

Chapter 1: The Light and the Sea

Year 6708. July.

Leem—a striking young man with deep blue eyes that reflects his introspective nature, giving him an intense, thoughtful gaze—drifted through the depths of his recurring dream, his mind a vessel lost in a vast, ethereal ocean. The image was always the same: a multitude of angels, dazzling and quiet, spun elegantly around a central, very powerful light source. Their slow, methodical motions resembled planets orbiting a far-off sun; their faces raised toward the light that appeared to be pouring down like a river of brightness. As the light sank closer, its dazzling brilliance faded into gentle, luminous waves across the great expanse of blackness.

Was this a mirror of his own unknown soul, or the heavenly summons he dreaded to embrace? The question gnawed at him, as if the light itself held the answer to the mystery of his being. Leem could feel the light's presence—no, more than that—its gaze, a powerful force that both beckoned and restrained him. It was as if the light was speaking directly to his soul, calling him closer even as it held him back, a silent command woven into the air. The hymn, ancient and sacred, resonated with an unfamiliar but profound meaning—a melody that comforted and terrified in equal measure.

As the light's waves drew nearer, Leem felt the joy and warmth emanating, but the dream always took a sharp turn just as the next wave was about to envelop him. The light, the angels, the warmth—all vanished as he was pulled back, as if sucked into a dark well. Fear gripped his heart as the brilliance faded into nothingness, leaving him alone in the cold, black void. Night after night, the dream unraveled in the same cruel pattern, leaving Leem to wonder if the light was a guide or a tormentor. Leem sat in bed, his heart rising and sinking with traces of terror.

Gradually, his chamber in Constantinople's familiar surroundings—the thick curtains shielding him from the early morning light, the well carved wooden furnishings, and the icons of saints decorating the walls—started to clear focus. He pushed back the silk sheets, his feet finding the cool marble floor, and rose.

He walked to the balcony, where a breeze from the Golden Horn caressed his skin, the coolness of the early morning air soothing the remnants of his nightmare. The city below was still, bathed in the soft glow of the moonlight, the waters of the bay shimmering with the reflection of the bright moon.

"Phiom," came a soft voice from the shadows.

Leem turned to see Marcos, his personal slave, lying on the stone floor of the balcony, his eyes fixed on the same view. Marcos, who habitually slept on the balcony under the open sky, looked at Leem and smiled gently. The warmth of the smile was like a balm to Leem's unsettled mind.

"What?" Leem enquired after hearing the word.

"Phiom," Marcos repeated, his voice filled with reverence. "It means 'sea' in my language, Coptic. I was simply considering the water and how it ties all of us together, wherever we live."

Leem nodded, the pressure in his shoulders releasing as he considered the significance of the phrase. Once more, he gazed out over the seas, the word "phiom" hovering in his mind, its meaning expanding with every word Marcos spoke about his homeland.

Leem recalled the first time Marcos had mentioned the sea—how his eyes had brightened, so contrastingly with the gloom often enveloping them. Leem suddenly understood that Marcos was more than he first appeared — a kindred soul covered by shackles.

Living along the Mediterranean coast, Marcos had been a fisherman in Alexandria leading a modest existence. He was one of the Christian descendants of the ancient Egyptians who was a Copt that had remained steadfast to their beliefs and customs through centuries of invasion and change. Marcos had learnt to read and write in several languages as a young lad, abilities that would have been invaluable to him as a slave taken to Constantinople.

Leem had warmed to Marcos right away because of his peaceful manner and brilliance. Though he was a slave, Marcos had earned a particular position in Leem's house not from slavery but by his knowledge and the peaceful, consistent presence he provided to Leem's life. Leem showed a unique level of compassion, granting him liberties unheard of for others in his position. Yet, Marcos rarely asked for anything; he was content with the small pleasures Leem provided. Marcos would make Leem a cup of herbal tea every evening, a little act of kindness that had developed into a shared ritual of peaceful companionship whereby words were superfluous and the link between them strengthened.

Leem leaned on the balcony railing, the cool stone rooted him in the present as his mind drifted back to the dream that had haunted him for years. Not even Marcos knew about it; he had never mentioned it to anybody. It was his secret—a riddle he had yet to solve, appearing to get more complicated every night.

First light of morning started to slink across the horizon, softly lighting Constantinople. Leem sighed; the dream remaining shadow-like in his hands. He looked to Marcos, who was now sitting up calmly observing the morning.

Leem wondered aloud, "If the sea holds the answers we seek."

Marcos grinned but said nothing; his ideas were as deep and unbroken as the rivers below.

Though Leem knew Marcos had seen in his life—probably more than he would have ever seen—there was simplicity about him that he yearned for.

Envy for the placid knowledge that appeared to come so naturally to Leem drove not for Marcos' history but rather for something else. Leem's own ideas, on the other hand, were sometimes a jumble of doubt, a reality that just heightened his need for clarity.

Byzantine calendar dictates that Leem was born on June 22, 6683, under the rule of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos.

Leem was born amid a great celebration. Michael and Theodora, members of one of Constantinople's most esteemed families, had only one son. His father had served as a diplomat for the Emperor, negotiating treaties and alliances that maintained the Empire's security. Leem was raised by his devout mother, who nurtured hopes that he would one day follow in his father's distinguished footsteps.

Leem's looks captured his honorable background. Among his colleagues, he stood out for his elegant attitude and height and slenderness. His black hair, trimmed short in the Roman manner, accentuated a face with intelligence and beauty. His blue eyes appeared to contain a universe of ideas and feelings he seldom expressed with others.

The family's wealth allowed them to lead opulent lives, attended by both slaves bound by obligations and hired helpers who catered to their every need. Their home was a microcosm of the Empire itself, a convergence of languages and cultures, each person playing a role in the intricate dance of daily life. Leem had grown up with this variety, picking Greek and Latin from the many teachers and servants who had been through their house.

Yet, Leem frequently felt uncomfortable in the environment he was surrounded by despite his affluent background. His soul was restless and he yearned for something greater than his present life. With its eerie light and angels, the recurrent dream appeared to represent this need, a call to something beyond the mundane world, something he could not yet understand.

He recalled a day from his childhood, standing on the same balcony, gazing at the distant horizon. Even then, he sensed the world presented more than what he had been trained to anticipate.

