

Scenes from the Life of Mathias Almoossino

A novel

Isidoros Zourgos

The novel “Scenes from the Life of Mathias Almoossino” is the story of a man, who could be the first European man. It is also the open palm of a hand that touches the map of Europe in the 17th century; every finger of the narrative is directed toward a different cardinal point: Newton’s England, England of the Royal Society, religiously tolerant Amsterdam of the merchants, icy Petersburg of the reformer Tsar, Venice of the carnival masks. The wrist of the hand touches the Ottoman wilderness, Salonica, Istanbul and Candia, the boundaries of Europe.

Mathias Almoossino, a closeted Jew living in Basel, Switzerland, crosses at a tender age the *Respublica Cristiana*, a Christian territory. Orphaned in a Dickensian manner, imprisoned and oppressed by the theocracy of his time, he builds his adulthood through picaresque adventures changing masks of religious and racial identity, torn inside almost to the end by the great stakes launched during the century: the birth of scientific discourse and the explosion of rational thought against the nostalgia of miracles and all messianic expectations. Spinoza and the conflicts of intolerance, Descartes and Sabbatai Zevi, the universe through the eyes of the new science that looks like a clockwork machine. It is an era of awaiting the end of the world in 1666 AD.

The places of journeys are changing rapidly in a rich scenography: a crossing of the Alps, the Jewish and Greek communities of Venice, Sabbatai Zevi’s Salonica, Padova with its famous university, Zante, the fall of Crete, Constantinople’s Wonderland, London of the groundbreaking science, landmarks of Germany, the Romanian Orthodox counties, the territory of Peter the Great in the steppes and overflowing rivers and finally Mount Athos, the holy mountain in Northern Greece that marks the beginning and the end of this mesmerizing journey...

The central hero of the book, Mathias Almoossino, a charismatic child, lucky enough to survive in a hostile and dangerous environment, became a gifted man, who found in the wonders of medicine his own self. More than a famous doctor, Mathias is the *homo universalis* who straddles countries, languages, cultures, wandering through people and ideas.

Scenes from the Life of Mathias Almoossino is a literary tour de force by one of the most beloved and acclaimed Greek authors, a novel on the origins of Europe itself, on the origins of our own identity. The history of medicine, the nostalgia for God,

the clash of religions are the frames of this novel, that looks inside the soul of what we call humanity in the western world.

“The humanity manifesto”

Kathimerini Newspaper

The best novel of 2014? This novel is a journey in Renaissance Europe and Greece under the Ottoman Empire, a journey through space and time. In its 774 pages, the reader feels like living himself in this continent, that feels so close, although we are in year 1656. The moving and mesmerizing adventures and intertwined stories will keep readers awake...Every single scene is a short film itself...

Katerina Tsemperlidou, 5-5-2014

A great novel, a book that, through the history of medicine, but also of philosophy and natural sciences of the 17th century, recreates the first memories of Europe itself.

Efimerida ton Syntakton newspaper

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More than 30.000 copies sold to date

Isidoros Zourgos (born in Salonica in 1964) is one of contemporary Greece's most successful and praised writers. He has written seven novels, among them *In the Shade of the Butterfly* (2005), that sold over 70.000 copies, *The Nightingale Pie* (2008), with more than 40.000 copies sold and *The Way We Were* (2011, National Book Center/Readers Award, more than 35.000 copies sold to date).

Artes moriendi⁷

Basil, Swiss Confederation, October 1656

There is something on the docks, an expectant look in people's eyes, an impatience in the wide brimmed hats from which tassels of rain hang before dropping down to the shiny planks... There is something in the finely winnowed rain, a shine in the wet shoe brooches, a scent of mildew in the white lace that fits smugly against the throat.

The wooden docks on the Rhine were next to the bridge that joined the river's two banks. That autumn morning, they were full of people waiting for the riverboat, the one coming in from the east. Tobias Almossino was one among the many darkly clad men, waiting in the drizzle. The boat's bell had tolled some time ago and it wouldn't be long now before its ropes were secured onto the mooring posts of the dock. Tobias Almossino, who was only called that within the four walls of his house at night, gripped Matthias' hand and pointed out the boat's shape that could be made out against the muted sheen of the rain.

On rare occasions, there is on the fogged docks a joy amidst the white smoke and steam, a luminous shawl of prayer that hides the invisible presence of Yahweh. It is possible then to feel His eyes, which decree all human affairs, put aside His omnipotence and even in the lack of sunshine, smile languorously and rejoice. It is a time when Divine Law has turned all the pages and is closing the covers. The title

of the book of life is now joy, not eternal in the least, but ephemeral and moist, like the rain. That morning, Matthias, who loved books, was leafing through the most joyous chapter in the book of God.

"Will you recognize your uncle, Matthias?"

"But I've never seen him."

"You have seen me, it's much the same, we're twins. But you've grown heavy..." he whispered into the boy's ear. "You must abide more strictly by the prescriptions of the Law."

Matthias raised his hand and pointed to the passengers of the small riverboat, standing and waiting impatiently to come on shore.

"Which one is uncle?" he asked as he desperately searched the faces of those disembarking.

7 Artes moriendi: the arts of dying, the death arts.

Suddenly he felt his father's hands nervously squeezing him around the waist as he was being quickly put down. In front of Matthias' eyes, the world once again became thick felt coat and high boots; the view of the river's waters was now obscured.

"That's just how he's always been, thoughtless!" the low voice was heard of Tobias Almoosino.

"What is it father?" the boy asked.

"You be quiet. That's just how he's always been..."

He felt himself dragged by his father's hand, pulling him away from the crowd. Tobias' goatee barely hid the redness, born of his anger, that had spread across his face.

"Afterwards we'll say that he had it coming... That's what we will say."

Tobias Almoosino, capable milliner and wig maker, honorable member of his guild in the city of Basil, where the large river turns at the bend of the Rhine, kept up his monologue, his breath steaming against the fine rain. Matthias clutched his father's hand and, instinctively, without understanding why, felt compassion towards him. His black eyes scanned uncertainly the banks of the river and further away, where the city's water mills and cottage industries stood.

In a while, a stocky man came up to them carrying a chest on his shoulder. He seemed powerful; a whole chest – loaded with what, one wondered – and he wasn't straining. He seemed so unencumbered that you'd think this Jew who is approaching must have filled it only with air and prayers. Matthias perused his strange clothing. He was not wearing trousers but a grey robe that reached to his ankles, weird looking shoes and the strangest cap. His face though... yes, the face was the same as his father's. Except. He now stood in front of uncle Isaak like a stone statue.

"Tobias, it's been years.... It's a good thing I have a mirror to see myself in, otherwise I would have forgotten your face."

"I can't believe you came dressed like this?" The redness still hadn't left his face. "I didn't expect such thoughtlessness from you. This isn't Amsterdam, Isaac. Nowhere on this continent is it Amsterdam, you mustn't forget that."

Isaac Almoosino leaned forward and kissed the stone effigy of his brother. As he squeezed his shoulders, he had time to whisper in his ear:

"My dear Tobias, making a mountain of a molehill as always. Nowhere is it Amsterdam, but the glory of Israel is everywhere."

"Follow us!" his brother curtly ordered him.

They did not take the main thoroughfare but veered into the side streets. Matthias was walking between the two men in silence. His uncle's hand at some point, ruffled his hair. He turned and gazed up at him. In his cap and strange attire, he looked as if he had walked out of the pages of the holy books they read at night, especially on Fridays before the Sabbath, when Esther and Tobias Almoosino shuttered their windows, wore clean white clothes, changed the sheets on the beds, set out the table with a white tablecloth and around the oil lamp of the Sabbath, read the holy strictures of the Law.

Esther had an admittedly large belly and in the last month, that had affected her walking inside the house. They were expecting somewhere between Christmas and New Year's. Circulating outside the house was out of the question; the slippery cobblestones of the town had in the last few days become dangerous. Tobias still remembered the trials of Matthias' birth. It seemed like Esther, daughter of Israel, with her long black hair, had difficult pregnancies, as if she gave forth gold from inside her, every time. Besides, winter looked like it was going to be heavy. It'd been quite a few days now that the wild geese had assembled their flocks and flown South. The fishermen of the Rhine, who knew all the quirks of the river's carp and watched daily for their color from the grassy riverbanks, were already speaking of the first snow, which wouldn't be long coming. "Pile up wood!" they would say every so often, as they sat in the town's low-roofed taverns, under the smoked crossbeams.

That same night of the docks, Tobias Crais, a well known hatter and wig maker in the town, had opened one of the carved chests of the house and brought out washed shirts and trousers, diligently folded by Esther's blessed hands.

"Try these on and you can wear whatever fits", he said to his twin brother, giving him yet another disparaging look.

He was no longer stony, like he'd been at the dock, but the redness of the earlier upset still lingered.

"Don't you even consider going out of the house tomorrow morning wearing what you arrived in."

Isaac had been bent over Matthias for some time.

"Isn't your back sore yet?" asked Esther who waddled around, every so often supporting the small of her back with her hands. "He's ten already, you know, Isaac."

"It's just that I haven't had enough of him yet", Isaac answered and again tightly hugged his nephew to himself. "Last time he was just a baby, have you forgotten?"

“You left for the other end of the world”, Esther remarked in a tone of complaint.

“My beloved family members, Amsterdam is the centre, not the end of the world.”

“ Whether it’s in the end or in the middle, the boat trip there takes three days – if you can get on it and if you can afford it.”

“I’ll wait for a few days for my brother to get over his anger and then I have much to say and, especially, to propose...”

“Speak now”, Tobias intoned.

Isaac bit into a bright red apple he had been toying with for some time; there were more like it in a platter on the table.

“How is business, my dear brother?”

Under his whitening goatee, a sly smile nestled. Nothing about this man indicated he’d spent almost two days squeezed on a crowded deck with only a makeshift awning to keep at bay the rain and fog. He had started out from Zurich, where the great bank of Amsterdam had sent him on business at the beginning of summer. The riverboat, following the current of the Rhine, always traveled westward. If he didn’t get off at Basil, he would reach Strasburg within a day and from there, it took another five days to reach his home, at Amsterdam’s Jewish quarter.

“ As I have told you in my letters”, Tobias answered as he placed by his side two shirts and an overcoat.

“You know, in Amsterdam, the rich heads are increasing manifold, like the grains of sand in the sea. Merchants, ship owners, middlemen, stockholders, financiers, bankers, and fleas make no distinction but suck on whatever blood they come across, be it a rich man or a poor. Therefore, my brother, we’re talking about thousands of rich, shaved heads. And what do rich shaved heads buy, Matthias?”

Uncle Isaac had turned his head, still with that understated smile, in expectation of the answer from his nephew.

“Wigs”, Matthias answered.

