

Fly Over Nation

#1: Prelude

Andrew John Valencia

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The End **135**

Foreward

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Retired Army Colonel Kurt Schlichter wrote a series of novels featuring the protagonist Kelly Turnbull. The premise is that the USA breaks into the two obvious parts, and it’s primarily a description of the dystopia which Blue policies cause. In addition to its dark satiric treatment, it features some outstanding action sequences—a fighting retreat, a fixed defense against a superior force, and an insurgency faced with modern weapons. Plus lots of one-on-one violence, of course.

I enjoyed his novels, but realized that Colonel Schlichter’s fiction made me curious about the other, mostly implied side of the story. What would it take to break away from the Blue states? What would fail, and what would it take to address it? This book is the fiction I wrote to wrestle with the answer to these questions.

Beyond that, there’s a *utopian* tale waiting to be explored. What *really* needs to be changed to transform the USA from what it is, into what we can dream it could be? As you rebuilt from a Great Separation, what new decisions do you make, guided by all the past failures?

When you want to explore ideas, one way to do it is by writing a political essay. Another way—much more fun—is to write a fictional world containing the things which interest you, then let your readers climb in the storytelling vehicle and you all get to drive around the world and give it a look. The protagonist in this book isn’t me, but he’s a *part* of me. He straddles the worlds of politics, organized religion, and personal spirituality.

There’s the fine art of letting the wonders of the universe leak in around the edges of the story, without making it a supernatural tale. My inspiration for this style of storytelling comes from the book “Where is Joe Merchant?” by Jimmy Buffett.

As a born-and-raised Catholic who even had a year of education in a college seminary, I’ve tried to present Catholic practices with some attention to detail. Where inaccuracies sneak in, they are caused by either a decision to streamline the narrative, or by simple author error. I take full personal responsibility, and offer you my apologies in advance.

Oh, and case it's not obvious: this is *fiction*. Neither the places, institutions, nor the people represented here are intended to be a reflection of anything in the real world.

Andy Valencia
Vashon Island, WA

Can I Be a Priest, Please?

The Deacon

Brian Linse walked along the back of a construction trailer. He'd gotten off his delayed flight to St. Louis, and reached the address of his appointment with minutes to spare. His cab had sped past the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis, which was the place he'd *assumed* he'd have his meeting. He then assumed the cab would stop in some office nearby. But instead, the cab had continued onward to a neighborhood more than a mile away, ultimately dropping him among a wasteland of suspended, mouldering urban renewal.

He stared at the back of one of those temporary office trailers they drag into a construction site, and felt a twinge as his cab drove away. There was no entrance on the side he could see, so he walked along it to try and find an entrance. Coming around the corner of the trailer, he found a ramp sloping up to an open door. The door was held open by a man, frowning at his wristwatch. Though dressed in business attire, Brian recognized a deacon's lapel pin.

"Hi! I'm here for a meeting with Father Millson?"

The deacon looked up from his watch, apparently deciding whether to answer or not. He exhaled, "Alright then", and stepped back inside.

Brian hurried up the ramp and caught the door before it closed—it was locked, so would have left him outside if he hadn't—and followed the deacon into the trailer.

Brian had supposed the meeting might happen in an office in the Basilica, or perhaps down the hall from the Cardinal's office. He hadn't counted on a catered meal, but he *had* been invited to this meeting. He expected to be treated with reserve, but still a little professional courtesy. He now realized that his hopes were far off the mark. This trailer in this urban wasteland was empty except for a card table and two folding steel chairs. The deacon actually swept his own chair with a handkerchief before sitting down.

Brian joined him, minus the sweeping part.

He hadn't expected this to be a warm welcome, but a card table and two chairs was . . . ridiculous. It was the fruit of almost a year of letter writing and more than a few phone calls. Brian had retired in his late forties from the world of technology, and after taking time to analyze the ills of the world, had decided

that becoming a Roman Catholic priest was his best chess move against what he saw out there in the world.

He had a wife. They'd just celebrated their thirtieth anniversary. Married priests really weren't a Catholic thing, even if the marriage *had* been in the Catholic Church in its earliest history. If successful marriages counted for something among the higher levels of the Church, Brian hadn't found it yet.

Brian started again. "I'm assuming with no collar and the grey shirt, you're not Father Millson. Does there need to be a reschedule?"

"I'm Deacon Sims, and no, this meeting will suffice." He put his fingertips together, and rested his wrists on the table in front of him. "You have been pulling at the sleeves of anyone with a ring for far too many months now. It was decided to meet you in person and clarify the Church's position." His lips made a wet smacking sound, then pulled into a tight line. "You are *married*, and you will be suffered to attend mass. But let me clarify your state of grace. By your own words and writings, you *understand* that what you are seeking is outside the bounds of Canon Law. You *accept* that the clerical hierarchy has authority, and yet you set yourself against them in an endless stream of letters and calls. You have been told "no". And yet despite this, you *sustain* your assault against the Church."

There was a glow of triumph in the deacon's eyes. "It's time to firmly address your behavior. 'Heretic' would be needlessly dramatic. But you are pursuing a violation of Canon law, are obdurate, and insubordinate. You are hereby barred from the sacraments, and from participating in any Catholic event outside of attending mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation. You may be counseled one hour, once a week, at your own expense, by someone chosen by your local diocese."

"I wish to emphasize that, even in the unhappy circumstance of your becoming a widower, your application to *any* Catholic seminary will be summarily rejected."

The deacon turned his head to look at Brian sideways, "Have I made the Church's position clear?"

Brian leaned back in his chair. "So I've been asked to fly all the way from the West Coast, to sit in this horrible trailer, and be told to go away?"

"Yes."

Brian shook his head. "Marriage HAS been a part of the Church, including married clergy. You and I know that the original impetus at barring marriage was to protect Church property from civil attachment when the priest died. Corporate law has, obviously, subsequently addressed this."

He continued, "With the endless succession of sexual scandals, the Church must be reeling under the monetary costs. Never mind the spiritual costs—the loss of moral authority. You and I know there *are* married priests quietly serving in the corners of the Church. Is it *really* so offensive for an independently wealthy

man—with an unblemished record in both professional and personal conduct—to want to step up?”

Deacon Sims swept his hand sideways in negation. “Go away. If you were a true member of the Church, you would never air such observations.” He stood, and pointed at the door.

Brian studied him with interest for a moment, then stood as well. “The world is in desperate need of the classic values: hard work, honesty, honor, integrity—virtues, if you will. I’m very sorry that the Church is so committed to its failings.” He started for the door.

There was a snort behind him. “You have *no* understanding of the Church.”

Brian stopped and turned to look at the deacon one last time. “Maybe you know better what it is. But I think there’s many of us with a better idea of what it was, and what it *will be*.”

A New Destination

Brian stomped down the ramp of the trailer, then grinned.

“That meeting sucked, but that was a pretty good exit line.”

He looked around for some landmark which would let him call a cab. But his eyes stopped in surprise, for just across the street was a cab idling. Not wanting to wake up in a bathtub of ice with one of his kidneys missing, his eyes narrowed as he considered this amazingly convenient “coincidence”. The driver rolled down his window, and it was the same cabbie who’d brought him over from the airport.

The cabbie smiled in recognition of Brian’s hesitation. “All done with the good Father’s minion? Get a nice blessing? Have your admission papers to the seminary?” He grinned ironically, and tilted his head to indicate the passenger door. “It’ll take you forever to get a cab—or Uber, or Lyft, or whatever. I’m sure His Holiness the deacon made sure you had a ride?”

Brian shrugged, and crossed the street to open the passenger door of the cab, then hesitated.

“Either St. Louis is a much smaller town than I thought it was, or you are not some random cab carrying some random fare.” He looked at the door, then at the plexiglass shield separating the back from the front of the car.

The cabbie just shook his head. “I would’ve gotten you on the trip out, Mr. Linse. Maybe this will help?”

There was a gap in the plexiglass, and through it he offered Brian an envelope. Brian reached forward gingerly to accept it. It held plane tickets, made out in his name. St. Louis to Reykjavik, Iceland by way of New York, then back to his home airport, Seatac.

“So you’re an organ-legger who moonlights as a travel agent.” He climbed in, slammed the door, and settled back as the car pulled away from the curb. “We’re going to the airport? If I use these tickets, what’s in Iceland for me?”

“Perhaps what the good deacon failed to give you?”

“And how do you know what he did or didn’t offer? Have you considered that I might have a new mitre tucked in my bag?”

The cabbie waved to something like a ray gun laying on the front passenger seat. “I’m nosy by profession; I bounced a laser off a trailer window and listened. Sorry, Excellency.”

The car accelerated onto a highway in, Brian noted with a little relief, the direction of the airport.

The Airport

Brian tried a few more conversational gambits with his cabbie, but failed to even elicit a name. The permit on the dash was for somebody else, but Brian noted the name and description as a starting point to hunt this guy down if needed. The miles passed as quickly as St. Louis traffic and work zones permitted, and presently they reached Departures at Lambert.

His driver finally turned around to face him through the plexiglass. He seemed almost apologetic. “I hope you’ll consider going to Iceland. If you do, you know Hallgrmskirkja Church?”

“That’s the dramatic one right in downtown Reykjavik?”

“Yes. Once you get there, at noon–local time–stand outside in front of the doorway. Turn on this,” he handed Brian something which appeared to be a simple tag you’d attach to your keychain, “by taking it off your keychain and sliding the front and back in opposite directions. Text will display on the label to guide you from there.”

“Please tell me it won’t go up in smoke afterward?”

The cabbie smiled, “No, but when deactivated, it would be hard to tell that it was ever anything but a little accessory for a keychain.

“Anything else?”

“No.”

“Thanks for the lift.” Brian climbed out of the cab and walked without a backward glance into the terminal.

The cabbie watched for a moment, then brought out his phone and dialed.

“Yes.”

I Still Want To Be a Priest

Choosing Your Destination

Brian walked into the terminal and looked at the line for agents. He held up the new tickets, then brought out his existing return ticket. He looked at each in turn, then asked, “What kind of rando would act like that guy?” He pondered a few moments, then decided: “If it’s fake, I forget the guy and head home. So far, this trip has sucked. If I fly straight home, that’s how it ends. Maybe my luck will change in Iceland? I love visiting that place in any case.”

He got in line, and after inching along, reached an agent. “Can you confirm this ticket’s availability?”

The agent took the ticket, scanned it, and looked at her screen. “This is an open ticket, when did you hope to travel?”

“Now.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m pretty sure you’ll fly out tomorrow at the earliest.” She tapped a few more keys, then her eyebrows arched. “A first class seat is already reserved for you. Wait, this ticket was open, now it’s booked?” She looked up a little accusingly, “Where did you get this ticket?”

“If I told you, ‘from my Fairy Godmother’, it really wouldn’t be that far from the truth.” He paused, then sighed and handed over his old ticket. “Can you refund me for this one to Seatac? I won’t be needing it.”

The Other Half

Brian reached the boarding gate just minutes before they started boarding. As he walked up (he never traveled with more than could fit in his backpack), the agent at the gate was just getting off the phone. She peered around and past the large mass of would-be boarders, and called out “Mr. Linse? Mr. Brian Linse?”

Brian waved a little self consciously as the crowd all stared at him coldly. “Right here.”

The agent moved aside the crowd to reach him with some strategic use of “excuse me”, and took his boarding pass. “Come with me, please?” She led him back past the crowd with a few more firm “excuse me”’s and gestured him down the jetway to take his seat.

Brian could feel the flat, jealous, reptilian stares of his fellow passengers on his back. It was an almost physical relief to get far enough down the jetway to escape their accusing looks. “This is great until the revolution, then I think I just won a place against the wall.” He plopped into his seat—1A—and pretended to be absorbed in his phone as all the lesser mortals streamed by.

The seat next to him remained open until a shout came down the jetway just as they prepared to close the door. A tall, elegantly attired blonde in her 30’s

stepped through the door, and with an English accent asked the flight attendant “please hold that door, will you?” The attendant’s mouth had just opened as the woman sat down next to Brian, placing a book on the tray in front of her.

She turned to him, “You know, I *don’t* think I want to fly today after all! Please watch this for me?” She tapped a finger on the book, stood up, and breezed back out the plane’s door.

The attendant kept giving him dirty looks as they finished preparations for takeoff, then announced “That book from *your wife* needs to be stowed.” Brian was going to tell her she wasn’t his wife, realized that it wasn’t going to help, and instead meekly put the book in the pouch in front of him.

It was only as they took off and climbed out of Saint Louis that he reluctantly took the book back out, and opened it to the first page:

Golden Dawn Theory and Practice

Golden Dawn

With seven hours of flight time ahead, Brian decided that any book delivered in such an absurd fashion was worth at least a skim. He was well-read in Western philosophy and Catholic theology, and had surveyed many other systems of thought. This book seemed to be over in the Theosophy corner of the world, systems which typically involved some rituals, a mythology, and various stages of initiation. Rosicrucians and Speculative Masonry were well-known practices, but this book was a new twist.

As best he could figure out, it was nominally a creed which would train one in magic. *Fine*, he thought, *you always need to put something attractive in the window*. Each section paired ancient history (Hebrew alphabets, symbolic meanings of chapel decorations, cosmic terminology) with meditation exercises and expository footnotes. The footnotes appeared to be a later addition to the material, and the book would have been impenetrable without them. It was tough going in any case.

About three hours into the flight, Brian closed the book, put it away, and settled back in his chair with the reading light off. He decided to try out one of the meditations he’d just read about.

He inhaled, held, exhaled, held, and repeated. His breathing slowed, and he started to sense the underlying deep silence beneath all the usual airplane noises. It had been a long and demanding day, and he was exhausted, trying to follow the points of the meditation even as he drifted off. He fell asleep beholding points, things with location but no width, no height, no depth, no dimensionality whatsoever. But then there were four points, one before him, one behind him, one on each side. And he suddenly saw that the points flowed outward in dimensions which his eyes could not see nor his hands touch. His plane flew towards Iceland, guarded by four angels.

Iceland

Reykjavik

Brian's flight arrived in Iceland on time, and he braved another round of passengers glaring at him as he left the plane first. He remembered that there was talk of a rail connection over to Reykjavik, but alas, for now it was still just a bus. He settled in for the drive to the capital city, and looked out the window as they proceeded. It was a grey, windy, cold day—the default weather for Iceland. But Brian liked the unique barren beauty, and hoped he'd have time to see some of it again. It had been many years.

At the bus terminal in Reykjavik, he considered his options, then decided to just rough it and walk all the way into the center of the city. He had two hours, but although it was windy and cold, it wasn't raining. And he'd been sitting down long enough.

He reached the front of Hallgrmskirkja Church with time to spare, and circled out in search of a cafe he remembered which served the best espresso he'd found in Iceland. After a few false starts in the twisting streets of Reykjavik, he did indeed find it, they were still in business, and he sat inside to warm up, gather his thoughts, and get ready for whatever this meeting was supposed to be. The espresso was at least as good as he remembered.

With ten minutes to spare, Brian headed back to the church (which turned out to be right down the street) and stopped out front to gaze at the groups of tourists entering and leaving the magnificent building. When his wristwatch said it was noon, he slid the little device off his keychain and opened it. The tag—which had looked like nothing but an empty label—changed to “wait”. After a few seconds, it said “back of church”. When he got there, it changed to “left on Baronsstigur”. And off he went on a walking tour of Iceland.

After 45 minutes, he found himself on a road which looked familiar. When the “buy piccolo and wait” message popped up, he realized that he had come all the way back around to the same cafe from which he had started. Brian looked at the display, at the cafe, came very close to grinding the device under his heel and walking away. Instead, he went inside, bought the diminutive espresso drink, and sat down at a table.

He had just reached for the espresso when a man walked up and picked it up instead, sitting down across from Brian. He sipped it, “Thanks.”

Brian looked at the man. He was wearing a clerical black shirt, but no collar. In his fifties, Brian figured, short but trim, holding himself with good posture. From long experience he glanced down at the man's shoes (“the shoes rarely lie”), and saw leather laced shoes, well used but freshly polished.

The man lowered the cup as Brian cleared his throat, “How often would you estimate you get punched for doing that?”

The man laughed. “Really, Mr. Linse, offering violence to a member of the clergy?”

Brian nodded. “It’s been a good couple of days for that.” Brian thought a bit more. “Sit here for a sec,” and went to get a drink for himself.

An Offer

When Brian sat back down with his drink, the man nodded thoughtfully. “I’m Father Patrice, and let me thank you for coming out to meet me here.”

“Nice ticket. How’d you make it auto-jump me to the front of the line? Who’s the woman who dropped off the book?”

The Father seemed puzzled, “It’s a first class ticket, but I honestly am surprised you got here today. It didn’t seem like it would work out until tomorrow. And I don’t remember arranging any woman for you, with or without books. Not really my line.”

“Huh, OK. And you seem Catholic, so why’d we start in front of Hallgrmskirkja Church? Don’t you have Landakotskirkja around here?”

“Meh. I like their building better. But theology, we have it *all* over them. We’re very secure there.”

“Why the walking tour of town? For that matter, we’re two Americans, what are we doing all the way over in Iceland?”

“Call it old habits, or call it necessary caution. Iceland made a nice halfway spot for my own travels to intersect with yours. But tell me more about this encounter with your woman?”

“Not *my* woman, but...” and Brian recounted the meeting on the plane.

Father Patrice looked thoughtful. He sipped from his espresso as his eyes sought the distance. Finally he turned back to Brian. “The book. What did you think of it?”

“Over in the Theosophy corner of philosophy, thoroughly Western in its treatment of tradition. It had some mental exercises...” Brian hesitated, then told the Father about his dream, angels and all.

Father Patrice gave a short laugh and slapped his right hand down on his knee. “Wonderful! That decides it.”

“Decides *what*?”

“You want to be a priest. But you’re married—and your wife is still living (God willing, for a long time to come). That presents quite a barrier. Not happy to be a glorified altar boy? I expect they’d let you become a Deacon.”

“And you care... why?”

“Please, humor me. This can be off the record.”

“Ok, then. The Church has evolved to hold all necessary change at arm’s length. I want to get in past those barriers.”

“The primary function of a priest is to *minister*.”

“For all intents and purposes, the hierarchy of the Church has Eucharistic ministers at the base. Everybody else—married deacons, lectors, even sisters and monks—are outsiders. Technically, we’re all within the body of Christ. Practically, we’re part of their inventory.”

Father Patrice nodded, apparently satisfied. “Imagine that a discreet group of us are interested in testing the bounds a bit, in the name of preparing a defense for the Church. If I can slip you into some seminary classes, are you willing to keep your mouth shut? My intention is to have the students—and most of the faculty—think you’re simply auditing a few classes. In reality, you’ll assemble all the prerequisites of training to be a priest.” After a small pause, Father Patrice adds “Well, some priestly bits will need to be covered in a few late-night coaching sessions.”

Brian’s head had pulled back bit by bit at this bizarre proposition. “What, exactly, would be the point of this?”

“Simple. Train you to be a priest. Place you in a small Catholic splinter group as their celebrant. Get a little mileage under the old sacramental celebrant hood, then petition the Mother Church to bring you back into the fold. We’ll do all the groundwork so the answer is ‘yes’. The Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of Saint Peter will be your diocese—it’s the dumping ground for all the odd bits which get gathered in. But voila! You’ll still be married, you’ll be a priest, and you’ll be an actual *Catholic* priest. The precedent is solid.”

“So you’re going to do a legal hack on the Catholic Church.”

“It’s entirely within the rules.”

“If not the spirit.”

Father Patrice shook his head. “The *spirit* is that the Church is always becoming what is needed in the world. I’ve seen your letters to the Church (made some enemies, you did). You know very well that we have some real problems right now. My conscience is absolutely clear in using the letter of the law to let you join our clergy.”

Brian paused. “Well, it’s not how I imagined joining up. But as you know, *that* is not happening. What’s the next move?”

“You were very nearly excommunicated. We can’t sidestep that, so you need to get it settled.”

Brian wrinkled his nose. “I’m not sure I read the part of Catholic Theology which tells me how to fix a spiritual parking ticket.”

