BATTLECORPS

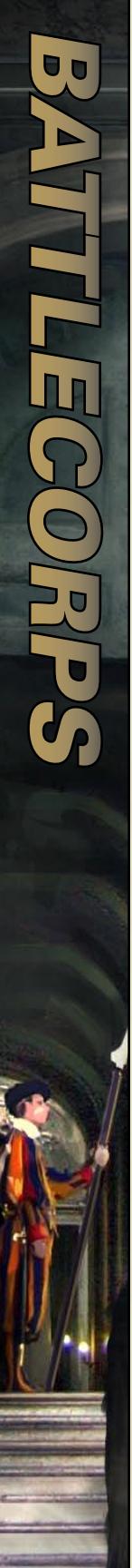
THE GAUNTLET

by Ilsa J. Bick

V

Half of the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important.

--T.S. Eliot, "The Cocktail Party"



Rome, Terra
7 August 3028
2345 hours

"How much longer?" Francesca was breathing hard, her chest straining against the gauzy film of sea-green tunic cut low enough to reveal the swell of her breasts. She twisted the knot of her laced fingers.

They were in the living room, near the front foyer: an attractive room done in Mission with a spindle couch of plush forest green and matching coffee table, and two matching slat chairs of a lighter oak. The agent—that blonde with those odd eyes; the one who said her name was Gloria—was sprawled in one chair. She opened her mouth to reply, but it was Reinhardt, lounging on the sofa, who answered.

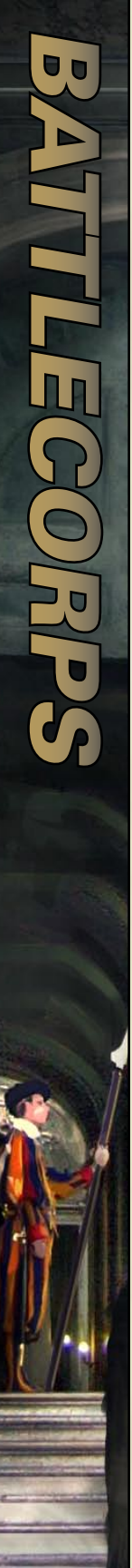
"Just another fifteen hours, give or take," he said. Reinhardt took a minute sip of a very strong brandy from a balloon snifter. The liquor cut a warm tail like that of a shooting star down the middle of his chest before pillowing in his gut. The brandy was two centuries old, potent and very expensive. Setting the snifter on the coffee table, he tweezed a packet of cigarettes from his left breast pocket and knocked out a smoke. His first smoke of the evening and only the third of the day, and in a few moments, he felt his head expand with the familiar buzz of nicotine combined with brandy. He said, a bit strangled because of the smoke, "Cardinal Flynn will be here day after tomorrow at one, and the broadcast Mass will be at four. In the meantime, this is the safest possible place to wait."

"Do you really think so? Maybe we should take it someplace else. Out of the Vatican, I mean."

"Whatever for?"

"Well, drugging a *baby*," Francesca said. "I mean, what if it wakes up?"

"It won't," the agent said. Her thick blonde mane was in a long braid, but Reinhardt could see the first blush of red roots along her scalp. "But don't worry. It's a mild sedative, and with the active noise reduction hardware added to the whole security net here, no one will hear him if he cries a bit. Anyway, the more the baby sleeps, the better off we'll be. No yowling to wake up the neighbors and it will make it easier to slip him into the basilica."



"You still have to get past security, and it can't be good for the baby to..."

Reinhardt cut her off. "Don't worry about the child. As for the Davion security people, I can assure you that it's only a small contingent. Their commander, Sortek... he's an efficient enough sort; we met, briefly. Of course, I pledged my full cooperation," he said, with a touch of irony. "The Vatican's walls weren't built without reason, my dear. They keep invaders out and secrets nicely partitioned away, and corridors in-between."

"Maybe." The agent looked dour, perhaps because she'd been forced to fold herself and the drugged child between canisters inside a delivery hover for three hours. "I didn't count on CID running around the place, you know. You sure their guy doesn't know anything? Maybe they're here because there's been a leak, and they want to..."

