

# THE KEY

BOOK TWO of the  
SANCTUS SERIES

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# I

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind ... And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues

KING JAMES BIBLE *Acts 2:2-4*

# 1

*Al-Hillah, Babil Province, Central Iraq*

The desert warrior stared through the sand-scoured window, goggles hiding his eyes, his keffiyeh masking the rest of his face. Everything out there was bleached the colour of bone: the buildings, the rubble – even the people.

He watched a man shuffle along the far side of the street, his own keffiyeh swathed against the dust. There weren't many passers-by in this part of town, not with the noon sun high in the white sky and the temperature way into the fifties. Even so, they needed to be quick.

From somewhere behind him in the depths of the building came a dull thud and a muffled groan. He watched for any indication the stranger may have heard, but he kept walking, sticking close to the sliver of shade provided by a wall pockmarked by automatic weapon fire and grenade blasts. He watched until the man had melted away in the heat-haze, then turned his attention back to the room.

The office was part of a garage on the outskirts of the city. It smelled of oil and sweat and cheap cigarettes. A framed photograph hung on one wall, its subject appearing to proudly survey the piles of greasy paperwork and engine parts that covered every surface. The room was just about big enough for a desk and a couple of chairs and small enough for the bulky air-conditioning unit to maintain a reasonable temperature. When it was working. Right now it wasn't. The place was like an oven.

The city had been plagued for months by power cuts, one of the many prices they'd had to pay for liberation. People were already talking about Saddam's regime like it was the good old days. *Sure, people might have disappeared from time to time, but at least the lights stayed on.* It amazed him how quickly they forgot. He forgot nothing. He'd been an outlaw in Saddam's time and had remained one under the current occupation. His allegiance was to the land.

Another grunt of pain snapped him back to the present. He began emptying drawers, opening cupboards, hoping he might quickly find the stone he was looking for and vanish into the desert before the next patrol swung past. But the man clearly knew its value. There was no trace of it here.

He took the photograph off the wall. A thick black Saddam moustache spread across a face made featureless by pudgy prosperity; a white dishdasha strained against the man's belly as his arms stretched around two shyly grinning young girls who had unfortunately inherited their father's looks. The three of them were leaning against the white 4x4 now parked on the garage forecourt. He studied it now, heard the tick of the cooling engine, saw the shimmer of hot air above it, and a small but distinctive circle low down in the centre of the blackened glass of the windscreen. He smiled and walked towards it, the photo still in his hand.

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The workroom took up most of the rear of the building. It was darker than the office and just as hot. Neon strips hung uselessly from the ceiling and a fan sat in the corner, silent and still. A vivid slash of sunlight from a couple of narrow windows high in the back wall fell across an engine block dangling on chains that seemed far too slender to hold it. Below it, lashed to the workbench with razor wire, was the fat man in the

photograph. He wasn't smiling now. He was stripped to the waist, his huge, hairy stomach rising and falling in time with every laboured breath. His nose was bloodied and broken and one of his eyes had swollen shut. Crimson rivulets ran from where the wire touched his sweat-slicked skin.

A man in dusty fatigues stood over him, his face also obscured by keffiyeh and goggles.

'Where is it?' he said, slowly raising a tyre iron that was wet with blood.

The fat man said nothing, merely shook his head, his breathing growing more rapid in the anticipation of fresh pain. Snot and blood bubbled from his nostrils into his moustache. He screwed up his one good eye. The tyre iron rose higher.

Then the desert warrior stepped into the room.

The fat man's face remained clenched in expectation of another blow. When none came he opened his good eye and discovered the second figure standing over him.

'Your daughters?' The newcomer held up the photograph. 'Pretty. Maybe they can tell us where their *babba* hides things?'

The voice was sandpaper on stone.

The fat man recognized it, and fear glazed his staring eye as the desert warrior slowly unwound his keffiyeh, slipped off the sand goggles, and leaned into the shaft of sunlight causing his pupils to shrink to black dots in the centre of eyes so pale they appeared almost grey. The fat man registered their distinctive colour and shifted his gaze to the ragged scar encircling the man's throat.

'You know who I am?'

He met the grey gaze and nodded.

'Say it.'

'You are Ash'abah. You are ... the Ghost.'

‘Then you know why I am here?’

Another nod.

‘So tell me where it is. Or would you prefer it if I dropped this engine on your skull and dragged your daughters over for a new family photo?’

