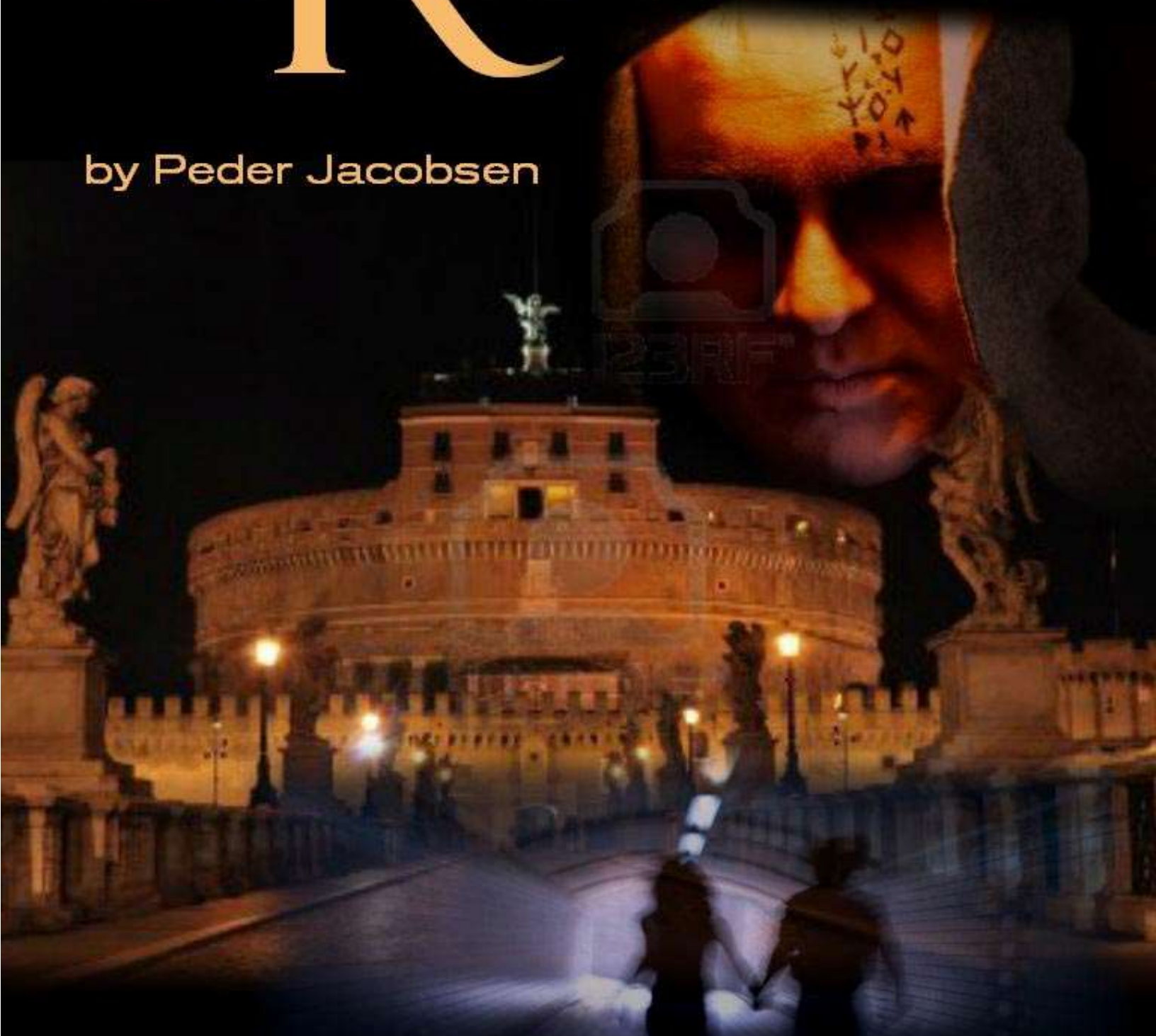


A Griffen & Alexandra St. Georges Novel

# URIM

by Peder Jacobsen



"a stylish and provocative archeological thriller...  
think Dan Brown except christianity is the good guys."

## Prologue

October, 732 AD

Outside Tours France

Grimald Adalbert gripped his spear so tight that his knuckles shown white, even under the blood and the mud.

“Remove the dead,” came the commander’s call. “Tighten the phalanx. They’ll be back again.”

Grimald stepped over a wounded comrade-in-arms and filled the gap the Frankish infantryman had left when he had fallen. Moans rose and fell as men pulled the wounded to the back of the phalanx. Their backs were against the Loire River, so there was no place to bring the wounded or dead. The men were simply dragged to the river’s edge.

The drumming of receding hooves changed tenor, and the Frankish infantrymen knew the Muslim cavalry was wheeling for another terrible charge. He recognized the pause before the storm.

Grimald was a seasoned warrior, having followed Charles Martel into numerous Frankish wars of expansion in Gaul. He knew they had no cavalry to respond to the Muslim threat. Theirs was a purely infantry force—suicidal odds at best. He banished the thought and tried to clear his mind. Grimald was close to exhaustion and their commander, Theodoric, would let them rest until the next attack.

Six days ago, the Franks had intercepted the Moorish horde led by Abd al-Rahman from Spain. The Islamists had plundered Bordeaux and were now approaching Tours in Gaul. After six days of facing each other across the plains and measuring each other’s worth, the battle was joined

that morning. The Franks had been under attack since dawn, and both their numbers and stamina were steadily whittled away by the relentless charges of the superior Muslim cavalry.

The drumming of the hooves started again. It was low at first, as the Muslim cavalry started their horses forward in a trot.

“Here they come,” their commander shouted. “Shield wall! Ready spears.”

Metal clattered against metal as the Frankish infantryman again overlapped their shields into a nearly impenetrable wall—a wedge of shields bristling with spears. Grimald ensured his shield was in place. The right side of his shield was behind the shield of the man on his right, and the left side of his shield was overlapping the shield of the man on his left. Good. Any attacking cavalry spear would stand a chance of deflecting—sliding along the wall of shields.

Twelve-foot anti-cavalry spears lay flat on the ground, spearhead out and manned by others kneeling in front of the shield wall. The spears were braced—butt in the ground and spearhead ready to be lifted when the cavalry drew close. This formation created a wedge-shaped porcupine, bristling with the spears and backed by the shield wall. It was the only reason the Frankish infantry were still alive at mid-afternoon.

Grimald felt his breath deepen as the staccato drumming of a thousand trotting horses changed tenor again and became a solid pounding. The Muslim cavalry appeared over the crest of a small hill one hundred yards away. The pounding grew louder, and as the horde approached, Grimald could feel the tremble deep in his bones.

Fifty yards.

“Steady,” Theodoric called.

Thirty yards.

The commander shouted above the charging cavalry, “Spears up!”

A man near Grimald's feet lifted the front of his spear off the ground and braced the butt end with his foot.

Fifteen yards.

The infantry phalanx braced for the crash of impact, Grimald screamed a guttural, Frankish war cry. The Muslim cavalry was so close that he could see horsemen screaming in return. Their dark faces contorted with the heat of battle. The rolling thunder of hooves was so loud that Grimald couldn't even hear himself screaming his battle cry.

