

The Reviews

SATAN'S SCAT **Book 2 of the *Destiny's Damned* Trilogy**

ForeWord CLARION Reviews:

Despite the immediate similarities to the works of Dan Brown, Ryan has created a truly thrilling and entertaining series that is as original and insightful as anything in the genre.

Ryan's style of writing is far more straightforward and less complex than most mystery and thriller writers, but her prose is inspired and carefully penned, making the story easily enjoyable for all readers. Set largely in Ireland, the story offers detailed and accurate descriptions of many real locations, such as the library at Dublin's Trinity College and the Abbey of St. Ide located in the Burren on the west coast. Ryan hits the nail on the head with her wonderfully layered and detailed descriptions. Setting the story in Ireland offers myriad ideas, locations, events, and even characters that help mold the story into another stunning thriller by this talented writer. The protagonists find themselves in a variety of colorful situations: Alicia joins a convent in order to help bring the church down from the inside, while Kevin and Alex work closely with librarian Mrs. Shanahan in the moody and atmospheric

Old Library in Dublin. The situations abound with Sherlock Holmes-esque moods and settings, while the storytelling moves forward with careful planning. Everything is kept tight and intact in this story, as multiple story lines unfold in each chapter and allow the entire work to come together in a climax that will have readers scrambling for the third installment in the series.

DESTINY'S DAMNED

Patricia Harrington, Mystery Author:

“*Destiny’s Damned* is the first in a trilogy that will undoubtedly collect a very loyal following. The novel is structured so that each chapter covers a single day. The result is that the novel has a kind of cinematic quality as the story unfolds, and the pacing is such, that readers will find the novel a quick page turner! (five star review).”

In an e-mail from Carroll A. (Oregon):

“You are a Word Smith for sure. I held off reading it till I could do it at one sitting and was glued to it without any breaks. Great descriptive verse and a book that will keep me on edge until the next installment. Bloody but not enough to turn true readers away. The plot is just a wonderful mind bender and the style of skipping back at times was added zest. It was hard to pin down the bad guys till late in the book and guessing was not possible as you hid them well.”

posted on Amazon.com by BR:

“The pace is fast with enough clues to keep you trying to figure out the plot and the villains. I kept racing ahead looking for the next clue. A fascinating read. Excellent first book, I can hardly wait for the next book in the series.”

posted on Amazon.com by Beth (Mill Creek, Washington):

“Literally couldn’t put it down. Finished at 2 a.m., after standing since midnight, reading ‘just one more page’. More twists than a hanged man’s feet. If you liked *The DaVinci Code*, you’re going to love this one.”

In a personal note from Kathy M. (St. Maries, Idaho) regarding her husband, Jim:

“He was VERY impressed. Jim is a BIG reader—used to be all Louie L’Amour but has branched out the last 5 yrs. and has read many of John Grisham’s. He thinks your book is going to do really well. Hooray.”

In a personal note from Marilyn R. (Pasco, Washington):

“I haven’t had that much fun reading since I don’t know when. In fact, I found myself talking out loud, to the characters! Usually just before someone was about to be killed. You know, that is not my typical choice of genre, but I am really looking forward to the next one. Bravo!”

In an e-mail from Jan E. (Renton, Washington):

“I absolutely LOVE your book—scares me to death reading it and I am not done yet. Your writing is so good I find myself feeling what the victim is feeling. I am in awe! This certainly wasn’t the romance I was expecting.”

By Shawna Ryan

Destiny's Damned

Satan's Scat

Triumvirate of the Damned

TRIUMVIRATE OF THE DAMNED

The Destiny's Damned Trilogy

Book 3

by
Shawna Ryan



Snohomish, Washington



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All of the characters, events, situations, and interpretations in this book are fictitious; any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to other fictional characters, events, situations, or interpretations is purely coincidental.

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Dedicated to
Rhonda Winchell.

Thank you, Rhonda

“There is no science in the Bible. Zero. None....
The Bible was written in different times by different
people. Some of the books are poetry, some of
them are history, some are stories.”

Father George Coyne
Retired head of the Vatican Observatory and
former member of the Academy of Sciences

From Discover Magazine,
September 2008;
“Holy Alliance” by Michael Mason

CHAPTER 1

3:30 a.m.

May 29th

The Vatican

Rome, Italy

THE VATICAN WAS ancient and powerful, an independent state with no army to protect its borders or control its people. Seemingly unaware of enemies within, it slept peacefully this night under soft, inattentive lights.

Inside the thousand room palace, with dawn hours away, Cardinal Pasquale of Genoa sprinted up the worn, Noble Stairway, the *Scala Nobile*, to the third floor and to the Pope's Residence. The Pope had summoned him at this strange hour for what could only be an emergency. Breathless as he approached, he merely nodded as two Swiss Guards in uniforms out of the Renaissance snapped to attention with their halberds and allowed him to pass.

Rushing down the hallway, hurrying passed doorways bearing the coats of arms of other Popes, he came to the closed door to the papal study and hastily knocked.

"Come," came a faint response.

Cheeks flushed, pulse rushing, he entered.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he blurted, forgetting protocol.

Still dressed in his night gown, Pope Linus II was sitting. No, only half sitting on a gold trimmed, silk chaise in front of windows overlooking Rome, leaning heavily against its arm. He was weak and withered, yet when he feebly lifted the hand that bore the ring of his office, he brought Pasquale to his knee.

Reverently genuflecting. Head bowed. Lightly holding the Pope's right hand in his, Pasquale let his lips hover just slightly over the gold ring Linus wore on his fourth finger. Yet Pasquale never let his lips touch it. Never let the bas-relief of St. Peter casting his net be soiled by them as he symbolically kissed it.

With small, brown eyes, Cardinal Luigi Spinali, the Pope's private secretary, looked on, a deep and dangerous anger festering inside him.

His smile was calculatingly pleasant as Pasquale stood and acknowledged him. The flesh around his eyes was amiably crinkling as if he was pleased to see Pasquale while he adeptly hid his displeasure at seeing him.

It was the middle of the night, and Spinali had not been invited to or even told of the meeting. Had he not seen a light under his chamber door. Had he not sensed something was wrong, he would never even have learned of it.

Lately, Pope Linus had been excluding him from important Vatican affairs. Affairs in which he usually took part. More and more Linus was relying on Pasquale for the kind of advice Spinali should be giving him. When less than half-an-hour ago he learned Pasquale had been summoned here in secret, Spinali bristled. Linus was pushing him out of office, preparing to dismiss him, and he knew it.

Spinali glared at the simple Roman cassock Pasquale was wearing. It was a plain black cassock trimmed with only the thirty-three buttons down the front that symbolized each year of Jesus' life. *Look at him. He's not even in proper attire. He's a peasant. A priest only fit to serve the poor.*

Triumvirate of the Damned

Pasquale was tall and thin, his graying red hair disheveled from his having just gotten out of bed. He was from a small country village and looked like it.

The customary cardinal's cassock was a conspicuous scarlet choir cassock with scarlet trim, scarlet watered-silk sleeves and wide fascia around the waist. As if it was an unholy mark, Pasquale shied away from wearing it. He had one, of course, but he seldom wore it and then only on formal occasions. On official business he wore a dressier black cassock with scarlet piping and fascia. Otherwise, he wore the plain, unpretentious cassock he had on tonight, and Spinali had no patience for it.

He admired his own robe, red silk trimmed in ermine to match the color of his thinning hair. He examined for a moment his impeccably manicured hands.

He stared on Pasquale with disdain. *What could this peasant know of power?*

"Spinali."

Pope Linus was addressing him.

"Yes, Your Holiness."

"Leave us."

Spinali's naturally exaggerated lower lip thinned as it spread to a thread across his bottom teeth. "But, Your Holiness?"

"I want to talk with Cardinal Pasquale alone."

His fat cheeks taut as steel bands, Spinali bowed. "Whatever you wish," he strained. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

"I prefer you wait for me in my apartments. Pasquale will let you know when we are finished."

What is so secret between them that I cannot be anywhere near? Spinali seethed. *Am I to be replaced by Pasquale immediately?*

Trying not to reveal his anger, Spinali slowly bowed. "Very well." He turned, walked to the door and gently closed it behind him. Yet, he had no intention of leaving.

Inside the room, patiently waiting for the door to close, Pope Linus put a finger to his lips as if to silence Pasquale for words not yet spoken. Long, uncomfortable moments past.

Linus drew Pasquale to him with a simple gesture and whispered, "Make certain he's gone."

Opening the door, Pasquale stepped into the hall.

"He must have done what you asked," Pasquale reported to Linus when he returned. "I didn't see him."

"Good." Pope Linus had been ill for several weeks, suffering a kind of stomach and intestinal flu. Because of his age and failing health his doctors had not been able to help him much. He could eat only tiny portions of food at one time without vomiting or having to endure painful bouts of diarrhea. He had lost fifteen pounds of his already small frame since Easter. Chronically pale, his lips slightly blue around the edges, he looked very fragile.