A hint of defiance surged up inside him at the mention of his family. ‘If you kill me you will find nothing,’ he said. ‘Not the thing you seek, and not my daughters. I would rather die than put them in danger’s way.’

The Ghost laid the photograph down on the bench and reached into his pocket for the portable sat-nav he had pulled from the windscreen of the 4x4. He pressed a button and held it out for the man to see. The screen displayed a list of recent destinations. The third one down was the Arabic word for ‘Home’. The Ghost tapped a fingernail lightly on it and the display changed to show a street map of a residential area on the far side of town.

All defiance drained from the fat man’s face. He took a deep breath and, in as steady a voice as he could manage, told the Ghost what he needed to hear.

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The 4x4 bounced over broken ground alongside one of the numerous canals that criss-crossed the landscape to the east of Al-Hillah. The terrain was a striking mixture of barren desert and patches of dense, tropical greenery. It was known as the Fertile Crescent, part of ancient Mesopotamia – the land between two rivers. Ahead of them a line of lush grass and date palms sketched out the banks of one of them – the Tigris – and the Euphrates lay behind them. Many believed it was the original location of the Garden of Eden, but no one had ever found it. What was certain was that between these ancient boundaries mankind had invented the written word, algebra and the wheel.

Abraham – father of the three great religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity – had also been born here; and so had the Ghost, birthed by the land he now served as a loyal son.

The truck eased past a palm grove and bounced out into the chalk-white desert, baked to concrete by the relentless sun. The fat man grunted as pain jarred through his bruised flesh. The Ghost ignored him, fixing his gaze on a hazy pile of rubble starting to take shape through the windscreen. It was too soon to say what it was, or even how close. The extreme heat of the desert played tricks with distance and time. Looking out at the bleached horizon he could have been staring at a scene from the Bible: the same broken land and parchment sky, the same smudge of moon half melted upon it.

The mirage began to take more solid form as they drew closer. It was much bigger than he'd first thought, a square structure of some sort, man-made, two storeys high, probably an abandoned caravanserai serving the camel trains that used to travel through these ancient lands, its flat clay bricks, baked hard by the same sun almost a thousand years ago, now crumbling back to their original dust.

*Dust thou art*, the Ghost thought as he surveyed the scene, *And unto dust shalt thou return*.

They drew closer and blast marks became apparent, peppering the outer walls. The damage was recent – evidence of insurgence, or possibly just target practice by British or American troops. The Ghost felt his jaw clench in anger and wondered how the invaders would like it if armed Iraqis started blowing lumps out of Stonehenge or Mount Rushmore.

‘There. Stop there.’ The fat man pointed to a small cairn of rocks a few hundred metres short of the main ruin.

The driver steered towards it and crunched to a halt. The Ghost scanned the horizon, saw the shimmer of air rising from hot earth, the gentle movement of palm fronds and in

the distance a cloud of dust, possibly a military column on the move, but too far away to be of immediate concern. He opened the car door to the furnace heat and turned to the hostage.

‘Show me,’ he whispered.

The fat man stumbled across the baked terrain, the Ghost and the driver following in his exact footsteps to avoid any mines he may try to lure them on to. Three metres short of the pile of rocks the man stopped and pointed to the ground. The Ghost followed the line of his extended arm and saw a faint depression in the earth. ‘Booby traps?’

The fat man stared at him as though he’d insulted his family. ‘Of course,’ he said, holding out his hand for the keys to the truck. He took them and pointed the fob towards the ground. They heard the muted chirp of a lock deactivating somewhere beneath them as he pressed the button, then he dropped down, brushing away layers of dust to reveal a hatch secured on one side by a padlock wrapped in a plastic bag. He removed the bag, selected a small key then wrenched open the square trapdoor.

Sunlight streamed down into the bunker and the fat man followed, stepping on to a ladder that dropped steeply away into the darkness. The Ghost watched him all the way down from over the barrel of his pistol until he looked up, his one good eye squinting against the brightness. ‘I’m going to get a torch,’ he said, reaching out into the darkness.

The Ghost said nothing, just tightened his finger on the trigger in case something else appeared in the fat man’s hand. A cone of light clicked on in the darkness below and shone up into the swollen face of the garage owner.

The driver went next while the Ghost did a final sweep of the horizon. The dust cloud was further away now, still heading north towards Baghdad. There were no other signs of life. Satisfied that they were alone, he slid down into the dark earth.



