

The Saliente Fragment

Mystery Thriller

- Sample text -

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table of contents

Prolog.....3

Guadix, in the year 17164

The discovery in the sanctuary.....6

The digital tripwire.....9

Shadows in the Calle.....14

The hiding place on the roof.....17

The appearance of normalcy.....21

The digital noose.....24

Prolog

"And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant [...]. Then another sign appeared in heaven: a great red dragon [...]. The dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. Her child was snatched up to God and to his throne." (Rev 12:1–5)

Guadix, in the year 1716

The crackling of the fireplace was the only sound in the small, shadowy room of the inn. The air was heavy with the smell of cheap tallow and the tart aroma of wine. Two men from Albox sat at the wooden table, their faces marked by the long, dusty journey from the mountains. Before them stood what they had undertaken the arduous journey for: a figure of the Virgin Mary. It was small, yet of a flawless, almost supernatural beauty. The sun seemed to be reflected in the wood, and at her feet lay the crescent of the moon.

The priest who had handed them the statue moments ago still stood in the shadows of the door. His face was barely recognizable beneath the hood drawn deep over his features.

"She is perfect," whispered one of the delegates, barely daring to touch the figure. "Who created her? It is said, the hand of a woman in secret..."

"Do not ask about the creator," interrupted the deep, calm voice of the priest. "Keep her well. For she protects not only the faith. Within her rests that which the darkness wishes to devour, just as the red dragon wanted to devour the

child. Take her to the mountains. To Albox. There, she will be safe."

When the men opened their eyes the next morning, the room was flooded with bright daylight. The statue stood untouched on the table. But the priest was gone. When they asked the innkeeper about him, he only shook his head in confusion. There was no priest in this inn. No one had ever entered the chamber.

The two men looked at each other. They did not suspect that the statue's greatest secret did not lie in its divine aura, but in what the stranger had hidden inside the wood during the night.

The discovery in the sanctuary

Santuario del Saliente, present day (2026)

The harsh light of the LED work lamp cut mercilessly into every crevice of the old wood. The silence in the small workshop, which had been set up in the rear wing of the monastery for the diocesan restorers, was interrupted only by the distant howling of the wind sweeping over the ridge of the Saliente.

Matteo wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. As a specialist in 18th-century sacred art, he had seen many masterpieces up close, but the Pequeñica had a unique, almost magnetic charisma. Officially, he was here to examine the wood for damage caused by the dry summer air and to stabilize the layers of paint. Unofficially, he was looking for something else. For traces of the legendary sculptor Luisa Roldán.

He adjusted his magnifying glass and carefully guided the high-resolution endoscope into a tiny, almost invisible crack on the underside of the base, directly below the crescent moon upon which the Madonna stood.

On the connected monitor, the images from

inside the figure flickered. Dust particles danced like stars in the cone of light of the mini-camera. Matteo was just about to pull the device back when the image jammed. The endoscope hit a resistance that should not have been there. The interior of such a statue should be either solid or evenly hollow. But this was a smooth, unnatural edge.

Struggling for breath, he changed tools. With surgical tweezers and the precision of a watchmaker, he felt his way through the gap. It took agonizing minutes before he could grip the resistance.

As he pulled the tweezers back, he held a narrow, tightly rolled object in his hands. It was not wood. It was parchment, darkened by age, sealed with a brittle black wax stamp that showed a symbol Matteo had never seen on a Christian statue: a distorted, snake-like creature, the red dragon from the Book of Revelation.

With trembling fingers, he broke the seal and carefully unrolled the fragment on the workbench. The document had been written in 1716. The ink had faded, but the Latin words and the hastily drawn symbols on the edge were razor-sharp. It was not church liturgy. It was a

warning. A warning about what was slumbering in the foundation of the monastery, and a list of names that reached into the highest circles of that time.

Matteo stared at the lines. His heart hammered against his ribs. He did not yet fully understand the magnitude of the words, but one thing was immediately clear to him: this document should never have existed. If the church or the monument protection authorities found out about it, the entire project would be stopped immediately.

