

THE GAUNTLET

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IX

*Where does one go from a world of insanity?
Somewhere on the other side of despair.*

– T.S. Eliot, “The Family Reunion”

BATTLECORPS



Rome, Terra
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0330 hours

So, the big question was: what now?

It took both Nick and Sortek to get Davion—or whoever he was—to the surface. By that time the big man had regained consciousness, but he was unsteady and a little, well, depleted. That was the best word to describe it. Emma had Nick's flashlight and she watched as Nick and Sortek eased the man against the base of the Kerensky memorial. Davion's almost impossibly blue eyes were a little glassy, and sweat matted his hair and the tatters of a filthy, blood-spattered cassock. (Answering that question about whom Sister Margaret had really seen: The nun had been right.) His face was streaked with drying blood and mud. But his eyes didn't hold the vacancy of insanity that Emma remembered from her days as a uniform: that kind of sustained, inward focus of the catatonic. Instead, he was like a man from whom some evil had been purged, or one at the end of a long illness endured without complaint. That moment when a fever breaks, and you sweat it out, and then, finally, sleep a dreamless sleep that's truly restorative.

"Oh, God, look at his hands," Emma said. She shrugged out of her linen jacket and pulled at the seam stitched round the shoulder until the cloth gave way. Handing her flashlight to Nick, she squatted alongside Davion and began wrapping his torn left palm. When Davion winced, she said, "Sorry. Just let me wrap this, and we'll get you some help."

"It's all right." Davion gave her a tired smile. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," she said but not brusquely. She looked over at Sortek who'd ripped another length of cloth from her jacket and was, very gently, tending to the man's right hand. "We need to get him to a doctor."

Sortek shook his head. "We can't do that. You know we can't. My people can care for him. The problem is getting him out of Rome without anyone seeing. I can do that, but I need your help, and we can't tell anyone what's happened here."

She didn't look up from her work. "Sortek, there are two dead people down in a tunnel no one knows about, an injured man *here*, and three corpses at the Vatican. Landscape's getting pretty

crowded here. Just how the hell do you expect me to finesse this? I can't pretend this didn't happen."

Before Sortek could answer, Conley said, "But he's right." Conley had taken the child from Emma almost immediately, and now he held the baby in the crook of his left arm. Exhausted, the baby had leaned his head against Conley's chest and fallen asleep with the two middle fingers of his right hand still firmly screwed in his mouth. Conley cupped the back of the child's head. "Think, Detective. How can we explain all this? More, what damage will follow if we do?"

"Not my problem." Emma sat back on her haunches. "I don't have to worry about explaining anything. That's not my job. My job is justice."

"No, Emma." Nick, arming sweat from his forehead. "Our job is to catch the bad guys. Justice is different, and you know it. Besides, we've already stepped way across the line. We chose which side we were gonna be on. Now we're here, and it's a little late for you to start spouting crap about duty. If we were really interested, we'd have called for back-up. We'd have taken Sortek and Father Conley down to headquarters. Now if Sortek thinks he can get him taken care of, I say we let him do that."

Emma blinked. She opened her mouth, closed it. Nick was the voice of conscience—no, no, strike that. Nick was, sometimes, the face of a reality she didn't like, or didn't know how to negotiate.

Under her hands, Davion stirred. "Do I get some say in this?" His voice rasped, but he sounded stronger, as if he were pulling himself out of his exhaustion. "Ardan is right. I've been used as a pawn in some game I didn't even know I was playing."

Emma's eyes raked over his features. "Who are you, exactly?"

"Detective," Sortek warned.

"No, Ardan, it's all right." The man with Davion's face held her gaze, and though she couldn't see his eyes well, she felt an intensity from which she could not look away. "I would swear to you with every fiber of my being that I *am* Hanse Davion. Everything he is, I am. But I can remember days, and not very long ago either, that who and what I really am is on the tip of my tongue, or like a faraway star you see much more clearly when you're not looking right at it. *That's* who I am: something out of the corner of your eye. But, for the moment," his lips twitched into a semblance of a grin, "Davion will do."



"And the baby?"