"Come, sit with me," he invited.

As Pasquale joined him, he told him, "I want you to do something for me."

With deep sincerity and affection in his voice, Pasquale quickly promised, "Anything, Your Holiness. What do you need?"

"This illness of mine is, I think, the way to my mortality," Pope Linus confided. "I will be dead by Christmas."

Tears welled in Pasquale's eyes, and for a instant, he choked. "You can't mean..." he began, but then stopped himself. He loved this man. Linus was kind and, despite his station, unassuming. He managed the office of the Pope with a velvet glove, and his door was always open to whomever of his priests needed him. With all his heart, Pasquale did not want him to die. But he knew it would change nothing to argue.

"As I prepare the office for the end of my papacy, I will need your help."

Bowing his head in assent, Pasquale glanced at the beat-up Italian loafers Linus was wearing and smiled. They had been a

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gift from Linus' mother the day Linus became a cardinal eighteen years earlier. He had worn them every day since.

Maybe that's why Pasquale loved him so much. The two were kindred. Linus understood him. Understood why he didn't want to wear the bright scarlet cassock of a cardinal. Linus was as informal as Pasquale, always in private wearing these old loafers and just a plain white cassock with a gold trimmed sash. Each putting their work before the displays of their office, they had formed an unspoken bond.

"I want you to get rid of Spinali," Linus whispered. "Get him out of Rome."

Pasquale was not only shocked by the order but by its apparent finality. "May I ask why, Your Holiness?"

"I have heard and observed things about Spinali that trouble me very much," Linus began. "I believe he is corrupt. I have learned he is in control of forces within and without the Vatican in opposition to us. And after my death, he intends to take my place. Through blackmail and bribery he has obtained the support of many of the cardinals to secure his election.

I fear for the Church. Yet, I can prove none of it."

Pasquale was completely surprised by the revelation and paused before he responded. "How can I help?"

Linus was adamant. "I want him reassigned as soon as possible. Given a post of seeming importance somewhere across the world. I want him out of here, and I want you to take his place."

Pasquale brushed off his promotion. "Should we start a formal investigation? Perhaps if we had solid evidence against him, it would be easier to demote him."

"No, Pasquale. His friends are too many and too powerful. We will pretend, you and I, that he is still a trusted servant of the Church and that the post we send him to is of great importance. We will tell his supporters the assignment is 'temporary,' and that he will be welcomed back to his office when his work is done.

Shawna Ryan

Without telling them of his conspiracy, I have, in secret, been garnering support from cardinals loyal to me. With their support, I think my plan will succeed.”

Pasquale was silent, drooping his head as he quietly and sadly prepared to ask the unavoidable. “What happens, then, when you die?”

Linus reached out to him, gently lifting Pasquale’s chin with the back of his fingertips. “I have begun preparing for that, as well. The cardinals loyal to me already know my wishes. I want you, Pasquale, to succeed me. By the time of my death, I will have your election as Pope secured.”

“But, I’m not...” Pasquale protested, standing. A humble man, he did not think he was qualified.

“But you are, my son. You are the priest among all others I trust to lead the Church and to protect it.

In the hallway, his fleshy cheek pressed to the door, Spinali listened and fumed. His small eyes narrowed. The veins in his neck were thick, throbbing cords. He doubled his hands into fists as he seethed, *We’ll see about that, old man. You just try to get rid of me.*

Furious, he grabbed the doorknob but stopped before he turned it. *Hold yourself*, he counseled himself. *Don’t lose your way in a fit of anger.*

It no longer matters what Linus wants. By the time the stage is set, there’ll be no Pasquale.

CHAPTER 2

IN THE MUSTY, eternal darkness of the Sequentia, their underground prison, Hypatia lay naked, her garment a charred blanket on which she suffered. She was away from the three, expired cooking fires, in the Gero at the far corner of the Sequentia.

Burned through layers never meant to be touched, the skin on her lower back and right hip was blistered and black, divided into islands by unnatural, blood-red fissures. Her breathing was shallow and labored, her pain searing and unrelenting as if her flesh was still on fire. Yet courageous beyond imagination as the imprisoned colony of women anxiously watched, she barely uttered a sound.

Beside her, competent and steady Terentia, their healer, was kneeling. Her plump face was as grim as the painful, hideous death awaiting Hypatia.

Eight of the other women tore a strip of cloth from their own foul and filthy garments and filed by, one by one. Handing the strips to Terentia, each whispered tearful words of love to Hypatia as they passed.

Terentia soaked the dirty strips they gave her in a chamber pot filled with cold water from their clandestine well, a well one of them died for in the colony's crypt. She then gently covered Hypatia's wounds.

Shawna Ryan

The child, ten year old Livia, was also on her knees. Her hands gently and tenderly cupped about Hypatia's hand, she caressed it without moving it. Searching for words of comfort she watched charred portions of Hypatia's skin slough away.

"I told you to go lay down," Terentia disciplined Livia. "You should see yourself."

Though hurt herself, her face beet red and blistered, half her scalp bright red and scorched where her tangled, blond hair was burned away, Livia was adamant. "I'm all right, Terentia." She owed her life to Hypatia and wasn't about to leave her.

Hypatia was invaluable to the colony. She was not only teacher and scholar, she was keeper of the colony's secrets and sacred records. On their leader Cornelia's orders, and despite her youth, Livia had been named Hypatia's successor. Which was what brought them to this.

As part of Hypatia's instruction, she had taken Livia into the tunnel adjoining the Sequentia and then into an ancient tomb where their captors once buried their dead. The tomb was revered by their captors, so their captors never returned to it after it was sealed. That made it the perfect hiding place for the colony's mortal secret. Their secret was clues to the substance and location of what would be the most significant discovery in history: Christ's Remnant, the personal testament He dictated to Mary Magdelene just before the Romans took Him into custody. Those clues were hidden inside the hollow, granite and limestone platforms on which crumbled bodies lay.

As important as the Christ's Remnant was, every member of the colony was sworn to die to prevent its discovery. For if the Remnant was discovered, it would be destroyed.

In shock, Hypatia trembled, her hands reflecting her pain. Holding back, yet near the end of her strength, she curled her fingers. A spasm hit her, and she clasped Livia's hand, squeezing it

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until she nearly crushed it. She lifted her head, her tormented glance capturing Livia's. Hell's fire swept through her, and she went rigid.

"Hypatia!" Livia cried. If Hypatia died, the prime responsibility for the safety of His Remnant would fall to Livia, and Livia wasn't ready. There would be no one left to teach her what she needed to know.

When the two of them left the Roman tomb, resealing in it the secrets of the Remnant, they went back into the narrow tunnel that paralleled the Sequentia. Livia had the small hoghead candle and was leading as they crawled back to the hole through which they entered the tunnel from the Sequentia. Hypatia was immediately behind her.

Her mind and heart in reverie as they crowded with the souls of all the stewards of the Remnant who preceded her, Livia did not see that something was coming after them. But soon she heard. A whoosh so powerful the tunnel's walls trembled.

The earth behind them collapsed. The damp walls dried, and dust in midair caught fire.

Temperatures soared. Stones turned crimson. Rocks in the tunnel behind them cracked, then melted, and a river of lava flowed toward them.

As they rushed to the small opening into the Sequentia, from behind them over the lava, a fireball came screaming. Terrified, Livia stopped, her body refusing to crawl through the hole as the fireball reached them.

"Move!" Hypatia screamed, protecting Livia's body with hers.

The fireball struck, and they burst into flame. In excruciating pain, Hypatia physically lifted Livia, pushed her through the hole to the Sequentia, and dove through after her.

Forbidden to cross the threshold into the Sequentia by invisible forces stronger than its own, the fireball was miraculously held at bay in the tunnel. While the women inside the Sequentia rushed to Livia's and Hypatia's aid, it roared and raged outside.

While some of the women sealed the hole from inside the Sequentia with the same rocks Livia had removed to get into the tunnel, others put the fires out on Livia's and Hypatia's bodies. Then they secured them away, moving them further inside.

For hours the women heard the fireball ranting outside. Its sulphuric voice threatening them with violent, sadistic acts. Promising over and over it would get into the Sequentia somehow.

Yet each threat, without satisfaction, was weakening it, draining it of the power evil brought it. By the time three marks evaporated from the Sequentia candle, the fires that burned inside and about the fireball extinguished and turned to acid. Its power no longer slave to its hate, it quieted and calmed. It cooled, and a thin, near fleshless being appeared.

His cold, yellow eyes calculatingly searched the entrance to the Sequentia for the secret to finding entry. When they could not, he turned and crawled away.

