any interest in Miriam, who is now handing over cash to the clerk. Through the hotel's open entrance, the man watches another guest approach a waiting cab only to be steered into a different vehicle.

Miriam's slender figure belies her age. The man in the Greek cap, who could be in his late fifties, could easily mistake her for a much younger woman—*younger* even than him.

But he knows the truth about Miriam. He knows that she is the matriarch of one of the most feared organizations in the world, one with a history two thousand years old. That despite her gracious and charming demeanor with the hotel clerk, she can be cold and ruthless. That she and her eighteen-year-old grandson determine the life and death of many people of power throughout the world. And that this attractive woman, who is known to her inner circle as Eve, is perhaps the most *wanted* woman in the world. Wanted by intelligence agencies, terrorist organizations, black ops specialists, drug and human traffickers, and weapons dealers. They all want her either on their side... or dead.

And here she is, right in front of him. Smiling at the desk clerk. Fearlessly standing with her back to the hotel entrance.

Eve turns and strides confidently towards the entrance. The man in the Greek cap rocks forward, a motion that awkwardly bunches up his protruding gut even more. Eventually he rises, casually stomps a foot to urge a trouser leg to fall into place, and then follows Miriam out of the hotel.

A lone cab driver standing near the door asks "Where to?" then tilts back his Dodgers baseball cap to air out his scalp.

"Airport."

The driver, who appears in his mid-thirties, opens the rear door for his passenger and slowly walks around to the driver's seat. Miriam climbs into the back with her carry-on. Before she can close the door, the man in the Greek cap leans in and addresses her: "Excuse me, I'm heading to the airport too. Would you mind?"

With a stern look Miriam says, "We split the fare then." She starts to slide over, making room.

"Sorry sir," the cabbie interjects. "Shared rides in the limos only." He gestures to an airport van a few meters ahead. "If you wouldn't mind..." The van driver is just leaving the vehicle to enter the hotel, probably for coffee or a rest room break. The van won't be leaving for a few minutes.

Exasperated, the rotund man slams the door.

As the cabbie releases the parking brake and reaches for the shifter, the front passenger door suddenly opens and the man in the Greek cap slides in beside him.

Startled, the cabbie nervously stammers something unintelligible, but the new passenger interrupts. "I think you probably didn't hear me, son. I'm in a hurry, so I'll be going to the airport in your vehicle here. Drive carefully now."

The cabbie's eyes narrow. His right arm drops. His hand lunges into a paper lunch bag on the seat. But the passenger's left hand is quicker, grabbing the cabbie's wrist and pinning it. The cabbie tries an awkward left-handed swipe at the passenger's face, but his fist is deflected by the chubby man's right arm, which then hammers a vicious blow to the driver's nose. Blood spatters a Rorschach inkblot on the paper bag, which rips open during the skirmish exposing a semi-automatic pistol.

The passenger picks up the gun. "My oh my," he says, stretching out the words to emphasize fake incredulity. "Beretta Model 70, favorite of Mossad. And I was thinking maybe you were an independent contractor."

The passenger turns to view Miriam in the backseat. The woman is holding the barrel of a pistol against the back of the driver's seat as a precaution.

"What—you didn't trust me to handle it?" the passenger asks.

She holds the gun steady. "These guys certainly hold a grudge."

"You killed our chief." The Mossad agent's words are muffled by a bloody shirtsleeve he is using to stanch the flow of blood from his nose. "What do you expect?"

"That was five years ago!" The passenger notices a small blood spatter on his trouser leg. "Will you look at this? Ruined." He looks up and catches the Mossad agent stealing a glance in the side-view mirror as if expecting the cavalry to arrive.

Of course! A Mossad agent certainly would have back-up for a mission designed to abduct the head of a worldwide organization of assassins.

The passenger adjusts the rearview mirror to see behind the taxi.

"So tell me," the passenger says to the driver, "what's your name?"

"Moses."