Outside, the wind whipped a gust against the old windowpanes of the workshop. The sudden rattling made Matteo flinch. He looked hectically at the heavy wooden door. No one was there. The monastery lay in the deep, nocturnal silence of the mountain ridge. He was completely alone. No one yet knew that he had broken the three-hundred-year-old seal. No one out there yet suspected what a powder keg he had just opened deep inside the Pequeñica.

Carefully, he slid the parchment into his inside pocket, turned off the LED lights, and left the workshop. He had to get out of here. He needed a safe place to translate these lines in peace.

The digital tripwire

The drive down the steep, windy mountain of Saliente to Albox was a blur of headlight beams and racing thoughts. Matteo felt the monotonous vibration of the steering wheel in his cramped fingers as he drove the car much too fast through the darkness. In the inside pocket of his jacket, directly over his heart, he felt the rigid, cool roll of the parchment.

When he finally reached his small, rented apartment in town, he locked the door from the inside three times. The dull feeling of having done something forbidden gave way to a burning, almost feverish curiosity.

He cleared the dining table, switched on the small desk lamp, and carefully unrolled the fragment. To avoid damaging the old parchment, he weighed down the corners with two heavy coffee mugs. In the pale light of the lamp, the Latin letters looked almost branded into the surface. But most striking was the symbol on the left edge: the snake-like, seven-headed red dragon, whose tail wrapped around a stylized, inverted cross.

"This is not standard church Latin," Matteo muttered, rubbing his tired eyes. He opened his

laptop.

To decipher the text, he needed the exact meaning of two rare, alchemical terms that kept appearing in the text, followed by a combination of numbers that seemed like a coordinate. He typed the exact Latin phrase into a closed academic database for medieval studies. No match.

He switched to an advanced image search, activated his laptop's scanner, and uploaded a high-resolution photo of the dragon symbol. He searched for matches in digitized manuscripts of the Vatican and secret archives of the 18th century.

"Search in progress..." blinked on his screen.

Matteo did not suspect that this search query did not simply vanish into the ether of the internet.

Hundreds of kilometers away, in an unadorned, air-conditioned server room deep in the basement of a private estate in Madrid, a monitor flickered to life. A silent red alarm flashed. For decades, algorithms had been running there, filtering the global network for very specific, isolated search terms, terms that were not in any textbook. Symbols that did not officially exist because they had been burned without exception

three hundred years ago. The system monitored every academic database, every image upload that displayed the exact geometry of the dragon's seal.

The man sitting in front of the monitors was not wearing a cassock, but the tailored suit of a security chief. He stared at the match. One hundred percent. The symbol from the year 1716 had just been searched for on the web.

He immediately reached for the phone. His voice was low, cold, and businesslike.

"We have a hit. Someone is looking for the Alchemist's fragment."

There was a short pause on the other end of the line. "Where does the data originate? Is the archive in Granada compromised?"

"No," replied the security chief, typing on his keyboard. "The IP address is fresh. The request came exactly four minutes ago from a private DSL line. The location is pinpointed: Albox. Province of Almería."

Heavy breathing could be heard. "That is impossible. The characters were never cataloged or stored. They exist in only one place on this world... in the foundation of the Pequeñica.

Someone has opened the statue."

"What are your instructions?"

"The avalanche must not be allowed to start. Send Ramos and Cortés. They are already in the region. They are to get to the bottom of this. I want that parchment. And I want no witnesses who know what is written on it."

In Albox, the monitor on Matteo's laptop switched. A single, sparse hit in a digitized, apocryphal text fragment from the year 1720 appeared.

Matteo read the translation of the line aloud: "And the seal keeps the blood of the dragon in the deep lap of the earth, where the light of the sun never shines."

A cold shudder ran down his back. That was no metaphor. That was a set of directions.

Suddenly, the light in the room went out. The laptop switched to battery power. Outside on the street, the buzzing of the transformer had gone silent, a sudden power outage in the entire neighborhood. In the absolute darkness of the apartment, the bright light of the screen seemed almost ghostly.

Matteo froze. He stood up to go to the window

and look down at the dark street.

