



*F*alse gods, all—though all be real.

*We dwell on this hill, now scarred and overrun. We reside by the once whispering river, now dammed. We inhabit the sacred grove—or what is left of it. Consecrated stray dogs lie among us with the once worshipped snakes and goats, cats and cocks. Above us, the debased remnants of that wondrous Altar of Zeus. And not far off, the Aesklepion's blessed, still flowing fountain.*

*We live in time and without. All is present to us, past and future. We speak through time. Listen. The earth quakes at our words.*

*What now? Chaos yet again, plunder and massacres. Newborns wail, and the mortally wounded howl. We taste dust and ash. We smell smoke in the olive branches—and blood and dung. Devastation. Greed and lust. Folly and hubris. Evil rolls this way.*

*There are other ways, of course, but you only ask for help when you are already lost.*



PERGAMON, ASIA MINOR; 148 CE

Galen brushes his dying father's lips with a damp cloth. Nikon, who has been wasting away for most of a year, can no longer swallow. Though his muscles sometimes twitch, he cannot voluntarily move his limbs at all. His eyes don't blink, and his breathing is shallow and sporadic, as though his spirit is slipping away as his body withers.

Nicon lies on a couch in the atrium of the peristyle villa he designed. He is one of Pergamon's leading citizens, a philosopher, an avid collector of art and antiquities, and the architect of both the Temple of Trajan on the acropolis and the Serapeum, Emperor Hadrian's grand red-brick sanctuary for Egyptian gods. He was also Galen's first teacher, personally instructing him in mathematics, geometry, science, logic, philosophy, politics, and the proper Greek of the classical Athenian orators and dramatists.

Three years ago Aesklepios, the god of healing and medicine, appeared to Nikon in a dream, telling him to have his only son study medicine. Galen, now nineteen, is the most promising medical student in Asia Minor. He studies at the Aesklepion, which Nikon himself renovated and expanded into the finest health spa in the world. But Galen can do absolutely nothing to save his father. He can only offer palliative care and filial devotion and infinite love to the

man who has provided him with every advantage and set him on his life's course.

Galen's mother breaks through the ring of Nikon's friends and the household slaves that stand in the atrium at a respectable distance from the couch. Shrieking, she tears her stola and under tunic. Her screams, high-pitched and hysterical, echo through the atrium. She pulls out clumps of her long black hair and throws herself on her husband, almost knocking his emaciated body from the couch. Burying her face in his chest, she calls to Athena, pleading for intervention.

"Stop it!" Galen shouts as he grabs her shoulders and tries to pull her away.

She turns on him, raking his cheek with her long nails.

He raises his hand but does not strike her. "Get her out of here!" he yells at two of Nikon's slaves. "Take her away! Now! Immediately!"

She writhes, clawing at his face again while the two men lift her off her feet. As they drag her away past Nikon's favorite statue, a bronze rendering of a naked warrior with a bleeding sword wound in his chest, she kicks and snarls and bites at the slaves' arms.

Galen leans over and presses his ear to his father's heart. For a moment, he can neither hear nor feel any sign of life. Then, Nikon's chest heaves and an agonized breath escapes. Silence follows and then, finally, uneven gasping. As Galen shifts his father's body, straightening his legs and resettling his head and shoulders, blood drips from his cheek onto his father's toga. Only then does he become aware of his own heavy breathing and of his mother's continued wailing.

Those gathered to pay their last respects move closer, surrounding father and son. Without looking up at them, Galen says, "Go! It is not yet time." His voice is composed, stronger than he actually feels—almost, but not quite, imperious. "I will call for you."

Although the men are older and aristocratic, they step back and slowly turn away. Galen takes his father's hand, which lacks the warmth he has felt throughout his life. It may not yet be time, but it is close. Very close. He gazes across the atrium at the bronze statue of a Galatian plunging a sword into his chest as he supports his dying

wife with his other hand. Galen then looks into his father's eyes which stare blankly into the clear Aegean sky. He may not even be able to see the light that he has taught his son to love so much.

Galen bows his head but does not waste prayers on gods, household or Olympian, that he does not believe in. He feels gratitude for having had a father who was learned and just and moderate and good. But above all and far more deeply, he feels loss—an immense void that, to honor his father, he must somehow fill.

