

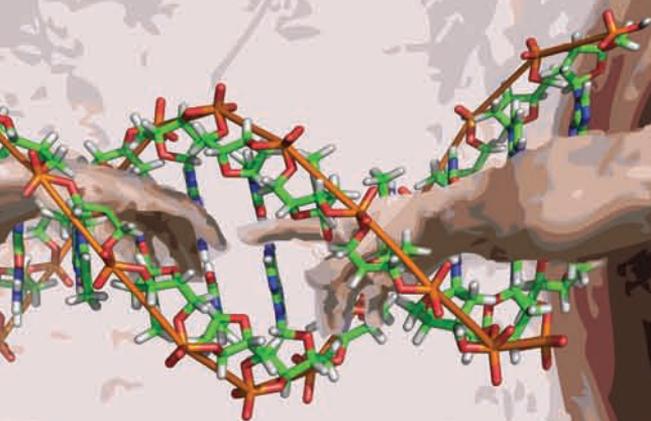
An archeology student and a Jesuit priest set out for Egypt to locate a mysterious black powder, The God Virus, described in an ancient Gnostic document. They believe the powder might be the missing link between God and Man, and contain the power to turn men into gods. But the Catholic Church and Israeli spies have other plans. Will the God Virus save the planet? Or destroy it...

The God Virus

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THE GOD VIRUS



Stephen P. Goecke

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Chapter One

Alexandria, Egypt 1945

Early in the morning in late December, Father Liège pounded on the door to Father Leo Bernardino's spartan room in Saint Dominic's monastery.

"Wake up, Father Bernardino. We have urgent business."

Father Bernardino rustled out of bed, clasping the collar of his nightshirt against the morning chill. He opened the door with a creak. "What is it, Father Liège?" The furrowed face of the balding, slightly hunched-over priest twenty years his senior looked at Father Bernardino with the same keen eyes that had found him in the desert.

"Get dressed and I'll tell you," Father Liège replied enigmatically.

Father Bernardino closed the door, flicked on the dim overhead light bulb, and laid out his black cassock on the bed. He attended to his daily ablutions over a washbasin, applying his customary brilliantine to his jet-black widow-peaked hair. A small mirror over the washbasin reflected the deeply tanned face of a square-jawed young man with dark brown eyes that radiated intense purpose. The former soldier Leo Bernardino was now officially Father Leo Bernardino, O.P., of the Dominican Order of Preachers since his recent ordination into the Catholic priesthood. As he raked a comb through his hair he reflected on the events that had brought him to this point.

Five years had passed since Father Liège had saved the young Italian army soldier from certain death in the North African desert. Leo had adapted well to the constant sun and withering heat. His already striking features gained an even more intense look, as if the sun had baked out any remaining doubt about his life's calling. He rarely permitted himself to think about Eva and the past.

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Wedded to the Church now, Father Leo Bernardino realized he was satisfied in ways that neither young love nor military service could have ever provided him. The Church had become his benefactress feeding his endless intellectual curiosity, sheltering him from the devastation of war, and clothing him in the holy vestments of priesthood.

Father Liège had been no less a benefactor to Father Bernardino by becoming his daily companion and mentor, guiding him towards his vast potential. Over the years they had reached an intellectual parity that made them more like colleagues than teacher and protégé. But Father Liège knew Father Bernardino was destined for great things from his single-minded devotion and fierce loyalty to the Church—brought forth by his rebirth in the desert.

The few times he allowed himself to reminisce about the past, Father Bernardino snickered to himself how his father had made grandiose plans for him as a military hero, which undoubtedly included him becoming his father's successor as Mussolini's handpicked leader of the Fascist Party in his hometown of Predappio in northeastern Italy. Father Bernardino was now able to see through the transparent hollowness of Mussolini's grotesque vanity and Hitler's megalomania. Partisans had dragged Mussolini's body by its feet ignominiously through the streets of Milan to be strung up like a pig on slaughter day. Hitler committed suicide in a bunker, just days before the Allies reached Berlin. Both seemed to think they could conquer the world through the strength of their own wills alone, apart from the will of God. Father Bernardino thought smugly about what Father Liège had said of Mussolini and Hitler. Indeed they were fools. Only by the favor and will of *God* could one vanquish his foes and claim true power over the world.

The former soldier Leo had applied himself to becoming a man of God with a military discipline more assiduous than he had in the army. Under Father Liège's tutelage he blossomed with unbridled zeal into a gifted biblical scholar and adept priest. He had mastered catechism and learned Latin; wrote exegeses on scripture; read widely into history and contemporary philosophy; and studied the collection

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of ancient manuscripts in Father Liège's library. In all, it was a liberal education. To defeat the enemy, one had to learn how he thought.

Father Liège knocked again at his door. "Let's go!"