He took the torch and swept it across the uneven, vaulted ceiling. The cave had been cut from rock by ancient hands and stretched away several metres in each direction. Military-style shelving units had been set up along each wall with thick sheets of polythene draped over them to protect their contents from the dust. The Ghost reached over and pulled one aside. The shelf was filled with guns, neatly stacked AK-47 assault rifles mostly, all bearing the scars of combat usage. Underneath them were rows of spam cans with stencilled lettering in Chinese, Russian, and Arabic, each containing 7.62mm rounds.

The Ghost worked his way down the shelves, pulling aside each polythene sheet in turn to discover more weapons, heavy artillery shells, brick-like stacks of dollar bills, bags of dried leaves and white powder, and finally – near the back of the cave on a shelf of its own – he found what he was looking for.

He eased the loose bundle of sacking towards him, feeling the drag of the heavy object inside, then unwrapped it reverently, with the same care he would use to peel dressings from burned flesh. Inside was a flat slate tablet. He tilted it towards the light, revealing faint markings on its surface, and traced their outline with his finger – a letter ‘T’ turned upside down.

The driver glanced over, his gun still on the hostage, his eyes drawn to the sacred object. ‘What does it say?’

The Ghost flipped the sacking back over the stone. ‘It is written in the lost language of the gods,’ he said, picking up the bundle and cradling it as if it were a newborn. ‘Not for us to read, only for us to keep safe.’ He walked up to the fat man and glared down into his battered face, his pale eyes unnaturally bright in the dim light. ‘This belongs to the land. It should not be tossed on a shelf with these things. Where did you get it?’

‘I swapped it with a goatherd, for a couple of guns and some ammunition.’

‘Tell me his name and where I might find him.’

The man seemed to consider saying nothing then shrugged and told him anyway. ‘He was a Bedouin. I don’t know his name. I was doing some business up in Ramadi and he brought it to sell, along with some other bits of junk. He said he found it in the desert. Maybe he did, maybe he stole it. I gave him a good price anyway.’ He looked up defiantly with his one good eye. ‘And now you will steal it from me.’

The Ghost weighed this new information in his mind. Ramadi was a half-day’s drive north. One of the main centres of resistance during the invasion and occupation, it had been bombed and shelled to rubble, and now had a cursed air hanging over it. It was also home to one of Saddam’s palaces, stripped clean by looters. The relic could easily have come from there. The late president had been a keen looter and hoarder of his own country’s treasures. ‘How long ago did you buy it?’

‘About ten days, during the monthly market.’

The Bedouin could be anywhere by now, roaming with his sheep across hundreds of square kilometres of desert. The Ghost held the bundle up for the fat man to see. ‘If you come across anything else like this, you hold on to it and let me know. That way you become my friend – understand? You know I can be a useful friend – and you do not want me as your enemy.’

The man nodded.

The Ghost held his gaze for a moment then replaced the sand goggles.

‘What about the rest of this stuff?’ the driver said.

‘Leave it. There’s no need to take away this man’s livelihood.’ He turned to the ladder and started to climb towards the daylight.

‘Wait!’

He stopped and faced the fat man, who was now looking up at him with a puzzled look on his face, all defiance melted away by his surprising act of charity.

‘The Bedouin herder, he wears a red football cap – he always wears it, I’ve seen him at the market before. I offered to buy it, as a joke, and he became offended. He said it was his most precious possession.’

‘What team?’

‘Manchester United – the red devils.’

## 2

### *Vatican City, Rome*

Cardinal Secretary Clementi drew deeply on his cigarette, drawing the soothing smoke into his anxious body as he looked down at the tourists swarming across St Peter's Square like a plump god despairing of his creation. Several groups stood directly beneath him, their viewpoint alternating between their guidebooks and the window where he stood. He was pretty sure they couldn't see him, his well-stuffed black cardinal's surplice helping to blend him into the shadows. They were not looking for him anyway and he took another long draw on his cigarette and watched them realize their mistake and shift their collective gaze to the closed windows of the papal apartments to his left. Smoking inside the building was forbidden, but as Cardinal Secretary of the city-state, Clementi didn't consider the odd indulgence in his private office an outrageous abuse of position. He generally restricted himself to two a day, but today was different; today he was already on his fifth, and it wasn't even lunchtime.