The passenger doesn't know if this is a joke or not. "I'm Gideon," he says, "the one who killed your chief. He double-crossed us, had it coming. I'm sorry... I actually liked him. But five years ago!"

A blue Nissan with two men in the front seat pulls up behind the taxi. Both men remain motionless. Gideon assumes these are Mossad agents investigating why the taxi hasn't departed.

"Eve, I have a plan." He uses Miriam's title when addressing her.

She leans forward.

A few seconds later, Gideon climbs out of the cab yelling angrily at the driver. The scene is staged for the agents in the blue van, giving Gideon the excuse of a disagreement to abandon the taxi. He trudges over to the airport van parked about two spaces ahead and gets into the front passenger seat. Only a young couple occupies the van, sitting in the middle row. Gideon slides over to the vacant driver's seat.

"Buckle up kids," he says.

Eve's taxi departs, veering around the van. As the Nissan begins to follow, the van thrusts backward, swerving into the drive lane to collide with it. The Nissan's air bags explode into the occupants, immobilizing both Mossad agents.

On cue, Eve's taxi backs up and Gideon calmly steps from the driver's seat of the van and enters the cab. "Drive," he says.

Moses pulls away from the hotel. "So now you kill me?" he asks, glancing at Gideon.

"I don't think so. You guys are clients of ours—from time to time. Why can't we just be friends?"

Gideon looks at Miriam. She nods *no*.

"Bad luck, Moses. I've been overruled. You see, the problem is you tried to kidnap *our* chief—probably with the intent to kill. In retaliation, I suppose. We believe in forgiveness, we really do, except this is kind of personal. You know what I mean."

Gideon directs Moses right on Shoreline Drive, then right again on Castillo Street, then finally left onto a small road that enters Pershing Park. At this time of day the park is almost unoccupied. The cab stops near a softball diamond. Miriam makes a call.

Moses is trembling now. Gideon shoves the man forward, pressing him against the steering wheel.

"This will be painless, I promise you." Gideon produces a small curved dagger—a modern version of the *sica* used in the time of Jesus by Jewish assassins called Sicarii. "Don't be afraid, it will be over soon."

Gideon delicately pushes the sharp blade between two specific ribs in the man's back. To Moses, it feels like an icicle penetrating a lung. Not unpleasant, actually, just cold. So cold...

Gideon arranges the dead man's body to look as if he's asleep against the driver's door. It will be an hour at least before anyone notices that the man has not moved. With no identification or money on him, the police will suspect a robbery-murder. Later they will discover that the man was a Mossad agent. Mossad will have to explain why they were running a covert operation in California without U.S. sanction. Sweet.

Gideon takes off the Greek fisherman's cap, pulls off a fake beard, and removes a false paunch from underneath his shirt. The man is transformed into an athletic late-forties man with dark hair and alert blue eyes.

"I hate wearing this crap," he says.

"Then you shouldn't have let yourself get photographed in India. Every damn agency in the world has your picture."

Gideon doesn't like to be reminded of his errors. He starts to go through the Mossad agent's pockets and finds a photograph of Miriam.

“Ah, look—a candid. Taken with a telephoto lens in, I would guess, London? Seems that Mossad, at least, knows *your* likeness as well.”

He hands Miriam the picture and she sighs, putting it into her purse. “This makes everything a bit more difficult.”

“Tell me about it.”

Gideon finds a pair of round wire-rimmed glasses in a shirt pocket, fits them to his face and then puts on the cabbie’s baseball cap. From another pocket he produces two small dental prostheses. When inserted above his upper molars on both sides, his cheekbones become noticeably more pronounced.

“Does that really work, Gideon?”

“Changes the geometry of the face. Doesn’t take much to fool the facial recognition systems.”

Miriam just shakes her head.

Less than a minute later, Gideon and Miriam, toting her carry-on, walk through the park, just two friends enjoying a nice walk in the sun. They are picked up on Cliff Drive by a man in a Land Rover. As a precaution they are driven to an alternative airport. It will take two days for them to get home and they can hardly wait.