"Coming." Father Bernardino was tightening the straps on his prosthetic right leg. He stood up from the bed and buttoned up his clerical collar. Under his long black cassock he could feel his artificial leg shift into place to accept his weight. The craftsmen in France from whom Father Liège commissioned the prosthesis had done an admirable job from the exacting measurements that Father Liège had provided them. Father Bernardino was able to walk with only a faintly noticeable limp. He opened the door and looked at his mentor with curiosity. Whatever Father Liège was up to had to be important. He was not a trivial man. "Where are we going?"

"I just received news from a Coptic priest friend of mine in Cairo about a cache of documents some farmer just discovered while digging for fertilizer in the hills surrounding Nag Hammadi."

"Nag Hammadi? Where's that?"

Father Liège escorted his charge out of the monastery through the pre-dawn courtyard to an awaiting taxi. Towering palm trees made it seem even darker. "It's in Upper Egypt near the ancient Egyptian holy sites of Luxor and Thebes. We're going to Cairo to charter a river boat up the Nile."

Chapter Two

The two Dominican priests boarded a blue open-hull wooden river boat with a white triangular sail while the dawning sun broke over the Nile Delta and shimmered off the water. They seldom left the confines of their monastery. After five years of study and prayer Father Bernardino was excited to see something new. If whatever waited for them halfway up the Nile in Nag Hammadi was as important as Father Liège seemed to suspect, Father Bernardino couldn't help but think it might finally give him the purpose he'd been praying for. As a steady northwest wind filled the sail, the slender river boat cut through the water lapping against its prow. The sun began to warm Father Bernardino's skin under his cassock and his mind drifted back to northern Libya.

* * *

Private First Class Leo Bernardino lay motionless on his back in the sand. The acrid smell of sulfur and burning flesh filled his nostrils. Above him swirled thick black plumes of smoke blotting out the sun, leaving him in surreal darkness. Leo slowly turned his head to one side and then the other. Crumpled and twisted bodies of his fellow soldiers lay strewn about a bomb crater, bodies rent, limbs severed, their blood seeping into the sand. Their Fiat L3 light tanks were reduced to hulks of twisted metal smoldering in the carnage.

He wondered in anguish if he was still alive, or if he'd died and gone to hell. Managing to move his hand down the side of his body Leo felt a wet mass of pulp, but nothing more past the knee of his right leg. As he raised his hand to his face to inspect it, he faintly heard a scream of pain penetrating the otherwise eerie silence. After staring aghast at his blood-drenched hand for several seconds he realized the scream was coming from him.

He reached inside his tunic with his left hand and pulled out the chain with the small gold crucifix that Eva had given to him. He had

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completely forgotten about it until now. Holding the crucifix towards the sky in his outstretched arm above his face he cried hoarsely, “Eva, I am so sorry. Please forgive me.”

The smoke cleared for just a moment and intense sunlight formed a glowing penumbra around the crucifix. His arm dropped limply to his side from exhaustion, the gold chain and crucifix spilling into the sand. Then everything went totally black as Leo lost consciousness.

Three days earlier, on December 8th, 1940 the British Army had launched Operation Compass from British-controlled Egypt, the first major Allied campaign in North Africa. The British forces surprised the Italian Tenth Army near the coastal village of Sidi Barani just inside Egypt’s northwestern border with Libya. The Italian Tenth Army had made an incursion into Egypt from their bases at Benghazi and Fort Capuzzo in the Cyrenaica region of Libya. As the Italians advanced into Egypt, the British attacked the rear of the Italian Tenth Army with heavy artillery, bombers, and armored tanks, cutting off retreat back to their colony of Libya.

Composed mostly of infantry, with a few armored tanks and light artillery, the Italian Tenth Army was no match for the heavily mechanized British Army. Though outnumbered in soldiers by two to one, the British managed to kill or capture almost the entire Italian Tenth Army of 100,000 men.

After three days of fierce fighting, British soldiers fanned out across the battlefield rounding up survivors and the wounded. The commanding British officer enlisted an order of Dominican friars from their monastery in nearby Alexandria to administer last rites to any remaining Italian casualties, since they were predominantly Catholic. Among the Order of Preachers was one Father Jacques Liège, who scanned the battleground with a keen eye for souls to send to salvation.

From twenty feet away Father Liège saw a blood-encrusted hand reach for the sky and he quickly moved to the soldier to perform extreme unction before he perished. Approaching the body, he started to utter the last rites but broke off in mid-sentence, exclaiming in astonishment, “*Deus in caelum!* It is a miracle.”

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Bending over the prostrate Leo, Father Liège marveled at a ghostly white sign of the cross in the middle of the soldier's forehead, as if a crucifix lay there for three days in the sun leaving the rest of his flesh a bright red.

"Eva...?" sputtered Leo, his lips parched and vision blurry from the baking rays of the sun.

"Yes, you will see her again, my son," the friar soothed. He rapidly tied a tourniquet around Leo's right thigh. The stout yet muscular friar half-carried, half-dragged Leo to a nearby field ambulance.

