



**BATTLECORPS**

# **THE GAUNTLET**

*By Ilsa J. Bick*

# BATTLECORPS

## IV

*The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.*

– T. S. Eliot, "East Coker"



**Vatican City, Terra**  
**7 August 3028**  
**1730 hours**

The heat was like something living, heavy and malevolent, and as Father Conley strode briskly across a courtyard of gray cobblestones, sweat started along his upper lip and back of his neck. Thank God, he didn't have far to walk. The courtyard was a long rectangle, hemmed by a blocky red stone barracks, with white marble keystones over its arched windows, that was home to the Pontifical Swiss Guard. He wore his clerical robes: a plain black cassock with the white collar and a simple silver pectoral cross on a silver chain. He wasn't entirely comfortable, as if he wasn't the man for whom the cassock was originally fitted, so the collar felt more like a noose. As if a monster lurked beneath, patiently waiting until it might rip his clerical garb apart at the seams.

He'd been back for almost a month, and nothing had broken yet. Blair's murder had been crowded from the headlines by the imminence of the wedding and, day after tomorrow, Cardinal Flynn's arrival. He hadn't seen or heard from the assassin or any of her people since leaving London, and so far as he knew, Blair's mistress had not been found. He wondered now if she, too, had been some sort of agent. But working for whom?

Conley passed out of the barracks courtyard and jogged across the Via di Belvedere toward the bronze doors of St. Anne's, the Guards' private chapel. As he did so, he glanced right out of habit and saw the young guard at his duty post, halberd in hand, in conversation with one of the nuns who shared the Guards' barracks. Not an unusual sight. Every pope chose the nuns he wished to provide his meals and, by default, the guards' meals as well, though only a select few of the nuns pressed into service did so at the pleasure of the Holy Father. The particular nuns Pope Victor XXVII favored were of the order of the Divine Providence of Meiringen. In fact, one—the rotund, perpetually cheerful Sister Margaret—was an astonishing pastry chef, adept at creating wonderful meringues, and a wizard when it came to sugar art, talents not gone unnoticed by the Archon who'd recruited the sister for the wedding cake. Margaret, like most of the sisters at the Vatican, was an older woman, chosen for this duty precisely because she was not considered a temptation to the guards, the majority of whom were in their twenties.

*This particular sister he didn't know well, having only seen her once or twice. Conley had been away from the Vatican when she*



replaced another nun who had succumbed to heart failure. So he had to think to dredge up the name. Sister Elsebeth; yes, that was it. A small woman with large brown eyes almost too big for the oval of her face. She looked a little like one of those porcelain figurines, delicate and needful and almost too beautiful, the belted white habit she wore clinging a bit in strategic places.

The guard—yes, Feller was his name; a first year—nodded and grinned. Sister Elsebeth turned, gave a demure smile but said nothing. Yet as Conley passed, he saw how very close, too close, she stood to the guard and made a mental note to have a word with the woman's mother general. Probably nothing more than her inexperience to being so thoroughly surrounded by men, but the guards had enough trouble complying with the many duties and religious obligations heaped on their heads without an attractive young nun making it doubly difficult.

Feller waved and called out, "*Padre, perchè gli sbalzi?*"

In reply, Conley forced a smile. "Because I'm late for confession," he answered in English, "and God waits for no man, or tardy priest."

As it happened, no one waited on *him* either, though St. Anne's was blessedly cool, and he welcomed the solitude. The guards were expected to attend mass at least once a day, but confessions were more infrequent. Guards allegedly were squeaky clean, but no one could really check up on that, what with the privilege of the confessional. Anyway, come evening, after being surrounded by the Vatican in body and mind, if not soul, the last thing most guards wanted was to confess.

There were two cherry-wood confessionals, one at either end of the transept at right angles to the nave. Each had a center box for the confessor, and two chambers on either side. Pulling open the door to the center box, Conley dropped onto a red-cushioned bench, flicked on an interior light that, in turn, activated a red light just above the door to his box: open for business. He sat, a leather-bound book of psalms open on his lap. He wasn't thinking anymore, just letting his mind drift, and he might have dozed a bit because the next thing he heard was the squeak of a hinge and then the shuffle of feet in the right cubicle. He bolted upright, slightly abashed, and slid the metal panel to one side, revealing an intricate, tightly-woven metal grill through which he saw only the bare outlines of a man's face. "You wish to make confession?"