Hypatia's head and hand went suddenly limp, and she collapsed. All awareness was gone out of her. Livia searched her back and lips for signs of breathing, and when she could not find them looked to Terentia.

Terentia's fingertips were resting on Hypatia's neck feeling for a heartbeat. Her ear was tucked into the space between Hypatia's ear and mouth listening. "She's very weak but still alive," was her verdict. "She's sleeping."

Livia removed her hand from Hypatia's and sighed. "Do you need more water?"

"Maybe later." Terentia sat back on her heels and looked up. "Why don't you go tell Cornelia I think Hypatia will live."

A wide, relieved smile broke through Livia's cracked, dry lips. Emotion overcame her, and she hurried to Terentia's side, knelt beside her, and hugged her.

"Enough!" Terentia grunted, squirming away from Livia's embrace. "Just find Cornelia and tell her what I said. If she asks when I'll know for sure, tell her before we light the next candle."

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All was peaceful as Livia sat beside Cornelia staring at the Sequentia's candle, waiting for it to burn itself out and be replaced by another: the event when Terentia promised to tell them whether she was certain Hypatia would live. Gathering before their expired cooking fires, the other women of the Sequentia were quietly waiting too. All were willing through prayer for Hypatia to survive.

There was only one thing that could break the women's concentration, and from behind the iron bars that cut off their world from any other, it came. The pounding of footsteps on rock. Metal scraping against stone. With hobnail boots, their captors were coming down the stairway.

Aroused and frightened, the women instantly moved into formation. Standing rigid in three straight rows as iron keys turned in the lock.

Yet their captors did not come into the Sequentia. The iron bars opened, and a body was thrown inside. Metal scraped stone. Their captors' footsteps pounded back up the stairs, and there was silence.

Inside the iron bars, at the edge of the dim and flickering light of the Sequentia candle, the body lay motionless as the women stared in fear. Rigid and still in formation, afraid to move in case their captors came back. In case the body thrown inside was a trap, or worse yet, something diseased, no one moved. No one except Livia.

Picking up the expiring candle, their only source of light, Livia approached the body and studied it. *It's dead*, she determined, gently nudging it with her foot.

She started when it moved its head. She stepped back but did not retreat. Her big, violet eyes widened as before her the dead body unfolded itself and sat up. "Where am I?" it asked.

"It's a woman," Livia whispered. But, never having seen a woman like that, alive or dead, she did not answer her.

"My name is Alicia," the woman told her. "Where am I?"

CHAPTER 3

6:00 a.m.

May 29th

The Vatican

Rome, Italy

AT DAWN, FRAMED by narrow museums at the northern edge of the Vatican, in the grassy courtyard called the *Cortile della Pigna*, Cardinal Luigi Spinali paced. At the upper end of the courtyard was the colossal bronze pine cone historically symbolic of the Greek mythological god known as Dionysus or Bacchus for which the courtyard was named. In the center of the courtyard was the magnificent bronze sculpture of two worlds colliding, seemingly destroying themselves. And over it all, directly above Spinali, was the towering bust of Augustus Caesar. Here, at this hour of the morning, before scores of tourists gathered there, he could be alone.

Weary from having been up the majority of the night and still very angry at Pope Linus for plotting against him, Spinali's face was bloodless, a gray shadow the rising sun could not disperse. In his hand was Kevin James' crumpled letter, the letter he sent to Monsignor Patrick Bodowski with the results of his research. Research that could not only bring down the Church, but disastrously interfere with its destiny. The future of the world. Spinali's future.

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His hand was shaking. His legs were unsteady as the gravity of the dangers before him loomed. Beads of sweat collected on his brow and upper lip, and he fumed. He stopped, uncrumpled the letter and read it again. “Heretics! Traitors!” he stormed, raising his right fist to the sky.

His ermine cuff slipped down his wrist to his elbow exposing a tattoo on his forearm. The tattoo was circular, a black disk with a red ring around it. The ring was wide and bold but fragmented. Inside the black disk was a long spear with a transverse bar that formed a cross. On top was a wreath, and within this wreath was a “P” intersecting an “X,” forming the ancient symbol for Christ’s name. That symbol was also the monogram of the ancient Roman Emperor Constantine. Constantine co-opted it to symbolize his own strength and power. Its presence on Spinali’s arm meant Spinali was loyal to Constantine until death and that he would do anything to see that Constantine’s ultimate and enduring order succeeded. To see that the Roman Empire survived in the Church and one day be reborn in it.

Spinali’s loyalty to the empire was absolute. Yet the fragmentation of the red ring was a constant reminder that the power and authority the empire and Constantine bestowed on him was not yet complete.

He withdrew his arm and lowered it. Unfolding his fist, he looked around for anyone who might be watching, who may have seen his unforgivable display of anger or, worse yet, his tattoo. But no one was there.

His mission known only to a few, he dared not reveal himself or give himself away until his power was complete. And he was being careless.

The Issue was Constantine’s handwritten order that the empire be revived within the Church and was the only surviving evidence of that order. Though its exposure was not long ago threatened by Patrick Bodowski and Alicia Cook, Spinali no longer needed

Shawna Ryan

to worry about it being exposed or its contents destroyed. Patrick Bodowski and Alicia Cook were taken care of. This Kevin James would be taken care of too.

The Issue was in safe hands. No one still alive and free would suspect that Spinali's biological sister, the Abbess at the Abbey of St. Ide in Ireland, was hiding it.

With all his heart, Spinali believed he was ordained to secure the papacy for Constantine's cause. That he was to personally revive the Roman Empire.

Once Pope, he would possess the supreme power in the Church. He could appoint the forces he controlled within the Church to their preordained positions, and together, they would resurrect the empire within the Church. Then, just as Constantine ordered, just as it had always been destined, he would use the power of the Church to enslave the world.

Fascinated by the prospect. Fully engaged in his musing, Spinali brushed his cheek with his hand and laughed.

His bliss, however, was fleeting. He recalled why he had been so angry, what he overheard Pope Linus tell Cardinal Pasquale just a few hours earlier, and his laugh extinguished. His smile burned away, and he spat at them as if they were standing in front of him.

"Take *me* out will you?" he shouted at Linus. "Send *me* away? I think not.

Pasquale will not survive me!"

Spinali paused. Then snarled, "Nor will you."

CHAPTER 4

6:20 a.m.

May 29th

The Vatican

Rome, Italy

IN THE COURTYARD of the Pine Cone, red faced, the veins in his temples near exploding, Spinali took several deep breaths trying to calm himself.

Reassuring himself that what he planned to do was what he was willed to do by the Roman Emperor Constantine, Spinali silently recalled the history of the empire's control of the Church. *That coward, Leo, did it to us. The great Pope Leo III, he mocked, did it when he surrendered the imperial power of the Church, the last vestige of the Roman Empire, to Charlemagne in 800 A.D. By that act, the ancient empire came under the control of foreign powers which dominated the papacy. Church and State were ultimately separated. As a result, the Church and papacy were eviscerated. The great Roman Empire was left an empty shell.*

Pope Linus, like his predecessors, knows as well as I do that the Church is, in all its essence, the ancient empire. Yet, he refuses to acknowledge it. To do anything about it. He is weak and powerless. Too cowardly to revive the empire. Instead, he has chosen to become our enemy, actually threatening the empire's resurrection by attempting to exile me.

Well, just try it old man! Just try it.

Shawna Ryan

“Sir? Your Eminence,” a Swiss Guard was at his elbow. Brightly emerging in the dawn’s sunlight, were the yellow, red and black stripes of his sixteenth century style breeches and blouse. “Cardinal Spinali?”

Abruptly turning, his eyes hard as steel, Spinali seethed, “What?!”

Snapping to attention, afraid to speak, the guard hesitated.

“What do you want?” Spinali demanded.

“To give you news, Your Eminence.”

“Well...?” Spinali asked impatiently.

“Monsignor Patrick Bodowski has arrived.”

“Good.” The news was almost soothing. “Then he must have survived the trip,” Spinali sarcastically speculated.

“We don’t know, yet.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“His injuries were worse than anyone expected. His condition is critical.”

“Where is he?”

“In his cell.”

“Good. Keep him there.”

“Shall we continue to give him medical care?”

“What have you done?”

“The doctor who accompanied him has him on morphine and is feeding him intravenously.”

“Get that doctor out of there. Bodowski is God’s enemy, and he must suffer for it. He’s to have no medical care. Just solid food and water.

“If God wills it, let him die!”

The guard briskly nodded. “Yes, Your Eminence.”

Spinali watched as the guard hurried away. Slipping Kevin James’ crumpled letter into the pocket of his scarlet cassock, he exchanged it for the cell phone that was there.

“Can you talk?” he asked, as a voice answered his phone call.

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“Then, get somewhere where you can,” Spinali demanded, “and now.”

Impatiently waiting, he kept the phone to his ear and started pacing again.