"This soldier is about to die. I must properly administer last rites to him. Take us back to Saint Dominic's monastery in Alexandria," Father Liège ordered the ambulance driver.

The driver nodded and threw the ambulance into gear. He was no medic, just a frightened conscript from Wales. In the chaotic aftermath of the battle little attention was paid to proper triage: mortally wounded, needing hospitalization, or deliverable to prisoner of war camp—so the British Army soldier did not question the priest's orders.

Father Liège decided he would personally attend to the young Italian soldier's recovery. The silhouetted cross on the man's forehead was a sign from God that he could not let him end up in a British prisoner of war camp.

The ancient road along the Mediterranean coast from Sidi Barani to Alexandria, Egypt was bone-jarringly rough. In between bouts of moaning, Leo half opened his eyes to see a wide-eyed priest looking intently down at him.

"Am I going to die?" Leo asked in halting English.

"No, you're not going to die, my young friend," Father Liège assured him in Italian.

Leo managed a partial smile. "You are Italian?"

"I am Father Jacques Liège. I was born in Paris, but received my ordination in Padua. But you must rest now, my son."

"I am..." Leo trailed off into blackness from excruciating pain as the ambulance tossed from side to side, its wheels swerving into deep ruts in the battered road.

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Later, Leo awoke in a sparsely furnished whitewashed room. A shaft of brilliant sunlight pierced the room like a dagger through a single narrow vertical window and illuminated dust particles in the air, as a ceiling fan whirred overhead. Beside him sat the squat man he vaguely recalled from an awful nightmare. Or was it?

“Where am I? How long have I been here?” Leo’s lips were still swollen, and his words came out spongy and indistinct.

Father Liège moved his chair closer to the bed, “You have been here for three days Leo. I am Father Jacques Liège, Friar of the Dominican Order of Preachers and you are resting safely at Saint Dominic’s monastery in Alexandria, Egypt.”

“What? Where is my Tenth Army regiment? I have to get back to fight,” stammered Leo in confusion. He began to sit up but a searing pain shot up from his leg, knocking him back flat. Leo looked down to see a bulbous bandage covering a stump where his right leg should have continued past the knee.

“The battle is over, my son,” stated Father Liège, wiping the sweat from Leo’s brow. “There is no Italian Tenth Army division to return to. It was virtually decimated by the British Army. Your regiment is in ruins and the British think you are dead, but you are safe here. You must rest and recover from your injury. Then we shall decide what is best for you.” Father Liège spoke as though he had already given much thought to Leo’s future.

Leo stared at the ceiling, the droning fan making his head spin. His entire world was spiraling out of control, his very *raison d’être* in question. He had been training to be a soldier at the military academy for the last five years since he was thirteen years old. The Army was his whole life. Now he lay on this bed in a Dominican monastery in Egypt just as wounded and useless as his entire regiment dead and defeated in the sand. Leo thought of Eva and their plan to start a family, lost in the desert along with the crucifix she had given him. How could he marry her now? His army was defeated and disgraced, and he was a broken man. Their plans for the future had ended on the battlefield along with Mussolini’s dream of a new Italian empire.

Father Liège watched as Leo’s features changed from bewilderment to despair. Now was his moment to proceed: “Leo, God

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has a plan for you. He brought you to me for a purpose. Out of the rubble and destruction you shall arise a new man!”

Father Liège’s conviction made Leo raise his eyebrows. “But I don’t believe in God, Father.”

“It will come, Leo. What’s more important now is action.” Father Liège leaned over and put his hand on Leo’s arm. “The Lord needs men of righteousness and fortitude to fight His war. Not for His enemies’ bodies, but for their souls. This war between men will end one day, but until the Lord walks upon the earth again, we must fight to protect His Church and dominion from heresy and heterodoxy alike.”

Leo was slightly taken aback by the priest’s unequivocal righteousness, yet he found Father Liège’s straightforward call to action intriguing. Leo shifted his eyes to his leg. “But look at my leg, Father. I am useless.”

“No, Leo,” Father Liège rebuked him mildly. He poked a finger in the middle of Leo’s chest. “*Fide, non armis*. By faith, not arms will we be victorious. The Church has witnessed countless wars, and seen nations rise and fall for almost two thousand years. It survived because of the cunning and unwavering dedication of men like you and me. And above all, because God is on our side, Leo. *Deo favente perennis*. God favors us always.”

Father Liège helped Leo raise himself into a sitting position and continued, his face twitching with brio inches from Leo’s. “Mussolini and Hitler are fools! The British apostates, the childish Americans, and the godless Russians will eventually overrun all of Italy and Germany. The Allies will win the battles and carve up Europe, but we must ensure that the Church remains unscathed to win the war for men’s souls. Mark my words, Leo. There will be grave threats to the orthodoxy and to the power of the Vatican for the rest of this century. We need capable and daring men like you to protect the Church and lead Her into the next millennium.”

