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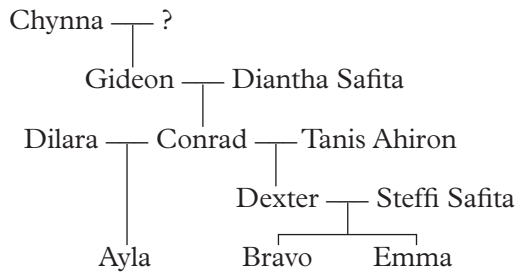
FOUR DOMINIONS



*For Linda & Dan,
who help keep me sane in an increasingly insane world*

SHAW FAMILY TREE

LAST FIVE GENERATIONS



THE HISTORY BEHIND THE FICTION

The Franciscan Observatines, here known as the Gnostic Observatines, are recorded in history, as are the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, who inspired the story's Knights of St. Clement of the Holy Land. In those early days, the pope was the most powerful monarch in Europe. Like all monarchs, he was obliged to maintain his power in the face of rivals and enemies. Thus were the Knights created, as a form of papal army, who fought in the pope's name both at home and in the Levant.

From as far back as the early 1300s, there was a deep division within the Franciscans regarding the strict vow of poverty demanded by Saint Francis upon the founding of the Order in the beginning of the thirteenth century. The Observatines believed in it; the Conventuals did not. The dispute came to a head in 1322 when Pope John XXII sided with the Conventuals and their allies, the more established Dominican Order.

The papal bull *Cum inter nonnullos*, which stated, among other things, that the rule of poverty was "erroneous and heretical," was likely a subterfuge. It seems far more plausible that the pope wanted to stamp out a faction of the Franciscans bent on roaming the world, spreading their gospel and, in the process, their power and influence, rather than staying put *intramuros*, within the walls of their monasteries, as the Conventuals were bound to do.

However, the papal bull was hardly the end of the Observatines. Quite the opposite, in fact. In the latter part of the fifteenth century and the first two decades of the sixteenth century, a good number of Observatines who had accepted the pope's ruling were settled in the Middle East, especially the area in and around Trebizond and Istanbul, serving as emissaries of Christ, proselytizers of Catholicism. It is here that I have

imagined my Gnostic Observatines discovering many of their secrets, including the Quintessence, which is recorded in history as the so-called fifth element, sought after by every alchemist on earth, but perhaps created by the cadre of alchemists employed by King Solomon.

Gnosticism is, in and of itself, anathema to the Vatican and its staunchly traditionalist orders. The name derives from the Greek word for knowledge. Gnostics, to put it simply, believe that the physical world is corrupt, evil, and that the true path to salvation lies in adhering to spiritual truth and goodness. Some Gnostics pursue study in the so-called esoteric mysteries, which lie beyond normal human comprehension. The Church, in its infinite wisdom, has, sight unseen, always judged these mysteries to be magic and, so, heretical.

The Knights, champions of both Christ and the pope, would naturally be predisposed to despise and fear the Order as much as the Holy See. It's entirely logical that the Knights would be only too happy to do the pope's bidding in dismantling the Order's power.

PROLOGUE

ONE YEAR AGO

BRAVO SHAW SAID, "AFTER SEEING YOUR VISION RESTORED, after Fra Leoni told me what had happened to you, I—"

"Bravo, Bravo, my brother." Emma Shaw, in his embrace, pulled her head back so their eyes locked. "I told you. I'm fine." A hand gentling his cheek. "Please believe me."

"I do, Sis. It's just that . . . I missed you more than words can explain."

She beamed. "We're always in each other's hearts. What more is there to say?"

Bravo and Emma Shaw, along with the newly orphaned Ayla Tusik, were aboard one of the Observatines' private planes, twenty thousand feet above the Mediterranean, starting the first leg of their journey back to New York City. Bravo, as he'd promised his sister, had no more use for Istanbul. They'd been away for two years, since the explosion in the Greenwich Village town house that had killed their father and blinded Emma. They both missed home far too much to stay away any longer.

Ayla was sitting back in her seat, an ice pack on her throat. She was completely recovered from the fire and the thing that had crawled out of it; no mark remained on her forearm. It was as if the shadow-serpent's coiling had never happened. She had tried to talk as Bravo and Emma were taking her out of the library, but all that had come out was a dry croak and an awful clicking sound painful enough to cause her to stop trying.