The Himalayas are beautiful this time of year.

CHAPTER 2

New York City, 2012

Charlotte Ansari stares at the man with the raised gun. Her heart beats against her rib cage as she recalls a similar scene that occurred five years ago in Kashmir. But she had survived that threat, and she will not let this man take her down.

With a blindingly fast rise of her arms she grasps the 9mm Glock 19 in both hands and rapidly fires five rounds, striking the man in a tight cluster around the neck and upper chest.

She takes a deep breath, but as she lowers her weapon another man from behind grabs her shoulder. She jumps—then laughs at herself.

“Pretty good shooting there,” the man says.

Charlotte pulls off her “ears” so she can hear what the man is saying.

“I think that target is dead,” the man continues.

“You think? I’m not so sure. Maybe I’ll plug him with a few more holes.”

She punches a button that moves the target carrier towards the shooter’s booth. She stares at the picture of the villainous man pointing a pistol and says, “Yep, he’s dead.”

“Can I ask you a question, Char?”

“You can ask, sure.” She removes the clip from her pistol and installs a trigger lock, showing her finished work to the duty range officer. “But hurry up, Dan. I’ve gotta go.”

Dan looks down at her Glock and nods approval. “I see you here what, maybe three times a week? More than any other chick who comes.”

“Chick?” She smiles. “I’m forty-three, Dan. That’s almost fifty. Wait, is the duty range officer here allowed to hit on members?”

Dan laughs. He can’t be more than thirty, if that. “Just wondering if it’s something to do with your work or what. I know you get into some hairy situations, like

that Iraq thing, you know? The kidnapping? I guess you want to be able to take care of yourself.”

Charlotte places the Glock into a locking case, and puts the case into a larger tote. “Actually, Dan, I work in a very hostile environment. The *world*. But I don’t carry when I’m working. It tends to make my interview subjects nervous, not a good way to get them to open up.”

“So have you thought about competition—you know, shooting?”

“I get my fill of competition every day, Dan. It’s called ratings. And frankly, my ratings really suck lately. The worse things get, the more people don’t want to know about it. Gotta go, see you.”

Outside the shooting range in mid-town Manhattan, a black Infiniti sedan pulls up to the door. A large Irishman gets out and starts to orbit the vehicle to open the rear passenger door, but Charlotte waves him off.

“Donald, you’re embarrassing me. Don’t you get tired of babysitting an old woman?”

“Yes, ma’am, I certainly do. But I’m not qualified for anything else.”

She knows better. Donald is a first-rate bodyguard doubling as a chauffeur. Cambridge Cable News sees him as an investment in their star international correspondent. His cost comes under “risk abatement” on the CCN books. New York City can be a dangerous place for a woman who is not universally admired by the international rogues she has exposed. And they all have business in New York.

Charlotte’s last contract renewal has made her a rich woman—wealthy enough to afford a top floor apartment overlooking Central Park. And yet she’s unhappy and alone. After the tragic death of her husband five years earlier, she left her “get-away” in Minnesota and moved here to the nerve center of the world.

She glances at her watch. “Damn New York traffic. I’m going to be late.”

“No way. The traffic lets up just ahead.”

She wouldn’t mind being late for this appointment. The company has insisted that she take a few sessions with their favorite psychiatrist, Dr. Roger Benson. It was that one incident that put her over the edge and made the brass worried about her stability. A little too much travel and exhaustion, that’s all, and one night of drinking a tad too much (and maybe a couple of pills—*what were they again?*), and that stupid drunk who came to the wrong door pounding and pounding, scaring the crap out of her, and that one mistake of loading her gun and firing through the door—my God, she was so sure he was trying to attack her! Two weeks of not working was the worst punishment, next to these interminable sessions with Dr. Morose who only wants to exorcise demons that don’t exist. And also the humiliation of “treatment” in exchange for keeping it all off the record so the respected correspondent wouldn’t lose her credibility and damage the revenue-generating potential of her stardom.