Father Liège’s words trickled down into Leo’s barren soul and planted a seed of hope. His enthusiasm and unrelenting faith in the Church were inspiring. He promised a new life, a chance for Leo to

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direct his untrammled ambition toward a higher power, to resurrect himself from the ashes of despair and defeat.

“How can I join you?” Leo turned to Father Liège with slight trepidation.

Father Liège smiled at Leo warmly. “I will guide you and teach you everything, Leo. Have faith in yourself and God will reward you. Now you must rest some more. Tomorrow we will begin to remake you into a soldier in God’s army.”

Father Liège pushed his chair back, looked at Leo knowingly, and then left the room. Leo slunk back down into his pillow. The shaft of sunlight had shifted to rest on his torso. He sensed the warmth of the sun stirring the seed that Father Liège had planted inside him. With nourishment and time, the seed would break through the scorched earth of his soul and bloom into a desert flower. He would arise a new man from the sand and walk along the corridors of power. His eyes closed and his face radiated a newfound resolve.

Suddenly, Father Bernardino jerked his head up and looked around disoriented. He was back in the boat headed up the Nile River and it was well past noon judging from the position of the sun. He had fallen asleep to the rhythmic undulations of the boat.

“Welcome back, Father Bernardino,” Father Liège chided. “You took quite a nap there.”

Father Bernardino shifted his artificial leg into a more comfortable position. “Where are we?”

“We’re still only about halfway to Nag Hammadi.” He handed Father Bernardino a parcel of feta cheese, dates, and olives wrapped in paper. “Here, have some lunch.”

Father Bernardino accepted the food. He looked at the thin strips of fertile land flanking each side of the river. No wonder the ancient Egyptians worshipped the sun so fervently, he thought. He understood very acutely from the food in front of him and his near death in the desert that the sun was both a giver of life, *and* a taker.

After a few more hours, the sun slid into the West and their boat eased up onto the river’s muddy banks near a tiny village of sun-baked wattle and daub houses. Father Liège instructed the boatman to wait for them and they strode off towards the nearest house. They

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knocked on the door and a withered old woman answered. "Where is Mohammed Ali Samman's house?" Father Liège asked in Arabic.

She pointed to a house two doors down.

"Shukran."

The Dominican priests continued on down the packed dirt path that served as the farming village's main thoroughfare. Before Father Liège could knock on the door a rangy bearded man in threadbare clothes opened up. "What is it?" he inquired through narrowed eyes.

"Mohammed Ali Samman?"

"Yes."

"Father Ibrahim sent us."

The man's features relaxed. "Yes, of course, please come in." He opened the door wide to a tidy but cramped single-room dwelling. There was a cast iron stove in the corner attended by a frail-looking elderly woman, probably his mother. "You are Coptic priests?"

"Yes, we work with Father Ibrahim," Father Liège lied.

"There are some Coptic Christians who live on the other side of the river."

Father Liège nodded. "We understand you found some old texts."

Mohammed Ali Samman gestured to a rough-hewn wooden table under the dwelling's only window. "Here," he pointed excitedly. Fathers Liège and Bernardino crowded around the table and stared in awe. It was strewn with what appeared to be very old leather bound folios containing papyrus sheaves written in Coptic. Father Bernardino counted fourteen folios in all.

"There were others, but my mother burned some in her cook stove for fuel. I can't blame her really, but I thought they might be worth something more."

The old woman turned her head over her shoulder and muttered something.

Father Bernardino didn't understand her dialect. "What did she say?" he whispered to Father Liège.

"She said these manuscripts have 'dangerous effects'."

Mohammed Ali Samman gently took the old woman by the arm and led her out of the house. "We'll be back in a little while to see if

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you want to purchase them,” he said on his way out the door, looking at Father Liège greedily. “Come, Mother. Let’s leave the priests alone.”

The Dominican priests eyed the ancient documents on the table with astonishment and trepidation. They had studied several early Christian documents together in their monastery’s library, but up until now they had both been confident that any heretical documents left over from the early days of the Catholic Church had long ago been “sanitized” and incorporated into the accepted canon, securely sequestered in the Vatican Library, or simply destroyed. What the scholars in them excitedly anticipated, the priests anxiously feared.

Father Liège drew up a chair and carefully opened one of the folios, scanning the papyrus pages with his discerning eyes. The pages were in very good condition and written in Coptic. “Mon dieu! This one appears to be a *Gospel of Thomas*.” He opened another. “And this one’s entitled the *Gospel of Philip*. Incredible...!” He looked wide-eyed at Father Bernardino. “But also possibly a threat to Church orthodoxy,” he added ominously.

Father Bernardino leaned over the table and unfolded a smaller, tattered but exceedingly well-preserved leather folio with a faded odd-looking glyph on its cover. He examined the contents. “This one appears to be different from the others,” he observed.

