

PART I: THE CONGREGATION

1993, 1942-1943, 2001

1. The Big Dog (1993)

The brown spatula of earth ascended, a fly-swatter targeting the underbelly of the buzzing, lurching plane. The pilot's breath, from the moment Loomis entered the aged Let L-410 Turbolet, had dispersed its sour odor of truly bad vodka with the vigor of a Times Square cigarette-puffing billboard. The L-410 withstood the earth's sharp smack and bounced, tossing Loomis around the stripped down cabin, his irritation spiking with every painful collision. As he disembarked he was more grateful for his release from the stale atmosphere of freezingly brittle oil-and-alcohol tinged air than that the plane had landed in one piece. The pilot pointed towards a cinderblock shed thirty meters away, a superfluous gesture as no other possible destination lay in sight. In saluting Loomis farewell, the pilot slapped his own eye. Blinking, he settled back into the cockpit, revved up for no apparent reason, slipped into gear, and almost blew Loomis to Pakistan with a blast of the sturdy turbo-prop engines. The plane lurched as if it too were fueled with vodka but eventually straightened its course down the packed-earth runway in time for take-off. It flew out of scent and sight and Loomis's mind. Sand tattooed against Loomis's shades in rapid-fire clicks that reminded him of automatic gunfire at a distance. He raised his collar against the modest assault and walked to the shed. The air smelled fresh and from far away and the sand tickled his chin.

He entered an ill-lit room some thirty feet square in the middle of which a man hunched over a flimsy paint-stained card table. Piles of manifests and receipts lay strewn on an awful brown bookcase with three shelves, and a picture of the president of the new republic hung askew over the bookcase. Yellow-gold flypaper stamped with faded red print hung from spindly aluminum cross bars supporting a tin roof had attracted a feast that would have satisfied even Renfield in his sanitarium despite the poor man's preference for spiders. The man looked up. He was chewing on a carrot stick which stuck out from under a frantically sprouting mustache like a field gun from an abandoned hedgerow. His face was the color and texture of dry undyed linen and his bottom lip had little more color than his skin, but his eyes glowed hard and sharp as volcanic glass. He nodded at Loomis and bowed over a map that covered the table and spilled to the floor.

"Da fuck they thinking?" he muttered, perhaps to Loomis, perhaps to himself. "Pardon my

language,” he said, grinning this time, and the effect was scary even to Loomis, as though a waxwork exhibit of a mummy had just recalled a joke current at the third cataract thousands of years earlier. “I’ve spent a lot of time with American agency types. I wanted to be a priest once.”

Loomis nodded. “No problem. Or maybe there is, considering your remark. Something bothering you about the mission?”

“Moscow is crawling with consultants talking about privatization. Meanwhile, the KGB and the gangs are coming up with their own version of privatization that only *looks* like what the Americans want. It’s all about transferring fungible assets from one gangster regime to another. ‘Why be satisfied with a pay-off when we can own the whole thing? The people who are paying us are crooks too. We can simply replace them and own everything.’ But the American and European bankers don’t care because they’ve already played the same game and won. In the end, they stand to profit most and underneath it all, they’re the ones funding everything. This group will get the forests, that group the oil. But one thing they don’t want anyone to get is the science.”

“You mean the nukes,” said Loomis.

The man shrugged. “My name is Zeugma. I am from Epirus originally, now from nowhere, or perhaps from here, though it is the same thing. Nukes and spooks, eh?”

Loomis waited through several minutes of silence before asking, “Does our mission have anything to do with Russian nukes?”

Zeugma waved his hands indefinably between contemptuous dismissal and habitual resignation. “The West makes believe it’s all about the nukes. ‘Protect the Soviet arsenal! Keep the plutonium in plain view! Don’t let nuclear secrets fall into the wrong hands! Keep us safe! Save the children!’ Ha! They’re already in the wrong hands!”

Loomis looked at him. “You mean the national nuclear arsenals. Fine. But you can’t deny there are ‘wrong hands’ and wrong hands.”

“What is this means?” asked Zeugma, puzzled. “I said ‘wrong hands’. What you say is like ‘x equals x’. Or is this one of those famous American idioms? Ha!”

“Yes, it is an idiom,” Loomis said impatiently. “It means some wrong hands are worse

than other wrong hands. Like terrorists who would use a nuclear device to obliterate a city.”