Then the cavalry was upon them. The first wave veered away at the last instant, flowing past Grimald and down the phalanx, slashing into an opening created by some broken spears from the last attack. Then the second wave closed in. Up and down the entire battle line, the lead riders in the second wave did not veer away. This attack was meant to be a crushing blow.

A war horse leapt into the air in front of Grimald, trying to obey his rider and still avoid the spears. The spear directly in front of Grimald moved to catch the front of the war horse but was deflected by the horse's armor before the spearhead caught an unprotected rear leg. The weight of rider and horse snapped the thick spear like a twig. Man and beast tumbled forward. Grimald was thrown six feet backward as the horse slammed into the shield wall, one of the hoofs striking Grimald's shield. Horse and rider tumbled through the ranks, killing several.

Stunned, Grimald looked up from the ground to see other Franks deeper in the phalanx descend on the downed rider. Looking back to where he had been standing, horror rippled through him at the wide hole created in the shield wall. A third, final wave of cavalry was fast approaching.

Without thinking, without his broken shield, and without thought for his own life, Grimald rose to his feet and charged toward the hole. He charged past his dead and dying comrades. He charged past the shield wall. He charged past the spearman who was sprawled facedown and

unmoving. He charged into the open. Wielding his Frankish battle-axe, Grimald Adalbert charged into the teeth of the Muslim onslaught.

There are moments upon which battles turn. There are moments upon which the future of millions of people is decided. There are moments when one man affects time for years to come.

This was such a moment.

The riders in the third charge slowed to meet the unexpected appearance of the lone axeman. The lead rider slowed further and swerved toward Grimald, scimitar raised. His cavalry horse responded, raising his forelegs so the weight of horse and rider would follow the killing blow.

Grimald spun to avoid the blow on his left. He continued spinning full circle, using his momentum to swing the heavy axe in a complete circle and catch the rider from behind—turning Muslim killer into victim. With no change in rhythm, Grimald spun another half-circle, swinging to his right. Grimald ended in a crouch, his axe slicing through the knee of a second oncoming horse on his other side.

The Franks sprang forward as one, screaming approval at the heroism they were witnessing. The counter-charge, against all military convention, rippled down the battle line in either direction like waves from the prow of a ship.

In mere seconds, the momentum of the Muslim charge was slowed. In minutes, the charge was broken as Frankish infantryman responded to the heroism of one man, and Frankish battle-axes exacted their toll from horse and man. A reduced Muslim cavalry wheeled away, and the hoofbeats receded. A hoarse cheer rose from the Franks, and a pause descended on the field of battle.

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In the rear of the Frankish line on the highest hillock stood Charles Martel—future grandfather of Charlemagne. He was an experienced general, and as the Mayor of the Palace, he was the real power behind the puppets on the Frankish throne.

Martel pointed to Grimald Adalbert in the distance. “Bring him to me.”

A runner immediately headed in the direction of Grimald.

Looking back to his generals, Charles Martel said, “The soldiers of Islam are still on horseback, and we are still on foot. We have bought time—that is all. One turn of the hourglass at most. But I do not intend to waste this precious gift. I have a plan, and that man...” He pointed in the direction of Grimald. “That man will lead it.”

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Grimald was still breathing heavily when he arrived at the tent of Charles Martel. Wide-eyed, he stepped into the tent as the flap was held aside for him. He knelt on one knee and bowed his head as he recognized Charles Martel leaning over a table strewn with scrolls and maps. The murmuring of numerous consorts and generals died as Grimald knelt.

The runner announced Grimald and his position in the army. “Grimald Adalbert, *axe heerbann*.”

Charles Martel turned and stepped forward. “Rise, Grimald Adalbert, hero of Tours.”

Grimald rose, head still bowed, uneasy in this tent of powerful men and uncomfortable with the honor bestowed on him. In honesty, he blurted out the truth. “I am no hero, milord,” he stammered. “I...just lost my head.”

Charles turned to a man in a hooded cowl, who was hovering behind the mayor. “You hear that, Beaufort?” he chuckled. “An honest hero.” Then he lowered his voice. “Unlike some in this

tent.” Martel exhaled deeply and turned back to the map table, raising one arm to Grimald in invitation. “Come here, honest hero.”

Grimald hesitated and then came forward, in awe at being at the mayor’s side.

Martel continued, “The day is not won. But you have bought us time—and I have a plan. We must strike quickly because their cavalry is wearing us down. Another charge or two like the last and we will be driven into the river.” Martel’s battle-worn hand traced a quick line over a river depicted on the largest map on the table. “The Moors are certainly brave, but did you notice that last charge? It seemed to me that they are not quite as willing to meet Allah as we have been told. They may be more interested in the temporal than in the eternal after all. And they have much to lose. They are heavy with the loot of Bordeaux.”

The other generals had joined them at the table, and one challenged Martel. “You are certain? How so, milord?”

Martel answered easily and without rebuke. “When the Duke of Aquitaine asked for our aid, he told of the treasures that had been looted from Bordeaux and surrounding lands. From their merchants, their lords—even the churches and cathedrals.”

The man in the cowl stiffened and took a breath as if to speak. But then he exhaled and said nothing.

Martel glanced over his shoulder at the churchman before continuing. “The Duke offered a share of the treasure to us if we stop Abd al-Rahman and recover it.” He returned to the map. “We have received word from a peasant – asdIf farmer that there is a heavily guarded series of tents...here.” He jabbed a finger at the map along the eastern side toward the rear of the Arab formations. “I believe it is their treasure train. If we strike at their treasure and the infidels believe that it is threatened, it may throw their order into chaos. And a cavalry in chaos is a vulnerable

cavalry. Just as we rely on our phalanxes and shield walls, the invaders rely on their organized charges, retreats, and countercharges in carefully maintained formations. If we disrupt those formations and strike simultaneously..." He paused. "We will carry the day."

Another general spoke up. "And if not, milord?"

"Then all of Gaul—indeed, all the kingdoms from Rome to the northern wastes of Britain—will come under the law of Islam." Martel's gaze briefly held each general before he continued. "After us, there are none to stop them."

He pulled another smaller map to the middle of the table. "Now, notice this small tributary here. It winds along the eastern edge of the battlefield, and my scouts tell me it is both shallow and in a slight ravine, and yet the ravine is deep enough to hide men. Grimald Adalbert, you will lead a company of my best men out of sight and along the tributary toward the treasure train. For you are not only brave—you are also blessed with fortune this day. You will surprise the infidel guard and set their treasure train aflame."

"Milord!" came the gasp from the cowled man, still hovering behind Martel. "The treasures of God cannot be so defamed." The words were spat out in indignation.

Martel sighed as if he were dealing with an exasperating son. "Very well, Beaufort. You may go along and rescue from the train those church treasures which you can carry yourself."

"But, milord—I am a man of peace."

"Enough, Beaufort. This is my best and only offer! Take it or not!" Martel's voice rose to a shout.

The cowled churchman stiffened and stepped back a half-pace, maintaining an air of disdain yet simultaneously managing a thin veneer of subordination.



Martel, evidently gaining a grip on his temper, turned again to Grimald. “Hero, once you have taken the train, give Beaufort two minutes to select such ‘treasures of God’ as he sees fit. Then light several of the tents afire. That should create enough smoke for us to see from the field of battle. At the sign of the smoke, all the men up and down our entire line will charge, shouting, ‘The Franks have captured the treasure!’”