Below, at the end of the narrow alley, a dark van without headlights slowly turned the corner.

Shadows in the Calle

Matteo took a step back from the window. His heartbeat, which had calmed down somewhat after the drive, set in again with a violent jolt. The unnatural, slow rolling of the van down there did not fit with a random power outage. In the narrow alleys of Albox, one did not park at night without lights unless one did not want to be seen.

He looked back at the table. The laptop display illuminated the old parchment like an exhibit in a museum. The Latin characters seemed to stare at him almost mockingly.

They know, it shot through his mind, even though it sounded completely irrational. Who could know what he had pulled out of the wood of a statue in a remote monastery workshop half an hour ago? And yet, fear gripped him with ice-cold fingers.

The soft, dull closing of a car door reached him from the street. No loud bang, but the controlled, muffled clicking of professionals.

Matteo acted purely on instinct. He closed the laptop, causing the apartment to instantly plunge into absolute, pitch-black darkness. Only the faint moonlight falling through the windowpane cast long, distorted shadows on the wall. With groping

fingers, he reached for the coffee mugs, took the parchment from the table, and slid it back into the inside pocket of his jacket. He left the laptop; it was too heavy, too bulky.

He crept flat along the wall back to the window and risked a narrow look down.

Two figures had detached themselves from the shadows of the van. They wore dark, inconspicuous clothing. No monk's robes, no conspicuous masks, but the functional attire of men who had a task to perform. The larger of the two held a flat, dark device in his hand, a mobile tracker or a signal receiver, the display of which cast a faint, bluish light onto his angular face. He pointed directly at the entrance of Matteo's apartment building.

They were not scanning the street. They knew exactly which house they had to go to. The IP address had led them here like a digital arrow.

A metallic click on the ground floor jolted Matteo out of his paralysis. The lock of the front door downstairs was not being broken; it was being overcome in seconds with a professional electric pick.

Matteo had sweat on his forehead. The front door of his own apartment on the second floor

was locked three times, but against these men, the wood would not hold for long. And the hallway was a dead end. Once they were on his floor, there was no escape.

He looked around the darkness hectically. The apartment had no balcony facing the street, but out back, from the small kitchen, there was a narrow window that led to an interior light well, a patio, as was typical for houses in Andalusia. Perhaps there was a way out over the roofs or the neighbors' courtyard.

Soft footsteps cracked on the tiles of the stairwell. They were already coming up. They were not hurrying; they were moving methodically, step by step.

Matteo turned and slid silently into the kitchen.

The hiding place on the roof

Matteo squeezed his body through the narrow kitchen window. The cool night air hit him as he carefully heaved himself onto the small canopy of the patio. His fingers felt over the rough roof tiles, still slightly warm from the daytime heat.

Centimeter by centimeter, he pushed himself higher until he reached the flat slope directly above his apartment. He lay flat on his stomach, his face pressed close to the tiles, and breathed only shallowly through his nose. Anything but a noise.

Through the open kitchen window directly below him, the men's voices drifted upward. The acoustics of the narrow inner courtyard acted like a megaphone.

"Whoever was here is gone," said one of the two. His voice sounded frustrated but controlled.

"I can see that," the other replied. The dull thud of footsteps on the living room tiles followed.

Shortly thereafter, the light in the patio changed. A faint, bluish glow came from the window, casting the shadow pattern of the window frame onto the opposite wall of the courtyard. One of the men had opened the laptop.

"That's interesting," the first whistled softly through his teeth.

"Who was that? And why is he looking for it?" the second asked urgently. "Where did he get it from? How does one even come up with this?"

"I don't know. But obviously, there is information that this someone now possesses. Let's search everything!"

What followed was the sound of pure destruction. The wooden cracking of an overturned chair, the splintering of glass, the ripping open of cabinet doors. Again and again, the bright, white beams of their flashlights flickered through the kitchen window into the night sky.

Matteo did not move a muscle. Sweat ran down his forehead, burned in his eyes, and dripped silently onto the dusty roof tile beneath his face. Every muscle in his body was tensed to the point of breaking. He knew he was in huge trouble. These were no simple burglars. These were men acting on behalf of an invisible power.