He took one last long breath of nicotine-laced air, crushed the cigarette out in the marble ashtray resting on the sill, then turned to face the bad news that was spread across his desk like a slick. As was his preference, the morning papers had been arranged in the same configuration as the countries on a world map – the American broadsheets on the left, the Russian and Australian on the right, and the European ones

in the middle. Usually the headlines were all different, each reflecting a national obsession with a local celebrity or political scandal.

Today they were all the same, as they had been for over a week now, each carrying more or less the same picture: the dark, dagger-like mountain fortress known as the Citadel that sat at the very heart of the ancient Turkish city of Ruin.

Ruin was a curiosity in the modern church, a former ancient powerhouse that had become, along with Lourdes and Santiago de Compostela, one of the Catholic Church's most popular and enduring shrines. Carved out of a vertical mountain by human hands, the Citadel of Ruin was the oldest continually inhabited structure on earth and the original centre of the Catholic Church, only ceding power to Rome sometime in the fourth century as part of an opportunistic alliance with the Roman Empire. The first Bible had been written within its mysterious walls, and it was widely believed that the greatest secrets of the early Church were still kept there. Much of the mystery surrounding the place stemmed from its strict tradition of silence. No one but the monks and priests who lived in the Citadel were ever allowed to set foot inside the sacred mountain and, once they had entered, they were never again permitted to set foot outside. Maintenance of the half-carved mountain, with its high battlements and narrow windows, fell exclusively to the inhabitants; and over time the Citadel had developed the half-finished, ramshackle appearance that had given the city its name. But despite its appearance, it was no Ruin. It remained the only fortress in all of history that had never been breached, the only one that had held on to its ancient treasures and secrets.

Then, a little over a week ago, a monk had climbed to the top of the mountain. With TV cameras capturing his every move, he had arranged his limbs to form the sign of the Tau – symbol of the Sacrament, the Citadel's greatest secret – and thrown himself from the summit.

The reaction to the monk's violent death had sparked a global wave of anti-Church feeling that had culminated in a direct attack on the Citadel. A series of explosions had ripped through the Turkish night to reveal a tunnel leading into the base of the fortress. And for the first time in history, people had come out of the mountain – ten monks and three civilians, all suffering from varying degrees of injury – and the newspapers had been full of little else since.

Clementi picked up the morning edition of *La Repubblica*, one of the more popular Italian newspapers, and studied the cover photograph of a dagger-shaped mountain beneath the banner headline:

## **CITADEL SURVIVORS LATEST**

### **DID THEY DISCOVER THE SECRET OF THE SACRAMENT?**

It was the same question all the papers had been asking, using the explosion as a pretext to dredge up every old legend about the Citadel and its most infamous secret. The whole reason the power base had moved to Rome in the fourth century was to distance the Church from its secretive past. Ever since, Ruin had looked after its own affairs and kept its house in order – until now.

Clementi picked up another paper, a British tabloid showing a shining chalice floating above the Citadel with the headline:

## **CHURCH ON ROAD TO RUIN**

### **'HOLY GRAIL' OF SECRETS ABOUT TO BE REVEALED?**

Other papers concerned themselves with the more lurid and morbid side of the story. Of the thirteen people who had emerged from the mountain, only five survived, the rest having died from their injuries. There were plenty of pictures: harshly lit shots snatched

from over the heads of the paramedics as they stretchered the monks to the waiting ambulances, the flash photography highlighting the green of their cassocks and the red of the blood that ran from the ritualized wounds that criss-crossed their bodies.

The whole thing was a huge PR disaster, making the Church look like a demented, secretive, mediaeval cult: bad enough at the best of times, calamitous right now when Clementi had so many other things on his mind and needed the mountain to hold its secrets tighter than ever.

He sat down heavily at his desk, feeling the weight of the responsibilities he alone carried. As Cardinal Secretary of State, he was de facto prime minister of the Vatican city-state and had far-reaching executive powers over the Church's interests, both domestic and international. Ordinarily, the executive council in the Citadel would have dealt with the situation in Ruin. Like the Vatican, it was an autonomous state within a state with its own powers and influence, but since the explosion he had heard nothing from the mountain – nothing at all – and it was this silence, rather than the clamour of the world's press, that he found most disturbing. As a result, the current crisis in Ruin was very much his concern.

