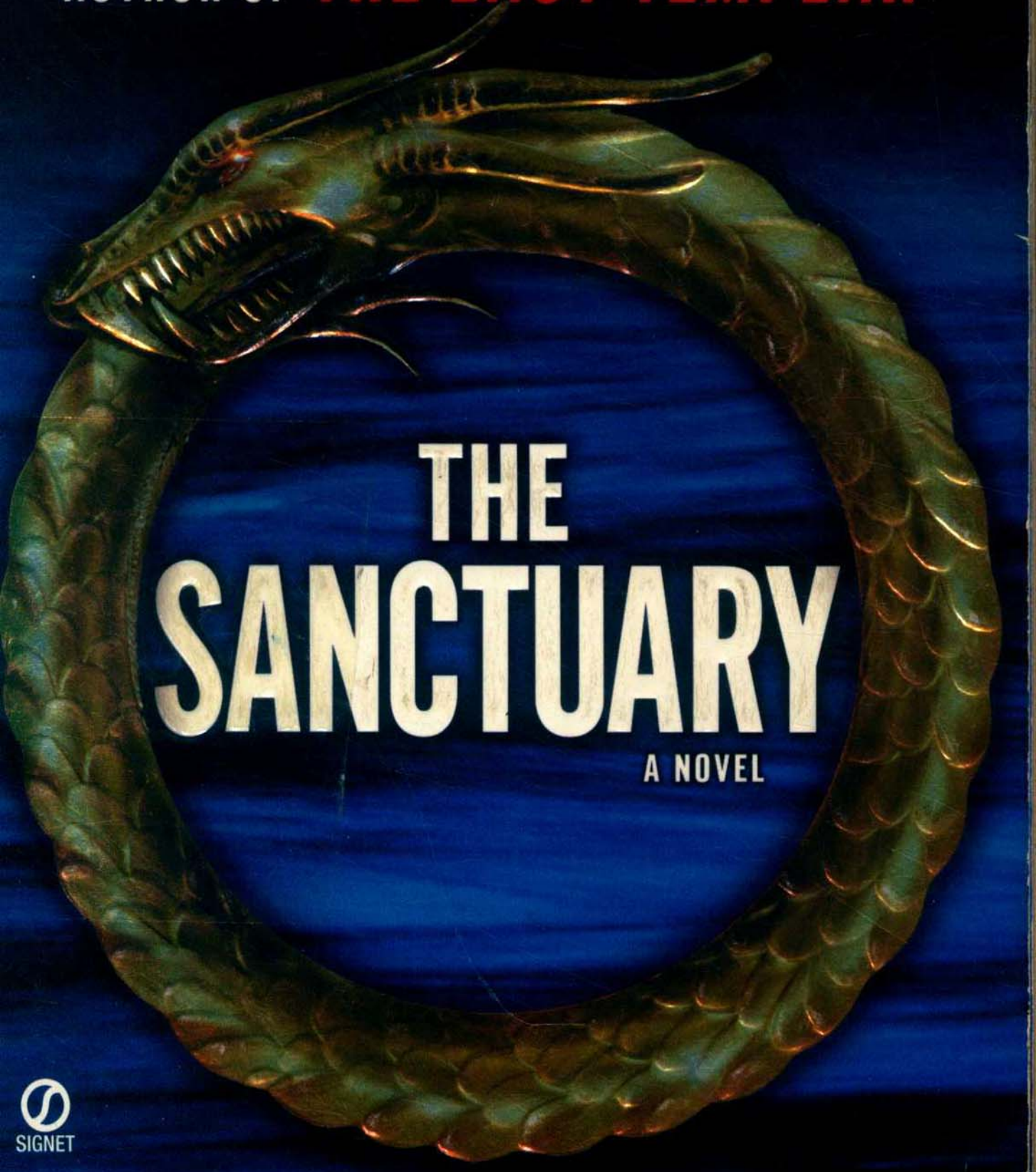


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

RAYMOND KHOURY

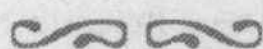
AUTHOR OF *THE LAST TEMPLAR*



THE SANCTUARY

A NOVEL

THE SANCTUARY



RAYMOND
KHOURY



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my very own elixirs.*

No father could possibly be any prouder.

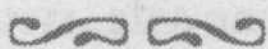
When a distinguished . . . scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.

—ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Tempus edax, homo edacior.
(Time devours; man devours even more.)

—ANCIENT ROMAN SAYING

Prologue



I

Naples—November 1749

The scrape was hardly there, but it still woke him up. It wasn't really loud enough to rouse anyone from a deep sleep, but then, he hadn't slept well for years.

