

PROLOG

In a silent chamber deep within The Vatican's Gemelli Hospital, a statistician named Mason Pratt rose unsteadily from his work table. He was still only half-willing to believe what his computer told him must be true. The octogenarian treated by a squad of the world's best doctors for almost a month would not die. He would survive disease and infection that could have killed—should have killed—anyone half his age. Lesions in his lungs healed now, as swollen tissue retreated. His raging fever abated. Chills and sweating diminished. His chest rose and fell rhythmically, shortness of breath no longer apparent. Without doubt His Holiness, the Bishop of Rome, would live.

This should not have happened. In a rational, logical world a papal conclave would already have been summoned, the Dominus Sanctae Mathae made ready for their retreat. His attending physicians now solemnly congratulated each other, unwilling to believe the Pope's survival was due to any intervention save theirs. Even so, Pratt's work had uncovered the real reason behind the patriarch's truly miraculous recovery. His latest calculations were undeniably clear: the Pope continued to live due to the manifestation of prayer.

Pratt's algorithms aligned the ebbing of the pontiff's illness to the estimated supplicants appealing for his life each minute as the earth revolved—strongest when daylight caressed the western hemisphere and Europe, weakest when Asia and the Pacific awakened. Every setback, every improvement in the Pope's condition correlated closely to the estimated number of heads bowed in orison for his life. Records from previous incidents throughout history had hinted at this conclusion. These latest observations, far more accurate and detailed, proved causality beyond doubt.

There were still many aspects of the phenomenon left unclear. How many minds in prayer were required to assure a life's continuation? What amount of time spent in holy petition was necessary? Did the sanctity of the subject make a difference? A multitude of factors would have to be solidified from basic theory. Still, as Pratt hastily collected his notes and records to escape the Vatican, he knew that all would eventually fall into place—given enough resources and sufficient money. He would seek sponsors with plenty of both.

Half a millennium later, Pratt's work had changed the world ...

CHAPTER 1: A Change in Middle Management

He stumbled through the rocky detritus of the cave, amazed to have escaped. He mewled and moaned as he plunged deeper into its darkness, clawing at folds and wrinkles new to his rapidly wizening face. Their itch was maddening. He felt himself weaken, aging by the minute—by the second. His entourage, his picked defenders, had all been murdered in the village below. Losing his balance, he fell—first to his knees, then fully to the ground face-first. He felt the last shreds of vitality drain from him. Muscle atrophied, leaving only loose flesh wrapping his bones and organs. His bowels and bladder voided. Then sight, consciousness, and ultimately life itself fled the collapsing husk of his remains. Grand Master Tyl Fontaine had finally died of old age, three hundred twenty-nine years after his birth.

On an uncharted south Pacific island thousands of miles distant, banking squadrons of swan-like drones focused irresistible particle beams at the last survivors below them. Their targets made no attempt to fight back, being unarmed save gardening tools. They were small in stature, none much more than five feet tall, all clothed in rough woolen smocks. Most wore crudely woven straw hats and few had shoes. Eyes wild with fright, they blundered about the valley screaming shrilly, rolling and scrambling as they tried to dodge the deadly beams. At their feet, legions of robot vipers lunged to inject them with fast acting neurotoxin, attacking them wherever they tried to hide. In a few more minutes, all would be exterminated. Of the twenty thousand supplicants who had prayed for the life and health of Tyl Fontaine since birth, none would remain. Their deaths and his would coincide.

The perfectly coordinated attacks had come without warning. The Grand Master's party was small. No more than a dozen heavily armed servitors accompanied him so far within his lands this morning, as he inspected farms around Krimml—high in old Austria's Hohe Tauern. Hundreds of drones watched their movements and satellites scanned near and far for any sign of threat or intrusion, as was normal and expected. At the first hint of danger, he and his retainers would be shielded by impenetrable defenses—the best Fontaine could muster, among the finest in the world.

