*Keystone* Prologue – part 1

**THE KEYSTONE**

**Prologue**

***AD 374 – Egypt The Egyptian Desert***

Tarasios of Luxor stared into the face of the taller man’s fierce, cold eyes. The sharpened edge of the engraved pugio pressed against his throat was already drawing blood, and the pressure of the blade on his larynx choked his breath. No matter what came next, he knew that this encounter ended with the blade being given a sharp jolt by the powerful man, cutting through his throat and sending him out of this life. That much was a certainty. His earthly journey was already over.

But there was still hope for good, even great good. He would be free, and his liberation would be the cause’s surety.

The taller man, who held a military bearing and whose well-worn garments bore imperial insignia, grabbed at Tarasios’s hair with his free hand.

‘Your companions have left you, little man. Your pathetic followers have fled like desert rats into the sand.’ He spat the words with a cruel venom.

‘They know what persecution means,’ Tarasios answered back, forcing a defiance into his tone in the face of his certain death. ‘They know what you and your men will do to them if they’re caught.’

The officer smiled, satisfied. ‘Good. At least their fear is justified. Perhaps there’s some knowledge in these “Knowers” after all.’ He peered deep into his victim’s eyes. He expected to see terror there. Hopelessness. Panic. Instead he saw only resolve, and his fury rose in response.

‘Tell me where they’ve gone,’ he demanded, forcing back Tarasios’s head and pressing the blade’s sharp edge further into his protruding neck. Blood began to seep across the metal surface. ‘Tell me where your friends have run to, and I will spare your worthless life.’

The knife still in his throat, a confident smile curled the edges of Tarasios’s mouth. ‘My life, as you call it, is already saved. I am free.’ Defiant against the pain, he forced his forehead down and stared directly into the persecutor’s eyes.

‘I will tell you no more. Do what you must.’

The soldier waited only a moment longer. The man would give him nothing – nothing but delays, distraction and heretical talk. Nothing worth putting off the inevitable for, not any longer.

With a powerful, swift motion, he wrenched the knife sharply to the right, severing tendons, vocal cords and arteries in a single motion.

Tarasios’s eyes bulged, but he did not remove them from his attacker’s face. As the blood poured from his throat, he watched the world fade to black in peace. He was already free.