“Just so”, uncle Isaac retorted. “And just think, Matthias, that the port of Amsterdam is filled with boats as tall as the belfry of St. George’s cathedral here, that go sailing around Africa to Cape Agulhas, that go as far as the East Indies, at the far end of the world... And if you can imagine the ships’ officers, the admirals of the fleet, men of marble, well turned out...”

“What is your point, Isaac?” Esther asked him.

“Fleas, my dear, unlike myself, don’t mind the sea. All the upstanding naval officers of the East Indies Company, in order to be able to sleep at night and not scratch constantly, have their heads shaved, therefore...”

“Wigs”, Matthias piped up.

“Many wigs, my boy. Not to mention the lawyers, the judges... Come to Amsterdam to make your fortune and be able to live freely in accordance with the spirit of our forefathers. We are very proud, Matthias, of our synagogue. I could talk to you about it for days.”

Tobias Almoosino had taken a chair next to the fruit platter and was listening in silence.

“But talk now of our tribe, Matthias”, Isaac said.

Matthias turned and looked at his father pointedly. He had been trained from a very young age, to keep his mouth shut about anything that had to do with their tribe and their religion. Tobias nodded wordlessly, giving him permission to speak.

“So, then, what are we doing here in Basil?”

“We came about a century ago... as exiles. We are converted Christians but deep down, Jews. We keep the faith of our forefathers in secret; we are Marranos⁸”.

“From where?”

“From the great peninsula behind the tall mountains.”

“What is the name of those mountains?”

“The Pyrenees.”

“Our old homeland?”

“Spain.”

“Who drove us away?”

“The pope’s monks and the Christian princes.”

“Your mother’s grandfather, where did he come from?”

⁸ Marranos: the name given in the 15th century to Jews who were christianized but – under the shadow of the Holy Inquisition – continued secretly to follow the injunctions of the Jewish religion. When given the opportunity in centers of the Diaspora such as Amsterdam or Salonika, the Marranos reverted to Judaism. In Marranism, the Christian and Jewish religion are intermixed and present in varying degrees.

“From the land of the Franks in the days of the great slaughter. He came with the Huguenots, who are the same as the Christians here in Basil. The pope’s people also...”

“That’s enough!” Tobias Almosino said. “Matthias, my brother, is no ordinary child. I didn’t mean to bring it up on the first night, but since the subject came around... Don’t ask him things like that, he knows the answer to all such questions and then some.... He knows the affairs of our tribe as if he were a little rabbi, and he keeps his mouth shut. He knows of other things too, the kind that belong to science and which we freely discuss in the marketplace. He has been able to read and count since he was three years old. He has memorized whole pages out of the Tanach⁹ and the Mishna¹⁰, he is familiar with the Bible of the Christians. I have written to you about it in my letters... The boys in our town, Isaac, set apart by their intelligence are my son and the youngest boy of the Bernoullis.¹¹ You do remember the Bernoulli family, no?”

Isaac shook his head.

“It won’t be long before we see him as a magistrate, here at our university, in Basil. Are you listening, Isaac? The only reason for me to get rich, as you say, is so I can afford to buy him books. But, pay mind, the path of faith and of the Holy Law, interest me a great deal more. But that’s enough for tonight. I don’t want him to be listening to that all the time, and start getting airs.”

“Matthias, time for bed”, Esther said and got up from the table.

The child stood up holding his nightgown and a box of sweets which his uncle had brought, bid everyone goodnight and, in his bare feet, started lightly off towards the back room.

“I’ve made your bed together”, Esther said and kissed him

He gently caressed her belly, like he did every night before going to sleep, and withdrew to the back room.

“He is a gentle boy, Isaac, gentle and smart. May God keep him”, said the mother, looking upward.

“What news from the synagogue?” asked Tobias.

“All things in good time”, Isaac answered and got up from the table.

“Shall I light the fire?” Esther asked.

⁹ Tanach: the Jewish bible.

¹⁰ Mishna : text of the Jewish literature which expounds traditions in sixty three essays.

¹¹ Bernoulli: well known family of Basil with many mathematicians and physical scientists.

“If my brother isn’t sleepy, it would be most welcome”, he answered while he searched in the small carved chest he had brought with him.

“Don’t you bend down, let me do it”, Tobias offered and bent himself double in front of the fireplace.

When after a few minutes, he came back to the table, he saw several colored boxes laid out.

“What are those?”

“Gifts, brother, gifts.”

Esther had opened a tin box and was smelling some seeds.

“Do you like them?” Isaac asked.

“What are they? Did you bring them for us to plant?”

Isaac burst out laughing.

“It’s coffee, Esther, the latest fashion in Amsterdam. It grows in warm countries, far away, and it requires a lot of sun. Shops have been opening in the last year, where you can have it served. I heard the same thing is happening in Paris and London. I will show how to make it tomorrow, the whole house will be filled with its fragrance.”

“What are the rest of the boxes?”

“Tea, cocoa... this small one has nutmeg in it. Think of it as gold. They say it’s the only medicine against the plague. The city where I live, is the large front door to the world. You can’t imagine the cargos that come off the ships every day.”

Every time Isaac Almoosino mentioned the large port, his face lit up. He seemed as if he’d left the city behind only a short while ago, flying like a big wild goose, as if he hadn’t been through Zurich at all, as if he hadn’t taken a two day trip in the freezing cold, on the narrow riverboat. His tongue had loosened; maybe it was the succor of the fire. He told them about the docks of Amsterdam, the large port of Holland, the largest province out of the seven of this new country called United Provinces. Its fleet, he said, numbered over four thousand vessels which is why the nickname for the Dutch the world over, was “the sea charioteers”. He spoke at length about its canals and windmills, the imposing municipal building where the Wisselbank itself, the famous exchange bank, had its quarters, about the currency changing shops, the building of the naval administration and the stock exchange, about Dam square and VOC, the Dutch East India company...

“I take it you are happy, then, brother.”

Isaac stopped talking and stretched his hand over the fruit platter. His fingers stroked the apples in it.

“Let's say free for the time being, given that the United Provinces, in addition to freedom of commerce, also leave people be. The hand of the Vatican and of young king Ludvich does not quite reach us.”

“You did not answer me, brother, are you happy? I am your elder by one hour and when I ask you something, I expect you to look me in the eye.”

“Zelda is dead five years now. Every afternoon I sit and watch the ships on the docks. When they asked for a commissioner to go to Zurich for a few months, I jumped at the offer so I could get away, so I could escape my memories. I was left in life alone, Tobias. God turned his care elsewhere.”

Esther and Tobias stole a glance between them.

“Why did you not get married again?” Esther ventured.

“You should have!” his brother asserted emphatically. “It is not your fault that your wife could not conceive. Keeping our race going is a penultimate duty.”

“You sound like the teachers at the synagogue”, he answered frowning.

“You have to, Isaac. It is an imperative instruction of our holy texts. The Law always knows better than us.”

“It is not easy to forget”. His voice now sounded cracked, as if all the hours of the journey suddenly caught up and hung heavily upon him. “It's as if every place is wearing a high boot and is kicking me. Over there, I can't forget about this place, and here, it's the other way round.”

It was a playful walk and it couldn't have been otherwise, with Matthias turned ten not long ago. Isaac was dressed in a vest, jacket and trousers of thin wool, all in the same color, all chosen by his brother. As he held his nephew's hand, he found himself obliged to return the greeting of several passers by, who mistook him for Tobias. One of them had even paused to ask him if the wig he'd ordered for his lawyer son was ready.

Matthias was enjoying immensely his uncle's being mistaken for his father and it was plain to see that, at times, he could barely keep from laughing out loud. Every so often they would stop at a fountain with water from the Rhine spouting to the

surface and comment on the sculptures erected by their fellow citizens' sense of beatitude: Neptunes, Tritons, dolphins, mermaids, angels, prophets, fruit, fish and, naturally, quite often, the Basilisk, the mythic creature, half rooster and half snake which, rumor had it, lived in the woods outside the city. Most of the fountains were wooden, painted in bright colors. Isaac asked questions about everything and anything and Matthias answered: what ancient god was depicted in that fountain there, what ancient prophet... But he was also asking after other things, his school, his classes, the baby they were expecting in a short while to fill their home with its crying.

They went by Tobias millinery, too, and infiltrated his workshop. They found him bent over a table, surrounded by models of naked heads and wig stands. The winter light came in through the skylight and there was the smell of glue in the air. Just then, he was mixing colors trying to get the right hue for an order. He looked morose. They quickly left him and continued their walk through the city. They crossed the neighborhood of Zankt Alban, of Birsik and they stood around for a bit admiring the churches of St. Leonard and St. Peter. It had been years since Isaac had left and many of the images had started to fade in his mind.

The rain had already quit from the night before, but had left in its stead a sturdy cloud cover, visibly overhanging the city at dawn, on both sides of the river. The houses of Basil were two-storied, three at most, with small attics whose tiny windows reminded Matthias, so he confessed to his uncle, of a weasel's snout. Their walls were well painted with green casings that matched the dark grey of the cobblestone streets.

They went past the Froben publishing house and stood before its miniscule window. Eventually they went inside for Isaac to inquire after the well known atlas of human anatomy by Vesalius and during the time he spent with the typesetter's assistant, Matthias examined a lushly colored parrot who leant his body first on one side, then on the other, shifting his weight from leg to leg.

"Matthias", Isaac asked after a while, as they were crossing the old bridge that led across the river, "do you go to school every day?"

"No", his nephew answered, as, frowning with concentration, he watched a large flock of birds gliding above the water.

"How come?"

"Because the teacher is old and he's sick on most days."

"Do you have friends there?"

“No, uncle Isaac. From the first days, the teacher placed me with the older kids. Everyone in class is a head taller and in the schoolyard, I get picked on, on the slightest pretext. This is your class, he said to me when I complained. Everyone is looking at me sideways, uncle, and I prefer to just keep my mouth shut.”

Isaac pulled him to the side because a coach was speeding along the rough road. It often happened that some aristocrat was in a hurry. The clanking and thudding of the horseshoes deafened them. As soon as everything around them was quiet again, Isaac bent close to his nephew’s face.

“Matthias, I think that you are entitled to a teacher at home.”

Matthias stared at him with his large, dark eyes, an Almoosino trademark.

“Have you asked dad?”

“Do you want it?”

“I do because I don’t like school and I get bored sitting around dad’s work for hours on end.”

Isaac stood back up and straightened his jacket by pulling it down. It would take him a while to get used to the new clothes; the Jewish robes of Amsterdam were infinitely more comfortable.

“Do you know what a gulden is, nephew?”

“A coin.”

“Prepare to earn one all of your own, if you manage to answer my questions correctly.”

After the bridge, they crossed the city walls by going through the open gate and headed for the municipal square. That side of the bridge was made of stone, in contrast to the other one, which led to the poor neighborhoods across the river, and was made of wood. For centuries, the city’s noblemen and merchants had wisely opted for the security of the stone to vouchsafe the safety of their step as it suspended over the water.