“As the Americans twice did?”

“That was war.”

“Ah, yes. Did you ever think that the declaration of a war is just a temporary way to legitimize crime?”

Loomis, annoyed, snapped, “There are wars and there are...”

“Wars!” Zeugma exclaimed, clearly impressed with himself. “No, my friend, all hands are the wrong hands and discriminating among them is a solipsistic game.”

Loomis sighed. “Look, I didn’t come here for a lesson in Socratic dialectic. You’re Greek, fine, three hundred years ago you guys blew up the Parthenon.”

“Yes, but the gunpowder was Turkish.”

“Now who’s making rhetorical distinctions? Look, can we cut the crap and get down to business?”

“No,” said Zeugma in a tone suitable to admonishing a child, “you are missing my point. Perhaps if you weren’t so intent upon justifying your own country’s experience with nuclear weapons you would have allowed me to complete my thought.”

Loomis suppressed his temper, whose fuse, already abraded by its exposure to the rancidity of the pilot’s half-digested vodka and bottom-feeding digestive juices, was undergoing severe abbreviation in the face of Zeugma’s rhetorical sparring. Instead he simply said, “Are you always so irritating?”

Zeugma continued in the same admonishing tone. “Do you find me irritating? That is a shame because we have much to do with one another. I am here to help you, after all. But I’ll ‘cut to the chase’ as you American idiomists would say. Nukes are just the tip of the iceberg—now that’s an idiom I understand because...”

“Okay, I get it. You don’t have to comment every time you use an idiom or metaphor.”

“Hmm. Are you familiar with the great similes of Homer? Magnificent. Not many but they break through the surface of the poems like revelation, like mighty Keats felt gazing upon his Grecian urn or a new canvass by Turner.” Zeugma noted Loomis’s ever-more-threatening

expression and he held up a hand. "Or," he continued, "as the world would stand before new scientific revelations that all previous knowledge could neither predict nor anticipate. And that is something in which the Soviets excelled and that is why you are here today listening to my discursive ramblings. Nukes are just surface, the easily understood danger in the old Soviet arsenal. But there are greater secrets, some as dangerous as the technology behind a deliverable warhead, but others holding such promise as men have dreamed longer than you or I have been wagging our penises at the world. And where such heady promises, not to mention dicks, wave in the wind, danger breeds in equal measure."

He rustled the map to indicate that Loomis should join him in studying it. Above him, a new fly had joined the ribbon of gold and was struggling to get loose, but as Loomis watched, its legs buckled and glue seized its belly. Loomis noticed its eyes seemed far apart for a fly; a female, he noted. Her wings beat frantically, the buzz rising in pitch, and then stillness and silence descended over her heroic efforts. On the map, it was a straight shot northeast to Samarkand where Loomis was to find the scientist in question and remove him from the city. The problem was that the scientist was being closely watched by Russian agents, the CIA, and who knows who else. It won't be easy, Zeugma explained. He pored over every mile of the route with Loomis. "Remember one thing, please, and you will increase your chances of succeeding. Any anomaly, any anomaly at all, read it as a warning."

Loomis nodded, acknowledging a lesson he'd internalized long ago. Zeugma grabbed his arm. Loomis instinctively snapped backward and brought his other arm around to break the older man's hold but despite a well-executed jiu-jitsu move, Zeugma's hand remained like a steel cuff. Loomis was about to react further when he heard a growl he would liken to the grinding rumble produced by a subterranean waste plant digesting glass and human bone. It came from a massive black shadow under Zeugma's cot. Zeugma issued a quick command and a gigantic dog stood up, raising the pillow end of the cot a yard in the air. Loomis thought the dog looked like a mastiff but rangier than he should have been. Zeugma smiled.

"Mr. Loomis, meet Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus is a Molossian and worth ten soldiers of most armies."

“Impressive creature.”

“I have always had Molossians, ever since the war.” Loomis had no doubt which war the old man meant. “Mr. Loomis, are you a fan of tobacco or are you like so many of your countrymen, who consider tobacco a costly affront to public health? Of course,” he went on, not allowing Loomis to reply, “given the irradiated, pesticide-soaked, nicotine-drenched ragweed that goes into your commercial cigarettes and the addictive character of most modern day smokers, I applaud the public relations war directed at your so-called ‘death sticks’. your “ash-flowers”. However, we are close by the tobacco heartland of the universe, so please, let us relax with a hand-rolled cigar. This particular tobacco is the nectar of Anatolia and as I wouldn't play the odds of you surviving your mission, please allow me to offer you the best last smoke on earth.”