“Are you certain no one can hear you?” he asked, when the voice came back on the line.

There was a pause before the voice responded. “Yes, I’m certain.”

Making certain no one could hear him, either, Spinali whispered into the phone, “You must do something for me right away...”

CHAPTER 5

5:30 a.m.

May 27th

The Sequentia

DAZED, HER MIND fighting to regain consciousness while the women in the Sequentia stared at her, Alicia Cook sat motionless. Her thoughts were of Jarvis. The blond, cocker-dachshund-cross she refused to leave behind had been her devoted love for many years.

Searching for him without moving, she forced herself to concentrate. Where is he?

She thought back to the last time she saw him. Where was I?

That's right. I was underground. In water. There was an explosion. We ran, looking for Patrick.

I was afraid. I was afraid for them both.

I tied Jarvis' leash around my waist. That's right, so I wouldn't lose him.

There was an horrendous smell. Something dead against the wall. But what was it?

"Aaagh," she groaned, as she remembered. It was Patrick.

Oh my god! She shuddered. He was slumped against the wall, his face burned and bloody.

Her eyes flitting beneath closed lids as if in REM, she silently cried, *Patrick.*

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As she remembered letting Jarvis go so she could lay Patrick down, her heart filled with terror. Her mind with frustration. So, *where is he? Where's Jarvis!?*

A man in some kind of robe had him, tying Jarvis' muzzle closed with the leash. Hitting him. He was going to kill him.

God, nooo!!

Hysterical, afraid to face what happened next, Alicia shutdown. Forcing her mind to turn off, she retreated into a mental darkness.

Moments. Months. Years may have passed.

Alicia didn't know how long. All she knew was that during that time her body refused to let her die.

Reclaiming awareness through the darkness, her eyes still closed, she saw a dim light coming toward her. A flickering light.

She moved her head and, when she opened her eyes, saw a pitch black cavern with a single light. A few steps away from her a little girl was holding a large, stubby candle.

Terribly burned, the right side of her young face was bright red and blistered. Half her tangled, blond hair was gone, her scalp bare. The girl was staring at Alicia with big, violet eyes. Strangely, behind her in the shadows, in a kind of formation, were what looked like dilapidated statues of women.

"My name is Alicia. Where am I?"

Frightened, Livia stepped back. Whoever this "Alicia" was, she spoke the same language the guards spoke. Livia turned her head addressing the statues. "She is one of them," Livia announced.

A much older voice spoke. A red haired woman came out from the shadows, and all the statues moved. Her blue eyes glared at Alicia. "What do you want?" Cornelia accusingly demanded. The statues, barefoot women with filthy, tattered sacks for clothing crowded around her.

Shawna Ryan

Clearing her head, Alicia tried to stand. But her hands were tied with twine. The broken rib in her chest ripped at her insides, and she sat back down. "Please, don't hurt me anymore. I don't want anything. I don't even know where I am or what I'm doing here."

Clotted with dried blood, Alicia's short, blond hair was straight and sticky. Her temples throbbed, and she could barely see. Dried blood crusted beneath her broken nose, and her cheek bulged with a big, black bruise.

"Where are my glasses?" she mumbled, when she realized they were gone.

Someone had taken her postulate jumper. All she had on was her light gray, wool pullover and a pair of underpants. She panicked. *They didn't rape me, did they?*

She quickly examined herself. There was no blood, no tear in her panties. *No. I would have remembered that*, she sighed.

"Thank heavens," she said aloud.

She looked back at the women staring at her. "Will you untie me? I won't hurt anybody."

She noticed the scars on Cornelia's cheeks and forehead and the long, thick one over her temple where her hair no longer grew. "They hurt you too, didn't they?"

"We all seem to be their prisoners," Cornelia observed. "We will untie you. But beware. We will be watching you.

Eumachia," she said over her shoulder to a much younger woman. "Get the cutting stone."

"So, where am I?" Alicia asked, while they waited.

There was no warmth in her voice as Cornelia responded, "You are in The Sequentia."

"What's that?"

Cornelia leaned very close to Livia and confirmed that the words she wanted to use were correct. Cornelia had decided that for their own protection they all must learn the language of their guards. Among all the women, the language came easiest to Livia.

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“Sequentia means ‘the continuation.’ Here in our prison, ‘the foreverness.’ For the circumstance in which we live is forever.”

“How long have you been here?”

“I told you,” Cornelia said, somewhat impatiently, “forever.”

“Well, I don’t plan on staying forever,” Alicia told her. “How did I get here, anyway?”

“The Romans brought you,” Livia said, as if she expected Alicia to know already. “Our guards.”

“Romans? But, you’re in Ireland!”

“We don’t know where we are,” Cornelia told her. “We never heard of this ‘Ireland.’ All we know is that the Romans have been here as long as we have. Many generations ago they forced our grandmothers-grandmothers out of their homes and country and brought them here. We’ve been imprisoned in this place ever since.”

“Romans?.... Soldiers?..... Robes?” Alicia murmured to herself. In her confusion, she forced herself to remember the tunnel beneath the abbey and the men with long, brown robes. The man who beat her. “Monks. They were monks!” she shouted. “The monks from the monastery.”

They’re not Romans,” she insisted. “They’re Catholic monks! Out of the Monastery at Cushacorra.”

In The Burren, Ireland, between the Abbey of St. Ide and the Monastery at Cushacorra, the ancient church was dark. Down its ancient stairway, through a cellar door, and down a corridor next to the church crypt was a bronze door, a closet, and an iron door. Behind the iron door was the torture chamber in which Sister Angelina, Sister Benedict Augusta, and Brother Auley were burned to death. Their remains lumps of char.

Though the Abbess refused to talk about it, she was the one who found them. On her orders, the monks and nuns had waited for her outside the church, and she had gone into the chamber alone. When she returned to them after having discovered the

Shawna Ryan

bodies, she acted very strangely. She told them of Sisters' Angelina and Benedicts' deaths and of Brother Auley's passing, simply by explaining that there had been a fire.

Yet, there was something about the chamber in which they died she did not want them to see. She locked it, posted one of the monks as guard, and refused to let anyone else in the room. As if she was waiting for something evil to expire there, she allowed no-one to touch the bodies for two days.

When the Abbess finally permitted the monks and sisters to go inside, her orders were specific: "Take the bodies from where they lay. Put them in the pits. One at a time in separate pits, and burn them to ashes. Sister Angelina first, then Brother Auley. The lives and deeds of Sister Angelina and Brother Auley are to be memorialized. Those of Sister Benedict Augusta's are not. She is to be forgotten. Her name erased from the roles and never spoken again."

Twenty-four hours later, in the darkness of night, with scores of candles burning, the nuns and monks filed out of the abbey and monastery and into the tunnels beneath them. Meeting behind the crypt under the church, they crowded around a wooden altar set beside the underground stream and held vigil.

At each end of the altar was a single, lighted candle. In the center of the altar was a cross. Behind the cross, exhibited for all to see, were 8x10 framed pictures of Sister Angelina and Brother Auley.

The picture of Angelina was taken when she was commissioned a Roman centurion. She was in full regalia. Mounted on her head was a bronze helmet with a tall, red crest running sideways from ear to ear. Bronze bars extending from the side of the helmet crossed her cheeks obscuring her face, revealing clearly only a silver filling in the bottom corner of a front tooth.

Lesser in rank than her, Brother Auley's photograph was behind Angelina's. He too was in uniform, wearing the plainer garb of a Roman soldier. Unlike Angelina's, the red crest on his

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helmet ran from front to back. He was dressed in red jasper cloth, wore a slatted, leather skirt and a molded, bronze breast plate.

Their ashes were in pewter urns next to their pictures. Having died in the line of duty, they were honored heroes. Their ashes would be scattered in the stream to flow out to sea.

Sister Benedict Augusta died a suspected traitor. Nothing would be said of her. Her ashes had been unceremoniously dumped in the limestone fields.

When all the nuns and monks were gathered, the tunnel brightly lit by their scores of candles, the Abbess stepped forward. Solemnly facing the altar, she stretched out her open, upturned hand in salute and brought it swiftly back to her chest. "Hail, Light of Light, Invincible Sun God. We, soldiers of Rome, Caesareans, salute you and pray.

Eternal rest give to them, O Lord, Our Mithra. And let perpetual light shine upon them. To You we owe our hymn of praise, O God. To You must our vows be fulfilled. Hear our prayer, O Mithra. To You all flesh must come.

Eternal rest give to them, O Lord, Our Mithra, and let perpetual light shine upon them."

As the monks and nuns repeated after her, she kneeled before the altar, reached for the cross, and kissed it.

CHAPTER 6

9:30 p.m.

May 30th

Izmir, Turkey

OUT OF THE night sky, its lights bright among the stars, KLM flight TK340 from Istanbul flew toward the Izmir-Adnan Menderes International Airport. It was half an hour late.