Martel then spoke to one of his generals, an older soldier with an air of quiet competence. “Tancred, pull one phalanx in five from the battle line and follow Adalbert’s raiding company up the ravine, spreading your men all along the ravine along the side of the battle. When you see the smoke, attack their flanks from the ravine. With any luck, our counter-charge along the main battle line, an attack on their flanks, and their treasure train burning will create the chaos we need. I’ve only lost one battle in my lifetime, milords. I don’t intend to lose another!”

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Forty minutes later, Grimald found himself crouching in a shallow ravine near the tents of Abd al-Rahman’s captured booty. Behind him was Beaufort, the cowl-covered man of the church, and twelve of Martel’s best Frankish warriors. Grimald Adalbert could feel the weight of the momentous battle on his shoulders. But what he couldn’t know was that the religious and political makeup of Europe for the next thirteen hundred years were hanging in the balance.

He heard the renewed Muslim attack in the distance and knew that the time for action had come. Using some small scrub for cover, Grimald peered over the edge of the ravine. He watched for a minute before scrambling back down to Beaufort and the others.

“There are only three guards,” he announced. “One near us and two others on the far side of the tents.”

One of the twelve, a seasoned warrior, spoke, “That must be because they are bringing every man to bear on the attack. They mean to crush us with the charge we are hearing. We should attack the treasure train now!”

Grimald nodded in agreement. “I will take the near guard and the largest tent. Beaufort, come with me if you want your treasures. I wager what you want is likely in that largest tent. The rest of you take the farthest guards and the other tents. Strike quickly and then burn the tents.”

He felt more the leader because of Martel’s trust and knew he would rather die than fail in that trust. Grimald had never led before, but from the expressions on the men’s faces, he wasn’t far from the mark. He also noticed that he didn’t feel the normal dryness of mouth that accompanied the start of a battle nor the uneasiness of stomach. He felt as though the path ahead was somehow predestined.

“Then God be with you,” Grimald said, looking each man briefly in the eye. As he turned back and started up the small riverbank, he spoke drily to the churchman. “As you are a man of peace, Beaufort, you best stay several steps back.” And without looking behind, Grimald Adalbert clambered over the lip of the riverbank and charged for the second time that day.

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The closest guard lay between Grimald and the largest tent. Twenty paces at most. At first, the guard didn’t hear him and kept walking the other way. However, at the noise of the twelve other Franks crashing through the brush as they emerged from the riverbed, the guard pivoted. He lowered his spear to the ready position in a single, smooth movement. With that distinct motion, Grimald knew he was not confronting a slave guard but an experienced Muslim warrior.

Grimald loosed a Frankish war cry as he pulled his Francesca battle-axe from his belt at a dead run. The Francesca was a smaller axe and all *heerbanns* were experts in throwing it or using it to cleave at close quarters. As a missile, it would give him the advantage over the guard's spear.

The warrior seemed to take in the situation with a single glance—Grimald charging but still forty feet away, twelve other warriors crashing out of the brush, a gangly churchman hurrying behind them—and without expressing any fear, the man turned and ran into the large tent.

Grimald's war cry almost died with surprise, but instead of caution, he charged ahead even faster, afraid of losing his prey. Raising his axe to the throwing position, he ran through the open flap and into the Bedouin tent without slowing. No spear or arrow materialized. No scimitar slashed through the air toward his head. And what followed seemed to occur in slow motion.

At the far side of the tent, the guard stood, hand closing around something inside an ornate chest. Grimald let his weapon fly, and the Francesca axe spiraled through the air with deadly aim. The guard withdrew his hand and started to move away but hesitated long enough to look back at Grimald. Their eyes locked just before the axe struck home. In that split second, something strange passed between them, and the world faded into the background.

Grimald slowly walked to the man, oblivious to Beaufort as he hurried into the tent. Grimald stood over the fallen guard, curious at what he had been trying to save. The man's hand was outstretched in death, and something glinted between the still fingers.

Grimald bent down, opened the hand, and picked up two smooth stones. He frowned. The warrior had ran to try and save two stones. Why? He looked at the stones. They appeared plain enough.

“What was he hiding?” Beaufort was behind him, trying to look over Grimald's giant shoulder.

Grimald shook his head in puzzlement as he studied the stones. “Just two stones. Nothing you’d want, Beaufort.”

He heard the gentle swishing of monkish fabric behind him, and a second later, he felt a searing pain in his back. Then another wave of pain shocked his system into immobility as the knife was wrenched sideways. For a moment, he thought in horror that he had missed another guard hiding somewhere in the tent. He twisted to look behind him and stumbled to his knees. He saw no second guard—only Beaufort backing away with one hand still outstretched toward the dagger he had thrust into Grimald’s back.

Grimald’s eyes widened in confusion, and he tried to stand but found that his legs didn’t respond. He drew in a sharp breath but couldn’t seem to exhale. *Poison*, he thought. Then, in bewilderment, he wondered, *Is this how heroes die?*

Another few moments and he collapsed, his head landing hard on a pile of coins and pearls. His vision began blurring. Darkness crept in from the edge of his vision and soon formed a tunnel through which he could only see at the very center. As he faded, Grimald saw his own hand which had flopped down directly in front of his face at a grotesque angle. The last thing that Grimald Adalbert saw was the man called Beaufort stepping on his wrist and extracting the two stones from his hand.

## Chapter 1

### *The Present Day, Rome, Italy*

The chilly night fog enshrouded the upper half of Castle of St. Angelo, and tendrils of mist nearly reached down to the River Tiber. The fog deadened the still Roman night and dimmed the

streetlamps on the Ponte St. Angelo bridge to a faint glow. The twelve Bernini statues of angels were mere ghosts lining the ancient bridge in the heavy night mist.

The massive Castle of St. Angelo that dominated the far side of the bridge was hidden behind ramparts and fog. Griffen St. Georges pulled back on his wife's arm as he approached the bridge. It was past midnight, and Griff was being cautious. He had glimpsed the shadow of a man halfway across the bridge headed in their direction. Griff wondered if this was the man Alex were supposed to meet.

Erring on safety, Griff pressed lightly on Alexandra's waist, and his wife wordlessly moved with Griff across the road to give the man a wide berth. Griff felt her gait stiffen as they neared the man, passing under the marble gaze of St. Peter's statue and walking slowly onto the bridge.

The man drew even with them on the opposite side of the road. The tip of his cigarette glowed, and his head was down. He seemed oblivious to St. Georges. Then the man was past them and off the bridge, turning right along the Tiber.

Griff exhaled, and he felt Alex relax as well. He stopped at the foot of the first angelic statue. Bernini's creation was breathtaking during the day—but grotesque in the dank night.

Griff spoke the first words in several blocks as he stared up at the first angel on the bridge's right side, the statue of the Throne Angel. "These statues are breathtaking but a little unnerving. They look like they could start moving."

Alex glanced up at the statue. "Look at the wings. In the dark, they seem more demonic than divine," she said, shivering again.

Griff chuckled. "Same feeling as being in a darkened cathedral in the middle of the night."

She smiled. Then her expression faltered as she glanced back in the direction where the man had disappeared. "Griff, do you think that was him?"

He realized she was tense. Her mind wasn't really on the statue, but on their meeting. He didn't blame her. The night had a silent expectancy—a palpable tension.