“What would Henry IV do?” Father Patrice stood up, and walked out of the cafe.

Brian had just dredged his history of kings out of his remembered history lessons when he realized the Father was gone. “Hey!” then stopped after getting a sidelong glance from the next table. A little more quietly he continued, “I guess I’ll have to see if the Pope is, in fact, in Rome.”

Seeking Pope Gregory VII

Back in the Air

Brian immediately bundled up and headed back to the airport. Before buying any more airplane tickets, he verified his memory of history. Indeed, in 1077, King Henry IV found himself excommunicated by Pope Gregory VII. But the clever trick which Henry IV had used was to observe that a Pope, first and foremost, is a *priest*. If you are truly penitent, then the priest ultimately has to accept your confession and grant reconciliation.

Henry IV had chased the Pope down to a castle, and kneeled and wailed and in general showed his remorse in the *snow*. And yes, had the excommunication rescinded. Brian hunted in the various Vatican web sites, and found that the Pope would be in Rome for the next few weeks. Just as well; kneeling in Rome would at worst get one sweaty, since it never snowed there. And Brian had some ideas of how else Rome would work in support of his cause.

Strategy completed, Brian went up and bought yet another ticket—to Rome, and it was going to take almost 24 hours. “Man, putting the hair shirt on early.”

“I’m sorry, sir?”

“Please excuse me. I’m just preparing myself for a pilgrimage.”

The booking agent smiled in that impenetrably pleasant way. “Very well, sir. Here’s your tickets, to Rome and an open ticket to Seattle.”

A Long, Long Flight

He kept a hopeful eye open for his fairy travel godmother to step in, but no luck. At the tail end of a line which filled the plane from nose to tail, Brian sighed as he settled into his middle seat between two large older men who, between them, left him about a third of a seat. One of them grunted with displeasure every time Brian took a deep breath, so it was clear that a simply wonderful travel adventure was in the offing.

With two return tickets now unused, he also felt certain that his name was going to start coming up on security lists. With this happy thought, he wriggled forward, pried the gift book out of his backpack, and wriggled back against his

seat. With mounds of Old Man bulging in at him from both sides, his only solace was that in a plane crash, he was well and truly packed and padded.

Except they'd probably bounce together and pop him.

Brian wriggled an arm with the book, carefully centered between the bulbous arms of his traveling companions. It was a little dim, but a quick glance upward told him he'd never make it up to the light switch and back again without a man-sized shoe horn. Squinting a bit, he continued reading.

Presently, he reached a part describing a meditation concerning a "vesica", and it took him a while to remember that this was the shape when two circles partially overlap. He settled back, closing his eyes, and tried to follow the instructions of the meditation.

He thought of silver, which the alchemists believed to be associated with the moon, and then he thought of rising upward from a marsh, floating upon silvery liquid under the light of the moon. He cracked his eyes to look to his left, and saw the moon out in the night sky beyond the airplane's window. It was a quarter moon, but his reading made him realize that the dark part—if he could see it—would be the shape of a vesica pisces.

Why that comforted him, he couldn't say. But it did, and he settled back in his small seat in the crowded plane. His eyes closed, and he fell asleep thinking about the glow of moonlight.

Welcome to Rome

Brian woke up feeling relaxed and rested. He sat up and stretched, then stopped to look with astonishment at his two seat mates. Both large men were still asleep, each turned away from Brian to give him a very comfortable space. Each had given every indication that they were going to take all of their own seat and most of his, so he felt grateful that they had changed their minds.

The flight attendant came by, and looked at his two slumbering neighbors. "I hope you didn't hit them *too* hard."

"I'm innocent, maybe somebody came by with a Soviet umbrella."

"Since they missed you, how about some coffee to celebrate?"

Brian was just finishing the modest breakfast which followed when the captain came on, and the airplane switched into the usual prepare-for-landing mode. His neighbors stirred, straightened, glared at him, and resumed their seat hogging. With a smile on his face, and thoughts of Soviet nerve agents in his mind, he counted down the remaining minutes.

Rome

After landing, Brian got to wait for the entire plane to empty. He usually just sat and waited for the rush to die down, but of course his seat mate on the window side insisted on standing and edging towards the aisle. He then got a large man butt hovering over his face for the ten minutes it took for the unloading to reach them. Once he was finally off the plane and through customs, he realized he was truly not in the USA. Following the signs, he hopped on a train right at the airport, and with one transfer reached the Vatican an hour later.

Brian had formed most of a plan in his head, but now that he was actually *in* Rome, it was time to see if the concept would fit with reality. If he started his campaign too close to the Vatican authorities, a cop would run him off before he could get some public support. If he started too far away, the authorities could safely ignore him.

Brian ranged around the streets outside the Vatican, and realized that he was never going to succeed by simply starting a show. To get noticed in all the noise and bustle, he needed to be very close indeed to the Vatican. Too close; the Polizia would have him safely removed within minutes.

Brian then ranged the successively more distant streets from the Vatican, studying the numerous stands offering refreshments to the tourists. Some were too big and commercial, but each time he spotted a smaller entrepreneur, he would buy a drink and a *cafe sospeso* (“suspended coffee”, a free drink to be offered to a future customer in straitened circumstances). When the barista was amenable, Brian would ask about their family, profession, and eventually ask about certain professional contacts they might possess. He eventually found what he needed, and with a profound thanks to the well-connected barista, began his preparations for tomorrow in earnest.

Dress the Part

The next morning, Brian was ready for action. He put on his sack cloth pants and a hair shirt, tied with a rough length of hemp rope. Tucking his passport into an improvised pouch hanging off his belt inside his pants, he left everything else in his room at the B&B he had found. Stepping out into the hallway, the B&B hostess stopped short to stare at him in his outfit. He looked like a refugee from the middle ages.

“You are an actor? In trouble?”

“No, Signora, a penitent.”

The good lady crossed herself. “You are not bringing dishonor upon my house?”

“I go to find reconciliation. If I fail, I will certainly depart immediately.”

“Andare con Dio.”

“Grazie, Signora.”

Show Time

Brian reached his selected stage location, and nodded to an elderly woman all dressed in black who was standing nearby. Brian spread out a square of burlap, stood at its edge facing the Vatican, and began in a loud voice.

“My name is Brian Linse! I am a sinner. I have offended before God and the Roman Catholic Church!”

A few people looked over. The woman in black came closer, tapping a distinguished-looking man who was passing, drawing his attention to Brian.

“I am barred from the sacraments.” A murmur from the crowd. “I have no place in the Church of my birth.” The murmur became sympathetic. “I have come to Rome, as so many have done so before, to acknowledge my sins and start upon the path of absolution.”

Two other matronly ladies in black showed up on the other side of the crowd. They shook their heads and crossed themselves.

Brian was very pleased at the opening of the show, but let none of it reach his face. Bowing his head, he now kneeled, and brought out a rosary. The three women in black brought out rosaries as well, and a man caught gawking at this spectacle received a glare from the lady nearest him. He was abashed, and lowered his head devoutly.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name.”

Brian knew the rosary forward and backwards, so was able to settle into the prayer while still keeping an eye on the audience out of the corner of his eyes. After the three Hail Mary’s, he raised his head to proclaim the Glory Be.

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.” (He was tempted by the older “Holy Ghost”, but decided to shy from any excuse for clerical offense.) The five ladies (two more had joined) picked up the cue and joined him, each holding their rosary. “As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”

The whole of the audience joined in for the “Amen”, which Brian figured echoed nicely off the Vatican walls. He lowered his head, and started into the mysteries. There were three different sets, but the Five Sorrowful Mysteries were definitely the right tool for the task. On the other hand, a scripture reading would bore the crowd and lose all the momentum, so he had decided on keeping it to just the basics.

“Jesus prayed in the garden thrice: ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.’” And Brian recounted the three rounds of Jesus preparing for what was going to be a really bad day. He finished with “The disciples were weak, and failed to stay with their Lord. As Jesus forgave them in time, so I pray for the Church to forgive me.” And he started in on the next decade.

By the fourth time around the decades, Brian had achieved a very satisfactory result. He had hired a dozen mourners, and plotted with their leader on how to bring on a couple at a time, and have them spread throughout the crowd to keep things orderly and focused. Such was the tremendous presence of a devout, elderly Italian woman, that the whole audience was participating in their finest church fashion. Brian knew that either somebody inside the Vatican would step in soon, or else he would have a critical test coming up shortly.

And he knew the crisis was upon him; nobody from the Vatican, and here came an officer of the Polizia. Any of the more militant law enforcement branches, and the game would be up—but it had been very likely that it would be the most civilian of the officers. And here he was, what Brian would term the beat cop.

But still more than sufficient to end his game. The officer parted the crowd with a few words, and approached Brian. Brian was doing a Holy Mary as the officer reached the front of the crowd, and was about to interrupt him when one of the Mourners stepped in front of the officer and shushed him, and then hissed a stream of Italian at him which made the policeman stop short, and then . . . *apologize*. He looked between Brian and the *signora*, back and forth again, then crossed himself as Brian reached the next decade and threw in a *Salve Regina* for good measure.

Brian had decided on the theme for the next decade (Carrying the Cross, he was going to tie it to carrying the shame of his sacramental ban) when he saw that the officer was going to cut in before he started. Suddenly a tall, distinguished gentleman stepped to the side of the officer and laid a restraining hand on his arm. The officer swung about, then stopped and bowed his head respectfully. Brian thought he heard “Ispettor”, but he clearly needed to keep it going. When he next dared glance towards the officer, both he and his inspector were gone.

On the home stretch of this Decade, Brian was just formulating the next Sorrowful Mystery when the crowd, which had been right with him as he finished the Hail Mary, faltered. Brian almost broke character, but raised his voice to pray the Glory Be solo, then stood up and bowed his head respectfully. One of the smaller doors into the Vatican had opened, and if his eyes didn’t deceive him, it was a procession lead by a thurifer (i.e., a kid with an incense holder). Thinking quickly, Brian recited the Hail Holy Queen, did the Sign of the Cross, and again fell silent.

In the sudden silence of the entire crowd, the clank of the chain suspending the thurible could be heard as the boy swung the incense holder, smoke drifting gently out of it. Behind him came two monks—tonsured, even—and finally a tall, elegant priest in the deep purple robes of the penitent. The procession reached Brian, the boy stopping short and awkwardly damped the swing of his thurible before it hit Brian. The boy seemed unsure what to do next, and the two monks behind him glanced at each other with almost a shrug. The priest, displeased, intoned “make way”, and swept between the two monks and past the boy.

The man had presence, Brian had to give him that. Brian was almost 6 feet tall

himself, and this guy must've topped him by three inches. A couple tremendously funny quips came to Brian, and it was touch and go for him to keep his face somber as he waited for the Priest to speak first.

"You seek reconciliation with the Church?" the Priest demanded.

"Yes, Father."

"Your sins were in another country. Why are you here?"

"The sins which barred me from the sacraments were sins against the Church in its entirety. I felt called to come to the Rock of the Church to seek forgiveness." (Brian had thought this one through carefully; the old rock/Peter thing from the New Testament let him bring the Pope into it without naming him explicitly.)

The Priest stared at Brian a moment, then seemed to realize that hundreds of eyes were staring at *him*. If he had been planning to say something, the multitude of witnesses changed his mind. Without saying a word, he swept past the monks, the boy, and headed back towards the door into the Vatican. The boy was caught by surprise, and hurried to catch up while also swinging the thurible into action. It swung in a wild arc, and bounced awkwardly off his hip before he got control. The two monks turned to follow, one raising his head to look at Brian. With a twinkle in his eye, he pointed his chin to tell Brian to follow.

Bless Me, Father

The procession marched back through the open door, and into the Vatican building. A security guard had stood to the side of the doorway on the inside, and closed the door as Brian came through, last in line. The Father at the head turned to the boy. "Put everything away and return to your duties." He bowed to the two monks, "Thank you, brothers."

The boy hurried down the hall, and the two monks followed him, the friendlier of the two giving Brian one last nod. The priest pointed at Brian. "You. Follow." And off they went down a side corridor, which branched several times, after which there were stairs down, more corridors, and stairs down again. They were certainly below ground level, and the the walls became bare, while the floor became stone. They reached an iron-bound door, and the priest swung it open.

Brian saw a small, comfortless room, and wondered if there was some sort of Church committee which had written a study on how to make unpleasant buildings. Discarding both "I love what you've done with the place!" and "Has it been used much since the last Inquisition?", he quietly entered at the gesture of the Father. There was a rude table, with a chair on each side. One had cushions, the other was plain splintery wood. Brian guessed which one was for him, and sat once the Father had.

"That was quite a show you put on out there."

“Respectfully, it was not a show.”

“Not *much* of a show, certainly. And you are most assuredly not a king.”

“Henry IV needed to get out from his excommunication, and his example was inspiring.”

“But you are not excommunicated.”

“But I *am* barred from participation in the sacraments.”

The Father stared at Brian for a moment. “That’s between you and your Bishop. Why bother us?”

“I was not cut off from a particular church, or diocese, or bishopric. I was cut off from the Church in its entirety. It is natural to come to the heart of the Church to beg reconciliation of the Church at large.”

“And put on a show which makes us look small and foolish!”

Brian shook his head. “To emphasize the enormous span of history, and depth of culture embodied in the Church.”

There was a knock on the door, and an acolyte in robes stepped in to whisper something into the Father’s ear.

The priest rolled his eyes. “Your fan club misses you. A priest—one of our usual trouble makers—has brought an altar and is celebrating a mass.” They both listened for a moment, and Brian was pretty sure he could hear singing. “Oh, let’s get on with this. I will hear your confession.”

And they proceeded through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Brian confessed his contrition for his impudence at the appropriate point.

“What have you learned from this transgression?”

“I vow to not ever again argue for modification to the Church’s current teachings and practices on marriage and the clergy. Neither in public, nor in private, unless first receiving permission from a Church authority.”

“Which you will never receive. Your penance is to go out there, help them finish up that mass, and then get them to disperse. If you achieve this within two hours, I will send a letter to your bishop. If not, I will have you expelled from Italy, and place an INTERPOL red notice on your name.”

The priest stood up, opened the door (Brian had wondered if it was locked) and walked away without a backward glance. Brian emerged to find the acolyte had remained, waiting in the hall. They retraced the path in silence, finally arriving at the outer door. The acolyte unlocked it and swung it open, gesturing for Brian to exit.

“Well, it was so nice talking with you!” And Brian went out to try and wrap up the show. As the crowd caught sight of him, applause erupted. A priest up on a

platform was indeed celebrating, and gestured for Brian to take a seat in the front row.

Jetting Home

The crowd was greatly distracted by Brian's emergence, but good Catholic discipline held, and stifled their curiosity until the priest finished the service (which, Brian noted, went at a breakneck pace, the priest doubtless as interested as anyone). Brian climbed up on the stage—somebody had even brought a microphone and amplifier—and announced that he had been granted reconciliation, provisional on some actions of his which necessitated his immediate return to his own country. The crowd, torn a bit between hopes for a celebration, and the nobility of a mission started from within the walls of the Vatican itself, got Brian a car and driver, and sent him on his way to gather luggage and speed to the airport.

The party proceeded, honoring his story even if robbed of his presence.

Back in the USA

Ready, Set, . . .

Father Patrice was waiting at Brian's gate as he deplaned at Seatac.

"Well, Father, I hope I put on a sufficiently amusing show for you?"

"Oh, yes, quite. I didn't count on you hiring those wonderful Italian mothers to join in your prayers, but I'm still glad I had that inspector on hand to head off any polizia interference."

"Ah, wondered about that. Thank you. And one of those monks was yours?"

"Not as such. Their order is quite aware of what goes on in the world of the Church, and I hoped that your visit there would be offbeat enough to attract their sympathy. Of the remaining parts of the Church which still listen for hints from God, they stand out. My sources seem to indicate that they helped get the Very Reverend Orfeo moving."

"Orfeo?"

"The priest who took you into the Vatican. Now, what *exactly* happened in there?"

Brian recounted the whole experience, trying to recall every detail. Father Patrice seemed pleased. "Good. Very good. The acolyte outside the door, plus the crowd, plus the monks, it would be very uncomfortable for him to break his word now."

A pause. "You still have a house in the Bay Area?"

“Yes.”

“Move back. I don’t see dorm life working for you, so you’ll be a commuter. Class starts in a week.”

“Wait. Books? Schedule? Tuition.”

“Give me a day, then call the seminary office, they’ll email you all the details. No bishop’s writing a check, I hope you have some tuition funds on hand?”

“Not a problem.”

They had drifted to a table after getting a pair of drinks (Brian paid again). Father Patrice stood up, and reached across to shake Brian’s hand. “I might not be able to check in on you for quite a while. If you slide that messaging unit open and place any three different fingerprints of yours on it within ten seconds, I’ll know you need to talk. Make sure it’s a true emergency. Keep that slide closed to save battery power.”

“Where did you get my fingerprints?”

“You visit a cafe pretty much every day, and you ask me that?” The Father shook his head. “Getting put on that plane in first class, getting that book—your ministry is not going to be at all... linear. But you wanted your talents to meet the needs of the Church, and I think you’re going to get your wish.”

Father Patrice took a deep breath, looked Brian square in the face one more time, then sketched a salute and walked out towards the nearest exit.

Brian saluted his back, then glanced at the Father’s cup and reached for a napkin to wipe it down. “Even though he probably has secret spy-type anti-fingerprint technology.” Feeling a little foolish, Brian wiped his own cup as well.

Back to School

It had been decades since Brian had been in college, and yet the routine to get set for the seminary was instantly familiar. Books, classes, tuition, miscellany. One oddity was having to take the famous MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory), widely acknowledged behind Minnesota’s back to be a screener for kooks and nut jobs. Brian knew the best way to fail was to try and game it, so he just answered honestly and hoped for the best.

Another unusual aspect of attending a seminary was the assignment of a Spiritual Advisor. His, a Father Peter, was probably half his age, with a dapper beard and ready laugh. He kept Brian guessing. They met once a week, and their meetings became the high point of each week. It was probably Fr. Peter’s order—Society of Saint-Sulpice, dedicated to teaching—which gave him an uncanny ability to Jedi mind trick Brian, always opening a new perspective on almost any subject of spirituality. Brian was halfway convinced he was a plant and a heretic, but admitted to himself that a great theological teacher would seem that way anyway.

The classes themselves were what you'd expect for somebody shooting for a Masters degree in Theology. He had read through the seminary's web site, and thought he'd come up short in the philosophy and theology departments. But his one year of prior seminary study was given a suspiciously large weight, and his computer science degree became "logic and methodology", which then applied to his philosophy admission requirements. So he was in, and looking at just a couple years to reach an M.Div.

The Elevator Shaft

The two years of study passed, with the usual demands of college study—lectures, paper, tests—intermingled with the unique elements of seminary training. Liturgy, public speaking, community service, proselytism. The skills to run a business were more than sufficient to meet the academic demands, and Brian was just old enough to remember doing college papers on a typewriter. He was glad to leave that in the past! Word processors were a great invention.

The student body was mostly young, and had a heavy representation of foreign students, which gave him some opportunities to help with tutoring for those coming to English as a second or third language. There were a few "old guys", widowers who were interested in a new phase of life now that their spouse had passed. Brian kept his own status vague, letting them assume that he didn't want to talk about a painfully recent event.

One afternoon, he had just finished explaining some of the fine points of past tense to a Vietnamese seminary student when one of the younger students skipped in to the lounge area. "Hey! You have to come see this."

The seminary buildings were old, and had many different generations of construction. A number of the younger students had formed a club of sorts to try and find forgotten nooks and crannies of these old buildings. As a half dozen students followed the student, he explained "We were measuring the interior and exterior walls, to see if there were any hidden passages." This was a favorite goal of the group, a sort of El Dorado of seminary architecture.

They reached an unused classroom, which had been a biology lab back when the student body had been much larger. In one corner was some shelving, disassembled and stacked to the side. One last shelf remained in place, at eye level. He continued, "It was right behind these shelves, but none of the usual hidden passage tricks worked. So we removed the shelves to get a better look at the wall."