"There hasn't been a leak." Reinhardt cut the blonde a frosty glare. "This was arranged months ago. We're talking one man and a small detail. They're not anxious to step on our toes. All they want is to mount a presence. Believe me, if they suspected, I'd already be hung up by my thumbs, and you'd be dead, if not by Davion's men then by your own people, don't you think? You just play your part tomorrow afternoon, and this will all go quite well."

"I can't see how." Francesca, again, her voice watery. Her eyes swam, and her cheeks were splotchy with color. "Can't we just back out?"

"For Christ's sake." The agent blew out in exasperation and pushed out of her chair. "You talk some sense into her, and get her to shut the hell up. I'm going to sit with the kid for awhile where it's quiet enough to hear myself think."

It was on the tip of Reinhardt's tongue to ask if she might be contacting *her* superiors, maybe to report how loopy their supposed allies really were, and he felt the heat start in his neck. Not when they were this close, not *this* close! Then he relaxed a bit when he remembered that the jammers he'd installed in this apartment meant that she'd likely not succeed.

So he betrayed nothing, just waved a negligent hand toward a small hall that led to both the master and back bedrooms as if to say, *Of course, go on, I deal with hysteria every day; nothing a little chat won't handle.*

But when he heard the snick of the back bedroom door pulled shut, he turned on his wife. "What's wrong with you?" He kept his voice down but put a threat into his words. "She's not benign, you know. If her people suspect that we're about to pull out, there'll be trouble all right, and we'll be in the middle of it. No one's heads will roll but ours. So snap out of it."

"But I can't." Tears tracked down her face but, thank Christ, she wasn't wailing in one of her fits. "Friedrich, we need to tell someone what's going on. The truth's bound to come out, and you know we'll be the ones they throw to the wolves."

"You're being melodramatic." Although, for the first time, he felt a tingle at the back of his neck: a premonition that things were about to go very, very badly. Maybe it was a mistake to have left Francesca alone, even for fifteen minutes. His eyes crawled over the flat's living room, and in another moment, he knew what was missing. "Where's your link?"

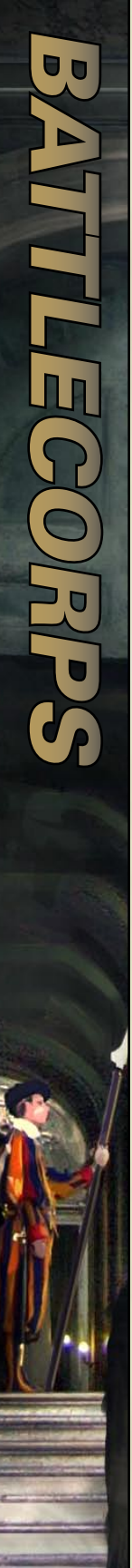
"Link?" Francesca echoed as if genuinely puzzled, but Reinhardt saw her eyes jerk toward the master bedroom. "I could've sworn…"

"Don't lie to me." Reinhardt's voice was soldier-hard, flat. "Did you call someone? What in *hell* have you done?" Without waiting for an answer, his hands lashed out in a blur, and then he had her by her arms, squeezing hard. She gasped with surprise and sudden pain, but he held on, dug his fingers into her flesh, ignoring the glowing orange tip as the cigarette burnt down and heat licked his skin. "What have you done, what the hell have you done?"

"Nothing, nothing!" She twisted in his grasp. "I haven't told…"

"Liar!" he hissed. And before she could react, he cracked her across the face with the back of his left hand. She staggered back, tripped against a slat chair and would've fallen, but now he had her by the throat and held the glowing tip of his cigarette above her left eye.

"You like pain?" He shook her like a child's rag doll. "You think you know pain? By God, you know nothing about what I can do and you will tell me what I want to know, or I swear that I'll destroy that pretty face of yours. I'll burn out your eyes one at a time, and then I'll keep going. Do you have any idea what they will do to us if we fail? That child is more valuable than God and all his angels. Now, who did you tell? What did you say?"