Something like pain arrowed across Davion's features. "A child I wish I could call mine because I could not love him more. I'm supposed to protect him. That's all in me, too, like my heart which I can't see but know is there. So I tell you now, on my life: if you speak, that child will never know peace, ever. They will use him, or they'll kill him, and it will amount to the same thing."

Emma said nothing. Damn him, he was right, and she knew it. She pulled in a long breath, held it. Let it out and looked up at the sleeping child in Conley's protective embrace, and then at Conley.

"All right, Father," she said. "What can you and your people make go away?"

The bob of lights and movement at those huge double doors that were, the assassin had now surmised, metal. About fracking time, too; her left thigh was beginning to cramp, and she'd had to move her head back a couple dozen times so the glass on the night vision scope wouldn't steam up. Now she watched, her right eye glued to the images in her scope as the figures—green, glowing, with slashes of black and grey that marked eyes, hair, mouth—began to resolve. Her scope was very good, and so she recognized the faces immediately: that woman detective in the lead followed by her partner, the good-looker. Both held flashlights that they'd switched off and a good thing for her. There was enough backwash glare from the fountain's spots as it was. Then, Conley with...yes, that *was* a baby in his arms. Her teeth showed in a tight, feral grin that quickly faded as she really registered what she was seeing.

Damn it. The small muscles of her jaw bunched in frustration. *Damn* that Conley! Dropping him was going to present a major problem because he'd hoisted the baby up high, so the child's head rested on his left shoulder. She could probably take him with a head shot just so long as the baby didn't wake up, or Conley didn't shift the kid from one shoulder to the next. As it was, he'd have to be stationary, or else she wouldn't risk the shot. Probably tag the kid, and then she might as well hang it up because she couldn't go back and report *that*: Gee, sorry, wasted the kid, too. But get Conley to stand still, things'd be fine, more or less. She worried, only marginally, that the baby would be hurt in the fall, but she didn't think that would kill him. Couldn't make everything turn out rosy.



The Davion commander appeared last of all, helping out someone...She swore, softly. Not Reinhardt but...Hanse Davion? Here, in Rome? The prince looked bad, roughed up and bloody, his hands bandaged, and what the...was that a *cassock*?

"This is getting nuts," she breathed out in an undertone that was so soft she barely heard. Where the hell had *Davion* come from? He hadn't been in the group. Waiting in the building? Or maybe he'd gotten in a back way, but she'd scouted round and she was sure there was no other way in or out. And where the hell was Reinhardt?

One thing at a time. She watched the group knot at the base of the steps. *Let's go, let's go.* As if on cue, they started up again, crossing right to left in her field of vision, heading for that hover they'd left parked to the extreme left of the fountain. As they walked, they strung out a bit, like beads on a lengthening string, the woman in the lead, her partner...and Conley, with the kid, all by his lonesome. The Davion commander and the prince much further behind: Davion was walking without help now, and the commander was talking into a bud.

"No time like the present," she murmured. Conley was standing now, in profile, his left shoulder—the one with the kid—facing her. Her scope's resolution was so good, she could tell which fingers the kid was sucking: the middle two, just like she'd done when she was a baby. At least, that's what her mom said.

And you just keep on dreaming, baby. She dropped the targeting crosshairs on Conley's head, a little above his left ear, compensating for gravity and thanking Christ there wasn't a breeze. Felt her heart slow. Thought: *First Conley, then the woman. Then the Davion commander and then the drop-dead gorgeous guy, save him for last*—she watched as the guy caught up with the woman detective who'd already popped the door of the hover—*save him for last and maybe he'll get lucky, maybe only tag him; be a shame to waste all that good material...*

Let out a tiny breath.

And squeezed.

Me and my people. Conley followed after Fusco and Rossi. His senses were suddenly sharper, and more crisply aware, as if something had passed from his eyes, and again he had that eerie



sensation that he'd passed through some trial of which he'd only been half-conscious.

