

Excerpt of

**THE
MAGDALENE
VEIL**

A NOVEL

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Prologue

Jerusalem – circa 33 CE

The unruly crowds lined both sides of the Via Dolorosa, most shouting, some spitting and heckling, many crying and wailing for the condemned Jew from Nazareth carrying a large wooden cross on his back. He would soon arrive at the hills of Golgotha, a section in the northwestern corner of Jerusalem outside the walls of the city, where his journey would end.

As he moved through the crush of onlookers, his face bloody and swollen from the beatings by Roman soldiers at his tribunal just moments earlier, one young woman took pity on the man, someone she knew. Stepping forward, she removed her byssus veil and offered it to him, so he could wipe away the blood and sweat of his burdens.

He held the veil to his face, taking in the soft, sheer, aromatic fabric smelling of myrrh, and after a moment of respite, handed the soiled veil, known as a *sudar*, back to the kind woman. Looking at it, she was astonished to find an imprint of his face had been imparted in vivid detail: the shape of his head, his tortured facial features, the stains of his blood—it was as if looking at a delicate painting. She took it to be a miracle.

As the man continued on his way, the woman followed along, outside the horde of onlookers, until she came to someone she knew, someone she had been seeking, whom she knew to be the man's closest disciple. The woman was weeping uncontrollably.

"Miriam," she said gently, "I, too, grieve for Jesus. Look upon my veil, you will see his visage passed onto the *sudar* when he held it to his face. I want you to have this."

Miriam of Magdala gratefully accepted the veil, thanking her. "*Sas efcharistó, Berenikē*, for this gesture of kindness. I will place it in my Lord's tomb."

Three days after the Crucifixion, Miriam of Magdala was the first to discover that the tomb was now empty. Soon, the apostles Simon Peter and John also came to see that Jesus' body was not there (John 20:3). They also observed two cloths where the body had lain: one was a large cloth which had been placed over their

Lord's body. The other blood-soaked cloth was balled up and laying next to a rock.

Seeing this *sudar*, and knowing it to be the one given to her by her friend Berenikē, Miriam removed the cloth from the tomb and took it away, its facial image her only memento of her beloved Jesus.



Rennes-le-Château, France – 1937

Ominous rumblings of an impending world war galvanized much of Europe as Nazi Germany grew restless under Adolf Hitler's unquenchable lust for expansion and domination.

Among the Führer's goals was the broad establishment of an Aryan race, one with, in Hitler's mind, historical roots that went back to the ancient Israelites—descendants of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac—even identifying Jesus Christ as an "Aryan fighter" who fought against "the power and pretensions of the corrupt Pharisees" and Jewish materialism over spiritual values.

In support of Hitler's Aryan mission, SS *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler, the architect of the Holocaust, commissioned large-scale archaeological expeditions for years, predominantly throughout France but also in such disparate places as Iceland, for Nordic races were deemed Aryan as well.

A man obsessed by the occult, Himmler was consumed with acquiring the two most legendary sacred objects in history—the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail. To this end he enlisted the aid of Otto Rahn, a writer of some fame whose book, *Crusade Against the Grail*, Himmler had embraced with a passion reserved for those of like minds.

Rahn was an avid student of the Cathar mythos—legends of a small and peaceful yet influential order whose beliefs and traditions rejected those of the Church of Rome. Rahn's own guiding principles in his search for the Grail were derived from Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic poem *Parzival*, from which Rahn had identified the last surviving Cathar fortress—perched strategically on the majestic peak of Montségur in the French Pyrenees—as the most likely resting place for the Holy Grail.

Funded by Himmler's think tank known as the Ahnenerbe—and in league with a mysterious Nazi occult group called the Thule Society—Rahn spent years searching the area—its churches, villages, even the labyrinth of caves snaking throughout the Languedoc region—to no avail. He never found the Holy Grail.

But while excavating a hidden room buried beneath the Church of Saint Mary Magdalene in Rennes-le-Château, France—a church that just two decades earlier had been overseen by a mysterious Catholic abbé named Bérenger

Saunière—Rahn did find something of profound importance. It was a particular artifact contained in a small white alabaster box secured with an antique bronze hasp. Inside the box was a delicate ancient veil finely woven of rare byssus—also known as sea silk—on which appeared the full facial image of a man whose features clearly showed he had been beaten, whose cheeks and forehead suggested fresh wounds, and whose *peyes*—the side curls at the temples of Jewish men in the first century—were clearly visible. The image on the opposite side was identical, though in reverse to the image on the obverse.

Rahn was convinced he had discovered the legendary Veil of Veronica, which oral tradition claimed had been given to Mary Magdalene while Jesus walked the road to Calvary, where he would be crucified moments later.

Ecstatic over his discovery and certain he had something of acute historical value to present to his master, he returned to Himmler's Wewelsburg Castle fortress in Büren, Germany, and handed the alabaster box over to Himmler's deputy, SS Colonel Walther Rausch, who promptly gave it to Himmler, who secretly placed the object in the castle's hidden vault. Outside of ceremonial use by the mysterious Thule Society, it has never been seen since.