They were now walking along the main thoroughfare, the Eisengasse.

The street through which they passed, was teeming with life: horses with necks held high like elms, ladies followed my handmaids with lace caps holding baskets, citizens with leather hats, some respectable office bearers with wigs...

“I love numbers, Matthias, and if you were older, I might have taken the liberty of saying to you that mathematics is the key to the universe.”

The kid suddenly signaled to him to bend down. They were at one of the city's busiest spots, and there was a confidence he wanted to whisper in his ear.

Isaac did as he was bid, full of curiosity.

"That's just what it says in the Zochar¹² as well as in the Cabala¹³, the world's tree of knowledge. We talk about those things at night, in the candlelight", he whispered.

"That isn't quite what I meant", Isaac commented and cleared his throat. "I was just referring to the digits on merchants' ledgers: addition, subtraction, calculating the mean and suchlike..."

Matthias shrugged indifferently.

"So, let us start with humble mathematics..."

Uncle Isaac's monologue lasted for about as long as it took them to cross the main street and the municipal square after that, until they entered the open air bazaar. He might have been more concise, had he been wearing more comfortable clothes but, as it was, he was clearly prattling. During the time he was stirring with his spoon of a tongue geometrical shapes and acts of division, they were passing among smoked fish hanging on hooks, benches loaded with apples and live geese in cages. At some point he noticed a yawn escape his nephew and threw him a chastising glance.

"When are you going to start asking?" Matthias inquired, hurriedly swallowing half his yawn.

Isaac Almossino started out with questions on simple calculations of arithmetic from memory, moved on to more complex ones and then to riddles and paradoxes. Matthias was answering without hesitation, as he walked with his head lowered, staring at his shoes.

"You've set your mind to getting that coin off me, have you?"

"You know best, uncle", came the modest reply.

On their way past the church of St. Martin, Isaac pulled him by the sleeve into a vacant lot where the ground was wet. He gripped his walking stick in his right hand and started drawing shapes.

"Two gulden if you solve this problem for me."

¹² Zochar: book of the collected oral traditions of Judaic esoteric teaching.

¹³ Cabala: system of knowledge of Judaic esoteric teaching wherein it is considered that a different truth lies behind the sacred texts, which is accessible only by the initiates.

By noon, Matthias had earned more money than his downcast father amid the hairs of the shadowy workshop.

When the big clock sounded exactly twelve, they walked into a tavern two narrow streets behind the university. Outside the brick-red door hung a wooden sign with the picture of a rooster next to golden eggs.

“Time for some rest, nephew”, Isaac commented as they took a table under the tall window.

The floor was made of wide, unpolished beams, stained here and there with blackish fat. The air smelled of wet ash from the fireplace and sour beer. The only other customers were a group of coachmen at a bench across the room.

“Classes mustn’t be over yet at the university. At this time, I expected to see students gathered here, and magistrates. You will take a soup, won’t you?”

Matthias had woven his fingers together on the table and was observing Isaac’s every move.

“How come you are so well versed in numbers, uncle?”

Isaac smiled.

“Five years at a shipping company and another as many at the stock exchange. Do you know what it is, the stock exchange?”

Matthias shook his head.

“Nor what stocks and bonds are...?”

Again the head shake.

“Still, you know the Cabala, the Zochar, the teacher Luria¹⁴, I imagine...”
“I know about those”, he answered calmly and unwove his fingers.

Isaac Almosino sighed and looked out the window while Mathias kept up his silent observation.

“You are clever” he told him at last, “a very clever boy at a time when the world is changing. I’m sure your father doesn’t know about this last bit.”

Matthias listened.

“I am afraid that, in the end, neither does the whole of our race know about it, not in Amsterdam or anywhere else”.

¹⁴ Isaac Luria (1534-1572): a commentator of the Zochar and an alleged visionary.

In the next few weeks, it became apparent that the nights grew and spread like stains of ink, if, that is, one imagined days and daylight as a white sheet. The more the days shrank, the more their hours by the fireplace increased. Tobias' workshop closed early in the afternoon, the birds and beasts in the Grand Vald forest nestled down with the first dimming of daylight and on the banks of the Rhine, the mill owners lit the oil lamps at the watermills. Passing by their door, one could smell the burning whale fat, as one could hear the stolid flow of the river's water in the darkness.

One of those nights, the first snow fell and it would have gone unnoticed if the clouds had not momentarily parted and a few errant rays of the full moon hadn't illuminated it. Behind the windowpane, Matthias made it out hovering above the cobblestones of the street to which the window faced. That occasion might have been a white ceremony of silence if only the shouting of his father and uncle wasn't audible from the living room. All evenings at their home nowadays ended with shouting, when the talk grew louder and burst out, as combustible as the trunks of the old elms in the fireplace.

"Snow!" he called out and ran in his white nightgown into the living room.

Just then, Esther was standing above the steam of a pot, while uncle Isaac sat with his elbows on the table, running his fingers through his hair in exasperation. Tobias Almoosino was standing and shaking threateningly a tome of the holy scriptures of their tribe.

"Snow", the boy said again, in a smaller voice this time and halted.

His father threw him a glance but it was as if he wasn't really seeing him; his mind was preoccupied with something else.

"You will allow me to have my doubts about who the sinners finally are and who aren't, as this is God's business and not yours", uncle Isaac said pointing his finger at his brother. "This narrow mindedness of yours is what drove me away from here years ago. If you had listened to me then, you wouldn't be stuck here gluing hairs day and night."

"The Amsterdam merchants have polluted you with their riches and you've all but forgotten your soul's salvation" Tobias answered angrily, then turned to his son. "You, off to bed!", he ordered.

Esther took the spoon out of the pot and wiping hastily her hands on her apron, went to the child. Uncle Isaac gave Matthias a look as if to say, "It's for your sake I get into these fights every night". But the snow had completely seduced his nephew,

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Isaac relaxed his grip on his brother's throat. His breath was coming in rasps.

“Please, both of you, don't!”

Matthias, his voice now cracking, was struggling to keep his tears at bay.

“Dad, let go of him”.

Isaac did and sat back on the mat. Tobias raised himself to a sitting position, holding the loosened headscarf in his hands. For a while, nobody spoke and only their breathing was audible.

“Uncle, tomorrow we'll go where you said. All three of us. Over at the courtyard of the synagogue.”

Isaac gave him a puzzled look.

“Dad, I want us to go. All three of us...”

Words were no longer needed. Tomorrow, eve of the Shavuot, the Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, they would all be there in clean clothes, at the courtyard of the Shalom synagogue, to see the Messiah up close.

As they sat unspeaking, outside the Talmud Tora guesthouse, with the night growing still, a melody was heard from across the street. A woman was singing a lullaby to her baby in Castilian. It was a melancholy tune. If the Almoosinos could understand the language, they would find out about that faraway homeland that was swallowed up by migration, about the great deeds of Duc d' Amandis and the royal princesses of Lara, about a bygone world, now lost.

Next day at dawn, Isaac and Matthias went down to the commercial strip by the port. They stood outside the warehouses of sior Panayotakis Melissinos where an enormous black Mauritanian was sweeping out front. The man stopped and, leaning on his broomstick, stared at them in puzzlement.

Using a few Venetian words and sign language, Isaac asked him to take them to the back of the store, where the company's accounts were kept along with all the papers and books on naval legislation. The slave brusquely blocked the way and pointed for them to wait outside the door. He was in no mood for taking a flogging just because two strangers were wanting to get inside his master's private business. In vain Isaac attempted to explain that he'd met the day before with sior Panayotakis and that

everything had been arranged, that he and his son were now part of the staff and needed to get inside and get to work.

They stood out in the street and watched the traffic up to the castle gate which led out to the docks. The first fishermen had already gone through the gate and were coming up to the city. Across their shoulders they had a long wooden pole with a basket at either end, out of which stuck the heads and tails of fish.

When Ignatio appeared, the master's adopted boy, also a Greek, he let them come inside as he was apprized of their presence there. After some time, the master himself arrived. Well dressed, portly with a trimmed white beard, he wasn't the kind to pass unobserved.

He was a Greek from the Ionian Isle of Zakynthos but had lived since youth in Venice; his home was there with his wife and daughters.

He took Isaac's shoulder and shook it amicably as he was bent over the ledgers, absorbed in studying them. Next to him, Matthias was collecting loose cargo orders and, after he had pieced them with a needle, threaded them together on a fine piece of twine.

"I've seen others work but you take the cake. I heard you were here, breaking down the door, at dawn."

Isaac scrambled off his stool and bid him good morning with respect.

"This is your son, Isaac?"

He spoke in Venetian with an imperceptible foreign accent.

"What is your name?" he asked the boy.

"Matthias", he answered bowing his head.

"Just plain Matthias?"

"Matthias Almoosino or Crais, sir, if it is your wish..."

"You speak Venetian, I see"

"I believe so, sir. Though I'm only at the beginning."

"It won't be long before you get to the end, young man, your eyes say so. So, then, Isaac, what do you think, will we be able to make heads and tails out of these papers?"

"I don't expect there should be any problems, sir. The person who has kept the accounts up to now hasn't made any grave omissions, as far as I've been able to tell

so far. Still, we need to do some archiving if the job is to be done easily and speedily. If, for instance, you had a cargo a few years back and are now discussing a new one with the same party, it would be sensible to go over the old deal in all its details. It would be a good thing to be able to locate that old piece of paper fast, sir. The way they are piled up at the moment, I doubt if that would be feasible”.

“What are we going to do with the currencies, Isaac? It’s a right headache. Every day we lay hold of the most unlikely currencies and we need to be figuring out the exchange rates in a way, naturally, that won’t be detrimental to the company. Then there is the banks and the exchange houses that are sprouting all over Europe like mushrooms. We need to be able to sense from afar who is good for their word and who isn’t. The insurance rates for the ships... there’s another headache right there. Venice has been at war in Cantia with the sultan for years, and the seas are teeming with pirates. Insurance rates, depending on the season and the flag each ship is flying, waver wildly”.

“Everything will get to be in order, sir, don’t worry”.

“Is this how things were in Amsterdam, too, Isaac?”

“No, sir, the Dutch have everything neat and tidy. Besides, the East Indies Company is there and many large banks.”

“Just what I thought. The same is the case in the English ports, I assume...”

“Yes it is, sir, despite the political unrest”.

Sior Panayiotis withdrew his attention from the papers and walked to the small window that saw into the street. He saw the slave from Mauritania arguing with a loudmouthed man in rags, with a thick beard. The miserable sod pulled a wagon with the intestines from slaughtered animals from which blood and bile dripped, soiling everywhere he passed.