"You're good," Emma had said to her, over and over in the private ambulance. "You're not going to die."

Ayla had looked up at her and smiled, but it was Bravo's hand she

clutched tightly all the way to the airfield, while a doctor who worked with Bravo's Order of Gnostic Observatines tended to her neck, injected her with a mild sedative, before checking Emma's head bruise, cleaning and dressing Bravo's wound. When the ambulance arrived at the airfield it had been met by the three-person flight crew. They didn't blink an eye at the physical state of the trio. It seemed they were getting used to helping their passengers board.

The moment Bravo and Emma had seen to Ayla, made sure she was resting comfortably, they had fallen into each other's arms. The return of Emma's sight was a miracle. For Bravo, it was as if the clock had been reset to a time before the explosion. There would be a right moment for exploring the reasons and mechanisms behind the miracle, but now was not it. They were spent physically and emotionally. Now all they wanted to do was hug each other, drink the lemonade made with fresh Egyptian lemons that Lida brought them, and slide into a well-earned sleep.

Bravo went out like a light, as had Ayla. As for Emma, her sleep was fitful, shallow, stalked by creatures that were no more than shadows. She awoke with a start, her hair and brow slick with sweat. Her armpits felt swampy. She rose, went to the lav, and, after voiding, threw cold water on her face. Though it had only been three years in real time, the face in the mirror staring back at her seemed so strange. She had aged since last she had seen herself. She had to remind herself that everything had shifted while she had been sightless, the world had moved on, rolling from day to day without her. Looking back upon those years, she realized that she had felt marooned in a land of perpetual night, darker even than the dark side of the moon. And yet here she was now on the other side of it—fantastic luck or something else altogether, she couldn't say. A surge of gratitude flushed her cheeks and neck, but soon enough the strangeness of it all began again to overwhelm her. She didn't look the same—this was to be expected, she supposed—but not to feel the same was a mystery that, deep down, frightened her. Who was she now? Exhausted, she felt inadequate to the monumental task of finding out.

When she returned down the aisle Lida was refilling her glass. Bravo's mouth was partly open, his features at rest. She felt such love for him. Everything they had been through in the last days had been worth it for this . . . for them to feel closer to each other than ever.

He had fallen asleep while looking at the *Nihilus Imusitatus*. On the

seat beside him was the rolled manuscript that was supposed to have been the Book of Deathly Things, The Testament of the First One to Fall, Brother of Michael, the Seraph Lucifer, King of Kings. But Aither, the curator of the library at Alexandria in Egypt, had claimed that it was blank. In a way, she was glad that it was blank, that the real Testament remained hidden. The manuscript was terribly dangerous. It was even dangerous for the reader, for, as Fra Leoni had told them, anything to do with Lucifer, with that ultimate evil, was seductive. It could drag you into the abyss before you knew what was happening.

Even if the manuscript was blank, it did appear very old, but who knew if it was. She had read about numerous archeological finds purported to stand ancient history or the foundations of religion on their head, only to be revealed as fakes, ingeniously doctored by clever scam artists wanting to make a quick buck or be spotlighted by their fifteen days of fame.

Idly, she reached over, took it up, settled back in her seat. Before she'd been blinded, and following her brother's lead, she'd become an expert in the identification of artifacts. Within thirty minutes or so, she'd be able to tell whether its apparent age was real or fake.

The manuscript was covered in what seemed to be calfskin, or something like it, the sickly yellowish hue of an onion's skin. A strip of some unidentifiable black cloth wrapped it tight, held it in a roll. That was enough to set off alarms inside her head. No cloth she knew of would have survived the centuries intact.

Unrolling the manuscript, she studied the first page. The paper was undeniably ancient—just how old she couldn't tell without a laboratory. A conundrum, then. She leafed through page after page. Aither hadn't been lying; not a single letter, character, or rune was to be seen; the pages were blank. She sighed. Now the whole thing seemed worthless. Who cared how old it was?