Leem and Marcos stayed on the balcony, both engrossed in their thoughts as the sun rose higher into the sky. With its great cathedrals, busy marketplaces, and soaring walls, the City of Constantinople started to come alive with morning noises. But in that moment, it was only the two of them, poised on the brink of a voyage neither of which could yet see, but both sensed was unavoidable. At the edge of a new day.

Leem glanced at Marcos, wondering what hopes and memories he carried with him from a past so different from his own, and what stories were concealed beneath his cool façade. Leem himself had an unusual calm as they stood there watching the city come to life, as though the light from his dream had momentarily touched him in the real world.

Chapter 2: The City

Rising like a guardian, Constantinople, the City of Cities, bore the marks of time and conquest. To those who resided inside its great walls, it was not only Constantinople but also Πόλις (Polis)—the City. No other name was necessary. For centuries, this metropolis had been the heart of an empire that stretched across continents, the nerve center of a civilization that proudly called itself Ῥωμανία (Romania)—the Roman Empire. Its people were not named Greeks, as later centuries would mistakenly label them, but Ῥωμαῖοι (Rhomaioi)—Romans, or more simply, Christians. Derived from the City's ancient past as a little Greek colony, the term Byzantium was adopted far later by French historians in the 16th century. They used it to set the Eastern Roman Empire apart from its Western equivalent, which had long collapsed to barbarian invasions. But in the 12th century, to those who walked its streets and sailed its harbors, the City was the living continuation of Rome itself, and its Empire was the last vestige of a world once ruled by emperors whose names echoed through history.

Constantinople was a concept, a picture of human civilization at its zenith, not only a city. The City was a wonder of engineering and architecture, where the grandeur of Rome was preserved and reinterpreted, meeting the medieval rather than the ancient world. Built by Emperor Theodosius II in the fifth century, Emperor Theodosius II's walls were fabled—triple-layered defenses that had enveloped the City in a protective embrace and resisted many invasions. These walls, with their enormous towers and gates serving as continual reminder of the City's strength, were evidence of the Empire's resiliency.

Every City gate told its own story—some spoke of pride, others of defeat. The Gate of St. Romanos, now bustling with traders, visitors, and pilgrims, was a passageway where news, products, and stories flowed in from across the known world. Near the imperial palace, the Blachernae walls bore the marks of past sieges; their stones silently attested to the City's

relentless spirit. Constantinople had endured—strong and unbroken —through emperors crowned and ousted, armies vanquished and triumphant, and all of it these walls had witnessed. Inside these fortifications, Constantinople was a maze of tall cathedrals, great forums, and busy marketplaces. The architectural crown of the City was the Hagia Sophia, whose enormous dome seemed to hover mysteriously above the nave, an unparalleled technical accomplishment. Mosaics depicting themes of Christian splendor, reminding all who entered of the heavenly favor bestowed upon the Empire, shimmered on her walls in the light.

The golden iconostasis, the frescoes of saints, and the relics of martyrs—all combined to create an atmosphere that was at once awe-inspiring and deeply spiritual.

In Leem's time, the Empire was vast, though no longer the sprawling behemoth it had once been. As the Empire was known, the borders of Romania stretched from the rugged mountains of the Caucasus in the East to the rolling plains of Hungary in the West, and from the southern shores of Italy to the deserts of North Africa. From the Seljuk Turks marching in from Anatolia, from the Normans who had established kingdoms in southern Italy, and from the Crusader states owing their allegiance to the Pope in Rome rather than the Emperor in Constantinople, the Empire was constantly under threat even as it held dominion over these territories.

The City was a microcosm of this Empire, a melting pot where the marketplaces and streets let one hear Latin, Greek, Slavic, and Arabic. While traders from the East arrived with silks, spices, and exotic items from distances as far away as India and China, merchants from Venice and Genoa landed their ships at the Golden Horn bringing with them the wealth of the West. Constantinople was a commercial metropolis, a nexus of trade between East and West where fortunes were earned and lost, as well as where the pulse of the Empire could be felt in every transaction.

The throbbing core of this trade was Constantinople's enormous marketplace, sometimes known as the Forum of Constantine. Here, traders from all throughout the empire and beyond assembled to offer their goods. The noises of bartering in several languages, the aroma of spices from far-off countries, and the vivid colors of silks and fabrics seen under the strong sun permeated the air. The Forum was a venue of trade—of products, ideas, and civilizations, not only a place of business. Leem may discover everything from the best Eastern rugs to the most recent philosophical treatises written by Athens academics here.

But Constantinople was a city of paradoxes beyond the trade and beauty. It was a location where the medieval present coexisted with the ancient past, where Christian shrines and relics stood beside pagan sculptures from Roman glory days, still gracing the public squares. The statues of gods long forgotten, their features worn by time, were a silent testament to the City's pagan roots. They stood as relics of a bygone era, now overshadowed by the towering crosses and icons that dominated the Cityscape. It was a city where the imperial court, with all its grandeur, existed side by side with the slums that housed the poor and the displaced. It was a city of great wealth, deep poverty, piety and decadence, stability, and constant change.

For Leem, Constantinople was the center of the cosmos where fate and history collided rather than just a place of residence. Standing on his balcony with a view of the Golden Horn, the City opened out in all its splendor—a live, breathing monument to the Empire that claimed to be Rome. Like the City, the future promised opportunities, risks, and uncertainty. Yet, the City persevered, as always, and so too will those who called its borders home.

Leem had spent several hours meandering through Constantinople's streets and alleyways, each turn exposing another aspect of the City's multifarious nature. He had strolled across Constantine's Forum, where the Emperor's monument formerly stood and the golden halo

reflected the sun's beams. Just the pedestal remained now, a sobering reminder of time passing. He had marveled at the Roman technical wonder known as Valens' aqueduct, which still fed the City with water. And he had prayed at the Church of the Holy Apostles, where the graves of emperors lay, their souls resting under the vigilant eyes of saints shown in mosaics.

One of Leem's favourite venues, the Hippodrome, represented the City's passion of spectacle and rivalry. Here, throngs of onlookers watched charioteers sprint for triumph. Long after the races were over, Leem could still hear the thrashing hooves, the shout of the audience, and the crash of wheels. The obelisk of Theodosius, brought from Egypt, stood in the center of the Hippodrome, a reminder of the City's ancient connections and its unbroken lineage back to the time of the Pharaohs.