“A different God is in charge here, Isaac, believe me, you’ve only been here a short while. Sometimes I feel that there is no value in creating anything in this place. Something will come out of the blue and tear everything down, an uprising of the Janissaries, an earthquake, an edict by the pasha that’ll stand everything on its head. Constantinople is a long way away and there is no chance of defending your case successfully. But what was it that brought you here?”

“It is a long story.”

“Just how long a story is it, Matthias?”

The master had turned and was facing the corner where Matthias worked, stringing the papers together. He was now observing him with a smile.

“It would take hours, sior Panayotis”, Matthias answered in greek, slowly emphasizing every word.

Sior Panayotis put together three fingers in the right hand and made the sign of the cross.

“By all the Saints of the Greek faith and the Patriarch as well! From now on, young fellow, I want you by my side. Your father here will be proud of you some day. Isaac, you must make him a dragoman. Come along now because there’s work to do, I’ll tell you the rest along the way.”

They went out in the alleyways. The way led Anastasios, the Mauritanian slave who made way for his master, sior Panayotis, who went next in his black velvet, the expensive Flanders lace around his throat, a thick gold chain and his broad-rimmed European hat. Behind him came Isaac and Matthias. At the very first sharp turn of the narrow street they bumped into two of the sultan’s special armed militia, the Janissaries. They locked eyes fiercely with the Mauritanian but sior Panayotis’ golden chain and expensive clothes made them move aside.

“It’s the Bezesteni¹⁸ we’re off to, Anastasios”, he called out to the slave, “pick a way that’ll spare us from stepping on all the shit of the New Jerusalem. Isn’t that how your people call this dump of a city, Isaac?”

“We did hear that, sir, when we were barely new in town”.

Sior Panayotakis sidled up to Isaac and conspiratorially whispered:

“We’re going to the Bezesteni. Under its domes you can see the best fabrics from the East, silks woven out of air. Last night I heard a large caravan has come in; its camels, they said, were past counting. I got my information from inside the Caravanserai, silks from Bursa and fine tapestries, masterful as anything. I know many newly rich in Marseilles and Flanders who would pay anything. Let’s go there to exercise the grand art of the East. Let us go, my friend, and bargain.”

He threw a glance at Matthias who was walking alongside Isaac.

“Auri sacra fames¹⁹, boy”.

“Sed propter hoc²⁰, sir”, Matthias replied modestly.

“Kospeto²¹!”

¹⁸ Bezesteni: the indoors, domed, commercial fabric market of Salonika.

¹⁹ Auri sacra fames: accursed hunger for gold (Virgil, Aeneid 3.57)

²⁰ Sed propter hoc: because of it.

²¹ Kospeto: Very well done!

Sior Panayotakis let out a cry of enthusiasm in the middle of the street. He put his arms out to Matthias and lifted him off the ground. Anastasios turned around and was watching puzzled.

“You keep your eyes on the road ahead!” his master commanded. “If I step on any of the street’s brown flowers because of your carelessness, I’ll have you clean my boots with your tongue.”

He reached and ruffled Matthias’ hair.

“Well, young man, it seems that you and I have some way to go together, mark my words.”

It was the eve of the Shavuot, the Jewish Pentecost. They took care to clean themselves thoroughly before sundown. They took out clean outfits from the satchel and changed their kerchiefs at the last moment, soiled with the droppings of the birds of Salonika.

“What consoles me”, said Isaac to Mathias as he rubbed his sandals with a piece of leather, “is that you can’t see all that much in the light of the torches. Blessed night, how many blemishes you do cover over!”

These were the only words they exchanged. Tobias led the way in silence and they followed. The memory of yesterday’s fight was still raw in his mind. His brother had grabbed him by the throat and Matthias had the gal to address Isaac as ‘dad’ in front of him. But he wasn't like other men, he was devoted and didn’t hold any grudges. His mind was set on heaven and he slept soundly at night because, thanks to him, they would secure some corner of immortality at the time of the Geula, the time of the final Redemption.

The humble homesteads had had their doorways and windows decorated with leaves and branches because of the celebration.

The alleyways of the Chouderia²² twisted and turned and it would be easy for someone to get confused. Tobias, though, walked upright never hesitating for a moment. Soon there were voices and lights which also guided them. Outside the gate of the Shalom synagogue, three brothers stood on reception, holding a torch dipped in resin. Isaac and Matthias held back and let Tobias approach them. They saw him exchange some words with one of the three, then point at them with his head.

“Why did you want to come here tonight” Isaac asked in a whisper.

²² Chouderia: Jewish neighbourhood

“For uncle’s sake, he wanted it so much.”

Tobias walked back to them briskly.

“Is it alright?”

“The grumbled a little about the child, but Joshua insisted that everything was in order. We owe him. We can go in.”

They walked into a spacious courtyard lit by torches. Laid out tables formed a large Π facing the gate of the synagogue. Most of the guests had already arrived and were occupying the places set out for them in advance. Respectable elders with white beards, rabbis, savvy merchants, a few parnassim²³ from the Talmud Tora...

Joshua signaled for them to follow him. He bade them sit in a half dark corner by the gate, on a large woven mat on the flagstones. Here sat servants and escorts since there were elderly noblemen among the guests who would be needing assistance and protection to make their way back to their homes. Isaac felt better for the fact that the places his brother had eventually secured were among the humble; it was a reassurance.

They waited in silence for all the places at the tables to be filled. Suddenly there was a ripple of whispering. A tall man appeared at the gate flanked by two followers. With a decisive tread, he crossed the courtyard under the light of the torches and took the most central seat at the large table, which had been kept vacant. Now his face was much better lit. He was around thirty, dark haired and fair-skinned. His robes were immaculately clean, tailored from expensive fabrics. He looked rather cold.

“Sabetha Sevi!” Tobias whispered. “Matthias you have just lain eyes on the Messiah. That’s how I imagined him, Isaac, would you believe it? That’s just how I’ve seen him in my dreams.”

His brother made no answer. He was silently observing the man with great attention. He was beautiful, there was no doubting that, with a striking arrogance in his every move. For the officials and the wise men of the scriptures to his left and right, he had spared not a single glance. His gaze remained trained on the gate of the synagogue.

The dinner started according to the customs of the ritual. The man seemed to grow relaxed. He ate very little, chewing slowly and he continued not to look to his left or right though everyone was examining him intensely. In the torchlight, Isaac could make out looks of adoration but also ones full of curiosity and suspicion.

“Matthias leaned towards Tobias and whispered in his ear.

²³ Parnassim: members of the council in the Jewish community.

“Uncle, I’m hungry.”

He gave him a look of contempt. Matthias hung his head in embarrassment.

Suddenly, something unexpected happened. With a slow, ritualistic movement, Sabetha climbed onto the table. You’d think even the crickets of the night went silent, even the resin in the torches which was burning noisily a moment ago.

He stood upright and folded his hands on his chest in an attitude of prayer. This lasted only briefly as he then leapt onto the flagstones and walking briskly, entered the synagogue. Those gathered around the table looked at each other but no one dared say anything. A few minutes passed like this, full of awkwardness.

Another wave of whispering was heard suddenly, started by those sitting closer to the door of the synagogue, who had a better view. Sabetha had come out into the courtyard and was standing in front of the tables. In his hand he was holding a ruby studded book of the Law, which he had taken from the holy crypt. He held it in a tight grip and then enfolded it in his arms.

“Play!” he called out to the musicians with the tambourines.

As soon as the sound of the music was heard, he started dancing to it with the holy book against his chest, as if he was holding a person. The crowd watched him stock still until he’d made a full circle around the laid out tables in the yard. Unexpectedly, he again jumped onto the table, sending plates and glasses flying. His voice thundered over the entire courtyard:

“It is done, brothers. My marriage has just taken place with the Torah, the daughter of God.”

“Adonai!”, Isaac murmured. “What blasphemy is this?”

Two or three cries of disapprobation were heard, but they were not enough by far; most of the crowd had broken out in triumphant shouts. Some among them had left the table and were flailing on the flagstones uttering incomprehensible words, scratching their face with their own hands. The furore was growing louder. Outside the synagogue gate, neighbors and passers by had started to gather, who wanted to be allowed in to see what was going on.

“It is Him. He is the One!” Tobias screeched next to them pumping their hands. “He is the Messiah! He is...”

More people in the crowd, in addition to the one that had started swelling inside the courtyard, began to inflict injuries on themselves as if this was a voluptuous act.

The voice of Sabetha Sevi was heard imperative, silencing the mob. His eyes were shining fiercely and his hair was flowing in the breeze. He finally dared to utter it. Nobody would ever have imagined that he'd do it. He started in a loud voice, deliberately, with perfect clarity, to enunciate the divine tetragram.²⁴

"For shame!" was heard from one quarter of the yard by an old rabbi who was crying out in holy indignation.

"Shame! Shame!" other voices were also heard.

Yet others, however, whose numbers were greater, began to cheer the new Messiah. Several were falling to the ground with their bodies contorted, frothing at the mouth.

"It is He! He is the One!" Tobias was standing, ululating with joy.

At the far end of the yard, the shoving had started. Indignant elders and students of Sevi were exchanging insults. Isaac saw that the child's face had gone pale. While the din around them grew in volume and as more and more people were pushing their way into the yard, the boy gripped his father's hand all the harder. Tobias had walked to the front and joined the crowd that surrounded the teacher, kissing his garments.

"Let's go", said Isaac gathering the boy to himself.

They made their way towards the exit where they were pressed from all sides by the crowd besieging the synagogue, wanting to get inside. Isaac elbowed his way through and they managed to get in the street with much pushing and shoving. Outside the synagogue, the throng of people was swelling fast.

"Let's go now!"

"Where to?" Matthias managed to ask.

"To the hostel", he answered as he continued to pull him by the hand through the crowd.

"I'm not sleepy, dad" the boy shouted so he could be heard.

"Neither am I, we are not going there to sleep."

They did, at some point, lose their direction in the alleyways. Thankfully the agitation at the synagogue had kept up the whole neighborhood of the Chouderia. There was light in most windows and it enabled them to find their footing and orient

²⁴ Tetragram: the word made up of four letters, which spell God's name in the Jewish text of the Holy Bible.

themselves. They saw many people on foot carrying lanterns, heading in the direction of the synagogue. The news was spreading like wildfire.

They went into their narrow room at the hostel and started packing their belongings in a hurry.

“Make haste”, he told the boy. “I don’t want Tobias to catch up with us here.”

They threw some dirty underclothes into the sac and a change of clothing for each. They also found three books in the semi dark, threw those in as well and went back out into the street.

An enraged man with his headscarf loose and a boy whose face was marked, holding something in his hands, dissolved into the crypts of the night. That thing was the anatomy atlas of the great Vesalius. As they carried it, the sweaty childish hands were leaving tender fingerprints on the cover.