Her gaze drifted to the window. She watched the clouds, fascinated by their changing shapes, their seeming contradiction, so solid in their weightlessness. She was like a child again, remembering how it had been the first time her parents had taken her and Bravo on a plane. How her face had been plastered to the window, nose mashed nearly to the cartilage, her breath fogging up the Perspex. She could not get enough of the clouds and what wonders lay spread out beneath her, shifting with every breath she took.

The drone of the plane's engines lulled her back to sleep, into a dream where a creature of immense size—not man, not lion, but a combination of both—was speaking to her with its tawny, final gaze. The light was dense, filthy, as if shining underwater or in a deep cave, its source some other place Emma could not imagine.

The beast crouched on a vast plinth made up of naked humans bent over double—thousands of them, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, all bowed down in obeisance. It stirred its heavy thighs, half-rising, launching itself toward her.

At that moment, the plane hit an air pocket, and she awoke with a cry lodged in her throat like a bone. As the turbulence accelerated, everything around her trembled and resonated, as if in a wind tunnel. Her ears popped as the plane was momentarily sucked downward. Her shivering glass began to tip over. She reached out, caught it, but some of the lemonade slopped over onto the manuscript.

She cursed wildly, unsure what to do. Bravo would kill her. But then everything changed. The moment seemed to go on forever as secret writing slowly appeared on the ancient paper, invisible until sprayed with lemon juice. Something in the acid reacted with the kind of ink used to hide the text. It was an ancient method of keeping secrets—no one really knew how old. But the fact was before her: a text that had not been visible moments before.

Slowly, with infinite care, she spread more lemon juice on the pages until all of the text had been revealed. She knew she should stop, put this thing aside, wake Bravo, and tell him what she had discovered. But there was something pulling on her, a pinprick of envy, dark and heavy, that had caught her, a fishhook dragging her down to another place.

Why was it Bravo who found everything first? Why was it Bravo who got the special training? Why was it Bravo who received all the credit, all the accolades from the Order? Who had been elected *Magister Regens*? All because of their father, when she had been the one taking care of Dexter ever since their mother had died? She was as smart, she was as clever, but it was never her. Never her. Where was the fairness in that? And now, now, when they were becoming even closer, there was Ayla, insinuating herself into their lives. She saw how Ayla had hung on to Bravo all through the hectic, dreamlike drive to the airfield, clutched his hand like the two of them were bonded somehow, like she, Emma, was the outsider.

No, no, no. The fishhook was tugging, tugging, tugging at her. Not this time. This time was different. This time there would be an alternate ending.

Without a second thought, she flipped to the first page, where the first words had by fateful accident come alive, and started to read the mixture of High Latin and Old Greek, two languages in which she was fluent:

HEREIN THE TESTAMENT OF THE FIRST ONE TO FALL,
BROTHER OF MICHAEL,
THE SERAPH LUCIFER, KING OF KINGS

PART ONE

THE APPLE



PARIS: PRESENT DAY

UNDER A PORCELAIN-BLUE SKY, STRIPED WITH WHIPPED-cream clouds, Lilith Swan strode along the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. She was tall, lissome, athletic. Dressed in a flowing ankle-length oyster-gray coat over a charcoal pencil skirt and a lacy blouse buttoned to her throat, she cut a stylish figure even among the chic Parisian, Japanese, and Arabic women entering and exiting the ateliers of the Faubourg's high-end couturiers. The only curious note was the pink ballet flats on her feet, which were certainly not made for walking the sidewalks of any city. Her thick hair, the color of midnight, reflected both light and shadow. A raven's wing dipped down from her sharp widow's peak partially obscuring one eye. Her gait was both provocative and artless, as can be typical with athletes of a certain type. It obscured an inner tension, which was, perhaps, simply nerves.

She turned into a narrow storefront between Bottega Veneta and Prada, its only sign a discreet brass plaque that unknowing tourists passed by without even noticing. Inside all was cool, dim, perfumed. One wall held three shelves of meticulously handmade shoes, below which was a large mirror. On the opposite wall, above two leather chairs, hung a chart of the thirty-five steps taken by the shop's master craftsman in assembling his made-to-measure footwear.

The master himself emerged from his workshop in the rear to greet Mlle. Swan. In one hand he held a pair of black suede shoes with five-inch heels.

"Finished," he said with a huge smile, after they had exchanged familiar greetings. He held the shoes aloft. "Every detail precisely to your specifications." He gestured. "Sit, sit. Please."