*"Si, Padre."* A voice Conley knew... yes, right, Carlo Luzi. A lance corporal, and a quiet sort, though the gossip in the barracks was the colonel commander was after the boy's hide. Luzi had four reprimands in the last month.

Luzi continued, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. My last confession was five weeks ago."

Luzi paused for a long moment, and Conley prompted. "Yes, my son. What sins do you wish to confess?"

"Reinhardt." He heard Luzi take a deep breath. "It's about Colonel Reinhardt."

# BATTLECORPS



## 2115 hours

Hanse Davion would drive her to drink, or curse out loud. Or maybe both, damn him.

The basement kitchens of the Pontifical Guards' barracks held the odors from centuries of cooking: olive oil and fried onions and tangy basil and the yeasty aroma of freshly made pasta. But now there was a new smell, sharp and sweet and with a hint of char, like cotton candy left too long in a cooker—and *that* was Hanse Davion burnt to a cinder, thank you very much.

Sister Margaret flicked off her micro-torch, backhanded sweat from her forehead and screwed her ample features into a frown. Her small black eyes, bright as a bird's, raked over her latest attempt at fashioning the prince's likeness: a lumpy, fractured mess of agglutinated sugar, with just the barest hint of that thatch of red hair.

*This will never do.* So what was it this time around, eh? Her sugar doctors? The sugar? *Her?* Tossing her micro-torch onto an aluminum counter, she scrubbed away grit from her left eye with a balled fist then used the fist to stopper a yawn. She'd been at this for days, *weeks*. Her muscles ached. Her eyes were torch-dazzled. Even her brain was sore.

First, the design for the cake, then the messages back and forth with Archon Steiner, and then when Margaret thought they'd settled on a design, there were addendums to the addendums, only from Prince Davion this time around, who wanted things done just *so* and a bit... oddly. A four-tiered chocolate cake with raspberry ganache, iced white—okay, that was sort of traditional and, frankly, a little boring.

But then the Archon and prince wanted much, much more than a simple bride in white, groom in black. No, no, this cake would sport exact replicas of the bride and groom. Margaret had studied holos of the two for so long, she knew their faces better than her own. Melissa Steiner, right down to that eye shadow, and Hanse Davion, the rich, copper-red hair, those intense lapis-blue eyes, and even the most noticeable of his scars, the nick above his right eye, and that lightning jag along the back of his neck on the left. The Archon-Designate's dress would be silk and white lace, with scores of tiny pearls sewn by hand into the pattern of her dead father's Donegal crest of four equilateral triangles, their points anchored to a central, invis-



ible axis. Margaret would have to replicate the design in sugar pearls, no less tedious a task.

By contrast, the prince would wear his dark blue dress uniform, void of medals or campaign ribbons, in honor of the supposedly peaceful occasion the wedding was supposed to represent. But even if Davion wasn't wearing a single reminder of his military conquests and triumphs, his tiny sugar doppelgänger *must*.

*Not very subtle there, Prince.*

Because what to make of the rest: likenesses of the leaders of each House and their crests, all artfully arranged along the cake's remaining three tiers? Whatever for? Talk about headaches! Pulling warm sugar into the thin strands necessary to represent Maximilian Liao's wispy moustache would take her a dog's age and then figuring out which medals and ribbons went to which leader...

"Ah, but then they'll all be eaten, won't they?" Margaret murmured. "And what will everyone make of *that*?"

Her current dilemma was time. The wedding was a little over two weeks away. She was supposed to leave for Hilton Head in ten days to make the sugar replicas on site and then oversee application of the sugar art to the finished cake. But if she couldn't resolve this current crisis—everything had worked so well until just these past two weeks—she'd be utterly humiliated, and the cake a total disaster.