It sounded like metal, brushing against stone.

Could be nothing. An anodyne, household noise. One of the servants getting a head start on the day.

Maybe.

On the other hand, it could be something less auspicious. Like a sword. Accidentally scraping along a wall.

Someone's here.

He sat up, listening intently. Everything was deathly quiet for a moment. Then he heard something else.

Footsteps.

Stealing up cold limestone stairs.

At the edge of his consciousness, but definitely there.

And getting closer.

He bolted out of bed and over to the French windows that led to a small balcony across from the fireplace. He pulled the curtain to one side, swung the door open quietly and slipped out into the biting night air. Winter was closing in quickly now, and his bare feet froze on the icy stone floor. He leaned over the balustrade and peered down. The courtyard of his palazzo was enshrouded in a stygian darkness. He concentrated his gaze, looking for a reflection, a glint of movement, but he couldn't see any sign of life below. No horses, no carts, no valets or servants. Across the street and beyond, the outlines of the other houses were barely discernible, backlit by the first glimmer of dawn that hinted from behind Vesuvius. He'd witnessed the sun rising up behind the mountain and its ominous trail of gray smoke several times. It was a majestic, inspiring sight, one that usually brought him some solace when not much else did.

Tonight was different. He could feel a prickling malignancy in the air.

He hurried back inside and slipped on his breeches and a shirt, not bothering with the buttons. There were more pressing needs. He rushed to his dressing table and pulled open its top drawer. His fingers had just managed to reach the dagger's grip when the door to his bedchamber burst open and three men charged in. Their swords were already drawn. In the dim light of the dying embers in the hearth, he could also make out a pistol carried by the middle man.

The light was enough for him to recognize the man. And instantly, he knew what this was about.

"Don't do anything foolish, Montferrat," the lead attacker rasped.

The man who went by the name of the Marquis de Montferrat raised his arms calmingly and carefully side-stepped away from the dressing table. The intruders fanned out to either side of him, their blades hovering menacingly in his face.

"What are you doing here?" he asked cautiously.

Raimondo di Sangro sheathed his sword and laid his pistol on the table. He grabbed a side chair and kicked it over to the marquis. It hit a groove in the flooring and tumbled noisily onto its side. "Sit down," he barked. "I suspect this is going to take a while."

His eyes fixed on di Sangro, Montferrat righted the chair and hesitantly sat down. "What do you want?"

Di Sangro reached into the hearth and ignited a taper, which he used to light an oil lantern. He set it on the table and retrieved his gun, then waved his men out dismissively with it. They nodded and left the room, closing the door behind them. Di Sangro pulled over another chair and sat astride it, face-to-face with his prey. "You know very well what I want, Montferrat," he replied, aiming the double-barrel flintlock pistol at him menacingly as he studied him, before adding acidly, "And you can start with your real name."

"My real name?"

"Let's not play games, *Marquese*." He slurred the last

word mockingly, his face brimming with condescension. "I had your letters checked. They're forged. In fact, nothing in the vague snippets you've let slip about your past, since the moment you got here, seems to have any truth."

Montferrat knew that his accuser had all the resources necessary to make such inquiries. Raimondo di Sangro had inherited the title of *principe di San Severo*—prince of San Severo—at the tender age of sixteen, after the deaths of his two brothers. He counted the young Spanish king of Naples and Sicily, Charles VII, among his friends and admirers.

How could I have so misread this man? Montferrat thought with burgeoning horror. *How could I have so misread this place?*

After years of torment and self-doubt, he had finally abandoned his quest in the Orient and returned to Europe less than a year earlier, making his way to Naples by way of Constantinople and Venice. He hadn't intended to stay in the city. His plan had been to continue onward to Messina, and from there to sail on to Spain and, possibly, back home to Portugal.

He paused at the thought.

Home.

A word meant for others, not for him. An empty, hollow word, bone-picked clean of any resonance by the passage of time.

Naples had given pause to his thoughts of surrender. Under the Spanish viceroys, it had grown to become the

second city of Europe, after Paris. It was also part of a new Europe he was discovering, a different Europe than the one he had left behind. It was a land where the ideas of the Enlightenment were steering people to a new future, ideas embraced and nurtured in Naples by Charles VII, who had championed discourse, learning, and cultural debate. The king had set up a National Library, as well as an Archaeological Museum to house the relics unearthed from the recently discovered buried towns of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Of further allure was that the king was hostile to the Inquisition, the bane of Montferrat's previous life. Wary of the Jesuits' influence, the king had trod carefully in suppressing them, which he had managed to do without raising the ire of the pope.