Despite its grandeur, Leem was acutely aware of the City's underbelly, the darker side that lurked just beyond the marble facades. The slums' narrow, meandering pathways were a labyrinth of poverty where the screams of the hungry and the stench of unashed bodies permeated the air. Living in filthy conditions, the residents were crammed into crumbling buildings teetering dangerously over the streets. Leem had strolled these neighborhoods with Marcos, who revealed to him the harsh reality of life for the less privileged people. In these slums, Leem glimpsed the real face of the City—not the glossy marble of the palaces, but the muck and despair of people merely trying to survive. The contrasts within the City mirrored the contrasts within Leem himself. He was the son of a noble family, raised in luxury and privilege, yet he felt a kinship with the City's poor and downtrodden. He had often wondered why he was so drawn to the suffering of others, why their pain seemed to echo within him. Maybe the same power attracted him to the light in his dreams—a need for something better than the existence he had been born into.

Leem sensed the pulse of Constantinople in every stride as he meandered over the busy marketplaces. The marketplaces were a cacophony of sounds and smells, a place where merchants from across the Empire hawked their wares, from silks to spices, and from gold to grain. Leem enjoyed wandering through the stalls, listening to the merchants' cries, haggling over prices, and observing the endless flow of humanity that passed through the marketplace every day.

The more Leem studied, the more his perspective on Constantinople shifted. The City was no longer just a place of marble and stone, of riches and power; it was a living entity, a complicated web of life and tales, of aspirations and dreams, of pain and atonement. Leem began to understand that his fate was intertwined with the City's; his own existence was merely one thread in this huge tapestry.

Leem stood once again on his balcony as the sun sank behind Constantinople, casting long shadows across the rooftops and transforming the Golden Horn's waters into a sea of gold. For a moment, he felt a sense of calm as the City below was softly illuminated in evening glory. Though the light from his dreams continued to torment him, as he gazed out over the City, he began to realize it was something to be welcomed.

Constantinople was a city of contrasts—of brightness and darkness, of richness and poverty, of might and frailty. And Leem would discover his actual route among these opposites. The City was a furnace, where his actual nature would be exposed and where his character would be tried. Leem understood he was not alone even though the road ahead would be tough and full with hazards. His friend, his guide, the City would provide the solutions he was looking for as long as he followed its direction.

The narrative then starts at ἡ Πόλις, in the heart of Ῥωμανία, in a city that would remain a lighthouse of civilization for millennia to come having witnessed empires rise and fall. For Leem, Constantinople was more than simply a city; it was a living, breathing entity where the past and the present, the material and the spiritual, the known and the unknown, all met in a dance as complex and beautiful as the mosaics that covered her churches. Leem would discover his calling, his destiny, and maybe the solution to the question that had tormented him since his first dream-time vision. This City.

Leem felt peace come over him as the stars started to glitter over Constantinople. He knew the City would endure whatever the future contained as it always had, and that he, too, would endure being propelled onward by the same power that had guided the City over millennia of victory and suffering. Living in the City was his challenge, his haven, and his home; he knew he would never be alone as long as he resided inside its boundaries.

Though Leem believed that being in the City brought him closer to discovering the truth buried deep inside the heart of Constantinople—a city that had seen it all—the light in his dreams could remain a mystery.

Chapter 3: The Stirring Shadows

"What's wrong with you?" The voice of Ioannes sliced through Leem's muddle of ideas. Lost was Leem in the veil of sleep deprivation; he had not seen Ioannes walking toward him in the school courtyard. Concerned about Leem's weary, drawn countenance, Ioannes wrinkled his brow at the obvious tiredness of his companion.

"Nothing, I didn't sleep well... bad sleep," Leem said, trying to hide the tiredness that had followed him everywhere.

"Your friend, you sleep too seldom too frequently. You might want to see a doctor. You want not to get sick," Ioannes said, his voice tinged with real concern.

Leem attempted a friendly grin. "No, Ioannes, nothing is wrong here."

Manuel joined them at just that, his typical light and carefree stride. "Hi buddies, hello. Our first lesson is what?" he said, his laid-back attitude strikingly at odds with the weight of the topic. Manuel was well-known for his lack of intellectual curiosity; he would rather concentrate on following in his family's military line than on scholastic interests.

"Philosophy," Ioannes said with a sigh, his voice subdued like he had reacted to Manuel many times before.

"And what's wrong with you, Leem?" As they strolled along the school corridor, Manuel asked, his voice laced with inquiry.

"Nothing, I just didn't get enough sleep," Leem said, this time more softly, the annoyance in his voice hardly quelled.

Manuel laughed at his own joke, his humor wasted on everyone but himself, "Maybe a philosophy lesson will put you to sleep."

Ioannes shook his head, disgusted with Manuel's effort at lightheartedness, while Leem only gave a feeble smile in answer.

Leem, Ioannes, and Manuel settled into their normal seats next to one another as the students streamed into the classroom. With large, arched windows allowing sunshine to flood the hallways and create elaborate patterns on the polished marble flooring, the school building was a great mirror of Constantinople itself. The classroom was large, rows of carefully placed

hardwood desks shining under the sunshine coming in from the windows. Maps and tapestries covering the walls highlighted the great distance of the Empire and the wisdom of past thinkers. Stefanos, their instructor, arrived in the classroom with a controlled stride and attracted instant attention. He resembled the old thinkers seen in the City's sculptures with his long beard and sharp eyes that appeared to reach the very souls of his pupils. He emanated authority and wisdom, the type of boy who had devoted his life to the quest of knowledge and the molding of young brains.

Stefanos started his lecture today with "The Topic of Today," his voice calm and crisp. "Is The Idea of the Soul in Aristotle." He summed up Aristotle's view that the soul is connected with the body but immaterial and the essence of existence. He said, "The soul is where movement and life originate, guiding the organism as its organizing principle."

A voice tinged with contempt cut off the instruction from the rear of the hall.

"How could some pagan know and talk about the soul? We have the Bible and our religion that give answers to everything we need." It was Niketas, as zealous as ever, his tone dripping with contempt for anything that deviated from the Empire's official doctrine.

Niketas was a young boy with an austere look; his small face and piercing eyes seemed to be perpetually full of judgment. Often criticizing individuals who ventured to investigate ideas outside the rigid boundaries of the Church's doctrine, he wore his religious fervour like a badge of pride.