Well, dammit, she’ll go to their stupid sessions. But she doesn’t have to cooperate!



The balding man with thick glasses and sloping shoulders sits motionless in a plush chair opposite Charlotte. His eyes study her, while her eyes evasively wander around the room.

She knows her silence is childish, and that Dr. Benson is smart enough to know that she knows, but still—she is fulfilling the letter of the agreement. She is attending her sessions. She just isn't talking. And Dr. Benson is just sitting there, as he had done for each of the previous three sessions.

Ten minutes to go.

But then Dr. Benson speaks. "It's early," he says, "but you can go if you want to. I can't force help on you. Next time, why don't you bring a book. We both seem to be just living out our sentences here."

Apparently even the esteemed Dr. Benson has a breaking point, and Charlotte has found it. His understated admission of defeat has an unusual effect. As he stands up and dismissively moves toward his desk, Charlotte suddenly feels release from—from *what*? Maybe from obligation. Defiance begins to drain out of her now that there is nothing to defy, no authority to obey, no healer to satisfy by healing.

"Dr. Benson," she says, startling him with sound of her voice, "I was told to come here because I was a woman in trouble who needed help."

The psychiatrist turns to face her. "You shot at a man because you were delusional. The stress and risks of your work overcame you and..."

"*Delusional*—a diagnostic term, isn't it? How much time do we have left?"

"A few minutes."

"I don't need that much time. Sit down and listen."

Dr. Benson reclaims his chair, which squeaks as he lowers himself into it.

"Let me make it easy for you by cataloging my delusions. Number one—my father was a priest who was defrocked for knocking up a fourteen-year-old girl. Number two—my mother abandoned us when I was seven to become the head of an international criminal organization. Delusion three—at the age of thirteen, my son, who has Asperger's Syndrome, was taken from me. He's now the head of that mob of murderers and I haven't seen him since."

She stops and takes a sip of water.

"Delusion four—because of what I know, I've been relentlessly hunted and almost killed by Islamic terrorists, our own CIA, Mossad, the Vatican, even Christian extremists. Delusion five—the only man I've ever loved is an assassin. He's the only reason I'm still alive today."

She stops. Charlotte and Dr. Benson awkwardly stare at each other for a moment, and then the psychiatrist laughs nervously.

“You’re making fun of me now, but you have a vivid imagination.”

Charlotte continues to stare unblinkingly at the doctor. He shifts in his chair. *It couldn’t be true, could it?*

At last Charlotte speaks, filling the void. “Number six—a man pretending to be drunk gained entry to a high-security apartment building and just happened to try to beat down my door by mistake. And this, just after an investigation I was conducting turned up some incriminating information that’s, how shall I put it, to die for?”

Charlotte stands up and walks toward the door. She sighs insincerely and adds: “Delusional? You don’t know the half of it, Doctor. Thank goodness for doctor-patient confidentiality. Some very bad people would like to know what you know.”

On her way out, Charlotte passes three empty chairs in the waiting room. A fourth is occupied by a tall man in a dark suit. The man smiles benignly as she passes.

Something about that smile, though, chills her to the bone.

Delusion seven, she thinks, as she pushes the down button for the elevator. *Maybe I do need help.*

CHAPTER 3

The Himalayas

The taut muscles of his chest shape the shirt's white fabric as he walks through the meeting hall. The chamber is smaller than it looks, the rock walls nearer than they appear, a clever optical illusion created by some anonymous architect centuries ago. It is enchantingly quiet in here except for the lisp of Gideon's wool trousers and a faint sigh of the wind that rustles his hair.

Three stone passageways open into this meeting hall, each one adorned by an inscription in both Aramaic and English chosen from the apocryphal Book of Enoch. Gideon, like all the other members of the order, knows these words by heart though their full significance eludes him.