With that, he brought a screwdriver out of his pocket and unscrewed the two screws holding the last shelf. The entire wall panel came forward with the loose shelf; it was clear the shelves were used to attach this panel to the framing behind it. He gently slid the panel and the shelf over to the side, exposing a dark rectangle of exposed volume.

"Don't fall in." He brought out a flashlight and shone it into the opening. The

group gingerly stepped forward to look at what had been hidden behind this panel for years? Decades?

It took Brian a moment to recognize it; it was an abandoned elevator shaft. It went down further than the flashlight's beam could reach, and up to the very top of the building, three storeys above. There was a suggestion of openings at floors both above and below, but at their viewing angle, nothing could be seen of what might be there.

Brian stepped back. He didn't like heights much, but on the other hand, this was intriguing. "Anybody have climbing ropes and harnesses?"

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

After a quick rampage into their storage, they reconvened with some rope and several more flashlights. They figured the torch mode of their phone would suffice to search, but the big, bright lights of the flashlights were much better for figuring out how to climb this shaft. It went further down than up, and all things being equal, gravity would work with them if they descended first.

By then, one of the youngest seminarians had become impatient, and despite the entreaties of the rest, free-climbed down a level just using his grip on the framing. He reported that it was just an alcove, very dusty, with nothing but some wooden objects left behind. With the group up above looking downward, plus his view from beneath, there was no clear way to rig up ropes to permit safe climbing.

Brian was looking at the sides of the shaft, and noticed some brackets mounted to the wall to the right. Looking upward, then downward, he could see brackets were mounted at intervals for as far up and down the shaft as he could see.

"Gregori!" He called to the seminarian down below. "Is there any way for those objects stored down there to click on to the brackets on the side of the shaft?"

After a few more back and forths, Gregori indeed clicked a ladder-like section onto the bracket. He handed one up, and with those two in place, he easily climbed back up to join the group.

Gregori had dragged another of the ladder sections up with him, and was looking up the shaft. "There's plenty of'em in there, we should be able to go all the way up and down! Which way first?"

Just as they started to answer, there was a groan and a clang from way down the shaft. Some cables along the shaft clattered a bit, and Brian grabbed the biggest flashlight and quickly shone it down the shaft.

The elevator shaft was not, after all, abandoned.

Brian saw the top of a elevator car coming up the shaft, and in a flash realized that the ladder sections would block it. When it got up here, it was going to be

one of those unstoppable force/immovable object sort of things. “Quick! Get those sections out of the way.”

There was a mad scramble, led by the incredibly agile Gregori. They got them out of the way with just seconds to spare.

Brian saw the next problem. “Close this panel, or the daylight might show up to whoever’s in that elevator.”

So they swung the panel shut, and heard the elevator groan by. As best they could tell, it went all the way to the top. The whole group looked upward with speculation, then as one, looked downward.

Gregori put word to it. “Where’d it start from? Where did it go?”

This kicked off a flurry of travels up and down the storeys of the seminary building, including sending someone outside to spot them at various windows and estimate distances to the secret elevator shaft. They worked their way level by level, with the shaft behind a storage closet, or at the back of another old classroom.

But when they reached the first floor, their triangulation took them to a familiar door.

“The *Rector*?” Brian said with blank astonishment. “Father Brown has a *secret elevator*? To what?”

The Rector of a seminary is the combination of a CEO, President, and High Priest. Having him rattle around in a secret elevator was right up there with finding out he had a batmobile.

Brian decided, “We can’t mess with the shaft right now. Let’s come back tonight and see what’s up at the top.”

Tick Tock

About half the members of the original group had bailed. Brian usually went home after dinner, but this was just too fascinating to ignore. When they re-opened the panel, it was with a great deal of trepidation. Digging into dusty corners of an old building was one thing; nosing into the affairs of their Rector was almost certainly crossing some lines.

They assembled the ladder sections going upward, very tentative until they verified that the elevator was no longer up above them. The first floor above them was a small alcove with a stuck, dusty door. Through a peephole they could see a long disused dormitory, bunks covered in sheets, cobwebs everywhere.

The next level was a narrow passage with no openings, which stopped at an enormous mechanical mechanism attached to a circle. They studied the gears and pulleys, until finally Brian recognized what it must be. “This is the back of a clock!”

Everybody agreed, but Gregori objected, “There’s no clock on any building at our seminary.”

Brian shrugged. “I bet it stopped working, they didn’t want to fix it, so they just covered it up. Then they just forgot about this access passage, since it was never going to be serviced again.”

The Other Student Lounge

The third, top level was different. The passages off the previous levels of the elevator had been dusty and disused, but this one was clean, and even had a small LED safety light illuminating the elevator landing. A great, iron-banded door stood in front of them, of the sort which might hold off a chainsaw for hours. But there was a latch, which opened with a smooth *snick*, and the door swung quietly open.

The immediate impression was of a vast chamber, mostly because of the acoustics—there was very little light present. Like the landing, there were red safety LED’s beside the door on the inside too, but their modest glow let the eye gather in the details of the chamber only slowly. They gingerly stepped through the doorway into the room.

It was enormous, easily as big as a major school’s gymnasium. The roof was twenty feet above, and the scant details in the dimness suggested that it was curved and domelike. There were seats, in rising levels, on both sides of the chamber. It was (fortunately) silent and empty as they edged further into the room.

In front of them was an altar, positioned in the open central space so that both sides of seats could be addressed from the pulpit. From where they stood, they would walk right down the center of the space between the seats to reach it. As they advanced to this open floor space, one of the older students, Ben, whistled. “Look at the symbols on the roof and floor! A summoning hex. Is our Rector a satanist?”

Brian snorted. “Some satanist. Those symbols have *seven* points, and do you know a lot of satanists who use the Rose in the Cross?”

It was true. The floor was a figure primarily in black, with figures in white outlines. With, indeed, the famous “Rosy Cross” symbol used by Rosicrucians. Above, the ceiling also had figures, their gold coloring glittered faintly.

“Maybe they’re *Rosicrucian* satanists!”

“Maybe you should join one of those orders where they don’t talk.” Brian was distracted by a diagram hanging from a pole to the side of the altar. He did a quick reckoning, and realized it was to the East. The diagram was of red serpents coiled up past Eve and encircling and even passing beyond Adam—a classic depiction of The Fall from Genesis. But all these details were nagging at his memory, and he finally dredged it up. He had finished that mysterious

Golden Dawn book more than a year ago, and he realized that he was looking at an arrangement for one of their ceremonies. From the details in that strange book he'd been gifted, this would be used for a very high level ceremony.

Brian suddenly noticed that a few of the group were starting to shuffle towards the central altar. "Wait! Stay back, and look carefully at the space *above* the altar."

They all stopped and stared. At first, there was just the silence which settled upon them again. And then the eye started to trick itself that there was a globe, barely visible, floating above the altar. But very elusive; even the dimensions were impossible to decide. And what would it be made of? Was it a globe of black thread slowly rotating?

Every face was frozen, all attention upon this elusive figment. The air tasted metallic, and Brian felt his hair prickle as if in response to a surge of static electricity. Somebody in their group shuffled his feet, and suddenly there were stirrings among the seats all around them. The invisible ball above them had become large and close without any apparent motion, and Brian's skin tingled.

"Time to go."

They backed away, not daring to turn their heads, and wincing every time a clumsy step made noise, loud and apparent. Brian was last through, and swung the massive door shut as quietly as he could manage. They all looked at each other, slowly exhaling in relief.

With no further discussion, they worked their way back out the shaft, detaching ladder sections and putting everything back as they went. Whatever they had just experienced, nobody was ready to talk about it.

The Rector

An Invitation

It was the home stretch at the seminary. Classes were wrapping up, and papers and tests were giving way to a focus on the practicalities of being a sacramental minister. Brian had done many tours of duty out in the community, assisting priests, running food programs for the elderly, and drilling on the details of the rituals—nominally familiar, but very different when *you* are putting on the robes, reading the words, undertaking the gestures. Most of his fellow students had been ordained transitional deacons, and so had Brian after asking the Rector and receiving back a bland, "why yes, of course".

All the philosophy and theology was called upon for an exercise Brian actually enjoyed; constructing sermons. Writing them, listening to his fellow seminarians speak theirs, and giving and taking critiques of content and style. His spiritual advisor, still with him, treated it with alarming lightness. His Theology professor, Fr. Leo, more than made up for this. As one was reading, Fr. Leo would suddenly

become wooden faced, and raise a hand at you as if he was a traffic officer ordering you to stop.

“Write a page on what you just said, why you should not have said it, and how grateful you are that the Inquisition is in recess.”

But Brian had dealt with legal issues in his previous professional existence, and brought a legalistically defensive mindset which served him well. He was much more often helping a fellow student out of their own fall into heresy. (Mercifully, the Church recognized “material heresy”, which was easily rectified.)

Brian had just finished with one of his favorites, a lantern-jawed, glum youth from Eastern Oregon. The young man inevitably ended up expressing the opinion that the Church was an optional, and–best case–mildly helpful companion on a Catholic’s spiritual journey. Brian suspected he’d end up in a parish where nobody spoke his language, and thus he could do little harm.

Most of the student body were congregated at the mail room, waiting to see if their mail cubby hole would receive anything. Since Brian was living out of his own home, his cubby rarely held anything unless the Seminary had a bill or notice for him. Today he saw a thick card there, and pulled it out with curiosity. It was of a beautiful, thick paper, obviously handmade. It had neither post mark nor return address, so had not arrived via the US mail system. His name, in elegant calligraphy, was the only writing upon its surface. It was folded to offer several pages, but sealed with a dab of wax. Brian broke the seal and leafed through its contents.

“Fratr Linse,” it read. “With the approaching completion of your seminary studies, it is time to offer you access to some additional learning resources which will very likely aid you in your *unconventional* approach to the priesthood. There is a little-known classroom at your seminary, perfect for this purpose. Follow these instructions to meet your instructor tonight at midnight.”

What followed was a description for accessing the hidden elevator shaft. Except rather than attaching ladders, apparently the elevator car would come up and stop for him!

The Rector came to mind immediately. He could easily put a card in his cubby hole. His office had access to the elevator. Enough seminarians knew about the adventure in the elevator shaft that word could have reached him somehow. He almost certainly had to know at least a bit about Brian’s Catholic career.

But *why* bother with all the theatrics? The Rector was busy and important. If he wanted anything to change, he need only mandate it. Up to and including showing Brian the door.

Midnight it would be.

Midnight

Although Brian wasn't a resident, he had still received a room—the seminary had more housing space than it would have needed for many times the student body. It provided a convenient place to store materials, and was also handy as a dedicated study space. Around dinner time, Brian faded away and ducked into his room. He had packed some food, so he ate a little, studied, and even took a nap. At a quarter to midnight, he quietly slipped out into the hallways and headed to the classroom.

They had left a screwdriver hidden in a corner of the classroom, and he had the door open and waiting with minutes to spare. At precisely midnight he heard the car moving, and, though he dared not use a light, could tell that the car was nearing. It came into view, with a dim red light glowing inside as its top cleared the level of the classroom floor.

His eyes, well adapted to the dark, could see that the car's front was one of those very old-fashioned cages of metal which could be slid aside to permit access. The spacing between the bars, along with a dim red light illuminating the figure within the elevator, permitted him to see a single occupant. It was *not* the Rector. It was the woman from that long-ago flight when he had received the book. As he met her eyes, she raised a finger to her lips in a caution of silence.

The Lounge, Again

When the elevator stopped in front of him, she carefully pulled the cage open, letting Brian join her in the elevator. She closed the cage, and operated a control on the side of the car. The elevator continued upward.

As he expected, it stopped when they reached the level of that strange temple. She again opened the cage, and they stepped out into the entry. The door to the temple was still closed, and the safety light still shone. She turned to him, speaking in a low voice.

“This room has not been used in decades. Your first task will be to clean it up, and become familiar with its parts. There are different panels to display depending on...”

She broke off as Brian made a small sound. “Um, the room is in perfect condition.”

“What?”

Brian looked at her in puzzlement. “We found it a while ago. It's clean and maintained. Can you double check your files?”

“What do you mean? You've been in it?”

“Some students like to explore. We found it.” Brian proceeded to tell about the room's discovery.

She turned without a comment, and operated the latch and opened the door. He followed her into the room, which was still dim, but better lit than it had been during his last visit.

Brian just had time to notice that The Fall diagram was no longer in place. And his eyes were drawn to the altar, at which stood . . . the Rector.

“Soror Elle.”

“Frater Gerald.”

“Branching out a bit? Want to run a seminary? I didn’t see your job application.”

“As if *I* would teach anyone how to be a Catholic priest. Only the Church could reduce the numinous to an exercise in bookkeeping.”

“And yet I think you’ll have to allow that there’s more to the Church than you expected.”

Brian was frozen. The two were squared off, having made some odd, stylized motions with their hands when they started their conversation. Now “Soror Elle” faced the Rector defiantly, her hands at her hips. The Rector stood, leaning upon the altar, and glared down at her.

Soror Elle hesitated, picking her words. “Surprise me some more. You know what’s coming, and you know what’s going to be needed. Tell me that he’s been trained beyond what’s necessary to spout safe sermons before passing the plate?”

The Rector’s eyes slid away from hers at that. “The foundation comes first—”

“Foundation! You’ve been playing it safe, and teaching how to stay safe. I’ve been watching; tell me there’s something more than the parish priest assembly line running here?”

The Rector’s face remained averted.

“To be standing in this room, behind that altar, and I had to *sneak* in here to try and remedy your training?”

The Rector looked straight at her. “What do you propose, Soror?”

This was obviously not what she was expecting. “Let me train here once a week. You can assess for yourself, if you wish.”

“Done.” He looked at Brian. “See me tomorrow morning at 9AM, my office.” With that, he stepped down, passed them, and they could hear the elevator rumbling away.

Looking past Brian, her eyes narrowed. “If he locks the elevator, I’m not sure how we get out of here.”

Brian shrugged. “I can call some friends to bring us a ladder.”

The First Lesson

“So you’re ‘Elle’?”

She collected herself visibly. “That’s French for ‘she’. It’ll suffice for now. ‘Soror’ is ‘sister’, ‘Sister Elle’ is good.”

“Rosicrucian terminology. What’s the connection?”

“I read a pamphlet once. First things first. You understand why these teachings are always shrouded in mystery?”

“Y . . . es? Well, I have a hypothesis, anyway. Also why they tend to be hidden in plain sight.”

“They *must* be hidden in plain sight. Neither giving nor losing is an option.”

She turned towards the altar. “Let’s make some sounds.”

When they were done, the elevator was waiting for them, to Brian’s relief.

The End of the Beginning

The Second Lesson

Brian arrived at the Rector’s office a few minutes before 9AM. The Rector’s secretary studiously ignored him until 9AM sharp, at which point she looked up to spear him with her eyes. “He’s waiting for you.”

Brian wasn’t sure what to expect, but when he entered the inner office, the Rector was seated behind his desk as usual. Brian stood before the desk, abashed for all that he wasn’t much younger than the Rector himself. The Rector briefly looked up from a paper he was marking, “Please have a seat.”

Brian sat in the visitor’s chair, squarely facing the Rector, who shortly finished the page before him and pushed pen and paper aside to look Brian in the face. “You understand why we have a seminary?”

“To teach the practical, philosophical, and theological body of knowledge needed to be a Roman Catholic Priest.”

“And to assess candidates. And Soror Elle—you understand why I am permitting her to have any involvement in your instruction?”

“It surprised me. It means you do not see a fundamental conflict, and that there is a potential for augmenting my training.”

“There *might* not be a fundamental conflict. You’re sitting in front of me after the first night; that’s not a coincidence. What do you think she can supply?”

“I’m on the home stretch with the seminary’s curriculum. I have solid A’s in both theology and philosophy. Can you give me some guidance on how I should answer?”

“The trajectory of the Church since the Enlightenment has been downward. The Jesuits (the Rector rolled his eyes) are an example of a Church-centric response to the emerging dominance of scientific rationalism. To the extent they succeed, it’s with religious members who are experiencing doubts because of the modern world.”

“And the Jesuits’ worldly connections make them the most vulnerable to those secular forces. As opposed to Theosophic schools, which are more of a philosophical bootstrap for people with no previous connection to religion, or spirituality.”

The Rector nodded. “Why do you think the Catholic Church puts some of its most highly qualified members in charge of seminaries? The job is basically hiring teachers, implementing the established curriculum, and resolving administrative matters.”

“Talent scout.”

The Rector laughed. “I wouldn’t have put it that way. Let’s say I am responsible for ensuring the training serves the intersection of the student’s aptitude and the Church’s needs.”

“I think my sponsors placed me here because you could say that.”

“I doubt you understand—yet—who your sponsors actually are. But how would you characterize... let’s call them ‘Golden Dawn’?”

Brian hesitated. “In many ways, they’re a standard model school from the Theosophic tradition. Rosicrucians with the details changed a bit.”

“Don’t hedge with me.”

Brian nodded. “Their explicit mentions of magic are, of course, heretical. But if you interpret them as psychological exercises, their net impact is towards spirituality.”

The Rector appeared satisfied.

“Your sponsors are right; all I can say is that everything you’ve learned so far will be absolutely critical to your calling. That said, I didn’t let you in because you’d fill one more parish priest slot.” He paused. “Do you know why I can’t just tell you what you need to know?”

Brian was shocked. His entirely personal conclusions were suddenly, apparently relevant to a senior Church figure. “I think so. We covered it last night. Hidden in plain sight?”

“Precisely.” The Rector nodded, satisfied. “And the metaphysical mechanism by which Jesus died for our sins?”

Brian’s mind reeled. His innermost theories, mostly motivated by non-Church resources, and certainly heretical if expressed out loud... and here the Rector appeared to be approaching them as some sort of remedial level of theology? “Um, what is the nature of his soul?”

“Good.” He smiled briefly. “But incomplete.”

The hour flew by, and Brian knew that none of this could be committed to any sort of record—what he could hold in his mind was all he was permitted to keep. And he realized that the nature of his last weeks at the seminary had suddenly changed. His primary job had become to examine questions, and mine his intuition for answers. When that failed, dragnet the many obscurities he had encountered, to try and find one which suddenly gave him an essential clue.

Or hope for an inspiration in a dream.

And try to keep not one, but two masters satisfied.

A Final Exam

Brian’s years at the Seminary were racing to a conclusion. As his class prepared for graduation, the obvious issue of his participation in Ordination loomed large. The one time he brought it up with the Rector, it was waved aside. “Not your problem.”

His lessons with Soror stopped suddenly. He arrived in the Sanctum (as they had christened the space) to find a note card saying simply “use what we’ve given you wisely”. It was weighted down by a wand.

And what a wand! Its handle was dappled with the twelve colors of the zodiac. The colors faded grey to black as the handle tapered towards the neck of the wand, and the wood was intricately worked here with the figuring of the dark roots of the lotus plant. The wand belled out to wood colored with streaks of gold and white, forming a cup in which was held a gem of some sort, its translucence holding a glow of amber and gold which was almost a continuation of the colored wood holding it.

Brian slowly let out his breath. He did not touch the wand, and knew he would never touch it. He was being given the gift of inspiration; to see a philosophy expressed in an object. But the labor of creating a wand was an inseparable part of being worthy of it. Brian had just been given his final exam, with his grade to be found by what happened in the outer world.

The Sponsor

Brian’s room at the Seminary had rarely been used as the place he slept. But it was still one of his favorite places to study, and had accumulated shelves and books which now had to be emptied and packed in the boxes he had brought. All around him he could hear students packing to leave—for the Summer, or on to ordination and their first assignments.

As he filled yet another box with books, he heard a fog horn through his open window from outside on the front drive. He stood up to look out the window at a pitch-black tour bus parked right up at the main entrance. Seminarians and

their families and friends skirted past it, giving it curious glances. Brian shook his head and laughed, “Subtle.”

He hurried through the hall and down the stairs to the entry lobby. Dodging many seminarians—their arms filled with moving boxes, often with parents in tow—he proceeded out the main doors and down to the still waiting bus. The door wheezed open as he approached, and a familiar voice “come in!” drifted out to him.