Loomis followed Zeugma outside. Under a makeshift awning of copper piping and stitched-together sheepskin, a wooden barrel stood opposite a stuffed Victorian throne spilling its white guts onto the dust. The upholstery was durable, thick-weave depicting hounds pursuing a boar. The boar's face on the right side of the chair, twisted outward, held its color most vividly and the little pig-eyes rolled with ferocious terror, tusks dripping canine blood. “Now here is my first anomaly,” Loomis said and Zeugma laughed. “What warning does it hold for me?”

“Despite the tapestry's theme, you get a free pass on this anomaly. Please, sit there and enjoy your cigar.”

“Oh, no, I should use the barrel...”

“Nonsense, the barrel suits me absolutely. There are things you must know and you will relax better *en couchant*. No good departing on a mission with a stiff back.” Zeugma clipped two cigars and handed Loomis one. The cigars were a good deal longer and just a tad thinner than average. Zeugma held the flame from a translucent red plastic lighter under the nether tip of Loomis's and worked it carefully round the lower demi-circumference and then to the center, circled three times round, and finished the job by airily waving the flame in the general vicinity of the cigar as if blessing it. Loomis had no idea that lighting a cigar could be so complicated, but then his host seemed to make everything complicated. He wondered what the briefing would be like.

Zeugma drew long and the smoke drifted out of his mouth and lazily up over his nostrils and eyes. Pyrrhus nuzzled him and plopped down beside the barrel, which shook with the tangential impact of his ribcage. Loomis gazed across the steps towards the distant fabled Emerald City that the mass-murdering conqueror (is there any other kind he thought) Tamburlaine had elevated into an aesthetic marvel. The land was really closer to desert than to the golden grasslands rippling west to the Don in a vast carpet five hundred miles to the north. Here only patchwork distribution of odd shrubs and stunted trees, sets of a withered mathematics with energy only to sprout the same equation repetitively here and there, and that one equation was this: whatever you can drag out of hard land is worth fighting for though it might not look it. Still, Loomis loved the open desolation and the scent of wind which changed with every new angle of approach, for each angle represented different donors of pollen and pheromonic molecules and hence a different mix of brain-tickling aromatics. Of course these scents were periodically drowned in the thick smoky holocaust of tobacco leaves that burned eight inches from his lips but still the wind differed texturally from the smoke and made itself known to his olfactory nerve endings despite the tobacco's rich aroma. The sky was silver.

"There is no easy route on the first part of your journey. They say every journey begins with a single step but then what? And so what? The first step is easy, you have barely left home. Farther on it gets tougher. There are many cultivated fields that will facilitate your journey, but also ravines and a ridge of mountains. You will keep the mountains well to your right and when you reach Aral, at about 60 miles, you can follow the old riverbed straight into Samarkand. Tadjikistan would have been closer but that is a madhouse now but that is good because the Uzbeks are looking east, not south. You ride an enhanced motor-cross bike which should handle the terrain. We've given it a Honda 550 engine and reinforced the frame. The gas tank is full and the tires are coating with extra rubber that shields them from puncture or impact with sharp stones. The exhaust pipes are coated with a special ceramic that cools instantly. You remove the left pipe as soon as you arrive. Your documents are sandwiched between two ceramic layers so you'll have to smash the pipe to get at them, though you may not need them at all. The bike works fine with just the right-side exhaust, but it won't work fine with just the left. Somewhere

around twenty miles from Samarkand you will come to the top of a low ridge and see a bazaar about one mile off to the northeast. Jag west to avoid it. The terrain there is rocky, boulders the size of oil drums and old stream beds that flood without warning. When you cross the stream beds, look for a gradual bank on the other side. It's easy to get in with the bike, not so easy to haul it out. The banks are eroded and deep, so it can be quite a labor to drag the bike over the overhang. As settlement gets thicker, you want to leave the road and come into the city directly from west. That area, however, is known for bandits. I don't think the people who sent you were quite aware of that. Perhaps they were and want you dead. Who knows? At any rate, no one asked me so it's up to you to deal with them. The gangs aren't large, though, no more than six or eight at most, so someone with your training should be able to make his way through. If not..."