He felt and saw everything: the clap of his shoes against stone; the fingers of the humid air dragging across his forehead; orange light dancing along the underbellies of stone dolphins around the fountain. The beat of his heart, slow and steady now, and the child in his arms; the child, most of all: the child's weight in his arms and against his breast, the slightly sweet smell of his still-damp curls, and that little intermittent mewl, a tiny whimper followed by a sort of sigh as the child dreamt. He was so close to Conley's ear that Conley picked up the moist sound of the child sucking his fingers.

So small and defenseless. Conley tightened his grip. *Davion's right. My people must never find you.* He had no doubts that the Cardinal Protector could make this go away. Fusco was right about that. But he would have to come up with some very imaginative reason why he'd not checked in before going with Sortek and the detectives. Or...he chewed his lower lip. Maybe not. If Sortek could make Davion go away...if the *child* disappeared...

His thoughts spiraled back to the thread of logic he'd followed earlier. Indeed, his reasoning felt like one of those recursive algorithms: feeding on itself and never quite breaking free.

The Cardinal Protector must know about Davion and the child, or at the very least, the child. He had to know about Reinhardt because the colonel commander could never have engineered this on his own. So he will never rest until he has the child, but he will never allow the Church to be exposed in any way. Then, something like grim humor: *Maybe that's why they call him a Cardinal Protector...*

"Now I will protect you," he murmured, a little startled to hear his own voice. "I won't let anything happen to you, I swear." *Maybe I can persuade Sortek...*

Suddenly, the child flinched in his arms and pushed up until they were nose to nose. His eyes were open, but the light was far too dim for Conley to make out the blue.

"Hello, bright eyes," Conley said. His right hand came round to cup the child's soft curls. "How...?"

Something feathered his hair, hot and fast, and then there was the high ping of metal ricocheting off rock and the whip-crack of a shot splitting the air. Conley jerked right, saw Fusco spinning,



on the alert, her mouth open, screaming, and he heard his name being shouted, except by a *man*, not Fusco, and then someone smashed into his back and Conley was falling...

Squeezed at the same moment the baby's head bobbed up.

"*Shit!*" the assassin hissed and jerked the instant before the rifle discharged. A yellow-orange streamer of muzzle flash spitting through the air, the crack of the shot at the same instant, the butt jamming into her shoulder. Her ears were ringing, and she couldn't hear her heart but felt it pounding in her temples. Christ, *Christ*, had she been in time; Conley was *down*; oh, shit, *shit*, what about the kid, where was the kid? Had she—?

Davion was a little ahead of Sortek. He felt better, physically, even mentally. Some poison gone from his system, he knew that now. Like a demon bottled up and uncorked but cleansed in pain and blood. This was right, and he had to trust Ardan to—

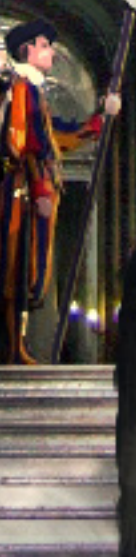
A loud *crack*, like a branch breaking, with the near-simultaneous shrill of a bullet striking rock ahead to his right, and Davion knew instantly.

"CONLEY!" Davion launched himself into the priest, caught him in the small of the back and wrapped him up, bearing him and the child to the ground. The hit was solid, and he heard the priest grunt, and then they tumbled to the ground: Conley hunched over the child and Davion swarming up now, shielding them both. He heard Fusco shouting at her partner, but he focused on the priest and the child. "Are you hurt, are you hit? What about the baby?"

"What, what?" The priest was gasping, yet the child was miraculously silent. "He's fine, but what...?"

Out the corner of his left eye, Davion saw Fusco coming for them, her partner a step behind, their pistols drawn. "Rifle, shooter, building across the square!" he shouted.

But the detective kept coming, shouting: "Davion, the fountain, get behind the fountain!" Then her partner straightened, looked right and high, then hurled himself after the woman just as the rifle went *CRACK*.



And now a scream, Fusco: "*Nick, God, no!*"

She was so stunned by how close she'd come that the assassin wasted a precious three seconds she would never get back. Her brain raced, figuring out the angles. Conley was down and now Davion was in the way! No shot to take there, and Christ, she'd been *this* close to killing the kid...