Lilith lowered herself into one of the chairs, slipped off her ballet shoes, offered the shoemaker her right foot. The shoe fit like a glove, felt exquisitely cushioned, and yet when she tried both on, rising and walking toward the mirror, they felt sturdy, not even a hint of a balancing wobble from the stiletto heels.

“Magnificent, Albrecht,” she said, for the shoemaker had been born in the north of Italy, grew up speaking German and eating Alsatian schnitzel.

Albrecht beamed. He lived for his shoes. “Shall I wrap them for you, Mademoiselle Swan?”

“Oh no, I’m going to show them off, Albrecht.”

The shoemaker blushed. “Then I’ll just pack up your ballet slippers.”

Across the boulevard, hard by Moncler, was a small establishment, its plate-glass window revealing a spare number of exquisite pieces of jewelry—one each of a necklace and ring with a pair of ruby-and-diamond earrings artfully hung between them.

Inside, Lilith slipped on the platinum bracelet she had designed and had made for her. Two twining branches encircled her left wrist. She walked out with it on, feeling it against the bones at the base of her hand.

Her third stop was a block beyond, across rue Royale, where the Faubourg ended and rue Saint-Honoré began. There she picked up a pair of long hairpins made to her specifications, allowing the salesperson to push them through the dense gathered hair at the back of her head, so just the teardrop-shaped green jade ends were visible.

Just next door she popped into Ladurée Royale, entering the gilt-and-cream nineteenth-century Empire interior. She took a small marble-topped table, ordered a hot chocolate, thick and rich as a melted chocolate bar. She sat straight backed, with a flinty, determined air that often flustered those attending her, waitpersons, front desk personnel, salespeople. It was not so much that she disdained convention as she willfully had no knowledge of it.

While she slowly drank, she allowed herself to experience the pleasure of her new purchases. The caffeine and sugar helped clear her mind for the morning ahead. She felt calm and strong, the blood rushing through her, rich as the Ladurée hot chocolate. She felt ready for anything.

When she was finished, she paid and left, walked two blocks farther east, entered a large deep-cream-colored building on the corner of rue

Duphot. The old-fashioned vestibule lit up at the press of a button; the light would go off after sixty seconds. Bypassing the claustrophobic elevator, she walked up the wide marble stairs, pressing the light button at each landing. On the fourth floor, as Europeans counted, she went down the shadowed hallway to the end, fished a key out of her handbag, and opened the door. It was a special key to fit a special lock that was guaranteed by the manufacturer to be pickproof. This was a legitimate claim, she knew, as the manufacturer was owned by the Knights of St. Clement, the order of which she was a newly elected member.

The guards in the foyer nodded to her, but not, she was certain, with the deference they would have shown were she a man. In fact, one of them, a dark-haired handsome man named Naylor, with a saturnine face and the shoulders of a brawler, ogled her with obvious interest, his gaze lingering over her bust and long legs. She gave him a smile that was a bit coquettish, a bit cowed. He liked that. Very much.

The entire flat had the air of a traditional British men's club, where, apart from gender, class, privilege, and entitlement mattered most. Where an invisible sign that read "Gentlemen Only" kept out the riffraff and the chaff not lucky enough to be born to the manor in Surrey or the town-home in Kensington. Landed, in other words.

In the long cherrywood-paneled hallway, Lilith paused a moment. The soft murmur of men's voices came to her, but for the moment her thoughts were elsewhere. They were with Maria Elena Donohue, the only female member of the *extramuros* team sent to retrieve the Veil of Veronica purported to be buried in the mountains of Arizona. All had been hunted down and killed by Braverman Shaw and his Gnostic Observatine crew, a bloodletting for which she was determined to take revenge.

When she entered the library turned conference room all conversation ceased. The thirteen men seated around the circular basalt table all looked at her at once, as if they were marionettes whose strings were being manipulated by a single hand. All but one of these men were between fifty-five and eighty-five years old. They made up the Circle Council, the brain trust of the Knights of St. Clement, at least those who had survived the all-consuming fire at their ancestral castle in Malta. The current expansion from seven to fourteen members was in response to the disaster. Among the dead: Aldus Reichmann, their former leader, the *Nauarchus* of the Circle Council. At present, no one sat in the *Nauarchus*'s throne-like

seat. In fact, this convocation had been called to elect the new *Nauarchus*. Lilith knew full well there was sure to be fierce debate and infighting before someone took Reichmann's place.