She couldn't answer, not while he crushed her throat, but that was almost incidental. By all that was holy, he would kill her and take what he wanted at the same moment, and he would enjoy it, he would! The idiot, she would ruin everything. All this planning for nothing; all their schemes and hopes snuffed out like a candle, and that New Avalon apostate Flynn who called himself cardinal due in the Vatican day after tomorrow and that accursed prince! They would have no better opportunity, and this addled-brained fool that was his wife… ! He squeezed harder, harder, *harder…*

Suffocating, her face choked with purple blood, she jerked, flailed. Her nails scored his cheek, drawing blood. Pain exploded in his face, and he let out a roar, loosed his hold. The cigarette flew from his fingers, leaving a trail of orange sparks. Blood drizzled down his cheek, trickling into his collar.

There was a squeal of hinges as a door opened, and then the agent appeared, eyes blazing. "What the hell's wrong with you people? You want… ?" The words died in her mouth as she got a good look at Reinhardt. "What's going on?"

Reinhardt paid her no mind. "Who knows?" he rasped, advancing on his wife. His chest was going like a bellows, and his face was on fire. His hands, suddenly empty, twitched then fisted. "Who *knows*?"

"What?" The agent gaped. "She told someone? The bi…"

"It's *over*!" Coughing, Francesca scuttled back on her heels, her black hair dragging along the carpet. Her voice came out in a tortured wheeze. A necklace of sudden bruises wreathed her neck, and there were tiny red hemorrhages in the whites of her eyes because death had been that close. "You… you hear me? It's over, it's…"

"Don't you tell me that," he said, his fury ratcheting higher like a spring wound too tight and ready to snap. He started for her again. "*I* say when it's over! You whore, you don't tell *me*! Do you realize how long I've planned for this, how many people I've had to sweep out of the way? How much money's…?"

A soft chime at their door, and Reinhardt froze, his bunched fists mere centimeters from his wife's face. The agent stiffened, her storm-cloud eyes narrowing. They all three stared at one another. Reinhardt saw the terror in Francesca's eyes, and he thought she must see the naked killing fury in his. The agent's face was a mask, but Reinhardt saw her hand sneak to the small of her back, probably where she kept a weapon.

One of the neighbors, perhaps, come to see what all the ruckus was about. Stepping back, he took aim at his wife. "Not a word," he said, hoarsely, backing away. He armed sweat and blood from his face, cursing when his white shirtsleeve turned a rust color. "When I'm through with this, you will answer, my pretty little thing, or I will snap your neck in two."

That lush lower lip trembled. "I'm not frightened of you."

"You should be." Reinhardt's lips stretched in a thin, hard smile that held, absolutely, not a trace of humor. "Be afraid, my dear, because this isn't over, and you will answer." And when he saw her eyes flick toward the back hall, he nearly laughed out loud. "What, going to barricade yourself in our bedroom? By all means, do so. You'll be out of sight. Only don't get any ideas about jumping out the window, all right? Because after you've shattered your lovely long legs and they've locked you away because you've been under a terrible strain and are quite, quite mad, I will come to visit you in hospital as a good husband should. I will bring a present to my darling wife and then we'll be alone, and I will take my time with it, and I will enjoy every single moment that it takes for you to die. And, my dear, the hell of it is, you think now that you won't, but you *will* tell me."

"For Christ's sake, enough threats." The agent was backing into the hall, a silenced pistol in one hand. "Just answer the goddamn door."