And still more things to worry about, what with Cardinal Flynn on his way here for a personal audience with His Holiness. (Of course, Cardinal Flynn was to be entertained, sumptuously, and he had a fondness for chocolate. So, more work for Margaret, and the items had added up: poppy-seed and almond policas, lavender cookies, madeleines, tea cakes. Given that she hailed from Meiringen and Flynn had a preference for sweets, she still had a horde of meringues to fashion: fluffy pillows of egg white mixed with sugar and absolutely nothing else, and so sweet, they actually gave Margaret a toothache. That's why she probably left them to last because she always abstained from sampling those, though not anything else and her middle showed that she enjoyed her work. And she still had a triple layer caramel mousse cake and one of flourless chocolate and walnut fudge heavy with chocolate ganache to prepare for the dinner night after tomorrow. Saints alive, if Flynn ate all that, they'd have to roll the cardinal down the aisle, not the bride.)



Certainly, propriety demanded that a cardinal, of whatever flavor, couldn't very well blow off the Holy Father, especially not on his own planet. But what gave this visit added weight was the fact that Flynn would be the first New Avalon cardinal to come to the Vatican not as an emissary but a supplicant: to formally ask a Roman Catholic pope to bless a momentous undertaking, the true-life marriage of Houses Steiner and Davion. The eyes of the Inner Sphere would be, for once, on the Vatican, and not glued to newsfeeds from New Avalon or Tharkad. All eyes on her wedding cake in Hilton Head, too, when the moment came. (Okay, a little vanity there, but it was something to take to confessional.)

So what was the problem? Sugar art was basic chemistry. In fact, all baking was chemistry. Sugar was a chemical compound, and what were the doctors—tartaric acid, ascorbic acid, fondant, titane, silicon gel—but chemicals? Sugar art was a precise science, with measurements down to the milligram. Every gram of tartaric acid required a milliliter of boiling water, no more and no less, and the water had to be free of impurities as well, or else the sugar either re-crystallized too rapidly or the impurities interfered with the color.

So was it the water? The sugar? Impossible: That last shipment came straight from La Blon, the Port Mosby Chain islands. The islands boasted the best sugar in the Inner Sphere, rivaled only by sugar cane from Mauritius Island off the southeastern coast of Terra's African continent. Still... She fingered a miniature pair of men's trousers. Hanse Davion's uniform, actually, and it was supposed to be blue, but the sugar kept turning a muddy gray.

*So the quality of the sugar, the base color, for example, that'll have an effect on the final color. But I skimmed it very well and I know I added blue right as the sugar turned to deep caramel...*

Once more. Sister Margaret reached for the sugar canister and a clean pot, and her colorings. She would get *something* right about Prince Davion if it killed her.



**Rome, Terra**  
**7 August 3028**  
**2330 hours**

A quiet night, for a change, maybe the quiet before the storm, and the eye of the hurricane, or whatever. The last few days had been hell, people getting all stirred up and brawling over Cardinal Flynn. The last time a representative from the New Avalon archdiocese had come to Rome was twelve years ago. The two religions did that periodically, sent representatives back and forth. Photo ops, mainly, and audiences in St. Peter's that served as propaganda for believers on both sides of a very old argument. Emma had been fresh out of the *Academy della Polizia* back then, a rookie working crowd control, so she knew that when the religious got cranked, all hell broke loose.

So far, the night hadn't been bad. The evening shift caught only one case and had nothing to pass off. Still, Emma was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When the call came in, Nick, ever the optimist, was doing a crossword while Emma, whose optimism matched her lack of religious affiliation, was debating whether to risk the evening shift's leftover coffee or just brew a new pot. "This stuff looks like it was brewed in the early Cambrian era."

Nick looked up. "I didn't know there was a *late* Cambrian."

"There wasn't." Emma swirled the coffee around the pot, studying the rainbow slick of oil on top. Definitely dump the pot. "There was Furongian, middle, and lower/early."

"No shit."

"I shit you not, Sherlock." She wandered to a tiny cubby off the bullpen that was the detectives' break room that no one used except for drawing water and ripping open fresh packs for the coffee pot because everyone ate at his or her desk. Emma couldn't remember the last time anyone had actually sat in the break room. The one counter was littered with empty sugar packets, the fine grit of powered creamer, and coffee grounds. "For crying out loud," she said, putting down the pot and grabbing a tatty sponge, "I'm not your mother, you know."

"Blame evening shift." Nick leaned against the door jamb as she fussed, a newspaper folded into thirds in one hand and pencil in



the other. "So what's a five letter word for 'pithecanthropine attitude'? Fourth letter's a C."

