

The Hidden Cipher

A Knights Templar Conspiracy Thriller

Reader Introduction

The Hidden Cipher. A Knights Templar Conspiracy Thriller
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Prologue

Seven hundred years ago, as the last Templar fortress burned, a knight lay dying amid the ruin. Flames danced against the night sky, the air thick with screams. An arrow pierced his shoulder, blood soaking the white of his surcoat.

His apprentice—barely more than a boy—knelt beside him, tears cutting through soot on his face.

The knight pressed a vellum scroll into the boy's trembling hands, his voice raw with urgency.

“Tear it, cut it into nine fragments,” the knight rasped. “Hide them across Christendom—where no pope, no king, no person will ever unite them again.” He coughed, blood flecking his lips. “It contains a secret unworthy of this generation—or any generation.”

“Master—”

“Go!” The knight’s grip tightened, blood dripping from his gauntlet.

“They come.”

The boy looked past him—and saw them. Dozens of figures advanced through the smoke, blades drawn, armor gleaming red in the firelight. Their formation never broke. Their eyes fixed only on the parchment.

The Guardians.

The apprentice ran.

Behind him, his master’s last cry drowned beneath the clash of steel.

That boy was Brother Martin of Troyes. He fled to the sea caves, waves crashing loud enough to mask his footsteps. There, with shaking hands, he cut the scroll into nine pieces under his knife and swore an oath. Each fragment would sleep in a different corner of Christendom, hidden where even kings couldn’t reach.

He scattered them. And for seven centuries, they slept. Until tonight.

Lisbon. Midnight.

Rain slashed across the cobbled streets, turning stones into black mirrors. A monk in a dark cassock ran hunched, clutching a leather satchel bound with iron clasps. His breath came in ragged gasps, each exhale echoing against the alley walls.

Inside the satchel, pressed between the pages of Psalms, hid something far older—a fragment of the Cipher.

Behind him, shadows moved with precision. The Guardians. Silent, relentless. Protectors of a secret that had slept for seven centuries.

He darted through the alley, cassock flaring, rope sandals slipping on rain-soaked stones. His whispered prayer was almost inaudible above the storm:

Novem nexus tenebrarum. Novem unum faciunt.

“Nine bonds of darkness. Nine makes one.”

A flash of steel cut across his chest. Crimson bloomed through dark fabric. He staggered, slammed into the wall, and slid down. The satchel fell from his grip, spilling across the cobblestones. Rain and blood mingled in the gutter.

A figure stepped from the shadows—smaller than the Guardians, moving with a different kind of grace. Hooded, silent. She knelt beside him without pity, her gloved hand resting on his shoulder. Not to comfort. To confirm.

His eyes dimmed as she reached for the satchel.

She worked quickly. From her cloak, she drew a fine needle and dark thread. Her fingers moved with ritualistic precision, opening a seam in the satchel’s lining, tucking something inside, stitching it closed with practiced care.

Not taking. Planting.

When finished, she set the satchel down beside the body and disappeared into the rain. From a doorway across the alley, another figure emerged. Older, broader, wearing the dark cloak of the Order. A Guardian. He’d been tracking the monk all night, trying to reach him before the Guild of Shadows could strike.

Two minutes too late.

The Guardian knelt and pressed two fingers to the monk’s neck. Nothing. He bowed his head—not in prayer, but in acknowledgment of failure. He scanned the alley. The killer had vanished. He knew the signature. Guild of Shadows. If they were moving this openly, their leader had sanctioned it.

Guimara.

His eyes fell on the satchel lying in pooled rainwater. He lifted it, searched through soaked papers and prayer books, looking for what the monk had died protecting. Nothing. The fragment was gone. Stolen. He pulled out his phone and dialed.

“Prefect,” he said. “Lisbon cache compromised. Brother Paulo is dead. They have the fragment.”

Valerius, at the other end, spoke coldly. “Guimara?”

“Yes. Her signature.” A pause. “If she has one fragment, she’ll want the others. She’ll need a scholar to decode the locations. Doctor Elena Voss arrives in Tomar tomorrow. She’s researching Templar ciphers.”