2345 hours

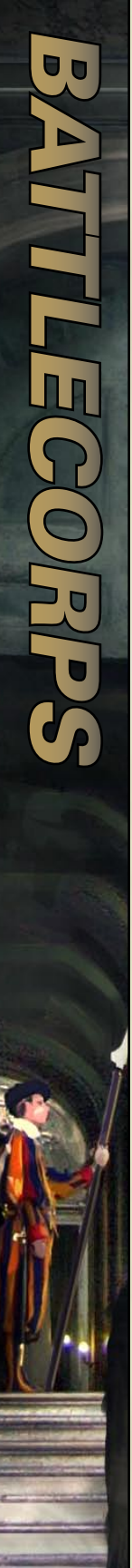
Sister Margaret's eyes ticked to the time, and she groaned. Enough. She had to be back in the kitchens in five hours. Thank heaven the other nuns would take care of the guards. She would be busy enough whipping up that mousse cake and melting chocolate for ganache, and doing those accused meringues. Well, a little rest and she could tackle the problem of this accursed sugar fresh.

She took a set of sagging stairs from the basement to the second floor. The stairs fed into a landing left of the hall. The landing was faced with glass and looked southeast toward the colonnade that made up the right half of St. Peter's square at the junction of a crenellated stone wall, the *Corridore di Borgio*. She glanced out the window as she always did—just a flick of her eyes out then back and absolutely without thinking—and then she paused.

What? She had an... impression. Something out there. At this hour? Frowning, she looked back, unsure, her eyes searching the darkness and then she saw it again: a flash that resolved into a flurry, like gray shrapnel from a bomb. Pigeons. Silly things. No matter what they did, the birds would insist upon nesting amongst the pillars of the colonnade and then a nun had to watch her step.

The apartment she shared with Sisters Bechte and Elsebeth was down the hall on the left, marked by a buzzer and a brass plaque adorned with heavy Gothic script. *MEIRINGENER SCHWERIN*. They'd tried sprucing the place up with spindly tangles of darkly green Shamrock and Devil's Ivy (a bit of perversity, courtesy of Elsebeth and one that earned her a narrow look from their mother general). She'd already reached into the pocket of her plain cotton shift for her key when she stopped.

Something wrong.

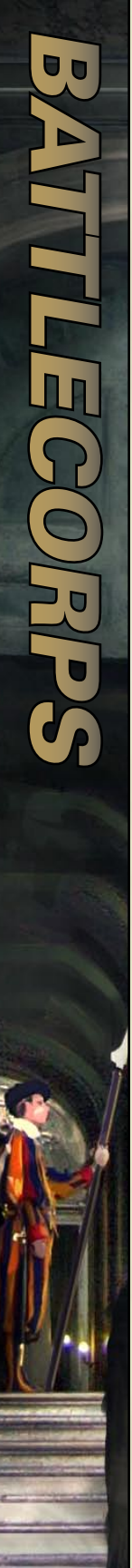


2352 hours

The Command Center of the Pontifical Swiss Guard was dead quiet save for the occasional rustle of paper or squeal of a caster as a guard shifted in his seat. (Sometimes it was quiet enough to hear the guards fart, something that happened with disturbing regularity whenever there'd been pasta fagiole for supper: all those beans.) Then again, the place was always dead roundabout ten when the Vatican went into lockdown every evening. Anyone legally wanting in or out of the Vatican after hours had to use either St. Anne's Gate, or the Bronze Door, the official entrance into the Apostolic Palace. Once ten came and went the night watch consisted of three guards, all corporals, each manning a security workstation, and the watch commander. Mind-numbing work because, short of invasion, nothing ever happened at the Vatican.

Major Pius Costa was into his second cup of fresh black coffee and up to his elbows in paperwork, some left from the previous watch (and wouldn't he have a word with Reinhardt about *that*). He'd re-read the same paragraph about ten times over, and his mind still wasn't on his work though his brain, jagged with coffee, was cycling in irritable little circuits, the way insects spiral around a bulb. He hiccupped, belched and then grimaced at the sour burn at the back of his throat. Maybe he shouldn't have had the coffee. He was keyed up enough as it was and his stomach was running on empty. He'd had no appetite, merely picked at his meal. (A shame: The main course had been one of his favorites, *carne alla pizzaiola*, a simple peasant dish of veal cutlets simmered slowly in a pan of stewed tomatoes and white wine until the meat was fork-tender, succulent and rich. He was a man who knew the value of good meats and produce and wines, and the smell had been heavenly.) But he couldn't enjoy the food because his nerves were jangled and his thoughts kept flitting away like a band of peripatetic biting flies, the kind that drew blood.