He shrugged. "On the outskirts, as you approach from west, you see roadside stand called 'Mongke's Uncle'. It sells junk—soda pop, trinkets, illustrated soap opera magazines—and of course junk, heroin, a very fine grade I am told, cut with benign substances and packing a punch that falls short of overdosing the dealer's clients, provided they're used to it, so don't try any. Park the bike there and wait."

Loomis scratched Pyrrhus's head and patted his massive body. "How will I recognize the scientist?" he asked.

Zeugma chuckled. "You cannot fail to know her. She will make herself known to you."

Loomis looked up, startled. "It's a she?"

Zeugma gave him a quizzical glance. "Is that such a surprise?"

Loomis thought for a moment. "Yes, it is. In a matter such as this, one imagines..."

"Yes, one does," said Zeugma, smiling. "That she is a woman is all I know about her. I have no idea why she is deemed so important."

"Neither do I," said Loomis, answering the unasked question, suspecting that Zeugma knew everything there was to know about the scientist and her work.

"They don't tell you?"

Loomis shrugged. "I'm not even sure who 'they' is."

"I'm not at all sure who you are. Except that I was told by a reliable source to expect you."

Loomis nodded. Zeugma continued. "He sent his greetings. Fain."

Loomis was startled again. Why would Fain reveal himself? And why was he involved?

Loomis was just about to voice a thought internally when Zeugma spoke it aloud for him.

"Quite a legend, that Mister Fain. I have met him in the rain."

"It rains here?"

Zeugma laughed. "Oh yes, that is why I told you to be careful in the streams. Flash floods."

Zeugma watched Loomis pet the dog. "You are a dog-person, as they say in your country?"

Loomis shrugged. Zeugma nodded as if Loomis had decided an important matter to his satisfaction. "I am a dog-man."

Loomis laughed. "We don't say it like that. We just say we're a dog-person, or a cat-person."

Zeugma smiled at him benignly. "Yes, I know. It is a mini-idiom. But I am a dog-man."

"Okay, you're a dog man."

The old man remained silent, still smiling. "What you really mean is, 'If you want to be a dog-man instead of a dog person, old man, fine, you're a dog-man.' But for such a man as experienced as you in coping with anomalous circumstances..."

"You seem to want to explain."

"Yes, I will, because I have not spoken to anyone for two months except for a brief telex exchange with Mr. Fain a week ago and I like you. I like that you like my dog and my cigars. I like the fact that you the odds do not favor surviving more than a few more days and that you do not seem to mind. And I think my story can help you on your mission."

2. The Congregants (1942)

“I was eleven when the war began. I lived in a part of Greece that was wild in antiquity and no less wild in 1939, a landscape to inspire Romantic poets, all deep gorges and tumbling cascades, mountain vistas of ambrosial golden light that plunge into the shadow-green mysteries of lupine forests. Our village was poor. The whole region was poor. We were so poor that the poor were relatively rich—and my family didn’t have any rich relatives. I would say there were bandits in the area except that everyone was a bandit so banditry was just how we lived and thus was not outside the law as we knew it. When the Germans invaded Greece in April forty-one we did not really feel the effects at first. The main invasion path was well east of Epirus, although we Greeks stalled the Italians the year before a good deal closer on Albanian border. By 1942, however, German garrisons secured the area which was strategic mainly for its access to Adriatic coast. However, Germans did have other concern. The steep folds of our slopes gave hiding places for resistance fighters. As you probably know, my friend, Greek Resistance was unrelenting and forced Hitler to divert fifty battalions that he expected to use elsewhere. The Germans were worried Epirus could become a staging point for strong Greek force that could open path to Tito’s partisans in Yugoslavia and then northern Italy. With English and American help, well, who knows what they were thinking, but the war came to us, no question of that.

“I lived with my mother. My father had gone to fight in Spain in 1938 and we never heard from him again. Two baby sisters died of fevers in the 1930s. It was harsh life. A few sheep and goat for livelihood I guarded on slopes of the Timfi range, three peaks each almost eight thousand feet. It held our village’s several hundred souls in palm of gigantic hand.”