Inside, Kevin James and Alex Caldwell were sitting near the tail section, six rows apart and in crowded center seats. It had been a long day.

Having completely misjudged the amount of time it would take them to get six-month visas, they were delayed in Dublin several days. Had they not settled for sticker visas good for only three months, they would still be in Dublin, delayed for at least another eight weeks, waiting for approval from Ankara.

They left Dublin on KLM flight TK1976 at 11:20 a.m. that morning and arrived in Istanbul at 5:30 p.m., eight hours later. After a three and a half hour wait at the Ataturk Airport in Istanbul, they caught flight 340 and, after another hour, were almost in Izmir.

Uncomfortably lodged into the cushion of the close, unforgiving seat in front of him, Alex's long legs were cramped from hours of sitting. He fidgeted, impatient for the final descent. His hands clasped, the thumb of his right hand rubbing his left, he looked past four other passengers, down the row of seats and out the

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window into the dark sky. Pushing back the brim of his brown leather baseball cap getting it off his black, curly bangs, he caught a glimpse of the airport lights. And his burnt-sienna eyes brightened.

Rows in front of him, Kevin saw the lights too, as the plane began its approach. His long hair, lightly tied back, was thin and disheveled. His khaki trousers, their multiple pockets bulging with necessities, were stained and wrinkled. His short-sleeved shirt with elephant designs, untucked and rumpled, matched his weary outfit perfectly.

The sophisticated, modern Izmir Airport was a glass and metal structure, the steel trusses of its arched ceiling part of its design. Images inside reflected off surfaces polished to a high gloss. Cigarette butts littered the floor where Alex and Kevin waited for their packs in the baggage area, oblivious to the thickset, stocky man watching them from several feet away.

Ordinary in appearance, a man of the working class, the man looked as rumpled as they did. A beige, plaid shirt, its pattern a slighter darker beige, hung in casual folds over his dingy, brown slacks. His waistband drooped off to the side where one of its two buttons was missing. Over short, brown hair he wore a beige baseball cap with the worn logo of a green tractor. Without taking his eyes off of them, he reached into a sagging pocket for a beat-up pack of cigarettes, withdrew one that was bent in the middle, and lit up. Seemingly satisfied with his position, he didn't move, didn't spring into action until their baggage arrived.

As soon as Kevin reached for his backpack, the man was beside him, pushing his hand away. "I'll take it." He reached for the strap of the plain, canvas bag Kevin carried across his chest, and Kevin pushed his hand away.

"Sorry," the man said without explanation, turning back toward the arriving luggage.

Shawna Ryan

Grabbing a second pack, very similar to Kevin's though slightly larger, he turned to Alex. "Yours?"

"Yeah," Alex said, reclaiming it.

"Please," the man explained, the arch of his eyebrows rounding. "I am the taxi driver, Manusch. I will take you anywhere you'd like to go for cheap."

"Cheap, huh," Kevin repeated. "How cheap?"

"The other taxi drivers charge twice the rate to go from here to Izmir. I charge only half."

"Half the base rate?"

"Yes."

Alex was suspicious. "If you can get four times that much, why?"

Manusch's high cheeks pressed against his lower eyelids, and he squinted. Ashamed, he looked down. "Because foreigners won't ride with me."

"Why not?"

"They say there's a little odor in my car."

Still suspicious as Manusch looked back up at him, Alex studied him.

Manusch's leprechaunish nose was a sharp contrast to his olive skin and unexpressive lips. His hands were rough, like a man who had worked in the fields all his life.

"You look harmless enough, I guess."

"Can you take us to Selcuk?" Kevin asked.

"Yes."

"How much more for that?"

"No more," Manusch told him, smiling. "That is, if you hire me to be your guide while you're here."

"How much for being our guide?" Kevin and Alex were already running low on funds.

"Thirty lira a day."

Kevin looked to Alex for approval. When Alex nodded, he told Manusch, "All right. You've got a deal. Thirty lira a day, starting tomorrow."

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“Good.” His smile broadening, Manusch took both packs and headed for the door.

“You weren’t kidding about that smell,” Alex observed, as he and Kevin climbed into the back seat of Manusch’s old model Mercedes.

They quickly rolled down the windows. The nauseating odor was like feces-encrusted sour milk. And as they pulled away from the curb, they stuck their heads out their windows like dogs.

CHAPTER 7

11:00 p.m.

May 30th

Selcuk, Turkey

CUTTING THE TRIP from the Izmir Airport to Selcuk to less than thirty minutes, rather than the usual forty-five, Manusch drove like a madman. But, Kevin and Alex didn't care. They were tired. The foul odor in Manusch's cab was more nauseating with each kilometer. All they cared about was getting to a hotel quickly and, hopefully, alive. There were only a few cars and buses on the road that night, and by the time Manusch got them to where he was going, they'd had just one close call.

Hurrying through the narrow, back streets of Selcuk, Manusch pulled up in front of a two story, white stucco hotel at the south end of town. Dark but for the light coming through the center of three red brick, arched doorways, it looked like the hotel was about to close.

Quickly opening the car door for them, Manusch grabbed their packs and hurried inside. "Foreigners," he announced to the tall, light-skinned man behind the upholstered, oak counter.

As Manusch rushed between a mix of round and square tables covered by colorful cloths with bold patterns, he told the man. "Englishmen, I think. Like you."

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Kevin and Alex were barely inside the doorway before the man behind the counter reached beneath it and surreptitiously wrapped his hand around the handle of a semi-automatic, Glock 26. Out of sight, his long-sleeved shirt was stretched to its limits exposing his lower forearm and a round, red and black scar.

Fingering the gun as if deciding whether to pull it out or not, he lingered there. Pretending he was putting something away, he asked Manusch, "Who are they?"

"They will tell you."

Manusch dropped Kevin's and Alex's packs on the floor and announced, "I must leave now." Tucking his shirttail deeper into his pants, he told them. "But, I will be back in two days."

"Two days?" Alex asked. "I thought you were going to be our guide?"

"Don't worry. I will send my fourth cousin on my father's side to help you while I am gone. He will take care of you. And as discount for your trouble, you will have to pay him only half what you would have paid me.

I must take my wife south to Antalya on the Mediterranean. Her father's brother died this morning. We must go quickly."

"But we don't know your cousin," Alex protested. "We don't even know you."

"My cousin is a good man. He will be here by dawn tomorrow and will be at your call twenty-four hours a day until I come back. I give you my word."

"What do you think?" Alex asked Kevin.

"Is he using *your* cab?" Kevin asked him, hoping to avoid that odor for a few days.

"No. My cousin has his own cab. A much better cab."

"Good enough for me," Kevin decided.

"Okay then," Alex added. "But, if your cousin's not here by the time we've finished breakfast, we're hiring someone else. Understood?"

“Understood.”

As Manusch hurried out the door, Kevin turned to the man behind the counter. “Too late for a beer?”

“Not at all.” Releasing his grip, the man left the gun beneath the counter and walked to the end of the bar where several varieties of bottled beer were displayed. “Efes Pilsen’s pretty good. It’s local.”

“Make it two,” Alex told him. “I’m Alex Caldwell. This is Kevin James.”

In his late thirties, the man’s long, kinky, red hair was streaked with gray at the temples. Thick and unruly it was tied in a ponytail. A finely sculpted mustache draped over the edge of his mouth in a fine line coming to rest in the nest that was his beard. Though cut close against his cheeks, the curly, scraggly beard was several inches long at his chin. Staring at them with intense, blue eyes, he served them. “McClusky’s my name.”

“Can we sit for awhile, or are you closing?” Kevin asked.

“No. Go ahead. Make yourselves at home.”

Sitting at a nearby table, Kevin and Alex leaned back in their chairs and collectively sighed.

“Wonder why we haven’t heard from Patrick,” Kevin mused. “I sent that letter to him about our research almost a week ago. Given what I told him, I was sure he’d get right back to me.”

“Don’t worry, it’s early yet. Maybe he’s hasn’t been able to get a message to you.”

“So, where you fellas from?” McClusky asked, as he turned a chair around, straddled it, and sat at the table with them.

“We’re Americans,” Kevin told him.

“Oh yeah. From whereabouts?”

“I’m from San Francisco. Alex is from New York.”

“How do you know Manusch? He doesn’t come around here much.”

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“We don’t know him,” Alex said.

“Just a ride, huh?”

“No, he’ll be our guide while we’re here too,” Kevin explained.

“So, what brings you here?”

“I’m a professor of mythology. We’re here doing research for a paper.”

McClusky turned to Alex. “And you came from New York?”

An investigative reporter for the *New York Post*, Alex knew when he was being interrogated. “Yeah,” he answered. He abruptly changed the subject to McClusky. “But, why are you here? Why’s an Irishman running a Turkish pub? You are Irish, aren’t you?”