They escaped the narrow alleyways of the Chouderia and after crossing the main road, they found themselves in even narrower ones. In this city everything was possible. At one moment, Isaac thought they were running inside the track left by a plowshare. After a few minutes of uphill clambering, their breath sounded deafening to their own ears, as if it could raise the living and the dead. He put his hand out and stopped his son in his tracks. If they wanted to pass unobserved, they’d have to proceed soundlessly.

They rested with their backs against a wall and stayed like that for a while, until they had recovered themselves. When the dizziness and panting had subsided, they listened to the dark surrounding them. A night bird was heard overhead and the swishing of a tree growing in the yard behind them, whose branches scaled the wall.

“We will be walking on tiptoe”, he whispered to the boy.

He nodded silently, but the night was too dark for them to see past their own nose.

“Did you hear me?” he asked him

“Of course”.

“Alright, let’s go quietly, you stay right behind me. Do you have the book?”

“Of course.”

For a moment, Isaac thought that his son, due to the frenzied escape, had lost all of his words.

“Are you alright?”, he whispered again.

“Of course”.

“Is that all you can say?”

“What else?”

“Come, let us go.”

Isaac went first with his pupils distended in the pitch dark. Right then, his instinct right told him that the only way to avoid untoward encounters, was to slide by invisibly. If they came across armed bandits or drunk Janissaries, there was no Messiah that could vouch for their safety.

The narrow path every so often divided in two; they chose at random and kept going uphill. Isaac had in mind for them to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the Chouderia. Once they reached the large gardens of the Ottomans and their two-story houses, they would be able to see some sky and decide what their next move should be.

As they climbed, their nostrils were filled with intoxicating smells. The mild northern breeze treated them to the breath of rose bushes, acacias in bloom and bushy cypresses in their fragrant sleep. At one point they saw a tall, lit window and they stopped. Isaac checked to see if there was a shadow cast, maybe of someone watching the narrow alleyway. The only thing that they could hear was labored breathing. Someone was in pain, some old man probably tormented by ailments or by pitiless dreams of his youth.

“Someone is breathing their last”, is what Isaac thought.

They skirted below the window ledge and passed by on tiptoe.

At the first large clearing the fragrances were holding a litany. The gardens were exhaling into the night and their breath was a hymn to spring, a sumptuous vigil. Further on down, under the shadow of the city wall a large building could be made out, barely, with an elaborate dome. The crumbs of moonlight faintly illuminated a half open door into a courtyard. Bats could be heard and the water trilling into a cistern.

He leaned into his son’s ear and whispered:

“The streets are dangerous at night, we need to find us shelter. Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

He lowered noiselessly the canvas sac to the ground and walked towards the door. Its opening was greatly tempting. “Blessed be all the careless people of this earth”, he thought and snuck inside.

He found himself in a spacious courtyard. The building at the far end was pitch black. A Muslim tekke, a monastery or perhaps a school, he wondered and paused in his stride. A lantern a few meters further away was on its way out. The flame that was hardly visibly allowed a glimpse of ...a path.

“Lord, stay by our side”, he prayed quickly, like is always the want of everyone hunted.

He came back out stepping lightly and approached the waiting Matthias.

“Let’s go inside, stay until daylight”, he said into his ear.

They slipped in through the half opened door and walked past the dying lantern. The path was carpeted with moist grass, they could smell herbs and, somewhere in the darkness, an acacia in bloom. They found themselves at a clearing just as the clouds parted and the light of the sickle moon fell on rows upon rows of marble plaques.

“Graves” he said and froze in place.

Matthias, coming up from behind, took his hand; his palm was warm and sweaty. They stayed like this for a bit, at a loss, doing nothing.

“Well?” Matthias’ whisper broke the silence.

“God has shown us the way” he answered decisively, after taking a deep breath.

He walked between the graves taking care not to step onto the beds of the dead. He found some free space and, before, setting the sac down, gave the spot one last look. They didn’t have much time. A new cloud bank was encroaching on the sickle moon.

“Here”, he said with deliberation.

They took out the two dirty shirts they had put at the top of the sac and laid them out. The ground was soft and springy; hospitable one might say.

“How many hours is it still till sunrise?” Matthias answered after he had lied own.

“Not many”, he answered after checking the position of the moon.

Their heads were side by side. Isaac took an overcoat from the sac, the one they had used on the boat, and draped it across their midriff and abdomen.

It wasn’t easy to close their eyes and let themselves drift off. The nervous tension from the events of the night couldn’t dissipate from one moment to the next.

“Who was the man we saw at the synagogue?” Mathias asked in a low voice.

“A charlatan.”

“I think uncle went mad tonight”.

“Let’s not talk about that now.”

Thy stayed like that for a while in the silence of the night. He was still holding his hand like he had when they made their getaway from the synagogue.

“Dad”, he asked a few minutes later, “do the dead change side from time to time?”

“What kind of a dumb question is that, Matthias?”

“Somnus aeterns²⁵, I’ve read it in a book. And when we sleep, we do move. Anyway, me, when I die, I’ll be awfully bored until the coming of the Messiah”.

Isaac almost burst out laughing in the perfect quiet.

“You are not like other children”.

“Sometimes I think I’d like to memorize the Obsecrote and the O Intermerata²⁶”.

“What are these? Where did you come across these?”

“They are prayers to the Virgin Mary, I heard them in Venice. I’d snuck into a church one day; you were busy at the square with old man Perachias”.

Isaac turned his head and they peered at one another

“What business do you have with Christians, any more? It’s months since you’ve left Basil, you’re not a Marrano any more, you won’t do them the favor of seeming to be one of them”.

“They have the great mother. Everyone has the Virgin Mary, whether rich or poor. If we, too, had a mother, things would be better”.

“You go to sleep now” Isaac said and wrapped him in the overcoat more tightly.

“The day before yesterday when I walked into a greek church to leave the candles...”

“Be quiet now and go to sleep, I said”.

The first light of day was visible. The swallows had left their nests of mud and were crisscrossing the air voiceless, some turtles were shunting on the weeds soundless since the dawn of creation, the dead were quiet as well. The cemetery was waking

²⁵ Somnus aeterns: eternal sleep.

²⁶ Obsecrote – O Intermerata: I beseech Thee – O Holy One; prayers to the Virgin Mary.

into silence and there seemed to be nothing in existence that might cause the heavy lids to flutter.

The young man bent over them with curiosity and examined them. The boy had crumpled the cover into a ball which it had saved between his feet. The sleeping man had his arm over his eyes as if he meant to hide from the light.

He leaned closer and kept on observing. Light footfalls were heard. Another man appeared, elderly and bearded, and he also stood above them.

“If they were night demons, chelebi effendi²⁷, they’d have fled with the first light.”

“How many times have I told you that this is hallowed ground and no demons come here?”

“Forgive me, I was just commenting...”

“Prattling with no reason, Santetin, and behind it, disguised, is fear, that above all. You nudge them, now, see what they’ll do.”

Before the young man had touched them, Matthias’ eyes had flown open. He jumped to his feet with his hair disheveled.

“Be still, boy.”

“Wake up!” he shouted and started shoving at him with his foot.

Isaac opened his eyes and closed them again straight away; the sun was falling straight on his face. He curved his back and sat up. Even in a sitting position, though, the sun kept blinding him.

“What are you doing here?” the elderly man asked. “Are you in a hurry to join the dead? Asrael²⁸ hasn’t yet sounded his trumpet and you re not exactly riddled with years”.

Matthias was appraising him silently. His father had shaded his eyes with his palm and was struggling to understand what was being said to him.

“Dede²⁹, they are Jews, have a closer look at the way they’re dressed”.

“How did you end up here?” the elderly man asked, in Latin this time.

Isaac put his other palm over his eyes as well.

²⁷ Chelebi effendi: a rank of the monastic mevlevihane order. His duties involved the overseeing of the morals and conduct of the dervishes and whether they abided by the order’s rules.

²⁸ Asrael: the angel of death in the muslim religious system.

²⁹ Dede: Elder, honorific form of addressing an old man.

“The night caught up with us outside and we saw the door open”.

The older man threw a chastising glance at the younger one, who dropped his gaze.

“You don’t look like thieves, so who is after you?”

“Nobody!” Matthias piped up.

“Is that what you teach your children at the Chouderia, to speak out of turn in the conversation of adults?”

Isaac threw his son a sideways glance.

“This is not his want, elder, you are being unfair, he does know his place”.

The old man was frowning and gazing sternly down at Matthias.

“He needs to learn to listen first”.

Matthias dropped his eyes to the ground. There was plenty he had to say, but he didn’t utter a word.

“Alright then, so, you are not thieves and you are not murderers either, am I correct?”

Isaac nodded.

“ You are hungry, though, yes?”

Matthias lifted his head. He saw something past the elder’s bushy eyebrows that reminded him of old man Perachias.

“Elder, may I speak?”

“You may”.

“We are hungry”.

“Go wash at the fountain and wait outside that door there”.

He tumbled at great speed along the downhill slopes. The sun was almost in mid heaven. It was hot and the deeper he went among the shacks near the sea wall, the more copiously his sweat rolled down from his neck to his chest. The thoughts tormenting his mind were more heinous by far than the steep inclines that made his knees go numb. Only a few times in his life had he wondered if he’d made the right decision. Usually he was sure, partly because of his mind which was always on the alert and partly because of a voice that echoed within him. That noon though, he

wasn't at all sure about what he had done a while ago. He had left Matthias on his own back at the monastery and was down making his way down to the shop, late. It was because he was afraid Tobias might drag some rabbi to the shop and demand with the papers at hand, to have to have the child back. But there was something else that had happened.

After they had finished their meal at the dervish compound, the Mevlevihane, Matthias had again fallen asleep from weariness, while Isaac was in conversation with the old man who had woken them up at the graves. They ceased their talk and sat gazing on him in his restfulness. He had one cheek resting on the table and the one that was less marked was showing. The gaze of chelebi effendi was not so strict any more. He was the one who had asked Isaac not to wake him.

What it amounted to was that he'd left his son alone with strangers on the assurance of the eyes of an aged dervish, which were transparent and peaceful as he saw him off caressing his long beard. He was now on his way to sior Panayotis, to apologize and to explain. He would tell him everything, he wouldn't leave anything unsaid.

He found Anastasios piling wooden crates outside the storeroom's side door.

"Is the master here?" he asked him.

"He's inside, writing".

He felt his legs buckle from under him. It wasn't because of all the frenetic clambering – he was ashamed. He only had a day in the man's employment and he was showing up for work at noon. He saw him at the desk leafing through the lists he had set to order the day before. He lowered his head and first, bid the other good morning.

"My apologies, sior Panayoti, I need to talk to you".

The Greek raised his eyes and scratched at his beard. Isaac started to talk and a veritable river flowed out of him. But his words were all mixed up, broken Venetian, Hebrew and some German from the Swiss mountains when he couldn't find any other words to fill the gaping holes in his speech with.

Sior Panayotakis at some point cut him short.