“Then watch her,” Valerius said. “No interference. If she locates what eluded us for seven centuries... we secure every fragment.”

The Guardian ended the call, looking down at the monk’s body, then at the wet cobblestones. From his pocket, he drew a piece of white chalk and knelt. But he didn’t write words. Instead, he drew a single symbol—simple, geometric.

A broken wheel with nine spokes. Ancient. Unmistakable. Any Guardian who passed would recognize it instantly: *Fragment compromised. Hunt active. Protocol engaged.*

To civilians, it was nothing—a child’s scrawl in the rain. He stood, took one last look at Brother Paulo, and disappeared.

Dr. Elena Voss arrives tomorrow. She and the Guardians are unaware that the thing they seek is close, hidden in a satchel she will soon have.

Seven centuries of sleep. Tonight, the Cipher had awakened.

Chapter 1 - The Chase

The morning sun broke through the clouds as Dr. Elena Voss's rental car crested the hill overlooking Tomar. The town sprawled below—terracotta roofs clustered around the Nabão River, and above it all, perched on its limestone hill, the Convent of Christ rose like a crown of stone.

Seven months of grant applications, academic committees, and bureaucratic red tape had led to this moment.

Elena pulled into the cobbled square near her hotel, the Pensão dos Templários, a converted merchant's house with ivy climbing its whitewashed walls. She'd chosen it for location, not its luxury—two blocks from the Convent, walking distance to the municipal archives.

As she stepped from the car, the proprietor emerged—a woman in her sixties, gray hair pinned back, wiping flour from her hands on an apron.

“Doctor Voss?”

“Yes, Senhora Carvalho?”

“Welcome, welcome! Your room is ready. You are here for the Templar research, yes?”

“That's right. Ciphers. Encoded manuscripts.”

Senhora Carvalho's expression shifted—something flickered across her face, too quick to read. “Ah. You'll want the archives. They open at nine.”

She gestured toward the entrance. “Come. I'll show you to your room. But first—” She turned back toward the small reception desk just inside the doorway. “Something arrived for you this morning. Very early. Before dawn.”

Elena frowned. “For me? I haven't told anyone I'm staying here, except—”

“The University, yes. Perhaps they sent materials ahead?” Senhora Carvalho produced a leather satchel from beneath the desk, its surface darkened with age and water damage. Iron clasps held it shut. “A courier left it, stating that I must give it to you immediately upon your arrival.”

Elena took the satchel, surprised by its weight. The leather is soft, worn smooth by hands and time. Old. Ancient.

“Did the courier leave a name?”

“No, he was...” Senhora Carvalho hesitated. “He wore the robes of a brother. From the monastery, I assumed. Very serious. He said that you would understand.”

A monk.

Elena’s pulse quickened. Her research proposal mentioned reaching out to local religious communities to gain access to their collections. Perhaps one of them had responded.

“Thank you.”

She followed Senhora Carvalho up narrow stairs to a corner room with windows overlooking the square. Simple and clean—a bed with white linens, a wooden desk, a crucifix on the wall.

“Breakfast is at seven. If you need anything, call down.”

The moment the door closed, Elena set the satchel on the desk and unfastened the iron clasps. They clicked open with surprising ease, as if recently oiled.

Inside: a worn prayer book, pages of Psalms in Latin, its edges yellowed and brittle. She lifted it—and froze.

Beneath it, tucked into the satchel’s lining, something crinkled. Elena reached in, carefully opened the seam with her penknife, and found it—her fingers closed around the paper. Old paper. Vellum. She drew it out.

The fragment was no larger than her palm, its edges cut. The vellum had darkened to amber with age; the ink faded to rust brown. But the symbols were still visible. She did not recognize any alphabet at first glance. Geometric shapes interlocked with abbreviated words. Numbers scattered throughout—some Roman numerals, others in a notation she’d only seen in one context before.

Templar ciphers.

Her breath caught. She’d spent five years studying Templar encryption methods. She’d written her dissertation on the fragmentary nature of their encoded communications—how they deliberately separated information to prevent capture.