Zeugma took a long draught from his cigar. He squinted against the setting sun and Loomis turned to watch the desert dust run interference for the shorter solar rays. Along the western edge of the Kamabchul Steppe in the direction of Bukhara a long red incision bled between earth and sky. It was easy to see the lines of ancient horsemen racing across that wound, black silhouettes with distant cities in their sights, oblivious to the history being written by

the dusty hooves beneath them. “Good hashish,” murmured Zeugma and Loomis realized that while he himself was enjoying exquisite tobacco, Zeugma's cigar differed from his in kind. “Not that opium-treated shit you get in Bangkok or Saigon. You should try some.”

Loomis shook his head. “Of course,” Zeugma continued personably, “you have your mission to consider. My only solace lay with my dogs. I had two white Molossians, big things, bigger than Pyrrhus even. The white Molossians are herders, the black ones guardians of the home. I never had friends in the village. There were only a few boys my age and quite early on they had coalesced into a tight-knit gang that hunted and played games of no interest to me. When they didn't have any animals to shoot or friends to fight they came after me. I suppose they inflicted on me a Zen type training, because I became so adept at hiding from them even in the confined village and fleeing them along the slopes that I navigated the terrain like a creature half-water, half-goat, even better than was usual for a shepherd.

“So there I was, 1942, fourteen years old, and the Germans placed a garrison in the main town of Kalumnos, just west of the mountain on the Vijose River, which cut a passageway into Albania. The Germans thus cut the mountains off from the sea and the north. I used to spy on them from the heights above the valley and I would shadow their patrols. My dogs would accompany me. But on the day of the massacre, I slipped down to the edge of town and hid in a doorway to watch, not knowing, of course, what was to happen.

“A couple of officers had been gunned down at a café in Kalumnos the day before. This was, as you may imagine, big news in our region, but the Germans had just arrived and we figured it would be viewed as an act of war. Of course, there would be reprisals, but... The Germans took their revenge by herding sixteen women and children into the main square. The townsmen shouted and pushed but the German troops held them at bay with three machine guns that covered the *plaka*. They lined the women and children up and a Gestapo colonel made a short speech in an abysmal-sounding Greek. It was full of classical grammaticisms and Platonic phrases, all spoken in an exaggerated accent as though he were declaiming a composition he'd written for a class in the *gymanasium*. A schmuck, your Jewish marines would call him. But not your everyday schmuck. His speech promised mercy to the townspeople. For

every man who stepped forward to identify the assassins, he would give back to the town four of the prisoners lined up against the church wall. And do you know what?"

Loomis leaned forward. The cigar smoke stung his eyes and he realized he'd forgotten to puff. "You know the answer, don't you my friend. Before anyone could speak, one of the women screamed out a single word. Can you guess the word, my friend?"

Loomis nodded. Zeugma laughed dry and bitter as a desert herb. His eyes circled in his head and Loomis thought the man might be circling in the skies above them. But he returned and said quietly, "*Eleutheria!*" They sat in silence for several minutes until Zeugma noted, "That is precisely the length of the silence that followed that one word as it echoed up and down the mountains. Even the Germans were transfixed. And, as you guessed, no one stepped forward, no one dared say a word in defiance of that heroine's scream. 'Freedom!' The Gestapo pig shrugged. He drew his pistol and shot a child through the head. He then strolled up and down the line, shooting people in random order. He would pass by several children and everyone would think, 'Ah, he is sparing them,' but then he would stop as if he had second thoughts, walk back a few steps, shoot one and then move on down the line. When he reached the end, having shot about eight people, he made his way back up the line. When there were about four prisoners left he gestured to his men to finish the job. Probably wanted to share the blood-guilt. The woman who cried out "Freedom!" was the last to die. She was my mother. I had no idea what she was doing in Kalumnos that day but whatever it was, it made me an orphan.

"I ran back to the mountain. I was insane with horror and grief. The Gestapo knew their business. They knew that if they executed the men, the men would die proud and that their deaths would inspire others to resist. But to kill women and children like that, well, you don't think any woman who survived would encourage her man to take up arms against the Germans, not when it meant the murder of their innocent children. Worst of all, the men were humiliated, because they had been forced to stand passively by while their own precious flock was slaughtered by those beasts in men's clothing. Yet still, many fought on, doing what they could, sabotaging equipment, and many of them still had families to protect. That is the Greek way. But there were no more killings of German soldiers. At least none committed by the men.