Griff and Alex were on vacation in Rome and had agreed to meet an acquaintance of their stateside friend Professor Timothy Johnston. Dr. Johnston had asked that Alex bring back a valuable item of antiquity. As a professor of Ancient Hebrew Studies, Johnston was constantly searching for archeological evidence supporting the veracity of the Scriptures.

Alex had received a text from Tim asking them if she could meet a courier at 8:00 p.m. on the *Ponte St. Angelo* on Sunday evening. He didn't mention what the artifact was, only that the matter was urgent. She had replied in the affirmative because of their long friendship and deep respect for Professor Johnston. Shortly thereafter, she had received a second text stating that the courier's flight was delayed five hours. The delay had pushed the meeting into the wee hours of the night. So now, Griffen and Alexandra St. Georges found themselves on the ancient bridge at nearly two in the morning.

Griff roused himself from his short reverie and walked to the left side of the bridge, peering into the mist the way the man had gone. Nothing.

Turning back, he finally responded to his wife's question. "Sure looks like he's gone. But it's tough to be sure in this fog." His voice drifted off as he stared into the dark. Focusing on her again, Griff took in his wife's slim figure in her calf-length coat. The coat's belt was cinched tight against her small waist, and her full brown hair cascaded around her shoulders.

The silhouette of his beautiful wife brought strong feelings to the surface. Griff felt affection and a healthy dose of attraction—as well as concern. Maybe bringing her to the meeting wasn't a good idea after all. "You sure you're up for this, Alex?"

“I’m not letting you out here alone, Griff. I’d be worried sick waiting alone in our hotel room.” She tilted her head back and shook her hair once—briefly, the way she did when she was making the final point in an argument. “And I’m the expert in antiquities, remember?” The humor in her tone belied the seriousness of her reminder. He loved that their relationship that was both laced with and softened by dry humor.

When they were first married, he had felt threatened by her independent strength. Now, after seventeen years of marriage, he adored her all the more for it. *Yes, Griff decided, I’m glad she’s here by my side.*

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Alex absorbed the affection in his smile as he returned to her side of the bridge. It warmed her, dispelling some of the disquiet that had been building in her. She slid her arm through his and then nestled her hand inside her coat pocket as they walked toward the next angelic statue the middle of the bridge.

Alex studied Griff as he scanned the castle ramparts on the far side of the bridge. His strong features, dark hair graying at the temples, firm jaw, and the first sign of crow’s feet—they all became visible and then retreated into darkness as he passed through the glow of the next streetlamp and into the shadows again. She loved him. Still...and more.

She faced forward, towards Castle Saint Angelo. “Hadrian’s Mausoleum,” she murmured. The castle’s outline was emerging from the dense fog.

“I thought you said this was the Castle St. Angelo.” It was a question.

“It’s both,” she answered. “The original foundations of the castle were built as gardens and as the final resting place for the Emperor Hadrian. Hadrian’s Mausoleum was the castle’s original name.”

“Cheerful thought, Alex,” he said dryly.

She smiled. But she also pressed a little closer to him as they continued across the bridge. She wasn't sure if it was the temperature or the atmosphere that brought her near. It was unseasonably cold tonight, and a breeze was picking up, swirling the fog. Griff blew into his hands as he scanned the bridge behind him. The breeze increased their visibility. She followed his glance, relieved when she saw no one.

Alex nudged him. She nodded toward the headlamps of a car approaching down the *Lungotevere Castello* road. The taxi lamp on top of the vehicle became visible as it neared.

They crossed the last twenty yards to the end of the bridge and then waited across the street from the ramparts of the famous castle.

The taxi slowed and then stopped about twenty yards away. A rear door opened, and a man stood. He remained behind the door and peered in their direction, one foot still in the taxi.

“*Signore et Signora St. Georges?*” the man called softly.

“*Si,*” Alex heard Griff respond in Italian.

The man glanced back the way he had come, then peered into the gloom over the Tiber River. Satisfied, he shut the door and came around to the front of the taxi.

“Please come into the light, *Signore St. Georges.*” This time he spoke in accented English.

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Griff raised an eyebrow at Alex. Because of her career in archeology, he knew there was a darker foil to the public face of antiquity. Items that ended up in museums curated by reputable historians had often been passed through the hands of the disreputable to get there. Midnight meetings and darkened alleyways were sometimes a distressing reality.



Griff stepped forward out of the shadow of the final angel, the Angel of the Offer of Vinegar, and into the harsh light of the taxi's headlamps. He noted that Alex didn't move, as if reluctant to leave the protection of the angel's marble wings.

The man held up his mobile phone to Griff, screen toward himself. He seemed to be comparing Griff to something on the screen of his phone.

Griff endured the scrutiny, one eyebrow still raised, squinting against the bright halogen headlight. He glanced back at Alex, then turned again to the man as he heard a muffled command in Italian.

The taxi headlights doused, and the man came forward. The darkness deepened as the headlights winked out.

Griff realized that he was more comfortable shrouded in the darkness once more. *Alex must be as well*, he thought, for she edged up to his side after the taxi lights were put out.

"So... you are Griffen St. Georges," the man said as he extended his hand. "I am pleased to meet you."

"And you are?" Griff asked, a bit slower in taking the proffered hand. Tim Johnston had asked them to meet someone tonight to bring back a package, but the brief texts hadn't revealed the messenger.

"I am Father Ricci. A friend and long-time..." He searched for the correct English word. "...associate of your *Professore* Johnston." He smiled.

Griff noticed the clerical collar beneath the man's overcoat as his eyes readjusted to the darkness.

Father Ricci turned his Italian charm on Alex. "And you are the beautiful Alexandra St. Georges. *Professore* Johnston was right about that." He addressed them both again. "I am sorry

that I am so late. However, I am leaving the country again early this morning, and the *professor* greatly desires to see what I have found.”

Father Ricci produced a small leather box from inside his overcoat and presented it to Griff. The box was about four inches square and two inches deep. It was non-descript, covered with decomposing leather. Ancient wood poked through the leather tatters in several spots.

Griff opened it. The quickening breeze had lifted more of the fog, and the lampposts shown brighter, aiding his vision. He angled the box to catch some of the light from the closest streetlamp. Gold glinted from a small statue of a horse head on a pedestal. A pair of embedded jewels studded the head as eyes. The whole thing wasn't more than two and a half inches tall, but even in the dim light, the detail was breathtaking.

Father Ricci's eyes bounced back and forth from their faces to the box, like a father watching his children open a package he knows they'll love. “May I present... The Third Knight of Charlemagne!”

Griff whistled under his breath. “A knight? Like a chess piece?”

Alex drew in a sharp intake of breath as she too glimpsed the treasure. “It's exquisite, Father,” she said, voicing her appreciation.

Father Ricci smiled, pleased at their reactions. “*Professore* Johnston said you would be able to appreciate this, Mrs. St. Georges. This was part of a golden chess set, a gift presented to Charlemagne by Pope Leo III after he crowned Charlemagne emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 800 AD *Professore* Johnston was instrumental in tracking down the knight. We couldn't have done it without him. His Holiness is lending the treasure to *Professore* Johnston for several months as his personal thanks.”

“He's going to like this,” Alex acknowledged.

“He’ll flip out over it all right,” Griff agreed.

Griff paused for a few moments, taking in the ancient piece of history. He was briefly transported back in time, to Charlemagne’s coronation there in Rome.