She pulled out her field notebook—the same system she’d used since graduate school.

Right margin for symbol frequency counts.

Left margin for pattern observations.

Bottom corner for her mnemonic anchors. The mental hooks she’d learned in fourth grade from Mrs. Cusick, her elementary school teacher, who’d taught her that memory was about mental pictures, not repetition.

The fragment on her desk was authentic, and someone had delivered it directly to her before dawn. Elena sat down, fragment in hand, and tried to think through the implications. It's not official. No university or monastery would send a priceless artifact via an anonymous courier. No provenance, no paperwork, no authentication. Illegal. Or dangerous. Or both. She should report it. Call the local authorities, the university, someone.

Even as the thought formed, her eyes traced the symbols, her mind beginning to decode the patterns. Frequency analysis. Substitution markers. Not random—it's deliberate, systematic. Part of something larger. Every symbol she translated felt like opening a door that should have stayed sealed. The world wanted truth—but some truths should stay buried.

Her phone chimed. A text from her department head back in Boston: *Settled in Tomar? Remember, this is preliminary research only. Don't go chasing treasure legends. We need publishable scholarship.*

Elena stared at the fragment in her hand, then at the text message. Too late.

She pulled out her laptop, opened her cipher analysis software, and photographed the fragment. When she uploaded the image, she noticed something she'd missed—faint marks along the torn edge. Intentional.

Numbers. A sequence, *1 of 9*. This fragment was part of a set, and someone had sent it to her.

She checked her watch. 8:45. The archives will open soon. Elena tucked the fragment back into the satchel's hidden pocket, gathered her research materials, and headed out.

The Arquivo Municipal de Tomar occupied a renovated building near the river, its stone facade weathered by centuries. Inside, the air smelled of old paper and preservation chemicals—a scent Elena had come to love during her years of research.

A young man sat at the reference desk, bent over a laptop, his fingers flying across the keyboard. Early twenties, dark straight hair that looked like it hadn't seen a comb in days, wearing a faded university sweatshirt. Stacks of manuscripts and photocopies surrounded him like fortress walls.

Elena approached. "Excuse me, I'm Doctor Elena Voss. I have an appointment to access your Templar collection?"

The young man looked up, eyes widening.

“Doctor Voss? *The Doctor Voss?*” He stood, almost tripping over his chair. “I—I’m Liam Hayes. I’ve read all your papers. Your dissertation on fragmentary encryption was brilliant. The way you proved the Templars used deliberate document separation as a security protocol—” He caught himself, face reddening. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I just—you’re kind of a legend in cryptographic history circles.”

Elena couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you, Liam. That’s very kind.”

“No, seriously.” He was already pulling out reference materials. “Your work on the Chinon Parchment decryption? I used your methodology in my thesis. I’m getting my Master’s in Medieval Studies—well, trying to. I’m working part-time as a photographer to help pay for school. When Senhora Mendes told me you were coming, I may have *requested* to handle your research access personally.”

Liam smiled, remembering his first day in the archives.

“Senhora Mendes runs this place like a fortress,” he said. “But she’s been kind to me. Last week, we stayed after hours talking about an illuminated manuscript she restored in the nineties—she said it was her favorite piece in the entire collection. She loves these books as if they’re her children.” His voice softened. “She’s one of the good ones.”

“I appreciate the enthusiasm.” Elena set her bag down. “I need to see any documents related to Templar cipher systems, particularly anything from the early fourteenth century. Encoded manuscripts, fragments, anything with geometric notation.”

Liam’s fingers were already dancing across his keyboard. “We have twelve primary sources from that period. Most are account ledgers, but three contain encrypted sections. Nobody’s been able to crack them.” He paused, looking up at her. “Maybe you can.”

Perhaps. Elena took out her laptop. “Can you start with these three?”

“Sure. Give me ten minutes.” He hesitated. “Doctor Voss? If you don’t mind my asking, why Tomar specifically? There are larger collections in Paris, London...”

