

An Egyptologist finds sacred objects in Rome  
and Glastonbury.

**Symbols of the Grid: Matrix of Mastery**  
By Jeri Castronova

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# **SYMBOLS OF THE GRID**

**Matrix of Mastery**

BOOK 3

of the 2013 Thriller Trilogy

MASTERS OF THE GAME BOARD

Jeri Castronova, PhD

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Book 1 of the Trilogy: Masters of the Game Board

Quest for the Emerald Tablets: The Secret of Alchemist Gold.  
Book 2 of the Trilogy: Masters of the Game Board

Paint the Sky and Dance: Women and the New Myths  
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*There are many ways to master the Game—this is One.*

*The return of the Game Board means it is time for  
The Awakening.*

*Isis*

*I leave this part of my journal so it may guide  
the chosen seekers to the sacred Orb.  
My Blessing on those Beings.*

*The Magdalene Journals*

## Chapter 1

### Rome

“Half a minute. That’s all it’ll take,” a male voice said.

Dr. Sydney Grace stepped through the gate into the enclosure of the most recognized structure of the ancient world. Standing grandly in the glow of sunset, the last of its tourists trickled out.

She smiled at her female companion, then turned to the voice. “Another time, perhaps.”

He seemed not in the least put off. “Ten seconds. One photo, that’s all.” Resplendent in the full regalia of a Roman tribune with shiny rippled breastplate, matching red-plumed helmet, and crimson cape, he blatantly puffed up to show off his physique.

Maria Grazzini, Sydney’s escort into the coliseum and the Chief Archeologist of the Roman Forum, turned to lock the iron gate and glared at the red-clad peacock. “She said no.”

His smile turned slowly into a grimace, as he backed away from the grating. Sydney watched him turn and walk toward the plaza that led to the *Foro Romano*. She hoisted her bag and followed Maria down the ancient stone steps to the grounds under the floor of the arena.

“They always get rather zealous at the end of the day,” Maria said. “They act like they’re still rulers of the world.” She clicked on her flashlight, pulled out a huge bronze key and unlocked a large dilapidated wooden doorway set into an arch. “Which seems to appeal to many women travelers.”

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Sydney peered into the inky tunnel. She pulled her light out of her bag, pushing it onto its brightest setting and shined it onto the ground. “It’s understandable. They do put on a pretty good show.”

“Watch your step. We never know what we’ll find in here.” Maria swept her light back and forth, up and down. Pockets of insects scattered at the light. Loud squeaks came from somewhere ahead.

“As long as you can show me the wall, I don’t care what’s down here.” Sydney frowned at the thought. She did care.

Had it only been a week since she received the email from Maria about the unexpected find in one of the tunnels under the coliseum? From the description, it sounded very like the wall painting she had seen two summers ago in a tomb in the Valley of the Kings. To her surprise, the tomb was intact—the burial place of a relatively unknown queen of the late nineteenth dynasty. As an Egyptologist, this find became the most thrilling moment of her career. At the same time, she could not reveal its whereabouts and betray the trust of the boy who led her to it. And so it remained her secret.

Maria inched her way in the narrow tunnel toward another arched entrance. “We think this was the gladiator entry into the arena. No turning around in here. They were committed.” She passed through the arch and veered left. “This goes into the passage used by the senators.”

Sydney noticed the difference. This tunnel, larger and wider, with faded color on the rough walls, had an air source that ensured the nobility could breathe as they made their way to their section next to the royal box.

“You said the wall had been covered so no one noticed it had paintings all over it?”

Maria’s foot crunched something that Sydney didn’t want to know about. “When I was an archeology student many years

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ago, I'd come down here and catalog the paintings. They fit neatly into my dissertation on Roman and Etruscan art, but the differences were pronounced. As I mentioned in my email, I found nearly the same thing on an Etruscan wall, which dated to three thousand years ago."

Sydney's back brushed the wall as she tried to avoid the insect carcasses at her feet. "The one I saw was on an Egyptian tomb wall at least thirty-two-hundred years old. Beautiful colors, like it had been newly painted."

Maria stopped. "I'd love to see it."

"Unfortunately, it's still hidden. Not even the Supreme Counsel of Egyptian Antiquities knows of its existence. And I gave my word not to reveal its whereabouts."

Maria's expression denoted disappointment. Her light swept into a tunnel wide enough for a four-horse chariot, then into a large room.

"The emperor's entry into the coliseum," she said breathlessly, pointing to the marble stairs at the end of the enclosure.

The walls rang with colored mosaics of every imaginable recreational scene—pools of azure water surrounded by swans and floral drapery, nude youths of both sexes scampering around the pool and the adjoining arched gardens, platters of delicacies piled on low tables surrounded by plush couches and pillows.

Sydney studied the walls with intense interest. "Stunning, even more so now that they've been restored."