“Yes,” averred Father Liège, “it’s also in Coptic, but seems to be a translation from an earlier Greek manuscript.”

Father Bernardino gave his mentor a look of incredulity. “So the original manuscript could date from earlier in the Hellenistic Period, and this copy translated from Greek into Coptic here in Egypt during the first three centuries AD?”

“That’s entirely possible,” said Father Liège, proud of Father Bernardino’s astute assessment.

Neither spoke for several minutes as they pored over the manuscript. Father Bernardino’s grasp of Coptic was basic, and Father Liège’s was only slightly better. They knew that the Coptic language was derived from ancient Egyptian employing modified Greek letters and used by early Coptic Christians in and around Alexandria during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. In his personal library

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Father Liège had a few copies of Coptic liturgy that had originated around the same time, so they had seen examples of commonly-used sanctioned Church texts. What made the manuscript in front of them unusual was that it appeared not to be liturgical or contemporary at all, but sourced from a much older document.

Father Liège broke their contemplative silence first. “Look here.” He produced a metal stylus from his cassock and carefully pointed to a passage on the first page. “This appears to be a reference to Hermes.”

“You mean the *Greek* god Hermes?”

“Not exactly...I think it translates to ‘Hermes the Three Times Greatest’. *Hermes Trismegistus*.”

“Hermes Trismegistus? Who’s that?”

“Egypto-Grecian mythology from Hellenistic Egypt describes Hermes Trismegistus as a syncretism of the Greek god Hermes with the Egyptian god Thoth. This happened all the time in antiquity. In this case the conquering Greeks simply merged Hermes with his equivalent, Thoth, and the result was Hermes Trismegistus. He was associated with communication and magic, a semi-divine messenger between God and man. The first four pages of the manuscript seem to be a story about him.”

“Why would Coptic Christians be interested in this Greek mythological character Hermes Trismegistus?”

“In this part here,” he indicated a paragraph with his stylus, “the text seems to be attributing secret and direct knowledge—*gnosis* in Greek—of God to Hermes Trismegistus. Moreover, in the second half of the text, here...” Father Liège pointed to a different passage, “the author writes about him as having been a *man*, not a god.”

Father Bernardino’s eyes bore through the pages. “So you don’t think this was written by Copts, but by a heretical sect of early *Gnostic* Christians?”

“It seems probable, yes. But since we know that in 367 AD, Athanasius ordered all non-canonical Gnostic texts in Egypt be burned, the author must have considered this document far too valuable and had it transferred out of Alexandria before then to a secret hiding place here in present-day Nag Hammadi.” Father Liège

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scanned the remaining four sheets of papyrus. “The rest of the manuscript appears to be a later commentary on the story of Hermes Trismegistus from the first four pages. Here the exegete appears either to be attempting to combine Hermetic tradition with early Christian beliefs by equating Hermes Trismegistus with Jesus Christ, or is suggesting Jesus himself was actually an adherent of Hermetic philosophy. And that ‘other *men* like Jesus’ could share his gnosis.”

“Blasphemy!” roared Father Bernardino. He was nearly apoplectic with rage. “Is the author denying the divinity of Jesus?”

“I believe so. It doesn’t seem to dispute the historicity of Jesus, just that he was the Son of God.”

Father Bernardino foamed at the mouth. “So it says Jesus was a mere man, *and* an initiate in Gnostic mysticism and Hermetic conjuration? It’s the work of heretics!”

Father Liège was reassured by the younger priest’s outrage. He had trained him well. Nevertheless, Father Liège was well aware of the perilous nature of being exposed to heretical works. One had to know one’s enemy in order to defeat him, but sometimes the allure of forbidden knowledge proved too enticing. Father Liège continued examining the text as Father Bernardino calmed down. “Look at this. The text seems to repeat these two words over and over.”

Father Bernardino followed Father Liège’s stylus with his eyes. “‘The...*something*...of God’?”

“I believe it reads the ‘Seed of God’, or *God Seed*,” Father Liège gave an inquisitive snort. “And here...” he moved the stylus, “Jesus’ name is mentioned several times in relationship to a God Seed...hmm...what are those other two words after?” He extracted a compact Coptic dictionary from his pocket. “‘God Seed...*breeding*...*program*’,” he finished tentatively.

They looked at each other stupefied and back to the page, double-checking their translation.

“*God Seed breeding program*? What the devil does that mean?” Father Bernardino asked, his face contorting with disapproval.

Father Liège ran his hand over his balding head trying to comprehend the meaning of the enigmatic passage. “Irenaeus had many discussions with the Gnostics in which they always insisted that

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Jesus, while enlightened through gnosis, was not divine, but a *man* who had attained a direct mystical connection with God. And that other men could share his revelation and *be like Jesus*, as well.”

“So you think the Gnostics were referring to this God Seed as the mechanism by which Jesus and others attained the godhead?”