"Is it about that madman your brother? What am I asking, of course, the two of you are like two drops of water. Imagine, when he came in the shop this morning, the other two who were with him had lagged a little behind. Justin asked him to weigh and record some barrels of sesame seed oil, because we had to start loading down at the dock".

He broke out laughing loudly and got up from the desk.

“Twins, yes, but what twins, indistinguishable! Except that he looks like he was born angry and that glare in his eyes needs medical attention promptly!”

“What did he say to you, sior Panayotis?”

“As you can imagine, he asked for the child”.

Isaac swallowed hard. What he was afraid of had already happened. His boss noticed that he started to go pale.

“Where did you spend the night?”

“The Lord looked after us. What else did Tobias say?”

Sior Panayotis again smiled.

“He tried to threaten me, but I cut him off. He said he would be back. But not now, Isaac, lay your mind at rest. He will come later, he said, after he gets back from the tour he is going on with the Redeemer. I’m inclined to think that you’ve all gone round the bend recently. He is going, he told us, to Castoria. All the faithful are going to spread the news of the Messiah’s coming.

“What id the rabbi say?”

“Nothing special, he seemed bored. The other one who had come along, didn’t seem to have an opinion either way and didn’t say a single word, though his face was that of a scoundrel. He was introduced to me as Joshua. If I was at Serenissima I might think I was watching a mighty bizarre comedy!”

Isaac breathed deep.

“So, then, he’s gone?”

“He’s gone, not to worry. He can’t even look after a dog, let alone a child... It seemed like he came in order to settle an obligation to himself, really. The way he also told me of your family business was all muddled up, a little cracked in the head”.

“I can tell you all about it...”

“Not now, Isaac, there’s work to do now. Tie back your headpiece because it’s come undone from all your running and let us go.”

He gave some instructions to Ignacio and signaled to Anastasios that they were going out. They stepped out into the streets and, as usual, they had the Mauritian slave lead the way.

“To the coffeehouse, Anastas.”

It was the time of the large crowds. They took shortcuts through tiny shops and open-air stalls, passed a row of reed cages with chicken, geese, doves. At another stall, they were selling live eels in buckets full of water. Further away, two goats with their udders distended were ready to give fresh milk to whoever came with his

Clay pot, in exchange for a copper coin to an Albanian with an enormous mustache.

“Sior Panayoti, did you baptize Anastasios?”

“He was baptized when I bought him. You mustn’t imagine, though, that he has comprehended the triadic nature of God”.

Again he laughed heartily. In the encroaching throng, this earned him some glances.

“Break a smile, Isaac, it’s a bright day. The fishermen have had a good haul and the marketplace is full. The Turks and the Venetians are killing one another out at sea but we are still alive. Laugh, Isaac. Matthias will be with you, nobody is going to take him away, and you will be in my employ. You can’t imagine what I have to tell you today. Last night I wouldn’t get to sleep, I was making plans...”

They sat at a shaded coffee-shop. As soon as the shopkeeper saw them, he tripped over himself to give them proper service. The place was much cleaner than the teashop where Isaac had sat with Matthias. The Turks sitting beside them were well dressed and were happily drawing on some φιλντισένια hookahs.

“Coffee!” said sior Panayotis imperiously and struck the ground with his walking stick.

The coffee-shop owner bowed deeply and retreated into the open door.

“Have you ever had it?” he asked Isaac.

“Don’t forget, sior Panayotis, that I lived in Amsterdam for years. The ships there have been unloading loads of it for years.”

“That’s what I wanted with you today, Isaac. I have been gathering information from ship captains and travelers for some while. The lovers of coffee say that with a cup, the mind can concentrate better. The wise men drink it so that they can spend all night with their books, and burn as many candles as possible. They know coffee in Zakynthos. The Muslims have been drinking it for years as the Koran forbids wine. With time, more and more coffee-shops are opening throughout Europe, London, Paris, Madrid, Venice...”

Isaac nodded in agreement.

“Salonika is right on the coffee trail. The great port where it’s sold is Mocha, in Arabia. Then, they take it to Egypt, load it on the Nile and let the river current do its work. Alexandria opens its arms and gathers it in. Salonika isn’t far from Alexandria. If we move smartly, we stand to get rich...”

“It’s a good idea, though naturally it needs quite a lot of thinking through... A ship from here to Alexandria to load just coffee... A captain who is experienced, trustworthy, because the seas are teeming with pirates and the war at Candia can have unforeseen developments... Then, with full storerooms here, you can play the prices as you like. Maybe, if you set out a caravan you can reach up to Buda...”

“You’re starting to get my drift. I need help, that’s why I want you by my side, with a good cut, it goes without saying. I hear the Dutch have shifted the commercial routes and are bringing coffee in from the East Indies. Hesperia is another world and I am not so young anymore. Let us teach Europe to drink coffee, why not? Does that sound overly ambitious to you?”

It was the accountant’s turn to smile.

“I’ve puzzled long and hard, Isaac, over what happens in the stock exchanges over there in Dam, in Amsterdam, where you were based. Gold changes hands in one night without anyone having laid eyes on the goods. Whole fortunes are won and lost in the space of hours.”

“Yes, sior Panayotis, like you say, it’s a different world. You don’t see the merchandise, you buy stocks at an assumed price; cinnamon, sugar, brandy, anything you care to name. After you buy, you sell at a profit, or at a loss. Those in the know live like kings, buying and selling thin air. A reliable piece of information that reaches your ears can be sold at an exorbitant price. This way, though, you don’t live off your honest labour, sior Panayotis”.

The Greek turned his head elsewhere. He seemed to be deliberating.

“You speak as if...”

He paused and fingered the handle of his walking stick.

“As if you see it like a kind of sin”.

“That would be Tobias’ way of putting it.”

“What would yours be?”

“Me, I’ve lived my life alongside them, but...”

“But what?”

"I never went after the gilder. I had made do with a little – an attic, the memory of a woman who lived far away, then another woman, neither of whom is alive any more..."

Sior Panayotis' eyebrows came together.

"I want people by my side whose soul is fired up and who have a love of silver. Are you one of those?"

Isaac looked him in the eye for the first time.

"I have a son who's been living in the streets for months on end, like a gamin; I can't tolerate this any more. I want to have a roof over our head, weapons and expensive knives to cut off any hand that would grab him. I want to be able to afford books for him, and expensive tutors. All of that takes silver, and my soul is in agreement. The greatest sin is the inactivity which Amsterdam taught me. It is a mistake to be afraid that your every step might land you in sin. I am not my brother, sior Panayotis".

The Greek smiled pointedly.

"Can I count on you, Isaac?"

The accountant, who had been betrothed to melancholy for years, brought his palm to his chest.

"I am with you in whatever you need me".

"We will flood the world with coffee and you'll teach me more about the stocks, when we make a trip to those parts. And after we get our fill of golden ducats, I will build another greek church in Venice in memory of my father's soul.

"Effendi!"

Justin was standing sweating in the courtyard of the coffee-shop.

"Capitan Leonardo is at the store asking for you."

"That's our man, Isaac. From Livorno, as shrewd as they get, he knows the open sea like the back of his hand. Trustworthy, you can absolutely count on his word. You give him your daughter for a big trip on the sea and he brings her back a virgin. He should go, let's not make him wait; and, smile, will you, for the devil's sake! Your life is taking a turn, don't you see it?"

Just then, Matthias was opening his eyes at the Mevlevihane; the cause was a fly that had been crawling on his face. He was lying on the sofa of the dining room

where they had eaten that morning. He sat up and, from that position, he observed his surrounds with the fecklessness of sleep. Through the skylight oodles of light was pouring in. It was a hot midday outside but there, within the stone walls of the tekke, it was cool. From somewhere came the smell of cooking, vegetables with onions. The fly buzzed again and landed on the table in front of him, seduced by some crumbs and a few spilled drops of milk from that morning.

He stood up and started to walk, looking about to his left and right. He entered a large hall full of designs on the walls and writing in an unfamiliar script. We went past pillars and when he raised his head up, he saw a great dome in emerald green. From somewhere out in the yard voices could be heard; someone spoke loudly and the rest repeated something rhythmically. Curious, he went up to a small window and cast a secretive glance. A group of young men sat on the ground with their palms resting on their folded legs. They were wearing cassocks and they all had the same tall hats on. One, who was in charge, was intoning loudly:

“Breath of the Holy Mevlanah, He! Let us all say it: He!”

“He!” they all chorused in unison.

He was barely awake and before him was unfolding yet another confusing performance. Salonika must, in some way, be like the theater – or what he’d heard of it, as he’d never been – where a different play was on every day. What with the rhythmic voices and the midday smell of the yard, he was now fully awake.

What was this place and what sort of people were those in the yard? They spoke Turkish, but they were dressed in cassocks and had the same hats on. His memory started slowly to open like a sunflower in the noon light. In the morning, his father had been talking at a low table with that old man. He didn’t remember much, he was eating busily because he was so very hungry. A thick soup with milk, some dumplings with rice... He was famished, he hadn’t felt his stomach so empty since the slopes of Gotardo, during the last days of the uphill climb when supplies were running out and all there was to eat in a day was a piece of dry bread. He had been hungry from the previous night already, on the eve of Pentecost when they were sitting aside in the synagogue courtyard, before the Messiah’s dance.

He threw his head back and scanned the huge room with the emerald green dome. What kind of a place was this? Where was father?

Suddenly he saw two of those men with cassocks coming his way barefooted. He recognized one of them. He was the youngest of the two who’d woken them up that morning at the cemetery.

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Anastasios secured the torch on the tip of the prow and put on the mask. All their masks were the French kind, covering the eyes only. The Venetian bauta was too large and burdensome.

"Anastasios has aged", Matthias whispered to sior Panayotis.

"Yes, all in a matter of weeks, during Dunkue's illness whom he also loved – as brother? as lover?... who is to say?"

Matthias reached out and put his arm around the older man. This was the first time he allowed himself such liberty since fate had introduced them, five years ago in Salonika.

Sior Panayotis was taken aback but seemed to quickly relax into the gesture. He took hold of his son's hand and squeezed it.

"And you, signor Melissinos, as what did you love her?"

His response this time, was to get upset. He swiveled around and gave him a look.

"How old are you, son?"

"Fifteen, father, but I feel twice that".

"What words just came out of your mouth?"

"If you feel a load on your chest, surely you'd be better off talking about it."

"No! You're still far too young", he answered curtly and put on the mask, covering his eyes. "Hide behind it and lose yourself in the crowd. Let the night be your teacher tonight. Forget who you are, Matthias Almoosino, or maybe that isn't who you are, after all?"

He made no immediate reply. He was trying on his new face, with the mask, looking to the left and right. He stood facing the sea and fog as if testing their recognition of him.

"I don't yet know who I am. I remember a host of things and feel as many on top" - he kept his face turned to the sea.

