Five days earlier, standing in front of the palace, Helena had demanded to see the emperor.

When guards tried to push her away, she presented a small package that stunned the guards.

They weren’t sure what she was showing them, but they knew it was not something she should have possessed.

Instead of being brought to the emperor, she had been held and interrogated about how she had acquired the item. Her confession had been confirmed, and she was then brought to Phrantzes.

Phrantzes now took out the small bundle, unwrapped the flax cloth, and placed the contents on the emperor’s desk.

The emperor’s gaze was as stupefied as those of the soldiers five days ago. But unlike them, he knew immediately what he was looking at.

More than nine centuries earlier, during the reign of Justinian the Great, master craftsmen had cast two chalices out of pure gold, studded with gems and glowing with a beauty that seized the soul.

The two chalices were identical save for the arrangement and shapes of the gems.

One of the two was kept by successive Byzantine emperors, and the other one had been sealed along with other treasures into a secret chamber in the foundation of Hagia Sophia in 537 C.E., when the great church was rebuilt.

The glow of the chalice in the Great Palace that the emperor was familiar with had dulled with the passage of time, but the one in front of him now looked so bright it could have been cast only yesterday.

No one had believed Helena’s confession at first, thinking that she had probably stolen the chalice from one of her rich patrons.

Although many knew of the secret chamber under the great church, few knew its exact location.

Moreover, the secret chamber was nestled among the giant stones deep in the foundation, and there were no doors or tunnels leading to it.

It should have been impossible to enter the chamber without a massive engineering effort.