Leem, who had been silently attempting to keep out of the daily conversations, felt his tolerance run short before Teacher Stefanos could reply. The obvious stupidity and intolerance of Niketas eventually drove his frazzled nerves to the breaking point.

"Even Muslims name Aristotle 'the First Teacher,'" says one, "yet you doubt his understanding of the soul since he was a pagan?"

Leem's voice, strained with suppressed frustration, cut through the tension in the room. His words carried the weight of a young man grappling with inherited dogma and the conflicting ideas he encountered.

Niketas looked disgusted as he turned toward Leem. "How can you bring up the viewpoints of Muslims here, our enemies?!"

Leem let his reply flow naturally. "Niketas, you have a narrow-minded approach. Even my slave Marcos is more receptive than you are."

Niketas's face twisted with wrath. Leaping from his seat, prepared to physically attack Leem, he said, "How dare you!"

But Manuel sprang up and firmly, unyieldingly blocked Niketas' path before he could get to him. Manuel continued, his voice calm but with a warning Niketas knew better than to challenge: "Touch him, and you'll regret it."

Niketas stopped, frustrated and bit his lip. Though his eyes blazed with wrath, he controlled himself as he knew that aggravating the matter would only make his condition worse. Rather, he scorned Leem. "If you're such a defender of pagans, maybe you're a pagan yourself," he said, his voice laden with poison.

Stefanos interfered at last, having been watching the conversation with increasing worry.

"Everyone back to your seats, immediately," he said, his voice allowing no argument. Niketas hesitated but at last obliged; his eyes stayed full of unresolved wrath.

"Niketas," Stefanos said, sounding somewhat sarcastic, "you definitely would not have been allowed to participate in discussions in the pagan school of Aristotle."

A slight grin passed through the classroom at Stefanos's remark, but Niketas, feeling increasingly isolated, chose to remain silent.

"The soul distinguishes and cognizes existence," Stefanos resumed, "but it often errs. To achieve reliable knowledge about the soul in all respects is, of course, the most challenging task."

The lecture carried on with a quiet tension hanging in the air, the preceding conflict leaving traces on every student there. Sophia smiled broadly as the class came to a conclusion and the pupils started to line out into the corridor. Her beauty is gentle and natural. Her bright green eyes, as striking as malachite, reflect her intelligence and deep sense of thought. With soft waves of dark brown hair falling down her back and fair skin that seems to glow, she has an almost otherworldly presence.

"It was brave of you to voice Muslims' view on Aristotle, but I really like how you contrasted Niketas with your slave. He won't pardon you for that," she remarked, amused glistening in her eyes.

"But it's true," Leem said, grinning. "Would I be deemed a martyr for the truth if Niketas kills me for it?"

"If you ask Niketas and his church friends, it's unlikely," Sophia said, grimacing.

Manuel said gently, "I hope Niketas and his relatives don't decide who goes to heaven and who goes to hell."

Everyone laughed as they made their way to the school garden. Ioannes, standing taller than the others, with a lean, athletic frame that hints at his love for physical activity, and his perpetually tousled wavy brown hair that complements his carefree and spontaneous nature, found two long stones that served as benches under the shade of the trees. The stones were carved into straight, perfectly smooth, and polished rectangular columns. The trees, common in the gardens of Constantinople, provided a cool, shaded spot for conversation.

Ioannes and Manuel took one stone, Leem and Sophia sat on another. With detailed inspection of Leem, Sophia inquired, "What's wrong with you?"

Half-smirking, Leem said, "I thought a miracle would happen, and you wouldn't ask." "I simply neglected enough sleep."

Sophia gently yet, forcefully demanded, "Why?"

Leem hadn't expected such a direct question. A whirlwind of thoughts spun in his head—whether to tell them about the dream or make something up.

"I had a dream," Leem said, and it felt to him as if he had already said too much.

His friends looked at him for a few seconds, waiting for him to continue. Ioannes broke the silence. "Congratulations... Should we celebrate with a sacrifice? Manuel, please ask Niketas if that would be considered pagan," Ioannes teased.

"Please stop, Ioannes. It's obvious that Leem is worried about something," Sophia said, not appreciating Ioannes sarcasm. "What was the dream about?"

Leem seemed not to hear Ioannes words. The fragments of the dream, the sensations, wouldn't leave him. All this time, he stared at a spot on the grass as if only his body was present with his friends.

"It's all complicated..." Leem forced himself to say. He was relieved that Sophia was interested, feeling concerned for him. It made it easier to speak and unload some of the burden from his soul, but he didn't know where to start or if he could even describe it.

Sophia looked at him with genuine interest, Ioannes with mild skepticism, and Manuel, who had been searching the trees for something edible, finally focused on Leem.

"This dream has been repeating itself for many years. Every time, it's the same thing," Leem spoke in a consistent voice, growing more confident.

The mistrust of Ioannes's expression changed to curiosity, and even Manuel stopped fruit-searching to pay close attention. Leem inhaled and started talking about the dream when—

"Leem, could you please come over?" The friendly but stern voice of Master Theophanes, the school principal in his late 50's, with graying hair that was once dark and a long, pointed beard streaked with silver, interrupted them from across the garden. His deep-set brown eyes seem to scrutinize everything, and his gaze often conveys wisdom mixed with stern authority. His frame is slim but tall, and he carries himself with the authority of a scholar who has seen many students come and go. He wears ornate robes of dark colors, befitting his position of authority.

Leem stood up, and with a mix of curiosity and apprehension, approached Theophanes, who was standing at the school's entrance. They walked together along the corridor toward the principal's office.

Watching them vanish inside was Sophia, Ioannes, and Manuel.

"I hope he won't get into trouble because of the incident with Niketas," Sophia added, her voice tight with anxiety.

Ioannes said, "Me too."

"Do you suppose the principle would beat Leem?" Manuel inquired, half-joking.

"This is not a funny joke, Manuel," Ioannes said.

Actually, Manuel continued, rather annoyed, "I wasn't joking this time."

Exasperated looks passed between Ioannes and Sophia, then they turned back toward the school door.

Books on theology, philosophy, and history lined the room of authority that housed the principal's office. The middle was dominated by a big desk with well-arranged documents and a single quill sitting in an inkpot. Theophanes motioned Leem to settle in.

"Leem, do you know why I called you?" As they both settled in, Theophanes started to see Leem staring at the principal.