Reaching over the sea of newsprint, Clementi tapped his keyboard. Already his inbox was bursting with the day's business, but he ignored it all, clicking instead on a private folder labelled RUIN. A prompt box asked for his password and he carefully typed it in, knowing if he got it wrong the whole computer would lock and it would take at least a day for a technician to unlock it again. An hourglass icon appeared as his server processed the complex encryption software, then another mailbox opened. It was empty – still no word. Leaving the subject line blank, he typed into the body of a new message:

Anything?

He hit *send* and watched it disappear from his screen, then shuffled the newspapers into a neat pile and sorted through some letters that required his signature while he waited for a reply.

The moment the explosion had torn through the Citadel, Clementi had mobilized agents of the Church to closely monitor the situation. He had used Citadel assets to maintain distance from Rome, hoping that the executive council inside the Citadel would recover quickly and take over responsibility for the clean-up. In his orderly politician's mind he saw it as priming the weapons to deal with an oncoming threat. He had never imagined he might be called upon to fire them.

Outside he could hear the chatter of the tourists drifting up from the square as they marvelled at the majesty and wonder of the Church, little knowing what turmoil boiled inside it. A sound like a knife striking a wineglass announced the arrival of a message.

Still nothing. There is a rumour that the ninth monk is about to die. What do you want me to do with the others?

His hand hovered over the keyboard but he typed nothing. Perhaps the situation was resolving itself. If another monk died there would be just four survivors remaining – and three of these were civilians, not bound by silence and obedience to the mother church. They posed the greatest threat of all.

His eyes crept across to the stack of newspapers on the corner of his desk and he saw their photographs staring back at him – two women and one man. Ordinarily the Citadel would have dealt with them swiftly and decisively because of the threat they posed to the long-held secret of the mountain. Clementi, however, was a Roman cleric, more politician than priest, a creature far removed from the trials of direct action. Unlike the Prelate of Ruin, he was not used to signing death warrants.



He rose from his desk and drifted once more towards the window, distancing himself from the decision he was avoiding.

There had been signs of life inside the mountain over the past week – candles passing behind some of the high windows, smoke leaking from the chimney vents. They would have to break their silence sooner or later, re-engage with the world and tidy up their own mess. Until then he would be patient and keep his hands clean and his mind focused on the future of the Church and the real dangers that faced it, dangers that had nothing to do with Ruin or the secrets of the past.

He reached for the pack of cigarettes on the window sill, preparing to seal his decision with the sixth of the day, when the sound of shoe-leather on marble drummed in the corridor outside. Someone was heading his way, in far too much of a hurry for it to be routine. There was a sharp tap on his door and the pinched features of Bishop Schneider appeared.

‘What?’ Clementi’s question betrayed more irritation than he intended. Schneider was his personal secretary and one of the lean, career Bishops who, like a lizard on the rim of a volcano, managed to live dangerously close to the white heat of power without ever seeming to get singed. His efficiency was beyond reproach, yet Clementi found it very hard to warm to him. But today Schneider’s smooth veneer was absent.

‘They’re here,’ he said.

‘Who?’

But there was no need for an answer. Schneider’s expression told him all he needed to know.

Clementi grabbed the cigarettes and thrust them into his pocket, knowing he would probably smoke them all in the next few hours.

He shouldn't have waited for the Citadel to act, he should have dealt with the survivors sooner – and now he had an even bigger problem to deal with.

### 3

#### *Ruin, Southern Turkey*

The rain drifted down like ragged phantoms from the flat, grey sky, swirling as it caught the fading heat of the dying day. It fell from clouds that had formed high over the Taurus mountains, pulling moisture from the air as they drifted east, past the glacier and towards the foothills where the ancient city of Ruin lay fringed by jagged crags. The sharp peak of the Citadel, rising from the centre of the city, tore at the belly of the clouds, spilling rain that glossed the side of the mountain and cascaded to ground level, where the moat had once stood.

In the old town, tourists struggled up the narrow lanes towards the Citadel, slipping on the cobbles, rustling along in souvenir rain ponchos cut from red plastic to resemble monks' cassocks. Some were merely sightseers, ticking the Citadel off a long list of world monuments, but others were making the trip for more traditional reasons, pilgrims come to offer prayer and tribute in exchange for peace of mind and calmed souls. There had been many more than usual in the last week, prompted by recent events and the strange sequence of natural disasters that had followed: earth tremors in countries that were traditionally stable, tidal waves striking those with no flood defences, weather that was both unpredictable and unseasonal – just like the thick, cold rain that was now falling in this late Turkish spring.

