

See of Darkness

by Mike Massa, ...

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„I swear I will faithfully, loyally and honorably serve the Supreme Pontiff and his legitimate successors, and dedicate myself to them with all my strength, sacrificing, if necessary, my life to defend them. I assume this same commitment with regard to the Sacred College of Cardinals whenever the Apostolic See is vacant. Furthermore, I promise to the Commanding Captain and my other superiors respect, fidelity and obedience. I swear to observe all that the honor of my position demands of me.”

—Pontifical Swiss Guard Oath administered to graduating recruits

The day that we locked the doors on the Sistine Chapel, the conventional wisdom inside the College of Cardinals was that His Holiness had died in his sleep from the flu stage of the devil-spawned plague. That wasn't, strictly speaking, true. I should know.

I shot him myself.

If anyone's listening to this, then you know all about the zombie virus that the scientists called H7D3. It raced around the Earth, killing off hundreds of millions, and eventually billions. Some people appeared to be either naturally immune or capable of fighting through the first stage of the flu. That still didn't leave enough to deal with either the mounds of decaying bodies or the living, perpetually hungry afflicted, which outnumbered the sane by hundreds to one.

We, the Guard I mean, started with a strength of almost one hundred and fifty. There were another hundred or so Vatican Gendarmerie at the beginning, but unlike the Guard they were more like police, equipped for crowd control and border security. They could marry early, have children—so many of them made the difficult decision to desert their posts in order to protect their families.

Understandable. They weren't personally sworn to the Bishop of Rome. Just damned awkward for those of us that were left inside the walls. In the end, I doubt that many found any lasting safety. A few months on and there's no view from the parapet where Rome isn't mostly smoldering buildings and mobs of mindless infected.

By the time that the decision was finally made to use a vaccine made from the spines of the infected humans, we were at three-quarters strength and dropping and we were without the guidance of the Holy Father, whom we'd pledged our lives to protect.

Our Faith, all of our training, our weapons, the thick walls of Vatican City—how do you fight an infinitesimally tiny virus without medicine?

As it turns out, the pope had been aware of the existence of a vaccine. He also knew how it was made. We were told, later, that he had prayed for guidance and determined that the use of such a vaccine was sinful.

We were sworn to obey His Holiness or his successor.

So, no vaccine even though it was available before the worst hit.

At least he was consistent, which was more than could be said of much of the leadership of the Holy Church.

Which you will also know from the papers documenting the scandals of the church, such of those records that survived the Fall. One of the upsides of the Plague, as it turned out, was that we all got to start again, but I don't want to get too far ahead of myself.

I'm Hauptman Matteo Gagliardi, commanding the remnants of the Pontifical Swiss Guard. Until the light of this Fallen world is re-kindled, we will hold the ramparts of Vatican City.

Or die on them.

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...I didn't start writing anything down at first. It was God's own truth; the disease didn't start out as a recognizable catastrophe; it began like something akin to a really bad joke. In retrospect, I can see that I began recording this diary after the most severe shock of my life. However, at the time I was just desperately reacting to one disaster after another.

If anyone listens to this, it's going to sound like several series of rationalizations, all meant to justify what I did. But you weren't there, were you, because if you

were, that meant that you survived. You did what you had to do in order to stay alive, didn't you?

All that I have done has been to keep the Church alive.

The fact that my actions were utterly necessary, that the man I killed absolved me even as I completed the trigger stroke, was cold comfort. I planned to tell my confessor, Cardinal Crivetto, even though I had already been shriven.

However, he had responsibilities too.

The pope has a sort of a chamberlain, the Camerlengo. In normal times, he's simply a personal assistant to the pope. However, should the pope die, the chamberlain has some unique and traditional duties.

In his role as the Camerlengo, Crivetto is a senior member of the *Familia Pontificalis*, which is a fancy name for the staff that surrounds the pope. The overwhelming majority of senior Vatican officials is older men. In most cases, really old men with strong political ties to the existing power structure and a deep resistance to change. Benedict XVI had been a different sort of pope. From the start, he'd been preoccupied with re-establishing discipline in the senior ranks, even when the „ranks” pushed back.

It's only if you look at it that way that his selection of this Camerlengo, a young outsider from an obscure order not normally employed in Vatican City, makes any sense. When you think about it, this uncharacteristic choice was a miracle.

The special duties of the Camerlengo cannot be postponed, and are guided by deeply respected tradition. As soon as the pope appears to have expired, the Camerlengo must notify the College of Cardinals, who will gather in Rome as fast as possible. After their arrival, the Camerlengo then personally and formally confirms the death of the pope. He's to remove the Ring of the Fisherman, the symbol of papal authority unique to each pope, which doubles as a seal for all official papal documents. Afterwards, the Camerlengo must deface the ring, honoring the ancient practice that forestalled papal forgeries, before delivering it to the assembled cardinals.

That the means to prevent cardinals from manipulating the pope's death is rote tradition tells you a little bit about what senior clergy used to be like. The fact that we still do this suggests that they haven't changed, much. Anyway, after the ring is rendered unusable, the Cardinal Camerlengo—which is his official title—then delivers the pieces to the College of Cardinals, who are met to elect the new pope.

My job was to escort him.

Clad in a bright white environmental suit, respirator, purple nitrile gloves and face shield, I watched the Camerlengo perform his duty.

Turns out the only certain way to instantly stop a human infected with H7D3 is to destroy their central nervous system—which means destroying the brain or severing the spine just below the skull. Brutal, you say? Certainly. Necessary? Utterly. But as a result, Cardinal Crivetto didn't have to invest much time in confirming that the pope was dead. Through and through gunshot wounds to the head are universally unambiguous and final.

Still, as is traditional, he murmured the dead man's given name in his ear. Predictably, His Holiness declined to answer.

Getting the ring off the rigid, swollen fingers of the corpse was a different problem. Crivetto was a deeply spiritual man and his unease at roughly handling

the body as he fumbled for the ring was plain to see in his eyes. They were all I could see of his countenance since he had sensibly donned the same full protections that I wore.

The body was still in rigor, so the Camerlengo's doubled gloves continued to slip as he fought the stiffened, curled fingers. There's nothing about being Catholic which is inconsistent with also being a pragmatist, and the cardinals were waiting. I leaned past Crivetto and handed him the bypass shears which were waiting for the ring. It was simpler to just sever the finger.

It turned out that Crivetto was a pragmatist too.

Thank God. And thank You for Cardinal Crivetto. We would all come to have reason to appreciate him.

Most of us.

Outside the sealed papal apartment, we sanitized the ring. Then I escorted the Camerlengo as he delivered it promptly to the Sistine Chapel. Normally, there would be a gravity, a deliberate pace to replacing the pope, but the College of Cardinals had assembled within twenty-four hours, such of those who either lived in Rome or were within easy reach of the City.

That's when we had our second miracle. As soon as we delivered the mutilated ring, tucked into its own enameled pyx, I was notified by the watch center that the American president was making an important announcement. Crivetto elected to come with me so that he could inform the more stalwart traditionalists who had begun politicking over the papal vote within hours of the Holy Father's death.

The Camerlengo, who could not vote anyway, would bring back the summary before the first ballot.

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The zombie plague had begun slowly, compared to what came later. It hadn't taken long for hospitals to become overwhelmed. Eventually, the Carabinieri and local police of Rome, the Municipale, began the wholesale collection of infected people. I knew things were serious when the Church closed the tour system, despite the lost ticket sales. Separating the Vatican purser from a rich source of revenue was a job that I wouldn't attempt without least half a section of armored Swiss Guard.

Even with the many landmarks inaccessible, the number of supplicants in St. Peter's Square stayed high. Had His Holiness approved it, closing the Square would've been a logistical nightmare—much of the southeast corner of the holy city lacked the high walls that lined the rest of our border.

That's one of the defining qualities of Vatican City, we're small. Less than fifty hectares—maybe twice that many of what the Americans call an „acre”.

But to my point, right up to the day that he was rendered insensate by the disease, the pope insisted that the Faithful were entitled to come pray. I understood his compassion, but I didn't think that we were doing them any favors. Even before the Crush, no day went by that some parent wouldn't bring a struggling, sick child to the Square, hoping for a blessing, a miracle.

I watched parents get bitten and turn, right there, below my duty station on the second floor. The Municipale would swoop in, stun them, flex cuff them and lock them in an armored wagon. The entire family, gone, just like that.

Sorry. I was speaking of the College of Cardinals.

Right.

What with the travel restrictions, the unexpected timing of His Holiness' death and the naturally risk averse bent of the College, only a few dozen cardinals were present to receive the Ring, not the hundred or more that were usually on hand for the passing of the mantle. Most of those waiting for us were likely banking that the reduced number of electors present improved their own chances of become Christ's representative on earth.

I know I sound cynical, not like the good Catholic you expected.

Believe me, I've earned it.