The writing over the north passage reads:

I saw the stars of heaven come forth, and I counted the portals out of which they proceed, and wrote down all their numbers

Over the east passage are carved the words:

I drew nigh to a wall which is built of crystals and surrounded by tongues of fire

And above the passageway on the south of the chamber is inscribed:

Purify the earth from all oppression, from all injustice, from all crime, from all impiety

Gideon is drawn toward a shimmering light at the far end of the chamber, a sunlit balcony veiled by opalescent curtains dancing timidly in the mountain breeze. Parting the curtains, Gideon beholds a fantasyland of dark mountain peaks and deep valleys—the Himalayas—his adopted homeland. Drinking in the cool, sweet air washes away the aftertaste of life outside the gompā.

As if defying gravity, the ancient Buddhist fortification juts out precariously from the near-vertical slope of a mountain in the remotest region. Abandoned long-ago by its founders, the crumbling monastery had been secretly resurrected

decades ago by Gideon's organization, an almost invisible society of assassins that has been off the charts of history for nearly 2,000 years.

Gideon enters the balcony, placing his hands on the smooth stone balustrade. The sun is like a warm hand caressing his face.

"Are you well rested?" Miriam asks. She is this generation's *Eve*. Her glittering silver robe flutters in the breeze. Standing next to her are a young man and Rachel, Eve's attendant.

Gideon nods. "It's good to be home. The world exhausts me more than it used to. I must be getting old."

Greg, a young man of eighteen, approaches Gideon and gives him a tentative hug and a mechanical double-pat on the back with one hand while holding a cup of tea in the other. "Welcome back, Gideon."

"Thank you, Cain."

Until five years ago, the young man's name was Greg, a name chosen jointly by his mother, Charlotte Ansari, and his grandmother, who stands next to him. But that was long before Greg was identified as the *Divine Light*, the hereditary leader of the Sicarii.

"Would you like any tea?" Rachel offers a tray with a steaming cup. She is perhaps a year or two older than Eve with hair the same shade of dark brown streaked with gray. From the rear you could mistake the two for each other, and Cain had done so a few times to his embarrassment.

"Maybe later," Gideon answers, watching Rachel turn and leave the balcony.

"Rachel has been here since before I came," Gideon remarks. "And yet I don't know anything about her except that she's a true believer."

Eve takes a deep breath before stepping closer to Gideon and speaking in hushed tones. "She's a Jew from Brooklyn with no family. She moved to Israel and became a citizen. At one time, yes, she was fiercely loyal to our cause. But we believe that she has been leaking information about us to Mossad for the last year. For what reason, we don't know."

"Doubt," Gideon suggests. "The great poison of a cause. Do you never experience doubt about what we do?"

Unconvincingly, her eyes averting the piercing gaze of Gideon, Eve shakes her head, then says, "Never."

"Well, if I were you, I would not spend any time alone with her. If she's capable of treason, who knows what else she might be capable of? I just hope you don't ask me to—you know... I'm rather fond of her. I imagine she is under surveillance."

"By me, mainly. Only Cain shares this knowledge about Rachel, and now you. This gompá is a maze of secret passages and hidden observation points unknown to anyone but Cain and me. Just one of the perks of our stations.

Cain impatiently changes the subject. "You should know, Gideon, that we've discovered how the Israelis knew Eve was in Santa Barbara."

“They had a picture of her,” Gideon replies.

“Yes, from last year when Eve spent her conjugal visit with Thompson in London.”

Eve winces at Cain’s tactless choice of terms—*conjugal visit*. Cain often lacks sensitivity. He is intellectually gifted—a savant in some areas—but also emotionally detached and sometimes pathologically frank, evidence to doctors of his Asperger’s Syndrome. To the Sicarii, this is a misdiagnosis; instead they see in Cain the heightened objectivity and fearless honesty expected of a Divine Light.

“Who took this picture, and how did Mossad get it?” Gideon is often Eve’s assigned protector outside the gompa, and he takes this security breach personally. “I was on watch the entire time she and Thompson were in England.”