“A few days later I awoke to find three black Molossians staring at me, tongues out, panting. They must have belonged to households that could no longer care for them after the massacre. Perhaps the men were fighting in the army or had already died. In any case, they were hungry and I fed them the rabbits I trapped to share with Arrow and Flint, my own dogs. The dogs naturally got along with one another. I knew it would be tough feeding them all, but decided to try and keep them together.

“Two days later, we had three new additions. A shepherd whose flocks ranged beneath one of the other peaks paid me a visit. He was going to fight the Germans. He planned to join the Resistance in Macedonia or march all the way to Yugoslavia if he had to, but he was going to kill as many as he could before he himself died. The massacre had driven him to this. He had three white Molossians and he knew I loved dogs, so he asked if I'd take them. Of course, what could I say? So now there were eight. And sure enough, two weeks later, one of the shepherd's dogs gave birth to a litter that doubled our numbers. It was like that movie, that cartoon, many many Dalmatians. Funny, isn't it? Dalmatia is just up the coast from Epirus. To feed this horde of mine I would go down to Kalumnos and wheedle scraps from the butcher, the café, the leftovers people had no use for and believe me, in wartime, these were not plentiful. Sometimes a kindly person would think I was trying to feed myself and would give me a good slab of meat. I fed some of the steak to the new mother to keep up her strength and ate the rest myself. I love dogs but I'm not crazy!

“Soon I devised a little game. I had always wanted to be a priest. After all, I had an intellect and there was little enough to do with it in my village but take it to a seminary. I was not particularly devout in the traditional way but I loved the ceremony. In a wilderness like that, the Church service, the paintings on the wall, the Bible stories—this was television, cinema, library all rolled into one and I loved my cinematic Church! Well, it looked like any dreams I had of going to seminary had died in the town square so I invented a harmless conceit. I began to conduct Mass for my Molossians.”

Loomis laughed. He recognized a second-hand buzz from Zeugma's cigar, which had probably burned up an ounce of hash and it was only half baked, so to speak. “Did you teach

them to bark 'amen'? By the way, how much of that shit are you going to smoke?"

Zeugma waved his arm. "It doesn't affect me the way it does other people. Perhaps it's a tolerance I've built up." He lolled back on his barrel, left shoulder to right and kept right on going to the right until he fell right to the ground. He and Loomis both began laughing hysterically. "Of course I didn't teach them to bark 'amen'," Zeugma said between gales of laughter. "Dogs can't bark 'amen'." He paused four beats. "They bark 'selah!'"

At this they both positively hit the ground. "This is very bad," Zeugma gasped. "Very off task. You'll get fucked up for your, for your..." and he howled the word "mission" as if it were the funniest thing in the world. This sobered Loomis right up; he was, after all, much less stoned than his companion. Loomis was surprised to see that Zeugma had enough self-possession to clamp down on his hilarity and climb back on the barrel.

"Have you ever known anyone who could learn foreign languages the way a gifted musician learns a score? They just swim through the grammar, intuiting structure while vocabulary sticks to them like flies to that paper dangling from the ceiling in there? I believe your Mr. Fain has that gift. Well, my friend, that is what it is like with me and dogs. I bend down and they trust me right away. I murmur to them, no words, just sounds, old Aeolian sounds, and then I look into their eyes and I feel what they are thinking. They don't think in words, of course, but they do think and I feel it and somehow, what I say with my old sounds and my eyes and my hands, they understand that completely. That's just the way it is with me. So they sat quietly in a circle, with Maria—what I named the mother of the litter—nursing off to the side, and I conducted mass for them. And when it came time to feed them the host, I dabbed a little wine on my finger and fed them a taste of bread and made the sign of the cross. You must believe me, this was not a profanation. It began because I wanted so much to be a priest and I thought it was harmless. But soon they grew to like it—maybe the bread, maybe even the wine, maybe they found the prayers soothing. At the same time each evening, at *lykophos*, "wolf light", they gathered in a semi-circle and we prayed together."

Loomis looked up sharply. Zeugma was smiling at him, a strange, back-lit smile. "You heard me. I told you I could understand what they were thinking. And as God is my witness, they

were praying with me. And then the thing happened that changed my life completely and from which there was no turning back.”