Once the chapel was sealed, in accordance with tradition, the Guards rotated through a watch bill. Unless the cardinals opened the door, we were to leave them undisturbed. It was a relief to get out of the isolation suit, though I kept a simple paper mask and gloves in place. They clashed with my traditional tricolor uniform of azure, scarlet and orange.

As an officer, I didn't carry a polearm, but my basket rapier was fully functional, as was the SIG P220 pistol under my blouse. Two of the steadiest men in my section guarded the ornate double doors that led into the inner part of the Sistine Chapel.

Feldwebel Felix Boivin was marked as noncommissioned officer by the partisan, a sort of pike, that he carried in place of the regulation Guard halberd. He wouldn't normally guard a single door, but this wasn't an ordinary post. Boivin was Swiss-French, and his Italian retained the same Gallic accent as my own. He was flanked by Korporal Muller, a bull-necked Swiss-German who'd watched the Polizia sweep up his younger brother during a fracas among the infected in the Square. But he'd stayed at his post.

The rest of my section I posted singly at unused side entrances.

The Chapel is only steps from St. Peter's Square. Its greatest protection is its appearance. From the outside it's largely nondescript, compared to the glory of the Basilica. For serious trouble, which we didn't expect, we also had some plain-clothed Guards whose MP7s were discreetly tucked into briefcases.

The real action couldn't start until the Camerlengo returned. Oberstleutnant von Messen, our vice-commander, was also on hand. I relied on his link to our operations center via his low-profile earpiece and cuff mike. They'd all settled in for the first of what we assumed would be many watches, waiting for the cardinals to argue the merits of this or that candidate before holding several rounds of voting.

Back in the 13th century, one election lasted two years, but the modern ones average three days. I was counting on one day, at most. The wearers of the crimson from beyond Rome were ready to return home nearly the moment that their slippered feet touched the gray concrete of the Vatican's helipad.

The good news was that I guessed over long. The conclave didn't last even a single day.

The bad news was that we didn't get a new pope out of it.

We never did determine which cardinals carried the virus into the Sistine Chapel that day. The College takes its privacy very seriously and literally locks itself in the chapel. Hell, even the word „conclave” is drawn from *cum clave*, Latin

for „with a key”. Over the years, acoustic insulation and thicker doors improved their isolation. The red wax seals on the ornate double doors were for show, but the reinforced locks and steel bars were quite real.

However, like I’ve said, the cardinals are mostly older men. Appointed for life, they nonetheless suffer the limitations of the flesh and old men’s bladders. As a result, if there is one thing that they like more than their comforts it's a predictable schedule. When no one came to admit our party, escorting the only man who could count the ballots for the papal election at the appointed hour, we were surprised.

Four hours later, we were mildly alarmed. Why no phone, video teleconference or computer, you ask? Why no externally accessible lock, you know, for emergencies? Why not give the Carmelengo a secret key?

Tradition.

Another hour passed.

Daring mightily, von Messen sought the permission of Crivetto to open the vestibule grille, a sort of two-way peep hole. We couldn’t see through to the other side, since the opposite grille was closed.

But we could hear.

And what we heard was screaming and fighting. Though past conclaves have been... exciting, this was a new thing, even in a world of rapidly devolving and unpleasant novelties.

When the Cardinal Camerlengo bade us open the door, we had to use a gasoline powered saw. The ceramic blade initially chattered on the steel reinforced doors, before settling into a long scream that left our ears ringing, mercifully drowning out the terrible sounds within. The doors sprang inwards suddenly, and we were treated to a view of Hell.

There was blood, bodies and parts of bodies everywhere. Immediately in front of the doors, a naked cardinal crouched over a freshly dead man whose robes were torn and pushed out of the way, exposing the soft abdomen and spilled purple entrails. The afflicted’s bloody face was pure feral hate, and it growled as if daring us to take its prey. Howls and screams rose even higher around the room as several more infected stood from their gory meals.

The Gendarme sergeant with the saw had stepped involuntarily into the room as the doors yielded, pulled inside by the weight of the cutting tool. I saw as he began to recoil, horrified at the sights before us.

Faster than thought, he was knocked sideways by another zombie.

I thought I recognized his Eminence from Argentina, but von Messen had drawn his pistol as the doors were cut open and was already servicing targets. Hastened by the regular metronome of my commander’s fire, I almost fumbled my own pistol, but managed to get my first rounds into another zombie that staggered towards us, slowed by terrible wounds that exposed the lower bones of one leg. The Gendarme was screaming and trying to scramble backwards across the blood slicked floor, his saw abandoned.

I’m ashamed to say that my marksmanship was not the magical thing that always seemed to be the case in American action films. After stopping the lurching infected, I ran through rest of my entire magazine, trying and failing to drop the

second infected. Korporal Muller was behind me, and even as the infected closed to grabbing distance, Muller ran his halberd straight into its throat.

The zombie fought and struggled to get around the polearm, its hands pulling at the shaft. Muller was shaken like a fisherman overcome by the ferocious jerking motions of a giant catch, but he kept the zombie a safe meter away from me as it weakened, and blood pulsed out around the exposed part of halberd blade. The distinctive rattle of a MP7 rang in my ears, deepening the tinnitus that already sang so loudly as to nearly drown out everything else.

Enough of the 9mm rounds found the zombie's head that it dropped to the worn tiles of the chapel.

„Back two steps, and rally!” von Messen screamed, even as he stooped to help the wounded sergeant, still scrabbling on the floor. „Close the doors!”

In that moment, there wasn't time to puzzle out how in heaven so many of the College turned in so short a time. Later, we determined that there were only twelve mobile infected left when we broke in. We also found out the how. But at the time, it seemed like all the zombies in the world were charging us, keening and screaming for our life's blood.

Von Messen had given up on helping the sergeant to his feet and simply towed him backwards through the ruined doors, fighting the pull of an infected who still maintained a literal death grip on the injured man. The trio left a broad smear of scarlet across the black and white mosaic tile.

Boivin drove the head of his partisan through one of the zombie's arms, searching for connective tissue to cut the policeman free. I finally completed my magazine change. More of my section had clattered up, and their sturdy halberds held off the struggling zombies that were gathering around the open doorway. Even at touching distance it is very easy to pull your shot and strike the wrong target. With exquisite care, I stretched, placing the muzzle of my pistol nearly in contact before shooting the infected off the sergeant.

One more hard tug and we were through. As soon as the second door closed, we stood panting.

And bleeding.

The gendarme sergeant was bitten in multiple places. Round-eyed, he looked at the worst of it, a great scallop of missing flesh on one calf, and tried to squeeze his wounds closed with his shaking hands. By now, we all knew what a bite from an infected meant. I exchanged a look with von Messen as he barked orders into his wrist microphone, demanding that a first aid team join us at the doors of the chapel.

„Herr Oberstleutnant,“ I began, staring at his hand.

Our vice-commander glanced down and grimaced. A set of tooth punctures wept red death across his wrist.

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„This man murdered His Holiness!” yelled the archbishop. His cloth of gold robes flapped as he gesticulated wildly. „And then he killed the vice-commander of the Papal Guard!”

Seated at the right hand of the Camerlengo, he flung one arm outwards, pointing towards the place where I was standing against the wall.

The Camerlengo had called an emergency meeting of the senior surviving officials. The excited archbishop was screaming himself hoarse at my presence and was becoming borderline hysterical. I can't say that it was making me any calmer, considering what I had just been asked to do not even half an hour earlier.

For the second time.

„Please calm down—“ Cardinal Crivetto tried to interrupt.

„...and now you've promoted him into the victim's place! He murdered his commanding officer! And you reward him? You're insane! He's insane! You—“

Crack!

Crivetto's calloused right hand left a white splotch on the archbishop's cheek. Stunned into silence, the archbishop raised a manicured hand to touch the numbed skin.

Like I said.

Pragmatist.

„Archbishop Tangretti, please to calm yourself,“ said Crivetto in a loud and clear voice, spanning the shock of the now quiet officials who were gathered around the antique gilt meeting table.

Believe it or not, even a tiny country like the Vatican needs a proper government. Ours is called the Roman Curia. The simplest description is to call it the Cabinet of the Roman Catholic Church. The heads of each department are always cardinals. There's a department of commerce, a department of communications, we even have a secretary of state. Okay, we *had* a secretary of state.

Now we had a deputy secretary of state. And Crivetto had just slapped him to silence.

The Camerlengo hadn't changed his black cassock since we'd resealed the Sistine Chapel. One of Muller's especially energetic blows with the halberd had splashed several feet. We'd disinfected our exposed skin and changed masks, but that was all. The dry blood stains on Crivetto's wide red belt had darkened, nearly matching the coarse fabric of the working uniform underneath.

Idly, I wondered if anyone else recognized the stains for what they were.

Cardinal Crivetto, having firmly established who was in charge of the meeting, continued speaking.

„There are pressing matters at hand which demand our attention, so I will only address this once,“ the Camerlengo said. „Hauptmann Gagliardi is here at my personal request. As you all well know, he did not murder His Holiness. Instead he valiantly defended the passengers in the elevator when His Holiness very suddenly succumbed to virus. With his last lucid thought, the Holy Father understood what was happening, recognized the peril to the group and forgave Gagliardi for the necessity.“

He stared around the table, meeting each the eyes of each official in turn.