"Yes, Master Theophanes, it's because of the incident with Niketas," Leem said, his voice sounding both tired and apathetic.

Theophanes went on, "Niketas's father came and complained," his voice calm. "He stated I let heretical talks to be given here and cannot run the institution in the Empire's best interests. His son being compared to a slave infuriated him. I felt he might explode in wrath. He even threatened to have me taken out or to close this institution."

"I'm sorry, Master Theophanes." Leem started apologizing, "not intending to cause you trouble, but Theophanes cut him off."

"Teacher Stefanos told me everything," the principal said, his voice firm but not unkind. "And I want to say that I fully support the way you defended Aristotle. However, saying that your slave is smarter than Niketas was a bit much."

Leem said softly, almost to himself, "But it's true."

"What was that?" Theophanes leaned slightly forward and inquired.

"Nothing, Master Theophanes," Leem rapidly rectified himself, understanding Theophanes was protecting him despite the problem he had made and tried not to repeat similar actions.

"Good," theophanes nodded. "Leem, you are a knowledgeable and competent learner. Having you here at this school makes me happy. You do, however, seem exhausted. Retrace your steps home and relax. You can copy your friends' notes for the upcoming classes."

"We appreciate you, Master Theophanes." Leem stood up and again apologized for any trouble. Good day to you.

Leem left the institution and began the trek home, his mind occupied with figuring out how to arrive without his mother noticing. If she saw him home early, she would surely have questions. Silently, he slipped into his room, undressed, and collapsed onto the bed. Almost instantly, his eyes closed, exhaustion pulling him into a deep sleep.

Chapter 4: The Dream and Its Aftermath

-Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις Θεῷ,
Καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη,
Ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκία.
Αἰνοῦμεν σε, Εὐλογοῦμεν σε,
Προσκυνοῦμεν σε, Δοξολογοῦμεν σε,
Εὐχαριστοῦμέν σοι, Διὰ τὴν μεγάλην σου δόξαν.
Κύριε Βασιλεῦ, Ἐπουράνιε, Θεέ, Πατὴρ Παντοκράτωρ...

(- Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward mankind. We thank You for Your immense grandeur; we praise and bless You; we worship You. Lord King, Divine God, Perfect Father...)

Once more, surrounded in the familiar but ever more vivid vision—a celestial choir of angels around a brilliant light pulsating with an unearthly brilliance. Though nearly suffocating, the dense air around them was more alive than anything Leem had ever known in the waking world. This time the hymn echoed from inside him, as though it had always been a part of his inner existence, buried deep into the caverns of his soul, not a far-off echo.

Now the dream was clearer and more powerful. From the surrounding gloom, Leem observed millions of brilliant lines—threads of light—stretching out and converging at the core of the radiant brightness. He had never seen these threads before. Though everything remained the same, it felt different, more forceful, as if the dream itself was evolving to reveal new layers of significance. A little hope surged inside him, that this time the dream may finish differently and he might at last grab the light. That hope was soon destroyed, though, as he felt himself being dragged down once more—away from the glorious light—into the chilly, engulfing blackness. Leem woke shocked, his heart thumping in his chest, the traces of the dream still clinging to his awareness like cobwebs. But unlike the pale, terrible light of the moon that had often met him after similar visions, the warm, golden beam of the morning sun suddenly illuminated his room. He had slept more than usual, and although the dream had left him with a residual sensation of anxiety, he felt an unusual surge of strength running through him as though the dream had given some latent power.

Though he pushed it aside, focusing instead on the fact that he still had time before school, the unsettling feeling of plunging into darkness still lingered, like a shadow at the back of his mind. There was an unexplainable urge within him— a drive to act, to do something.

"Marcos!" Leem yelled, his voice consistent despite the tumult within of him. His devoted servant showed up at the door practically right away, his warmth and consistency unbroken. "Yes, my lord," Marcos said, his voice soft and his eyes reflected a faint, knowing smile. "Quickly prepare my bath," Leem said. "I want to leave early today; take a walk before school; let your mind wander to the dream, replaying the hymn that had echoed so clearly in your mind." "Right away, my lord," Marcos said, his typically kind and efficient manner. Leem considered the words he had heard in the dream as he sank into the warm water. They connected with something deep inside him, almost familiar. Unable to keep the experience to himself, Leem told Marcos the dream, particularly including the song that had rung so powerfully in his thoughts. After some contemplation, Marcos responded, "Doxastion," his tone suggesting a little astonishment. "DoxASTion?" Leem repeated, not knowing the name. "Yes, it is a hymn of praise to God, often sung during evening liturgies," Marcos said, his voice vibrantly respectful. Leem scowled, searching for wherever he could have heard the hymn previously. Then it occurred to him—one evening he had gone by a church and heard the hymn being sung from within. That must have originated in his mind and shown up in his dream. Leem was ready to leave the home when his mother, Theodora, showed up in the corridor, her presence always demanding. Her voice stopped him in his tracks—stiff yet, calm. Her piercing and inquiring look inquired, "Where are you going so early?" "I... I wanted to take a quick walk before school," Leem said, his customary confidence wavering under her examination. "I hope you won't encounter Niketas during your walk," she added, her voice tinged with icy sarcasm and a trace of criticism, as though she knew more than she was giving on. Leem glanced at her perplexingly, not sure what to say. "Your father has an important guest invited to dinner today," she said, her voice controlled and strong. "I want you to be at the table, home on schedule, and without a black eye greeting our guest. From your father, you will have to pick the skill of diplomacy, which calls for time and commitment."

Leem suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. He wanted to protest, to express his lack of interest in such matters, but he already knew what harsh words would follow if he did, so he held his tongue.

"And who is the guest?" Leem asked instead, his interest aroused even in spite of himself.

"Ibrahim al-Nizari, the lately appointed ambassador to Constantinople."

Leem was startled. Though he anticipated someone from inside the Empire—perhaps a high-ranking official or a nobleman—this foreign name caught his attention.

Leem said sarcastically, "Very well, I'll be home on time... and without a black eye." But he departed right away before his mother could react.

Leem strolled down the City's main street, known as *Mese Odos*—the Middle Street, often simply called *Mese* by the locals. *Mese* began near Hagia Sophia at the *Milion*, the point from which all distances in the Empire were measured. The street stretched westward, passing through the Forums of Constantine, Theodosius, and Arcadius, and led to the Golden Gate at the Theodosian Walls. The morning light bathed the City in a warm glow, and life bustled along the street, with residents and visitors filling the space with movement and sound.