It wasn't *just* the murder, though when he'd read about it, he'd felt the blood retreat from his skin, and his stomach drop out the bottom of his shoes. How close he'd been to getting the hell out of here, abandoning the plan entirely! He was still jumping at every shadow. But then nothing had happened. After more than two months. Absolutely... *nothing*. He kept waiting for the ax to fall, but it didn't, and he started to believe that he was safe, and no one knew or suspected that he was involved.



And he'd come this far. He couldn't back out now, not with honor at stake! Besides, he had to make sure it happened just so. It was the damnable choreography of it all. State visits were always noisome, but this was more so because of just who would sit to table with the Holy Father. Each event, from greeting to audience to the state dinner, had to come off for Flynn's visit like clockwork.

No mistakes, nothing that would draw a reprimand or stick out later when there'll be questions. So, dessert course is at eight, and then brandy and coffee... Thank heavens, the Pope's an early to bed sort. Dinner will probably break up roundabout nine and then...

"Hey, *Maggiore*." Blinking to attention, Costa looked up. At the right hand workstation, a guard was leaning forward, a frown creasing his forehead. The guard was pointing at a monitor. "*Penso che ci sia qualcosa che accende.*"

"You think something's going on where?" Actually grateful for the interruption, Costa stood, yawned, stretched then tugged at the hem of his navy blue tunic top. He palmed the back of his neck with his right hand then wandered over to the workstation, still working out the kinks. The workstation comprised a bank of monitors, some twelve in all. Costa bent over the corporal's right shoulder. "What do you have?"

"It's Feller over at St. Anne's Gate," the corporal replied. He indicated a square of monitor screen. The image was enhanced with night vision and looked northeast at a shallow angle, so Costa could make out green-tinted cobblestone road, the curb beyond, and the gate itself surmounted by the Vatican state seal: crossed keys surmounted by the Triregnum, the Papal tiara of three crowns. The guard said, "See? Feller's not at his post and my status board shows that the gate's open."

Costa's black eyebrows knitted together. This was unexpected, though it was appallingly easy to lose track of a guard if he happened to walk beneath the cam, out of range, something he might do for any number of legitimate reasons. "How long has the gate been open? Did you see him leave?"

"About forty seconds, going on fifty now," the guard said. "And, no, I didn't notice. He might just be taking a piss."

"Possibly." That had the ring of authenticity. The Vatican frowned on guards dousing its walkways. *They won't set up a guard toilet nearby, but they don't mind if the pigeons crap on your head.*

But another possibility was the more likely—that Feller had spied a mate stumble-drunk after a night out and gone to help his fellow guardsman slip back into barracks. Despite the Swiss Guards' squeaky clean reputation, they were, by and large, young men with young men's appetites. It was one of the reasons there was such a long delay before the alarms would trip. Except... "He didn't key out the gate to keep the alarm from going off?"

"No, sir. Sixty seconds now, sir."

Costa looked round to the other two guards. "Anything?" When both shook their heads, he turned back to study the image, and debated. The alarm would kick in at two minutes, thirty seconds, and he really didn't relish all this attention, especially not when it would be directed toward him. He could probably give it another few seconds, maybe even manually override the automatic alarm, only...

"Oh, my God." Startled, Costa squinted to bring the image into focus. "Do you see that? Who the hell are *they*?"

2353 hours

Something wrong. Someone… *watching* her? Yes, but also… she sniffed the air. What was that smell? This part of the barracks always smelled a bit like men's sweat, carpet mold, and disinfectant, but now her sensitive nose caught something else: a burned smell, not of carbon but metal coming from her right.

And now she saw what she hadn't before: a weak fan of yellow light from a partially opened door. Commander Reinhardt's apartment. Strange for the commander still to be up, and his door *open*. She took one tentative step and then another. The smell of burning metal was stronger.