"Forget everything, life is ahead of you, you are young, do you hear me? Young!"

“Corpi morti!³²” the gondolier's gravelly voice suddenly rang out.

They all looked to where he was pointing; two bodies floated on the dark water.

“The knives are earning their keep in Serenissima at night”, sior Panayotis' voice issued sarcastically behind the mask. “A dagger for contraband or for a jilted love, I wonder? Push on, don't stop, to them, the fish are now flowers and the mist is their frankincense”.

They reached the neighborhood of San Mois  after quite some time. Managing the gondola in the fog required skill, to avoid her iron prow with its comb-like teeth catching on a keel or smashing against a stone pier.

“Should I stay here, sire?” the gondolier queried.

“You put out roots and don't move from this spot, you're mine for the night”.

Ridotto was a rented palazzo that had for some years been operating as a gambling hall. They walked in and, once they were past the wide anteroom, paused to put in an order.

“Champagne!” sior Panayotis commanded and went on ahead, leading the way.

Anastasios seemed to know the layout. He took the bottle of champagne and glasses and followed suit, with his mask in place.

Matthias was looking around him in amazement. He was becoming conscious for the first time of the beneficent indiscretion which disguise affords. The mask is a blessing for all and any fearful soul, every transparent soul worrying that it might foul itself by allowing its gaze to freely wander upon the world. Soon enough, as he scanned the red walls around him, the student of Venice's Flangini School of Greek Studies realized that the mask could conceal a lover's awkwardness, the embarrassment of a defeat, the flinching before an unexpected turn of events, the shyness of youth, the erection of a gaze before a plunging neckline.

Every room had its master of ceremonies who determined the pace of the game with a sonorous voice. They all wore a long, seamless mantle, that made them look terribly formal, and a wig. A croupier in livery was arranging on a large table

stacks of silver ducats.

“This is a true house of infamy”, sior Panayotis whispered in his ear.

³² Corpi morti:corpses. Through the centuries of Venetian history, this was a common cry by those steering boats in the lagoons, especially during the great plague epidemics when thousands of people succumbed and the corpses floated in the canals.

They needed to keep their voices down; around all the card tables it was dead quiet. In short stretches of time, fortunes were being lost amidst reverent silence. Every so often, the voice of the master of ceremonies was heard, providing the rhythm to the game by intoning, much like a priest: *paroli, sette, soto la prima*...³³

Sior Panayotis placed a small pile of coins on a table and thirstily drank down the whole glass of champagne. Wordlessly, he put out his glass again for Anastasios to fill.

“What is the game you are playing called?” his son asked.

“Pharaoh”, he answered, his eyes fixed on the croupier's hands.

“Why is that?”

“Go figure...”

Matthias once again let his gaze wander. There was a fair crowd that night. The thick fog had sent the denizens of Venice indoors. The nobility of Serenissima had filled the opera houses and the Ridotto, while the plebeians in the mood for sinning were getting drunk at the first *cavarkina*³⁴ they came to.

He perused many women; all with masks, most with young escorts. He had heard of the *cicisbeo*, the trusted servant who, in the husband's absence, shadowed a married woman's every step, obeying her every instruction. He noticed young women with revealing *décoletage* and fake moles on top of the rouge, and also noticed older women with a lot of make-up and withered breasts, giving off a smell of sweat, and aloe and mint oil. Some of them gazed searchingly at the secrets behind some other woman's mask. Some others, devoured with their eyes those male bodies that were exposed and provided what information the faces hid. Most of them, though, only had eyes for the croupier's fingers and flirted exclusively with the male figures of the deck. Their carnal desires were as dry as the playing cards.

Walking slowly and gazing leisurely around, they went from table to table. Every so often, Anastasios filled the master's glass, while he listlessly made his bettings. At one point, he signaled them they were going. They passed through the large entrance hall and walked out onto the cobblestones of the street. The street lamps only illuminated the foggy streets to a distance of a few feet.

“I am choking!” he cried out and walked to the edge of the canal. “Tonight, everything oppresses me”.

³³ *Paroli, sette, soto la prima*: *Paroli* is a betting system, seven, under the first.

³⁴ *Cavarcina*: a popular dancing spot, a den of iniquity.

He stood by the water and loosened the lace around his throat. Anastasios and Matthias briskly walked up to him when they saw he had started to stumble. They watched him exhale heavily, forcibly blowing his breath into the fog as if competing with it, as if he wanted to drown it out with the black humor he was hiding inside of him.

“My Mateo”, he called out, “a day will come when we will talk about everything, I swear to you, Mateo, on my mother's bones”.

He turned about, straightened his mantle any old how and started for the boat, with Matthias and Anastasios following silently in his wake under the street lamps.

“Boatman, where are you? Damned race of arsenalotti³⁵, where are you, you scum?”

“I am right here, master”, they heard his voice and saw his silhouette materialize out of the fog.

“Boatman, you're among the oldest rats of this port and you don't need too many explanations; to Marcellina's brothel, and fast”.

They were again sucked in by the night's chilly mist. Anastasios lit a second torch and held it aloft at the prow. The boatman, the aged arsenalotto, rowed in silence. The water, without a single ripple, black from the sewers, gave off the smell of the large city's rot. No one spoke. Matthias was nestling under the canopy overwhelmed by some inner, undefined excitement. His master seemed unpredictable, no one could tell where he might drag them that night, in his state of intoxication.

The silence seemed interminable. Only the oars could be heard, lifting and sinking in tandem, cutting into the black water for the wound to close immediately in their wake. The noise from the night traffic in the streets and the squares had been squashed by the fog and was gradually dying out.

“Will someone say something? Anastasios, you spawn of the devil, you've put a sock in it for days on end now. What are you sitting like that for, like a drowned cat? Say something”.

The Mauritanian continued to remain silent, keeping his back turned.

“She's dead and gone, that much is for sure... You won't bring her back with this kind of behaviour. And you boatman, old rat, with your youth spent in the galeasses³⁶ and in brothels, won't whistle a song for us. As soon as we dock at Marcellina's, you come up too, it's my treat”.

³⁵ Arsenalotti: the sailors at the shipyards of the Republic of Venice

³⁶ Galeass: a ship with sails as well as oars, a development of the galley.

Matthias turned around and looked at him. He had raised up his mask and it was sticking out in his hair.

"What is it, my son? What are you looking at?"

"You know my respect for you...." he told him in Greek so the boatman wouldn't understand.

"What do you mean?"

"Such a night does not become her memory".

"I take no advice from minors".

"My apologies", Matthias said and lowered his mask.

Sior Panayotis wrapped his cloak tighter.

"People are not like books, Mateo, they have caves and gorges..."

He lowered his head and started murmuring a greek lament, rocking back and forth, a rhythmic grieving and a lullaby, with his wine scented breath reaching throughout the boat.

Outside Marcellina's brothel, a large oil lamp burned in colored glass. They pushed at the heavy door with the lion's head in the middle, and they entered a broad corridor. There was a table with a candle burning on it and beside it, a masked man sitting on a stool. He seemed youthful, tall and willowy; his hands were well looked after, loaded with rings. The sound of laughter and music drifted in from somewhere in the house. The boatman hadn't followed them, despite sior Panayotis' persistence, unwilling to leave his gondola unattended in such a neighborhood as this.

"Let me have your names", the man told them and rose from his seat. He had a foreign accent, didn't seem to be from Venice.

"Are you new in the place?" sior Panayotakis asked.

"You probably haven't been for a long time, signor..."

He took off his mantle without answering the man.

"Signor...?"

"Melissinos Greco. Now go get Marcellina".

"And the other two?"

“Servants. Your name?”

“Massimiliano, signor; Massimiliano for any and every job, signor...”

“Now, go fetch Marcellina.”

“Let your servants take off their masks”.

Though his voice was high, reminiscent of the castrati who sang in operas, it carried a threat. Its harshness and its metallic ring reminded the drunken merchant of the worst types of men who held court in the dens of Serenissima.

“You look more like a houseboy to me”, he told him with a challenging look. “Matthias, Anastasios, take off your masks; it will save us a fight. Non vale la pena³⁷”.

Suddenly, a door directly behind Massimiliano opened, ushering in the smell of sweat and spilled wine. In the opening stood a middle aged woman in an expensive white wig and heavy make up.

“You evil Greek, where have you disappeared to, all this time?”

Sior Panayotis went up to her smiling and kissed her hand which was laden with bracelets and rings with large stones.

“Business obligations, signora”.

“I thought you might've become a general at the Stato del Mar³⁸, with a lot of stradioti³⁹ under you and gone off to fight in Candia⁴⁰” she said and gave out a near hysterical laugh.

“I am no lover of muskets, Marcelina”.

“What are you a lover of, my treasure, do remind me”.

“Gold, signora, the same thing as you. It's what makes the world go round. The world does go round, doesn't it, Matthias, isn't that what the books say?”

Massimiliano pointed to Anastasios and Matthias, gesturing for them to take off their masks.

“House regulations, il mio Greco” Marcellina said apologetically.

37 Non vale la pena: it's not worth the trouble.

38 Stato del Mar: the Venetian Imperium, the sovereign state of Venice.

39 Stradioti: Greek mercenaries at the service of Serenissima.

40 Candia: Chandax, modern day Heraklion in Crete.

As soon as Matthias took off his mask, he felt naked there, by the flame of the candle. He noticed Massimiliano's gaze piercing him and felt his skin prickle.

“Madona mia”, Marcellina exclaimed, “this one is still a child!”

“It is my son, Marcellina, the jewel on my crown. Maybe he will drink some honey tonight too. Is there any to be found in your honeycombs or should we look elsewhere?”

“Evil Greek”, Marcellina shrieked again with laughter, “come inside and see for yourself”.

She threw the door open and gestured for them to follow her. Matthias went in last, after pausing in front of Massimiliano. He saw a pair of eyes scrutinize him behind the mask. He had a sensation that started at his stomach and spread all the way down to his feet. It felt like fear that had the smell of an old chest, a confusion at once familiar and forgotten, that made his breathing accelerate.

“Go in, Mateo”, Massimiliano's mask said, then he bent close to his face. “Ask for Clarissa. She was a virgin like you, a week ago. I've taken a liking to you...” he added and gently pushed him in the hall.

Before that night, Matthias had only ever seen women's breasts on the large murals of hell. Marcellina's bare breasted girls had no serpents wrapped around themselves, nor flames by their side out of which horned demons with pitchforks

rose to torture the damned. The little hell of the brothel smelled not of sulfur but of rose oil and tobacco. The heavy velvet sofa coverings were moist from the sweat of the girls' thighs and from the clients' saliva. At one corner of the room, a flute and a spinet were barely audible in the din. The large bronze chandelier hanging from the ceiling numbered twelve candles.

“The last supper of whoredom”, he thought with the foul taste of champagne in his mouth.