“Tomar was a Templar stronghold. The Convent of Christ was their headquarters in Portugal. If they were hiding something, encrypting something important, they’d do it here.”

“Hiding what?”

Elena thought of the fragment upstairs in her room—1 of 9.

“That’s what I’m here to find out.”

Liam grinned and disappeared into the archives.

For the next two hours, Elena worked through the manuscripts he brought her. Liam hovered nearby, offering insights, fetching additional references, thrilled to be helping. He has a sharp eye for detail. More than once, he spotted connections she’d missed.

“You should be teaching,” she said after he’d found a pattern linking two separate documents.

“I’d rather be learning.” He pushed another manuscript toward her. “Look at this one. Same geometric markers as the others, but the frequency distribution is different. Like it’s using a secondary encryption layer.”

Elena studied it. He was right. “Liam, this is excellent work.” He beamed.

Her phone chimed:

Stop looking. Leave Tomar. You have no idea of the danger ahead.

Elena’s hand tightened on the phone.

“Doctor Voss?”

“Everything okay?”

She looked up, aware of how quiet the archives had become. They were alone in this section. The windows looked out onto a narrow alley.

“Liam, do you know anyone named Brother Paulo?”

He frowned. “Paulo? There was a Brother Paulo at the monastery. But—” His expression darkened. “Wait. He died last night. I heard Senhora Mendes talking about it this morning. They found him in an alley near the docks. The police are calling it a robbery.”

Ice crept up Elena’s spine.

The courier. The monk who’d delivered the satchel, Brother Paulo.

“Doctor Voss?” Liam was staring at her now. “What’s wrong?”

Before she could answer, the archive’s main door opened. Footsteps echoed on stone floors—measured, purposeful—multiple people. Liam glanced toward the sound, then back at Elena.

“We’re not expecting anyone else today.”

Elena’s instincts screamed. She grabbed her laptop and the manuscripts. “Is there another way out?”

“What? Why—”

“Liam. Now. Please.”

Something in her voice must have convinced him. He snatched up his bag and moved toward the back corridor. “Storage exit. Leads to the loading dock.”

Behind them, voices drifted through the stacks. Speaking Portuguese. Searching.

Liam led her through narrow passages between shelving units, past preservation rooms, toward a metal door marked Saída. He pushed it open—

And a man stepped into their path.

Tall, broad-shouldered, with close-cropped dark hair. He wore dark tactical clothing. His stance was relaxed but ready—former military.

Liam stumbled back. “Who are—”

The man raised a hand. “My name is Antoine Rousseau. I’m here to get you guys out.”

“How do you know—”

“No time.” Antoine’s eyes flicked past them, back toward the archives. “The people looking for you aren’t here to talk. There’s a car two blocks north. Let’s move.”

“We’re not going anywhere with—”

The sound of shattering glass cut through the air. Footsteps, running. Antoine’s expression didn’t change. “Your choice. But make it fast.”

Elena looked at Liam, whose eyes were wide with confusion and fear. She thought of Brother Paulo, dead in an alley. Of the fragment marked 1 of 9 and of the warning text.

“How do I know we can trust you?”

Antoine met her eyes. “You don’t. But I’m not the one who killed Brother Paulo.”

That decided it.

“Let’s go.” They ran.

Antoine led them through back alleys, moving with the fluid efficiency of someone who’d done this before. He never hesitated, never checked directions. Every turn was deliberate. Behind them, voices shouted in Portuguese.

“Who are they?” Liam gasped as they ran.

“Later,” Antoine said.

They emerged onto a side street. A dark sedan waited, engine running. Antoine opened the back door. “In.” Elena and Liam

tumbled into the back seat. Antoine slid behind the wheel and pulled into traffic.

“Seatbelts,” he said, as if they were going for a Sunday drive.

In the rearview mirror, two figures emerged from the alley, scanning the street. One of them locked eyes with Antoine. For a moment, something passed between them. Recognition. Challenge. Antoine turned a corner, and they were gone. Elena’s heart was pounding. She looked at Liam, who looked like he might be sick.