Come on, come on, too much time, drop them! She pivoted, rounding on Fusco who was already crouching, spinning, pulling out a weapon, and moving to close the distance between her and the fallen priest. *Christ*, she was fast! The assassin tried getting a good lock, but the woman was bouncing around and then as she pulled up, the assassin sighted and squeezed off another shot...

Just as the other detective, the drop-dead gorgeous guy, crowded behind, and pushed her to the ground.

Emma heard the first crack, didn't even pause to think much but knew: *Rifle, shooter, high*. Instinct and training kicked in, and she was dropping, pivoting, pulling her weapon, heading for the priest. *Going after the baby, Conley!* Then she saw the priest drop, had a heart-stopping moment when she thought he'd been hit but then recognized Davion, and Davion was shouting at her, "*Rifle! Building across the square!*"

"Nick!" Emma screamed without turning around. She dashed toward Conley and Davion. Had to get them closer to the fountain, the fountain! "*Building to the right! Shooter, there's—!*"

And that's as far as she got. She heard Nick scream once: "*Emma!*" And then, before she could turn, Nick crashed into her back, pushing her out of the way, and she was falling, looking back...

Just in time to see Nick take the shot that was meant for her.

The rifle *CRACKED*.



Ardan saw a puff of pink mist and then Rossi's body go straight down, right behind Fusco who was screaming: "*Nick, God, no!*" He didn't know if Rossi was alive or not, and it didn't matter. There was nothing he could do for Rossi at the moment, anyway.

Davion was screaming at him now: "*Ardan, for God's sake, across the square, across the square!*"

Ardan was the furthest back, and so he had the most time. In three bounds and that many seconds, he crossed to the fountain and dove for the stones just as another shot rang out. A geyser of water spurted from the fountain. Ardan ducked, pulled out his laser pistol. He was close enough to Davion so he could see that the priest and the baby were unharmed. Sitting ducks out here, but whoever was after them was going for *him* and the detectives, maybe Conley, too; but not the child and not Davion, or else he'd have finished Davion by now. If *he* could just...

Suddenly, he heard a high whine and the unmistakable whoosh of a hover. He looked right. Fusco's hover was on the move, circling round... My God, what was she *doing*?

Nick went down, and at the same moment, Emma was awash in a spray of warm blood and hair and bone. "*Nick!*" she screamed, and then he was on the ground, and she was crawling for him, frantic. "*Nick, God, no!*"

She heard Ardan shouting, and she realized that Nick had given her this chance, and she had no time to waste now, no time! If Nick was dead, she couldn't help him, and if she died and he *was* still alive, that wouldn't do him any good either. Or any of them.

The calculus flashed in her mind, the equation falling into place: *No chance against a sniper; weapons don't have the range, and the shooter has night vision, missing only because we're moving, and that first shot meant for Conley, doesn't want to hurt the baby, and the only way to beat him . . .*

She pushed up, legs pumping, going as fast as she could for the hover. The doors were already open, and she flung herself in, thumbed the auto-lock and even as the doors swung shut, she'd released the stand and the hover was moving. She felt the impact of bullets on the hover's windscreen, but the windscreen was ferroglass for this precise reason, and all police hovers were armored.



Last time I ever complain about a city car. She brought the hover round fast, banging on the flashers, bringing the beams up to high, and then swinging round and powering up her best, her most lethal weapon...

The assassin saw the male detective go down, swore, and then decided that, fuck it, she'd better take them down fast. The rifle was an autoloader and so she didn't have to worry about throwing a bolt, but her aim was off now, and she had the yips and a damn bad feeling about this.

Missing the priest had been a godsend. She had her orders and so she couldn't shoot Davion. But then she'd missed with the woman because her partner had pushed her out of the way, and now *she'd* ducked down behind her partner—what kind of crap coward was that, hunh?—and so the assassin swung right instead of left and fired at the Davion commander just as he dove for the fountain, and she squinted against the wash of fountain glare glinting off the water. Another goddamned miss!

Now, in tracking the commander, she'd lost the woman and then by the time the hover was moving, she thought, again: *Fuck-ass* coward...