Brian climbed the bus’s stairs and turned to look into the bus. There was Father Patrice, sitting in a—Brian took a moment—French *parlor*? The majority of the bus was made up as a sitting room, and Brian recognized several details from the pre-1700 Versailles decoration style.

“Please tell me that isn’t *real* marble?”

Father Patrice looked with scant interest at the walls. “Would the answer to that question make any difference whatsoever?”

Patrice waved to a chair—the wood of its arms almost glowed—and Brian sank down into sumptuously comfortable cushions, facing Patrice across a table set with a tea service. “L. Ron Hubbard *did* say that you should start a religion to get rich.”

“This little trinket could burn tomorrow, and neither my riches, nor those of the Church—the *true* Church—would be diminished in any way at all.” Patrice paused, then continued, “When we need to, we can move physical things around the chessboard of life. That’s the only lesson I want you to take from this bus.”

Brian nodded.

Patrice busied himself with pouring tea, and as Brian raised the cup to his lips, Patrice also pushed across a manila folder. “Your flock. They have an old storefront in San Jose, it’s really a decent enough chapel. They splintered off from the Church years ago. Be aware that their preference runs to lapsed Catholic priests—their last one drank himself to death last year. Let them pay you—it won’t be much—otherwise they’ll smell a rat.”

“Yes, about that *priest* thing?”

Patrice chuckled. “The Rector’s been giving you the run around? Well, let me set your mind at ease. That folder also has instructions concerning your ordination. Be at Saint Mary’s tonight—be sure that you use the side entrance!”

“The tradesman’s entrance?”

“What, really, *is* a priest, after all?”

Home

Brian hauled the last two boxes out of the back of his car and into his garage. The back of the garage connected to his house via a door, which was open, his

wife watching him as he finished unloading.

“I can’t believe you made it all the way through. I was betting on seeing you doing this move about a week after you got to that place.”

Brian put down the boxes, and clasped his hands together prayerfully as he looked upward. “It is the will of God.”

Judith snorted. “Skip the false piety, or I’ll turn you in to the Bishop’s God Squad, you fake.”

Brian lowered his hands, and pouted. “I’m *very* pious, I even have a degree coming to prove it. And good luck with a complaint, I don’t think even his pet rats tell the Bishop anything.”

“Well, the degree wasn’t really the point. Any word on the rest of it?”

“Yes. Tonight, in the City.”

“How shall I dress?”

Brian laughed out loud. “I think even *I* am going to avoid finding out what happens when a candidate brings his wife to his *Roman Catholic* ordination!”

Judith grinned. “Well, make sure somebody gets at least a few pictures.” She paused. “And if it looks anything like a bachelor party, I’m going to get you on the front page of the newspaper.”

A Priest

Brian arrived at the *old* Saint Mary’s with minutes to spare. Following the directions on the paper, he skirted along the side of the building while keeping a wary eye out—it wasn’t a great neighborhood, but then, there were hardly any good neighborhoods left in San Francisco. He found the promised door, and the provided code caused it to click open.

He advanced into a dark hallway, pausing to dig out his penlight. With its bright cone of light, he advanced further until some steps led him to a second hall, and then some more steps up to some curtains. He gingerly pushed aside the curtains and stepped out onto the raised altar area of the cathedral.

Father Patrice stood waiting for him beside—Brian stopped, stunned. A *Cardinal*? He didn’t recognize him, but the man was dressed in full regalia, and there was no mistaking the scarlet. “Eminence,” and Brian bowed awkwardly.

Patrice whispered something briefly to the Cardinal, and then came quickly over to Brian at the edge of the chancel, and smiled at Brian’s expression. “I happened to run into an old friend, and he said he had a few minutes to spare for a candidate.”

Brian stared at Patrice. “You *have* to be kidding me.”

Patrice hooked his arm through Brian's, and almost dragged him forward. "Eminence, may I present this worthy candidate, our brother, for service as a priest?"

The Cardinal stared straight into Brian's eyes. "Do you judge him worthy?"

"We do." From back in the shadows of the Cathedral hall, the Rector's voice boomed the answer as he walked up the central aisle.

"Identify yourself."

"I am the Rector of his seminary. He has excelled in his studies, and reliably demonstrated an adherence to the highest standards in ethics, morality, and spirituality. I so witness."

Brian looked at the Rector closely. He was dressed in ornamental robes, but was wearing a sash of... purple? A Monsignor and, to Brian's intuition, granted by a Pope in the old sense of the title.

The Cardinal turned to walk over to his place behind the altar. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

"Amen."

The Mass proceeded as Brian would have expected for an ordination mass. Samuel 3, then John 15, then a short homily (Brian retained no memory of it, alas). Both Patrice and the Rector joined the Cardinal as concelebrants for the Communion Rite. And then,

"Candidate, are you resolved, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to discharge without fail the office of priesthood?"

"I am."

The interrogation proceeded. Brian noticed that the oaths of chastity and poverty were skillfully avoided.

"Do you promise respect and obedience to your religious superior?"

"I do."

With the Cardinal's mitre handed off, the mass finished with a blessing. The Cardinal proceeded down the central aisle, stopping at the back of the cathedral, where an assistant helped him remove his sacramental robes. Patrice and the Rector loosened their collars, then led Brian down to meet the Cardinal.

"Father Linse."

Brian bowed again. "Eminence."

"Since I hold your oath of obedience, let me give you your first order. Do not celebrate any sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church requiring the office of priest."

Brian lowered his head.

“Give my regards to your wife.”

With that, the Cardinal turned and walked out of the cathedral.

First Parish

Brian looked over at Father Patrice, who was smiling faintly as he stared upward at some point on the ceiling. “That has to be a record.”

Patrice dropped his gaze to Brian. “I certainly could have had you ordained into a splinter from the Catholic Church. But an . . . obligation became available. Congratulations, Father Linse, you are, in any sane world, an excellent addition to the clergy.”

“I should’ve stayed up on the altar and started in on my first mass. Then His Eminence would have had to at least wait until I’d gotten my one mass in.” Brian smiled. “I think he would have *really* enjoyed my first sermon.”

Patrice mock shuddered. “I can only imagine. But don’t worry, you are going to be celebrating *plenty* of sacraments! Having you as an ordained Roman Catholic priest vastly accelerates the induction of your splinter parish back into the Mother Church. Run their parish smoothly, make any changes so their liturgies and ecumenical practices line up with ours. I’ll give you six months to put it all in order, then we’ll kick off a petition to our Bishop.”

“Great. So my splinter group’s down in San Jose?”

“South San Jose. ‘Honor Filius’, is how they put its name.”

“My Latin’s a little rusty. ‘Honor of the Son’? What language am I celebrating in?”

“Well, the old rite initially. It would really smooth things if you could get a modern mass up and running.”

“So a new priest, barred from conducting the sacraments.”

“Barred in a *Roman Catholic Church*, yes.”

“Brand new to celebrating, now I have to wing it in Latin.”

“You have my full confidence.”

“And drag them into line to satisfy our Church.”

“Right. Stop whining, you’re going to love it.”

Honor of the Son

Welcome to the Parish

Brian stopped in front of the abandoned shopfront. His paperwork had led him to this address, in a faded remnant of a San Jose neighborhood. The windows were barred, but one of them had been broken anyway, and had been replaced with a sheet of OSB.

Brian walked the length of the shopfront, and then back. The only entrance was the front doors; they had been the usual shopfront door with a metal frame and glass. But where the glass had been was now sheets of steel. He could see where the sheets had been neatly welded to the frame. Heavy duty metal door handles had then been welded on to the steel sheets, and a chain was looped through the handles and fastened with a padlock.

Brian had talked to Senora Marano, who had assured him she was “housekeeper, yes”. About the parish secretary, “secretary, yes”. And so on down the list, until Brian had indeed verified that with his addition, he had just doubled the workforce of the church. After an attempt to schedule when they could meet up, Brian also realized that it didn’t matter what time he showed up, as the Senora would be there.

Brian looked up and down the street, undecided. It was a lousy neighborhood, but he had his clerical collar on, and knew from the stories told by visiting priests at the seminary that he was probably safer here than in a three-piece suit in a business district anywhere in the USA. She had apparently stepped away on an errand, and he was torn about whether to bother her with a call, or just wait.

After ten minutes, he decided go with his Anglo impatience and called her cell. Senora Marano answered immediately, and assured him that she’d be right there. Brian looked up and down the street, expecting to spot her.

Behind him, the shop doors creaked, and Brian turned to see them being pushed outward from somebody inside the shopfront. A brown-skinned hand slipped through the gap, and deftly hooked the padlock, pulling its keyhole opening around to be reached by a second hand with a key. The lock *clicked*, and the chain slid loose as the doors opened fully.

Senora Marano was a short Hispanic woman of indeterminate age; Brian could have been told 40 or 60 and believed either answer. She held the door open for him and motioned for him to enter. He felt the immediate cultural awkwardness of a woman holding the door for a man, but didn’t see any way of acting on this, so he entered with a polite nod to the woman.

Unlike the unprepossessing exterior, the interior was a very nicely done vestibule, with inner carved doors which obviously led to a chapel, and an open door to the left through which he could see an office space. Brian admired the woodworking,

and realized that with a blue collar church, there were carpenters and even cabinet makers who had pitched in to build this entire interior.

“Senora, it is my great pleasure to meet you in person,” he began.

She ducked her head, and motioned him to a closed door on the right. “Your bags? You move in?” She swung the door open to a very neat apartment. Brian stepped in, impressed and halfway inclined to use it when he wanted to save the drive back to his own home. But a suspicion entered his mind, and he stepped back out, and crossed to examine the office. As he had guessed, there were several bags and boxes stowed neatly in a corner.

“Senora Marano, I hesitate to ask an imposition of you.” She waved her hands, but he continued, “I have a home nearby, and I think it’s important to have a live-in caretaker for this beautiful church. Would you consider taking on this duty?”

The halting transaction went back and forth for a few minutes, but in the end, she agreed to live there “until you need”.

His First Sunday: In Nomine Patris, et Felii, et Spiritus Sancti

Brian arranged his stole—a little self consciously—around his neck with both ends hanging down the front. He had ducked into the sacristy—if this phone booth sized compartment justified the lofty title—just before his parishioners had started filing in. He heard the muted buzz of Spanish, and the sound of fussing babies. The noise peaked, and then quieted gradually to an expectant quiet. Brian took a deep breath, and as he reached to open the door, somebody on guitar started playing something cheerful. He stepped forward to his place behind the altar, and looked out on a room absolutely full, all joining in the singing of *Pescador de Hombres*.

The pews had been given over mostly to the families, with the mother and father on the ends, and often a grandparent sandwiched in among the children. Standing along the walls were the young adults; women to his left, men to his right. They were obviously not wealthy people, but as he looked out at the smiling faces, he felt something shift inside himself. They were not, technically, Catholic. And he was only “sort of” a Catholic priest. But they were most certainly the Faithful, and he realized he was about to really, really celebrate the liturgy.

The song finished, and every eye was upon him.

“In Nomine Patris, et Felii, et Spiritus Sancti.”

The room vibrated with an “Amen”.

The Sermon

While he had initially cribbed to celebrate a true Tidentine Mass, it turned out the community had settled on something quite a bit simpler. He had met several members of the community, and decided that the real point was to use enough Latin to show their umbrage with the Mother Church. Otherwise they were happy with New Rite using Spanish. There was no Communion rail, and he had decided to skip offerin the Precious Blood until he could get his Eucharistic Ministers organized.

The gospel readings were Luke 13:1-9, followed by First Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12. Luke's happy tale was about Pilate doing bad things with human blood, followed by a one-year reprieve for, basically, the Jewish people. In the privacy of his mind, Brian reflected that many of Saul/Paul's letters read like the sort of trip reports he used to get in the corporate world. The administrative Church.

Setting aside these inappropriate thoughts, Brian was happy to run with Good Old Moses.

"Mi Espagnol no es muy bueno."

There were a few wrinkled brows. He was pretty sure he had the words right, but no doubt his accent was atrocious.

"Not enough Latin, either."

He squashed the impulse to recite "Hic, haec, hoc. Huius, huius, huius."

"So I will do my best in English."

A young woman in the back raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"Father, if you please, I could translate?"

She came up, and stood behind the lectern. It suddenly occurred to him that this was a long-solved problem for the congregation.

"Thank you!" He turned back to face his flock. "I have never met Yahweh, in a bush or otherwise. But I had an experience which gave me a small idea of how shocking it would be to encounter God."

He paused, and his translator spoke a few sentences in Spanish.

"I was hiking, and at the top of a hill had stopped to catch my breath beside a large bush. As my breath slowed, I became aware of an enormous humming right beside me."

She translated.

"The bush was *filled* with bees gathering nectar. The air vibrated with all that life, when I thought I was alone!"

“It made me think about Moses. Imagine finding yourself before not bees, but the flame of Yahweh!”

Meeting His People

After mass, Brian found that tables with refreshment had appeared in the entry. A cup of fruit juice was placed in his hand, and the woman who had provided the sermon translation stayed at his elbow, helping with his conversations. Once he had picked out the words for “thank you”, “grateful”, and “welcome”, he was mostly able to fend for himself.

Eventually, all of his flock had tidied up and departed, leaving just him and Senora Marano. After she had brushed aside his abortive attempts to help with some final cleanup, he stood back to let her work efficiently. “Senora Marano, that young woman who translated for me?”

“Si. Anna. Good girl.”

“And speaks English very well. Could I hire her?”

The Senora froze. “Me?”

“No, no! Her *also*.”

“Ah. No need. She do anyway.”

“Yes she did. But I need help, and it’s real work. Please ask her?”

“Si”

Brian stepped out to the street, Senora Marano locking the door behind him, hands once again deftly reaching through the door’s gap. As he looked at the door and calculated how to get a locksmith in to replace this slapdash chain affair with a real lockset, he sensed somebody approaching him.

“So, Father, I hear you delivered the goods?” It was Father Patrice.

“Yes. I had a friend who trained to be a private pilot. I remember how excited he was the first time he”solo”’ed. This seemed similar.”

“And in Latin, to boot. You did well. If the local Catholic Bishop was breathing down your neck, you’d have to be careful how many times you turned a cold shoulder to the Gospel in your sermons.” He paused. “On another subject, I do have some extra, well, call it local intelligence?”

“Oh? How so?”

“You must be wondering what so many salt-of-the-earth working class Hispanic folk are doing in a splinter Catholic church speaking Latin?”

“I’m climbing the curve on the language barrier. Yes, I was certainly going to find out more about that in the coming weeks.”

“They wouldn’t want to talk about it much, so let me spare you the ordeal. The local Catholic parish had a priest with profoundly unhealthy appetites for the children of the families. I’m in no position to judge the Bishop in detail, but the situation went on far too long. And then CBP raided some families, and the rumor was that it was targeted at families who were complaining.”

“Ouch.”

“Ouch indeed. My duties include troubleshooting, and this was trouble with a capital ‘T’. Attendance went to zero. I had this shopfront leased as a sort of neutral ground, and had a retired Sister lead prayer groups and bible study; I was afraid of any male figure and what would happen if they made one wrong step. They weren’t ready for the Patriarchy, but ‘Catholic Lite’ seemed like a possibility. Doing it in Latin lets them rebel against the Church without going too far outside the lines.”

“And here I am. I suppose you held off warning me until I was in too far to run away?”

“An older, married man with a spotless background was—pardon the term—a Godsend for me. Having you at odds with Mother Church even worked for a group with its own issues. But I want them to start connecting with the sacramental life of the Church. I know where both you and they need to end up.”

“Back in the arms of the Holy Mother Eternal Church?”

“Your ministry, the spiritual life of your flock, and the Church itself are all living entities. You need to accept that all of these will be what they need to be within God’s plan.”

“You should’ve done the sermon. What happened to their old church?”

“Bulldozed, cleared, and sold the parcel.”

“Amen.”

Last Rites

The routine which emerged was for Brian to show up at 11, handle paperwork and administrative phone calls until 1, and then open the front doors and let anyone come in and consult with him. One wedding was scheduled, and then a second and a third. He noted that he had to learn the Latin for the marriage part of a service, and then had to have Senora Marano call all of them back to schedule a few marriage preparation classes.

It was late in the day, and Brian was ready to hand off to Senora and head home, when an elderly lady came in. Her face was screened with black lace, and she held a rosary in her hand.

“Confession?”

Brian's mind raced.

“Sacramento de la reconciliacion?”

“Si.”

He had received training in this, but most of the *really* useful training had been over drinks with experienced priests. He had watched with some bemusement to see a twenty-something preparing to field the sins of a seventy-something grandmother. But, of course, the sacrament was actually between the sinner and the eternal Church.

He nodded. “Si. Um, please wait?” He knew this needed some trappings, so he hurried back to the sacristy to slip on some robes, then came back to motion the lady—Senora Sanchez—to follow him into the main church room. There was a nook at one side of the altar area, and he placed a chair inside the nook, and one outside and just around the corner. He motioned her to the nook, and quickly dimmed the lights before sitting around the corner from her. It wasn't the traditional confessional with a screen, but her body language said that she appreciated the arrangement.

“Bendiceme padre, porque he pecado.”

Bless me Father, for I have sinned. As the confession unfolded, his growing—but still pathetic—Spanish was sorely tested. He managed to extract that her transgression involved a daughter and a fight about money. As the exposition progressed, the speaking speed picked up, compounded by tears which started. He was missing almost all of it now, and hoped that she wasn't confessing to a decapitation and midnight burial.

When the words stopped, Brian waited a beat. “Reconciliation starts with contrition.” No, that wasn't going to get across. “Sorrow for sin. Lo siento?”

“Oh, si, si.”

“Bueno. You must. . . remember the love of Jesus Christ. And patience with your daughter. Paciencia.”

“Si, Padre.”

“Penance. Diez ave maria. Y dos padre nuestro.”

“Si, gracias.”

Brian finished with the remembered absolution—in English, it's all he had—and retired back to the outer office to let her say her prayers of penance in peace.

That Kind of Help

Brian was seeing off a family after blessing their baby. Their baby had been baptized by—they wouldn't say, but their stony faces and sudden silence made it clear. They wanted a *real* baptism. Brian's exposition of the theology behind

a flawed representative of an eternal sacrament had fallen a little flat. He had actually seen a baptismal font hidden in the closet, so he rolled it into the church aisle at front, and poured in a pitcher of water followed by a sprinkling of holy water. A blessing for the font and then the child, and soliciting a promise that the parents would raise the child in a good Christian household did the trick.

As he came back from wheeling away the font, an older gentleman rushed in. Brian didn't recognize him.

"Padre?"

"Yes?"

"Very sick. Help. Please come. Ven rapido."

"Shall I call 911?"

He looked pained. "No. Please." He waved at the door in agitation.

Brian relented. Grabbing his coat, they walked briskly several blocks over, then into a building and up narrow stairs to a small space converted to be an apartment.

One look told him the whole story. An elderly lady was breathing shallowly, her shrunken figure even smaller than her tiny bed. A small shelf built from planks over cinderblocks held supplies from the county Hospice service. The man had knelt by the bed, holding the hand of a sticklike arm. Still holding her hand, he turned to address Brian, "Please. No church after bad man. But... he turned to look helplessly at this woman, obviously his wife.

Brian froze. He'd been cramming for the community's sacramental life, one emergency at a time. The Commendation of Dying... his mind went blank. He had lots of material back at the church; he couldn't imagine leaving this couple here, nor holding up a book while he tried to confer the rite. Wait. Extreme Unction. He needed oil!

Brian nodded at the man, and then held up his hand to indicate the man should wait. Brian closed his eyes, and offered a plea for the Holy Spirit to help him serve this couple.

He opened his eyes, the man still watching. "Oil? Aceite de oliva?"

He patted his wife's hand, and tucked it under the blanket. He then went to some food supplies in the corner, and came back with a small bottle.

"Gracias. Small plate? Plato pequeno?"

The man grabbed a saucer. Brian took it, poured a small dab of oil, then handed the bottle back. He placed it on the floor, then knelt. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen." He held his hands above the oil on the plate. "Father, in this circumstance, please bless this oil, that its use will be holy in this sacrament."