And so he had reverted to the name he'd used in Venice many years earlier, the Marquis of Montferrat. He'd found it easy to lose himself in the bustling city and its visitors. Several countries had founded academies in Naples to house the steady stream of travelers who came to study the newly excavated Roman towns. Soon, he was meeting scholars, both locals and visitors from across Europe, like-minded men with inquisitive minds.

Men like Raimondo di Sangro.

Inquisitive mind, indeed.

"All these lies," di Sangro continued, gauging his pistol, eyeing Montferrat with a glint of unbridled greed. "And yet, intriguing and rather odd, since that dear old lady, the Contessa di Czergy, claims she knew you by the

very same name in Venice, Montferrat . . . how many years ago was it now? Thirty? More?"

The name spiked through the false marquis like a blade. *He knows. No, he cannot know. But he suspects.*

"Obviously, the old parsnip's mind isn't what it used to be. The ravages of time will get us all in the end, won't they?" di Sangro pressed on. "But about you, she was so insistent, so clear, so resolute and adamant that she wasn't mistaken . . . it was hard to dismiss her words as the delusional ramblings of an old crone. And then I discover that you speak Arabic with the tongue of a native. That you know Constantinople like the back of your hand and that you've traveled extensively in the Orient, posing—impeccably, or so I'm told—as an Arab sheikh. So many mysteries for one man, *Marquese*. It defies logic—or belief."

Montferrat frowned inwardly, berating himself for even considering the man a kindred spirit, a potential ally. For testing him, probing him, however cryptically.

Yes, he had totally misjudged the man. But, he thought, perhaps this was fate. Perhaps it was time to unburden himself. Perhaps it was time to let the world in on his secret. Perhaps man could find a way to deal with it in a noble and magnanimous way.

Di Sangro's eyes were locked on him, studying every twitch in his face. "Come now. I had to drag myself out of bed at this ungodly hour just to hear your story, *Marquese*," he said haughtily. "And to be frank with you, I

don't particularly care who you really are or where you're really from. All I want to know is your secret."

Montferrat met his inquisitor's gaze straight on. "You don't want to know, *Principe*. Trust me. It is not a gift, not for any man. It is a curse, pure and simple. A curse from which there is no respite."

Di Sangro wasn't moved. "Why don't you let me be the judge of that?"

Montferrat leaned in. "You have a family," he said, his voice now hollow and distant. "A wife. Children. The king is your friend. What more could a man ask for?"

The answer came back with unsettling ease. "More. Of the same."

Montferrat shook his head. "You should leave things be."

Di Sangro edged closer to his prisoner. His eyes were blazing with an almost messianic fervor. "Listen to me, *Marquese*. This city, this paltry boy-king . . . that is nothing. If what I suspect you know is true, we can be emperors. Don't you understand? People will sell their very souls for this."

The false marquis didn't doubt it for a second. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Di Sangro's breathing got heavier with frustration as he tried to size up the man's resolve. His eyes flickered downwards as he seemed to catch sight of something on Montferrat's chest that piqued his curiosity. He leaned menacingly closer and reached across the table, pulling out a chain-hung medallion from underneath the false

marquis's opened shirt. Montferrat's hand flew up and grabbed di Sangro's wrist, stilling it, but the prince quickly raised his gun and cocked back its flintlock. Montferrat slowly released his grip. The prince held the medallion in his fingers a moment longer, then suddenly yanked it off Montferrat's neck, splitting its chain. He held the medallion closer, examining it.

It was a simple, round piece, cast out of bronze, like a large coin, a little over two digits in diameter. Its sole feature was a snake, which lay coiled around the medallion's face, ringlike, its head at the top of the circle formed by its own body.

The snake was devouring its own tail.

The prince looked a question at Montferrat. The false marquis's hardened eyes gave nothing away. "I'm tired of waiting, *Marquese*," di Sangro hissed menacingly. "I'm tired of trying to make sense of this," he rasped as his fingers tightened against the medallion and he shook it angrily at Montferrat, "tired of your cryptic remarks, of trying to read through all your esoteric references. I'm tired of hearing reports about your passing questions to certain scholars and travelers and piecing together what I now believe is true about you. I want to know. I *demand* to know. So it's really your choice. You can tell me, here, now. Or you can take it with you to your grave." He pushed his gun even closer. Its over-and-under twin barrels were now hovering inches from his prisoner's face. He let the threat hang there for a moment. "But if that were to be your decision," he added, "to die here to-

night and take your knowledge with you, I would ask you to ponder one thing: What gives you the right to deprive us, to hold the world in contempt and in ignorance? What did you do to deserve the right to make that choice for the rest of us?"

It was a question the man had asked himself many times, a question that had haunted his very existence.