The room was filled with light from a crystal chandelier depending from the center of the ceiling. There was a large mirror adorning one wall, on another an enormous painting of their castle high on the Maltese bluffs, which now lay in blackened ruins. Heavy drapes covered the windows overlooking the rue Saint-Honoré. On the fourth wall was a large, exquisitely carved rendering of Christ on the Cross.

"You're late," Newell said from across the gleaming table as Lilith sat down. He was the Order's official conduit to Cardinal Felix Duchamp, their powerful contact inside the Vatican. "Had to stop to get your nails done?" Newell, silver haired, with a face cratered by overuse of a steroid cream during a hyper-hormonal adolescence, tapped his thumbs together, further showing his impatience at her tardiness.

She was well aware that he wouldn't treat any of his male peers with such outright contempt. If any of them expected her to apologize they were sorely mistaken. "I was working out a strategy that would prevent future *extramuros* groups from being slaughtered by the Gnostic Observatines."

"A useless exercise," Newell smirked. "Clearly, it was a mistake for a female to be part of an *extramuros* team."

"An experiment gone bad," Muller offered, echoing Newell's sentiment. A pale, balding man in his sixties with wire-rimmed spectacles and a bad case of ADHD, he was always fiddling with the position of the small things around him, lining and relining them up. Two spots of color high up on his cheeks, as if he applied rouge, gave him a vaguely effeminate air. He was the religious zealot among them. He kept the flame of God and Christ burning brightly within all the Knights. He would have made a fine monk.

By this time, she knew they had already decided her fate, the fate of allowing females into the Knights after centuries of systematically keeping them out.

"The experiment," Santiago said. He had a sour countenance, was a recidivist in all matters. As the overseer of the Knights' banking interests he wielded enormous power within the Circle Council. "We have no choice but to conclude that the experiment is an abject failure."

“How can it be judged a failure or a success,” Lilith responded, “when it’s been running for less than a year?”

“Everyone here realizes that Maria Elena was a friend of yours,” Newell said in the most condescending tone possible, “but the facts speak for themselves. The *extramuros* team of which she was a part not only failed to retrieve the Veil of Veronica, but they also got themselves killed, each and every one.”

“Including the Archer, the team’s leader,” Santiago pointed out, “an invaluable member of the Order, with many Gnostic Observatine kills to his credit.”

There was a small silence that Lilith correctly identified as hostility congealing around her.

“The loss of the Archer,” Newell said, “has caused consternation all up and down the *extramuros* corps.”

“He will be sorely missed by us all,” Obarton said in his basso profundo. Pushing eighty, he was the elder statesman of the Council; those watchful eyes had observed more than three *Nauarchus* come and go. Two of them killed by Bravo Shaw, the third by Bravo’s father.

Santiago pursed his ruddy lips. “Which is more than can be said for Maria Elena.”

“Surely you’re not fatuous enough to blame Maria Elena for the failure of the entire *extramuros* team,” Lilith said, aware that she was struggling against a rising tide.

“The team would have been stronger had it been all male,” Obarton said with the kind of finality that brooked no further argument.

“It’s settled then,” Muller said, looking to Obarton.

“There was an error made.” Obarton spoke like an old-fashioned barrister, an affectation he had picked up from watching Charles Laughton in *Witness for the Prosecution* so many times he could recite every one of Sir Wilfred Robarts’s lines by heart, and did so often when he was in his cups. “An attempt at what some people around this table call *modernization*. For myself, this notion is foolishness. I freely admit that I went along with the notion knowing full well that the expedition would end in tears.”

“Did you now,” Newell said shortly. “Then why did you vote in favor of Maria Elena’s inclusion?”

Obarton swung around in his chair as if impaling Newell with his barrister’s thorny gaze. “Results, my dear Newell, are more powerful than

words. I might have spoken out against the motion until I was blue in the face, but the majority was against me. The herd had already made up its collective mind. So I let nature take its course.” His stubby-fingered hand swept out in a shallow arc. “And here are the consequences for all to see and absorb.”