They continued their slippery way upwards, rising into the cloud to be greeted, not by the awe-inspiring sight of the Citadel, but by the ghostly outlines of other disappointed tourists staring into the mist towards the spot where the mountain should be. They drifted through the haze, past the shrine of wilting flowers where the monk had fallen and died, to a low wall marking the edge of the broad embankment and the end of their journey.

Beyond the wall, long grass moved gently where water once flowed, and there – just visible like a wall of night rising up from the edge of the mist – was the lower part of the mountain. It had the monumental and unnerving presence of a huge ship in a fog bank bearing down on a tiny rowing boat. Most of the tourists quickly headed away from it, stumbling away through the luminous fog in search of shelter in the souvenir shops and cafés that lined the far side of the embankment. But a patient few remained, standing at the low wall, offering up the prayers they had carried with them: prayers for the Church; for the dark mountain and for the silent men who had always dwelt there.

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Inside the Citadel, all was quiet.

No one moved through the tunnels. No work was being done. The kitchens were empty and so was the garden that flourished in the crater at the heart of the mountain. Neat piles of rubble and wooden props showed where tunnel repairs had been made, but those who had carried out the work had now moved on. The airlock leading into the great library remained shut, as it had done since the blast knocked out the power and disrupted the climate control and security systems inside. Rumour had it that it would open again soon, though no one knew when.

Despite the lull in activity, there were signs that the mountain was returning to normal. The power was back on in most areas and prayer and study rotas had been posted in all the dormitories. Most significantly, a requiem Mass had been organized to finally lay to rest the bodies of the Prelate and the Abbot, whose deaths had plunged the mountain into a leaderless and unprecedented chaos. Every man in the mountain was heading there now, treading in solemn silence as the occasion demanded to pay their last respects.

Or almost every man.

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High in the mountain, in the restricted upper section where only the Sancti – the green-cloaked guardians of the Sacrament – were permitted to tread, a group of four monks were nearing the top of the forbidden stairs.

They too walked in silence, trudging up the darkened stairway, each weighed down with the heavy trespass they were undertaking. The ancient law that bound them was clear: anyone caught here without permission would be executed as an example to those who sought to discover the great secret of the mountain uninvited. But these were not ordinary times, and these were no ordinary monks.

Leading the way was Brother Axel, bristling like a brush, his auburn hair and beard a close match for the red cassock that showed he was a guard. Hard on his heels came the black-cloaked figure of Father Malachi, the chief librarian, his stooped figure and thick glasses a legacy of decades spent hunched over books in the great library caves. Then came Father Thomas, dressed in the black surplice of a priest, implementer of so many of the technological advancements in the library. And finally there was Athanasius in the simple brown cassock of the Administrata, his bald head and face unique among the

uniformly bearded brethren of the Citadel. Each man was head of their particular guild – though Athanasius was only acting head in the absence of an abbot. Collectively they had been running the mountain since the explosion had removed the ruling elite from their midst, and collectively they had also taken the decision to make this journey and discover for themselves the great secret they were now custodians of, sharing the heavy burden of the broken taboo.

They reached the top of the stairs and gathered in the dark of a small vaulted cave, their torches picking out roughly carved walls and several narrow tunnels that led away in different directions, the flickering light as jittery as their mood.

‘Which way?’ Brother Axel’s voice seemed too big in the narrow confines of the chamber. He had led most of the way, surging up the stairs as though it was something he was born to, but now he too seemed as hesitant as the rest of them.

Discovering what lay inside the chapel of the Sacrament was usually the pinnacle of a monk’s life, something that would only happen if they were selected to join the elite ranks of the Sancti. But they were here on nobody’s invitation save their own and the deep-seated fear of learning the forbidden knowledge was both intoxicating and terrifying.

Axel stepped forward, holding his torch out to illuminate niches cut into the rock with solid wax oozing down from them showing where candles had once burned. He swept his torch over each tunnel in turn, then pointed to the central one. ‘There’s more wax here. It has been used more than the others; the chapel must be this way.’

He moved forward without waiting for confirmation or agreement, ducking to enter the low tunnel. The group automatically followed, with Athanasius reluctantly bringing up the rear. For he knew that Axel was right. He had trod this forbidden floor just a few

days previously and seen the horrors the chapel held. He steeled himself now to witness them again.

The group continued down the tunnel, the light from their torches picking out rough symbols on the walls of crudely rendered women undergoing various tortures. The further they went, the fainter the images grew, until they faded entirely and the tunnel opened into a larger antechamber.