"Commander Reinhardt?" she whispered. No use waking the neighbors with her nonsense. "It's Sister Margaret. You've left…"

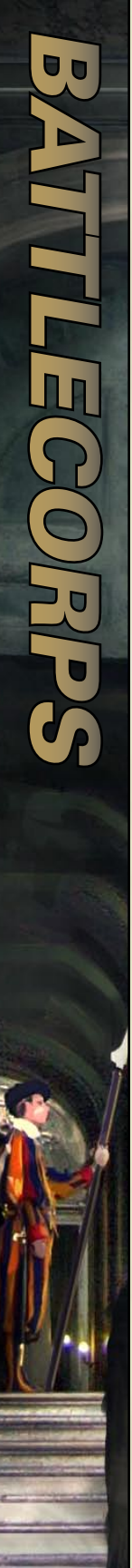
Movement out of the corner of her left eye, and then a soft squeal of a floorboard. Margaret's eyes jerked toward the stairs she'd just climbed and in time to catch that swirl of black cassock snapping right to left on the landing. She opened her mouth, but the question died in her mouth as the priest took the stairs. A face: an impression of broad, square features, dark sapphire-blue eyes, and close-cropped dark hair—and then he was gone.

That face… Not Father Conley, but I know *him.*

A sudden frisson hop-scotched up her spine, and her belly went cold with dread. Her head swiveled toward the commander's open door, and as she pushed her way in, that burnt odor smacked her full in the face.

For the first three seconds—moments that seemed to stretch to infinity—she could only stare, too stunned even to breathe.

Then, time started up again, and Margaret let go of her breath in a scream as the sirens began to wail.



2353 hours

They'd gone with lights but no siren, speeding down the Via della Conciliazione that cut straight through the Borgo district and connected the Vatican with the west bank of the Tiber River. As they whizzed past the crenellated, multi-tiered Castle of St. Angelo on the right, the great basilica, still a klick and a half distant, hove into view directly center, drawing the eye as if the structure were rising out of nowhere, the double-bricked dome splashed with gold from hundreds of spotlights.

After Amaris's siege, this broad avenue was capped at the Vatican with massive gates to stop the influx of foot traffic into the relatively unprotected piazza after ten at night. They'd chosen St. Anne's Gate because of its proximity to the barracks, and as they pulled round, Emma suddenly cried, "Hey, hit the exterior spot. Shine it on the gate."

"What? Why?" Nick jabbed at a control. A wash of harsh white light flooded the general area of the gate and cobblestones, and then Nick said, "Uh-oh."

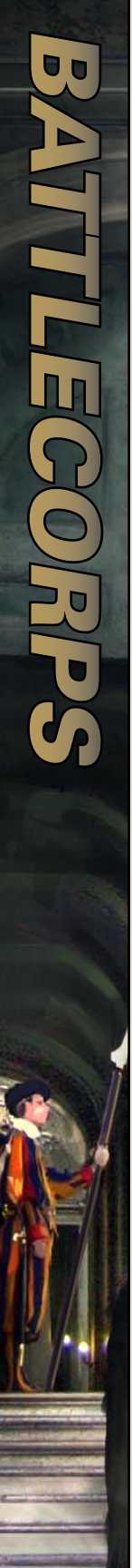
"Yeah." Emma leaned forward in her seat and pointed as Nick pulled the hover to a stop alongside the curb. "The gate's open, and I don't see a guard. Oh, boy, I don't like this. I think this is bad."

Popping their doors, they bolted out of the hover. As they trotted to the gate, Nick put a hand on Emma's forearm. "Magnetic lock's been keyed open," he said, pointing at a winking green light. "May not have been open long enough yet to trip any alarms. Do we go in?"

"Let's take a look around for a few seconds." Emma ran back to their city hover, grabbed a long, black, molded aluminum torch, flicked it on, and then headed back, sweeping the tongue of blue-white light over the cobblestones. "Uh-oh." She knelt, bent close over a patch of what looked like oil. "Blood. Still tacky." Then: "Oh, Christ. I found the guard."