Maria shook her head. "Not restored. These are the originals. We just cleaned them up after this tunnel was dug out. It had been filled with debris for the past two thousand years. And a hard surface had formed which actually preserved them."

"You've done an excellent job. It's amazing it didn't have water damage anywhere."



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“The National Archeological Society is ecstatic with this. They wanted to have tours down here to show it off, but it would be dangerous. Too many cave-ins have filled some of the tunnels here and under the Palatine Hill.”

Maria moved in the opposite direction. “Even though the coliseum was built by Emperor Vespasian, who was a victorious general, he put no scenes of his military triumphs down here. Neither did his son and successor, Titus. It’s as if they wanted their victories to be seen by the public, not hidden from view. We think this area had tables and cushions, a respite from the heat during the games.”

She shone her light on long indentations in the walls, around which could be set lounges for the emperor and his family. “I’ve been down here when it’s been sweltering in the city. It’s always cool.”

Sydney followed the light. “After my adventure in Jerusalem several years ago, I learned that many Israelis believe the treasures from the Temple that was sacked by Titus and the Romans in 70 C.E. were brought back to Rome and are still here. Of course, the Palestinians claim the Temple Mount where the Dome of the Rock now sits, and won’t let their archeologists dig anywhere on it.”

Maria walked slowly around the room. “The Arch of Titus in the Forum has that victory carved into it and shows the golden menorah and the rest of the treasure. If it’s here, it could only be in one place.”

“Since Titus brought it back with him, he could have buried it here in the coliseum, or under his arch.”

Maria shook her head. “I don’t think so. The treasure’s probably in the Vatican.”

Sydney got another whiff of fresh air. “Air holes.” She looked up but saw no source.

“Where’s the wall painting? I don’t see it.”

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Maria stood in the center of the room. “You’re standing on it.”

Sydney looked down as they both shone their lights onto a gravel floor. She bent down and cleared an area of sand until she noticed a patterned mosaic. Maria swept the floor with a small whisk brush.

Sydney reached for a water bottle and cloth from her bag to wipe the ground. Rows of brilliant blues, reds and yellows appeared as if by magic. They curved in a circular pattern and some of the rows had symbols she had never seen.

“This covers nearly the whole floor,” Sydney said, amazed at the size. “Must be ten feet long.”

“Fifteen by fifteen to be exact. It extends out nearly to the walls.”

Sydney shook her head and exhaled slowly. “Exactly like the one in Egypt, except bigger. I wonder why they made it so big?”

“No idea,” Maria said. “We don’t even know what it is, and they probably didn’t either. Just that it’s a copy of one found in an Etruscan grave, which is much smaller of course.”

Sydney had a section from the center to the outer edge uncovered and wet wiped with the cloth which revealed each circle made of different colors and shapes of mosaics. She counted the circles—nine, plus the center.

“Same as the one in Egypt.”

“What were they used for?” Maria asked. “Can you make out any of the symbols? Some kind of religious meaning?”

Sydney recalled the extraordinary circumstance of the Egyptian tomb. Led to it by a boy who saved her life, it contained a treasure of ancient artifacts from which his family had plucked for three generations. They only sold a piece at a time, always to the same dealer they could trust.

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The remarkable thing about it was that a wall painting which showed the queen playing some kind of board game seemingly came to life. Sydney watched as the scene transformed from a flat wall into a hologram in which Thoth, the God of Wisdom, directed the female pharaoh to throw several rocks onto the game board. One flew off and landed at her feet. It was a smooth green stone, which she picked up. Later she learned it contained a clue to the discovery of the legendary Emerald Tablets.

She told this to Maria, who seemed nonplussed by the supernatural event and the discovery of Tablets whose existence had been passed down as fable. "I've heard strange things about Egypt. This just confirms them. But I doubt any of our emperors would have played such a game, or even known about it." She suddenly looked up and gazed into the black distance.

Sydney turned but saw nothing. "What?"

Maria whispered, "We're being followed."

Sydney shone her light into the dark tunnel at the end of the room. "I don't hear anything."

"I didn't want to mention it, but for some reason this floor has become quite interesting to certain archeologists in the Society," she whispered. "They want to keep it hidden. I think that's the real reason they want to keep people out of here."

"Why? I'm the only archeologist who's ever seen this kind of board, and I don't even know what it's for. Just that it's some kind of game. Why would that be so valuable?"

"Let's get out of here."

Sydney fished her camera out of her bag. "I just want to get a few shots."

She clicked off a few frames.

Suddenly a bright beam came from the end of the room and hit them like a bolt. They both jumped.

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The deep voice echoed in the enclosure. “I wouldn’t do that. Drop the camera.”

They turned to see a Roman gladiator sauntering toward them, swinging his light at them. Not the same costumed figure who confronted them at the gate, this one wore a highly polished silver mask that covered his face and most of his head. The chest and leg covers were not the legionnaire’s breastplate, rather the utilitarian black unadorned type worn as protection in the arena. His leather sandals wrapped around his ankles.