“It would appear that way,” Father Liège replied in a circumspect tone.

“So how did this God Seed breeding program work?”

“Well, without a complete translation it’s hard to say, but I get the feeling the Gnostics believed Jesus was somehow the result of a deliberate Hermetic attempt to create—”

“A man-made messiah,” Father Bernardino finished Father Liège’s sentence with a strange flash of excitement in his eyes.

Father Liège regarded his protégé with apprehensiveness. “Yes, I suppose you could say that.”

Despite his scathing *Against Heresies* written in 180 AD, Irenaeus, and other early Church Fathers like Hippolytus and Clement were beguiled by Gnostic philosophy. After all, it wasn’t until the Roman Emperor Constantine called the Council of Nicea in 325 AD that the Roman Catholic Church finally started to gain the upper hand over the Gnostic heretics. Even while Athanasius burned their texts forty-two years later, the Gnostics almost prevailed in their belief that direct union with God resulted in immediate entrance into Heaven, versus the Church’s teachings that only *after* a lifetime of prescribed faith and good works—and later on the idea of direct cash payments to the Church—could one possibly attain salvation. Had the Gnostics prevailed, the Church’s whole source of power might have evaporated before it even got started.

In spite of Father Bernardino’s accusations of heresy only minutes ago, Father Liège felt a creeping sensation that the young priest might be in danger of succumbing to the powerful allure of the document. He made a move to grab the papers on the table and hurl them into the oven. “The old woman was right. These documents are dangerous. We must destroy this infernal manuscript immediately.”

“Wait!” blurted Father Bernardino, restraining his mentor’s arm sternly. “You taught me that we must exercise patience and use our

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wits. Why don't we try to fully translate the manuscript first? Then we'll know the scope of what we're up against."

"Yes, you have a point." He was reassured by Father Bernardino's display of level headedness. "We need to get this manuscript to the Vatican right away to have it properly translated."

"But we could translate it back at the monastery ourselves."

"No. This manuscript is too dangerous to keep here in Egypt. You must immediately deliver it to Rome."

"Should we take all the manuscripts?"

"It might look suspicious if we took them all. This one appears to contain the largest potential threat to the Church. We're extremely lucky to have arrived here before anyone else. There's no question this cache of manuscripts will either soon be found out by the Egyptian authorities and seized, or end up on the black market."

Father Bernardino nodded. Trying to remain dispassionate, he picked up the metal stylus and pointed to a cryptic grid of letters on the last page. "I noticed the last page of this manuscript contains what looks like some kind of code."

Inside a calligraphic border was a matrix of what appeared to be random Greek letters densely arrayed in a square formation, like a large word search puzzle.

"It certainly could be. By the looks of it, the Gnostic author went to a lot of effort encoding it and surely risked his life putting it down on paper."

"Father Liège, do you think it could be a coded message with a clue to where the God Seed might be located?"

Father Liège narrowed his eyes warily. "Maybe, or perhaps it's a very secret Hermetic incantation or initiatory rite. Whatever it says, it appears to be the centerpiece of the manuscript, the very basis for the entire codex. But we simply won't know until the scholars at the Vatican have a look."

Father Liège carefully assembled the eight papyrus pages of the Gnostic codex and secured them back into the leather folio. He scanned the tiny house for something to wrap it in and settled on a flimsy piece of soiled cotton cloth that served as a window curtain. Tearing the curtain from the window, he carefully wrapped the codex

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and tied it up with a bit of cord he found on the floor. He handed the codex over to his charge and said, "I will write a letter of introduction for you to take with this Gnostic codex to the Vatican. We have to get back to Cairo tonight. And Father Bernardino..."

"Yes?"

"This manuscript could be very dangerous in the wrong hands. You'll recall how in the twelfth century the Cathars fell under this same Gnostic spell, which denies that Jesus was the only living Son of God. When you arrive in Rome, remember how our founder Saint Dominic chastised the papal delegation over the Vatican's failed first attempt to convert the heretical Cathars from their unorthodox views: 'It is not by the display of power and pomp that you will convert the Cathars. Zeal must be met by zeal, humility by humility, false sanctity by real sanctity, preaching falsehood by preaching truth.'"

"Yes, Father Liège," Father Bernardino replied, adding menacingly, "And I will also keep in mind Saint Dominic's warning to the Cathars that 'Where words fail, blows will avail...'"

At that moment Mohammed Ali Samman and the old woman returned to the house. "Have you decided to purchase these papers?"

"Yes, we are interested in this one." Father Liège pointed to the codex with the glyph on its cover in Father Bernardino's hands. "How much do you want for it?"

Mohammed Ali Samman stroked his beard. "I was thinking five hundred pounds," he said hesitantly.

It was an enormous sum by the standards of such a modest farming village this far up the Nile, but Father Liège had come prepared for such a contingency. He took out a wad of bills and counted out the Egyptian Pound notes. "Here's six hundred. Now if you'll excuse us, we must be getting back to Cairo."