I stared across the narrow chamber, focused on a point a thousand meters away.

„When the senior surviving officer of the Pontifical Swiss Guard was infected only an hour ago, he, too, recognized the danger that his illness represented, and knowing that suicide is a mortal sin, begged the Hauptmann to end his life. I pray

to God with thanks that we have strength such as this officer left in our ranks, especially now.“

A few of officials looked like they wanted to object, but they only darted glances at reddening mark on Archbishop Tangretti’s face.

„The mother church is at mortal risk,” Crivetto went on. „His Holiness is dead. The entire Conclave is likewise dead. There are doubtless infected staff and dependents inside the Vatican. Unless we move swiftly to contain the infection and protect the Faithful, we risk everything.“

„Your Eminence, what do you propose?” asked Archbishop Atherton-Clive. „His Holiness, may God grant him peace, set forth very specific guidance on these matters, conforming to the most hallowed doctrine. We cannot divert from his path unless redirected by a new pontiff.“

The deputy vicar of Rome and vice-regent was very much a member of the existing power structure. Atherton-Clive been appointed by the late pope’s predecessor. Though a member of the Familia Pontificalis, or papal family, his office oversaw the diocese of Rome and had no real authority in Curia matters. However, his boss had been a significant political player in Church politics. The vicar of Rome had also been a cardinal.

I think that he was the one that Muller took in the throat.

„This emergency is without precedent, Your Grace,” responded Cardinal Crivetto. „And you’ll of course pardon me if I recall to you that the Vicar of Rome and his deputy are invited to the Curia as a courtesy only.”

If the vice-regent was concerned with the reminder, he didn’t show it.

„Still, Your Eminence,” Atherton-Clive replied, waving away the objection. „The point stands. We can’t arbitrarily select which doctrines and traditions we’ll follow and which we’ll dispense with in the name of expediency. Just as it is doctrine that I’m present as a courtesy—” He smiled unctuously. „—so too is it true that only the pontiff may change a standing Papal Encyclical.“

„Tradition has its place,” said Crivetto, turning again to address the entire room. „And so does modern medicine. We *will* accept the plague vaccine, regardless of source. We—“

His next words were drowned out by yelled objections, delivered by several members of the Curia who stood, some pounding on the table. Atherton-Clive stayed seated, but his quiet smile spoke more loudly than the yells of his faction.

The late pope had in fact rejected human sourced vaccine. Some three dozen of the Guard who had been bitten, and turned, might otherwise have been saved. For that matter, we wouldn’t be without a pontiff if the previous one had chosen differently.

So, yes, I wasn’t neutral in this debate. And it wasn’t supposed to be a debate.

I raised my hand, and as I dropped it the section of Guard that I had brought with me, twenty strong, slammed the iron ferrules of their halberds downwards, marring the wooden floor. I’d never ordered it in this room before and the crashing sound was unexpectedly loud in the confined space. It startled the meeting attendees and silenced the historic chamber.

I felt nothing.

A few faces turned to look at us.

As a rule, the clergy do not pay much attention to most Guardsmen, though a well turned out monsignor might dart the occasional glance at the younger, handsomer recruits. Indeed, our military role was often dismissed as ceremonial. However, we now carried live blades, and our firearms, normally carried out of sight, were in plain view. I could see that some of the more thoughtful church officials were noting the changes.

I didn't care, as long as they stayed quiet and let Cardinal Crivetto get on with his job.

„You have all noted that I've ordered the Guard to this meeting,” Crivetto said. „Their very *presence* is mandated by the *absence* a vaccine. Without restricting entry to the City and mandating prophylaxis within, the possibility of providing lasting shelter to the Faithful is remote. We'll immediately embrace the vaccine, and encourage dioceses everywhere to do the same.”

„Your Eminence, His Holiness declared the vaccine attainted,” objected a second official, who rose to his feet but moderated his tone. Bishop Dutto was a minor prelate, titular deputy to the Papal Almoner. Like most of the meeting attendees, his cardinal's demise had left him in charge of the entire folio. With a sideways look at Atherton-Clive, he squared his narrow shoulders. „Made from corrupted material stolen from still-living members of the flock, it represents most vile of sins. The doctrine is quite clear. Your pardon, Cardinal Crivetto, but your Order may have focused your thinking too much upon worldly matters and not enough on the moral peril that represented by this temptation, in what may only appear to be the last extremity.“

Murmurs of pleased agreement buzzed around much of the room, and Dutto sat, arranging his robes. Crivetto briefly allowed the low sidebars to continue.

Then the Camerlengo stood and leaned on the gleaming table top with the splayed fingertips of both hands. I could see a spot of blood under one cuff. He tapped the table surface twice. The prearranged signal prompted one of my own and the halberds crashed again.

The room was still.

„Bishop Dutto, thank you for recalling to me the precepts of my Order,” Crivetto said, his face set like stone. „The Cistercians are misunderstood by many, and indeed our habits of manual labor, austerity and fidelity have often felt quite removed from the—” he paused, sweeping his eyes over the assembled council, all clad in formal attire made of rich, colorful fabric. „—sophistication of the Diocese of Rome. However, long has my Order endured both the disdain of our more worldly brethren as well as truly dire straits, such as the Nazi occupation of Greece, or the crushing of the Hungarian revolt by the Soviet fist. We know something about the *last extremity*. One might suppose that is why His Holiness appointed me and a few brothers to this place...”

He paused and took a deep breath.

„Fellow members of the Familia Pontificalis and my Brothers in Christ,” he began. „I'm afraid that you've misunderstood. I am not contravening doctrine in any way, not in the slightest detail. I'm also not seeking your agreement. The office of the Camerlengo includes the historical duty to serve as acting sovereign of Vatican City in all matters, both legal and spiritual, during an interregnum. In order to elect a new pope we must again assemble the College of Cardinals, and I

will work diligently towards that goal. However, until that happens, my word is the final word. Vaccinations will begin at once. Any who refuse may relocate to the Castel S'ant Angelo—”

The incipient roars of opposition were stilled as soon as I raised my hand, preparing to signal the Guard again.

„—immediately.” finished Crivetto.

Archbishop Tangretti looked first at me and then towards the Camerlengo. A bright red hand print was now visible on his face. The man of the cloth communicated his hate and fear very clearly with bright, loathing eyes. However, he kept his peace.

Down the table, Atherton-Clive still wore his smile.

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The recipe for vaccine is pretty brutal. It starts like this. „Begin with three dozen live infected humans. Separate spinal cords from surrounding tissue and process to a fine even, consistency.“ I think that they're omitting an important step. I hope that they're omitting a step.

I know for certain that I do *not* want to know how to recognize „a fine, even consistency”.

Apparently, the hospital had people for that.

The vaccine was a two-part series of injections, at least a week apart. The first dose „primed“ your immune system to recognize H7D3. It began to provide a little protection, but for full coverage, the „booster” was needed to accelerate the immune system's response to the point where you could reliably beat the infection before the first phase of the flu hospitalized you. So, one person meant two shots.

Despite the papal sanction against the manufacture and use of the vaccine, many Italian Catholics who had both the connections and the budget were still clamoring for it. Where there is a demand, someone will find a supply, and the demand was enough that while we were dithering, the black market stock was being used as fast as it was made. Further, the lab manufacturing the vaccine had an „arrangement” with the Polizia Stato—the police handled raw materials in exchange for finished product.

We found out later that was not uncommon on a small scale, pretty much everywhere. Seems as though persons who are charged with high risk duties have a tendency to find solutions on their own, and policy makers be damned.

Damned.

Get it? I joke.

Anyway. The lab wouldn't do delivery and their agents, the cops, wouldn't sell to us, not openly. We had to go pick it up at a hospital. Fortunately, there are no fewer than five hospitals within a three kilometer drive from the walls of the Vatican. Our target was Salvator Mundi Internationale Hospitale.

Despite the apparently heartfelt emotions in the Curia's war council, most of the senior Vatican officials and nearly all of the staff elected to accept the course of vaccine. The permanent population of the Vatican used to be about eight hundred, of which a fifth was the Swiss Papal Guard. However, more than two thousand worked there, and that's not counting the tour operations. Even after attrition and

desertion, we were already housing about fifteen hundred in total. The list of petitioners for refugee status grew daily.

Cardinal Crivetto had been quite specific about everyone in the Holy City requiring a complete course of vaccine.

Do you know what that costs?

During early negotiations I asked the Direttore di Hospitali, but he equivocated. The bottom line was, „How much you got?“ Paper currency and bank drafts were no longer negotiable. Bullion was a possibility. The Vatican isn't short on gold. But what he really wanted was the Lancea Longini.

That's right.