Again the group huddled together, instinctively keeping close while their torches explored the darkness. There was a small, enclosed fireplace on one wall, like a blacksmith's forge, dark with soot and dripping ash to the floor, though no fire burned in it now. In front of it stood three circular whetstones, mounted on sturdy wooden frames with treadles to turn the wheels. Beyond them on the back wall a large circular stone with the sign of the Tau carved at its centre had been rolled to one side to reveal an arched doorway.

'The chapel of the Sacrament,' Axel said, staring into the darkness beyond the door. For a moment they all stood still, tensed and nervous as if expecting a beast to come rushing out of the dark towards them. It was Axel who stepped forward to break the spell, holding his torch in front of him like a talisman against whatever might be waiting there. The light pushed away the dark, revealing more dead candles inside the door, drowned in puddles of cold spilled wax, then a wall, curving away to the left where the chapel opened out. And then they saw what the sharpening stones were for.

The walls were covered with blades.

Axes, cleavers, swords, daggers – all lined up from floor to ceiling. They reflected the torches, glittering like stars and carrying the light deeper into the chapel to where a shape rose up in the dark, about the same height as a man and as familiar to each of

them as their own face. It was the Tau, symbol of the Sacrament, now transformed in front of them into the Sacrament itself.

At first it appeared like darkness solidified, but as Axel took a step forward, light reflected dully on its surface, revealing that it was made of some kind of metal bonded together with rivets. The base was bolted with brackets to the stone floor, where deep channels had been cut, radiating out from the cross to the edge of the room where they joined deeper gulleys that disappeared into the dark corners. A withered plant curled around the lower part of the cross, clinging to the sides in dry tendrils.

The group drew closer, drawn by the gravity of the strange object, and saw that the entire front section of the Tau was open, hinged at the far end of the cross beam and supported by a chain fixed to the roof of the cave.

Inside it was hollow and filled with hundreds of long needles.

‘Can this be the Sacrament?’ It was Father Malachi who voiced what everyone in the group was thinking.

They had all been brought up on the legends of what the Sacrament might be: the tree of life from the Garden of Eden, the chalice from which Christ had drunk as he was dying on the cross, perhaps even the cross itself. But as they stood there, confronted by the reality of this macabre object in a room lined with sharpened blades, Athanasius could sense gaps starting to open up between their unquestioning faith and the thing that now stood before them. It was what he had hoped would happen. It was what he *needed* to happen in order to steer the Citadel away from its dark past and towards a brighter, purer future.

‘This can’t be it,’ Axel said. ‘There must be something else; something in one of the other tunnels.’



‘But this is the main chamber,’ Athanasius replied, ‘and here is the Tau.’ He turned to it, averting his gaze from the interior, where dark memories of the last time he had stood here were snagged on the sharp spikes within.

‘It looks like it may have contained something,’ Malachi said, stepping closer and peering at it through his thick glasses, ‘but without the Sancti here to explain, we may never know what it was or the significance it held.’

‘Yes. It’s a great pity they are no longer here in the mountain,’ Axel replied, turning pointedly to Athanasius. ‘I’m sure we all pray for their rapid return.’

Athanasius ignored the jibe. The Sancti had been evacuated on his orders, a decision he had made in good faith and did not regret. ‘We have coped together,’ he replied, ‘and we shall cope together still. Whatever was here has gone – we have all borne witness to this – now we must move on.’

They stood for a while, staring at the empty cross in front of them, each lost in their own private thoughts. It was Malachi who broke the silence. ‘It is written in the earliest chronicles that if the Sacrament is removed from the Citadel, then the Church will fall.’ He turned to face the group, his thick glasses magnifying the deep concern in his eyes. ‘I fear that what we have discovered here can augur nothing but evil.’

Father Thomas shook his head. ‘Not necessarily. Our old idea of the Citadel may have fallen, in a metaphorical sense, yet it doesn’t follow that there will also be a physical end to everything.’

‘Exactly,’ Athanasius continued. ‘The Citadel was originally created to protect and keep the Sacrament, but it has become so many other things since. And just because the Sacrament is no longer here does not mean the Citadel will cease to prosper or have purpose. One may remove the acorn from the root of a great oak and yet the tree will still flourish. Never forget, we serve God first, not the mountain.’

Axel took a step back and pointed his finger at Thomas and then at Athanasius. ‘This is heresy you speak.’