As Leem walked, his thoughts still occupied by the dream and his mother's words, he noticed a beggar sitting on the side of the road, dressed in tattered clothes. The man smiled at him—a smile that was not at all like the desperate, hollow smiles of other beggars. There was something different about this man, something that caught Leem's attention. The beggar's eyes held a confidence, a light that seemed to emanate from within him, rather than from any external source. Leem, trusting his instincts, slowed his pace and tossed a coin in front of the beggar. At that moment, the beggar's voice, deep and resonant, filled the air:

Merging with you is the purpose of existence.

And do not turn from your path, come.

I, Shirvani, am merged with you, but you are the soul; I am the body.

I have no other concerns: I thirst to see you.

Merging with God is the wine of sacred faith,

I drink this wine at a drunken feast.

Worlds live in me, all eighteen thousand,

And God is hidden in me, who is hidden in everything.

I am the secret of all the wonders hidden in this world,

I am the sun that always burns over you during the day.

These words, spoken loudly and confidently, pierced Leem's soul. He stood frozen, staring at the beggar who had recited the poem in flawless Greek, without any trace of a foreign accent. The beggar looked back at Leem with a knowing smile, as if he had been waiting for this moment.

"Who are you?" Leem asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I am Nasim, Nasim Shirvani."

"Shirvani?" Leem repeated, trying to recall where he had heard the name before. In the East, surnames often indicated the bearer's place of origin. "Where are your lands?"

"Shirvan lies near the Caucasus Mountains, by the Caspian Sea. Shirvan means 'the land of lions,' my friend."

"What brought you to Constantinople from such a distant land, Nasim?"

"For my words, my poems, I am persecuted as an unbeliever and a heretic," Nasim replied, his voice calm, almost indifferent to the attraction of earth of his words.

"Why did you look at me and smile?" Leem asked, suddenly curious and a bit unnerved.

"I saw in a dream a young man who resembled you," Nasim answered simply, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"And what was in the dream?" Leem asked, his voice tinged with anticipation, his heart beating faster.

"I saw a young man dressed in purple. A sword, a bowl of water, and scattered coins lay on the table before him. He held a shepherd's staff in one hand and a parchment in the other. He told me that he could not read what was written on the parchment, and this tormented him because it was in a language he could not understand. I could read what was written when I turned over his sheet."

"And what does it say?" Leem questioned, swallowing hard and clearly excited.

"I don't remember," Nasim said, flashing a lighthearted smile.

Leem seemed uncomfortable at this answer, as though the earth under him had changed. He turned and left fast, attempting to ignore the meeting without additional word. But he heard Nasim yell behind him, "The purple clothes marks the young man's aristocratic birth. The sword and water on the table suggest that he will become master in both instinctive knowledge and willpower. The staff in his hand symbolizes his intellect and logic. The unreadable parchment

speaks of his inability to interpret some event or dream. And the fact that I could read it means I can help him understand. If this isn't about you, then forget my words as you would a dream. If so, though, come to the Golden Gate tomorrow at the same hour, friend."

Leem halted, still turned away from Nasim, and then hurried forward, his head flurry of ideas and feelings. *This dude, who was it? Was this a chance occurrence, or something more?*

"Nasim Shirvani?" Ioannes asked loudly and skeptically in the schoolyard later that day.

"Shh," Leem glanced around to ensure no one else had heard. For some reason, he felt awkward telling his friends about the dream and his encounter with the mysterious stranger.

"And tomorrow are you headed to the Golden Gate?" Sophia inquired warily, her voice tinged with worry.

Leem said sincerely, his voice weighed with doubt: "I... I don't know."

"Do you want me to accompany you?" Manuel questioned, his voice austere, as though Leem were getting ready for a battle or a violent meeting.

Leem spoke fast, startled at the proposal, "No, no, please."

"Perhaps the clever Venetians or the Turks are laying a trap to kidnap you and demand payment." Manuel persisted, his mind flying.

Leem said softly, trusting his inner voice to tell him there was no threat, "No, definitely not."

"How are you aware?" Manuel pushed, his eyes narrowing with mistrust.

"I simply know... I know..." Leem kept repeating, his ideas still whirl as he sought to organize the activities of the day.

Chapter 5: The Dinner with Ibrahim Nizari

As evening deepened, shadows stretched long, mirroring Leem's mounting discomfort. The words of the man he had encountered earlier lingered in his mind like a ghostly fog—illusory but relentless. Telling himself that maybe the stranger had sent the same cryptic message to many, he sought to dismiss them, knowing he was the one stupid enough to give them any thought. Exhausted after the activities of the day, Leem started berating himself. How had he even considered visiting the Golden Gate the next day and following the mysterious advice? Years of intense study had sharpened his mind, which had now turned against him and mercilessly examined his previous desire to believe.

Deeply ingrained, nevertheless, this self-criticism was resisted. A small voice in his mind murmured that this meeting had more significance than simple chance. Was this the precise conflict the ancient thinkers of Hellas had considered—that constant fight between heart and mind? Leem had always been taught that reason must prevail, that the mind is the guiding force of humanity. To surrender to the heart's desires would be a sign of weakness, a betrayal of rational thought.

Leem quickened his pace, hoping to outrun the doubts swirling in his mind. Unlike the tumult in his head, the familiar streets of the City blurred around him, each step bringing him closer to home but not closer to clarity. When he eventually got home, his mother was already waiting, her stern, measured voice left little space for reply when she issued her orders.

"I have ordered Marcos to prepare your bath. Fresh clothes are in your room. The guest is already seated. Be at the table before next church bells, and do not forget to apologize for your tardiness." Her voice was crisp, carrying the weight of expectation, brooking no argument.

Leem hurried to his room, bathed quickly, and dressed in the clothes laid out for him. He applied a few drops of perfumed oil, noting with some surprise that his mother had not mentioned it. With a final glance in the mirror, he descended to the dining room, his thoughts still a maelstrom of doubt and curiosity.

He was already talking with their friend, Ibrahim Nizari, as his father spoke. Leem's father was the perfect example of an experienced mediator. He always acted polite and knowledgeable. His speech and every move he made showed that he was at ease, which is a sign of someone who knows how to persuade others.