Then, a woman's scream: high, loud, shrill. Emma spun around, twisting this way and that, trying to home in on the sound. Then the ululating shriek of alarms blasted the night just as the woman screamed again, but now Emma knew where the woman was.

"Over here, the barracks!" she shouted. She transferred the flashlight to her left hand as she reached around for her Python with her right. "Let's go, *let's go*!"



They pelted across the cobblestones as St. Anne's Gate began to close.

* * *

"Key it shut, key it *shut!*" Costa shouted. Without waiting for the guard, Costa pushed the man aside and rattled through the keyboard commands to manually shut St. Anne's Gate. Even as the gate began to swing to, he knew he was too late. The masonry of the command center was thick, but he could hear the alarms now: distant whines and all the boards in the center were lighting up.

A man and woman, those flashers, they must be polizia di stato*; no, God, not now, this will ruin everything!* Costa knew where they were going because of the angle at which they'd crossed the screen, and he'd seen the woman jerk her head around like she'd heard something; her face came out shadow and then he realized who she was.

Fusco, what the hell *is she doing here?*

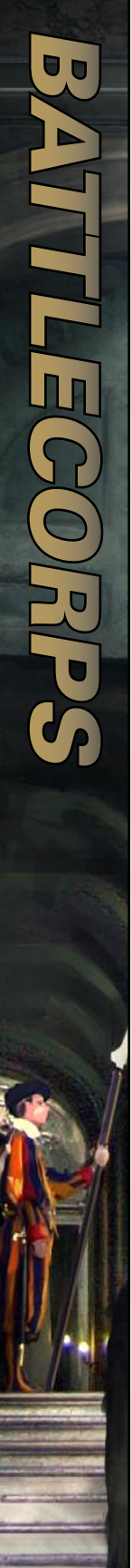
"Button us up *now*!" Costa shouted. He was already moving as he tapped a channel on his link. "Two intruders, St. Anne's Gate, a man and woman. They are armed and in the vicinity of the barracks. They are to be considered dangerous. I repeat…"

* * *

They'd run straight through the shadowy courtyard—no one there, thank God—and now Emma huffed up the stairs into the barracks, leading with her Python, with Nick at her back.

Nothing at ground level, or the first floor, landings are clear, but with the alarms, Christ, how can anyone sleep through that?

Less than thirty seconds since the first scream, but she could still hear her: more of a gasping inarticulate torrent of mingled cries and words, getting louder every second. The alarms were still going, but they were muted by brick, and now coming from the second floor landing dead ahead, Emma caught the sounds of doors opening and an excited gabble of overlapping questions



and exclamations. As she hit the landing, Emma catalogued no weapons fire, no flat *bap* of pistols, or high whine of lasers, but that didn't mean there wasn't someone up there, waiting. On the landing, she instantly peeled left, flattening against the edge of the jamb while Nick went right. Emma did a quick peek, saw mostly men in various stages of undress, a few women in nightgowns and bare feet, their backs to the landing, all looking at something or someone, all talking to one another. She gave Nick a quick nod then rolled around and jogged down the hall, her pistol arm cocked, the barrel aiming for the ceiling.

"*La polizia, polizia, li ha lasciati attraverso*!" she shouted. *Watch the gun, watch the gun!* "Let us through!" She caught startled exclamations as she and Nick muscled their way along, and then the crowd seemed to part, people drawing to either side.

Now she could see a diminutive woman dressed in a simple black nun's habit. Still sobbing in articulate cries, her hands shielding her face, the tiny nun was leaning against a wall to the right of an open door. Two other women, each on either side, had hold of her and were making shushing noises.

And there was a third, a man in a priest's cassock who reeked of cigarettes. He looked up as Emma broke through, and his brown-black eyes were too large in a face gone ashen with disbelief. "It's hell in there," he said hoarsely. He passed a trembling hand over his lips, as if he could stop himself from speaking. But he couldn't. "It's all the piece of a hell."

Then Emma caught the stink—burnt metal and cordite and watery rust—and knew: Hell wasn't the half of it.

-End of Book One-