3. The Soldiers

“One day I was wandering the ridges. Maria was still nursing the pups but they were growing. She was white but two of her progeny had come out black and one was a black and gold mix. Two of the grown dogs, a black and a white whom I’d named Harmodius and Aristogiton, after the tyrant-killers of ancient Athens, scrambled the slopes alongside me. Of course, I couldn’t spit out such multi-syllabic mouthfuls every time I called them, so I shortened their names to Harms and Giton. We crossed a stream when they bristled but their cue was not olfactory but visual: stepping out of the woods, rifles in hand but not yet pointed at us, were three German soldiers. They must have been sent to reconnoiter, perhaps to dig up evidence of a resistance in the high ground. The dogs missed their scent because the wind was from the west and we were upwind of them. As soon as they saw me they barked a command and aimed their guns at me.

“I placed my hands on my dogs’ necks, just behind their skulls to relax them. We were in a remote area, large boulders above and below us, dark forest in every direction and no settlement within miles. One of the Germans was quite young but he seemed to be the leader; it was he who questioned me. The other two were grizzled veterans of who knows what invasions. Don’t forget, in the spring of 1942 the war was still going well for the Germans, although the first inklings of desperation had entered their strategic planning now that the Americans were involved and because the Russian campaign, to that point, had proven costly, although of course they had no idea! The Americans hadn’t quite got into gear and Operation Blau was still a month away, while Stalingrad would not begin for another three months; the Leningrad siege was yet in its first year. So these fellows still felt like lords of the universe. They did not, however, know Greek and I certainly didn’t understand German but, as any Greek who has catered to German tourists knows, that was not viewed by them as a bar to communication. The soldiers simply shouted at me in their native tongue.

“I was frightened, I won’t pretend I wasn’t. I was even more afraid for my dogs, that the Germans would just shoot them or try to seize them from me. I pointed to myself and stooped over and made herding gestures with my arms. They seemed perplexed so I made baa-ing

sounds so they would get the picture. The two older soldiers laughed but the younger one - I think he believed I was mocking him. '*Schliessen dein Mund!*' he shouted. '*Du bist ein...*' and he mimicked a person gazing through binoculars. He thought I was a spy! '*Okhi, Okhi!*' I cried and flapped my hands against my clothes to show there was nothing there. '*Wo sind die Männer?*' he demanded. I had no idea what he meant. We stood in silence. I was aware of a growing tension that was innate to the circumstances. They had the power to do whatever they wanted with me. They could kill me and no one would ever know; probably no one would ever know I was even dead much less who killed me. On the other hand, it was self-evident that they had no reason to harm me other than acting through the perversity of power and war. Given that we were at war, I could see which of the two impulses—to crush or release—would win out.

"He said something to his two companions. One of them replied and they all laughed. '*Bist du eine Flusse-Madchen?*' he asked in a kinder voice. Odd, I remembered the sounds as I too have an innate gift for languages and I learned German before war's end. It was only a year or two on that I realized he was asking me if I were a river maiden.

"*Die hunde,*" said the leader. The others didn't need to be instructed any further. They shifted their rifles to the dogs. "No!" I screamed and threw myself in front of them, gathering their heads to my chest, guns aimed at my back. The younger soldier stepped up and grabbed my hair and yanked me away. It was then we heard the rustling, not as the wind among leaves, but more purposeful. '*Was ist dass?*' asked one. All three readied their rifles, scanning their sights along the edge of the woods, pausing at the edge of boulders. And suddenly I knew because I was in two places at once. I don't mean that figuratively, I mean it quite literally. Of course, to the Germans I suppose I still appeared a frightened mountain boy. I had some cognition that I was still in my body. But I also felt muscles pulling inside me that felt like steel cables being tautened for release. I saw the clearing through other eyes, colors muted and forms shadowy but distinct. No need for idioms or metaphors, my friend, this is as it was. But I was overwhelmed with an odor, a combination of antiseptic and rotting meat, the odor of mankind, the odor of fear. I was stirred by a titanic hatred, as if broiling flames rose out of my bowels and engulfed my brains. I was somewhere else, but I was rooted to the spot. And I felt absolutely calm.