“Does someone want to explain...what the hell just happened?”

Antoine’s eyes found hers in the rearview mirror. “You opened the satchel.” It wasn’t a question.

“How do you—”

“Because Brother Paulo is dead. And you could be next.” The car’s interior suddenly felt tiny.

“Who are you?” Elena demanded.

“Someone who knows what you found.” Antoine’s jaw tightened. “And I know what it means when the Guardians pursue someone.”

Liam’s voice cracked. “The Guardians?”

“Yes. A splinter order of the Templars.”

Elena’s phone buzzed. Another text message. This time, just an image. Her hotel room. Photographed from across the square. The window was clearly visible. And below it, a single line of text:

We know where you sleep—Guimara.

“Who’s Guimara?”

Antoine glanced over, the first crack of tension showing in his calm. “Isabella Guimara,” he said. “She’s not church or state. She runs a rogue breakaway order — calls them the Guild of Shadows. Zealots. They believe the original Templars failed their divine mission and that it’s their duty to finish it, no matter the cost.”

“Chased by Zealots. Awesome.” Liam’s voice cracked.

Elena looked up at Antoine in the rearview mirror. His expression was stone-cold.

“Where are you taking us?”

“Somewhere safe.” He turned down a narrow street. “But first, you’re going to tell me what that fragment says.”

“I don’t have to do—”

The rear windshield exploded.

Glass rained down.

Liam screamed. Antoine cursed and yanked the wheel hard right. Elena twisted in her seat. Through the shattered window, she saw a motorcycle—black, no plates—weaving through traffic behind them. The rider wore dark leather and a full helmet. In their hands: a pistol with a suppressor.

“DOWN!” Antoine shouted.

Another shot punched through the trunk. Antoine sped up, taking corners at speeds that threw Elena against the door. Liam, hyperventilating beside her.

“Who are these people?” she screamed.

“Not Guardians.” Antoine’s voice was ice-cold, focused. “Worse.”

He yanked the wheel again, cutting through an alley so narrow Elena could hear stone scraping both sides of the car. The motorcycle followed, agile. They burst onto a wider street. Market stalls. Pedestrians scattering. Antoine swerved around a produce truck. The motorcycle gained.

“The satchel!” Antoine barked. “Check the lining—is there anything else in there? Maybe a GPS tracker?”

Elena grabbed her bag with shaking hands and pulled out the satchel. Her fingers found the hidden seam where she’d discovered the fragment. She reached deeper. Her fingers touched something else. Something small. Metallic. She pulled it out. A flash drive. Black. Unmarked.

“No tracker, but there’s a—”

“Flash drive, right?” Antoine’s voice had changed. “And now I know why they want you dead.”

The motorcycle pulled alongside them. The rider’s helmet turned toward Elena’s window. For one frozen moment, they made eye contact through the tinted visor.

The rider raised the pistol—

Antoine slammed on the brakes.

The motorcycle shot past. Antoine cranked the wheel, reversing direction in a screaming U-turn that left rubber smoking on the cobblestones.

“Hold on!”

They rocketed down a side street, then another. The motorcycle was gone—for now. Two minutes later, Antoine killed the engine in an underground parking garage. Emergency lighting casts everything in yellow. Silence now, except for their breathing.

“What’s on the drive?” Elena asked.

Antoine was staring at it as if it were a live grenade. “If I’m right? The locations of all nine fragments.”

Liam made a sound between a laugh and a sob. “That’s impossible. The fragments have been hidden for centuries.”

“Not hidden.” Antoine looked at Elena. “Protected. By people who would kill to keep them separate.” His eyes dropped to the flash drive. “Until now.”

Elena’s mind raced. “But if someone wanted us to have this—if they planted it in the satchel—”

“They’re not trying to protect the secret.” Antoine’s voice was deadly quiet. “They’re trying to expose it.”

“Why?”

Before Antoine could answer, Liam’s phone lit up. He looked at the screen and went pale.

“What?” Elena asked.

Liam turned the phone toward her—a news alert. Portuguese, but the photo was clear enough: The municipal archives. On fire.