Emma finished up with the counter then dumped the coffee and ran fresh water into the pot. "Do you even know what a pithecanthropine is?"

"Haven't the foggiest. Of course, you do, right?" When she nodded, he said, "Is there anything you don't know?"

"Sure. As soon as I find something I don't know, I go find out about it, and then I *do* know."

Nick blinked, all blue-eyed innocence. "But why?"

Now he was baiting her. He knew it, she knew it, and responded in kind. Verbal jousting was about as close as she dared. "Uhm... I hate surprises? I dislike being ignorant? Anyway, why are you grouching when you asked...?" She broke off when her link chirped. She tapped her earbud. "Fusco."

"Emma, it's dispatch. Sorry to bother you, but I got a lady on hold who wants to talk to you about a possible kidnapping."

"Kidnapping? Switch her to missing persons." Emma glanced at Nick. He shrugged and shook his head. Emma said to dispatch, "Pembrese's on, right?"

"Yeah, but he hasn't answered. Anyway, she was pretty insistent and said it had to be you."

She frowned. "Me?" When Nick spread his hands, she shrugged. "Who is it?" she asked.

"She wouldn't give her name. Look, can you just talk to the lady? She sounds like she's in trouble, like maybe she's being threatened or something."

Only marginally more interested in the call (yet far more interested in taking out Pembrese's tonsils through his nose), Emma ripped open a packet of coffee grounds, poured the contents into a new filter, then filled the pot with fresh water. "Did she say that?"

"No, but the prefix... she's calling from somewhere in Vatican City."

That made her stop. "The *Vatican*?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nick straighten from his slouch. She said, "You're kidding."



"No. You should talk to her."

*Hoo-boy, there goes that other shoe.* Emma put the pot on the counter. "Pipe her through," she said, ignoring Nick's urgent semaphore with the newspaper. She knew he'd give her an earful. "Put her on overhead so Nick can hear."

"No!" Nick hissed *sotto voce*. "Jurisdiction, Emma; we don't have jurisdiction! Get her to route it over to the Vatican *Vigilanza*."

"Will do," the dispatcher said. Emma's earbud went dead and was replaced by fizzle spewing from the grill of the overhead speaker. The dispatcher said, "You're on."

Nick threw up his hands as Emma said, "This is Detective Lieutenant Emma Fusco. Can I help you?"

A woman's voice, low, tense, nearly a whisper. "Yes. I can't talk long for now, though. They're gone right now. But you need to help me, Detective Fusco."

"Do I know you?" Even as she asked, something tickled the back of Emma's brain. The woman's voice was familiar... A quick glance at Nick showed that he was equally startled, thinking back... and then it clicked. "Wait, is this Ms. Romano?"

"Yes. I... I don't have time to explain it all, but I need to get the baby out of here."

"Baby?" Emma riffled through her memory. She didn't think the Reinhardts had children. "You mean, *your* child?"

"No, no. It's not my baby, but my husband brought it here. I don't know from where. But they've got something planned."

"Who are they? What plan? Whose baby?" Emma heard a quick intake of breath on the other end of the link and said, "Ms. Romano, are you still there?"

"Hang on, I heard something. There's someone... hang on."

"Ms. Romano? Ma'am, don't disconnect. Tell me what's going on." But either the woman had muted her end, or put down her link because nothing came out of the speaker but background fizzle. Then Emma heard something like the squeal of hinges and dull claps that sounded like shoes against wood, and Emma relaxed, fractionally.

"Oh, boy," Nick murmured. "That's that hard-ass Reinhardt's wife, isn't it?"



Emma nodded. "Get on the horn to dispatch, see if she can trace this back. Ten to one, she's in the barracks, but I want to be sure."

"Got it." Nick tapped his bud and moved away.

"Hello?" The woman again, on speaker, still whispering. "No one there. I thought I heard someone but—"

Emma cut her off. "Listen, Ms. Romano, I can't help you if I don't know where you are or what's going on. Are you in danger?"

"If my husband finds out... yes."

"Okay; that's okay," Emma said, thinking that, really, it wasn't. Her eyes ticked to Nick, his hand cupped over his link's mike, talking fast, low and urgent. "Is there a way for you to get out?"