Click.

The sudden, hard rattling of a loose roof tile right near him made Matteo's heart stop completely for a moment. Damn.

He turned his head by fractions of a millimeter. He had not moved. But in the pale moonlight, two green eyes shimmered. A stray cat was creeping along the roof ridge, just two meters away from him. If it got scared and meowed or moved more tiles, he was done for.

Like mad, but in absolute silence, Matteo waved one hand in the air to chase the animal away. His movements were hasty, a silent, desperate dance against fate.

Down in the kitchen, it suddenly went quiet.

The sound of a window sash being pushed open further echoed. A head stuck out into the light well.

"What was that? I heard something," said the rough voice of the first man from below.

"Yes, I heard it too. Our client is surely still nearby," the second determined. Matteo could hear the soft click as a weapon was unlocked.

In this unbearable moment of paralysis, the cat did Matteo a favor: it lost interest in him, turned, and jumped with an audible leap from the main roof onto the lower canopy of the neighbor's house.

"Oh, damn... just a cat," the man at the window

scolded and pulled his head back into the apartment.

Matteo closed his eyes for a brief moment and exhaled the breath he had been holding the entire time.

In the apartment below, the frantic search continued for a few more minutes, then the noise ended abruptly. Matteo heard the men slam the heavy apartment door shut with full force. The echo resounded through the stairwell. Shortly thereafter, the monotonous howling of the van engine sounded out on the street, followed by the sound of tires quickly moving away from the alley.

Then there was absolute silence again over the rooftops of Albox.

Matteo still lay motionless. His mind was racing while adrenaline shot through his veins. Was it a trick? Had one of the men secretly stayed behind to wait for him in the dark below? Was it a trap? Could he dare to climb down from the roof?

The appearance of normalcy

Holy Pequeñica, what has happened here?
Where on earth have I gotten myself into?

The scream remained stuck deep in Matteo's throat, inaudible to the world, while his entire body trembled with adrenaline. He pressed his forehead against the rough roof tile until it hurt, to somehow anchor himself in reality. This was no dream. These were no burglars who had their eyes on his television. These men were looking for the parchment. They were looking for him.

He waited. For minutes. Every tick of time felt like an eternity. When the distant hum of the van had finally died away in the streets of Albox and nothing stirred anymore, he was sure: the two men were gone.

Slowly, with stiff limbs and an aching back, he rose from his cover. He could not go back into his apartment; the risk that they were lying in wait there or would return was too great. Instead, he crept hunched over the roof ridge and climbed carefully onto the flat roof of the adjacent neighboring house.

At that exact moment, a window on the top floor of the neighboring house was pushed open.

"When is the power finally coming back? I need light!" called Maria, a neighbor Matteo had known for an eternity, impatiently into the dark interior of her apartment.

"My dear, I don't know either!" boomed the deep, leisurely voice of her husband from the background. "But it can't take long now. You know how it is... the tourists, the air conditioning everywhere. Surely a main fuse blew somewhere in the quarter again."

While the sentence was still fading in the warm night air, there was a soft click at the street lamps. The dull hum of the air conditioning units suddenly came back to life, and the facades of the houses were bathed in bright, electric light. Maria blinked into the sudden brightness, looked up, and stared directly into the face of Matteo, who stood as if caught on her roof tiles.

"Matteo? What are you doing up there?" she called out, surprised, and a wide laugh spread across her face. She waved at him cheerfully. "The light is back, you don't have to look for it up there anymore!"

Matteo felt the blood rush into his cheeks. He tried not to let anything show, forced a completely cramped smile, and waved back

hastily. "Yes... yes, thank you, Maria! Everything is fine!"

Without waiting for another question, he turned around, sprinted the last meters over the roof, and navigated through an open window directly into the upper hallway of the neighboring building. His shoes squeaked on the clean tiles as he hastily stumbled down the stairs. Step by step, floor by floor, until he arrived on the ground floor. He stopped abruptly in front of the heavy exit door to the street. His breath came in gasps. He pressed himself flat against the wall next to the door and looked cautiously through the glass pane out onto the Calle.