The headline: INCÊNDIO DESTRÓI ARQUIVO MUNICIPAL—UM MORTO

One dead.

“Oh my God,” Liam said. “Senhora Mendes—she was still—”

Antoine snatched the phone and scanned the article. His expression darkened.

“They’re cleaning up. Destroying evidence.” He looked at Elena. “Everyone who’s touched that satchel ends up dead.”

“Except for us,” Elena said.

“Except us.” Antoine started the engine and pulled out into the rain, heading for the highway.

“We need to figure out what’s on that drive. Find the fragments before they do.” He glanced at Elena in the mirror. “And find out who wants them badly enough to start a war.”

Elena clutched the flash drive. Her thoughts racing. Brother Paulo. The cipher. The Guardians. Guiomar. The Guild of Shadows. 1 of 9.

Other fragments are hidden somewhere in Tomar.

And someone was willing to burn the city down to find them.

Chapter 2 -Mors Rubra

The warehouse squatted south of the river, windows punched out, loading dock strangled by weeds. Antoine killed the headlights two blocks away and approached on foot, motioning Elena and Liam to come closer.

Inside, the space was cavernous and cold. Moonlight shafted through broken skylights, sketching bones of shadow across the concrete. Rows of rusting shelving stood like dead trees.

Antoine moved as if he owned the place, clearing corners, testing doors. He led them into a back office—windowless, with a single entrance, lockable from the inside.

“We stay here tonight,” he said, dropping a duffel. “No lights. No calls. My hotspot only.”

Liam sank onto a crate, trembling. “This is insane.”

“Yeah.” Antoine passed out bottled water and protein bars with military economy. “Welcome to the club.”

Elena set the satchel on a rusted desk. “If we’re going to survive, I need to know who you are. Really.”

Antoine studied her, then showed his phone—security ID photo, younger face, same cold eyes. “Private protective services. Sometimes artifact recovery when things get... complicated. Three months ago, I was hired to track criminal activity in Portugal. Anonymous client. Standard job, or so I thought. Then Brother Paulo turned up dead.”

“Hired by who?”

“Don’t know. Encrypted channels. Payments routed through shell companies. But they knew about the fragments. The Guardians. And what happens if the cipher’s ever reassembled.”

Elena took out the flash drive. “Let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

Liam had his laptop open before she finished. “May I?”

She handed it over.

For ten minutes, the only sound was keys tapping. Liam hunched in, fear gone, mind on fire.

“WPA2,” he said. “Quick and dirty. Like Wi-Fi encryption. Twenty seconds, max....” His fingers flew. The screen flickered. “Got it.”

A single folder appeared. Inside: four files with scrambled names—each flagged corrupt.

“Whoever rushed the copy didn’t verify it,” Liam said.

“How long?” Antoine asked, eyes on the blacked-out glass.

“Just a few minutes.” Liam unplugged, re-plugged, and fed a file into a recovery tool. A loading bar crawled. “I can pull chunks—headings, partial text.”

Latin spilled in patchwork: half words, broken lines, numbers out of order.

Pestis Prima. Mors Rubra... transmissio per sanguinem...

“Plague number one. Mors Rubra, blood-borne—keep going.”

Febris debilitas hemorrhagia oculis, naso, ore...

“Fever, weakness, hemorrhaging from eyes, nose, mouth. Internal organ liquefaction. Mortality: eighty-three percent. Death in eight to twelve days. No treatment recorded. No survivors beyond day six.”

Silence.

“That’s worse than—” Liam began.

“Ebola,” Antoine said, his voice flat. “Filovirus. Or older. I’ve seen what that looks like—Halabja, 2007. Chemical weapons.” He shook his head. “This is worse. Chemicals kill. Biology spreads.”

She continued translating. “*Pestis Prima Facit — sanguis humanus per salem argenti et radicem mandragorae sub luna nova distillatur; fore in vitro vitali donec rubor sanguinis vivat et se multiplicet.*”

“This isn’t medicine,” Elena said. “It’s instructions for an engineered pathogen. If this is what the Templars found—what they hid—”

She stopped, breath catching. “There are eight more,” she finished for herself.