In a distant past, another man, an old man whom he had watched die, a friend whose death he had even—in his own eyes—helped bring about, had made that choice for him. With his dying breath, his friend had stunned him by telling him that despite Montferrat's deplorable and heinous actions, he could see the reticence and the doubt in his eyes. Somehow, the old man felt sure that the valor, the nobility, and the honesty of his young ward were still there, buried deep within, smothered by a misguided sense of duty. In his darkest hour, that friend had managed to find promise and purpose in his young ward's life, something the false marquis had himself long given up on. And with that came an admission, a revelation, and a mission that would consume the rest of Montferrat's life.

The choice had been made for him. The right to decide had been bequeathed to him by someone far more deserving than he had ever imagined himself to be.

But he had surprised himself.

He had done his best, tried his hardest, to discover what the missing pages of the codex had contained and wrest the ancient book's lost secrets.

He'd managed to evade his accusers in Portugal. He'd

searched in Spain, and in Rome. He'd traveled to Constantinople and beyond, to the Orient. But he hadn't found anything to advance his quest.

He had failed.

He'd thought a return to the land of his birth would help him decide on what his next step would be. Di Sangro's interruption had put pause to all that. And in the fog that clouded his mind, one thing glowed with certainty: that holding the man who was sitting before him in contempt and keeping him in ignorance was a choice he was happy to make.

The rest of the world, well . . . that was another matter.

"Well?" di Sangro snapped, his hand wavering slightly under the weight of the pistol.

The man who called himself Montferrat leapt out of his chair and hurled himself at his adversary, reaching out and pushing his pistol away just as di Sangro pulled the trigger. The charge exploded in a deafening roar as both men grappled over the gun, its lead ball bursting out of the upper muzzle and whistling past Montferrat's ear before biting into the paneling on the wall behind him. The two men slammed into the table by the fireplace, still fighting for the gun, as the door to the bedchamber swung open. Di Sangro's henchmen rushed in, swords raised. Montferrat caught the momentary distraction in his adversary's eyes and exploited it, hammering the *principe* with a fierce back-elbow that caught him in the throat. The prince recoiled backwards under the blow,

loosening his grip on the pistol just enough for Montferrat to wrest it from him. Montferrat pushed the prince away and raised the pistol, rotating its barrel and cocking its firing arm as he moved away from the first of the henchmen, who was already charging at him, and fired. The round struck his attacker in the chest, causing him to twist sideways and drop to the ground at Montferrat's feet.

Montferrat hurled the empty pistol at the second attacker and swiftly picked up the fallen man's sword. The prince had recovered somewhat, and despite being unsteady on his feet, he drew his own sword. "Don't kill him," he hissed, inching forward to join his henchman. "I need him alive . . . for now."

Montferrat gripped the sword with both hands, holding it up defensively, flicking it left and right to keep his attackers at bay. The two men facing him were impatient, and in his experience, poise was as effective a weapon as a sword. He would wait for them to make a mistake. The henchman was eager to prove his worth and lunged forward recklessly. Montferrat blocked the strike with his sword and kicked the man with all his might, his bare foot catching the man in his thigh. The man howled with pain, and from the corner of his eye, Montferrat noted that the prince had held back mindfully. He decided to stay on his attacker and swung his sword, catching the faltering man's blade with the full brunt of his own and knocking it out from his hand. The prince screamed in anger and rushed forward, interrupting Montferrat,

whose sword was now needed elsewhere. Montferrat managed to kick his first attacker back before quickly spinning to face di Sangro. The henchman reeled backwards, crashing into the table and slipping off it into the large fireplace. Sparks and embers flew out from the hearth as he yelped from the pain in his seared hand, with which he had tried to catch his fall. Montferrat saw the man's sleeve catch fire just as the lantern, which had fallen off the table, ignited the carpet in a swath of fire.

The false marquis struggled to parry the resurgent di Sangro's thrusts as the flames from the carpet grew furiously and licked at the thick velvet curtain before taking hold of it. The heat and the smoke in the bedchamber were infernal as the prince fought on relentlessly and surprised Montferrat with a ferocious strike that knocked the sword from his hands. Montferrat stepped backwards, trying to avoid the edge of di Sangro's blade, which now loomed too close to his throat. Through the rising smoke in the chamber, he noticed that the thug with the burnt hand had managed to extinguish the flames on his coat and was now rising to rejoin the fray. The man moved sideways, positioning himself by the bedchamber door to block any attempt at escape by Montferrat.

Montferrat was outnumbered and outgunned, and he knew it.

Darting nervous glances left and right, he saw a possible way out and decided to chance it. He raised his