Father Ricci broke the silence. “You have no car?” he asked as he glanced around. “Allow me to assist. I will drop you off at your hotel.” The father gestured to his waiting taxi.

A quick glance at the forlorn surroundings confirmed to Griff that it may be some time before another taxi came along. He didn’t relish the long walk back to the hotel in the middle of the night. Especially with Alex and the valuable antiquity.

“We’d be delighted, Father. *Grazie.*” Griff returned his attention to the golden knight, taking one more extended look under the dim light. After several long moments, Alex’s hand tugging at his elbow brought him back to the present.

She whispered into Griff’s ear without taking her eyes off the Vatican’s emissary. “Griff, Father Ricci is nervous. He was scanning up and down the street as if he were expecting someone.” She hesitated before continuing. “Or maybe he’s afraid of something.”

Griff tore his gaze from the treasure and searched her face. Her expression and tone had turned light and didn’t match the gravity of her words. He recognized the cocktail party smile on her face—the artificial one—and followed suit with a false smile of his own as her fingers dug a silent message into the crook of his elbow.

Gesturing at the boxed treasure as if she were commenting, Alex said, “He’s holding something back. He’s afraid, Griff.”

Griff responded with lighthearted nod of his own. He had learned to trust his wife’s instincts. His eyes narrowed as he too scanned their surroundings. Calculating aloud, he said, “If

Ricci intended to hurt us, he sure could have done that already. And if he was planning mischief, he would be nervous, not afraid.”

She picked up his thread of thought. “Okay. But how do we know he’s really a friend of Tim’s?”

“Who else would know we were supposed to meet someone here?” Griff answered his own question by saying, “No one. And I don’t want to be wandering around the streets until two in the morning with you and a valuable piece of antiquity.” She stopped.

Griff could see her praying for a few seconds before she spoke. “My heart says that we should not be afraid of him but of what he fears.”

Griff raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement and started toward the taxi. Father Ricci murmured something to the taxi driver through the passenger window. The driver absently flicked a glowing cigarette stub outside the car before raising his window against the night air.

Father Ricci straightened and faced them. “Come, come. You walked here, so your hotel is not too far?” The father’s head nodded again in acceptance of his own invitation.

Griff opened the rear door on the driver’s side for Alex, then slid in next to her.

With a final look up at the castle and quick glance across the river, Father Ricci joined them in the rear seat from the opposite side. His smile faded, and he leaned forward to address Griff across Alex sitting between them. “There is something more, *Signore* St. Georges.” He hastily added, “And *Signora*,” addressing Alex after she tensed at being overlooked.

Griff smirked to himself. *Alex and I will probably discuss that back in the hotel room*, he thought.

“As I was searching for the Third Knight, I came across—how do you say—‘hard’ evidence of something far more valuable. If I give you the information, can you also take that back to *Professore?*”

The driver turned in his seat and interrupted. “*Scusi... Albergo?*” The driver groped for the English word. “...Oh-tel?” He put his hands next to his head and tilted it as if laying his head on a pillow, addressing Griff. “Oh-otel?” He turned on the dome light inside the taxi and gestured toward a map in his hand.

“*Spegnere la luce!*” Father Ricci spat out the words in a machine-gun whisper.

*Turn the light off!* Griff recognized the Italian. He spoke a smattering of several languages, and Italian was one of them. Griff and Alex looked in shock at Father Ricci—fear and panic was obvious in his outburst.

He met their gaze, and for a long moment, their eyes locked, but he didn’t speak.

Then, almost simultaneously, the side and rear windows of the taxi exploded. And in the instant before his eyes reflexively shut, Griffen St. Georges saw the left side of Father Ricci’s skull shatter in a splash of crimson.

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Fifteen minutes earlier, the Guardian was following the taxi as it picked up Father Ricci at the Vatican. Almost immediately, his earbud had crackled to life, and he heard that the meeting place would be the foot of Castle St. Angelo, by the bridge. As the taxi moved in the direction of the *castello*, the Guardian dialed a number on his encrypted mobile phone. The call was answered on the first ring.

“Report,” was the one-word greeting.

“He’s meeting someone at the foot of *Castel Sant’ Angelo*,” the Guardian said.

Silence. For a moment, the Guardian thought the call had dropped, then the voice replied, “He can’t be allowed to share his knowledge.”

“I know what to do.”

“Will you use your Acolyte?”

“No. He’s new. I only gave him back-up instructions.”

“Clean-up arrangements?”

“In place.”

“Get yourself into position and wait for my final go-ahead.”

The connection was severed.

The Guardian knew the tangle of one-way streets around the Vatican and along the Tiber river intimately. The taxi with Father Ricci inside would need to go east past the *castello* and then come back along a one-way road bordering the Tiber to drop its passenger at the *castello*’s front. That would give him time.

Armed with that knowledge, he didn’t follow the taxi but instead wound his way to the Piazza Pia and followed it toward the Tiber River. He turned right onto the Borgo Santo Spirito and parked. He was still on the Vatican side of the Vittorio Emanuele bridge and less than three-hundred meters from the front of *Castelo Sant’Angelo*.

Grabbing the backpack lying on the passenger seat, he trotted across the street to edge of the bridge. Dressed completely in dark gray, he was hardly noticeable as he turned left along the pedestrian walkway that ran along the Tiber and headed for the stairs leading down the river.

He glanced at his watch. He calculated that he had gained about three minutes because the taxi would have to go past the *castello* and double back. He had used one minute walking to the stairs. That meant he had about two more minutes before the taxi should arrive in front of the

*castello*. It would be enough time for the Guardian to act, but the Master would have to grant his approval quickly.

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The OverMaster picked up the phone on the first ring.

“Yes?”

“I just received a call from my Guardian. Ricci is meeting someone tonight. I am requesting permission to act decisively. The Guardian is in place, and our action window opens in three minutes.”

The OverMaster recognized the caller, there was no need for names. It was one of his subordinates, a Master—and this particular Master was placed in the Vatican.

“Did Ricci meet with the Monsignor yet?”

“No.”

“Status, then.”

The Master encapsulated the situation quickly. “We lost Ricci in France but picked up his trail again at the Rome airport. He came straight here to the Vatican only thirty minutes ago. He couldn’t have met with the Monsignor because the Monsignor has been with me all evening—first at a Curia function and then at a late teleconference with Asia. I watched him leave not two minutes ago.”

“Did he get any phone calls or messages?”

“No. Not anytime after Ricci would have landed in Rome.”

“Did the Monsignor show signs of stress?”

“No. But he wouldn’t.” The Master paused before summarizing. “So, Father Ricci comes straight to the Vatican, doesn’t meet with anyone of consequence, yet leaves again in less than

thirty minutes for a midnight meeting at the Castelo. My conclusion? No one here at the Vatican knows about what he found yet, but in..." There was a pause on the line as the Master apparently calculated. "In about ninety seconds, someone might."

"Giving the Guardian the go-ahead to act is a serious escalation." The OverMaster sighed. "And there is no time to consult the ArchMaster. But...your man lost him in France, so we have no choice."

The OverMaster's words were clear. If the assignment went wrong, the OverMaster would lay the blame on the Master's head.

The Overmaster hesitated for only a second. "Guard us," was his curt command.

"Thy will be done," was the Master's reply.