The good direttore wanted the Spear of Destiny that is locked deep under the Basilica. In exchange for a six hundred units each of primer and booster now, and triple that in two weeks, he'd accept the lance of Centurion Longinus, who stabbed the crucified Christ.

I had a feeling that this was going to be a one-time transaction, but if that is what it took, I'd take the deal. Of course, I had to get permission from Crivetto.

He said yes without a second thought, but endorsed my insistence on getting all the vaccine up front.

Still a pragmatist.

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Very early in the crisis, we had deployed the vehicle barricades that closed off vehicle access to the St. Peter's Square. Despite experimentation, our efforts proved that there was no practical way to stop pedestrians from entering the Square itself. Not even the Gendarmerie's riot control grenades, shot into the Square from high above, kept the supplicants away permanently. Both refugees and infected humans could stroll all the way up to the base of the steps of the Basilica and short of shooting them out of hand, there was nothing to be done about it.

However we could close and fortify the building entrances. We also completely blocked pedestrian access from St. Peter's Square into the Vatican proper. The walls of the old stone buildings were more than sufficient to keep zombies at bay. Any sane humans that appeared to have evil intent were verbally cautioned over loudspeakers and if they persisted, given a warning shot. After the collapse of our relationship with the police, I ordered the omission of the warning shot.

More on that later.

The point is that we couldn't just drive out of St. Peter's Square and ease on down Via delle Fornaci—I mean the main road south to the hospital. And even if we could, the roads weren't wholly safe. Supplies were running low in the city, particularly petrol. Any vehicle was going to attract attention both from criminals and the merely desperate.

Why did I fear the regular people? Just because I'm not a parent doesn't mean that I can't understand how a father will do anything to provide for his family. Know how easy it is to stop a vehicle?

Exactly.

So, yes, our mission needed to account for every threat. On the outbound leg, we had surprise on our side. But anyone watching would know that we had to eventually return.

We rolled out the sally port built into the Museo Vaticano and made it to the hospital without incident. The greatest challenge was navigating the around spilled mounds of black plastic garbage bags that were heaped head high along the street. The naked infected we just ignored.

The swap was likewise unremarkable. The direttore was sweating, but that might have only been the fact that I'd ordered full Quick Reaction Team kit for the job. I used Muller to carry the locked Haliburton case with the lance head inside, so the Municipali at the meet got a good look at his hulking size. We'd had to order special body armor for him—they just didn't have troll-sized kit on the shelf. Of course, Boivin and several others were covering us. We're limited to individual small arms, but the Gendarmerie aren't, so I'd borrowed a couple of their automatic weapons gunners.

Nothing says „*Tutti stanno calmi, calmi...*” like a bipod mounted FN Minimi and a box magazine of belted ammunition. Except perhaps, two of them.

Yes indeed. One per vehicle, perched across the roof.

I checked the coolers that the direttore offered us. As far as I could tell, everything was present and correct. I'd insisted on getting the complete order in one go, despite his bleating that he couldn't afford to short other customers. Eventually, with a few glances at our team, he yielded, and added a third container.

We left the hospital without incident.

It is a human failing to want to relax as soon as you pass the point of maximum perceived danger. That's an error.

The mission is never over until you count your last Guardsman across the threshold and turn over the post. Which is why, even as we turned onto Viale Vaticane, the road that parallels Vatican City just outside the stone walls, I wasn't wholly surprised when a Carabinieri panel van shot out of the alley and hit us. Aldemar was one of our Guards who'd been to driving school, so his reactions kept the impact to a glancing blow, instead of being center punched as the attackers intended.

Once we came to rest, however, we were hung up on a traffic bollard.

Immediately, small arms fire peppered our SUV. I wasn't too worried, since the damage to the bullet proof glass suggested a light caliber. However, we were immobile, which means we were vulnerable. Right on time, glass jars of petrol broke against the hood and grill. They were trying to damage the engine, not merely kill us outright. That meant a hijack.

Then the first high powered round pierced the glass, and struck Detective Tranquilo, the Gendarme with the FN. We immediately scrunched down behind the thicker door armor, and Hallebardier Aldemar rocked the SUV, trying to free us.

Understand, that this all happened in the space of fifteen seconds. I was still processing the direction of the attack, reaching for a trauma bandage with one hand and keying the radio mic with the other when the Boivin saved our ass. He ordered his driver to ram our stalled vehicle, knocking us back onto the road. He'd

also gotten all of his guns into play, and plaster, cement and stone chips flew from the orange facade of the hotel that held our ambushers.

Then one of the windows of the hotel opposite our walls belched flame. I thought it was a rocket attack and cursed. That we couldn't survive. Even as bile rose in my throat, a second window exploded, and the incoming fire dropped to almost nothing. I registered a sharp bark and looked over to see Boivin hanging outside passenger window of the second SUV, shooting his third grenade from a South African revolving tear gas launcher. Then a fourth.

While I knew that we had access to the crowd control weapon, I had no idea where Boivin had found explosive grenades. I probably didn't want to know. Actually, scratch that. I really did want to know. We could use some more.

Meanwhile, we were still in the ambush zone and eventually some creative opportunist would come along to finish what our ambushers started.

„Will it run?“ I asked Aldemar.

For an answer he gunned the gas pedal, and our SUV crabbed down the street a few hundred more yards, paced by my faithful Boivin.

Who attacked us? Someone with a police truck. Doesn't prove it actually the Carabinieri. Was it the original buyers for the vaccine? Maybe desperate citizens that resented our apparent safety inside Vatican City? I still don't know. Doesn't matter.

The Gendarme bled out from his neck wound before we drove back into the sally port.

* * * * *

Cardinal Crivetto never relinquished the initiative that he seized during the first postmortem meeting of the Curia. He had the full, public support of only a few of the prelates. Much of the Curia and the surviving members of the College of Cardinals were overwhelmingly focused on finding a mechanism to reconvene the Conclave. Globally, there were still many cardinals, but the rule prohibiting members of the college older than eighty from voting subtracted heavily from the available pool. Many cardinals, often the younger and more pious, had also succumbed to the disease in the course of living up to their oaths to minister to the sick.

In fact, the entire basis for one of the seven sacraments, the Anointing of the Sick, was nearly called into question. Fortunately protocols that permitted clergy to minister to the „sick“, even if they were bound, muzzled and tranquilized, were adopted from practices secretly perfected by the Archdiocese of New York. In fact, issues of scale persuaded them to administer last rights to thousands of infected at a time.

Talk about pragmatists.

At least it cut down on the number of priests that we were losing.

I know that this account is rambling.

Sorry.

I haven't even mentioned one of my biggest problems. When I added it to the agenda for the weekly executive session of the Curia, it blew up more than a little bit.

We were nearly out of ammunition.

The sole remaining cardinal in Rome didn't lose his head.

„Hauptmann Gagliardi, we won't try to dissect how this came to be,” Cardinal Crivetto said, gesturing around the table where the weekly Curia executive committee was in session. „We must focus on what we can do. Is there more ammunition to be had anywhere?“

„Of course, we must discuss who is responsible for this outrageous lapse!” stated Archbishop Tangretti, lightly tapping one fist on the table. „Who's to be held accountable? Is there not a store of military supplies beneath our feet?“

The good archbishop had gotten over his shock of being slapped. Then again, he wasn't raising his voice overmuch or actually pounding the table, even now.

I'd take it.

Besides, he had a point.

The Vatican is honeycombed with tunnels, storerooms and secret passages. Construction projects overlapping nearly a millennium and a half of human activity have created a large amount of storage space. You'd think that with all that room, someone would have a tremendous cache of arms and equipment.

„Your Eminence, Your Grace, honored members of the Curia,” I said, standing up. I'd been promoted to an actual seat at the table by this time. „There certainly have been substantial military stores inside our walls in the past, indeed there was a time the papal Armeria included muzzle loading cannon. However, we are limited by treaty and by Papal Bull to a much smaller force now. Our ordinary needs are modest and our ammunition is stored with the police, whose facilities we use to train.“

Swiss Guard recruits were required to take a history class in the original Italian, but I won't inflict that upon you. Suffice to say that in the early twentieth century, the Vatican accepted dramatic limits on its military capabilities in exchange for extra-territorial concessions from Italy. Then, in 1970, the reigning pope relinquished all but a ceremonial force.

Us.

„Then draw your ammunition from the police!” demanded Tangretti. The deputy secretary of state was nothing if not single-minded.

„The Carabinieri and the Stato are already operating somewhat...” I searched for an appropriate adverb. „...independently. Our stocks of ammunition were not huge to begin with. At this time, we cannot be certain that they still exist.”

There was a low rumble of displeased conversation around the table.

Our ammunition stockpile had never really been worthy of the name, even prior to the advent of H7D3. Despite the more aggressive role assigned to the Guard after the assassination attempt on His Holiness John Paul II, the impact was principally on our protective role, not sustainment. In fact, during my vacation to the United States, I'd seen medium sized gunstores with several times the amount of ammunition that we kept on hand for range training.