As he stood there, counting the candles, feeling at a loss, his own thoughts caught him by surprise. His logic had gone haywire, his associations were out of control, like projectile vomit. The twelve flames of the Apostles, breasts from which wine pours into hungry mouths, brown teeth, spit, beards. A woman was dancing wearing only a sheer fabric that left nothing to the imagination; men were sprinkling her pink bottom with champagne. Sin... the jester loneliness, a magenta slipper on its own in a corner, the epitome of the abstracted whore. At the same time, Theophano unmoving in the dark, her own dark. Would her soul have time to rise up or would it stay closed up in the casket, mulling in dirt? Surely the worms would pass by her

inviolable womb. Eternity my joy, together at some point forever, the Nazarene, Yahweh, breath of saint Mevlana, He...

"In what do the faces differ of mothers and whores?" he had time to wonder before a powerful hand gripped his arm and pulled him away.

He turned and saw Anastasios, as expressionless as ever. Suddenly, without as much as a look, he started to pull him outside. They stumbled on an old man savagely kissing a young working girl. His wig was askew and his shaved and powdered skull shone whitely under the candlelight. There were teeth marks on the girl's neck.

Anastasios gripped him more firmly, dragging him to the door. The old Mauritanian kicked it open and they went into the corridor. There was no one in sight.

"Let's go!" he only said, without releasing him.

They entered the heavy fog outside and headed for the docks, slowing down momentarily for Anastasios to catch his breath. In his free hand, he held their mantles.

"Put in on, princeling, it is cold".

There was a streetlamp nearby, and they walked over to wait under it. Matthias leaned against the Mauritanian's shoulder and closed his eyes. His cape smelled of wet wall and resin from the torch he had held at the gondola.

Suddenly, he stood up. He didn't want to fall asleep, he liked it there, in the fog.

"Shall we go tomorrow to light a candle for her?"

"We shall, if you wish it".

They stayed like that for a while, staring at the mist.

"Did he love her, Anastasios, what do you think?"

"The master is a sheep with a goat's wool. But she loved him as well..."

"Has he been drinking a lot recently?"

"Ever since she became ill. I understand him well enough, but what about the others?"

"Who?"

"Signora Flora and the little mistresses".

They heard footsteps in the fog and two men emerged, holding onto each other. They jumped to their feet and Anastasios reached for the dagger he kept well hid in his belt.

“It's the master...”

In the light of the streetlamp, they made out Massimiliano and sior Panayotis leaning against him with eyes half closed.

“Anastasios, go get the boatman straight away”, Matthias said.

“Your father is harmless tonight” Massimiliano jested under his mask. “What he has in his pants is only good for pissing. Help me get him in the boat. Do you have a boat somewhere around here or did he dream it up?”

Anastasios came back at a trot, followed by the gondolier. They each took one of the master's arms and dragged him towards the boat.

Massimiliano went up close to Matthias. He was a head taller. The boy took a step back.

“Why did you leave?”

Matthias did not answer him, but looked on him with curiosity. The eyes of Marcellina's first-in-charge had a magnetic effect on him, like a mountain cat's on its prey.

“Do you always leave, is that what you do?” the other man said and stepped even closer.

“What do you want?”

“The same eyes, the face marked by the pox...”

“What is it you want? Your voice...”

“My voice, what?”

He again felt that numbing down his legs, that primal fear from being out in the dark woods in winter, with branches snapping at every step, all the trees bare... at nightfall...

Matthias brought his hand to the mantle's inside pocket and pulled out his dagger. His eyes were aflame, the feeling of numbness had turned into rage.

“Do you still have it, Matthias, the coachman's gift?”

“Who are you?”

Massimiliano removed his mask with one fluid motion.

“Tell no one I am here. If you ever see the old man, tell him only that I am alive”.

“Michael, my God, it's you!...”

“Yes, Matthias, it's me. I spend my days with the whores now and you, from what I gather, with the Nazarene. A triumph, really, for the sons of Israel! If you ever see old Perachias, tell him I don't regret leaving. Do tell him that. And as for you, you can come see me whenever you want”.

Matthias had grown somewhat calmer.

“There are no herbs in Serenissima for you to study”, he told him.

Michael smiled.

“You still collect them?”

“I will always study them, I'm going to be a medico”.

“If I ever catch the morbo gallico⁴¹, I'll come find you”.

Lux Perpetua⁴²

Petro Ludovico shifted a bit on the hard desks to get rid of his soreness. The handkerchief in his hand, which he had dipped in fragrant oil, had dried out. In an attempt to ease his discomfort, he started to take a deep breath and immediately regretted it. Without the handkerchief, the air in the Teatro Anatomico was, as always, foul. He replaced the scented square of fabric under his nose and turned his attention to watching the rest of the vivisection.

The two assistants of professore Tomazo Scantieri placed in two separate sheets whatever it was he presented to the full class. Every time he handed them what he held, after first presenting it to the students, he used to walk around the anatomy bench, where the corpse of a young man was being vivisected. As he walked heavily on the stone flags, his boots resounded and his sonorous voice reached the room's furthest desks. Figure 1

“Always remember”, he intoned, “that the observations of Sanctorius⁴³ about body temperature, respiration and the physiology of blood circulation are an invaluable contribution and need to be consulted on every occasion. Nevertheless...”

41 Morbo gallico: the french disease, syphilis.

42 Lux perpetua: continuous, everlasting light.

43 Sanctorius (1561-1636): doctor and physiologist, a lecturing professor at the University of Padova.

At that point, professore Tomazo Scantieri stood still over the dissected body holding the heart which he had just extracted. He started scrutinizing the faces of the students before him, one by one.

“Nevertheless, you need on every occasion to remember what William Harvey⁴⁴ said, who observed and recorded as he vivisected in this room for years: I learned anatomy not from books but from vivisections. Are you listening properly, gentlemen? As for the perfumed hankies that I see all over the place, they remind me of certain portly matrons of this city, promenading under the Clock Tower. Have I made myself understood, my dear Petro Ludovico Cazaro?”

Pedro Ludovico felt himself flush and he reflexively removed the handkerchief from his nose. With his face bright red, he darted a sideways glance at his nearest neighbor. Mateo hadn't turned to look at him, unlike every other person in the amphitheater, but kept on watching with amusement their professor who, with an actor's stance and motions, was yet again stealing the show.

“I can fully appreciate, gentlemen, how on a spring day like today, you'd much rather be in class with my colleague who teaches pharmacology, walking among the plants of the Orto Botaniko. It is true that the garden of our university is wonderful and the enormous variety of its species has much to teach you in the cultivation and preparation of therapeutic plants, although throughout your professional life as medicine men, it is bodies you will have to handle, rather than leaves Male bodies and female, clean and dirty ones, aged, ripped, and bloody as well as their saliva, phlegm, urine, feces.... But then again, I also say to give thanks to God, the god of the philosophers especially, for allowing the public dissection of bodies for purposes of teaching. Above all, however, you need to thank the authority of the Republic of Venice, the Signoria⁴⁵ and its laws, which allow it. Dear colleagues, were you to find yourselves at any other University, at Montpellier for instance, you would be taught anatomy from essays and diagrams – presumably with no handkerchief to your nose. Any questions?”

A ripple of merriment went through the amphitheater. Professore Tomazo Scantieri always had a way of capturing the attention of his audience. His eyes roamed once again over the faces of his students, framed by the frilly lace of their collar.

“Questions, comments? Anyone?”

The excitement in the amphitheater had settled back down.

44 William Harvey (1578-1657): English doctor, the first to correctly describe the blood's circulatory system.

45 Signoria: the government of Venice, i.e. the doge and his nine councillors .

“Spring is here today with such a vengeance that I don't even see Mateo Greco raising a hand. Well?”

Petro Ludovico glanced again at Matthias. He seemed pensive, with his right hand tugging at his goatee. He didn't seem in the least affected by the professor's mention of his name. Another half a minute went by with only the barest whisper here and there and the two assistants were already tying in a knot the two ends of the sheet containing the lesson's exhibits. Just then, a hand rose from among the desks. It belonged to Matthias whose other hand was simultaneously loosening his lace collar on account of the heat.

“My dear Mateo Greco, at last. You have my complete attention, as always.”

“Signor professor, as far as I have understood, the one fact about circulation which William Harvey wasn't able to account for, was the blood's passing from the end branching of the arteries to the end branching of the veins. We are still ignorant on that score, are we?”

Tomazo Scantieri smiled.

“We were, until recently. Come by after class and ask me for Malpighi⁴⁶'s announcement. With the help of a new instrument of magnification, very minute vessels have been located in the virtually transparent lungs of the frog.”

Petro Ludovico had meanwhile left before Matthias a note scribbled with coal: It's such a nice day today, don't hurry off.

“I remind you that today is the calendar month of May 11”, professor Scantieri continued. In three days we have the large celebration of Serenissima, of the marriage of the state to the sea. In three days, our esteemed Doge Domenico Contarini⁴⁷ will throw his ring in the water, while our banners are proudly waving on the docks. Gentlemen, you are free for one whole week. Knowledge can wait, the spring and the Doge, never. Thank you.”

With no further ado, his assistants started to remove from the centre of the lecture hall the dissected body, the two sheets and all the instruments of the vivisection. Matthias glanced at the note by Ludovico who was already on his feet, collecting his papers.

“Mateo, my friend, what will finally stay ineradicable in my memory from the anatomy class, is that I spent it sitting on the most uncomfortable seats ever”.

Matthias smiled, then crumpled the note he had been passed.

46 Marcello Malpighi (1628-1694): Italian doctor and anatomist.

47 Domenico Contarini: the Doge of the Venetian Republic from 1659 to 1675.

“After the meeting with the professore, I am at your disposal”.

“I'm coming too. It may not be apparent, but I'm also interested in what Malpighi has found”.

They went out onto the path of flagstone that led to the library, trailed by the odious smell of the anatomy class. They saw their professor ahead, mounting the first steps.

“Hurry, Ludovico, because I get the feeling that Scantieri is in a greater hurry than anyone to get out to the gardens.”

The central hall of the library was empty at that time. The professor unloaded some rolls of paper onto a large table and impatiently removed his cloak.

“Mateo, the hot season is upon us and my classes are becoming more and more grueling. We will be needing more scents these coming weeks, it seems... Wait for me to give you a note to the librarian for Malpighi's announcement. You'll find it interesting”.

A while later, as Scantieri dipped a goose feather in the ink, at the large library table, Mateo came up and stood before him.

“Signor professor, there is a host of issues arising from Harvey's writings. I would like to take up some of your time, at some point...”

“Why not now, Mateo? I am not leaving for Serenissima myself, anyway. The Doge , you know, is a childhood friend and the last thing I feel like, is seeing him the day after tomorrow with his ermine across his shoulders, practicing a cardinal's ponderous walk, tossing rings in the water...”

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