The OverMaster set down the receiver. He moved slowly to his fourth-story window, high in the mountains of Croatia, and gazed down from Castle Erazemer. It was after 1:00 a.m., and the dozen or so buildings that formed the tiny Croatian hamlet below were completely dark.

It was a serious escalation indeed, he thought. He preferred subtler methods. This could easily bring unwanted scrutiny, but the deadline was barely a week away. The Order needed to be protected. The 5th Order was waning, and the 6th Order needed to rise.

He stood frozen for a full minute, his lips pursed in concentration, his hands clasped behind his back. Then he nodded to himself. He had acted correctly.

The OverMaster moved away from the window. His nose and lips briefly emerged from beneath the shadows of his black cowl as he blew out the single candle that lit his room. He would inform the ArchMaster soon—but now, he needed to join the others in the caves beneath the castle. The ritual was about to begin.

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The Guardian glanced ahead at the landing at the top of the stairs leading down to the river. The location was about fifty meters from the *Vittorio Emanuele* bridge and provided cover in all directions except down the stairs. Trees along the *Borgo Santo Spirito* road blocked the view from the buildings across the street. On his front and his right were stone walls just over a meter high. Behind him the stairs led down to the riverbank below. At this time of night, no one would be coming up from the riverbank below. Very private. The landing would do nicely.

The Guardian ducked behind the walls of the landing and started pulling pieces out of his custom-made backpack. In seconds, he had laid out five pieces on the ground in front of him. None of the pieces were longer than eighteen inches. Twenty-five seconds later, he had attached the shoulder stock to the main body of the weapon, screwed on the rifle barrel, and inserted the bolt.

His phone rang, and he lightly touched his earpiece. “Yes?”

“Guard us,” came the curt instruction.

“Thy will be done,” was the Guardian’s reply.

Leaving his backpack on the ground, the Guardian squinted through a thickening fog toward the *Castelo Sant’Angelo*. Sure enough, headlights were approaching the *castello* from the far side along the *Lungotevere Castello* road. He snapped the scope onto the rifle and quickly glanced in all other directions and saw only the faint red taillights of a single car.

*And the only other car in view is heading away. Good,* he thought.

He rammed a clip home, working the bolt action in one smooth movement. He planted his feet slightly wider than shoulder width apart and crouched behind the stone wall. The Guardian now held a fully loaded German DSR-1 sniper rifle. The oversized scope was letting in enough ambient city light to be effective at night. With this rifle braced along the stone wall of the landing and the front of the *castello* less than three hundred meters away, he couldn’t miss.

But the Guardian hadn't counted on the fog. The few wisps he noted while approached on the *Piazza Pia* hadn't concerned him. But here along the river, it was definitely thicker. He frowned as he settled in behind the scope. The taxi had stopped with the driver's side almost broadside to him about 290 meters away. The fog swirled as a figure left the back of the taxi and disappeared in the growing haze.

The Guardian pulled his head from the scope, peered into the mist, and cursed. He was about to leave the landing and risk moving closer to the *castello* when he felt the breeze pick up. He lowered his right eye to the scope. The breeze was clearing the fog slightly. It might be enough.

Even if it wasn't, he recalled that *Lungotevere Castello* road was a one-way road in his direction. The taxi would have to pass within one hundred and fifty yards of him when it left. But it would be a shot into a moving car. Better to try for this longer but static shot.

The headlights of the taxi showed three people, and just when the Guardian picked out the father, the taxi lights doused. He paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust. The fog swirled again, and the figures were once again too dim for a clear shot.

He waited. The wind freshened again and it cleared enough to see that the other two people were a man and a woman. They appeared to be examining something in the dim light. There! The man held it up toward the streetlamps on the *Ponte St. Angelo* for a better look.

The Guardian swung the scope back to the father, who was returning to the taxi. Damn, the fog again! He waited another few interminable seconds.

When it cleared a little, he could see the man and woman getting into the taxi from the side closest to him. The father was nowhere to be seen. That meant he had gotten in on the far side of the taxi, probably in the back. He positioned the crosshairs of the scope in the location where he

thought the father would be and waited. The fog was thinning, but he couldn't see into the back seat of the taxi. The light of a streetlamp reflected off the windows.

The interior light blinked on. With it, the Guardian had a clear view of Father Ricci. Almost immediately, the light went out. But it had been enough.

The Guardian corrected his aim in one millisecond and tapped the trigger twice in succession. Two shots. The first shot would shatter the window but might be deflected by the glass. A slight deflection probably wouldn't miss, but it may not be the killing shot he needed. The second shot was for insurance.

Through the scope, he saw the dark outline of the father's head snap sideways, followed by his body slumping forward against the back of the front seat.

The Guardian swiveled and ducked once more behind the stone wall of the landing. In seven seconds, he had disassembled the barrel, and in another twelve seconds, the shoulder stock was off and all the pieces were in the backpack. Leaving the backpack where it was, the Guardian emerged from the stairs empty-handed, as if he were coming up from the riverbank, and headed back to his car.

But he wasn't satisfied.

Two things bothered him: One, the father's head was moving during the second shot. And two, the head had snapped sideways, not backward. The subsonic rounds he'd used were necessary in the city because it eliminated the crack of the rifle bullet. At this distance, it would've taken almost a full second to reach the target. It might not have been a clean kill, despite the two shots.

But the Guardian knew that if Father Ricci wasn't dead, the Guardian's Acolyte would finish the job.

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The crash of shattering glass and Alexandra's reflexive scream were barely a millisecond apart. Griff grabbed Alex and pulled her upper body across his legs.

"Go, go!" Griff shouted at the driver in English, then switched to Italian. "*Andare!*"

The driver had needed no translation, and the car was already rocketing forward.

Griff realized the driver was starting *toward* the shots and shouted, "*Indietro!*" *Backward.*

The driver slammed on the brakes and started to turn around.

Griff had thrown his own torso over his wife's, and now his head nearly touched Father Ricci. He turned to examine the father and locked eyes with Ricci's lifeless orbs barely four inches from Griff's face. The father had flopped forward against the front seat, and his head was wrenched sideways toward Griff.

He took in the sight—the father's face was almost unmarred, and yet a large part of the left side of the skull was a tangle of matted red. Griff was both fascinated and revolted but didn't dare sit up and expose himself to more gunfire.

Then he heard Alex's voice, muffled yet insistent: "Griff, head to the Vatican. He must have come from the Vatican. They have a hospital." Her mind hadn't stopped processing—even through the violence.

Griff barked at the driver, "*Vaticano! Prego, prego!*" *To the Vatican, fast!* He carefully raised his head to look back through the missing rear window. No vehicle was following, and in a few seconds, the taxi would disappear around the far side of the *castello*. He ducked and again found himself inches from Father Ricci's sightless eyes.

The sightless eyes blinked.

Griff started, fighting the instinct to back away, realizing that raising his head could make it a target.

Griff heard a cough—more of a gasp. And the eyes slowly focused on Griff.

The lips moved.

Griff was transfixed. Father Ricci was desperately trying to communicate. The lips moved but gave no sound.

Their weights shifted as the taxi cornered to the left, following the Piazza Adriana to the rear of the *castello*.

“Griff, let me up now,” Alex said. “I think we’re behind the castle.”