Nothing. The street lay peacefully in the bright glare of the street lamps. A cat slipped under a parked car; in the distance, a dog barked. Nothing indicated that professional hunters had been on the move here just a few minutes ago. He had escaped for now. But he was on the street, his apartment was devastated, and in his jacket pocket, the parchment burned like fire.

The digital noose

Matteo stood in the dark shadow of the entrance, his face pressed almost to the cool glass pane. His gaze wandered up and down the Calle. Every parked car suddenly seemed like a threat, every dark window pane like an eye watching him.

His first impulse was to run to his car. The key lay heavy in his trouser pocket. But even as he wanted to reach for it, the movement froze. No. Absolutely not the car. If these men had found his address within minutes, they probably only needed seconds for his license plate. Perhaps a second van was already standing at the next intersection, just waiting for the ignition of his car to start.

A heavy thunderstorm raged in his head. Thoughts raced, piled up, blocked each other. There was no plan. No route. No logical direction for escape.

What actually happened here?

The thought was so obvious that it almost hurt: The parchment. This damned three-hundred-year-old piece of skin in his jacket pocket was the trigger for all of this. It was not supposed to

be where he had found it. It had never been meant to ever see the light of day again. It was highly explosive, a historical incendiary device of the highest quality, but the *why* remained a black wall. He did not understand the riddle.

He had not been able to find a solution on the internet, only that one cryptic sentence about the blood of the dragon in the lap of the earth...

Matteo's breath caught. His eyes widened in the darkness of the hallway.

Oh, holy shit. I'm such a fool.

The realization hit him like a physical blow to the pit of his stomach. The internet. They hadn't found him through a stupid coincidence. They hadn't had spies in the monastery who had followed him to Albox. He himself had called them. The moment he uploaded the high-resolution photo of the dragon symbol to the search engine and typed the Latin phrases into the databases, he had tightened the digital noose around his own neck. He had awakened a sleeping giant, tripped a digital tripwire of whose existence he hadn't even had an inkling. How could he have been so incredibly stupid? In the year 2026, anonymity on the net was an illusion for anyone who didn't know how to cover their

tracks. And he had behaved like a complete amateur.

Panic, hot and cutting, flooded his body. If they could track his IP address, what were they doing now?

With trembling fingers, he reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out his smartphone. The display lit up brightly. On the screen, unread messages flickered; the GPS icon at the top edge blinked innocently to itself. For Matteo, the device suddenly seemed like a ticking time bomb. Every second it was turned on, it sent signals to the cell towers around Albox. They only had to have his mobile number, and they knew to the meter behind which door he was seeking cover.

Without thinking for another second, he pressed the power button, forced a shutdown, and as the screen went black, he ripped off the protective cover with his thumb nail. He managed to pry open the SIM card slot, took out the tiny plastic card, and simply let it fall to the floor in the dark hallway. He pushed the phone deep into his pocket. He was offline now. Cut off from the world.

But he needed a shelter. And immediately.

No one was allowed to know where he was. No one was allowed to hear even a single word about this parchment. If he went to an acquaintance now, to a colleague from the monument protection authority, or even to a fleeting friend in Albox, he would put these people in mortal danger. These men in the van shot first and asked questions later; the cold clicking of the weapon on the patio had shown that clearly.

Who could he still trust now?

Matteo went through all the faces he knew in the region in his mind. Priests, restorers, local historians. But with every name, his mind immediately shook its head. There was no one tonight. Trust was a luxury he could no longer afford.

He had to disappear, be swallowed up from the face of the earth, somewhere where no algorithm in the world would suspect him to be. A place without electricity, without internet, without people.

Matteo pressed the handle of the entrance door very slowly downward. The cool night air of Albox hit his face. He pulled the hood of his jacket deep over his forehead, pressed his arms to his body,

and stepped out into the dangerous brightness of the street-lit alley. He had to walk out of town. Into the darkness of the surrounding hills.