The Last Templar

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Published by Orion

Extract

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CHAPTER 1

At first, no one noticed the four horsemen as they emerged out of the darkness of Central Park.

Instead, all eyes were focused four blocks south of there where, under a barrage of flashbulbs and television lights, a steady stream of limos decanted elegantly attired celebrities and lesser mortals onto the curb outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It was one of those mammoth events that no other city could pull off quite as well as New York, least of all when the hosting venue happened to be the Met. Spectacularly lit up and with searchlight beams swirling across the black April sky above it, the sprawling building was like an irresistible beacon in the heart of the city, beckoning its guests through the austere columns of its neoclassical facade, over which floated a banner which read:

TREASURES OF THE VATICAN

There had been talk of postponing the event, or even canceling it altogether. Yet again, recent intelligence reports had prompted the government to raise the national terror alert level to orange. Across the country, state and local authorities had stepped up security measures, and although New York City had been at orange since 9/11, additional precautions were taken. National Guard troops were posted at subways and bridges, while police officers were working twelve-hour shifts.

The exhibition, given its subject matter, was deemed to be particularly at risk. Despite all this, strong wills had prevailed and the museum's board had voted to stick to its plans. The show would go on, further testimony to the city's unbreakable spirit.

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A young woman with impeccable hair and brightly enameled teeth stood with her back to the museum, taking her third shot at getting her intro right. Having failed at studiously knowledgeable and blasé, the reporter was going for earnest this time as she stared into the lens.

'I can't remember the last time the Met hosted such a star-studded party, certainly nothing since the Mayan show and that's going back a few years,' she announced as a chubby, middle-aged man stepped out of a limo with a tall, angular woman in a blue evening dress a size too tight and a generation too young for her. 'And there's the Mayor and his lovely wife,' the reporter gushed, 'our very own royal family and fashionably late, of course.'

Going on in earnest, she adopted a more serious look and added, 'Many of the artifacts on display here tonight have never been seen by the public before, anywhere. They've been locked away in the vaults of the Vatican for hundreds of years and –'

Just then, a sudden surge of whistles and cheers from the crowd distracted her. Her voice trailing off, she glanced away from the camera, her eyes drifting toward the growing commotion.

And that was when she saw the horsemen.

The horses were superb specimens: imperious grays and chestnuts, with flowing, black tails and manes. But it was their riders that had roused the crowd.

The four men, riding abreast, were all dressed in identical medieval armor. They had visored helmets, chain mail vests, flanged plate leggings over black jerkins and quilted hose. They looked as though they had just beamed in through a time travel portal. Further dramatizing the effect, long scabbarded broadswords hung from their waists. Most striking of all, they wore long white mantles over their armor, each bearing a splayed, blood-red cross.

The horses were now moving at a gentle trot.

The crowd went wild with excitement as the knights advanced slowly, staring ahead, oblivious to the hoopla around them.

'Well, what do we have here? It looks like the Met and the Vatican have pulled out all the stops tonight, and aren't they magnificent,' the reporter enthused, settling now for plain old showbiz. 'Just listen to that crowd!'

The horses reached the curb outside the museum, and then they did something curious.

They didn't stop there.

Instead, they turned slowly until they were facing the museum.

Without missing a step, the riders gently coaxed their mounts up and onto the sidewalk. Continuing the advance slowly, the four knights guided the horses onto the paved piazza.

Side by side, they ceremoniously climbed up the cascading steps, heading unerringly for the museum's entrance.

CHAPTER 2

'Mom, I've really gotta go,' Kim pleaded.

Tess Chaykin looked at her daughter with an annoyed frown on her face. The three of them – Tess, her mother Eileen, and Kim – had only just walked into the museum, and Tess had hoped to take a quick look around the crowded exhibits before the speeches, the schmoozing and the rest of the unavoidable formalities took over. But that would now have to wait. Kim was doing what every nine-year-old inevitably did in these occasions, which was to hold off until the least convenient time had arrived before announcing her desperate need for a rest room.

'Kim, honestly.' The grand hall was teeming with people. Navigating through them to escort her daughter to the ladies' wasn't a prospect Tess relished right now.

Tess's mother, who wasn't doing much to hide the small pleasure she was finding in this, stepped in. 'I'll take her. You go on ahead.' Then, with a knowing grin, she added, 'Much as I enjoy watching you get your payback.'

Tess flashed her a grimace, then looked at her daughter and smiled, shaking her head. The little face and its glinting green eyes never failed to charm its way out of any situation.

'I'll meet you in the main hall.' She raised a stern finger at Kim. 'Stay close to Nana. I don't want to lose you in this circus.'

Kim groaned and rolled her eyes. Tess watched them disappear into the melee before turning and heading in.

The huge foyer of the museum, the Great Hall, was already crowded with gray-haired men and vertiginously glamorous women. Black ties and evening gowns were de rigueur and, as she looked around, Tess felt self-conscious. She fretted

that she stood out as much for her understated elegance as for her discomfort at being perceived as part of the 'in' crowd all around her, a crowd she firmly had no interest in.

What Tess didn't realize was that what people noticed about her had nothing to do with her being understated in the precise, seamed black dress that floated a few inches above her knees, nor with her discomfort at attending platitude-intensive events like this one. People just noticed her, period. They always had. And who could blame them. The seductive mass of curls framing the warm green eyes that radiated intelligence usually triggered it. The healthy, thirty-six-year-old frame that moved in relaxed, fluid strides confirmed it, and the fact that she was totally oblivious to her charms sealed it. It was too bad she'd always fallen for the wrong guys. She'd even ended up marrying the last of that contemptible bunch, a mistake she had recently undone.