Ibrahim Nizari sat opposite Leem's father, and as Leem entered, the guest turned to look at him. For a brief moment, Leem felt a shiver of unease under the weight of Ibrahim's gaze. His eyes were deep, almost black, and seemed to penetrate beyond the surface, seeing through to the very core of Leem's being. But then, as if sensing Leem's discomfort, Ibrahim's face softened into a warm smile, and he greeted Leem with a hand over his heart.

"This is my son, Leem," his father said, his tone imbued with pride and expectation. "He is finishing his schooling and will soon begin his studies in diplomacy at the Imperial University. He will keep me working for the benefit of our Empire and for His Majesty the Emperor." Leem grinned graciously, but the reference to a future he did not completely want sank his heart. The stirrings of his spirit did not fit the possibility of a life committed to diplomacy.

His father said, "And this, is our esteemed guest from the Nizari State."

The Nizari State... Leem's head whirled with awareness. The assassins were hashish users before completing their lethal tasks. In Constantinople, the Nizaris were already well-known; their notoriety for deliberate killings had extended among Romanians and Franks both.

As the slaves brought forth food and drink, Leem's mother stood on the periphery, overseeing every detail with the same seriousness she applied to all matters of state. She was a woman who took her husband's imperial responsibilities as seriously, if not more so, than he did.

Leem's ideas were cut off by Ibrahim's deep, forceful voice. "Our castle, Alamut, a haven of knowledge and a shelter for people searching truth outside the grasp of earthly rulers, is in the shadow of the mighty Elborz Mountains. Our strongholds are quiet sentinels with walls as relentless as our will."

Ibrahim's remarks enthralled Leem as they vividly described the Nizari fortifications standing strong inside huge empires. Yet, he could not suppress the urge to ask, "What is the basis of your faith?"

"Our Imam, a beacon of heavenly light in this dark world," Ibrahim said, his smile widening.

"Descended from the Prophet, His words are the echo of a greater truth, a truth we, the faithful, try to understand and live by, not just advise."

The weight of Ibrahim's conviction really hit Leem. His interest aroused, he kept on. "You raised up your strongholds within empires with strong armies. Without being detected as Nizari-Ismaelis, how do your people go between them or even reach Constantinople? Driven by a silent need to grasp the invisible forces sculpting the world—a yearning long simmering behind his disciplined exterior—the question stayed in his head.

"You have a keen intellect, my boy," Ibrahim responded warmly. "When facing persecution or danger, the doctrine of taqiyya, which allows us to conceal our faith, aids us. This practice has enabled the Nizaris to survive in hostile environments, blending in when necessary while preserving our beliefs in secret. For there is wisdom in silence and power in subtlety, we are like water beneath the ice—invisible but always there."

The pragmatic soundness of such a philosophy really pleased Leem. "This is very wise," he added earnestly, his appreciation of the Nizaris mounting.

Sensing Leem's enthusiasm, Ibrahim carried on with fervent intensity. "Our responsibility is to search Haqq—the Truth. We search for the essence buried from the inexperienced sight behind the curtain of words. Every letter and every symbol for us has a secret meaning—a road to the holy. The planet you view is only a shadow, a mirror of a larger, unfathomable reality.

Leem found himself pulled more into Ibrahim's life as he absorbed every word. Then, though, he had an idea. Having known of the Nizari assassins, he paused before saying, "Kyr. Ambassador... you speak of seeking truth and the divine, but what about... the assassin?"

Though Ibrahim took the question in stride and grinned as though he had been expecting it, his father's disapproving gaze did not go missed.

"Our road is not one of senseless violence but of surgical precision," Ibrahim said, his voice as consistent as a surgeon's hand. "The sword has to cut the root of corruption, thereby extracting the core of justice from the anarchy. Our behavior is only shadows thrown by the furnace of truth.

Still fascinated, Leem questioned with fresh bravery, "Forgive my ignorance, but who leads your people? Or with so many fortifications, are there several leaders?"

As Ibrahim spoke about his cherished leader, his eyes glittered. "Our brilliant commander, Hassan-i Sabbah, was not your typical man. Scholar, master strategist, and lighthouse of religion, he turned the desolate outpost of Alamut into a haven of reason and spirituality. Under his direction, our people created a knowledge empire in which religion and intellect serve as our shield and weapon.

He stopped then said, "Our leader Rashid ad-Din Sinan, whom the Franks nickname 'Old Man of the Mountain,' rules with a mind as keen as a blade in the far-off territories of Syria. From his fortification at Masyaf, he creates a web of power throughout the Levant."

"You've heard of Masyaf, haven't you?" he asked, his voice steady, almost casual.

Leem nodded, intrigued. "Of course, the fortress of the Nizaris. The Assassins."

Ibrahim smiled faintly, leaning back in his chair. "Yes. But have you heard of the night Salahaddin's power was broken without a single drop of blood?"

Leem shook his head. He knew of Salahaddin's sieges, but this story seemed different. Ibrahim's voice lowered, and the courtyard's noise seemed to fade into the background as he began to speak.

"It was a night much like this one," Ibrahim started, his words slow and deliberate, "Salahaddin, the mighty Sultan, had laid siege to Masyaf, thinking that sheer force would bring our walls down. His army camped beneath the fortress, ready to crush us. But they underestimated more than just stone walls that night."

Leem leaned forward, captivated, as Ibrahim's deep voice filled the space between them.

"They say that one evening, as Salahaddin sat in his grand tent with his most trusted bodyguards—men who had sworn their lives to protect him—something happened that he could never have predicted. An old messenger, cloaked in black, approached his camp. He claimed to have come from Masyaf, sent by none other than Rashid ad-Din Sinan, the 'Old Man of the

Mountain." Ibrahim's eyes twinkled at the mention of Sinan's name, a legend in his own right.

"Salahaddin, curious but cautious, ordered the man to be searched for weapons. None were found, and so the Sultan allowed him inside his tent. But what happened next... well, it's said that even the bravest of men would have trembled."

Ibrahim paused for effect, watching Leem's expression with interest.

"The messenger entered," Ibrahim continued, "and revealed himself to be none other than Rashid ad-Din Sinan himself. Imagine the audacity—to walk into the lion's den, unarmed, and face one of the greatest rulers of the time."

Leem's brows furrowed. "What did Sinan say?"

Ibrahim's voice deepened. "'Salahaddin,' he said, 'you speak of power over life and death. You threaten the lives of those within Masyaf. But tell me, Sultan—do you even have power over your own life?'"