„Can we not persuade them to relinquish some of our ammunition?” asked the Camerlengo. „Perhaps, Archbishop Atherton-Clive, you might lend us the support of the Diocese of Rome and persuade the police to yield back to the Vatican that ammunition so critical to our protection?”

Atherton-Clive tapped a gold pen on the table top before replying.

„Prior to the ill-advised raid on the Salvator Mundi that might’ve been possible,” he said, holding the gleaming pen upright like a stylized exclamation point. „But now, our contacts in the Municipali are most upset and our relations are tenuous.”

The police force was rapidly crumbling. We’d received a pro-forma request for extradition for unnamed Swiss Guard personnel who’d participated in the purchase of vaccine and a subsequent gunfight outside our walls. The extradition order lacked any of the signatures which would make it genuine—understandable since many of the senior bureaucrats were dead or had fled the city.

Before I could argue, a browned-cassocked monk glided forward to hand Crivetto some papers.

I hadn’t realized that at least one of the Camerlengo’s aides was a Cistercian as well.

Huh.

Cardinal Crivetto read for a moment and then rebutted his colleague.

„I ordered the operation and so their anger should be laid at my feet,” he said, consulting notes now laid at his side. „But a business transaction is hardly a raid. As if they dare to add me to the extradition order. Yet everyone in this room has already benefited from the initial injections, including you, Your Grace.”

„Respectfully, Your Eminence, one doesn’t bring machine guns to a business meeting,” Atherton-Clive said, reminding everyone about my security precautions. He might have continued with that logic because the Curia wasn’t comfortable with the twin concepts of force and violence. Instead, he made a significant error.

„But quite apart from the provocation that Gagliardi offered the authorities, you may recall that I did not request to be vaccinated with medicine made from the bodies of the dead. If I accepted your order, it was because of your temporary authority and my calling to serve the Church takes precedence, even if I must endanger my immortal soul upon your order to do so.”

More than one prelate inhaled sharply, both at the gall of the vice-regent as well as the impact of his words. It wasn’t the first time that they’d thought about it, but it was the first time it had been spoken aloud since the vaccinations had started.

As Americans like to say, shit just got real.

As much as the assembled survivors were wary of the Camerlengo, they were creatures of habit. They were accustomed to the certainty of rote ceremony and hierarchy. Even if the Camerlengo was slightly alarming, his authority flowed from centuries of tradition.

To a significant majority, as it turned out, internal revolt was a more terrifying possibility than either zombies or Crivetto with indefinitely extended authority.

„You could’ve tended your business from S’ant Angelo,” the Camerlengo replied, smiling towards the archbishop. “You still could, if you feel the moral hazard is too severe to allow you to remain here.”

Precious few of the staff inside Vatican City had declined the vaccine. Even though it was made with attenuated virus, it wasn’t uncommon to experience mild discomfort for a few days as one’s immune system adjusted to the deliberately weakened disease. We had been administering it weekly to the Guard and rotating by section, largely out of an abundance of caution to ensure that we had enough

hale Guardsmen every day. Second section had just received their last shot. In another month, all of us would be fully protected.

There weren't enough Guard to protect S'ant Angelo, though. It was far less secure, and certainly more austere. And of course, to be outside Vatican City meant to be excluded from influencing the selection of the next pope.

That last made this mildly voiced rebuttal equal parts reminder and threat. Atherton-Clive briefly clawed his fingers before hiding them in his lap. He glanced at Dutto, who dutifully noted his cue.

„Your Eminence, how are we to protect ourselves without arms?” he asked.

I took up the thread of my initial briefing again.

„We have some ammunition, sufficient to defend against limited criminal behavior by uninfected persons.” I said. „However, other than in a complete security failure, all future defense against infected humans will be effected by Swiss Guard in full armor and equipped with hand weapons. Our polearms are well suited to this role. The Armeria has dozens of historical armors with provide full coverage, and even the modern issue of armor includes a curraiss and morion,” I added, referring to our individually fitted back and breast plates as well as helmets.

„Then we'll be trapped inside, with no way out!” Dutto bleated.

„Calmi, Bishop Dutto,” the Camerlengo said, motioning with both hands palm down, over the table. “Our place is here. We'll accept as many more refugees as we can inoculate, we'll provide guidance for the global church and we *will* seek to gather the College of Cardinals as soon as is practical.”

„And when will that be, Your Eminence?” asked Atherton-Clive. “The Faithful need their pope.”

I didn't like our vice-regent, but we agreed on his last point.

* * * * *

As the ranking surviving officer of the Swiss Guard, I'd taken to sleeping in my office, only a few steps from the guardroom. It was no surprise when I was woken in the middle of the night only a few days after announcing our switch in primary fighting weapons. Full armor was now the required uniform for all internal posts, while Kevlar-clad Guardsmen and Gendarmerie discreetly patrolled our walls the better to avoid attracting the attention of infected below.

„Feldwebel, rouse the Hauptmann, already!” a voice said beyond my door. I didn't recognize the speaker. „We must advise him on the incident and it can't wait.”

It was the work of a moment to pull on boots and don a cap before striding out to find Muller stolidly arguing in a low voice that I wasn't to be disturbed. Boivin's instruction, presumably.

„What's the matter?” I said, breaking up their argument.

The newly-arrived guard turned to me with relief visible on his weathered face. It was Wachmeister—literally watch-master—Lecuyer, a ten-year man. He held his partisan at the trail and saluted.

„Herr Hauptman, there has been an incident,” Lecuyer said. „One of the refugees was screaming and one of my section found a prelate—ah—interfering with a small child.”

Well, fuck. There wasn't time to do anything but confront the situation. The last thing we could afford was an open confrontation between clergy and our refugees, and with a dependent involved, the potential for conflagration was, you'll pardon the expression, *alles abgefuckt*.

„Muller, boots and saddles,“ I bit out. „Turn out the reaction team and send a private message to His Eminence that we will need his guidance very shortly.“ I turned back to the Wachmeister.

„Take me there, immediately.“

It was a few hundred yards to the wing of the Palazzo which we had converted to a sleeping area but I didn't tarry, and only a few minutes elapsed before I strode into the office indicated by Lecuyer.

Another guardsman, this one a newly minted hallebardier in Fourth Section named Taliaferro, held his halberd at the low ready. His breath rasped audibly in the stone room, even though we were the ones who had just finished running. The needle-sharp spike that projected past the bill of his weapon hovered only a handspan from his prisoner's throat.

The man looked up, his terrified expression seeking delivery as our boots scuffed to a halt.

It was Dutto.

* * * * *

Cardinal Crivetto didn't wait for morning to conduct a quick inquiry. After receiving my succinct verbal report, he ordered that the enhanced guard force remain in position and very politely requisitioned the office of the late commander of the Pontifical Guard.

Under his instruction, we quietly orchestrated the meeting well before daylight. Six of my best, including the ogrelike Muller, were present. Three lined one wall and the others formed a shield around the mother of the child that Dutto had... well, molested is too light a term, but it will do. It had taken some persuasion to part the mother from her child, but after seeing her offspring safely ensconced in the Guard-only infirmary with one of the brown robed Cistercians and hatchet-faced Boivin for company, she reluctantly agreed to participate.

A fire danced in the grate, providing much of the light in the room. The large legal desk was overlaid with a plain white cloth, where a plain wooden crucifix was paired with a thick leather bound tome. A brazier stood in one corner, small blue flames occasionally darting above the grill and the objects laid there.

The entire scene was outside my experience.

However, we are sworn to obey His Holiness or His successor.

I stood by the door and when the seated Camerlengo gave a nod, I knocked against the door frame. A few moments later, a group approached, heralded by heavy footsteps and querulous pleading.

A Cistercian monk in a traditional brown robe, belted with a heavy beaded rosary, strode through tightly gripping the arm of Bishop Dutto. The prelate had been held under guard, and his black cassock appeared to be newly torn at the neckline and down one sleeve. He entered, visibly reluctant, and was trailed by a second monk. That man mirrored the first, firmly holding the accused's second arm.

Both brothers carried small wooden cudgels, wrapped with thin pieces of iron. Those were also new in my experience.

All present remained silent as the trio halted in front of the desk.

Dutto's eyes darted around the office, searching for any anchor or familiarity to orient himself.

„Bishop Dutto, we are met to conduct an ecclesiastical inquiry into the incident reported by,” Crivetto said, consulting a notepad. „Mrs. Angelina Tranquilo, widow of Gendarme Detective Tranquilo. Specifically, that you sexually assaulted a minor, her child, this very night inside the walls of Vatican City.“

„I, uh, I mean, Your Eminence,” Dutto said, stuttering.

„It is only meet and proper that you are advised of the complaint of Mrs. Tranquilo, the report of the pontifical surgeon and the report of Guardsmen Lecuyer and Taliaferro.”

I flicked my eyes over to the young guardsman. He stared at Dutto, eyes slitted and sweat beading his forehead. Anger comes in many flavors, and Taliaferro was possessed of an indignant fury.