“I’m only half Irish. My mother’s Turk.”

“Were you raised in Turkey?”

“No.”

“So, what brought you back?”

“Like I said. My mother’s people are Turk.”

“Is that the only reason?” Alex knew he was pressing. He was tired, and pushing back.

“No, but it’s a good part of it.”

“What’s the other part?” Under the table, Kevin was pushing at Alex’ leg, trying to get him to stop.

But McClusky stopped it. He stood, “That, my man, is between me and my god.” Grinning only as an Irishman can grin, disarmingly wickedly, he walked back to the bar.

4:29 p.m.

May 31st

On the tarmac at the Izmir airport, a light, commuter aircraft, its jet propellers winding, was waiting. Nearby, Manusch was saying goodbye to his wife and three children.

Shawna Ryan

“Tomorrow,” he told her. “I land at midnight.”

She nodded. “I’ll be here.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be alright.”

She nodded again. As Manusch ran to board the plane, she sadly turned with her children and walked away.

CHAPTER 8

*Mid-morning
May 31st
Selcuk, Turkey*

MANUSCH'S FOURTH COUSIN was right on time. He had arrived at the hotel at 5:00 a.m. and was waiting. At mid-morning, he was still waiting.

Leaning against a blue and white, unmarked, subcompact which looked like the loser in a demolition derby, he stared through the central, arched doorway and into the hotel's bar and restaurant. Kevin and Alex were ordering their breakfast of coffee and bread.

"So, where are you off to this morning?" McClusky asked them, as he served them.

"Thought we'd do a little sightseeing," Alex responded, cautious about this overly curious man.

"We're going to the Ephesus Museum," Kevin added. He learned years ago that if you truly wanted to learn about a culture or area you had to build good relationships with knowledgeable locals.

"Looking for anything in particular?" McClusky asked.

"Not especially. But, we want to see what's there and talk to the curator. Do you know him?"

"Yeah, I know him. His name is Oguz. Nice guy if he knows you. Not so nice if he doesn't."

Shawna Ryan

“Do you think he’ll help us with our research if we ask him?”

McClusky looked straight at Alex. “Only if he’s convinced you’re not thieves or here to exploit us.” He turned to Kevin. “Somebody Oguz likes needs to introduce you.”

“Somebody like you?” Kevin asked, getting the drift.

“Sure, I’ll introduce you. Oguz and I may not be friends, exactly, but he knows me well enough. He’ll help you if I tell him you’re legit.”

“Then you’ll go with us?” Kevin pressed.

“As long as I’m back for dinner service. My cook can take care of things while I’m gone.”

McClusky gestured toward Manusch’s cousin. “You won’t need that cab. We can walk from here.”

Outside at the cab, Manusch’s cousin was not happy. After fifteen minutes of arguing, insisting he be allowed to help them, he was appeased only after Kevin paid him for the day and promised he would not tell Manusch they sent him away. With the added promise the cousin could come back tomorrow, Kevin sent him home.

Framed by rolling hills, Selcuk was a worn, sprawling city of about 23,000. Nearby were the ruins of Ephesus, an ancient Roman city, a center of ancient Christianity and the Virgin Mary’s House.

Ephesus was once a thriving port but withered and died when the port dried up. The Roman occupiers destroyed the port centuries ago when they deforested the hills around it, leaving the soils on the slopes unanchored. The bay that once so generously nourished Ephesus filled with silt from the runoffs created. As the bay was replaced by a salty marsh five miles long, Ephesus’ economy starved. Ephesus was ultimately abandoned.

Selcuk was now a destination for visitors to Ephesus. Tourists were everywhere.

Directly above Selcuk, on Ayasoluk Hill, was an ancient fortress. Just below the fortress, were the partially renovated

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ruins of the Basilica of St. John and the presumed location of St. John's grave. The Ephesus Museum was at the edge of a park, near the entrance to the basilica and the intersection of Ataturk Cad, a four lane thoroughfare. It was just a couple of blocks from the hotel.

Kevin, Alex and McClusky walked northwest avoiding the traffic as they wound through narrow streets toward the hill. Above them and all along the way, perched on poles and fountains, on old fashioned television antennas, and on anything else they found convenient, storks were ubiquitous.

The Ephesus Museum was a red clay and brick structure in which distinctive rows of plain, gray stones were individualized. Its dome was red clay tile.

Just inside the entrance was the strange and beautiful, marble statue of the mother goddess, Artemis. Huntress. Sister of Apollo. And daughter of Zeus.

Similar to the Phrygian goddess Cybele, the Ephesian Artemis was the goddess of virginity and fertility. Her statue depicted her as the source of nourishment, life, and regeneration. She had three rows of many full rounded breasts nestled between her outstretched arms. She wore a kalathos headdress like those worn by Cybele and the mother goddess Demeter, with carved images of griffins flowing down the halo. Animals, sphinxes, and bees crowded about her all the way down her body.

"Are you familiar with the story of the feud that rose between Artemis and the Christian's Virgin Mary?" McClusky baited.

"I'm afraid not," Kevin admitted reluctantly. His knowledge of the Ephesian Artemis was limited.

"About 650 years before Christ was said to have been born," McClusky began, "the people of Ephesus built a temple of marble to Artemis on a site already sacred to the mother goddess, Cybele. That temple was fantastic. It was four times as large as the Parthenon and was one of the wonders of the ancient world.

People from all over the empire came to worship her. And with them came donations of treasures and money to spend. A regular economy developed around her.

When the Christians came to Ephesus several hundred years later, they brought with them their mother goddess. The Virgin Mary. Only Mary didn't have a temple. Didn't attract people with treasures and money. Her followers didn't believe in Artemis and tried to break up the Artemis cult.

Needless to say, the merchants didn't like this new goddess. This goddess that was ruining their businesses. The two factions feuded.

I don't know if it was by sheer numbers or just the wearing away of time, but the Christians won out. Artemis was pushed out and her temple destroyed. Picked apart by Christians who used the stones to build Christian temples." His having no taste for either side of the dispute, there was an edge to McClusky's voice. There was sarcasm in his eyes.

"You can see what's left of the temple if you want," he offered. "Just one lone column that was once sixty feet high."

"Thank you, I will," Kevin told him. He could hear the disgust in McClusky's voice, and thought it best if he visited the temple's remains alone. "Maybe I'll stroll down there after dinner one night."

"Suit yourself." McClusky turned to leave. "Go ahead and look around. I'll find Dr. Oguz."

Dedicated to the exhibition and preservation of artifacts from Ephesus, the museum was a monument to them. It consisted of two large halls, a small hall, and a courtyard with colonnades. Its treasures were priceless. Among them were statues of Dionysus and Zeus; two huge statues of Artemis; a bronze statue of Eros with the Dolphin; and a fresco of Socrates.

Alex drew Kevin aside. "I don't trust that guy," he whispered of McClusky. "How do we know he won't scuttle us with Oguz?"

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“We don’t,” Kevin said, unaffected, “but who else do we know? Don’t worry, he doesn’t even know what we’re looking for. And I’m not going to give him the keys to our mission, yet. We’ll take it slow with him.

Come on, let’s take a look around.”

Almost an hour passed before McClusky came back to them. By then, they were in the courtyard in front of the reassembled pediment of the Temple of Augustus, the Roman emperor known as Octavian.

A light breeze stirred the many fronds in the courtyard as McClusky approached them in the company of a short, dark-olive skinned man with gray hair and goatee. He was casually dressed, wearing white pants and a short-sleeved, knit shirt.

“Dr. Oguz,” McClusky began most appropriately, “these are the Americans I told you about. This is Dr. Kevin James, professor of mythology, University of California, Berkeley and this is his assistant, Mr. Alex Caldwell of New York.”

His assistant!?! Alex silently bristled.

“Gentlemen, this is Dr. Oguz, with doctorates in anthropology, archeology, and ancient Roman history. He is curator of the museum.”

“Thank you, Dahren,” Oguz told McClusky, addressing him by his first name, Daren, with its Turkish pronunciation. He extended his hand to Kevin.

“I understand you are here to do research of some kind, Dr. James,” Oguz began. “What is it that you want to learn?”

“We’re here about Mary Magdelene. We think she came to live in Ephesus after Jesus was crucified.” Kevin wasn’t about to tell him that their research so far indicated Christ was not crucified.

It was better, for the time being, that he and Alex act and appear to be Christians who have adopted Christian dogma. Many of the tourists who came to Ephesus and the museum were Christians, and Kevin didn’t want to draw any undue attention

from those who would disagree with him. It would only cause distractions, slow them down and interfere with their research.

He continued, “We want to confirm that Magdelene did in fact come here. We also want to discover whether there are any artifacts she might have left or might be linked to her.”