The two priests thought the man's eyes might pop out of his head. He probably never expected they'd give him so much money for what he considered just a bunch of useless papers. They bade each other good night and Fathers Liège and Bernardino left the house to scramble back to the waiting river boat. The boatman pulled them aboard and pushed off from the muddy riverbank as the sun dipped

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beneath the horizon like a giant red scarab burrowing into the desert sand.

The boatman lit two kerosene lanterns fore and aft as the river boat sailed swiftly with the current down the Nile. The light from the lanterns didn't seem to reach Father Bernardino as he hunkered down against the bottom of the boat clutching the Gnostic codex to his darkening heart. As a faint outline of a plan emerged in his mind, a wave of excitement washed over him. This is what he had been waiting for: not only a way to gain entrance to the hallowed halls of the Vatican, but also a way to exercise the strength of his ambition and his desire for true power.

Chapter Three

Two days later, Father Bernardino sailed into the port of Brindisi on the heel of Italy. Instead of boarding the train to Rome he purchased a ticket to Lugano, Switzerland. He had unfinished business to take care of there. He hadn't spent the last five years toiling in the desert and having the fateful codex fall into his lap to see his future threatened by a youthful indiscretion.

Father Bernardino methodically unfolded the tattered letter that Eva had sent him while he was serving in the Italian army over five years ago. He double checked the return address, crumpled the paper into a tiny ball and discarded it into a trashcan, silently censuring himself for having committed an act of such stupidity and lack of foresight. How could he rise up the ranks of the Vatican if they discovered that he had fornicated and sired a bastard child! To remove the last stain of his past and clear his conscience he must hear Eva's confession.

Before his train arrived, he went to the telegraph office and dashed off a telegram to Eva in Switzerland telling her he urgently needed to meet with her the following day.

Soon his train rumbled up the Adriatic coast past Pescara, Ancona, Rimini, and across the Po River plain to Milano. From there he switched trains and rolled into Lugano, Switzerland on the morning of the 31st of December 1945.

* * *

Eva Rimini-Reimann left her notes scattered on the desk when she heard the door buzzer announce a visitor. August had taken Maria with him to the laboratory to box up his ultrasonic sonolysis equipment. She hurried downstairs and opened the front door to find a smiling telegram courier.

"Signorina Eva Rimini?" the courier chimed.

"Uh...yes."

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“Telegram,” he cheerfully extended a thin envelope towards her. “It was addressed to the old convent, but luckily we had your forwarding address.”

“Mille grazie,” she distractedly intoned, scrutinizing the envelope. She thought it was strange that someone would still address her using her maiden name since she’d been married for over four years.

The courier bounded down the steps and replied over his shoulder, “Prego!”

Eva went back upstairs to her desk and sat down heavily in her chair. All she could think was that her father had died. After witnessing how August had reacted to the news of his family’s death in the concentration camps, she was afraid how she would react upon learning that the last connection to her mother was gone. Running her finger under the seal of the thin paper envelope, she removed a yellow card with a typewritten message:

30 December 1945

Dear Signorina Eva Rimini

I must speak with you urgently <stop>
Meet me on the top of Monte San
Salvatore on 31 December at noon sharp
<stop>

Signed Leo Bernardino

Eva covered her gaping mouth with her hand and set the telegram down on the desk. Leo was alive? It couldn’t be! The 31st of December was today. She looked up at the clock. The hands read a quarter ‘til eleven. Leaping up from the chair, she dashed to the doorway.

Leo was alive!

Stephen P. Goecke

Her heart raced as she thought about everything she had to tell him. How she had never stopped loving him, even when she thought he had been killed in the War.

She grabbed an overcoat, burst out the front door, and ran to catch a streetcar to the other side of town. The sky was overcast and a cold wind blew from the north, whipping her long dark brown hair across her face. It would take her at least an hour to get to the top of Monte San Salvatore, and that was if the funicular was running. She jumped off the streetcar in the Paradiso neighborhood and hurried to the funicular station and bought a ticket. The cable car lurched up the steep tree-covered side of the mountain with her as the only passenger, depositing Eva within a short distance to the peak.

When she finally reached the Terrazza Panoramico at the summit of the mountain a couple of minutes before noon, there was nobody in sight. She walked over to the edge of the cobblestone terrace to a thin metal railing that was the only barrier between her and the cold deep waters of Lake Lugano two thousand feet below. Eva knew from being on the promontory many times before that the view was spectacular: the whole of Lugano lay to her left, while lake and mountains sprawled out in front of her. But this afternoon the low gray clouds and stinging drizzle prevented her from seeing all but the edge of the rocky precipice that loomed beyond the railing.

Off to her right she noticed a priest wearing a long black cloak over his white habit emerge from the tiny chapel that was situated at the other end of the terrace. He approached her, and as he neared she recognized the unmistakable brilliantined widow-peaked black hair, aquiline nose, and piercing brown eyes. His gaunt face was deeply creased and his features bore the weathered complexion of someone who had spent years in the desert sun.