It took a moment for her voice to register. Then Griff responded, “He’s alive, Alex. And he’s trying to say something.” He sat up, allowing Alex up as well. As she rose, Griff gently said to the dying priest. “Father, save your strength. We’re taking you back to the Vatican.”

\*\*\*

The Guardian stopped at the edge of the *Vittorio Emanuele* bridge and glanced left across the bridge toward the heart of Rome. A figure was approaching him on the bridge. The Guardian wasn’t concerned. He watched while the man stopped at the foot of a lamppost, lit a cigarette, then threw the match over the bridge.

Their eyes briefly made contact, then the Guardian turned toward his car with a casual stride. Once at his vehicle he turned around.

The man from the bridge had turned right toward the *Castelo Sant’Angelo*. Fifty meters down the walkway, he stepped onto the landing, scooped up the Guardian’s discarded backpack without breaking stride, and disappeared down the stairs and into the Roman night.

The Guardian got into his car and one minute later he was heading west through the *Sassia Lungotevere* tunnel and out of the city.

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Alex gasped as she took in the sight. The priest's eyes narrowed. The lips moved again without sound.

Her hands reached toward Father Ricci's wound, then halted in mid-air as she realized there was nothing she could do. Instead, she reached down and grasped Father Ricci's dangling hand, offering the comfort of her touch. She stroked his hand for several moments, subconsciously realizing that Griff was speaking Italian to the driver.

After a minute, Griff turned to her. "The driver is pretty shaken up. He wanted to dump us all at the next corner."

Alex could hear the driver muttering what she thought was the rosary.

Griff continued, "You were right, by the way. Father Ricci came straight from the Vatican. It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes ago. I convinced him to take us to the entrance where he picked up the father. I said I'd pay for the damage to his taxi if he took us there. I'm hoping someone who can help will be there."

Alex tore her gaze from Father Ricci and glanced out the taxi window into the darkened city. She sensed Griff studying her face before saying, "Don't worry. I told the driver to stay well away from the river and use the Via Crescenzo."

She turned back to the dying priest. Her eyes searched Father Ricci's face, not looking at the wound but at the person behind the face.

Compassion and dismay flooded her being—then suddenly, confusion. Her head jerked down to where her hand held Father Ricci's. His hand twitched inside her gentle grip: once, twice, several times—a pattern.

She glanced at Griff, eyes wide. "Griff, his hand is spasming. But...but there's a rhythm." She paused, concentrating. "I think's it's Mor—" She stopped and looked at their joined hands.

The father's hand was squeezing hers hard. Her eyes flew up to his, carefully avoiding the gaping wound. Was he slipping away? His eyes locked with hers. Somehow in her spirit, she understood. The eyes wanted her to listen.

She exhaled through pursed lips before whispering, "I don't know it, Father. I don't know Morse code." Her throat tightened in quiet despair, and she couldn't speak for a long moment.

Father Ricci's eyes moved to Griff.

Alex frowned a moment, then nodded. "He used to know it. I dare not move your arm—or even bump you. Your wound...it's..." She struggled for the right words.

Ricci's eyes blinked once in slow resignation.

"Wait," she said. "Let me be the conduit to him." And she slid her free left hand to Griff.

\*\*\*

Griff stared at the life and death drama playing out before him. It was like the fog outside. He was seeing everything just as she was, but he wasn't quite comprehending. Yet he trusted her completely.

Alex's hand started squeezing his. Short squeeze. Long Squeeze. Short squeeze. Pause...  
Morse code!

He looked from their hands to her eyes and finally to Father Ricci's ashen face. The eyes were desperate and determined. Father Ricci was transmitting Morse code to Alex, and she was passing it on to him.

Griff's amazement caused him to lose the first few letters.

"...n..?...t...t..r..u..s..t...d..r.." He didn't know some of the letters—he was too rusty.

"God, help me!" The arrow prayer shot up silently into the heavens. "...not trust D.R."  
Which doctor?

Griff lost the next few letters again in the mental scramble. He concentrated.

“r...?...u..s..t.....?...i..n..?”

The letters trailed off. Griff watched as the father’s eyes started to lose focus. The eyelids drooped.

“He’s too weak, Griff.” Alex’s voice was small and resigned as she let go of Griff’s hand and reached across to stroke Father Ricci’s cheek. She was careful to stay away from the wound.

Griff exhaled deeply. He turned away in time to see the white bricks of the *Atlante Garden Hotel* slip by. The Vatican was only a few blocks away now.

Alex whispered an almost subconscious prayer as she stroked the father’s cheek with the back of her fingers. “God, help him...”

The father’s eyes turned watery, and the eyelids nearly closed. A single tear escaped and curved down his cheek in tiny fits and starts.

Griff could see Alex continue to pray silently. Suddenly, the father’s eyes widened and focused again.

“Griff!” She grasped Griff’s hand again and once more transmitted the silent code. The letters came slower this time. Clearly, it took great effort. He knew this couldn’t go on much longer. It was a miracle Father Ricci had lasted this long.

“u...?...i...?...c...a...t...a...c...?...?...?”

....?...r...?...e...r.....?...a...t...c...h...i...n....”

The eyes glazed over again, and the hand went limp.

Griff could barely hear Alex’s whispered prayer, “Lord, receive him.”



Griff breathed his own silent prayer and turned his attention back to their surroundings. The taxi was slowing as it entered the *Plaza Del Risorgimento* from the west. The wall of the Vatican loomed on the far side of the plaza. A quick scan confirmed that the area was deserted.

Not surprising. It was the middle of the night, Griff reminded himself. Looking ahead to the Vatican, he noticed the driver repeatedly glancing in the rearview mirror.

Griff twisted around and peered through the shattered opening that used to be their rear window. Nothing. No headlights following. He waited a long moment before turning back and addressing the driver. “You see someone?” Griff asked in Italian.

“*No, signore.*”

The taxi headed straight across the plaza and slowed as it approached the wall of Vatican City. The headlights caught twelve-foot-high doors in the Vatican wall as the taxi swung wide and then close to the entrance. The driver stopped with Father Ricci’s rear passenger door only eight feet from the large bronze doors. Griff studied the entrance. All was quiet.

“*Porte de Santa Rosa, signore,*” the taxi driver said. Then he switched to rapid-fire Italian.

“What’s he saying, Griff?” The extended burst of Italian had pulled Alex’s attention from Father Ricci.

“He’s saying that this is a new entrance into the Vatican. It closes right after rush hour every day and isn’t opened until rush hour in the morning. He says it’s never open at night.”

Griff asked a question in Italian, then started translating for Alex again as the driver answered. “I asked him if he was sure this was where he picked up the father. He assures me that it was here.” He glanced in all directions, then at the door again. No one here. He asked another

question and got another response—this time, the driver seemed agitated, his gestures getting more pronounced.

Griff turned to Alex again, simultaneously listening and translating. “I asked if he actually saw Father Ricci come out of these doors, and he says he didn’t see exactly where the father came out. But he insists that the father must have come through the *porto*. He says when he first arrived, no one was here. He circled the Plaza once, and by the time he had returned, the father was waiting here outside the door.” Griff glanced across the adjoined plaza, measuring distances in his head. “Couldn’t have taken more than ninety seconds for the taxi to circle the plaza once.”

“And there aren’t any other entrances to Vatican City that are close enough for Father Ricci to come from that quickly,” Alex mused. “The closest is the Museum Entrance, and that’s a half-mile away at least. He’s right. He had to come out from here.” She thought for a moment. “Think we should have him honk?”