Leem sat still, the question hanging in the air between them.

"Salahaddin was furious," Ibrahim said, a slight smile playing on his lips. "He stood, enraged, and ordered his bodyguards—his most loyal men—to kill Sinan where he stood. Twice he gave the command, but the bodyguards didn't move."

Leem's eyes widened. "They refused?"

Ibrahim's smile widened. "No. They didn't refuse—they simply couldn't. They stood there, motionless, as if bound by an invisible force. And then, with a single gesture from Sinan, the bodyguards moved."

Leem leaned in, barely breathing. "What happened?"

"They drew their daggers," Ibrahim said softly, "but not to strike Sinan. No—they turned those blades on Salahaddin himself, pressing the cold steel against their master's neck."

Leem's pulse quickened. "But... how?"

Ibrahim's voice was calm, but there was a glint in his eyes. "That, my young friend, is the power of the Nizaris. The power of fear, of influence, of control. Even the most loyal of men can be turned with the right methods—methods only Sinan knew."

Leem sat back, stunned. "What did Salahaddin do?"

Ibrahim chuckled, his voice softening. "What could he do? Sinan simply looked at him and said, 'You see, Sultan, you have no power over your own life. How then, can you decide the fate of those in Masyaf?'"

For a moment, Leem imagined the Sultan, once so powerful, standing frozen in fear before this quiet, unarmed man.

"Sinan left the tent that night," Ibrahim continued, "and the two bodyguards followed him, as if in a trance. Salahaddin didn't shout for help, didn't call his army—he was too shocked, too afraid. By dawn, he had ordered his entire camp to be packed up, and they left Masyaf without a fight."

The courtyard seemed eerily quiet as Ibrahim finished the tale. Leem felt a chill run down his spine. The story was more than just a tale of power—it was a reminder of the unseen forces at work in the world, forces that even the greatest of rulers couldn't always control. Ibrahim smiled gently and picked up his cup, taking another sip of wine. "You see, Leem, the power of the Nizaris isn't always in the sword. Sometimes, it's in the mind. A well-placed fear, a perfectly timed gesture... and the mightiest armies can be brought to their knees."

Leem nodded slowly, the weight of the story settling over him like the night itself. The walls of Constantinople seemed a little less secure in that moment, and the power of the mind, of influence, felt far greater than he had ever imagined.

Ibrahim's remarks created clear pictures in Leem's head. These people were characters of enormous knowledge and influence, not just leaders. Still absorbed, Leem asked, "We have all heard about the exploits of the Assassins, but it's impossible to determine what is genuine. Could you mention any of these occasions?"

Ibrahim related the murder of Grand Vizier Nizam al-Mulk, a man whose power had altered nations. "One of us cut his rule with a single blade. Presenting himself as a modest dervish, our brother went to the Vizier with the calm of a man delivering a word from God. The Empire was permanently altered when the blade struck true in that moment of confidence."

Then he mentioned Conrad of Montferrat, King of Jerusalem, who was killed by two Nizari operatives masquerading as monks. "Their daggers flashed in sync, and the monarch collapsed, his aspirations quenched forever. This was the application of divine justice executed with the accuracy of a surgeon, not the deed of simple assassin."

Finally, he spoke about Raymond II of Tripoli, whose death was quick and silent. "Our brothers struck with blazing speed as he rode across the streets. The Franks spoke about us in subdued tones as they only know that the next strike will be unavoidable and exact, not when or where."

Though his voice softened, Ibrahim's statements had great conviction. "Understand this, my friend, we do not kill for profit or enjoyment. Only when justice demands it, when tyrants and oppressors are tipping the scales of the world, do we draw our blades. Every life we take is a prayer—a plea for balance in a world teetering on the edge of chaos. Still, Leem, every decision has an outcome. The facts you search might cost more than you are ready to pay."

Leem silently absorbed what Ibrahim had spoken. This evening had let him see a level of spirituality and purpose he had never considered, well beyond the stories of assassins.

Sensing the effect his comments had on Leem, Ibrahim carried on. "In our view, the earth is a shadow of a higher reality painted on a canvas that the divine uses unseen hands. We stroll in both realms, our spirits in the sky underfoot. Death, as you understand it, is only a passage—a necessary step in the ceaseless dance of creation and destruction. This helps us to discover our serenity, our justification, and our mission."

The Nizari point of view enthralled Leem, who said, "Your assassin do not fear death, but why?" "Why are we, the Nizari, unafraid of death?" Ibrahim said in a deep voice. "To understand this, one must delve deeply into the core of our faith, where the journey of the soul spans much beyond this life, and life and death are not so precisely defined.

"In our customs, we welcome a truth gently stated over the years that smart people from all walks of life acknowledge. Using the sophisticated language of ancient Greek, you would call it metempsychosis—the soul's trip from one life to another. From where we stand, this is the "Cycle of Return," sometimes known as "Dawr al-Adwar." We hold that the soul, a divine spark, travels on a journey of growth, discovery, and improvement across many incarnations rather than merely disappears with the body.

"For us, death isn't the end but a shift—a move from one way of being to another. This insight gives us a deep peace and bravery that those who believe life ends can't understand. The dread of death decreases once we see it as a passage to a different stage of life, a journey back to our origin. This explains why our warriors, our brave ones, who follow our leader's directives, do so fearlessly, aware that by fulfilling a higher calling, they're on a journey that benefits their soul, no matter the earthly risks. They're ready to sacrifice their lives, knowing a more significant existence exists beyond this physical world waiting for them."

Ibrahim's comments were greeted with silence—not out of apathy, but rather from the weight of the facts he presented. Leem felt as though he had been given a glimpse into a world few could ever truly comprehend.

Leem clasped Ibrahim's hand firmly as the evening came to a conclusion and stated, "To be honest, I was first full of biases about the Nizarites and regarded them entirely against the background of the assassin. But today, I once more see how damaging preconceptions and early assessments are."

Speaking with an honest voice, Ibrahim grinned broadly. "My friend, you have amazing future. May peace follow your house and you."

With those comments, Ibrahim left Leem to consider things.

Leem dreamed of the evening's talk as he lay in bed that night. Ibrahim's comments had planted something deep inside him that would not be readily dismissed. Leem understood that this meeting had affected him in ways he was only beginning to realize when sleep finally took him.