Sydney thought she was hallucinating, or seeing a specter appear out of the bloody past of this place. Big and ponderous as his forebears who must have been used to the weight of their protective shells, he carried his sword at his side.

Maria shone her light back at him, blinding him so that he stopped. She quickly dug in her pocket, pulled out a large bronze key. She moved close to Sydney, put it in her hand and said softly “Get out and bring help—Fast.”

Sydney whispered, “I can’t leave you here.”

“It’s okay. I can handle him. Hurry.”

Sydney hesitated, then dashed to the entryway.

“Stay where you are,” the soldier bellowed, shielding his eyes. “Or I’ll kill the Director.”

She stopped.

Maria’s voice bounced anxiously off the walls. “Go! Get out.”

On instinct, Sydney bolted for the tunnel, trusting she did the right thing in leaving her friend, desperately hoping she could find her way out and get help. She wanted to believe Maria could handle him, but his threat sounded so ominous that she slowed and considered going back.

She heard Maria say, “What do you want?”

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Sydney couldn't hear the answer, then heard a scuffle and a scream. Impulsively, she ran back just as the gladiator dashed through the entry, sword thrusting out ahead of him.

She knelt, picked up a handful of gravel, and threw it into the eye sockets of the mask. Then without looking back ran toward the tunnel. She heard him groan and drop the sword.

Maybe she could remember the way they had come. Maybe she had enough time to find her way out. And maybe she would find a policeman quickly. She bounced off the walls of the narrow tunnel, adrenalin propelling her to act fast and save herself.

"Maria," she whispered, and fell against the tunnel wall, the light nearly slipping from her fingers.

A loud clang echoed from the enclosure, rousing her from the growing despair she could not accept. Metal on stone. Another clang. Fear gripped her as tight as a vise around her neck, and the effort to take a breath strained her muscles.

Her mind told her this made no sense. Her body told her to flee, but her arm felt as if it were under water. She could hardly hold the light. Her senses told her she was in the bowels of the coliseum—the most horrific killing-place ever known. She suddenly heard screams emanating from the arena, the bellowing cries of the crowd, and wails curling up from the agonies of victims. Or was it only her imagination?

The sudden flood of emotions seemed to shut down her response mechanism but her legs carried her forward out of the tunnel toward the archway with the decayed wooden entrance.

Then her heart sank. The door slammed shut. Its loud retort echoed in her ears.

Sydney ran to it. She pushed. It didn't budge. Fumbling in her pocket for the key Maria gave her, she felt for the lock, jammed the key into it and turned. Nothing.

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She shone the light onto it and tried the key again. And realized this must be the key to the outer gate, not this door. She retrieved it, ran back into the tunnel.

Ahead lay a narrow entry they had passed on the way in. She stopped, heard nothing, swept the light ahead and behind. The passage made a curve and seemed to circle back. Stairs led to an entry and the sound of traffic. When she emerged at the gate they had entered, she heard a voice.

“Photo now, lady?”

The tribune leaned against a wall casually smoking a cigarette. She dashed into an opening, one of the entrances that led to the interior of the arena. Then ducked behind a wall, switched off the light, and surveyed the area. Laying right before the walkway tourists use to circumnavigate the ancient structure, she knew there were other entryways.

The clacking of footsteps on the stairs could only mean one thing—the gladiator’s pursuit continued.

“Didn’t get out this way.” She strained to understand the tribune. Her knowledge of Italian was limited.

“Don’t worry,” the gladiator said gruffly, “I’ll get her.”

“Don’t screw up this time.”

As she moved further into the coliseum, she thought the gladiator said, “...to get the other one out ... but she’s gone.”

The tribune began yelling, obviously not pleased. He cursed in his native tongue, undoubtedly words of universal meaning. And said something about “...the other way.”

The illumination in the coliseum interior proved to be just enough that she could find her way to another section and still keep hidden in the shadows.

She decided she was far enough away from her pursuers to call the local police.

“*Aiuto! Puo aiutarmi, per favore?* Do you speak English? Ah, yes, *bene*. This is Dr. Grace, a friend of Dr. Grazzini, the

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Director of *Foro Romano*. I'm locked in the coliseum. A tribune is at the gate and won't let me out. A gladiator is chasing me. He just killed Maria Grazzini, who's in a tunnel under the floor of the arena ..."

"*Scusi?* Who is this?" the voice said.

She realized how this must sound, but knew she had to convince him that a terrible crime had been perpetrated and her life at jeopardy. "I told you. A colleague of the Director's ..."

She heard him whisper to someone, stop, then whisper again.

When he came back he said, "You are mistaken."

"No," she said with emphasis. "I'm not mistaken."

She heard his voice in her ear. "Maria Grazzini is standing next to me." The line went dead.

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