„The statements are quite comprehensive and leave no room for doubt as to what occurred,” the Camerlengo said, implacably. „This inquiry is to give you an opportunity to confirm these reports and explain your actions.”

„This isn't proper, Your Eminence,” Dutto replied unevenly. „I reject these accusations. Any inquiry must occur in due course, Archbishop Atherton-Clive was quite clear, this was perfectly arranged, I—“

„It was arranged, then?” Crivetto said, sitting back and seeming to relax. He smiled pleasantly.

„Yes, yes Your Eminence, the vice-regent told me himself, it was perfectly fine. He made the preparations for...” And then Dutto stopped, doubtlessly skipping ahead to the logic which would imperil not just himself but his master. He attempted to backtrack.

„I mean no, no indeed, I mean...”

„Well?” the Camerlengo cut off what would have been a long lists of protests, raising a single hand across his chest, fingers bladed together. „Which is it? There's no room for denial. Are you suggesting that a senior prelate, the vice-regent for the Vicar of Rome himself was procurer for this vile act?”

The accused shut his mouth, which previously had been open in mid-expostulation. The clapping sound would have been amusing under other circumstances.

„Tell me, Bishop Dutto,” Cardinal Crivetto said, giving the prelate another chance. „Tell me now of your arrangement with the vice regent. For the sake of your immortal soul, tell me all.“

Dutto stood mute, slowly straightening his spine, building his defiance.

„The evidence is overwhelming, Your Excellency. I give you one more opportunity to speak of your own free will, before God.” the Camerlengo said. His words were absorbed by the old stone that walled us in.

Silence.

„Please!” Crivetto said, his tone suddenly changed. Pleading. „I implore you. Speak fully, spare yourself pain. There's not time enough for me to persuade you to return to God. Please do not compel me to put you to the question!”

„You cannot!“ Dutto replied, his voice firmer than it had been a moment before. „The Cardinal Camerlengo no longer has that authority. Only the Doctrine of the Faith applies.“

Dutto thought himself safe. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is—rather—was a sort of supreme court for senior members of the church who were accused of serious crimes. Only a few years before I was born, it was known by a different name, an ancient name.

The Inquisition.

There was a long pause.

Then the Camerlengo pounded his fist into the table top three times. By the third stroke, his face had transformed. His eyes were cold.

„The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith died inside the Sistine Chapel,” Crivetto said, slamming his fist into the table top yet again, making the crucifix jump. „I alone survive.“

Crivetto eyed his subject a moment longer and then nodded to Muller, who strode two steps to the brazier and selected a heated pair of insulated pliers. He brandished them with a grin, clacking the jaws in an obscene parody of castanets.

„What...?” Dutto stammered, eyes wide now. “What are you doing?”

„As the scholar that you seem to be it should interest you, Bishop Dutto, that prior to the Lateran Treaty the Mother Church retained the option of physical persuasion in matters of ecclesiastical courts,” Crivetto said, opening the book before him to a marked page. „As Camerlengo and sole remaining member of the Congregation that you correctly reference, I am the supreme ecclesiastical authority until the election of a new pontiff. In this matter, I have elected to return to the guidance of laws written when crimes such as yours were addressed more... robustly. It has been nearly a hundred years since then. Of course I have taken due care to consult with authoritative references. You will be reassured that we will strictly conform to prior ecclesiastical precedent, you see.“

He consulted the book while Dutto looked wildly around the room. I gave him a bored glance, but most the others ignored him, save the widow Tranquilo, who met his frantic looks with truculence. Muller, who stood just to one side, snapped the pliers again.

„Ah, yes.” Crivetto ran a finger down the page as he continued. „Here we are. Of course, physical, ah, intercession, was limited only to serious charges. Heresy. Apostasy.”

He lifted his eyes again to meet Dutto’s unbelieving gaze.

„Pederasty.“

Dutto swallowed, and watched Muller advance. The steel of the pliers had discolored in the flames and the air stirred above them, heated by the burning hot metal.

„You wouldn’t dare!” the prelate said. „You wouldn’t!“

The monks to either side of Dutto gripped his arms firmly.

If I had been my normal self, the screaming would have bothered me a lot more.

* * * * *

Morning mass was still a fixture of Vatican City.

Early morning sunlight streamed into the medium-sized chapel at a sharp angle, gemmed by the brilliant colors on the ancient stained glass. I stood near the Camerlengo, stained by a puddle of red-tinted light, cast by the image of the Sacred Heart.

The Guard, and perforce myself were on station, just as the Cardinal Camerlengo had carefully outlined following Dutto's interrogation.

We were sworn to obey His Holiness or his successor.

By Cardinal Crivetto's firm, standing suggestion, all of the Curia had made a habit of attending the daily seven a.m. service. Upon their entry this morning, they discovered a rather different setting. The altar furnishings were moved, and last night's table, complete to crucifix and lawbook, was present. Something else had changed as well.

Aspiring bishops and archbishops dreamed of the day when they could don the crimson mantle of a cardinal, to become a Prince of the Church. Once they won that distinction, they rarely were seen in public without it. However, this morning Cardinal Crivetto wore a different garment, matching that of the other brown-clad Cistercian who flanked him on the dais.

As prelates arrived, they were conducted to their seats by a line of Guardsmen. By prior arrangement, we packed them into the pews closest to the front. The buzz of questions grew, but the Camerlengo sat unmoved until the entry of the last bishop occasioned the closing of the iron bound doors. Then he stood, displaying the broad red sash that belted his cassock and signaled his status as the last cardinal in Rome.

As he rose, the Swiss Guard came to attention, their cuirasses gleaming.

„My fellow Brothers in Christ, this morning we cannot celebrate Mass.” Cardinal Crivetto said, his voice soaring above the chatter courtesy of the small microphone clipped to his robe. „This morning, I was summoned to find that one of our own had *interfered* with a refugee, a small child. During the questioning, I learned that the death of His Holiness was not random chance, but the culmination of a careful plot. Therefore, we are met to hear the evidence against members of our congregation who conspired to murder His Holiness. Further, in the course of this conspiracy, the innocence of refugees sheltering within our walls was bartered away in exchange for silence from those complicit in terrible crimes.“

Even the threat of our halberds and my sidearm could not contain the murmurs.

„Crivetto, are you mad!” one voice rose above the rest. Atherton-Clive stood, his face white with fury. „What is this? On what authority do you begin any proceeding? This is an outrageous overstepping of your limited authority! Only the Congregation of the Faithful may call a full trial, and the Congregation—“

„*The Congregation of the Faithful is dead!*” thundered the Cardinal Camerlengo, still standing, his fists clenched in the air at chest height.

Startled, I stared at him, with the rest of the gathered Curia. This had not been any part of our plan.

„Archbishop Atherton-Clive. Sit. Down,” the Camerlengo said, his amplified voice overriding the archbishop and forestalling any reply. „Or I will have you bound to that pew.”

Atherton-Clive sat, his bloodless face a sharp contrast to his red-trimmed midnight stole.

After a moment, the Camerlengo sat as well. My Guard returned to parade-rest.

„As you well know, I alone remain among the *cardinale* who led the Congregation of the Faithful,” Crivetto went on in a slightly more normal tone of voice. „We find ourselves in a dark time and at a moment when we must work in concert, we instead confront evil inside our own ranks—inside the very walls of the Holy City. Therefore, we will return to the harshest of God's law. I invoke the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition.”

Gasps of understanding were suddenly audible.

„And as to my *limited* authority—”

He let his eyes rove around the mostly silent room, passing over the hand-picked Guardsmen that I led.

The faintest rattle of armor came from one side of the nave. I glanced over at the offending guardsman. It was Taliaferro, from the previous night. He stilled under my look.

„Crivetto, you're a power-mad fool!” Atherton-Clive snarled. He stayed seated. „What evil do you speak of, then?”

„Ironic, that you label *me* power mad, Your Grace,” the Camerlengo replied. „I speak of your plan to succeed His Holiness, after he died of the disease which he contracted due to your careful preparation. I speak of your plot to kill the College of Cardinals. I speak of your web of collaborators whom you compensated with promises of power and the corruption of the flesh.”

„Absurd!” Atherton-Clive answered, and then twisted in his seat to address the remains of the Curia. „Crivetto's cracking under the strain of his office. Where's any proof of any of this madness, I ask you!”

„I have the proof here,” answered Cardinal Crivetto, tapping a clipped sheaf of notes. „Carefully transcribed from the questioning of Bishop Dutto which I personally attended this very morning. And I have Bishop Dutto to certify this testimony.”

He rang a small bell. The door to the sacristy opened and the remaining Cistercian monk pushed a wheelchair ahead of him. Bishop Dutto's ashen face was beaded with sweat, despite the cool temperature. His hands were covered in white bandages, and his feet were splinted into place on the chair's footrests. His wide eyes took in the entire room, like a sacrifice wondering which hand held the knife.

A widespread gasp spread across the gathered prelates, and the group swayed as though a strong wind had buffeted the room.