‘Our very presence here is heresy.’ Athanasius swept his hand toward the empty Tau. ‘But the Sacrament has gone, and so have the Sancti. The old ways no longer bind us. We must agree on new rules to live by.’

‘But first we must choose a new leader.’

Athanasius nodded. ‘On this at least we agree.’

At that moment a noise rose up from the deeper depths of the mountain and echoed within the chapel. It was the sound of the requiem Mass, hundreds of voices lamenting the loss of the mountain’s leaders.

‘We should go and join our brethren,’ Thomas said. ‘And until we have new leadership, I suggest we say nothing of what we have seen here – it will only lead to panic.’ He turned to Malachi. ‘You are not the only one who knows the chronicles.’

Malachi nodded, his eyes still magnified with fear. He turned and took a last long look at the empty Tau as the others filed out behind him. ‘If the Sacrament is removed from the Citadel, then the *Church* will fall, not the mountain,’ he muttered, too quiet for anyone else to hear. Then he quickly left the chapel, afraid to be left there alone.

## 4

### *Room 410, Davlat Hastenesi Hospital*

Liv Adamsen burst from sleep like a breathless swimmer breaking surface. She gasped for air, her blonde hair plastered across pale, damp skin, her frantic green eyes scanning the room for something real to cling to, something tangible to help drag her away from the horrors of her nightmare. She heard a whispering, as though someone was close by, and cast about for its source.

No one there.

The room was small: a solid door opposite the steel-framed bed she was lying on; an old portable TV fixed high on a ceiling bracket in the corner; a single window set into a wall whose white paint was yellowing and flaking as if infected. The blind was down, but bright daylight glowed behind it, throwing the sharp outline of bars against the wipe-clean material. She took a deep breath to try to calm herself, and caught the scent of sickness and disinfectant in the air.

Then she remembered.

She was in a hospital – though she didn't know why, or how she had come to be there.

She took more breaths, long and deep and calming. Her heart still thudded in her chest, the whispering rush continued in her ears, so loud and immediate that she had to stop herself from checking the room again.

*Get a grip, she told herself. It's just blood rushing through your veins. There's no one here.*

The same nightmare seemed to lie in wait for her every time she fell asleep, a dream of whispering blackness, where pain bloomed like red flowers, and a shape loomed, ominous and terrifying – a cross in the shape of a letter 'T'. And there was something else in the darkness with her, something huge and terrible. She could hear it moving and feel the shaking of the earth as it came towards her, but always, just as it was about to emerge from the black and reveal itself, she would wake in terror.

She lay there for a while, breathing steadily to calm the panic, tripping through a mental list of what she could remember.

*My name is Liv Adamsen.*

*I work for the New Jersey Inquirer.*

*I was trying to discover what happened to Samuel.*

An image of a monk flashed in her mind, standing on top of a dark mountain, forming the sign of a cross with his body even as he tipped forward and fell.

*I came here to find out why my brother died.*

In the shock of this salvaged memory Liv remembered where she was. She was in Turkey, close to the edge of Europe, in the ancient city of Ruin. And the sign Samuel had made – the Tau – was the sign of the Sacrament, the same shape that now haunted her dreams. Except it wasn't a dream, it was real. In her blossoming consciousness she knew that she had seen the shape, somewhere in the darkness of the Citadel – she had seen the Sacrament. She focused on the memory, willing it to take sharper form, but it kept shifting, like something at the edge of her vision or a word she could not utter. All she could remember was a feeling of unbearable pain and of ... confinement.

She glanced up at the heavy door, noticing the keyhole now and recalling the corridor beyond. She had glimpsed it as the doctors and nurses had come and gone over the past few days.

*How many days? Four? Five, maybe.*

She had seen two chairs pushed up against the wall with men sitting on them. The first was a cop, but not a New Jersey trooper: the uniform was a darker blue, the badges unfamiliar. The other had also worn a uniform: black shoes, black suit, black shirt, a thin strip of white at the collar. The thought of him, sitting just a few metres from her made the fear rise up again. She knew enough of the bloody history of Ruin to realize the danger she was in. For if she had seen the Sacrament and they suspected it then they would try to silence her – like they had silenced her brother. It was how they had maintained their secret for so long. It was a cliché, but it was true – the dead kept their secrets.

So the priest standing vigil outside her door was not there to minister to her troubled soul or pray for her rapid recovery.

He was there to keep her contained.

He was there to ensure her silence.