She advanced into the main room, the buzz of conversation echoing off the walls around her in a dull roar that made individual words impossible to determine. Acoustics, it seemed, had not been a prime consideration of the museum's design. She could hear traces of chamber music, and tracked it to an all-female string quartet tucked away in a corner and sawing away energetically but almost inaudibly at their instruments. Nodding furtively at the smiling faces in the crowd, she made her way past Lila Wallace's ever-present displays of fresh flowers and the niche where Andrea della Robbia's sublime blue-and-white glazed terracotta *Madonna and Child* stood gracefully watching over the throng. Tonight though, they had company, as this was only one of many depictions of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary that now adorned the museum.

Almost all of the exhibits were displayed in glass cabinets, and it was clear from even a cursory glance that many of those exhibits were enormously valuable. Even for someone with Tess's lack of religious conviction, they were impressive, even stirring, and as she glided past the grand staircase

and into the exhibition hall, her heart raced ahead with the rising swell of anticipation.

There were ornate alabaster altar pieces from Burgundy, with vivid scenes from the life of Saint Martin. Crucifixes by the score, most of them of solid gold and heavily encrusted with precious stones; one of them, a twelfth-century cross, consisted of more than a hundred figures carved out of a walrus tusk. There were elaborate marble statuettes and carved wooden reliquaries; even emptied of their original contents, these chests were superb examples of the meticulous work of medieval craftsmen. A glorious brass eagle lectern proudly held its own next to a superlative six foot painted Spanish Easter candlestick, which had been prized away from the pope's own apartments.

As Tess took in the various displays, she couldn't help but feel recurring pangs of disappointment. The objects before her were of a quality she would have never dared hope for during her years out in the field. True, they had been good, challenging years, rewarding to a certain extent. They had given her a chance to travel the world and immerse herself in diverse and fascinating cultures. Some of the curiosities she had unearthed were on display in a few museums scattered around the globe, but nothing she'd found was noteworthy enough to grace, say, the Sackler Wing of Egyptian Art or the Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art. *Maybe... maybe if I'd stuck with it a little bit longer*. She shook the thought away. She knew that that life was over now, at least for the foreseeable future. She would have to make do with enjoying these marvelous glimpses into the past from the remote, passive viewpoint of a grateful observer.

And a marvelous glimpse it was. Hosting the show had been a truly remarkable coup for the Met, because almost none of the items sent over from Rome had ever been previously exhibited.

Not that it was all gleaming gold and glittering jewels.

In a cabinet facing her now was a seemingly mundane

object. It was a mechanical device of some sort, about the size of an old typewriter, boxlike and made of copper. It had numerous buttons on its top face, as well as interlocking gears and levers protruding from its sides. It seemed out of place amidst all this opulence.

Tess brushed aside her hair as she leaned forward to take a closer look. She was reaching for her catalogue when, above her own blurred reflection in the glass of the cabinet, another loomed into view as someone came up behind her.

'If you're still looking for the Holy Grail, I'm going to have to disappoint you. It ain't here,' a gravelly voice said to her. And although it had been years since she'd heard it, she recognized it even before she turned.

'Clive.' She turned, taking in the sight of her former colleague. 'How the hell are you? You look great.' Which wasn't exactly true; even though he was barely into his fifties, Clive Edmondson looked positively ancient.

'Thanks. How about you?'

'I'm good,' she nodded. 'So how's the grave-robbing business these days?'

Edmondson showed her the backs of his hands. 'The manicure bills are killing me. Other than that, same old same old. Literally,' he chuckled. 'I hear you joined the Manoukian.'

'Yeah.'

'And?'

'Oh, it's great,' Tess told him. That wasn't true either. Joining the prestigious Manoukian Institute had been a big coup for her, but as far as the actual experience of working there went, things weren't all that good. But those things you kept to yourself, especially in the surprisingly gossipy and backstabbing world that archaeology could be. Seeking an impersonal remark, she said, 'You know, I really miss being out there with you guys.'

His faint smile told her he wasn't buying that. 'You're not missing much. We haven't hit the headlines yet.'

'It's not that, it's just...' She turned, glancing at the sea of displays around them. 'Any one of these would have been great. Any one.' She looked at him, suddenly melancholic. 'How come we never found anything this good?'

'Hey, I'm still hoping. You're the one who traded in the camels for a desk,' he quipped. 'Not to mention the flies, the sand, the heat, the food if you can call it that...'

'Oh my God, the food,' Tess laughed. 'Come to think of it, I'm not so sure I really miss it anymore.'

'You can always come back, you know.'

She winced. It was something she often thought about. 'I don't think so. Not for a while, anyway.'

Edmondson found a grin that seemed more than a little strained. 'We'll always have a shovel with your name on it, you know that,' he said, sounding anything but hopeful. An awkward silence settled between them. 'Listen,' he added, 'they've set up a bar over in the Egyptian Room, and from the looks of it, they've got someone who knows how to mix a decent cocktail. Let me buy you a drink.'

'You go ahead, I'll catch up with you later,' she said. 'I'm waiting for Kim and my mom.'

'They're here?'

'Yeah.'

He held up his palms. 'Whoa. Three generations of Chaykins – that should be interesting.'

'You've been warned.'

'Duly noted.' Edmondson nodded as he ventured into the crowd. 'I'll catch you later. Don't disappear on me.'

Outside, the air around the piazza was electric. The cameraman jostled to get into a clean shot as the claps and whoops of delight from the elated crowd drowned out his reporter's efforts at commentating. It got even noisier when the crowd spotted a short, heavy-set man in a brown security guard uniform leave his position and hurry over to the advancing horsemen.