He picked up the plate, and stood over the woman. It occurred to him that the anointing came later in the rites. But he wasn't sure how many minutes he had. Murmuring the Lord's prayer, he dipped his finger in the oil and drew the cross on her forehead. He turned to the man, "Her name?"

"Juanita."

"Lord, our sister Juanita might soon be leaving us. If it be your will, she shall be healed. But each of us must come before you in our time, and if this is Juanita's time, we pray that she shall find peace with You, and that you will grant comfort to her family. . ."

As he continued his prayer, Brian heard her husband begin to weep. When he finished his prayer, he bowed his head for a moment. When he looked up, it was to find her husband folding her hands. She looked haggard, and yet also peaceful. She had passed as Brian prayed.

Brian had picked up some pointers from his fellow seminarians, and saw immediately that one lesson was now going to pay off. "Senior. A towel? Una toalla?" The man looked puzzled, but dug into a stack and handed Brian a medium hand towel. Brian rolled it up, and tucked it gently underneath her jaw; her face looked much more composed without the mouth open.

Brian went to the hospice care pack, and found the expected sheet of paper with all the usual details. Bringing out his phone, he dialed the number. "Hello, hospice? This is Father Linse, with Senior Garcia. I regret to inform you that Juanita has just passed. Yes? Thank you." He hung up. "Soon."

As they waited, Brian and he prayed the rosary. When he heard footsteps on the stairs, Brian finished the Hail Mary and went to open the door. A stout Latina took in his clerical collar with a sneer, and brushed past to address Senior Garcia in a rush of Spanish while holding him and patting his back. She eventually broke off to turn back to Brian. "So you Catholics turned up for the finale?"

Brian raised his hands in surrender. "I'm the pastor at *Honor of the Son*. Senior Garcia just showed up at my door and asked me to come and help."

The hostility faded from her face. "*Honor of the Son*, huh? I heard about your church. An improvement over the previous act, which is saying almost nothing at all."

Brian shook his head. "I've heard a little bit about those troubles, but that's all before my time. If you ever start hearing bad things about my church, you have an open invitation to drop by and tell me."

She gave him a searching look before turning back to Senior Garcia. She asked several questions, with him answering and pointing at the oil, his wife, and patting his rosary. She seemed satisfied, and turned back to Brian. "You helped today, Father, no doubt about it. Thank you."

Brian was presently back outside. He realized that he was so shaken by the whole experience that he leaned against the wall to release a long breath. “Whew.”

He eventually found his way back to his church, his legs still shaky. He made a few wrong turns before he got his bearings.

Back in the Church

Tridentine Mass

Brian finished the mass, then followed his retinue down the middle aisle and out to the sidewalk in front of the church storefront. He nodded greetings, and exchanged pleasantries as he kept an eye on the doorway. A lean man with a short-cropped black beard and wearing clericals had sat in the back of the church the whole time, sneering at Brian every time they made eye contact.

Brian sighed as most of his parishioners finished socializing and headed away to their cars. Whoever he was, he expected Brian to come to *him*. Brian suppressed an impulse to chain the doors shut and leave. Instead, he walked inside and waited for his eyes to adjust to the sudden lack of sun.

“Never mind the theatrics, ‘Father’. Do you know why I’m here?”

Brian almost replied by asking him if he was from the Job squad. “Not for me to sign the program for you?”

“Dim and annoying is a terrible combination. Thank you for living up to your file.”

“Since light hearted comments don’t seem to be working, I’ll cut to the chase and guess that you’ve been ordered to look into this splinter group rejoining the Mother Church. I inherited the Latin form; I’ve found that they wanted a break from the ‘real’ Church, and hearing the mass in Latin made it feel ‘old’, and thus more reliable. Aside from that, I’ve lined up our calendar and practices with standard form.

“You don’t think you advanced your priesthood by sticking this Latin routine in the eye of the Church?”

“It’s a symptom. The break was the culmination of some horrible events. You’ve read that file, too?”

“I cannot comment on cases which are still open.”

“Then let *me* comment. People were trusted because of their position. They used that trust and authority to do some real harm. The Church needs to think about how to start building a bridge.” Brian shook his head. “Sitting in the back radiating attitude at the guy who runs their church and celebrates their sacraments? Did you think it wouldn’t be noticed?”

“I was listening breathlessly, and admiring your masterful presentation. Be sure to let them know.”

Brian slid into the aisle in front of the man, then turned and hooked his arm over the back of the pew to face him. “So you have a plan, and I’m not part of it. You didn’t talk to anyone, so you were just here to get a head count.” Brian thought, then snapped his fingers. “You’re going to build a church in this neighborhood, and then the faithful will return.”

“I am speaking with the authority of the Bishop. Do not interfere in this project. Do not sabotage it. This is demanded of you under your oath of obedience.”

Brian smiled. “You must have noticed that, although my path through the Church *is* a little unconventional, I have never, ever acted against Her.” Brian stood up. “If I can help, let me know how. By the way, what should I call you?”

The man stood also. “Close this place down; it’s gone on quite long enough. I doubt we’ll ever talk again, so just call me ‘sir.’” He walked out the exit.

Ready for the Fold

Brian pulled into his home driveway, noticing a black government-style SUV at the curb in front of his house. “Oh boy, here we go...”

Brian didn’t pull into his garage, instead leaving the car outside and stepping out to face the SUV. The driver’s door swung open and Father Patrice climbed out to face Brian. “Father Linse. What an unexpected pleasure!”

“You’re parked in front of my house. You weren’t expecting me home? Is there something you and my wife need to tell me?”

Patrice laughed out loud. “Unlike certain ordained people here, *I* am under an oath of celibacy. Like an oak beam—bent but not broken.”

Brian waved towards his front door. “Join us for dinner?”

“Thank you! Maybe some other time. I understand you met Father Salom today?”

“Was that his name? He told me to call him ‘sir.’”

“Ouch.”

“Sat in my service, giving me stink eye the whole time. Please tell me he isn’t the new parish priest for my flock?”

“Good heavens, no! He’s basically a project manager for the Bishop. He could plan and execute a Corps of Engineers scale project, been through Stanford’s Construction Executive Program, the whole routine. He gets grumpy when it’s just a little church in a poor neighborhood.”

“And yet I get the feeling he has no plans for *me* to preside in the shiny new digs?”

Father Patrice grimaced. “Well, about that. You’ve put everything in fine liturgical order. It’s a textbook candidate for induction, except word has come down to never accept an application with your name on it.”

“I could have my office manager send in the application, except I looked over the Canon Law, and it has to come from the top authority in the organization.”

“And you don’t report to a bishop. They like to score points against the competing brands. Bringing a misguided flock back into the fold is the narrative, but you don’t really fit.”

“I can step back, but...”

“Right. My beloved Church expects the Faithful to accept whatever shepherd stands behind the altar. If my Bishop forces it, what do you think your people would do?”

“It would stop short of violence. I can pass the word, and guarantee that. They’d probably just stay away, maybe start planning their own church again.”

Patrice nodded. “Leave the rest to me.”

Shiny New Church

It turned out that the Church had already purchased a building from a failed community church. A whirlwind of deferred maintenance was addressed—steps, railings, landscaping, fresh paint. One Saturday an aloof man in a van showed up at Honor of the Son. He ordered Senora Marano to gather her bags and put them in the van, after which he affixed a sturdy steel bar to the doors, and drove her to a local motel. Handing her a week’s worth of housing coupons, he placed her bags on the curb and drove off.

The next day, the regular group—most of them had heard about Ms. Marano’s treatment—showed up at their church. A sign on the locked door announced that the group had rejoined the Roman Catholic Church, and they should proceed three blocks over to their new church location.

As a group, they shuffled as instructed to stand in front of the renovated building. They all stopped and studied it for a while, suspicion and dislike evident. A greying man, clearly the leading elder, turned to a young man. “Luis? Can you stand out front? Not too friendly?”

Luis nodded. While actually a kind and thoroughly reformed man, he sported a jagged scar across the side of his face from a knife fight in his youth. When he was displeased, a dark cloud radiated from his cold eyes, and very few people indeed would choose to try his patience. Luis walked up the steps, turned his back on the new church, and glowered out at the world.

The door behind him opened, and a young man in celebrant robes peeked out. Luis turned his head to give the man one cold glance, then turned back. The door slammed shut.

The leader looked about. “Father Linse says we must find patience. Make no trouble. Go home and we’ll try again next Sunday.” The group dissipated. A few people pulled up in their cars, took a look at Luis, and drove away again.

Churches Are Not Buildings

Brian, dressed in jeans, was working on the garden in front of his house. He had remained scrupulously ignorant of what had happened at his church last Sunday, but he was entirely unsurprised when an enormous Escalade pulled up to the curb, screeching to a halt. Father Salom, not looking peaceful in the slightest, stepped out of the vehicle and stalked over to Brian.

“Sir.”

“Are you pleased with yourself, Linse?”

Brian stood, turning to face Father Salom. “I told my parishioners to cause absolutely no trouble, and to wait for word from the Church. Aside from that, I have *no* knowledge of current events.”

Salom was about to call him a liar, but caught a look in Brian’s eye, and held back the words. He considered for a moment. “They all came by the new church, posted one of your thugs to scare off any attendance, then left.”

Brian kept his face impassive, though his shoulders shook briefly with a suppressed laugh. “I imagine that was Luis. He’s neither a thug, nor mine. I’ll grant you he can be a little intimidating.”

“Call him off.”

“I have nothing to do with his presence. I could send word that he should not stand in front of the church, but they’ll just find some other way to express their feelings. These are good people, and the Church will be the richer to have them back inside. But you’re going about it all wrong.”

Father Salom gritted his teeth. “Name your terms.”

Brian shook his head. “This is not some stunt of mine. I literally have nothing to do with their actions. You need to make peace with *them*, not cut a deal with me.”

Salom, for the first time in the encounter, relaxed minutely, his face becoming thoughtful. “*Suggest* to me the best way to address the situation.”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“I have no doubt.”

“Let me celebrate. They’ll come.”

“In a *Catholic* church? You?”

“I’m a *Catholic* priest. You know that.”

Salom pointed his finger at the house behind Brian. “Do you want to introduce me to your *wife*?”

Brian shook his head. “First, she’d be rude to you. Second, you’d be rude to her. In any case, your point is irrelevant. There are married priests in the Church. You and I both know it. I’m one of them.”

Father Salom’s face was stony. “I’ll have your injunction lifted. You celebrate mass this coming Sunday in the new location. You get your flock in *line*. I need them as a congregation, not a one-time mob. Two conditions.”

“Name them.”

“First, we are sending you *away* after that mass. Oh, we’ll send you away as a full, sacramentally authorized priest. But we’ll send you out of state.”

Images of a hut in the Alaskan wilderness crossed Brian’s mind. “Done. The second condition?”

“You go alone. No wife.”

Brian, just for a moment, wanted to throw away the whole undertaking. Throw this man off his property, possibly with violence. And then, just like so many times before, a surge of wild humor bubbled up in his heart. “Now you *really* don’t want to meet my wife.”

Happy Easter

Brian borrowed a van, and swung by to pick up Senora Marano. He had received keys to the new church, and the two of them opened the big front doors and locked them in the wide open position. They conducted a search of the entire building, using Brian’s flashlight until they figured out where all the light switches were located. There was a very nice little apartment suite in one corner, and the Senora refused with shock when Brian told her that they would bring her bags in. She only relented when Brian *ordered* her with feigned asperity, and they headed back out to the van to get her belongings.

Word had gone out. Already dozens of his parishioners were at the door, peering into the church. Brian and Senora Marano greeted them, and received happy cheers when they asked for help with moving in the Senora. It was a laughable oversupply of laborers to bring in her few possessions, and yet as everything was unpacked to the Senora’s directions, Brian saw vases, flowers, comforters, and blankets appearing. He realized that people were hurrying home to find items to help complete her living space.

Groceries were suddenly available, and then the oven and stovetop were turned on as tables were found in a storage room and extended out front of the church. Some of his parishioners had formed a band, and they set up to provide music for the impromptu celebration of the new church.

Father Salom pulled up in his Escalade, and moved among the parishioners. Brian watched with some trepidation, but the Father effortlessly had dropped his Church Official persona, and was just a humble priest of the Church, chatting with people and listening with interest. His Spanish was flawless. It suddenly struck Brian that this priest was a microcosm for a way to look at the Church as a whole.

It was quite late, with Senora Marano having retired to her new bedroom. Brian and Father Salom had wished a good night to the last few people, and now it was just the two priests. They turned to face each other.

“I’ll just lock up, then. Thank you for coming,” Brian offered.

Salom nodded. “It was a pleasure. I’ll be back on Sunday to concelebrate with you. You have your white and gold robes ready?”

Brian looked blank.

“Your first Easter Sunday celebration, then?” Salom actually laughed as realization hit Brian. “I’d enjoy watching you freeze up there. But we both know you’ll do fine. Good night, father.” He turned back as he reached his car. “I hope your wife can make it.”

Salom drove away as Brian’s mind started to work on his first-ever Easter sermon.

Easter Sunday

The church was filled wall to wall. Brian had to hand it to Father Salom, the place had been built and equipped by somebody who clearly knew their business. There was an overflow of people out front, and a simple flip of a switch routed his audio to a pair of speakers mounted up high on the outside face of the church.

Brian had halfway expected Salom to bring some Inquisition-style muscle with tasers. When he made his first stumble, they’d rush him, shock him into a coma, and thus end his career. But Salom was dressed magnificently (Brian had had to call around his fellow seminary graduates to find some robes to borrow), and participated as a concelebrant with effortless grace, letting it be clear that Brian was leading the service.

The readings wrapped up, the prayers ran through, and everybody settled back expectantly. Brian stepped up to the lectern, and caught the eye of his wife in the front row. She nodded her support.

Brian had been torn on this sermon. But an old, experienced priest had told him “Don’t feel like you have to dumb it down. Religion isn’t dumb, neither is faith. So long as you have an honest reason to try and present something, even the ones who can’t quite follow will be reassured that the Faith isn’t just some cartoon stories.”

Taking heart, Brian started, “A long time ago, we all believed that the Earth was at the center of everything. We then found out it was the Sun, and later we

found out the Sun rotates within our galaxy. We found out the faster you go, the more mass you have, and the slower your clock ticks.”

His translator caught up. “We thought light was like ripples in the water, then we thought it was like tiny rocks being thrown. Now we find it is both.” A number of his audience had wrinkled brows. Some of this was news, apparently. Brian kept his face from showing a smile.

“There is a pattern in God’s creation. We can find something which is true, and then each truth has further truths hiding inside it. I always keep this in mind as I study the acts and teachings of our Lord. The greatest theologians have found new insights, even in things they’ve read so many times before.”

The mass passed in a blur after the sermon. Father Salom stepped minutely backward, and cast an inquiring look at Brian. Brian realized that he had almost let an important moment pass.

“Before we close, I need to talk with you.” The room, gathering its usual energy for the end of the mass, stilled. “I have been honored to celebrate so many sacraments with all of you, and we have come to know each other well. We were born into the Church. We were raised in the Church. We can stand outside a church *building*, but we were never really outside the Church itself.”

Brian took a breath. *Here we go.* “I’ve been very happy with you, and it’s been an honor to serve you. I will always remember you and keep you in my prayers. We shall certainly stay in touch! But I know where I am needed next. If you have been happy with my work, can you be generous and let me continue with my work?” Brian caught Luis’ eye, and smiled. “And work *with* your priest, whoever he might be?”

There was silence, and then a shuffling over to one side. Senora Marano came up to Brian, and hugged him as she started crying. Brian saw that the whole congregation was going to be streaming up to him, and raised his hands in blessing. “The Mass is ended. Go in Peace to love and serve the Lord!” He laughed. “Let us proceed outside where we can talk!”

With that, Brian hooked his arm through the Senora’s, shoed the two altar boys out ahead of him, turned so they could bow, then proceeded out of the church. Father Salom took the place of honor at the tail of the procession, managing to look humble.

Outside, Brian weathered an endless succession of questions, each one just a variation of “why?”. Brian and Salom settled into a routine, Brian mentioning that his new status made him perfect for “a new assignment”, and Salom nodding solemnly. Nobody was happy with it, but they all had taken Brian’s words to heart, and simply repeated how much he’d be missed.

Finally the crowd thinned to just Brian and Salom; Brian’s wife faded back into the building to “check something” after (somewhat stiffly) finally being

introduced to Father Salom. Brian looked Salom in the eye. “About that *assignment?*”

Salom chuckled. “We did play it up a bit there, but it obviously made the change easier to accept. Truthfully, your assignment *is* important. We have one of our highest income parishes which is in the process of melting down. You know we’re desperately short on priests in general, and fluency in English adds to the challenge. We placed a priest there who was a terrible match; communication was almost nil. Which would work out, since everybody knows the words and the tunes. But the priest started bringing in ‘helpers’ and ‘cleaners’ and ‘assistants’. As in, ‘friends and family’. And the accounts stopped balancing, and the savings melted away. He ultimately tried a Special Appeal, and more than half the parishioners sent their empty envelopes directly to the Bishop.”

“Oh give me a break. I’m going to go play nicely with a bunch of rich, Catholic WASPs? Get the pump re-primed? Fix His Excellency’s balance of payments?”

“Right now you’re a one-trick pony. You want to carry the argument that people like yourself are a valuable *general* addition to the clergy? These parishes couldn’t be more different. Knocking it out of the park with both is the kind of argument which is hard to ignore.”

“How many of his friends and family am I going to be clearing off the payroll? Do I need to hire some muscle?”

“No, I wound down operations and let some deputies accompany the movers for the final cleanout. You’ll have a clean sheet.”

“Do I have any operating funds left at all? Or is it going to be a bake sale to get the lights back on?”

“Stop being such a baby.”

Bake Sale

Brian pulled up to the church. The ends of the front facade had spires, and he could see a bell tower which rose from the back of the building. It appeared to be two storeys on the sides, with the main church hall in the middle being one big high-ceilinged space. He brought out the bunch of keys Salome had provided, and found the one for this lock. The door swung silently open, looking into a vestibule with windows providing a view into the main space. The sun shone through stained glass windows, giving the whole altar area at the front a gold and red glow.

He stepped inside. The pews were of some polished wood, the floors were carpeted. It was all beautiful and expensive, and Brian felt a sudden pang of longing for his old church. He felt ridiculous here, both decadent and useless.

Stop it he commanded himself. *He’s right, I AM a big baby.*

He stepped back outside, made sure the big front doors were locked again, then searched along the building until he found the parish office, and then the key to open its door. There were six desks in an open cubicle arrangement, and six more offices along the walls, each its own fully enclosed room. The back wall had one more office, as big as all of the rest put together. The walls were dark walnut, there was a large fireplace, and a massive desk commanded the room, with high windows behind it.

You sit behind that thing, anybody approaching is going to feel like an insect Brian mused.

He went around behind the desk, and settled into astoundingly comfortable swivel chair. He opened the drawers of the desk, finding them empty. With a sudden foreboding, he did a circuit of the big office, then all the other offices, checking every filing cabinet and desk drawer.

There was not one single piece of paper anywhere.

Brian stopped at the front door, and noticed a box to catch letters dropped in to the mail slot. He pulled out a single envelope, addressed to him from Father Salome at an address in Vatican City. Peeling open the skinny envelope, he extracted a single newspaper clipping.

Mysterious arson at storage unit

Brian shook his head.

Arsonists broke into the Pacific Solutions storage units on Thursday night. Ignoring everything else at the facility, they forced their way into a storage space rented by the local Catholic Church, pouring kerosene over the contents and starting a fire which completely destroyed the unit's contents. Officials from the Diocese say that, fortunately, no valuables were stored there, only old paper files.

Brian brought out his phone, and did a few searches, then dialed.

"Hello, I'm trying to reach the Chief Financial Officer for the Diocese? This is Father Brian Linse. Yes, I imagine you were waiting for my call. Can you tell me what bank my church used? And then send somebody out to meet me at the branch so we can start un-f—" Brian broke off from the epithet he was about to use, "start *fixing* the situation? Great, thanks."