“It happened so fast, faster than you think it could happen when you try imagining it. Without a sound, from several directions at once, five of my Molossians struck at the soldiers from out of the forest, while Harms and Giton launched themselves at the young one, who only had time to shoot wildly in the air as his rifle swung skywards. Giton was on him in a flash ripping out his throat. I watched the blood spurt and splash over Giton's white fur. By the time I looked at the other two soldiers, they were both on the ground shrieking horrible sounds. Birds flew in clouds from the trees and in the distance a mountain lion roared. My dogs were hungry, despite my best efforts to feed them, and they spent a few minutes digging into the soft spots for organs and muscle. I didn't even think to take the Germans' rifles. I just turned and disappeared into the forest, and my seven companions followed me.

“I had ranged far that day and by the time we returned to our home, it was wolf-light. The pups were scampering all over the camp under Maria's watchful eyes. They were still young but growing rapidly, although it would be months before they could leave camp. I hoped we had that much time. At any rate, it was time for our evening prayers.

“I recalled a passage from the Philokalia, that collection of wisdom from the early Greek Christian sages. I chose the prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian and recited it slowly, so even the puppies could understand it. Are you a religious man, my friend?”

Loomis shook his head. “Not at all.”

Zeugma laughed gently. “Neither am I, although I do not close the door on *pistos*, faith. But I cannot have faith in that in which I do not believe”

“So what do you have faith in?”

“Faith itself. To persist in investing belief in anything, the one true spiritual act in this world. Why save that child? One must have faith that its life is worthwhile. Why wake in the morning? One must have faith that life is worth something against perpetual sleep. Why fight against evil? One must have faith that good is preferable to evil and not just a relative prospect. God? That is too abstract and removed. Most people do not really believe in God anyway. They believe in whatever matrix of feelings, reassurances, images, conditionings, and childhood memories makes them feel at ease or important in the world. Then they are told to call that

feeling “faith”. But most religions are jealous masters and cannot bear for people to have faith in anything other than whatever orthodoxy they peddle. So people are cajoled and bullied and persecuted into investing all their faith into a mean-spirited tangle of images and ideas and this eats away at them. Because underneath it all, everyone knows everything that will happen to them, everyone knows everything about everyone else, and nothing we say or do is new. Traditional faith is the captain’s tower built on a shaky, storm-tossed, sea-worm-hollowed deck which is why people insist on it so desperately and why it is enforced so ruthlessly. And everybody knows it is a lie and that they are violating themselves and they feel bitter hate. Me, I discarded God a long time ago and now I have faith in everything else, most of all in the act of faith.”

Loomis gazed at him speculatively. “I never put much thought into it. It never meant anything to me.”

“I can understand that, my friend. But do you have faith in anything, Mr. Agent? Why do you do what you do?”

Loomis shrugged. “To know even that, I would have to stand outside myself and abstract from who I am something clear and precise, like filleting a fish. But if I did that, I’d lose my edge and be dead within a week. I don’t need to know. I just need to do.”

“Yes, you agents are self-reliant ones. You are here to bring agency into the world. You tell yourselves you have no masters but you can never really be sure, can you. In a labyrinth of lies the only truth is the Minotaur. But for me at that time, my strengths came from faith in prayer and faith, too, in my dogs. So I spoke the words of St. Ephrem the Syrian as I looked over my flock of shepherds and guardians. ‘O Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of sloth, vain curiosity, lust for power, and idle talk. But give to me Thy servant a spirit of soberness, humility, patience, and love. O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother: For blessed art Thou to the ages of ages. Amen.’

“Did the dogs answer with ‘selah’?” asked Loomis and both men smiled.

“No, they did not. But they did answer. I chose St. Ephrem’s prayer for its simplicity and purity. We had just shared something terrible and I wanted to bring them back to themselves, to

reaffirm timeless human values. Funny I should say that, all these years later. 'Timeless human values.' For I did not think of them as humans, as some people do their pet dogs. Yet it seemed natural that they should possess what we think of as 'human values', that they had crossed a boundary fearsome and sacred as death itself, and on the other side found life's rules reversed. There was something different about them now they had killed the soldiers. They stared at me with a wild, wolfish light in their eyes that was mixed with adoration. We had shared something profound, something immeasurable. And they had tasted blood, human blood, and it was not for a few more weeks that the full implications of this fact came through to me."