The probability that Mary Magdelene left a writing containing Christ’s last testament was, as yet, too astounding to mention, too inflammatory to reveal. Despite Magdelene mentioning that testament in her diary, Kevin could not yet prove it existed. More importantly, he and Alex wanted no competition as they looked for it. Publicly revealing his finding would cause a rush of people that would overrun Ephesus and probably destroy the very evidence for which they searched.

“Mary Magdelene, huh? You know you’re not the first who thought she came here? The Greek Orthodox Church believes Mary Magdelene retired to Ephesus to be with the Virgin Mary and that she died here. The 6th Century historian, Bishop Gregory of Tours, concluded that too.”

“Yes, I know.” Kevin also knew that whatever Jesus told her, whatever testament he dictated to her, would have come to Ephesus with her.

“You’re also aware,” Oguz continued, “that if artifacts existed, they would probably have been discovered by now.”

“Yes, I know the chances of our finding anything are remote. But, we have to try.

Any idea where we might start looking?”

“Next to Antioch,” Oguz began, “Ephesus was the chief center of Christianity in Asia Minor. The Christians who came here were retreating from Palestine. They were following the disciples of John the Baptist. St. John the Apostle even brought the Virgin Mary here. There were many Christians in Ephesus at the time of Magdelene and the Virgin.

One of the places they met was the theatre. If I were you, I’d start there.”

Triumvirate of the Damned

From the main gate of Ephesus, Kevin, Alex and McClusky walked along the Curetes Way, a marble-paved road through the city. Lined with the ruins of many statue-less, marble pedestals; topped-off columns; and the remains of ancient buildings, Curetes Way led them to the library. From there, they walked along the Sacred Way to the Great Theatre, a mammoth structure built into a hill.

Relatively well preserved, the orchestra and stage buildings were almost as they were when the theatre was finished, around 100 A.D. With twenty-two tiers of seating, divided into sections by twelve stairways, it held nearly 25,000 people and still hosted concerts.

Kevin, Alex and McClusky were standing on the stage, looking up at the top rows of seating, when the professor in him took over and Kevin told them, “St. Paul was supposed to have spoken here.”

Appreciating the importance of the site for that reason alone, he paused. “But scholars debate whether Paul was very popular. Non-Christians hated him because he preached against the cult of Artemis and criticized the artisans who created Artemis’ shrine. Christians didn’t like him because they were followers of John the Baptist and Jesus. Paul was born a citizen of Rome and never knew Jesus. Trying to bridge the gap between Roman and Jew, he incorporated aspects of Roman and Greek cultures into Christianity. That probably wouldn’t have gone over very well with the Christians. They might not have trusted him.”

“So,” Alex said, bringing Kevin back to the reason they were there, “if Mary Magdelene hid anything in the theatre, where would it be?”

“She would have hidden it under the marble.”

“Where under the marble?” Alex asked. The entire mammoth structure was marble.

“Anywhere.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.”

Shawna Ryan

McClusky was more than willing to help. “I’ll start you out,” he said. His gaze returned to the upper tiers of the theatre. “The most remote, the area of least traffic, is there.” He pointed to the last row, stage right. “And, there.” Turning, he pointed to the last row, stage left. “She would have buried it under one of the seating slabs.”

CHAPTER 9

9:00 p.m.

June 1st

The Vatican

Rome

IN THE SHADOWS of late twilight, as the Vatican ended its day, a lone figure strode along the Leonine Wall through an enclosed passage. The *Passetto di Borgo*, “passageway of the Popes,” was the Popes’ historical escape route to the adjacent Castel of Saint’ Angelo, next to the Tiber River.

The figure was entering the Vatican from the east, from Saint’ Angelo Castel. His face was hidden in the shadows, his identity revealed only by his garb. Though the plain, black cassock he wore was that of an ordinary priest, the black watered silk fascia around his waist suggested he was not an ordinary priest at all. He was a member of the Pope’s household.

Not far from the advancing figure, at the Vatican end of the passage, Cardinal Pasquale of Genoa was descending the Royal Staircase. He was coming from Pope Linus’ apartments.

In private meetings that day, Pasquale and Linus planned Cardinal Spinali’s exile. The decision to discharge Spinali as Pope Linus’ secretary had already been made. That day, they decided to send Spinali to some remote location in southeast Asia, to a troubled place where the politics of just staying alive would keep him busy.

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Before Spinali could be sent away, however, his allies had to be undermined. Those of his supporters who were influential in the church must first be removed from influence. Those who would threaten Pasquale's succession to the papacy must be exiled themselves before Spinali was removed. Their plan had to be kept secret.

Pasquale was exhausted. Intrigue was neither his forte nor was it to his liking. An honest, straightforward man, he felt like he was completely out of his element. Though he understood Spinali was a threat to the papacy and that exile was necessary, he hated conspiring against any man of the cloth. He dreaded the divisiveness in the Church that would come of it.

He reached the bottom of the staircase, paused for a moment, then went into the garden. On the Leonine Wall was a ninth century mosaic. It depicted, in the tradition of the church, the supreme powers on earth: the Church and the Roman Emperor, jointly ruling the world under the protection of Christ.

Several feet away, beneath an ancient tree, was a cream-colored, marble bench. Pasquale sat down. With his palms over his mouth and nose, he contemplated with great trepidation his succession to the Papacy. Becoming Pope was not what he wanted. It was never what he wanted.

He joined the priesthood when he was eighteen, believing that in wearing the cloak of the Church he could spend his life helping those who could not help themselves. He believed with all his heart that God was guiding him.

But Pasquale had learned a lot since then. As he moved up the ranks of the Church, he became leery of its objectives. To stay closer to God he found himself retreating from the Church and going deeper into himself.

Growing stronger within him in the last few years was the realization that God did not want him here. His duties in the Vatican were not God's work at all but more secular in nature. More often than not, he separated God from his duties. Preferring

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to make the worship of God a private matter within his own heart, he only went through the motions at mass. Its rituals were meaningless to him.

Spinali's conspiracy to seize the papacy was a political coup not guided by God but by Spinali's own ambitions. To Spinali the Church was a realm to be conquered. And as if the Church was his earthly kingdom, Pope Linus' reacted like a threatened king. The two of them were preparing to fight over it.

Even more troubling than that, Pasquale fretted. *I've got to help them!*

He lifted his head and stared at the mosaic. *Emperor and Church ruling the world*, he thought.

"It's true, isn't it?" he accused the Church aloud. "Christ isn't your god. He's your shield!"

Enraged, he stood. Fists knotted. Teeth clenched. He was ready to quit.

Pacing, his mind shutting out all else, Pasquale mentally drafted his resignation.

Promising himself he would be gone from the Vatican by dawn, he did not hear footsteps on the marble path or notice the lone figure suddenly stop on seeing him. Lost in angry righteousness, he did not see or sense the figure coming toward him with a steel object in hand.

Yet in the next instant, he felt it. A terrible sting.

His head jerked back. A warm fluid ran along his nose and down his cheek. Dizzy, he stumbled.

He lost feeling in his legs, and they buckled.

He panicked, but it did not matter. By the time he hit the ground, he was dead.

CHAPTER 10

June 7th

The Sequentia

IN THE DARKNESS of the Sequentia where only the single candle glowed, the colony of women anxiously waited, their thoughts and hopes in the gero. Arria was in the gero. Groaning, screaming every time the sharp, brutal pain sheared through her, she was removed from them and taken to that dark corner of their prison to be nursed.

Terentia's twisted, matted hair was clumped tightly against her head and well out of her eyes. She knelt beside Arria. Pressing cold, wet rags against Arria's forehead, she tried to soothe her. "Hold girl. The time is coming."

Livia placed at Arria's feet an unlit, three-wicked candle in the shape of a hog's skull. It was one of the hog's head candles they made for emergencies out of melted wax from the Sequentia candles. As she knelt, sitting on her heels, she clutched her thighs. She, too, was anxious.

"How much longer?" Alicia asked. She was the other patient in the gero. Recovering from the head wounds and broken rib the monks inflicted on her, she had not been out of the gero since she arrived. Restless, she moved closer.

She suspected the colony kept her in the gero, separated from them, not so much for her own good but because they did not trust her. Perhaps if she helped them with Arria, they would at

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least let her join them. “Do you want me to time the contractions?” she offered.

Livia and Terentia didn't know what she was talking about. They ignored her.

Alicia paused, then tried again. “I can help hold her,” she offered.

“You are not strong enough to hold her,” Terentia said flatly.

“I could try. Anyway, I'll be here if you need me.” Alicia stayed close but out of the way.

Terentia spread Arria's legs apart and inserted her fingers in Arria's vagina. When she reached the cervix, she stopped.

“Eumachia! Veturia!” she summoned.

“Now!” she told Livia.

Brushing the air with the back of her hands, Terentia hurried Livia away.