Eve places a hand on Gideon’s arm. “No one can watch every second, Gideon. So don’t worry, our estimation of your skills has not diminished. You are still our top operative—next to Caleb, of course. Fortunately, we know how this happened.”

“Then tell me, please.”

“Not here—inside.” Eve takes Gideon by the arm and they enter the meeting hall, veering toward the north passageway.



Gideon has rarely seen the inside of the Center for Intelligence Analysis, or CIA, a name whimsically applied to the operation by Chen Lee, who was already a hacker prodigy at twelve. The Sicarii know that every intelligence agency in the world is trying to intercept their data and find the locations of their facilities. Now twenty-seven, Lee has created a complex network of high-powered computers that is hermetically sealed from the outside world, virtually impervious to third-party “hacking, tracking, and attacking,” as he puts it.

Incoming streams of data from nodes in other parts of the world enter the network through one gateway and are carefully scrubbed, filtered, disassembled and reassembled to eliminate threats. No data is allowed to leave the CIA facility. Only two computer stations have access to the Internet through a dizzying maze of connections and encryption services that Chen has said “even I could not decrypt or trace back to us.”

Smaller facilities in London, New York, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Rio, Moscow, Tehran, Saudi Arabia, New Delhi, Singapore, Shanghai, Sidney, and Tokyo gather intelligence and perform first-tier analysis before sending it to the Sicarii CIA. In the case of physical intrusion, all data facilities including the CIA can be destroyed in less than two minutes, including complete eradication of data on all resident storage devices. Data back-up is in another location that not even Chen knows, and that facility also can be quickly destroyed.

Standing in front of a large projection screen in the CIA conference room,

Chen looks like a teenager in a Dallas Cowboys tee-shirt and dark vest. He glances up at the screen and grins. “This was an easy one,” he says.

The screen shows the London photo of Eve. “The background is out of focus, but clearly the location is Piccadilly Circus.”

“Yes,” Eve interjects, “it was a Tuesday. You can see the lavender shawl I bought earlier in the day.”

“From the sun we can tell the time must be approximately two to three o’clock p.m.” Chen gestures toward a hard shadow cast by a man walking in the background. “According to London meteorological records, the sun was out only during that timeframe.”

“Seems about right,” Eve adds.

“Notice that Eve is not looking at the camera. She is glancing to the side, distracted by something. That’s when someone took the picture.”

“It’s hard to recall,” Eve says, turning to Gideon, “but I remember you were watching from a distance, making me feel safe as always. And then a man in a raincoat caught your attention. You started heading for him, and I must have glanced over to see what you were going to do. Stupid of me!”

“That’s right, the raincoat seemed out of place in the sun, and it wasn’t cold enough to need it for warmth, and his hand was in his pocket. Seemed like a possible threat. I wanted to get close so if he had a weapon, I could convince him to uh, well—he pulled out a tissue and blew his nose.”

Chen laughs, but stops suddenly when he finds himself laughing alone.

“But who?” Gideon asks. “Who knew that Eve was going to be in London. Who knew what she looked like before snapping the picture?”

“An opportunist,” Cain answers, joining the conversation. “Someone with a cell phone camera.”

“The image was digital, probably 5MB, cheap wide-angle lens.” Chen is staring at the screen. “Most likely an Android phone made by Samsung.”

“You’re just teasing me now,” Gideon says.

“I am, yeah, but there was only one person there who was close enough to take this picture of Eve.” Chen pauses for dramatic effect.

Gideon knows there is just one possibility. “Thompson!”

“I’m sure he was just trying to sneak a memento,” Eve suggests. “He knows that pictures are forbidden during our—” she glances at Cain “—our *conjugal visits*. He’s not supposed to carry a cell phone either, but he did.”

“All right, but how did that innocent family photograph end up in the hands of Mossad?” Gideon has started to pace.