“Leo?!” she half-shouted incredulously.

He closed the distance between them, his right foot dragging slightly.

“Buon giorno, Signorina Rimini,” he greeted her as a priest would his parishioner.

Eva felt her heart go cold as if it were sinking into the frigid waters of the lake below them. She could hardly believe her eyes.

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“Is this another one of your old childhood pranks? First I thought you were dead, and now you return as a *priest*,” she said without realizing the contempt and bitterness in her voice.

“Yes, I am Father Leo Bernardino now, a friar in the Dominican Order of Preachers. Where’s the boy?”

“*What?*” Eva stared at Leo in shocked disbelief. “You mean our son?”

Father Bernardino glared at her intently. “Where is he?”

“I-I don’t know where he is now,” she bit her lip. “I left him with the nuns at the Convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli here in Lugano before it closed. I was so young and scared then. You were off to war and I didn’t know what to do. I waited for you to return from the War, but when I got news you were dead I didn’t think I could go on living. The only thing I could think to do was give him up to the orphanage.” On the verge of tears, Eva took a step backwards and felt the metal railing press against her back.

Father Bernardino loomed over her, his black cassock billowing from strong gusts of wind.

“When I got your telegram this morning and learned you were alive, I thought you were *coming back for me*. If I had known you were alive all these years, and not a priest, I would have waited for you, Leo. I got married and had a family.”

Father Bernardino raised an eyebrow with intrigue. “A family?”

“Yes, my husband August and I have a daughter named Maria,” Eva replied, instantly feeling uncomfortable she had mentioned their names. Leo gave her a strange look that made her regret not ever telling her husband August she already had a son with another man, which she had been afraid to do for fear of being rejected. “Have you forgotten we were in love?”

“That wasn’t love, you foolish girl. Merely the deadly sin of lust,” he leered at her icily.

Eva felt as though she would faint. “But, but...I can’t believe this,” she stammered. “You show up out of the blue talking about sin in a priest’s habit, showing a sudden interest in our son, and then denying we were ever in love. Where were you for the last five years? What happened to you?”

Stephen P. Goecke

She searched deep into his eyes for the kind and carefree Leo she had known before the War, but that Leo was gone. Now his eyes radiated only a dark deviousness, stabbing at her like the cold wind swirling around the mountaintop.

“I am a man of God now,” he answered woodenly. “And you are an adulteress, a seductress sent from Satan to torment me. If you confess our sin of fornication, God will have mercy on you.”

“Our sin of fornication? Is that what you’re calling it now?” Eva expelled a long guttural laugh as Leo’s countenance turned from smugly pious to furious. “I will not confess to anything. You can go to hell, Leo Bernardino, if you’re not already there!” She spat at his feet and turned to go back home.

He grabbed Eva by the arm. “If you do not willingly repent your sins, then I must apply the mercy of the Lord forcefully...”

“Let go!” cried Eva.

With all her strength Eva twisted her arm free of his grasp, her momentum sending her crashing off-balance against the railing. She lost her footing on some loose gravel and slid to the ground under the railing, her arms flailing for something to cling to. Leo’s left hand whipped out reflexively and clutched her by the arm.

“Pull me up!” she screamed, trying to get a toehold on the slippery rocks that tumbled down the sheer cliff face.

“Eva,” Leo said in a calm voice, staring at her with his intense brown eyes, “this is best for everyone.”

Their eyes locked, and for a split moment Eva could read his mind. “You’ll never get away with it,” she said, meeting his glare with her own.

He retracted his hand from hers and bellowed, “Oh, I think I will!”

As Father Bernardino watched impassively, Eva’s body plummeted down towards the water, her shrieking swallowed up by the howling wind. The Terrazza Panoramico was empty now except for him. He made the sign of the cross in the air as a stinging drizzle from the slate sky struck his face. Father Bernardino thought for a moment about what just happened, and then with exculpatory finesse spun around to hike down the mountain to the train station, not once

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looking back. He had given Eva a chance to redeem herself, but she chose perdition instead.

His thoughts quickly shifted to the contents of his satchel in a locker at the train station and their incredible promise of power. Eva had been the only one besides him who knew they had a son together and now she was gone. And now he knew Eva also had a daughter. A plan was gradually taking shape in his mind. Nothing could stop him now!

Father Bernardino collected his satchel from the locker and boarded a train to Rome and his awaiting destiny in Vatican City.

An archeology student and a Jesuit priest set out for Egypt to locate a mysterious black powder, The God Virus, described in an ancient Gnostic document. They believe the powder might be the missing link between God and Man, and contain the power to turn men into gods. But the Catholic Church and Israeli spies have other plans. Will the God Virus save the planet? Or destroy it...

The God Virus

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