Brian headed for the door, then stopped with a realization. He flipped a light switch, then another. Nothing. He pushed redial.

"Father Linse again. If you know anything about my utilities, can you bring that paperwork along too? Thanks again."

Calling the Flock

Brian had slowly but surely rebuilt the parish's world of paperwork. The lights were back on (the Diocese had tapped an emergency fund to mollify the electric company), and Brian had gotten a provisional status account at the local bank. While he and the Diocesan CFO worker had been chatting with the bank's manager, an assistant from the District Attorney's office had shown up to join them. By the time all the banking was in shape, Brian was newly educated on his responsibilities in working with the DA's ongoing investigation into the church's history of fraudulent management.

It had been a few days, and Brian was still stuck on how to reconnect with his erstwhile parishioners. Somebody had swept through the church property in its entirety, gathering every single scrap of paper. He had dragged in his own laptop, as the church was as empty of computers as paper. A talk with the detective investigating the storage locker arson verified that PC's were *not* part of that fire, and for a while he had hoped to find the PC's or their hard drives tucked in somewhere.

But, no such luck.

He had a browser open, hand coding SVG for the graphics of a banner he was going to hang up out front:

” Grand Reopening Sunday Service @ 10AM ”

He was still fiddling with a third statement. “God willing”? “God is Great”? He couldn't believe he could have writer's block for a poster.

Somebody knocked at the office's front door, then opened it. An elderly woman peered in tentatively. “Hello? Father?”

She was in her 70's, with an immaculate outfit and a coiffure freshly out of a salon. He could just see past her to an S-Class Mercedes, its rich black paint glowing in the sun. *My target demographic* he mused.

“Welcome to Saint Joseph's Church, Ma'am?” as he stood up.

“I am Mrs. Wilson. Are you a crook?”

Brian considered a joke about stealing his wife's heart, then realized that would certainly make this introduction even more awkward. “I know there were some problems. I think I was selected to serve here partially because of my reliability in such matters.”

Mrs. Wilson looked around the office. “They really did burn everything, didn't they?”

“In a glass-half-full sense, we can be grateful that they didn't burn it all in place. You are a parishioner here?”

“I *was* a parishioner. I saw what was happening sooner than most, and withdrew.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. When they burned everything, it was *everything*. I don’t have a roster, mailing list, not even copies of any weekly bulletin.” He waved at his laptop. “I’m going to run the figurative flag up the pole and see if anybody still salutes.”

She came around to see his graphic editing. “You need a third sentence. What’s your name?”

“Father Linse. Brian Linse.”

“Meet Father Linse.”

Brian typed it in, and viewed the result. “Thank you.”

She thought for a moment, then nodded at a decision. “Let me go get the backup drive.”

“You have a *backup*? There *were* PC’s here?”

“Oh, yes. It won’t have anything after I backed away several months ago, but it should have a useful roster. Maybe other information—that really doesn’t interest me. But I backed up all the PC’s, four of them. Can you leave me out of it?”

Brian pondered. “In the current criminal investigation, the contents will be much, much more useful if there’s a complete and honest accounting of where these backups came from. Do you want such people to be free to behave this way in the future?”

She smiled for the first time. “Maybe you *are* cut from a different cloth. If you had given any other answer, I was going to drive away and never return. Wait here.”

She walked out to her car, popped the trunk and came back with a USB backup drive. “Here you go. I am at your disposal; what’s next?”

Brian motioned her to a chair, then sat down himself, bringing out his phone. Pulling the DA assistant’s business card from his wallet, he dialed. “Hello? This is Father Linse. I’ve come across something which I suspect will be very helpful.”

Meet Father Linse

The hard drive helped all the way around. Brian was assured that it filled in a number of blanks in the ongoing fraud investigation. The DA personnel’s initial position was that they would return a partial copy of the drive at the conclusion of their investigation in a few years. But after some wheedling—and a call from the Bishop’s Chief of Staff—they relented and supplied newsletters, calendars, even some phone directories. They didn’t give him all of the web browser files, but they did dig up the church’s social media logins.

Mrs. Wilson became his (unpaid) *de facto* administrative assistant. The word went out quickly, but Brian decided to still print and hang his banner (with

Mrs. Wilson's addition). The emergency funds from the Diocese were long gone; Brian was left to cover parish expenses from his own pocket.

Sunday arrived, and Brian peeked out through a side window to see the parking lot full of cars, including more Teslas than he'd ever seen in one place. 10AM arrived, and he stepped to the altar. He looked out at a full church, and stopped to study his congregation.

He was ready to dislike them. He had loved his time with his previous group, and came to know how close to the edge they lived. Being forcefully dispatched here to fix the problems of the rich rankled. And yet. The faces here were friendly. Curious, Hopeful. And it struck him that looking down on the poor was wrong, but it was no more justified to do so to these people. He felt silly that he had fallen into this trap. The Faith touched all people, of all walks of life. Today it was here.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

"Amen!"

The Mass

He'd become used to the Latin of the Tridentine Mass. It felt lazy to be back in an English language mass. He was also used to pacing himself to a translator, and kept pausing for the Spanish words before catching himself.

Brian hadn't had time to get his altar boys trained up (there were seven candidates and, yes, all boys). But he had readers who knew their stuff, and the church's stores had everything needed right at hand. Mrs. Wilson had obviously done some calling, and Saturday afternoon a group of people had come to wash windows, vacuum, and a few of the younger ones had set up tall ladders to replace a couple dead bulbs. The church looked great, and the service had run without a hitch.

He'd already decided to not put out collection baskets until he had a better feel for the community—money was surely a sore point, and he had done the math and could cover the deficit for more than a month. So as the service headed towards the Eucharist, he was expecting Mrs. Wilson and the two lectors to bring up the offertory (that is, the bread and wine). He saw people out at the walls passing baskets in at each row, which was odd. He had told Mrs. Wilson his decision, and she had nodded. Had she forgotten to pass the word? But no, there she was organizing the baskets before joining the lectors to bring the gifts.

As her trio approached with the gifts for the altar, three ushers followed behind with the baskets. They set them to the side, and Brian's gaze fell on them, only to freeze. There were at least eight baskets, each packed tightly with pledge envelopes. He didn't know what amounts were pledged, but unless this was a large prank—and Mrs. Wilson would never suffer that—the financial problems of this church were over.

Brian turned to the congregation with surprise still on his face. A wave of pleased laughter swept over the crowd. He saw smiles and realized that, somehow, they had decided to give him their trust. He nodded gratefully, then moved back to the altar to celebrate the Eucharist.

Your Money and Your Life

The apartment attached to the church was comfortable. It had been a little grubby, but scrubbing every flat surface had helped immensely. The carpet had a dirty gray tint, but a rented shampooer had fixed that. There was a carport attached in back, and a breezeway to an entry in the back of the church proper.

Brian had made a light dinner, and had shifted the dinner dishes aside to do a video call with his wife. He was now scanning his inbox, planning to defer everything except a true emergency. Nothing critical had come in, and he was just about ready to close the laptop, do the dishes, and head to bed.

The lights went out. His laptop screen still glowed, running on batteries. A scraping sound came at his front door, and then he heard the sound of movement outside the door to the breezeway. He slammed the laptop shut, willing his eyes to switch to nighttime vision as soon as possible.

He kicked off his slip-on shoes quickly, then moved as quietly as possible towards his bedroom. As he moved, he brought out his cell phone, and covered the screen to avoid its glare (his eyes still mostly blind in the darkness). He dialed 911, and heard an unfamiliar sound from the phone. Sighing, he uncovered the screen to see “No Service”.

What the . . . This location had excellent service. He put away the phone and hurried into his bedroom as he heard somebody doing something to the lock on the door to the breezeway. He picked up the landline phone by the bed, and nodded in resignation when no dial tone came.

He heard the breezeway doorknob turn, and the door pushed in to bump against the slide lock he had (thank God!) set. He had only a few seconds.

Cell phone jammer, cut power and phone, bad guys at both doors. This is bad.

He moved to the bedroom closet, and reached up into the far left of the overhead shelf. He punched his code into the gun safe, and the door popped quietly open. He brought out his Ruger GP100 .357 magnum revolver. He had some quick reload clips, but didn't have time to reach for them when he heard his breezeway door kicked open, followed by the sound of somebody landing a kick on his front door. It held, but now he had somebody heading into his kitchen.

His eyesight was next to useless. But his phone, still on the bed where he had dropped it, gave him an idea. He picked it up and flicked it to camera, auto flash on. Not giving himself time to chicken out, he moved to the door and held his hand high, poked it out beyond the doorway, and clicked for a picture, his

eyes squinched shut. Even through his eyelids, he saw the flash of light, and heard the “s-word” grunted out.

He came through the doorway, his pistol leading and pointing where he was looking. He could barely pick out the outline of a figure, and fired twice, once center mass, the second up a bit from the natural climb of the big revolver’s recoil.

He spun to the front door as another, desperate kick made it fly open. Brian fired once, twice, and a third time into the opening as the door flew inward. He felt like he had one more shot in the gun, but it was hard to concentrate, his ears ringing and his whole body clumsy with adrenaline. He backed awkwardly, bumping into the door jam, and finally reaching his bedroom. He was waiting for more attackers as he managed to grab a quick load. He listened desperately for anybody, then popped open the cylinder, dropped out the mostly used cartridges, and dropped in a new load. Clicking the cylinder back into the body of the revolver, he tried to calm down and decide how much danger was left out there.

He waited, listening. Nothing. After a minute or so, he realized he had no idea where his phone had gone. But he had a flashlight in the bedside table, and after grabbing it and undertaking some heart stopping experiments of flashing the light into the other room, he finally dared to take a look.

A body was sprawled on his kitchen floor, a dark pool which he didn’t want to think about spreading out from underneath it. He hardly dared look, because the open doorway to the front loomed at his side. Going through the same cautious lighting routine, he looked outside. Nobody. He figured that was bad news, and it took him a little bit to realize that the body had flipped up and over the hand rail of the steps, and was now resting down in the plantings beside the house. He still half expected somebody to come at him from some unexpected hiding place.

Stepping back inside, he saw a glowing rectangle on the floor. His phone. He picked it up, still “No Signal”. The jammer was apparently still running, probably on one of the bodies. He suddenly had had enough, and backed out of the house and kept moving up the street until service returned. He dialed 911 again, and this time got an answer. The operator had lots of questions, but he just put the phone down beside him. When the first cruiser, lights flashing, appeared at the end of the street, he put the revolver on the curb, well beyond his reach. He held his hands up, palms facing the officer.

It would just totally complete the night to get shot by the responding officer.

Crime Scene

He did not get shot. The first officer at the scene had his service weapon out, but didn’t actually point it at Brian. Brian’s own pistol was gathered and locked in the patrol car, then Brian was (politely) ordered to submit to a pat-down. As that was finishing, the second unit arrived. An officer stayed near Brian, while

two more approached the house, verified the body, then ran a “room entry” into his house. Presently, they came back out, one officer trying to use his cell phone, then switching to his radio.

Another unit arrived, then the EMT response. The techs spoke with the officers, then went back to their vehicle. Brian didn’t notice it, but at some point they had left. It started to sink in what he had just survived, and at what cost.

A sedan arrived, and a non-uniformed man climbed out. A uniformed officer came over, answered some questions, then pointed at Brian. The man asked a few more questions, then walked over to Brian.

“Father Linse?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Detective Jonas. I happened to be nearby, and came over to see if I could help. Are you OK?”

Brian sat back down on the curb. “Still a little shaky. But no injuries.”

Detective Jonas turned to the officer. “Did the EMT’s do an assessment on him?”

“No, sir.”

“Crap.” He turned back to Brian. “Please stay here.” He walked away.

Presently a new medical unit arrived, lights on and siren going. It pulled up to the detective.

“Wow,” Brian said. “A full paramedic upgrade.”

A woman from the unit walked towards Brian, pulling on rubber exam gloves. “Sir? Are you Brian Linse?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, I understand you were in a violent confrontation. Sometimes people are injured and don’t realize until later. Can I check, please?”

“Of course.”

After a thorough trip over his body, the woman thanked him, wrote up some paperwork for the detective, then jumped back into her unit. Her apparent partner had waited at the wheel the whole time, and the lights came on as they raced off to a new call.

The detective came back. “I just needed to be sure.”

“No problem.”

Detective Jonas looked at Brian with a strange expression on his face. Brian had seen him enter his house during his health check, and wondered what he had seen.

“In your own words, can you tell me what happened?”

Brian knew from all his self defense studies that he needed an attorney right now. Stupid with the adrenaline dump after a life threatening encounter, there were so many stories of people saying the wrong thing and landing themselves in endless legal trouble. Brian hesitated, then told the detective what had happened anyway.

Jonas nodded, thoughtful.

“Can you come with me, Father? Are you OK on your feet?”

“Sure.” Brian got up. “Lead on.”

They went into Brian’s unit. The body was still on the floor, and some people Brian hadn’t even noticed arrive were busily processing the crime scene.

The detective squatted down beside the body, waving to the face. A monocle was still strapped into place. “The other guy has one, too. Night vision.” He pointed to a box clipped to the belt. “Cell phone jammer. I turned it off, we use cell phones for most of our comms these days.”

The detective stood back up. “You’re a priest?”

“Yes.”

“Married?”

“Yes.”

“A *Catholic* priest?”

“Yes. Long story, but married priests landing inside the Catholic Church happen.”

“Great. So we have a huge embezzlement case at this church. All the records gone, arson, good stuff. You show up—pow. All the records drop into our laps. Within a week, all the money starts flowing back into your bank. And now the other side sends a hit team, and you take them out just, one-two BAM.”

Detective Jonas glared. “So what is this, *Father* Linse? Are you a fixer from some sort of Vatican Bank? Am I going to find you with a long gun up on some nearby roof next? How messy do you plan on this getting?”

Brian held his hands up. “Detective, please. I’m just a married guy who was a priest in a non-Catholic church which was folded into the Catholic Church. They assigned me here because they wanted to placate the parishioners. And, honestly, get the donations flowing again. One of them had held on to that disk, and gave it to me after she decided I was honest. The money coming in now is because they want their church back.” Brian shook his head. “People with guns kicking in my doors. I have *no* idea where that comes from. They must know there’s no money kept here, most of it was just pledges, and the rest went straight to our bank account.”

The detective studied him. “You have good moves. That cell flash blinded both his night vision monocle, as well as his other eye. Even with that, he nearly got you.” Jonas pointed at a hole in the trim of the doorway Brian had come through to shoot the first intruder. “I would’ve thought they’d clear the place in advance of the attack, disable any guns.”

Brian nodded. “Maybe they made some assumptions about a priest.”

“Well, priest-involved shooting is a first for me. It’s like we’re in Texas or something.”

Helpers

All of the rituals surrounding violent death were observed. At some point the coroner’s representative signed off, and the bodies were whisked away. Photos were taken, and positions marked. Detective Jonas came back and had him run through the events again, this time including a physical walk-through. He thanked him, and gave him a card for a cleaning company which could handle “this sort of thing”.

As the detective led the last of his workers back out to their vehicles, Mrs. Wilson came in, followed by a pair of men he recognized from the Sunday service. They had carpenter’s tool belts on, and each carried a tool chest as well.

“Father! They said you were unharmed?”

“Aside from some loss of peace of mind—yes. I’m fine.”

The men stood behind her expectantly. Mrs. Wilson surveyed the scene, twisting her nose when she spotted where the body had been. “We’ll fix your broken doors and locks, but I don’t think you should stay here tonight.”

“I was just about to pack a bag and head to that motel up the road.”

“Excellent. Will you be safe there?”

Brian was about to answer “of course”, and stopped. “They’ll likely have a watch on me, at least for the time being. I should be fine.” They had taken his pistol as evidence, but he had a smaller one which had remained in the safe. It was for concealed carry in states which permitted it, but it was certainly going with him tonight.

The men turned to their tasks. Mrs. Wilson assured Brian that she’d drop off the keys to the new locksets, and shooed him to his room to pack.

Life as a Target

Brian changed to full civilian garb. He just couldn’t deal with it at the moment, but when he reached the motel office, the kid behind the desk seemed to know who he was anyway. Brian noticed he picked the unit way out at the most

remote point from the office, and was tempted to point out that the assassins would make him cough up the master keys before killing him anyway.

But, again, he just wasn't in the mood for that kind of fun. He thanked the kid, paid, and drove out to his unit. Then sat there in his car, looking at the lonely unit. If they came for him, there weren't any tricks left to save his hide. "Hell." He turned off his phone, pulled its battery, then drove away. He proceeded to drive around the city until he was pretty sure there was nobody following. He knew the combination of a local mechanic's padlocked garage, and pulled inside there.

He should have just asked the detective to bed him down in a cell. He should call his wife. Instead, he pulled a space blanket out of the trunk, got as comfortable as he could in the back seat, and went to sleep, his pistol resting within easy reach on the floor of the car.

He woke to a knocking sound on the window. His blanket had slipped to cover his pistol, and he casually got it in his hand while turning his head to see who was knocking.

It was Mike, the owner of the service garage. Mike's face had a scowl, obviously displeased with a surprise overnight visitor. But when he recognized Brian's face, the scowl was replaced by a look of comprehension. Brian sat up carefully, not wanting the dramatics of wielding a pistol, but Mike caught the awkwardness of his posture, and understood. Brian, sitting up, rolled down the window.

"Mike, good morning! Sorry about the informal visit."

"Hey, no problem. I heard about the trouble. Why'd you bed down here? I would've put you up."

"I appreciate that, but I was running on fumes, and just wanted to go off the grid while my brain got some rest."

"You good now? Can I help?"

"No, I should be on my way, thanks." Brian paused. "Do you have any coffee?"

Welcome to the Game

Brian, caffeinated, drove back to his church. He had left them finishing repairs on his doors, and was ready to check a couple places to see where they had left the keys. But instead, he saw a police cruiser parked right out front, and the officer got out as he pulled up.

"Father Linse?"

"Yes?"

"Sir, I really wish you had let us know where you had gone. Are you OK?"

"Yes, thanks."

“Ok. Please hold on a sec.” The officer sat back in his car, and spent some time on the radio. “I’ve let them know you’ve arrived safe and sound. We traced you to that motel, and things got a little frantic once we verified that you hadn’t made it inside the unit.”

“Last night, you all finished up here and took off. I got the impression I was on my own.”

The officer looked pained. “I’m not sure about that, sir. I think somebody got a call, and word came down to be a little more proactive on your safety. By then, you were gone, and we had a heck of a time trying to find you.”

Brian had a sudden, horrible thought. “You checked with my wife?”

“She didn’t know where you were. In fact, I don’t think she’d heard about any of the trouble.”

“Heck. I have to do some calls.”

“Of course. Here’s the keys to the new locks.”

Brian almost sprinted inside, thumbing on his phone as he went. It rang as soon as it finished booting. “Hello?”

“Brian, we have a problem.” Father Patrice’s voice was calm.

“Oh *we* have a problem? How many assassins did *you* shoot?”

“We can swap war stories at some point. Two things for now—I did contact your wife and assure her of your health. You should certainly talk, but I wanted you to know that she hasn’t been forgotten. Second, can you step out your front door and tell the nice officer to let in your visitor?”

“You’re here?”

“Well, in spirit. We’ll talk soon.” The call ended.

Brian dropped the phone on the bed, and stepped over to open the door and wave in. . . Soror Elle. She was dressed in a nun’s traveling habit, and the officer gave her a small bow as he motioned for her to proceed up the walk.

“Ah, Father Linse. Have you had fun playing house? You’re good at it.”

Brian closed the door after letting her in, and she settled in a kitchen chair after stepping around the body location markings, studying them with interest. “It’s wonderful what they can do with stains now.”

Brian sat across from her. “It’s a little unsettling, how comfortable you and Patrice are with this sort of thing. Maybe in this whole ‘spiritual warrior’ world, you should have emphasized the ‘warrior’ part. If I’d been a hair slower, your seminarian project would be in the morgue.”

The Soror frowned. “Patrice and I—and a number of other people—are sorry about that. We knew they had reached the kinetic phase of their project, but you were well outside the parameters we understood.”

“‘Project’?”