"I don't know. Someone might hear or see me."

"All right." Out of the corner of her eye, Emma saw Nick make a *keep rolling* sign with a forefinger. "How about I come to you? Are you in the barracks? Just tell me where you are, or where I can meet you. Can you get out to the Via della Conciliazione?" That road was the biggest thoroughfare into the Vatican and ran nearly to St. Peter's Square before traffic was funneled off to either side, skirting the city-state's massive walls. "We can meet you there."

"No, that's too far. I'd never make it without someone spotting me." Then the woman's voice spiked with fear. "I have to get off, they're coming; I hear them in the other room. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called, I..." The link went dead.

"Damn," Emma said. She looked at Nick, who was listening to dispatch via his bud and looking glum. "Well?" When he shook his head, she said, "Okay, let's whittle this down. She said the Petrine was too far, so she's probably in her apartment in the barracks." She started for her cubicle. "If she's not going to come to us, we'll have to go to her."

Nick snagged her arm. "Emma, we should call the *Vigilanza*. We don't have jurisdiction, and they sure as hell aren't going to just open up the gate and let us waltz on in."

"Juris-ass-my-dick-shun." Emma shook free, snatched her jacket from the back of her chair and shoved her arms into the sleeves. "You heard her. She'd have called the Vatican police, or another Guard, if she thought it was safe."



Nick hadn't budged. "Emma, you can't. You do this, and it blows up, it's just one of more of those dings. Maybe enough to get you busted down for good."

"Then don't come along," Emma said, simply. "But I'm sure as hell not going to wait to read about this tomorrow morning."

He caught up with her at the stairs. "Go back, Nick," she said, pushing open the door to the landing. "You're right. No use getting you involved in this."

"Oh, shut up," Nick said, irritably. He pulled open the door to the stairwell. "Someone's got to save you from yourself."

"I don't need saving," she said.

Nick looked down at her for a long moment and she saw some emotion fire his eyes. His lips thinned, and he almost seemed angry. And then he did the most extraordinary thing. He took her chin in one hand and, while she was still recovering from *that*, gently pressed his lips to her forehead.

"Yes, you do," he said. His voice was husky. "The hell for me is you just don't know it."

They didn't speak as they trotted downstairs for the basement: Nick, looking dark and thunderous; Emma, for once, struck dumb. *Oh, my God.* Her pulse tripped, and she felt a little dizzy. *What the hell...*

Then as they reached their city car, she blurted, "Erect."

"What?" Nick pulled up, and his eyes skipped down to his jeans. "Excuse me?"

"Not *you*," she said, starting to laugh, though she didn't know how much of that was nerves, and she bit her lower lip, trying to sober. "The word you were looking for. It's *erect*, from *Pithecanthropus erectus*. It was supposed to be the missing link between apes and humans, but it's not. It got renamed *Homo erectus*." She caught his look. "I, uh... just... you know, it was on my mind. The cross-word."

"Okay," was all Nick said. They popped their doors, Nick dropping into the driver's seat, and her sliding into the passenger's seat feeling like a complete fool. They buckled, and then he flicked the rocker switch, brought the hover's compressor on-line but didn't disengage the stand. Instead, he looked over at her.



"I like you, too," he said, fiercely. "A lot. I think maybe more than a lot. So, let's go do our job and then... let's talk, a long time. Over coffee or something. No more jousting, no more skirting for either of us. You know it's there, and so do I, and after three years, it's only getting stronger for me. I don't know about you because we both dance away from it, as if our feelings aren't allowed. But, damn it, they are. Because I think, for most people, this only happens once. Even it doesn't, I think for me," and then he did something else extraordinary: bunched his fist on his chest, over his heart, "for me, it's only going to happen once, Emma. Just once, and for just one person. So don't believe everything you hear."

Stunned and now a little humbled, she looked into his eyes and saw nothing there but sincerity—and something much, much more. Deeper and, perhaps, more enduring. She also realized that, if she wanted, she could hurt him very much because he trusted her that much.

And she didn't want to hurt him.

"Okay," she said, and as she did, something loosened inside. Like she'd been shackled but been offered a key she hadn't the courage to use until just that instant. "Okay."