Lilith, smiling through bared teeth, silently seethed.

“With all due respect for my elders,” Highstreet broke in.

“You know, my boy,” Obarton broke in, “it has been my experience that when someone says, ‘With all due respect,’ what they really mean is ‘Screw you.’”

Highstreet ignored the interruption. “With all due respect,” he deliberately repeated, “we’ve wandered off topic.” He was a thin young man with pale, translucent skin; blue veins pulsed in his temples. His hair, as black as Lilith’s, started high up on his domed forehead, swept back over his pate and down his neck to just above his scarecrow shoulders. It gleamed in the overhead chandelier light, slicked down with pomade. “We’re here to choose Aldus’s successor.” Highstreet, a Brit originally from Liverpool, was a genius savant; he ran all the Knights’ networking, IT, bugging, and clandestine online hacking units. A number of the elders had no clear idea what he did; their eyes rolled back in their heads when he attempted to explain it. “That will be difficult enough, I wager. I move that we table all other matters.”

“I second that,” Lilith said immediately.

Without an eye toward either her or Highstreet, Obarton continued as if neither had spoken. “With the recent debacle in Arizona as background, I think it perfectly clear that our hallowed predecessors were correct all along; women have no place in our Order, let alone in this august body. Therefore, I move that we do vote on whether or not Lilith Swan is to be kept on the Circle Council.”

“I second that,” Muller said, nose figuratively planted between Obarton’s rotund buttocks.

“A show of hands,” Newell commanded. Clearly, this motion was not up for debate.

One by one hands were raised until all thirteen men had voted in favor of the motion. No surprise there, Lilith thought, as she scraped her chair back and rose to her feet.

“There’s a good girl,” Newell said.

“Well, say this for her,” Obarton sniffed. “She knows when she’s beaten.”

Lilith circled the table, taking the long way to the door, smiled easily now that her path was made clear. “You know me so well,” she said to Obarton in a honeyed voice. As she passed behind Newell, she reached up, withdrew one of her new hairpins, and plunged it into his carotid artery. The result was startling; Newell rose off his chair as if levitating. His face drained of blood, his extremities spasmed, he slid off the chair, all but disappearing under the table.

Extreme shock ricocheted around the room, rooting everyone to their seats. No one moved; no one could even think. Their minds were frozen. Lilith, now behind Santiago, thrust her left wrist beside his head, right hand drawing from her new bracelet a length of piano wire, which she expertly wrapped around his throat. Bracing one knee against the back of his chair, she jerked on it with such force that the wire drove through skin, cartilage, muscle, nearly decapitating him.

Several members around the table were shouting, a nearly incoherent string of what she assumed to be epithets. Reaching around to her raised leg, she detached the spike heel of her new shoe and drove it through Muller’s right eye and into his brain.

The sickening stench of human death had taken hold of the room. Lilith, both shoes off and dangling from her fingertips, continued to circle until she stood behind Highstreet. The others had pushed their chairs back, were staggering to their feet, their faces blotched, their sensibilities hijacked, stupefied, rejecting what their eyes had recorded. But Highstreet remained immobile, staring straight ahead into the mirror directly across from them.

Leaning over him, Lilith sensed the entire room shudder in terror. She placed her hands against Highstreet’s cheeks and, with her lips against his ear, whispered, “Now.” Then she stood back.

Highstreet came alive. He alone had shown no horror at what had just happened. It seemed clear now that he wasn’t even surprised. “Let it be known that the last vote, along with all attendant motions and seconds, be forever stricken from the record of this august body.” Everyone was staring at him; none of those left alive could bring themselves to look at

their dead compatriots or, for that matter, their murderer. He looked each and every member straight in the eye. “The motion to rescind the order is passed unanimously, yes?” Someone vomited, adding to the miasma of involuntary human evacuation; Obarton stared at Lilith stonily. Highstreet smiled. “I’ll take that as assent.”

“Now.” He leaned forward, elbows on the table as if the room hadn’t been turned into a charnel house. “As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted, our business here is to elect a new *Nauarchus*.” Everyone expected him to continue. Everyone, that is, except Obarton, whose dawning grasp of the present situation was entirely evident.