„What happened to you?” Atherton-Clive's voice rang to the rafters, but Dutto was silent. „This man has been tortured! Who's responsible for this outrage!”

I'd anticipated this question. We were back on script now. I ordered my Guard to attention and back to rest.

„Attenzione!” And the four-meter ashwood-hafted polearms snapped to the vertical.

„Riposo!” And the gleaming bills and spikes of the halberds were shoved a meter closer to the pews.

Two dozen halberds suddenly thrust towards the congregation had the intended salubrious effect.

The space was once again quiet, except for the rasping inhalations of the vice-regent.

„I put Bishop Dutto to the question,” the Camerlengo replied. His voice filled the still room. „And Bishop Dutto himself will explain why.”

He turned to the seated bishop.

„Your Excellency?”

Dutto stirred, and leaned to the opposite side of his wheelchair before he spoke.

I stared at him, at the man whose fellow plotters had placed me in the impossible position of having to shoot the man that I had sworn my life to protect. My hands quivered at my sides as he stuttered through the details of entire repugnant affair, occasionally lapsing into long pauses only to be gently encouraged by the Camerlengo.

The infection of the pope. The brokering of counterfeit vaccine to several of the cardinals who were terrified of H7D3 and prepared to accept the medicine after the death of His Holiness. The attempt to block the return of the true vaccine to the Vatican. Lastly, trading access to minors in exchange for the continued alliance with Atherton-Clive.

The restless Curia had stilled as soon as Dutto mentioned infecting the pope with the virus. The tale of the mass murder of the College of Cardinals drew mutters and a few of the Curia edged away from the vice-regent. By the time that Crivetto prompted Dutto to speak up as he recounted his personal crime against the child there was an armspan of open space around Atherton-Clive and a few of his closest supporters.

Finally, Dutto ran down the last bits of his testimony before sagging backwards like a doll whose sand was leaking out. Into the hushed atmosphere one of the prelates disbelievingly addressed a former friend.

„Gregory, is this true?” an older archbishop said, extending his arm to touch Atherton-Clive’s shoulder. The accused batted the shaking hand away.

„Shut up, you damned fool,” Atherton-Clive said, squaring his shoulders and facing the Camerlengo. „Your pet dogs will enforce this farce, no doubt, Crivetto. What would you have of me?”

„Confess, Your Grace,” replied Cardinal Crivetto. „Choose to repent. Declare a vow of silence, never again exercise any ordained ministry and accept a life at prayer within these walls for the rest of your life. If you insist upon the full trial under the Inquisition, you will certainly face a capital sentence.”

„You leave me nothing!” Atherton-Clive sidled towards one edge of the open space, but kept well distant from the nearest Swiss Guard.

„I offer mercy,” answered the Camerlengo.

„I choose more,” said the archbishop, unrepentantly. He drew a small, flat automatic from under his vestments and shot the nearest guards four times. One was Aldemar, and he slumped, dropping his halberd with a clatter. The other lay face down so suddenly, I couldn’t be sure who I’d lost. The vice-regent grabbed Archbishop Tangretti by the neck to serve as a human shield.

At the first shot, several Guardsmen, including myself, lunged into the space between the Camerlengo and the shooter. Others advanced with their halberds as

Atheron-Clive walked backwards out of the pew and towards the front of the church. For a sixty-year-old man, he moved well. Of course, he had the advantage of surprise and desperation. The other prelates were shocked into immobility and then panicked at the sudden violence. Some scurried towards us like a flushed covey of quail, blocking the Guardsmen who advanced, blades at the ready.

„Halt, or I'll shoot this man!” Atherton-Clive threatened. He wedged his gun under Tangretti's jaw, pushing hard enough to make the muzzle disappear into the man's fleshy wattle. Where had the archbishop found a FN Five-Seven? It had been adopted by many security services precisely because it could defeat modern armor, let alone our antiques.

„Another step, and I'll kill him and as many more as I can!”

I only carried my familiar SIG Sauer and though I closed the gap rapidly, I was still several meters away. Even at this range, I could easily strike the hostage.

„I'm leaving!” Atherton-Clive yelled. „Nobody follow or the good monsignor will join those dogs on the floor.”

It was worth the risk. I had a nearly ideal sight picture, the front post in perfect focus, the target's head slightly blurred but distinct.

I inhaled fully and then let half of my breath trickle out slowly.

„Hold!” the Camerlengo ordered behind me. „Don't shoot!”

I'd been shocked at Camerlengo's offer of leniency. His order struck me with like a blow.

I vibrated with the need to kill Atherton-Clive. For a moment I almost added the extra fraction of pressure needed to trip the sear and complete the shot, but the moment passed. I forced myself to relax a trifle, and laid my forefinger along the trigger guard. Arrayed behind me were a dozen Guardsman, weapons held horizontally, hip high.

I could hear Muller panting, restraining his own urge to close and kill.

We all wanted blood. But we were still sworn.

„You can't escape your sins, Gregory,” Cardinal Crivetto said, almost kindly.

Atheron-Clive snarled. With his right hand he used the muzzle of his weapon to force the hostage's head upwards and with the other, opened the counter-weighted door before slipping through.

„Boivin, guard these men with Second section!” I ordered, trusting my senior noncom to keep the other accused from fleeing. „Fourth, on me!”

Even as I screamed my orders, I lunged after the vice-regent. So did several others and we piled up almost comically as too many men with polearms attempted to open the chapel doors. Once through, we stumbled again, squinting in the sudden brightness and tripping over the abandoned hostage.

I heard the footsteps receding, and gave chase along the garden's emerald topiaries. There was no way that I would allow Atherton-Clive to escape. He fled northwards, toward the stairs that led to the museum and the underground car park we had used to get the vaccine.

I emerged from the garden, and immediately saw my quarry surprisingly close. Atherton-Clive was no fool, and knew that he couldn't outrun us. Instead he shot several times. One round took me across my left thigh, burning like fire. Another glanced obliquely from my helmet, wrenching my head sideways so hard I felt my

neck vertebrae grate together. My leg held, though blood sheeted down my leg, saturating my sock and boot.

Ahead, I could hear Atherton-Clive calling for help. Giant, calloused hands pulled me up. Muller, watching out for me again.

He grunted, eyeing me with concern, then ordered one of the accompanying Guards to tend to the other wounded man, down with two bullets that penetrated his cuirass.

„You okay, sir?”

„It’s nothing,” I answered. I began to add more orders when I heard Atherton-Clive ahead, screaming for help. I couldn't see the museum, but it was close. I ordered the men forward.

„Don’t wait! After him!” It was imperative that vice-regent not escape. It was a matter of honor. It was a matter of justice.

The unwounded Guardsmen sprinted boldly ahead, but I heard more shots, more than Atherton-Clive’s pistol could hold.

Muller looked the question at me. I had no idea either. Who could be shooting?

We reached the foyer of the museum’s upper floor. There we found a bloody tangle of bodies. Swiss Guards lay shot, their striped blue, gold and carmine uniforms sodden with more blood. At least two were dead, cuirasses punctuated with perfect black circles, the hafts of their halberds still gripped in armored gauntlets.

Others were wounded. But how?

Two Gendarmerie were also present. Both were dead. Lecuyer lay with both hands on his weapon. The spike of his halberd was still buried in the chest of one dead man whose soft body armor had failed to stop the heat treated steel. The throat of the other was gashed all the way to his spine. He had a carbine, which I collected as Muller and a few others saw to our wounded.

I don’t know if the Gendarmerie were part of the archbishop’s conspiracy or just reacted to the sight of the Swiss Guard chasing the archbishop with murderous intent. It didn’t matter right now, except that the vice-regent had even more to answer for.

„On me!” I said, wrenching the door to the stair open. Below I heard shouts, then a single shot.

Atherton-Clive was still in reach.

Two flights later, we burst into the small garage. Our vehicles were there, as well as a wounded Gendarmerie officer, clutching his stomach. An SUV was being used to ram open one set of exterior doors, and the attempt was failing. The vice-regent had been accustomed to being driven everywhere, and had no idea that the comparatively lightly build SUV was no match for the heavy doors that sealed the garage. While we watched, he did manage to spring one, opening a gap of perhaps a meter.

Through which a naked infected promptly appeared.

Atherton-Clive either panicked or was unimpressed, because he wrenched the transmission back to reverse, and as two more zombies came through the gap, he shifted back into forward, and tried one last time to ram the doubled doors. They shook, but stayed intact. The vice-regent did manage to push the radiator back

into the fan, and I could hear it beating itself to death as green radiator coolant poured from beneath the truck.

Atherton-Clive had also ran over two of the infected in the garage, which I appreciated, but he had further widened the gap. A few more infected trickled in, growling deep in their chests, their eyes on us, their prey.

The carbine I borrowed was good enough to kill them both with only five or six shots.

I ordered the men into a line, halberds at the low ready and stood behind them. The vice-regent bailed out of the car, and I shot a zombie only a step from grabbing him.