As soon as the funeral rites are performed and his father's vast affairs are settled and the household put in order, he will leave this villa and his mother's interminable, incurable mental illness. Her repulsive display of emotion in this hour is, despite what others might think, merely the culmination of the domestic strife she has sown. Throughout Galen's life she has demonstrated a penchant for harping and hectoring and berating his father, who did nothing to deserve her irrational eruptions.

He will depart from this city that, thanks to Nikon, he will always feel is home. He will go first to Smyrna and then wherever the learning of medicine and the search for truth take him. The enormous material wealth he is inheriting will not bind him but rather provide the freedom to discover medications and procedures that will alter the world of medicine. Nikon taught him to avoid following any particular sect or tradition—Empiricist, Dogmatist, or Methodist—but instead to take the best techniques and curatives from each and to discard the ignorant, the useless, and especially the harmful.

And yet in this moment, he cannot even help himself. He has been taught that mourning is weak and irrational. He knows he should not grieve, but his sorrow runs so deeply that he clings to his father's cold hand. Tears mix with the blood running from his cheek. For an hour, his head remains bowed to the sheer weight of loss. His breath is erratic, and his shoulders shudder intermittently. As the brilliant Aegean light traverses the atrium's statuary, he is so consumed by grief that he misses the exact moment of his father's last breath.



BERGAMA, TURKEY; 2017

Osama Flynn's scarred left hand squeezes the steering wheel as he drives along the main street. His phone is on the seat between his legs, and the gnarled fingers of his right hand fondle the detonator at his side. He is cramped in the white pickup truck's cab, but his mission is holy and his discomfort unimportant. His black headband is hidden beneath a blue and white service cap. The sweat trickling from his temples and running down his neck is nothing. He brushes his right hand through his long beard gone to gray since he turned forty-five.

Traffic is moving slowly this morning, a snake in the sun. Flynn's blue eyes dart at the pedestrians. The men smoke as they walk. Some of the women have on colorful scarves, but none wears a niqab. They may all be Sunni, but no one is entirely devout. And in the caliphate, none will be spared but those who obey Sharia law. These people might as well be kuffar as he himself once was.

But now he is on his journey to Paradise, on his mission of Glory, a mission for which he alone was selected. Allah is his Commander, and all is clear. God's mercy and righteousness fill him. He has moved from darkness into light. This is his moment to liberate the world from the control of Jews and the United States. To strike a death blow against the globalists, the United Nations and its Coalition of Devils.

When he passes Bergama's central police station, he pulls his cap

lower and slouches in his seat. Despite his conversion to Islam, old habits die hard. He raises his right hand and stares at the scars. At fifteen, Terrence Patrick Flynn, who he once was, dropped out of Catholic school to work in Dublin's pubs. But what he did best, even then, was fight—over football or politics or anything at all. "Fightin' Flynn!" He went back to school twice, but the pub life was far more compelling than any classroom. By the time he was twenty-six, he had three children by two women.

The construction job in Saudi Arabia provided an escape from the pressures of fatherhood, and a couple of times he sent a little money back to the mothers. Selling illicit liquor on the side enabled him to live large in the desert until the three stills he set up in his apartment caught the attention of the Salafist authorities—and saved his life. He converted to Islam early in his prison term, before he had ever read the Quran. He saw Allah's mercy and truth in all things and emerged ready to fight for something worth believing in. And he has brought jihad to Ireland and Pakistan and England and Syria and Iraq and now Turkey.

The Bergama Archeology Museum, clean and solid, seemingly permanent behind its wrought iron gate, is a target worth obliterating, but its destruction would not garner the international attention that his glorious mission will. As his right hand slides again to the detonator, adrenaline pops. But no. It's too soon. He's got to stay in control. When the Hacı Hekim Turkish bath comes into view on his right, exactly where his operational tactics video pointed out it would be, he slows the truck—and himself. At a mosque also on the right, a new ablutions fountain is being built. His breathing quiets.

The massive brick Red Hall looms to his right. Though the Romans built it two thousand years ago to honor false gods, it is not the target either. And one of its two circular outer buildings is now a mosque. When he turns left onto the steep road leading to the acropolis, sheep are grazing on stubby ground cover in an empty lot. He is transported for a moment to the fields of his grandfather's farm in County Kilkenny, but he banishes the thought. His is a jihadist mission to eradicate the memory of Western Devils.