The Soror brought out a phone, the same model as Brian’s. She held her hand out.

“Your phone?”

Brian’s brow wrinkled, but he handed over his phone. She brought out a small box with two USB cables dangling from it. One went into his phone, the other into the one she had brought. Brian started to ask something, but she held up a finger, stopping him. Presently, the box chimed a note, and a small green LED went on. She kept his phone, handing him the other.

Brian suspected his phone had just been cloned, and was unsurprised when it unlocked normally. His usual home screen was there. Brian looked up questioningly.

Soror had meanwhile slipped his original phone into yet another black box. It buzzed harshly for half a minute.

“Your laptop?”

He brought it over, and they went through the same routine. *They even know my laptop model*, he mused. She then nodded.

“*Now* we can talk. Your phone and laptop should act like your originals, but they both have been hardened against a very wide range of attacks.” She paused and collected her thoughts. “About that ‘project’. You know that the Church is very large, very old, very wealthy. We have people *everywhere*. How would you characterize the Church as a force for good these days?”

“Off the record?”

“Off the record.”

“Pretty much useless. Marry happy couples at weddings, comfort relatives at funerals. Provide weekly Sunday morning fillups. Marx called it the ‘opiate of the masses’, but it’s not even a potent opiate any more.”

“Imagine you’re a bad person, and are planning to force a large disruption of the societal order. Famine, degradation, slavery, secret police, unspeakable uses of children. All the old evils. Would the Church fight it?”

“I’m sure there’s a number of us who. . . oh. Right.”

“Right indeed. They *are* running a large project, and we’ve determined that they have identified the Church as a minor risk, sized it, and scheduled some assassinations to minimize the risk. We thought it was a simple intersection of authority with moral compass. Your attack tells us it’s probably using Big

Tech surveillance to identify dangerous social profiles. You're right down at the bottom of the Church hierarchy, but you assemble effective social networks quickly. I bet they parsed your sermons to estimate whether you'd stand up to evil."

"Wait, how'd they get my sermons?"

"You streamed them, so they have them. Speech to text for content, facial recognition to confirm the source of the sermon. Easy enough."

Brian hesitated as Soror's phone rang.

"Yes? Ok. Right, I'll let him know." She hung up. "We put a team on your wife, since that would be a reasonable fallback if your assassination failed. Our people intercepted kidnapers as they entered your property, and... stopped them."

Brian was rigid. "My wife?"

"Completely fine. She heard a little noise in her backyard, but it was all secured before she came out to contact our team."

Brian got up to head to his bedroom. "I need to get back."

Soror stood up and put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "We're relocating her right now. You can meet up with her before your new parish assignment."

"But I just got here. And Salom ordered me to keep my wife out of it."

"This game has gone far beyond Salom, don't worry about that. The cover story here is that your digging up that hard drive angered the local crime bosses, so you can't stay."

"Will I like my new assignment?"

"Do you like Mormons?"

Welcome to Utah

Getting There is Half the Fun

Soror Elle had a folder with plane tickets, and Brian riffled through them when she handed the tickets to him.

"You know that Rome is not even vaguely on the way to Utah?"

"You and your wife will be briefed, after which you'll have some decisions to make."

"I understand why Father Salom wanted my wife out of the way. Does your group have its own issue with her?"

"Not at all. You've guessed that the action here at your house tonight was not an isolated incident?"

Brian realized that it had crossed his mind, but he hadn't taken the time to think it all the way through. "How bad?"

"Not that bad, mostly because we had made preparations. You were an outlier, and—fortunately—got lucky. *We* got lucky. I suspected the full breadth of your training would be needed soon, and the other side's actions tells me they agree."

"In Utah."

"How do you assess their brand of Christianity?"

"Mormons? I'm not a believer. But the universality of salvation says that their mythology can't be rejected out of hand. And on the whole 'know us by our works' thing, I very much respect them."

"That's fine. Not even one polygamy joke?"

"Well, obviously it's not a current practice. But I read that one function was to provide a social safety net for widows, where other cultures would have them starve to death. Or be pushed into the oldest profession."

"You'll get along with them. A sedan's outside. An *armored* sedan, if you can believe it. They'll get you into the secure part of the airport, and you'll be met at the gate in Rome. By both security *and* your wife, who'll get there a few hours before you."

They stepped outside, and a sedan was indeed there, along with a van which had obviously arrived with it. Men stepped out from both the sedan and the van, bearing short-stock weapons held low and ready. SCW-9's, it looked like.

Unfortunately, the cruiser with the officer was still there, and his body language went from surprise, to escalation, to panic. The officer considered opening the car door and exiting the vehicle. Brian could see him trying to figure out how to get to his sidearm (always tricky when sitting in a vehicle). Or grabbing the Remington in the car's rack. . . .

Fortunately, the patrol car's radio went off. Brian saw him fumble a bit, get the microphone, listen, and answer. The officer hung the microphone back up, then conspicuously sat back in his seat, looking out his window into the distance. *See nothing, say nothing* Brian guessed.

Brian's group came down the steps, men with guns forming a protective circle around Brian. Everybody climbed back in their vehicles, and off they went. Convoy.

The van peeled off and drove away as they pulled up to the employee's entrance at the airport. The automatic weapons had been stowed out of sight, and the driver presented some papers to the guard, along with the flashing of a badge. The gate went up, and they proceeded into the airport. The driver knew how to participate in tarmac traffic flow, and they presently pulled up beside the stairs of a jetway connecting to a 747.

Soror Elle turned to Brian one last time. “Up the stairs, into the jet. They aren’t loading yet, but the crew has been told to expect you. They’ll also take your ticket. Do you still have that device from your first contact?”

Brian dug out his keychain, to show it still attached.

“You still have your ham license. How’s your morse code?”

“Rusty.”

“Brush up if you can. When you activate that device—sliding the sides, remember?—you can pinch the two sides between your fingers. If the device detects valid morse characters, it’ll send them. You’ll see what you sent on the display. Use it in an emergency.”

“James Bond.”

“Speaking of which, you’re still carrying?”

Brian started. For the first time in his life, he was bearing a gun and about to board a commercial jet. “Wow.”

“We’ll have security with you all the way through until you reach Utah. If you let me take charge of your weapon, I can have it there, waiting for you.”

Brian handed over his pistol in its holster, along with two spare clips. Then a folding knife. He patted himself down carefully. This was surreal.

Soror Elle climbed out of the car, and Brian followed. The security people stayed inside; they were still watchful, but obviously considered this a safe environment. Elle noticed Brian checking this, and waved her hand towards some of the outer buildings.

“We have overwatch, too.”

“I’ll never look at airports the same.”

“I predict it’s the first of *many* things you’ll add to that list. Have a safe flight.”

She climbed back into the sedan, Brian hefted his bag and headed towards the door built into the side of the jetway. He heard the sedan drive away, but didn’t turn around to look. He remembered a story from a helicopter pilot in Viet Nam; the pilot said he could tell who was going to make it by what they did as he flew away after dropping off a squad in the jungle. People who stood in the clearing watching the helicopter fly away were the ones who died. Brian shivered, then opened the door of the jetway and started up the stairs.

Temptation

The flight had filled up, Brian already comfortably installed in his (coach) window seat. It was looking like he’d get a row to himself when a slender, young, blonde woman worked her way up the aisle to take the aisle seat. She sat, pushed her small bag under the seat in front of her, then took off her jacket. She was

wearing a shirt with too few buttons, and it was immediately obvious that she was wearing nothing underneath. Brian mentally rolled his eyes while keeping his face immobile, and turned towards the window to look out.

“Excuse me? Father?”

Brian felt the hairs on his neck prickle, and turned to face the woman. He had switched to full fight-or-flight mode. He was wearing *nothing* to identify him as a priest.

“Relax, Father. I mean you no harm. We just wanted to reach out to you and give you our side of the story.”

Brian looked around. With the usual noise of a flight, along with her low voice, their conversation was private.

“Sorry, I’m not looking for new relationships right now.”

She smiled, arching her back, and looked him right in the eyes. “You passed our test. Do you have any idea of the rewards you could enjoy if you throw in with us? Millions–billions–in money. Live anywhere. Have any number of people do anything you want at any time. Virtual immortality due to the most advanced medical care.”

“Squalid cash. Squalid mansions. Squalid people. And a worthless life extended with organs harvested from *children*. Your side is an atrocity.”

She shook her head. “Our side is *winning*. I bet you’d change your mind if you got cold enough, hungry enough, sick enough. If not for yourself, think of your wife.”

“She’d divorce me before joining in the life you’re dangling.”

“Fine. Then how about this Catholic thing? They’re mostly coming around to our way of thinking. Aren’t you frustrated with being a little cog, moved around at their whim? We can advance you to being a Cardinal within five years.”

“The part of the Church which is attracted by your offers is the part of the Church which needs to go.”

“As a Cardinal, that would be your call.”

Brian shook his head. “I’m sure you’re great at recruiting young dudes.”

“Old ones too. You’d be surprised.”

“No, I wouldn’t. But guys all a-flutter with your skimpy clothing and stories of a long life of endless indulgence. I’m sure you’ve landed some in your time. The bible has a story about this sort of offer.”

She hissed. “You’re a fool.”

“Get thee gone, Satan.”

Brian looked around in confusion. Where had she gone? He hadn't seen her disappear, or get up. But somehow the aisle seat was empty. He looked for her bag under the seat in front of that position, and nothing was there. Brian stood up, trying to spot her anywhere in the surrounding rows. Nothing.

Then the flight attendants were making final preparations, and one came down the aisle counting heads. Apparently everything tallied, because soon they were in the air on the way to Rome. Brian stared at the empty seat, and the empty space under the seat in front of it. He wished he'd kept his concealed carry pistol, even though he knew it would be begging for trouble.

He stayed awake and watchful for the entirety of the long flight.

Rome

Brian appreciated that Rome's airport was named after Leonardo da Vinci—he felt like that great mind would keep the airport safe, even from beyond the grave. His seat was well towards the back of the jet, and he was resigned to the usual long wait while everybody drained out the front door. But then an airport worker who had apparently come in via the back service door tapped him on the shoulder. “Father Linse?”

Brian was surprised. “Yes?”

“Come with me? Please?”

Brian paused, suspicious, and studied the man.

“Do you also work at the Vatican?”

The worker smiled. It was the friendly monk from his previous visit.

“You have a good memory. I'm glad you've advanced in the Church.”

Brian grabbed his small bag and followed the worker/monk to the very back, and then through the access door and out onto a food services scissor lift. The lift lowered, with a security guard waiting at the bottom.

“This way, Father.”

And off they went, through a nearby door and then a maze of service spaces and corridors. He saw belts carrying luggage, and then garages, and finally offices. They went up stairs, and into an office hallway. Halfway down on the right was a conference room, holding his wife and, facing her across a table, Father Patrice.

The monk opened the conference room door, motioned in Brian, then closed it and left with a friendly wave.

His wife came around the table and hugged Brian tightly. Father Patrice gave them a few moments, then cleared his throat. Brian and his wife sat at the table on one side, presenting a unified front to Patrice.

“Brian, let me start by apologizing to you and your wife. I know it’s scant comfort, but when they launched an operation against you, they gave us a huge insight into their planning. Going after your spouse crosses a lot of lines, on top of everything else.”

“What can you tell me about what I’m apparently involved in?”

“The public view of the Church is we’re old, impotent, irrelevant, corrupt. And some of it is true enough—the endless sex scandals are truly dreadful. You remember what Sun Tzu said about apparent weakness?”

“The appearance of weakness is a product of strength.”

“We see some fundamental conflicts coming to the world. Not conflicts as in ‘arguments’, but coercion, imprisonment, and violence. And we were hoping to keep our abilities well hidden until they were needed. But Big Tech’s machine learning caused us to get added to their operational planning. Some of our assets told us we were on some lists, and we invested in defenses around what we thought were the critical command structure of what I’ll call the Deep Church.”

“Which I’m obviously not a part of.”

“Yes and no. You’re like a member of our reserve officer corps; you’d probably be brought in as the conflict went hot. The fact that they deduced this, extrapolated how you’d be used, and then allocated a team? I don’t like that they gained this much insight, but there’s only about four information vectors leading to you. When the balloon goes up, a whole chunk of their intelligence network is going to collapse because they used it in this way, which discloses its presence.”

Brian thought for a bit. “You want me in Utah because I’ll be needed there or nearby. I’m sort of compromised, but I’ll be embedded in the middle of the best armed Christians in the nation, with the most stable state and local government. Now you’re going to tell me why my wife should be somewhere else?”

Patrice looked at Brian. “It’ll be *relatively* safe—in fact, safe enough that the risk/reward for you easily justifies it. But your wife’s herbalist and natural healing skills will be invaluable in the case of civic disruptions—which are likely. She can make an enormous contribution here in Rome, and she will be safer here than anywhere else in the world.” He turned his gaze to Judith. “Traditional medicine is already mostly broken. It’s very likely going to collapse when things get hot. Please consider helping us to get information and supplies out where they’ll save lives.”

Brian and Judith looked at each other, then shrugged. Brian turned to Patrice. “It’s a deal. One condition.”

“Name it?”

“I want ongoing communication access between us.”

“If we have it, you can use it. That’s all I can promise.”

Brian nodded. “Oh, wait. One more thing?”

Patrice guessed it, and smiled. “Yes?”

“We want a nice dinner in a restaurant, then a nice hotel room for the night.”

Partings

They were standing beside a fence just off a country road. The road was unexceptional, except that it was paved and straight and had no street lights. The night was very dark, with the moon well below the horizon. Aside from insect noises, the night had been quiet, but now the drone of an airplane engine was growing in volume.

Brian turned to his wife. They had had their dinner and evening, and all of the day now ending. In the morning they had followed their friendly monk (whose name turned out to be “Brother Joseph”) through a hidden passage and into the walled portion of the Vatican. Patrice had told them that public areas were too risky, so they had been given access to a villa—which was a veritable museum—and its attached gardens. It even had a solarium. They had enjoyed the garden, admired the art, and napped in ludicrously comfortable stuffed chairs. Brother Joseph had appeared with their lunch, and later again their dinner. With dinner, he had announced that Brian would be departing around midnight; Judith was welcome to come along to see him off.

Brian’s departure did not involve commercial services, but instead whatever plane was approaching and—apparently—landing on this country lane. Brother Joseph had driven off after delivering them, and a shadowy figure had told them in broken English “wait”. The plane was very close, showing no navigation lights at all, which was no doubt very much against the rules. But Brian remembered a friend’s story about driving his new Ferrari in Italy; a policeman had pulled him over and chastised him for driving too slowly. The Italians had an appreciation for style.

Brian heard a click from the direction of their shadowy friend, and small LED lights turned on, outlining the sides of the lane. The plane was just visible as a silhouette touching down. It lumbered along past them, turning around at a wide spot in the road. The figure told them “come”, and then walked out to the plane. Somebody inside the plane opened the door, and Brian hugged Judith one more time before climbing up into the plane.

He stood in the doorway for a moment, outlined by the dim cabin lights. “You’re going to do great things for them.”

Judith was just a faint outline in the dark. “When you see medical gardens featuring the teachings of Hildegard of Bingen, you’ll know it worked out.”

“I love you.”

“I love you. Be careful!”

Brian felt a tap at his shoulder, and turned to sit down. A man closed the door, then went forward to sit as the copilot. The engine revved, and they sped up and lifted into the night sky.

Brian whimsically considered demanding a flight safety briefing. They'd probably just open the door and throw him back out. He settled back to try and get some sleep.

On the Way

The small plane flew smoothly for a couple hours, then the engine slowed and they descended. The plane was buffeted by sharp gusts of wind, and they climbed and descended actively, sometimes veering to the right or left. The view out the window was mostly of impenetrable darkness, but at one point a hillside loomed out of the gloom, the plane turning sharply to curve around it, then diving downward to follow the opening of a lower valley.

Brian had heard of nap-of-earth flying to avoid being seen by radar. It was just as uncomfortable as he had imagined.

Within an hour, the ride settled down, and presently Brian saw a lit airfield out his window. The plane's navigation and anti-collision lights were on; the world of civil aviation had returned. They turned, turned again, and settled onto the runway. After a bit of taxiing, they stopped and the same copilot opened the door for him.

He climbed down, glad that Brother Joseph had kept his bag, promising that it would reach Utah ahead of him. (Joseph intimated that in certain untoward circumstances, traveling lightly might make "all the difference".)

A Learjet was parked nearby, and his copilot pointed at it, then waved goodbye. Even as Brian walked towards the jet, he heard the light plane rev up and taxi back to the runway. It was in the air as Brian saw the jet's passenger door open, and stairs fold down. In a familiar pattern, a man inside waved him to a seat, folded up the stairs and closed the door, then took the copilot seat up front.

The engines revved, and presently they were up in the air. The clandestine phase was over, as the jet climbed and climbed, then settled into a cruise. The sun showed on the horizon, and Brian briefly tried to do some timezone math. He gave it up, and went back to sleep.

Utah

Brian awoke to a bump, and pulled up the window shade. Salt Lake City International, and probably his port of entry. Brian pulled out his passport and realized he'd been doing a lot of international traveling in a pretty informal fashion. He doubted his handlers would mess this up.

They trundled along until they reached a hangar, and the engines wound down.

Presently a Customs van pulled up and a man came out to rap on the airplane's hull. The copilot opened the door, and lowered the stairs. An official-looking man came up. He faced the cockpit, and accepted a bundle of paperwork.

"Charter?"

"Yes."

"No passengers?"

"Cancelled."

"Did you leave the transit zone at any time?"

"No."

He grunted and did some writing and stamping. "Welcome back." He went back down the stairs, managing to angle his body away from the passenger section of the jet.

Brian saw the van pull away. "Wow."

The pilot came out, removing his aviator shades. "Nothing but the truth. We *did* fly out on a charter, they *did* cancel. You're not a passenger since we weren't paid for you. It's *lucky* for you that he didn't search for stowaways."

"I'm clear to be back in the USA?"

"Your travel documents say you never left. Who are we to argue with the government?" He looked out at the runway. "Here comes your ride."

A high-wing light airplane was taxiing towards them. A Cessna 172, Brian recognized.

"Thanks!"

The man looked towards his copilot. "Did you hear something? I didn't hear anything."

Brian climbed out of the jet and waited for the Cessna to pull up and wind down the engine. His life had been aviation for days now, and he was ready to stay on the ground somewhere. *Wah!* he chided himself, then walked over and climbed up into the Cessna. Strapped in, and off they went.

Ministry Among the Mormons

Angels by the Sea

The Cessna was piloted by a man with a USMC cap and aviator shades which he did not remove. The pilot watched Brian buckle in without comment, handed Brian some hearing protection, then turned back to spin up the engine, taxi back out to the runway, and took off.

Two hours later, they started their descent. Brian saw them pass a small town, the pilot flying low and slow just offset from the road out of town. The engine revved up, they climbed a bit, then turned around and came back to land directly on the road. The pilot didn't even shut down the engine, simply turned to motion for Brian to open the plane's door. Brian did so, being stopped only to relinquish his hearing protection, then climbed down to walk clear of the plane. Brian was *pretty* sure the pilot watched to make sure he was clear before going to full throttle. The plane accelerated, then climbed into the sky. Its drone faded away.

Brian looked around. He was directly in front of a church, "Angels by the Sea". It was the usual church hall, with an attached residence to the left, and a church office to the right. This was an arid region, mostly bare reddish hills with spots of scrub. The front yard of the church had some planter beds and shrubs, all dessicated and long dead. No sea, and Brian didn't feel like any sort of angel after all his travels. So much for "Angels by the Sea".

He saw some bags leaning against the door of the residence, and walked over to find they were indeed his own luggage. He knocked on the door, got no answer, then tried the doorknob. It opened into a front sitting room. There was furniture, but no personal touches at all. *Move in ready*, Brian thought. Yet another posting.

He had just dragged his luggage into the front room when he heard a vehicle approach, then pull into the yard out front.

The Bishop

The biggest, shiniest Ford F-150 he had ever seen rolled up. The Ford would have attracted admiring glances even in Silicon Valley, where executives used its 400 horsepower to carry them and their briefcase. Here, set against his yard, the machine glittered like a window into heaven. A man climbed down onto the step which automatically folded out as he opened the door, and paused on that step to turn and look at Brian.