„No tricks, Your Grace,” I warned him. „Come to us with your hands empty or I’ll leave you as a meal for the infected. Your choice.”

He looked at the zombies starting to clamber over the hood and then ran towards our line without a second thought. Muller grabbed him by the back of the neck and lifted him straight of ground. The prelate began to protest, but a light cuff left him quiet. Muller searched him roughly but thoroughly.

Infected were pouring in now. The most damaged garage door was moving back and forth, as though it were being pounded by a hammer. The amount of screaming and growling grew so loud that I had to shout to ensure I was understood.

I emptied the carbine into the press at the door, clogging it for a moment.

„Back upstairs with him, Korporal!” I said, and then readied the line. „Shoulder to shoulder—aim for throats! Here they come.”

I bought us a few more moments, running my pistol dry with carefully aimed shots, and without time for reload, I drew my rapier.

The first few zombies reached our line singly, and economical blows dropped them to the ground. The next few approached at once, and the hallebardiers made quick work of them, working together, one holding the zombie off while the second made a deliberate aimed thrust.

We backed slowly, keeping our dressing. The walls narrowed as we approached the stairs, and then one door failed entirely. It fell inwards, propped up at an angle over the car. Beyond, I could see a nearly unchecked tide of naked, infected humanity. The sound of their keening and growling was so loud that even yelled commands were swallowed by the cacophony. They pressed us, a mindless wall of hunger, and I lost another man right away, his halberd caught in the sternum of his target. He failed to let go and was swarmed. He fought on, alone. I couldn’t afford to break ranks and retrieve him.

I didn’t want to think about what it meant to leave him.

But I still think about it, every day.

We backed to the stairs and compressed our line further, only two men wide. I was in the second rank, next to Taliaferro, and we were shoved back by main force, crushing us back up the stairs. The distance was so short, that we to choke up the grip on our weapons, and take care not to trip the men behind us, but the polearms and our armor were going to make this work.

We’d almost reached the top.

All we had to do was get to the landing, back through it cautiously and block the metal door. And then without warning, Taliaferro began screaming. Confused, I looked for his attacker.

There wasn't any.

„Get it off, get it off me, get it off, get it off!” He dropped his halberd, tripping up the man in front him. His morion flew away and he began to try to unbuckle the clamshell armor that covered his chest and back.

He never stopped screaming.

„Taliaferro!” I shook him, looking at his eyes closely. „Taliaferro! STOP!”

His skin was hot to the touch. As I drew back in shock, he howled and abandoned his efforts to get out of his armor. His eyes focused on me and when I met them, they were empty of anything but hunger and hate. There was no room to stab him with the sword. Without hesitation, I rammed my rapier blade sideways, taking him above the armor, opening up the great vein on the side of his neck.

He screamed and grabbed for my face while blood spurted into my eyes, blinding me for a moment. The men in front tripped and I heard one scream.

I think it was only one.

Unable to see, I began punching with the guard of my rapier, striking yielding softness. Once my guard struck metal. I backed up a short distance more before I was plucked from my feet and thrown backwards, skidding on my backside.

I dropped the rapier to try to clear my sticky eyes of blood. Through a red-tinted film, I saw one more Guardsman come through the foyer stairway door. Then he and Muller slammed the door shut. Muller picked up a discarded halberd and rammed the spike under the door, wedging it tightly closed.

I stood, collecting my thoughts. There were four of us left. One guarded Atherton-Clive, and I turned to congratulate Corporal Muller. After today, he would be getting a promotion as well as my personal thanks.

We never would have made it without him.

He was staring at his hand.

It was shaking.

„I'm not doing that, Herr Hauptmann,” he said, looking fixedly at the offending limb. „I'm NOT doing that!”

His voice began to rise.

„Shit, shit, shit – sir, help me! Help me, please!”

I tried to understand. Taliaferro in the stairway. Muller above? Both had been vaccinated, receiving their booster with the rest of... the rest of Fourth section. Using the last of the booster that had been sold to us by the reluctant *Directore di Hospitale*. It hadn't been quite good enough, and he'd known it.

„No, Muller no!” I yelled. I was done killing my men. I didn't know how I would restrain him, but I was not going to shoot another Guardsman. Not even if it cost me my life.

His eyes began to grow wild and he turned and blew through the outer door, back the way we'd entered initially. I followed, bumping into the Camerlengo and a quartet of Swiss Guard. Outside, the aroused mob of infected below the parapet sounded like heavy surf beating against our walls in a terrible, unending storm. Occasional keening wails added a terrible counterpoint to the guttural moans and

growls. The sound reverberated from the stone buildings that surrounded the Vatican, so that it seemed like the entire burning city was howling in madness.

Korporal Muller stood at the edge of the parapet, at the very edge of the tempest. He was frantically scratching his arm. I approached him cautiously.

„Helmut, let me help you,” I said. „Please.”

„There’s only one way to help me, sir,” he rasped. I could see what the effort to stay in control was costing him. If we could tie him up, perhaps give the antibodies time to defeat the infection, maybe I could save him.

„No, not that way, just lay down and let me secure you long enough—”

„If you won’t do it sir, I will,” Muller answered simply.

And he stepped off the wall.

* * * * *

There is a gap in my memory. I don't know how long.

I didn’t pass out.

I simply chose not to remember the next few moments.

The same way I chose not to listen to the sounds below the parapet.

I did focus one on thing.

Atherton-Clive.

I stalked back to the foyer. The Camerlengo’s Guardsmen, all from Second, had collected the vice-regent. The surgeon and his assistant were working on my wounded. A pounding noise came from inside, but a glance confirmed that it was another pair of Guardsmen pounding wedges around the door to the stairway, reinforcing it.

Absently, I leaned over and collected a halberd. It had been Muller’s and the haft was tacky with congealed blood. I walked back to where Atherton-Clive was held by a hallebardier, hands zip-tied behind his back. His hair was standing up in all directions and a deep scratch marred his white skin, oozing blood.

It dripped onto his cassock front, staining the gold silk. Cardinal Crivetto watched me approach, his faced lined with concern. Before he could speak, I lowered the polearm from the vertical, and twisting my wrists, I casually whipped the ferrule around in a tight circle, striking Atherton-Clive across the abdomen.

The impact doubled him over, driving most of the air from his lungs.

„Hauptmann Gagliardi!” the Camerlengo reproved me, angrily. „He has surrendered.”

„Yes,” I answered.

With practiced, nearly automatic skill, I reversed my grip, and wound the halberd through another twisting move, moving it so rapidly that the blade whistled faintly, causing vice-regent’s guard to hop back in concern.

This time the ferrule struck the prelate behind the knees, dropping him entirely to the sod, where he lay wheezing, the pain of my blow muted by his shock. I might have broken one of his legs. It didn’t matter. I let the weight of the halberd blade carry the weapon upwards, and rotated to absorb the inertia. I stopped, poised with blade cocked over my shoulder, both hands gripping the shaft a few inches apart.

„Straighten him,” I ordered the hallebardier.

With a look at my blood-stained face, he kicked Atherton-Clive into a more or less straight line, face down. No one moved to interfere, but the Camerlengo spoke up, urgently.

„Matteo, you will not strike him!” Cardinal Crivetto began to understand what I intended. „You must not take God’s justice into your own hands! He has surrendered to the will of God! He’ll spend all his days in silence, contemplating his sins.”

„Yes, yes,” Atherton-Clive said, coughing. „Prayer, con—”

He coughed more and turned his head sideways, craning his neck to look at me. I regarded him, looking directly into his eyes and shared my torment with him.

„Contemplation,” he said. „I will remain silent for the rest of my life! The Camerlengo has ordered it!”

I answered him.

„We are sworn to obey His Holiness or his successor.”

Then I unwound the strike with all my force in my soul, and brought the blade down across his neck, severing his head from body, and his life from our world.

Finished, I dropped the halberd to the reddened sod.

* * * * *

Your Holiness,

The foregoing was transcribed from an audio diary discovered among the records retrieved during our evacuation of the Holy See. All of the Pontifical Swiss Guard work in Italian, but also speak German and French as well—this officer used all three so my translation may be a little choppy thereby. I believe that you worked closely with Maggiore Gagliardi, and anticipate that you would appreciate the opportunity to read how he and his men kept the faith during the darkest hours of our Mother Church.

After the Purge, the maggiore could not continue in charge. He swore an oath of silence and daily toils in the gardens, speaking to none, commanding none. Yet we need his strength, his faith and his proven fidelity. More than that, I believe that we owe him the opportunity for redemption—not to redeem himself in our eyes, but in his own.

I beg you, Holy Father, to consider visiting him again, that he might hear your words, that you might yet help him mend his wounded soul, that he might lead the Army of the Faithful. The world must be raised from the shadows. It has been some time since the Church fought for its life, but we do so now. Men like Gagliardi are needed in God’s service again.

Yours in Christ,

Monsignor Hector Gallierez

Prefect

—Excerpted from a letter addressed to His Holiness, John Paul III
from the Prefect to the Papal Household.