Present Day

Michael Dominic ran swiftly along the red clay path lining the Sarthe River in northern France, wiping back a thin sheen of sweat as he listened to the distant meditative Gregorian chant of the Benedictine monks at the Abbey of Saint-Pierre de Solesmes, a few hundred meters away.

He had been on retreat at the abbey for ten days now, just the respite of silence and prayer he needed from the rigors of his job as prefect of the Vatican Secret Archives. His friend and predecessor, Brother Calvino Mendoza, had retired seven months earlier, leaving the young priest in charge of the Church's vast collection of historical manuscripts, books, and ledgers comprising the official record of Church business for well over a thousand years. From its inception it had been known as the Secret Archive, but the Pope recently renamed it the Apostolic Archive, purportedly to demystify its purpose, since "Secret" had for centuries implied an aura of conspiracy to its contents—though not without justification. Dominic had arrived at this point in his career believing he had more than enough tools to fulfill his tasks: he was fluent in several languages and well versed in history. But the last year or two had shown him there was more to his place in the Church as Prefect than he had imagined. He'd faced dangers and disputes, with heresy and truth colliding. He had truly welcomed this retreat as a time to re-center himself.

The haunting chant grew louder as Dominic approached the abbey, echoes of it drifting through the surrounding trees and gardens of the monastery. Shifting to a cool down pace, he walked through a meadow of wildflowers and poppies, wild gladioli and orchids. The last rays of the setting sun cast an amber glow over the scene as butterflies danced around him in the warm spring air. Compared to the chaos of Rome it was a surreal moment—no honking cars or petrol fumes, no chattering tourists. Just the serenity of otherwise complete silence within the sounds of nature.

Tomorrow he would end his retreat, leaving for Paris and a brief visit with his journalist friend Hana Sinclair before heading back to Rome. But for what moments remained, he intended to take it all in.

"Excuse me," said a man with a thick German accent approaching him from

behind. "By any chance, are you Father Dominic?"

The priest turned around. "By chance I am, yes."

"Ah, good. I was told I might find you here, near the trail."

Dominic appraised the man. About his age, early thirties. Good-looking in an Aryan sort of way, tall and well-built, with blond hair and angular facial features. He wasn't smiling, but his steady blue eyes told Dominic he was carrying some kind of burden.

"Is there something I can help you with?" Dominic asked. "How did you even find me here? Few people know where I am."

"Forgive me, Father," the man said, blushing uncomfortably. "I took great pains in locating you, for I believe you are the only one who can help me. I spoke to your assistant in the Archives who told me I might find you here."

"My apologies," he added, extending his hand. "My name is Jacob Rausch."

After accepting the handshake, Dominic spotted a bench in the garden. Encouraging Rausch to take a seat with a wave of his hand, he did the same. Then he waited for the man to begin speaking.

"Where to start..." Rausch said, looking at nothing in particular in the distance, his brow furrowed in thought. "What I am about to tell you may seem bizarre, but it is all quite true. Please bear with me as I explain."

"During World War II, my grandfather, Colonel Walther Rausch, was a high-ranking member of the Nazi party, assigned to the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS. He was not the kind of man one could look up to, for he did terrible things during the war. It is embarrassing for me to speak of such things, even now."

"At some point he became personal aide to SS Commander Heinrich Himmler, who, as you may know, was chief architect of the Holocaust and one of Hitler's most intimate confidants. Himmler was fascinated with the occult and its assumed influence in guiding tactical decisions over the enemy. He even hired thousands of tarot card readers in Berlin to supposedly learn how Allied powers were strategizing their wartime efforts. It seems ridiculous now, of course, but Himmler took it all quite seriously."

Rausch drew in a calming breath. "But more to my point. Himmler acquired an immense castle in Wewelsburg, Germany, not only to house his vast collection of mystical trappings, but to serve as the spiritual home of the Nazis' expanding empire."

As he listened to the man, Dominic's peaceful state of mind turned restless. *Nazis? Tarot cards? Shouldn't I instead be sitting in the chapel, listening to monks chant?* He'd discovered enough of Hitler's atrocities a couple years ago when he assisted Hana Sinclair in research about the Church's connections to Nazi gold. He didn't feel inclined to be swept into more of such dark—and dangerous—secrets of the past. Yet the man had gone to some trouble to find him here. He decided to let it play out—but not for long.

“As Himmler’s most trusted deputy, my grandfather—I’ll call him Walther for simplicity—was in charge of this collection, and indeed of Wewelsburg Castle itself. Nothing happened there that Walther did not know about.

“In November 1937 a man whom Himmler was very fond of, a medieval researcher and writer of some note named Otto Rahn, came to Wewelsburg Castle. With him he had brought an object—an artifact Himmler himself described as among the most important religious relics in all of world history. Himmler had given Rahn millions of Reichsmarks and a complete archeological team and security force to search for such objects, mainly in the area of southern France around Montségur and Rennes-le-Château. Apparently Rahn discovered something very special and brought it promptly to Himmler. He was ecstatic in having taken possession of this relic but swore my grandfather to complete secrecy. No one else was to know of its existence.