On the island, eventide had faded into benediction, as the sun slipped below the Pacific horizon with a momentary flash of green. Five thousand supplicants rose from their prayers to perform their daily chores, while a similar number consumed their evening meal before resting. Those before them broke fast and settled at their stations to pray continuously for Fontaine's life and health during the next four hours, as mandated by Pratt's Commandments. Unblinking

cybernetic sentries watched over them all and masked their speck of land across radiation's spectrum. On the beaches, banks of holographic projectors erased any image of the island from visual discovery. Life continued with a rhythm that had remained unaltered for more than two centuries. All should have been well.

Malevolent forces were at work. A year ago, free-floating robot buoys had found the masked island. Aberrations in the ocean's current had confessed its location, finally defeating its invisibility. Soon afterward, tiny insectile drones launched from cloaked ships investigated and confirmed its purpose. Data from continuing undetected surveillance determined the benefactor of the discovered *orisopolis*—the sempiternal this nest of supplicants kept alive. Once identified, Grand Master Tyl Fontaine was marked for certain death.

The steps toward his demise were painstakingly cautious. Any mistake would render the unearthed information useless, and might endanger those who had learned it. A buyer must be found—someone who would gain from the Grand Master's expunction, and had the power to protect his slayers. Potential benefactors were numerous—most of the two hundred like him, those who ruled the world, would gladly see their ranks reduced, their own powers enhanced. However, as vassal to the Nords, Fontaine had strong allies. The overlords of Stockholm, Zurich, and Berlin underwrote his Tyrolean fief—a small but important part of their realm, coveted by neighboring Mediterraneans and Slavs alike. They would fight hard to protect him.

So, while other realms might have interest, a client from among the Nords themselves seemed the best alternative. After months of agonizingly delicate negotiation, Sigfried Hoffman, Gauleiter of Bavaria, stepped forward. His fief was contiguous to Fontaine's. The addition would grant him another supplicant base—two *orisopoli* to guard his life and magnify his vitality instead of just one, another step up the path to Godhood.

Surgical neutron bomb strikes, killing people but sparing valuable property and equipment, were typically used for such erasures. These tactics were not chosen now, because of the projected loss of noncombatant life and the immediate salvage value of Fontaine's *orisopolis*. Instead, as the Grand Master's movements were known in advance, assassin drones were planted in the earth around a preselected killing zone—minimizing collateral damage. His island would be subdued by amphibious assault. The Cyborg mercenary Typhon was selected for the Pacific invasion. It had proved itself dependable, discrete, and cost-efficient in the past.

Timing was crucial. Two targets, with a world between them, had to be devastated at almost the same minute. If Fontaine felt his vitality abate before his ambush unfolded, he would protect himself almost immediately, and probably shield enough supplicants to maintain his life. In the reverse situation, he would have time to counter Typhon's investment, and place himself behind impenetrable defenses. Both events had to occur simultaneously.

The Grand Master's erasure was successful. His guardians, robotic and human, were dispatched within a minute after the Pinzgau region ambush began. His corrupted, dissolving remains were found soon afterwards, in a mountain cave above the kill zone. Typhon's creatures annihilated the supplicants on the Pacific island and their defenders as well—following a swift albeit costly assault.

Slithering up a volcanic ridge high above the island's beaches, Typhon reared back on its brassy twin tails—each the height of a standing man and several times as long, before tapering to titanium barbs. Scanning the valley below, the cyborg wondered how much of the coffee the half-men here had been cultivating here could be saved. The beans were said to be as good as any in the world. It broadcast a command to its minions below: "Prepare to take the coffee in the warehouse. It's ours—fortunes of war. Be careful with the structures and equipment. They must be saved, undamaged if possible. Part of our contract. If necessary, sacrifice units to make it so."

It noticed robotic vipers milling around now that their human quarry had stilled. "Collect the vipers before they damage each other," it advised their handlers, underlining the order with a bolt of neural pain. "Get me a body count, damn your eyes. I need the little people all stacked where I can see them. We don't get paid until the job's complete. I want no moping supplicants left to pray for the dead." Typhon's men and machines knew their jobs well. They were the best *condottiere* money could buy. Even so, cracking the whip from time to time never hurt—to remind everybody who was in charge, if nothing else. Besides, inflicting pain was enjoyable.