The recovery tool coughed up a header thumbnail: nine circles surrounding a small tower.

“Not decoration,” Elena said. “A count.”

She marked nine dots in her notebook—one to nine. “If the icon repeats, it’s structural. Nine entries. One symbol.”

More text appeared: nine plagues, each meticulously recorded. Every entry ended the same way:

Fragment location: [ENCRYPTED]

At the bottom, a tenth entry stood apart:

Antidotum Universalis — compositum ex Salvia sacra, Myrrha, et Mandragora officinarum; experimentum cum successu limitato contra Pestes Secundam ad Quintam.

An experimental compound derived from sacred sage, myrrh, and mandrake root; tested with limited success against Plagues Two through Five. Preparation: [Appendix].

Elena stared at the words. “An antidote?” “An experiment,” she murmured. “Something they tried—maybe even believed in—for a while.”

Antoine leaned against the wall. “They discovered plagues, documented them, made what cures they could—and then buried everything.”

“Deliberate fragmentation as security,” Elena said. “Nine locations. Unless you have all nine—”

“Can’t weaponize them. Can’t release them into society,” Antoine finished. “Assuming they stay separated.”

“We have one fragment. And whoever killed Brother Paulo knows it.”

Elena laid the vellum on the desk, angling the laptop’s glow across the faded ink. Geometric shapes. Abbreviated Latin. Numbers.

She opened to a new page in her notebook. “Frequency analysis first.” The most common symbol appeared seventeen times—a vowel. Secondary patterns suggested consonant clusters.

“Substitution cipher?” Liam asked.

“Layered with positional encoding,” Elena murmured. “Same symbol changes by position. And these numbers—” She traced them. “Not values. Keys. Each tells you which layer to apply.”

For twenty minutes she worked, Liam feeding dictionaries and Templar forms. Twice the Latin collapsed into nonsense; on the third key, a phrase locked into place:

Sub lapide angelorum flentium.

“Beneath the stone of weeping angels,” Elena translated.

Where the Red River meets the Sacred Hill. The first plague sleeps in darkness, guarded by twelve who know not what they protect.”

“A location cipher,” Antoine said. “Poetic.”

Elena cross-referenced:

Red River. Sacred Hill. Weeping angels.

“Alcobaça,” she said. “The Monastery of Alcobaça—fifty kilometers north. ‘Red river’ is the Alcoa; the monastery sits on the sacred hill, and the tomb of Inês de Castro—” She pulled up images. “—Angels that ‘weep blood’ cover it, according to the legend.”

“Twelve who know not what they protect,” Liam said. “Monks.”

“Likely.” Elena felt gears click. “The Templars hid the first plague there, in a vault twelve monks guard without knowing what’s inside.”

Antoine checked his phone. “Public hours end at six. That gives us fourteen hours to plan entry.”

Elena looked at the translation.

Mors Rubra. “Red Death.”

Mortality: eighty-three percent.

This wasn’t publishable scholarship anymore.

“Doctor Voss?” Liam asked. “What do we do?”

Walk away. Burn the drive. Disappear. If she walked away, someone else wouldn’t.

“We find the vault,” she said. “Confirm what’s there. Then make sure no one ever finds it again.”

“And if the Guardians catch us first?” Liam asked.

“Then we prove we’re on their side,” Elena said. “Because the real enemy isn’t them.”

Antoine nodded. “Alcobaça. Tomorrow night.”

Elena’s phone chimed—a telephoto image: their warehouse, shot from across the street—time-stamped twenty minutes ago.

Sleep well, Doctor Voss. We’ll see you in Alcobaça—G.

Elena’s pulse froze mid-beat. She showed Antoine. His face didn’t change; his hand slid to the pistol grip at his waist.

“Pack up,” he said. “We’re moving. Now.”

“But you said—”

“I said we’d stay. I was wrong.” He was already stripping the room. “They’re not just tracking us.”

“They’re herding us.”