“Go on, my dear,” Obarton said. Only a voice thinner than usual betrayed his heightened state of inner turmoil. “Take your seat.”

Lilith held his inimical gaze for a long moment. Then, returning to where Muller’s corpse sprawled slack in his chair, she reached around, pulled her heel from his eye socket. A gush of blood ran all over his front, splattered onto the gleaming tabletop. Someone moaned; another turned away.

Still holding Obarton’s gaze, Lilith wiped her weapon clean, fitted it back into the sole of her shoe. “Do you like that?” she said to Obarton. “There’s more where that came from.”

“Oh, I have no doubt,” Obarton replied, with effort summoning his *basso profundo*.

“You have doubts,” Highstreet said. “A whole sorority of ’em.” A tight-lipped smile. “But you’ll just have to live with the uncertainties of this new tomorrow.”

As if this was a signal, Lilith went around the table, sat in the *Nauarchus*’s seat. “Now,” she said, “we can get down to the business of annihilating the Gnostic Observatines.”

Obarton made one last effort. “Our circumstances have radically changed. Continuing this obsession to bring down the Gnostic Observatines once and for all is a pipe dream cleverly embedded in our culture by Conrad Shaw, then exacerbated by his grandson, Bravo.”

Lilith’s eyes blazed. “Our *extramuros* teams harried and killed, our last two *Nauarchus* assassinated. Are those pipe dreams?”

With a theatrical flourish, Obarton placed a silk handkerchief against his nose and mouth. “First, I suggest we dismiss the other members, call

for a cleanup crew, and continue this discussion elsewhere in the apartment.”

When these tasks were accomplished, he and Lilith and, as she insisted, Highstreet settled themselves into plush sofas in the large salon. They did their best to ignore the comings and goings as the bodies, wrapped in plastic, were boxed and carried out so the cleaning crew could return the boardroom to its former pristine state. She saw Naylor overseeing the tasks. He carried no expression whatsoever on his face.

Someone brought a tray of coffee, a fresh baguette, butter, and a pot of strawberry jam, set it on an onyx cocktail table between them, and left as silently as he had entered, closing the sliding doors behind him.

Obarton stood at the high windows, hands clasped behind his back, observing the moving truck idling in front of the building, ready to accept the long boxes as they were loaded inside. He turned back to the room. “What is it with you two? Having an affair?”

“Not interested,” Highstreet said.

Obarton turned his attention to Lilith, who merely shrugged.

Having no choice but to accept their unexplained liaison, Obarton commenced his thesis. “This obsession with the Shaws caused our last two leaders to go head-hunting. Instead, they got their heads handed to them.” His expression grew dark. “Don’t you see, Lilith, the very obsession you seek to perpetuate made your predecessors incautious, made them susceptible to the Shaws’ legendary wiles.”

With fire in her eyes, Lilith leaned forward. “Which makes it imperative that Bravo Shaw be killed. The sooner the better.”

“And what, may I ask, do you propose to do about the demonic creature that attacked and killed everyone inside our castle?”

Her hand cut through the air. “What creature? There was a fire, doubtless motivated by revenge against the last *Nauarchus*, who, I may say, was both incautious and wrongheaded in all matters. But he escaped.”

“Only to be killed by Braverman Shaw in Tannourine.”

Her unblinking gaze trained on him, and even he shuddered at the sight of her clear intent. “We shall leave the fantasy of demons to the Gnostic Observatines, who dabble in that kind of anathema to Church orthodoxy,” she said with finality. “Carpe diem. We have the opportunity now, and we must seize the day! The Gnostic Observatines have been

severely weakened by the destruction of their Reliquary. The Order spent centuries amassing its cache of sacred relics in Alexandria, Egypt: all dust.

“Now is the time to strike, I tell you, and strike hard, while they are at their most vulnerable. I swear to you, Obarton, I will use every last resource of the Order to eradicate the Gnostic Observatines.” She lifted a forefinger. “And Bravo Shaw is first.”

FOUR DOMINIONS

Eric Van Lustbader is the author of twenty-five international bestsellers, including the most recent Jason Bourne novels. His books have been translated into over twenty languages.

BY ERIC VAN LUSTBADER

THE BRAVO SHAW NOVELS

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