A smug look wrinkles Chen’s face. “Was pretty easy to hack into Thompson’s personal Gmail account. He emailed the photo to his daughter about a month before hooking up with Eve in Santa Barbara. That’s nearly a year after the London

trip. Why he waited so long we don't know. Maybe he just got lonely. Anyway, here's the message."

Chen clicks a button on a remote. The image changes to a Gmail message from Thompson that reads:

Char, I thought you might like to see a recent picture of your mother I took in London. And selfishly, I thought that this might get you to read my message for a change. You haven't answered my emails for a long time..

The message degenerates quickly into an emotional outpouring about how difficult it is for Thompson to "share the bliss" with Miriam for only one month a year, and how his daughter's shunning has made him "desperately lonely," and how Charlotte could make life bearable for him if she would only...

"The poor old fellow," Eve says. "He has no idea how much damage he has done."

"At the end of the message, right there—" Gideon's finger-shadow points to the last paragraph of the projected email— "he tells Charlotte he's going to meet Eve in Santa Barbara."

"We think he was trying to entice her into making it a family reunion," Cain says. "A monumentally bad idea, but it's clear he had no malicious intent,"

"And do you make that judgment without prejudice? He is your grandfather." Gideon means this as a gentle challenge. He sometimes prods the young man to see if he can provoke an emotion.

Cain looks at Gideon dispassionately. "Yes, I'm very sure. In a minute you'll see why."

Chen takes a step toward Gideon. "I have to agree with Cain on this one. It appears that Thompson isn't the one who passed the photograph to Mossad."

"Then who did?" Gideon studies the three stern faces that stare back as if waiting for him to reach an all-too-obvious conclusion. "You think *Charlotte*? But why would she do that?"

Eve grows pale and takes a seat. For a moment she seems intent on reading her knees, but finally looks up. "Charlotte's email accounts had no clues. But knowing when she received her father's email allowed us to track her movements in detail over the next 24 hours.

Chen punches the remote and the screen illuminates with a photograph of an attractive, trim American male in his late fifties who is standing next to the former President of the United States. "Six hours after opening her father's message, Charlotte used her phone's calendar to schedule a meeting with this man, William Wyatt."

“Does that name ring a bell, Gideon?” Eve asks.

Gideon shakes his head in disgust. “William Wyatt, former director of the American CIA. Five years ago he ordered me killed. And then I almost killed him. Probably should have.”

Gideon stares grimly at the face on screen. “He’s now an executive with Blackwatch, the so-called security firm that rents out mercenaries around the world. But Charlotte hates this guy as much as I do. He put her on the Agency’s dead-or-alive list. Their last meeting was extremely unpleasant. Why would she want to meet him?”

“Because my mother wants to destroy us.” Cain’s blunt words bring the conversation to a temporary halt.

Eve stands. “Charlotte is a special case, as you know, Gideon. She’s my daughter, and Thompson’s. She’s Cain’s mother. You and she developed a special bond—”

Gideon objects. “I was her assigned bodyguard, that’s all.”

“She called you her *Guardian Angel*,” Cain reminds him.

With a wave of his hand, Gideon dismisses this.

“We’re quite sure that Charlotte wants to expose our organization,” Eve continues. She is trying to be matter-of-fact, but accusing her daughter of personal betrayal is not easy. “She is obviously willing to sacrifice her family—and you, Gideon—to take us down. Looking at it from her point-of-view, it’s understandable. We did keep her in the dark about her son’s true lineage until he was thirteen. And we killed her husband, who betrayed us. And we separated Cain—Greg, that is—from his mother with no contact since, which must feel to her like he was abducted into a cult. So she’s probably pretty angry with us, don’t you think? All that, plus she has what you might call serious *moral objections* to our line of work.”

“Keep in mind that she’s CCN’s star international news correspondent and has deep connections around the world,” Cain adds. “So she’s not without resources. And her celebrity can win her a lot of new friends.”