Proudly gleaming, the cyborg stood high on its twin serpentine tails now, towering more than twenty feet above the hillock it stood upon. Typhon had seen many modifications and upgrades during the century since brain and spinal column had been extracted from its failing human host. Its torso remained a humanoid column, almost three brazen meters high, with massively muscled arms, shoulders and chest. The heavily corded neck supported an egg-shaped head that was humanlike as well, save its enormous, unblinking eyes—crystalline ovals which changed color according to mood and function, from glowing obsidian, cerulean, or emerald to crazed lemon or lunatic crimson. Serpent-headed tentacles hung cape-like from its shoulders to its hips, each snapping poison-dripping fangs. Any creature's mere approach guaranteed its death—unless Typhon consciously chose to allow the intrusion.

Confident now that its invasion had followed plan, Typhon propelled itself carefully sidewise down the steep, rocky hillside toward the birthing facilities and dormitories below. These were the prize its paymasters coveted. The Nords wanted them up and running immediately, staffed by crews of techs to be flown in tomorrow—fertilizing, incubating, and CRISPR editing new embryos as soon as possible. Even so, half a decade would pass before the island would once again echo with whispered prayers. Long ago, when Pratt's Commandments were first embraced, conversions of intercession had been tried. The experiments failed

drastically. Stunted half-people produced in the birthing vats could only protect the beneficiary they were wired for at conception. Attempts to program a replacement invariably caused madness, paralysis, and death. Better to kill them and birthe new, as would happen here.

Sliding closer to the bottom of the island's volcanic valley, Typhon noted movement to its left, and pushed itself to investigate. At closer range, a pair of orphaned supplicants struggling up the hillside were clear to its infrared sensors—a male and a female. They held hands and helped each other up the treacherous scree. It could blast them to jelly, rip them limb from limb, or crush them beneath its tails. Or ... simply ignore them, as the cyborg chose to do. They would die soon enough in any case, it was sure. There were important matters to take care of in the buildings below. Why waste the time?

KAX and TNO watched the golden monster as it slid past them. Both were 182's, their now all but extinct clan the rank of their dead beneficiary among the planet's two hundred rulers. Numb with shock, confused and frightened as well, they had miraculously avoided the death that had found others around them.

KAX, the female, whispered to her companion. "Keep climbing," she hissed, "or the monsters will have us!" Both supplicants panted from exhaustion as they clawed up the loose earth of the hillside, but she kept TNO's hand firmly gripped in hers—determined not to let him slip away. Below, in the dark, they could still hear wails from brothers and sisters, though few voices called now. The rest had already been immolated by things that flew, or poisoned by metal snakes that bit.

Struggling to the top of a hillock, they watched the monstrous man-machine recede past them, as it slid further down the valley toward their dormitory. The pair stood for a moment, gathering breath and strength for the rest of their climb—still tightly holding hands. Both were slim and even-featured, about the size of ten-year-old children from the twenty-first century. Their eyes were large (hers blue, his gold-flecked brown), hands and feet small. Both had high, prominent foreheads, small ears, and brown hair. TNO was oldest, having seen forty of the island's summers. Still, KAX with only twenty-six behind her had become the pair's leader.

"What will happen when we reach the top of the hill?" TNO asked.

"We'll find a place to hide and rest until daybreak," KAX told him. "Then, when it seems safe, I'll sneak into the vegetable gardens and find us some food."

"I must pray now for our lord Tyl," TNO said. "My urge is strong."

"We should pray," KAX agreed, "I fear he needs us more than ever before."

Both small souls knelt, pressing their palms together in supplication, and whispered the now meaningless prayer etched in their minds, which had sustained Tyl Fontaine for centuries.

*Our father, who is in Heaven,
hear this prayer for Tyl Fontaine.
Protect him from any harm, Dear God.
Mend his wounds, bless him with strength and vitality.
Clear his mind, erase all pain.
Guarantee his life, until I pray again.
Amen.*

In a dark Austrian cave, a tiny healing impulse danced among the jumble of decaying bones that had been their beneficiary, just an hour ago. Had their prayers been joined by five thousand likewise focused souls, more startling activity would have occurred—though even the full force promised by Pratt’s Commandments had never reanimated the dead.

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