“Wewelsburg Castle had a special room they called Consecration Hall, a place where the number twelve figured prominently: there were twelve seats around a large table fashioned after King Arthur’s Round Table; twelve pedestals surrounding the table, on which Himmler had placed the contained ashes of fallen comrades; and he appointed twelve SS officers as his followers, or ‘apostles,’ if you will.”

Dominic was perplexed. “Why tell *me* of these things? What is this object Rahn found?”

Rausch looked directly into Dominic’s eyes.

“I imagine there is no one alive who really knows. But to my mind there is only one thing it could be, of course,” he said matter-of-factly. “The Holy Grail.”

2

Dominic looked at the man as if he were slightly insane. He stood up and glanced at the Tag Heuer strapped to his wrist.

"I'm afraid I have to get back to the abbey, Herr Rausch," he said.

"It's nearly time for vespers."

"I figured that might be your reaction, Father. But, you see, you are already involved."

Rausch now had Dominic's attention, mystified as he was.

"What do you mean, I'm already involved? I've never heard of this before now."

"Well, I did not mean to imply that you personally were mentioned in the documents that led me here. But please, let me explain."

Dominic sat back down on the bench, his curiosity aroused.

"My father recently passed away and as the sole heir to his estate I inherited, among other things, the papers and property of my grandfather, who died in Santiago, Chile, in 1984.

"My grandfather was very active in politics and espionage during his twenty-six years in exile in Chile, and despite repeated efforts by Israel and Germany to extradite him for war crimes, he managed to evade expulsion through the courts due to his close relationship with Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. I am sorry to say, but Walther was a truly evil man, and quite deserved the punishment he avoided. As the inventor of mobile gas chambers, he was personally responsible for exterminating some 100,000 Jews, Roma, and other 'enemies of the German state' during the war." Jacob paused, and Michael could see in furrows on his forehead as if in remorse for these actions of someone of his own blood.

Jacob took a breath and continued. "I traveled to Chile a few months ago to take possession of Walther's estate and settle matters there which my father had failed to attend to over the years. In the process I discovered he had kept both a substantial account and a safe deposit box at the Santiago branch of a major Swiss bank, one that had catered to Nazis even before the war. With the proper papers, I went there to claim Walther's assets. But it was what I found in the safe deposit box that was both shocking and, admittedly, rather exciting.

"As it turned out, my grandfather was a prolific writer, and secretly documented a great deal of his covert work as a spy for both the West German

and Chilean governments at various times.

“He also wrote profusely about his association with Heinrich Himmler at Wewelsburg Castle, and the bizarre events that went on in the Consecration Hall—strange rituals, intimate séances, and other occult ceremonies in which Rahn’s discovered object was revered, much like Catholics venerate the chalice and Holy Communion during Mass. But Himmler’s ceremonies, of course, were of a more pagan nature, dedicated to Aryan principles.”

Heading back to ideas of the occult didn’t settle well with Dominic. “This is all very interesting, Jacob,” he said earnestly, “but once more, how does this relate to me?”

“You are the prefect of the Secret Archives, yes?” Rausch asked.

“Yes, of the Apostolic Archives, as I’m fairly sure you already know.”

“Well, my grandfather was a close associate, even a good friend, to Austrian Catholic Bishop Alois Hudal who was based in the Vatican. Hudal helped set up the ODESSA ratline that served as an escape network for top Nazi officials fleeing prosecution, including Walther himself.

“At the end of the war, while the Allies were closing in on capturing Nazi leaders, my grandfather gave to Bishop Hudal Himmler’s own personal journal describing the incredible powers of this object—powers described as true miracles—and the location where it was hidden. And according to Walther’s diary, that journal is now in your Vatican Apostolic Archive, where Hudal placed it on the instructions of Pope Pius XII. And now we need to find it.”

Dominic had been patiently listening to Rausch’s story, but when he got to the end of it, the priest’s mental radar lit up.

“Wait... you said Pope Pius personally instructed this bishop to archive Himmler’s journal in the Vatican? That on its own seems rather strange—that the Pope himself would be involved in such a, well, fairly low-level archival undertaking, regardless of its author. It makes me more than curious.”

“I’m glad I have your attention now, Father,” Rausch said, encouraged by Dominic’s change in attitude. “So, how do we go about locating this journal?”

“Slow down, Jacob,” Dominic cautioned. He had chased other theories in the past, and fiction was filled with tales of the Holy Grail that held no reality. He didn’t even know this man, let alone the veracity of any of it. “Is it possible to see your grandfather’s diary myself first?”

“Yes, of course. It is back at my apartment in Paris. That is where I live.”

“As it happens,” Dominic said, “I’m leaving for Paris tomorrow, to visit a friend before heading back to Rome. Will you be there later this week?”

“Actually, I leave tomorrow as well.” Jacob gave Dominic the address of a Parisian bistro where they would meet the following day. They parted company, and Dominic headed back through the gardens to the abbey. He’d found the peace and relaxation he’d needed this week. But now he contemplated the

strange turn of events on his last day of retreat. And how it might shape his days ahead.