Chen pokes his remote again. The screen begins to display a series of documents. “So let me cut to the chase. Over the last year—after a tip-off from an associate in the NSA—we’ve been tracking Charlotte’s electronic communications, and the photos on her cell phone. She likes pictures of children and dogs. She’s also fond of taking pictures of documents, I suppose so she can transcribe them later. She’s had a number of conversations with law enforcement and intelligence personnel and others who aren’t a logical part of any CCN story.”

Gideon watches the sequence of email subject lines, highlighted comments, and photo attachments showing crime scenes.

“So what exactly am I looking at? What does it add up to?”

“She’s been conducting an investigation,” Cain says. “Most of this research has to do with contracts we’ve fulfilled. At least a third of them by you, Gideon. She’s trying to tie us to high-profile assassinations. And she’s enlisting help from some very capable resources.”

Gideon turns to Eve. He doesn’t need to ask the question that’s on his mind.

Eve avoids Gideon’s eyes as she speaks. “It’s a very bad time for this to be happening,” she says. “This year is pivotal for us. We can’t allow anything to disrupt our work, particularly now. Cain, please... make it clear for him...”

Cain looks Gideon in the eye. “Charlotte must be eliminated.”

“She’s your mother,” Gideon says, baffled by the boy’s callous tone.

“She’s a threat.” Cain’s terse reply seems practiced, like the snap of a bullwhip.

Gideon turns to Eve. “She’s your daughter. Are you sure about this?”

Eve can’t muster the same kind of whiplash response. She pauses first, as if gathering her resolve—who could blame her?—and says, “Do you know the story of Abraham and Isaac?”

Gideon nods. Of course he does.

“Did Abraham refuse to perform the sacrifice just because Isaac was his son?” She pauses briefly, staring fiercely at Gideon. “This is *our* test—mine and Cain’s.”

“God spared Isaac at the last minute. What if God doesn’t spare Charlotte?”

“That’s entirely up to God, isn’t it?”

Gideon fidgets. Eve senses him struggling to accept this.

“Do I have to remind you of the story of Sarah?” Eve asks. “It was the will of God that she slay her own brother on Masada. I don’t think that was easy for her, do you?”

Gideon looks away.

“And God did not stay her hand, did He?”

Cain is uncomfortable with the direction of this conversation. He steps forward. “Gideon, we’ve decided you should be the messenger.”

Flung like a fistful of grit.

Gideon knows that Cain means *messenger of death*. Suddenly he wants to take a deep breath, to let out a long sigh, but his lungs won’t cooperate. His breath is caught in his throat. Feelings surface—emotions he had never acknowledged, that even now he tries to bury. Hadn’t he once, maybe a few times, dreamt of a normal life, maybe as a stockbroker or a high school football coach, with a wife and children and a home in the country. And wasn’t it always Charlotte in these fantasies?

Cain peers into Gideon’s eyes. He seems to be searching them for some sign of doubt or weakness.

Unblinkingly, Gideon stares back, though his eyes still burn from the grit. He is not allowed to have feelings for Charlotte. She was just an assignment. He did

his job. It's over. Sicarii do not have girl friends or wives; they are married to the mission. Sicarii do not have homes away from the order; the order is their home.

Sicarii assassins must remain unknown, unattached, unrepentant, undefeated.

The order is all he needs. All he will ever need.

It is his family.

"Do you accept our decision?" Cain asks.

It is both terrible and magnificent, Gideon thinks, that this man-child can rise above emotion, if any exists within him, for the good of the Order.

"Of course I accept."

"Good. It must be done soon."



Eve turns away so the others won't see the mother's pain in her eyes. She believes that Abraham's and Sarah's eyes must have betrayed their pain, too, just before picking up the knife.



Cain stays in the room after the others leave, his mind oddly fixated on the memory of seeing his mother's stretch marks for the first time, scars that he had caused but nature had ordained. In a rare moment of emotional clarity, he doubts just a little the great plan.



That evening, in the coolness of his bed, with the moon throwing shards of light against the wall and his mind caught in the blurred border between the land of the living and the realm of the dead, Gideon dreams of Charlotte.