The truck's wheels rattle on the paving stones as the street narrows between stucco houses. A dog runs along barking at the truck's wheels. A girl on a side street to the left feeds a goat. A little light-headed, he rolls down his window to relieve the cab's stifling heat and fumes. Five bent old crones in long, multicolored dresses and bright headscarves file down along the walls of the buildings. A rooster crows in the distance, and another, much closer, answers.

When he sees a beardless younger man in a white shirt standing in front of a blue door talking on his cell phone, he stops the truck, leans out of the cab, and asks in English, "The acropolis? Is the gate ahead?"

The man's eyes meet Flynn's. "Take the right fork." When the man steps forward, Flynn hands over his cell phone, his last contact with corrupt society, the final evidence of his worldly existence. The man pockets the phone, nods, and says, "Allahu Akbar."

"Allahu Akbar!" Flynn proclaims.



### BERGAMA'S ACROPOLIS

When his grandfather taps his shoulder for the third time, nine-year-old Mehmet Suner logs out of *League of Legends*. He stows his new phone in his pants pocket with the special gift from his grandfather. They ride up in the elevator from the cable cars' ticket office to the cable car platform; the four other people in the elevator are Asians, chattering in high-pitched voices. His grandfather ruffles his hair and smiles down at him. Mehmet is excited, not just about the visit to the acropolis and its piles of old stone on which he'll get to leap and run, but even more for the cable car ride and the bird's-eye view of Bergama that his grandfather promised.

The elevator door opens to the platform where more Asians are standing in a knot. The cable cars' cogs and wheels are whirring. A woman with red-blond hair lines up the first six Asian men for the shiny cable car swinging down toward the enclosed platform. Her speech is just as rapid as theirs but less singsongy. The car's doors slide open, and the first six bustle in. As the doors shut and the car slides away, she is already lining up the next six. Mehmet takes his grandfather's hand and grins up at him. When a mother and father with twin girls about his age exit one of the elevators and line up behind him, he avoids eye contact with any of them.

He and his grandfather follow the Turkish woman and the last

two Asian men onto the fourth car, number nine. In perfect, musical Turkish, the woman offers him a seat on the bench to the left so that he can watch the acropolis come into view as the car rises, but he shakes his head and tells her he *wants* to look *down* the hill, back toward the town, and out into the sky over the valley. His words are halting because the woman's bright gray-green eyes astonish him. The car clicks over and swings up and away from beneath the station's roof.

When the wind buffets the cable car, startling him, Mehmet hooks his arm around his grandfather's and slides close. The two Asian men, even older than his grandfather, are already taking photographs with large cameras that have lenses that turn. He pulls out his phone and takes a shot down through the plexiglass at the olive grove to the left of the station. When the wind rattles the car again, he slides back to his grandfather's side. The bus and cars parked on the bluff beyond the station are already starting to shrink.

As they float into the sky, his grandfather asks the woman who these people are. She explains that they are Hui, Muslims from China who visited Islam's holiest shrines and now want to see the ruins of older civilizations.

Mehmet glances back and forth between the valley spreading below and the woman's face. "And who are you?" he blurts. It is the boldest question he has ever asked anyone, but she is so beautiful he can't help himself. When he realizes how rude he is being, he blushes.

Both his grandfather and the woman laugh—but not *at* him. She cocks her head and smiles. "I am Uighur," she answers. "I am Chinese, too, and Muslim, but from a western province." She reaches over and pats his hand. "Uighurs are the oldest of the Turkish tribes." She takes his hand for just a second. "You come from my people." Her smile envelopes him. "I've been living in Istanbul for... How old are you?"

"Uhh...ten tomorrow..."

"Happy birthday! Since just before you were born."

*Forever!* he thinks. He has never been to Istanbul, and he would love

to go, but he can't find the words to say anything at all. His face burns.

The cable car jiggles as its taut aerial cables run over the first towering stanchion's wheels. He is higher than he has ever been before in his entire life. The two men glance at the car's roof, nod, and whisper. The car rises at a steeper angle so that the world opens even wider.

"Look at that!" his grandfather says, breaking the embarrassing silence. He points back down the hill at a spot near the cable car station. Mehmet presses his nose to the plexiglass. At a sharp turn in the road, two black cows, now the size of cats, are blocking the way of a shrunken white truck.