The hover didn't speed away but veered for the building where she perched, and that's when the assassin made her first real, honest mistake. (Yeah, okay, she'd killed the blonde before the lady dick, but that was a technicality, and Ardan was on the move.) She drew a bead on the hover and began to fire.

"FUSCO!" Ardan roared, but the woman was already darting for the hover and in less than five seconds, she was in and the hover was moving.

My God, she was leaving them! He couldn't believe it. His thoughts boiled like water over rapids. *Leaving them, her partner; is she calling for help, what can I do to get us out...*



And then when the hover's flashers came on, Ardan realized what Fusco was going to do an instant before she did it.

It had taken all of ten seconds for Emma to get to the hover, crank it and maneuver round, and as she did, listening to the bullets bouncing off the armored vehicle, her lips curled back in a savage grin of triumph.

That's right, you keep firing at me, you bastard, look at me—her left thumb hovered over a control—look at me, keep looking!

Her magazine held ten rounds, and after the fourth discharged at the hover, the assassin realized she would never punch through. She also realized a mistake that wouldn't have been one if things had worked out differently. She couldn't go over the building via the roof because the fire escape didn't extend far enough. Her only choice was to go down, and she weighed the odds. She could hang up here, but that would be risky because if the cop didn't go away; if she started shooting from the base of the building, *she* stood a much better chance of actually getting hit. Plus, while she was busy with the cop, that Davion commander could swing around and take a couple shots. Or—she tracked the hover through her scope—she could let the cop get in close, forget the rifle, squeeze off a couple bursts from her laser and fry the bitch and then...

Suddenly, a ball of white light burst inside her head.

Emma hit the spot, full. Bright white light punched a hole into the semi-darkness, illuminating the shooter on the fire escape. The shooter—a woman, *who the hell is she working for*—sprang back as if she'd been burned, and Emma's heart leapt. *Yes!* She'd guessed right! There was no way for the shooter to be that accurate unless she had night vision, and now with the full, bright spot on her, she'd be blind for a few seconds, the scope and goggles perched on top her head useless.



“And the odds just got a little more even, you *bitch!*” Even as the hover hissed to a stop, Emma had popped the door and then she was rolling out of the car. She caught movement to her left and saw Sortek closing, coming up behind, his laser pistol out and ready.

Above, she heard a clatter of metal against metal; she looked up, saw the shooter stick out her fist. Emma didn’t even wait. She dove for the fire escape.

A lancet of ruby light needled the rock where Fusco had been standing just a split second before. The beam punched a trough in the rock, blowing out a small mushroom cloud of smoke and chunked stone. Ardan’s angle was bad, and he couldn’t see where Fusco was and then there were two quick shots arcing up from beneath the fire escape: *bap-bap!* The sound of bullets pinging off metal and then streamers of sparks.

Fusco, under the fire escape; bad angle; she’ll never hit her like that, but maybe I...

But the shooter saw him now, and that laser was pivoting, locking on...

Ardan fired, on full.

The laser caught the assassin in the right shoulder, and she went down with a shriek. He’d caught her in the ball of the joint, and she gagged on the sickening reek of burned meat and charred bone. The pain was so bad, she felt physically sick and when she was able to kick back from the landing’s edge, a wave of nausea left her stomach pushing at the back of her throat, and a sheen of sweat bathing her face. Wound was bad; she had to get out of here!

Struggling to her feet, she switched her laser from her right to her left hand. Not as good with her aim, but she was hoping that wasn’t going to matter. She was pushing down on her pain, trying to wall it off, trying not to stop using her head.

Keep close to the building so he can’t tag me again—fifth landing, coming down the steps fast, squeezing off shots at that com-



mander who was holed up, hunkering down behind the open door of the hover—*good, keep him pinned down; that cop won't be able to hit me, not with a slugthrower, not with the fire escape in the way*—fourth landing, rounding to the third, touching off bursts at the commander, scoring rock; taking a quick peek at the huddled group still on the other side of the fountain—*good, no one getting all heroic, good; now if I can just get down a little further, I can take out the cop, thread the needle with the laser and burn a hole right through that little bitch's...*

She hit the third landing, turned, and—

“Hi,” Emma said, and fired.