Eumachia was young and healthy with long, palomino blond hair. Veturia was older, her face and scalp disfigured by scars. They rushed toward the gero.

Livia put the hog's head candle to the flame of the single-wicked, large Sequentia candle and lit it. As she returned to the gero, Arria, nearly hysterical with pain, was screaming, “Hurry! Get it out!”

Terentia was between Arria's legs. Eumachia and Veturia were holding Arria down. Terentia cupped her hands and almost instantly received the baby's head. Tugging only slightly while Arria pushed, she pulled, and a tiny, bright red infant came into their world.

Holding it upside down by the ankles, she waited, unenthusiastically, for it to cry.

“I'm sorry,” Terentia said, as she rested the squirming, seemingly healthy new life into Arria's arms. “It's a boy.”

Her words rang through the Sequentia like a death toll. “A boy,” was the sigh.

Turning their backs on him, the women returned to their clutches beside the empty fire pits and mourned.

Having chosen not to witness the birth at all, Cornelia was already sitting at the first fire pit. The scars on her head and face where a guard repeatedly beat her with the butt of his knife the night the guards raped Arria, Eumachia, and Virginia, were red and sore.

Heartsick by what she knew was to happen to the newborn, Cornelia closed her eyes. Helpless to do anything about it, she took slow, deep breaths, covered her face with her hands and mentally fortified herself.

Quietly, without a word to each other or to the new mother who was sobbing over her baby, Eumachia, Veturia, and Livia cleaned Arria with old, wet rags. When they finished, they moved her to the wall, letting her sit with her back propped against it.

Her heart broken, Arria was distraught. After they placed the beautiful baby boy in her arms, they left her alone with him.

Eumachia and Veturia joined the other women at the fire pits. Livia went into the push, the colony's toilet, a deep, dark hollow in one of the walls. There, she claimed an empty chamber pot and took it into the community bedroom, the space they called the cubicularis. With a sharp stone, she scraped from the bedroom walls enough dirt to half fill the pot then took it back to the gero.

Handful by handful, she covered the bloodied dirt floor where the baby was born. Raking and mixing the fresh dirt into the bloody dirt with her fingertips, she cleansed it. By the time she was finished, it almost looked like nothing had happened there.

Alicia stared unbelievably at the silent chill that had settled over the Sequentia. She studied the baby, but there seemed nothing wrong with it. She studied Arria, who now wept openly. *What's wrong?*

When Livia was finished in the gero, she blew out the hog's head candle and returned it to its hiding place. Joining Cornelia,

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her adoptive mother, at the first fire pit, she crowded close to her. With the rest of the colony, she too stared at the only measure of time they had, the *Sequentia* candle.

The infant had been born halfway between the melting hash-marks on the candle that marked the time to go to bed and the time to wake-up. By that reckoning, the baby had less than the width of three fingers to live.

When the three fingers of wax was melted, when the time came for him to die, Cornelia rose and nodded to Terentia. They went into the *gero* together.

He was nursing at Arria's breast, clutching at it with his tiny fingers. Content in his mother's arms, his eyes were closed.

"It's time," Cornelia told her.

With bulging, terrified eyes, Arria looked at them and then at her baby. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, she shook her head.

But the urgency was mounting. Her head shook violently, and she cried, "No!"

Mere feet away, with no idea what was going on, Alicia watched. "What's wrong?"

Cornelia's response was harsh. She did not trust Alicia and glared at her. "Stay out of what does not concern you."

Believing Cornelia and Terentia were being unexplainably cruel to Arria and her baby, Alicia decided to intervene. Adamant they leave her alone, she strode to Arria's side, inserting herself as a silent barrier against them.

"Neither of you know what you're doing." Terentia told them. "We have to take him!"

"No!" Arria screamed, "He's mine!"

Alicia looked down at her. Arria's hair was sparse, her scalp cluttered with deep red scars. Her eyes bulged and never blinked. There was scarring around them, and Alicia realized Arria had no eyelids.

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Suddenly shutting off, Arria stared into space. She lost all sense and started humming.

Oh..h..h, Alicia silently concluded, *she's not quite right*.

Maybe Cornelia has a good reason for taking the baby, Alicia considered. *Maybe Arria can't take care of it*.

Arria pressed the baby to her breast, came to and tearfully pleaded, "Please don't take him."

The baby had finished breast feeding and was sound asleep in Arria's arms.

"Why don't you just leave them alone for awhile?" Alicia calmly suggested, with what she thought was a greater understanding.

Cornelia sighed. She wanted to spare Arria this. Yet they were not going to struggle with her. What was to happen to the baby would be hard enough on the colony without adding strife among themselves.

"Then, so be it. I'm sorry, Arria," she whispered. She turned away with Terentia, and they went back to the fire pit.

They were not yet settled when footsteps on the stairway and metal scraping on stone outside the Sequentia brought them to attention.

The women at the fire pits scattered and hurried into their lines, staring nervously through the iron bars at the bottom of the stairway. A light equal to a thousand candles flared on and flooded the room. As it blinded them, they lowered their eyes.

Outside the bars were two dozen monks from the Monastery at Cushacorra. But they weren't dressed as monks, in peaceful, earth brown robes. They were dressed as Roman soldiers, standing beside a high-powered spotlight they shone into the Sequentia.

Sister Angelina, the nun who was their centurion was dead. No one had yet been named to take her place.

This morning, Gerald was leading them. The handsome, young monk with a self-assured smile and manner who first met Patrick Bodowski at the monastery was chosen by the Abbess, commander of the legion, to take the lead until a new

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centurion could be appointed. He would be no less cruel than Angelina.

Barking orders, he turned the iron key in the lock, opened the barred gate and let the soldiers flow into the Sequentia. Armed and menacing, they split into two lines. In slow, regular cadence they lined up against the walls on either side of the women and encircled them.

The women were trembling. Shoulders down, hands submissively clasped in front of them, they cringed as the soldiers drew their swords.

“Confine them!” Gerald ordered.

The soldier monks pressed against them, shoved against them with their swords, constricting the women’s lines into a circle. Face to face and back to back, the women were bunched so tightly together they could not move.

When they could be constricted no more, the soldiers pressed on anyway. Jabbing the women with the points of their swords, they tortured them. They ignored the women’s cries begging them to stop.

“Halt,” Gerald finally ordered.

He selected from the ranks surrounding the women three of his biggest men, pulling them out of the circle while the remaining soldiers filled in the spaces they left.

Finding Cornelia, he demanded, “Where is it?”

Refusing to answer him would only bring the colony additional pain. “In the corner,” she said, nodding toward the gero.

“Follow me,” he ordered the three men, as he walked toward the corner.

“Shine the spotlight over here,” he directed a soldier who had stayed outside the gate.

The spotlight moved, and its brilliant light illuminated every cranny and crack of the gero. But the gero was empty. Arria and the baby were gone.

Gerald glared at Cornelia. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Find them," he ordered the three soldiers.

"Follow them with the light," he told the man outside.

There was only one place Arria and the baby could hide. In one of the walls of the Sequentia was the dark hollow that was the entrance to the "push."

"There!" Gerald yelled, as he spotted it.

The three soldiers converged on the hollow and rushed inside it. Brutish by the force they used, they dragged from it two women: Arria and Alicia.

Gerald pressed his nose against Arria's. "Where's the baby?" he demanded.

"Look at her," he told his men, gesturing to her garment. "She's had it."

He wrapped his hand around Arria's neck and squeezed. "Where is it?"

"It's not in there," one of the soldiers offered. "These two were the only ones in there."

"Go back and look again," Gerald ordered. "It must be there."

Another soldier drew from beneath his slatted, leather skirt a tiny flashlight, then ducked back into the hollow. A moment passed. "Here! I've got it!" the soldier shouted, to the obvious embarrassment of the one who denied the baby was there.

He brought from the hollow the urine soaked infant. "Found it sitting in their piss pot."

"No!" Arria screamed. "Please, no."

"Boy or girl?" Gerald demanded.

The soldier held the baby boy up like a trophy. "It's lunch," he grinned.

Arria tearfully pleaded with Alicia to stop them. "They're going to kill him. They're going to eat him because he's so near God. Help him. Please, help him."

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Stunned, not believing what she was witnessing, Alicia struggled to escape the grasp of the soldier who held her. She kicked his shins. She bit him everywhere she could reach.

One punch to her bruised and broken rib cage, stopped her. The breath gone out of her, her chest in excruciating pain because the broken rib was broken again, she wilted in his arms, unable to go on.

She was dead weight, and since she could no longer resist, the guard dropped her. Like a shattered doll, she fell hard against the ground. "I'm sorry," she gasped to Arria.

Taking the baby from the guard who found it, Gerald triumphantly tucked it under his arm and strode toward the light. "Release them," he ordered, as he disappeared up the stairway.