“Let’s not wake up the neighborhood. We have a dead priest here. I’ll go knock on the doors.” Griff opened his door and started to get out. He was interrupted by another machine-gun stream of Italian. Griff listened, then gestured toward Father Ricci and Alex, responding to the driver in Italian.

When he was finished, the driver grunted sullenly and turned back to the front—his agitation held in temporary abeyance.

Griff got out and turned around to look Alex in the eyes. “He’s doesn’t want a dead body in his taxi. I explained to him how the father is barely alive and you are nursing him.” Griff’s eyes bore into hers with the unspoken message to not reveal that Ricci was now dead.

Alex nodded her comprehension of the deception.

Griff resumed, “I also told him that if I can’t get anyone’s attention, he can take us to the nearest hospital. Then we’ll pay him.”

Although Griff and Alex knew that Father Ricci was dead, the driver didn’t have a clear view of Father Ricci’s face and couldn’t know for sure.

Griff headed toward the bronze doors.

“Griff!” Alex called, and he poked his head back in. “Better hurry,” she said quietly as she gestured over his shoulder, toward the way they had come.

Down the *Via Crescenzo* Griff saw a single set of headlights moving their direction. *Lord help us*. He hurried to the *porto*. He took in the twelve-foot-high bronze door panels. The emblem of the Swiss Guard, security force for the Vatican, was emblazoned across the panels. He banged his closed fist on the doors. Hard. The booming sound carried into the darkness. He stepped back a few feet and looked up, searching for any sign of a response.

Nothing.

He glanced over his shoulder, past the roof of the taxi behind him. The car coming down the *Via Crescenzo* was closer. It couldn’t be more than six blocks away now, he calculated. He turned to bang on the door again.

A single bronze panel—the one directly in front of him—was now open.

A figure stood back from the opening a few feet, shrouded in darkness. Before Griff could speak, the figure burst into motion. The feet slid shoulder width apart, and the figure crouched slightly, arms moving up.

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Alex had been alternating between watching Griff at the door and checking the approaching car. She hardly noticed as the taxi driver leaned over and fumbled with the glove compartment.

The next thing she knew, the driver had swung his arm into the back seat as if to swat an unruly child. As Alex shrank back, she registered the silenced weapon in the driver's hand. Then the arm swung away from her, and the driver deliberately pressed the silencer against Father Ricci's side and fired twice. The weapon barked two harsh coughs.

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Griff registered the sound of two rapid coughs coming from the taxi behind him.

Before he could move, a handgun appeared in the man's hand, four feet in front of Griff.

*He can't miss.*

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Alex dove for Griff's open door, but her feet slipped on the blood that had pooled on the taxi floor. Her hips bounced off the front edge of the seat, and she slid to the floor between the front and back seats.

She was half in and half out of the taxi. Her legs and hips were wedged on the floor behind the driver's seat, and her torso and arms were on the pavement outside. Beads of tempered glass sliced into her knees as she desperately tried to scramble away from the gun.

Twisting, Alex saw the driver trying to bring his weapon to bear on her, awkwardly trying to aim behind his seat. Then she heard the roar of a gun from the Vatican entrance and saw a simultaneous flash from the silenced weapon in the driver's hand as he fired a third time, this time at her.

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Bright flames bloomed from the handgun in front of Griff's face. Then a deafening boom. Even as he flung his body to the side, he was too late. The heat of the flame and the grit of spent powder stung his face.

He hadn't moved in time.

Griff rolled as he hit the ground. Coming up in a crouch, he didn't register any pain. *How had he missed—?* The figure in the doorway had not been aiming at his head but over his shoulder into the front of the taxi.

*Alex!* Griff lunged to the back door of the taxi but halted as the figure swung the handgun unmistakably at the center of Griff's chest. His ears still ringing from the roar of the handgun, Griff froze.

The figure moved through the doorway toward the car, gun never wavering from Griff's chest.

"Alex!" Griff called. His own voice sounded mushy through the ringing in his ears. He heard a distant response but couldn't make it out. "Alex!" He turned his head toward her as he called, but his eyes never left the man with the gun.

"Griff?" This time he could make out her response, as the ringing in his ears faded. *Thank God!* She sounded okay. But he didn't go to her—the gun was still trained on his chest.

At the sound of Alexandra's feminine voice, the man with the gun frowned as he cocked his head to the side and looked past Griff's shoulder through the taxi. Griff followed his gaze to Alex. She was squirming out the other side. Seeing she was all right, Griff turned to the man from inside the Vatican.

The man was early thirties and muscular beneath a well-tailored gray suit. *Probably Swiss Guard.* Knowing the security services around the world frequently identified each other by a lapel pin when on duty, Griff scanned the man's suit. Sure enough, he saw a small lapel pin. Glancing up at the three bronzed door panels that were still closed, Griff could see that the small pin matched

the seal of the Swiss Guards on the doors. Griff relaxed a little, but the weapon was still pointing at him.

The man's eyes took in the entire scene as Alex struggled to her feet from the far side of the taxi. The man lowered his weapon but kept it at the ready—cradled in both hands in a classic combat grip. When he spoke, it was with the faintest German accent: "Where is Father Ricci?"

Griff realized that he was standing in front of the rear taxi door where Father Ricci's body lay slumped in the back seat. Wordlessly, Griff stepped aside and slowly pointed to the rear of the taxi.

"Open it," the man commanded.

Griff opened the door using no sudden movements and raised his hands as he stepped back.

The man's eyes took it all in.

"We tried to help him," Griff offered truthfully, clearly trying to place Alex and himself on this armed man's side. She paused. "We were too late."

The man glanced first at Griff, then scanned the area in all directions.

Griff followed his gaze around the plaza. No one yet. Even the car that had been approaching down the *Via Crescenzo* was gone.

Still alert, the man lowered his head to look into the back seat. Griff watched as he switched the gun to his left hand and brought his right hand to check for a pulse on Father Ricci's spattered neck. The gun pointed at the ground, but Griff saw a finger was still on the trigger. The man seemed as comfortable with the gun in his left hand as it was in his right.

His hands still up slightly, Griff took a few steps backward and watched through the missing back window.

Alex stayed clear on the far side of the taxi but also leaned down to watch.

The man's eyes flickered over the taxi driver he had just killed and stopped on the weapon still held in the driver's hand. It was out of his reach on the far side of Father Ricci.

His right hand went back to his gun with the same combat-ready grip. He said to Alex, "Take the gun from his hand and put it on the floor. Touch only the barrel of the weapon, please."

It was a command—and again it was tinged with a faint accent. Evidently, he wasn't ready to shoot them. But he clearly wasn't ready to trust them.

She slowly reached in, pausing mid-air near a hole in the seat right above the weapon. The taxi driver's third shot hadn't missed her by much.

She grasped the barrel and pulled. It came free easily. She placed the silenced weapon on the floor, then stepped back.

"*Grazie*," the man said.

Griff watched with Alex as the man holstered his weapon under his suitcoat and headed toward the driver's side.

A second voice surprised him as it spoke from the darkness of the open Vatican entrance.

"You'd best come inside the Vatican, Mr. and Mrs. St. Georges. It will be safer." The voice said. "And we have much to discuss."