This man had the greatest presence Brian had ever seen. He was the sort who could walk into a room, and make the room and its occupants seem smaller just by comparison. He wasn't fat, nor proportioned like a giant. But one automatically reckoned the size of everything else using him as the benchmark.

"Howdy, Padre! Folks around here call me The Bishop." He was in his late 50's, with a neatly trimmed beard and moustache, and a bit of grey silvering them. His hair was mostly hidden by a wide brown cowboy hat which he had worn even when driving his truck.

"Bishop, pleased to meet you. I'm Father Linse. Brian Linse."

Brian could tell that he knew exactly who he was, and had been looking forward to this meeting. Bishop widened his eyes in mock surprise.

“Not *the* pistol-packing Padre?!?”

Brian was taken aback. With all his travels, the shoot-out felt like a long ago. Yet counting the days, it was much less than a week ago.

“More like the self defense in his own home padre?”

Bishop shook his head in disappointment, looking Brian over for any sign of print-through of a concealed carry weapon. He crooked a questioning eyebrow.

“I just got back from, um, travels.” Brian couldn’t believe a Catholic priest would be explaining why he wasn’t carrying a sidearm.

“You breathe in this good desert air for a couple days, you’ll get a little color in your cheeks, and then we can talk about it.”

Brian laughed. “That’s a deal. What do people do to make a living around here? It looked very spread out as we flew in.”

“Dry, too. The answer is, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. We get by.”

“If this wasn’t Mormon country, I’d assume that meant cooking meth.”

The Bishop pursed his lips. “We had a little bit of that try to sneak in. Our Sheriff is an attentive man, and went out and had a talk with them. That did the trick.” He paused. “We have some mining in the region, a couple irrigated valleys with cattle, a sawmill which provides some of its lumber to local woodworkers. The railroad comes through to the north, and we have some folks taking care of our division. Things like that.”

“And now a thriving Catholic church.”

The Bishop broke into a rolling laugh, his face delighted. “The last priest posted here was ten years back. He made it less than a month. This must be the loneliest Catholic posting in your Pope’s portfolio. I had no idea why they kept the place, but it seems like somebody was planning ahead.” His face was serious. “You may not find a bumper crop of Catholics here. But you *are* among Christians, and if Satan tries to reach into this county, we’ll make sure he pulls back a stump.”

“Thank you, Bishop. The only serious violence I’ve ever experienced was less than a week ago, and I shot and killed two strangers. I didn’t even see their faces until the detective pulled up the sheet to see if I recognized them.” Brian shook his head sadly. “Complete strangers. I haven’t even had time to sit down and make peace with what I did.”

“You did what you *had* to do, Padre. When we were told that you were coming, and we were asked to keep you safe, our sheriff got a copy of the report. You did OK, and your actions are absolutely justified—don’t you worry about that.”

“Thanks. You have some experience?”

The Bishop waved his hand dismissively. “I was in the military, and I like guns alright. But I pretty much filed papers for people named ‘sir’”

Brian had, with some misgivings, sent his phone along in his luggage, and hadn’t had a chance to dig it out yet. “What day of the week is this?”

“You *have* been traveling! Wednesday.”

“Do you know if it’s too late to put something in the local paper for this Sunday’s service?”

“Let’s head over. I’ll introduce you around, and they can put your grand reopening on the front page as a news item. The paper comes out tomorrow, but they’ll make time.”

“This isn’t door-locking country, is it?”

“The bank and the gun shop do. Most people probably haven’t seen their house keys since they moved in.”

Town

The town center was a couple miles away, a brief and comfortable drive in Bishop’s mighty vehicle. Brian realized that he’d need a car, and asked about the used car market.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Bishop assured Brian with a wave of his hand. “That last little priest fellow scampered away so quickly, he just asked us to sell his car and give the proceeds to charity. Sunken chested little twerp, but that was a kind gesture. I know just the vehicle, let’s call it a house warming gift.”

“Wow. Thank you!”

They pulled into town, a short stretch of buildings on both sides of the road through. They parked, and stepped inside the offices of the newspaper. With the Bishop at his side, the editor was more than happy to reorganize the planned front page to include Brian’s Sunday service. The Bishop introduced her as “Joe’s daughter”, explaining that Joe was a great editor right up to when he passed. The woman, in her late 20’s, asked a number of questions, then promised to get an item in the paper for tomorrow. Brian thanked her, and they stepped back outside.

Brian said “groceries” just as Bishop asked “how’re you fixed for ammo?”. They laughed, then Brian answered “I have 40 rounds each, .380 ACP and .357 magnum”. Bishop waited as if for more, then hung his head.

“Padre, that isn’t even enough to warm up. Let’s take care of the *important* things.”

They went across the road and down to the gun shop, emerging 20 minutes later each holding a box with 1,000 rounds. Brian had promised to think about

an AR-15, an M1 carbine, and an FN SCAR, finally admitting that he was an AK-47 kind of guy.

“What are you, a commie? What’s wrong with an AR?”

“An AR is more for an elite trooper. The AK was for a drafted peasant. I’m *way* closer to the peasant than an elite.”

Bishop sighed. “Anything else you need in town?”

“I guess I should get some groceries.”

“Your church office manager’s taking care of that.”

“I didn’t know I had an office manager. What’s she been doing since the last priest left?”

“Caretaking. I didn’t want your property getting run down, so I put Mrs. Brenton on my payroll as a half-time caretaker there.” He looked at his watch. “I’ll drop you off, and then I should take care of a few things.”

Mrs. Brenton

The Bishop pulled up to Brian’s residence, and each of them carried in an ammo box. Bishop waved, and drove off.

Brian took a look in his refrigerator, and it was indeed nicely stocked with bread, meat, vegetables, and a number of condiments.

“Not going to starve.”

He closed the door, and then went out and over to the church offices on the far side of his building, past the church hall. He gave the hall doors a tentative pull as he went past, but they were locked. Reaching the office door, he considered trying it, but then knocked.

The door opened, and a woman in her 70’s with grey hair tied in a bun opened it. She looked at him with no interest at all.

“Yes?”

“Mrs. Brenton? I’m Father Linse, the new priest for this parish.”

“Yes?”

“Well, thank you for stocking my refrigerator.”

“Wait here.” She closed the door, and Brian heard some rustling. She opened the door, and handed him a paper. “Here’s the receipts for your groceries.” She looked at him expectantly.

Brian dug out his wallet and gave her a \$20 bill.

“Wait here.” The door closed again. More rustling, and then she opened it, to hand him some change. She looked at him.

“Um, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She closed the door.

Brian shook his head, feeling like something needed to be dislodged. He walked back to his own rooms, deciding that making himself a lunch would be a needed touch of normalcy.

The Church

Brian had been almost afraid to go back and ask for the keys to his church from the enigmatic Mrs. Brenton, but a search of his own rooms had found them sitting on the countertop. He had opened the doors with a sense of foreboding, but found a very tidy little church space, with dark wooden pews, the altar space spic and span, and curtains covered a large window which made up much of the wall behind the altar. When he drew them back, he found beautiful stained glass windows in primarily amber and blue tones, which nicely offset the central crucifix.

One of his keys opened a side supply room, in which he found all the usual sacramental supplies. Just outside the door of the supply room was a Fedex package containing fresh hosts and altar wine, and a UPS box which held the rest of his small possessions, sent by Mrs. Wilson. He made a mental note to send her a note; he had left his parish without making any arrangements, and hoped Father Patrice had handled the details, including getting his weapons to him in the near future.

He celebrated a mass, put the consecrated hosts in the tabernacle, and made sure the sanctuary candle was lit. Everything was in impeccable order; if this was Mrs. Brenton’s work then, quirks aside, she was a thoroughly competent caretaker. He had found his phone and recharged it, and took it out to double check the date. Four days until his first service.

Sunday Service

Brian was in his robes. There was a small room off the entry space, with one door into the church’s entryway and, and another into the church offices. That latter door was into the domain of Mrs. Brenton, and he had decided that she was going to make the next move. He left it closed, not even trying to find out if it was locked.

The parking lot was full, and it sounded like a full house in the church. There was organ music, which surprised him. He had found the house sound system, and even had a wireless mic clipped on. But he’d seen no musical instruments at all. At 10AM sharp, he stepped into the entry, and then stopped at the threshold into the church proper. The organ music trailed off, then started with a very suitable processional. Mrs. Brenton was behind an electronic keyboard located to the side of the altar.

He walked up the center aisle, bowing before proceeding behind the altar to face his parishioners. Sitting right in the front pew was The Bishop, who gave Brian a friendly smile. A woman in a pretty floral dress sat beside him, and then six children beside her, ranging from he'd guess 16 years old down to 6.

In fact, most of the people in the pews were clearly families, with father, mother, and their children.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Each person had a printed paper in their hand. They were following along from the sheet. "Amen."

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

"And also with you."

Interesting. Whoever had printed the sheets was not up to date—or had decided to disregard the liturgical fiddling. He mentally shrugged.

As the mass proceeded, Brian came to a conclusion about his "congregation". Every priest, especially in public events like weddings and funerals, gets a feel for the people in the audience. The faithful, attending mass on a regular basis, lead the rest of the people in audience in the responses. Sitting, standing, and showing how the kneelers fold out at the right time.

Then there are the occasional attendees. They're Catholic, but can go years between masses. They know what to do, but the priest has to give them clear cues so they can lead the rest.

Then there are the visitors. They'll follow along if there's a sheet at hand, and are happy to try their luck at the songs. If they come up for communion, despite explicit instructions, Brian chalks it up to an extraordinary prompting of the Holy Spirit, and lets them experience the sacrament.

With a full house of a newly restarted Roman Catholic church, you'd expect a solid one third of the attendees to be regular faithful. As this mass proceeds, Brian realizes that there might not be *one* regular Catholic parishioner. They participate with a will, and they join the songs with both volume and talent. But these are *not* Catholics.

Which, if you're calculating the odds, means almost every Mormon in the zip code has showed up keep him from playing to an empty house.

Brian has a sermon ready, purposely low key with just a few points to provoke thought. A Jesuit priest once told him that most priests in the Society of Jesus accumulate sermons which they'd like to use, but have to hold them back until they find the right audience. Some end up with dozens.

Brian doesn't have dozens, but he has a couple. These Mormons look bright eyed, and that decides him to break one out. They settle back, and Brian steps

in front of the altar. *You want Catholic, you get Catholic.*

“In physics, scientists around the time of Sir Isaac Newton—they called themselves ‘natural philosophers’ back then—were mapping out the math to describe the planets, the sun, rocks flying through the air. Some began to think you could describe everything on Earth and predict all of the future. Determinism.”

“It didn’t work out. Especially as things get smaller and smaller, your ability to know about them runs into limits. Ultimately, the great scientist Werner Heisenberg described the *uncertainty principle*, a fundamental limit on how much you can know about a particle’s location and energy. It’s not a limit on what we can know *now*; it tells us about a limit wired right into the Universe.”

“This aspect of God’s creation made me think about Faith and miracles. We often wonder why God doesn’t step in, stop things, or tell us the answers? In thinking about laws of the universe, I found myself wondering if, just like the uncertainty principle, nothing can happen which would end the need for Faith?”

He could tell the congregation was following his reasoning, and were paying close attention. He had been waiting for the right time to try out this sermon, and this was finally the perfect audience. As his sermon built upon this theme, he could see people thinking and nodding, or wrinkling their brow with thought. It was very gratifying, and he could tell he’d be fielding questions out front after mass. *Maybe they avoid alcohol and that leaves more brain cells?* he thought.

Brian arrived at Communion with a mix of curiosity and dread. He explained that all are welcome to come up for a blessing, but please only take the sacrament if you are a Roman Catholic in good standing. As Brian stepped to the front, the entire house sat down to wait until the Communicants returned, after which they all appeared ready to kneel in contemplation.

He stood alone at the front of the aisle, facing a church full of Mormons who had come to support his first Catholic mass. He noticed Bishop, his body shaking with suppressed laughter at the situation. Brian tried hard to keep his face solemn.

There was a movement in the back, and a single elderly lady slowly made her way up the aisle to stand before Brian. She held out her cupped hands, and Brian handed her a Host, “The Body of Christ”.

“Amen.”

Communion finished, they were on what Brian always thought of as “the home stretch”. For announcements, he put out a call for musicians and for lectors (he’d done all the readings himself).

“Mass is ended. Go in Peace to love and serve the Lord.”

He paused.

“I’ll proceed out first, and then I’d be happy to meet you out front.”

The Sheriff

The crowd out front was large and friendly. Brian was welcomed many, many times. More than one visitor reminded Brian that Paul from Acts had been literally blasted out of his saddle on his way to persecute Christians. If that wasn't God making Himself known, what was? Brian responded by asking—innocently—if their conclusion was thus that Paul was *not* a man of Faith? *That* got their attention. The discussion was spirited.

The LDS members were certainly Christians, and well-read. As he chatted, his eye was drawn to a pickup truck parked halfway up the hill across the road in front of his church. A man stood beside it, bearing some sort of long gun. Now that he looked, he saw another further over on each side, and then he looked both ways down his road to see security posted there as well.

The people around him saw that his attention had been captured, and smiled when they realized what he had spotted. Since they weren't concerned, he decided he wouldn't be, either. Brian was deep in theological "geeking" when the conversations wound down, people thanking him once again and drifting away. Bishop walked up.

"Padre, you are a fair treat. Now, we all felt a little bad about how the previous priest left so quickly. We never want to fail when it comes to hospitality. So a group of us have pooled a little contribution to help you get started here."

Bishop handed Brian an envelope, then looked over Brian's shoulder.

"Padre, I don't believe you've met our sheriff yet? Sheriff Barnes, meet Father Linse. Father Linse, meet our sheriff."

The Bishop backed away even as a short, trim man wearing a cowboy hat stepped up in front of Brian. The man had a moustache, mostly grey. But what brought Brian up short was the eyes. Brian had heard about the "1,000 yard stare", and realized that he had always thought of it as something which came with trauma. Here in front of him was something completely different, as if an alien sat way, way back inside the sheriff's head, looking out his eyes and operating the body accordingly.

Brian shook off his reverie. "Sheriff Barnes, are those your men I see located all around us?"

The sheriff's expression didn't change. "Yes, Father Linse. We're running inner and outer perimeter security, centered on your church."

"Were you expecting trouble?"

"Father, I was briefed on your situation. The odds of an attack this soon after your arrival were small, but it was useful to have my men practice security. It also tells the community at large that I consider the risk real, and that I intend to fight the Evil which will reach for you."

“You sound certain that it’s *when*, not *if*?”

“Correct. My analysis—based on intelligence—is that they will project force into my county. We will fight them.” He could have been reading from a card, but his matter-of-fact delivery made it unnerving.

“Any suggestions for how I can help?”

The sheriff dipped his head in one short nod. “With your permission, I’ll bring by a few deputies over the next couple of days. You’ll know that they have my complete confidence. When trouble arrives, please plan on following my directions, or those of a deputy I send.”

“That will be fine. Thank you, sheriff.”

The sheriff held out his hand, and Brian shook it. It was like shaking hands with a pneumatic cylinder. The sheriff stepped back, turned crisply, and strode away.

Brian blew out his cheeks. “Wow.”

“Looks like the sheriff is warming right up to you.” Bishop had quietly drifted back to Brian as the sheriff departed.

“Bishop. Where did that sheriff come from?”

“I couldn’t say. When we were recruiting, he showed up as a candidate. During the reference checks, I got a call from a general in the DoD. He told me that the Department would vouch for the sheriff 100%, but that no further details should be expected. I think the general picked up that I was going to give him a pass, and said the DoD would cover the sheriff’s salary and benefits for five years if we hired him. He’s been on the job for fourteen years now, so I guess you can tell how it worked out.”

“What’s he like when you take him out drinking? Oh, er, coffee?”

Bishop shook his head. “He lives a good way out into the hills, with his wife. No kids that I’ve ever seen. I’ve talked to his wife twice. She’s easier to talk to than him, but I think the two of them have lived through something extraordinary together.” He paused, thinking. “He’s the most dangerous man I’ve ever met. No matter *what* they send into our county, my money’s on the Sheriff.”

Something Wicked This Way Comes

The Outside World

Brian settled in to a routine. The number of attendees to his Sunday service dropped back quite a bit, but he still had several of his Mormon neighbors attending. When they stayed after mass to chat, he discovered that Bishop had declared his theology “not bad for a Gentile”. (They hastened to add that by “Gentile” they simply meant “not a member”.) Word had reached a few more

Catholics in neighboring counties, so his communion line was no longer a solo act.

He had a visit from a representative of the diocese in Salt Lake City. The visitor was a priest, and stayed for his Sunday mass. Strangely, he declined to concelebrate, instead sitting in back, not even coming up for communion. He left before Brian had even finished the mass, thus giving Brian the warm and welcoming experience he had come to expect from the Catholic hierarchy. But there was no further fallout, so apparently he was coloring within the lines.

The only other remnant of that visit was that the priest visitor had brought a box. It was labeled “Our Lady’s Victory Garden”, and inside Brian found a selection of seed packs, a couple seed potatoes, and detailed instructions on how to adapt a garden to a range of climates. His wife had told him that their project had been funded, and in the back of the instructions he found a prayer written by Hildegard of Bingen. He was certain this was the work of his wife, even if it wasn’t labeled a “Hildegarden”.

He went out and bought drip irrigation tape, shade cloth, several bags of compost, and some hand tools. It was hard work digging alongside the church, but a pickup with a couple local young men driving by stopped to help. One of them said he’d be right back with some “scrap wood”, and returned with tools and lumber. Brian ended up with raised beds, cold frames, and a pair of compost bins. All the compost had been nicely dug into the turned soil, and an initial round of seeds was in the ground.

The garden was a harbinger of trouble out in the greater world. Life rolled along slowly and surely out here in rural Utah, but he had satellite internet, and the national and international news held ominous signs leaking through a blanket of censorship. Prices were up, and many mechanical and electrical parts were long delayed or simply impossible to order. The one metal-working shop in the county got busier and busier, and then a second and third shop opened, along with a blacksmith for the rougher kinds of metal fabrication. The farmers he knew kept their tractors running, but only because of these local resources.

Although almost unmentioned in the internet news, the word from local farmers was that most supplies were expensive and in short supply. Without enough bulk seed and soil amendments, the food yields were down sharply from what the region traditionally exported. After being sworn to secrecy, Brian was told that most counties had adopted a policy of quietly storing away a portion of the crops before reporting available crops to the outside world. So exports were even further reduced, but every farmer was acutely aware of what was emerging as an actual attack on their industry. They were making sure that the farms and their farming families would remain viable, come what may.

There was word from neither Father Patrice nor Soror Elle. He guessed they were very, very busy, and kept them in his prayers.

Here They Come

It was Saturday night, and Brian was finishing the outline of his sermon for tomorrow. With some help, he had installed motion sensors facing out from all of the church buildings. The pitch of the “ding” would immediately tell him which zone had seen motion. He heard a tone indicating activity in front of his rooms, and he stopped to listen. A truck was pulling up.

He peered sideways past the curtain, not providing any outline of his presence in the window. It was the sheriff’s SUV, and he saw the familiar figure climbing out to stand waiting beside the vehicle. Brian unlocked his front door and stepped out.

“Sheriff.”

“Father Linse. It’s time.”

“Trouble?”

“Yes. An informant at a regional airport tells me four Cessna Caravan aircraft appear to be loading up with mercenaries.”

“What’s a Caravan hold?”

“Call it a dozen men. Each.”

“That’d be a *platoon*.”

“Yes. Mostly individual duffels, but one large box, on a plane which only loaded 8 men. I assess that as a M249 type squad automatic weapon with a team to serve it. If *I* was coming here, I’d bring heavy fire support.”

“What are the odds this is a false positive?”

“One in three. Nighttime operation, multiple aircraft, no flight plan, obscured tail numbers, and a very military style of load-out. They’ll be here in 45 minutes. In 90 minutes I’ll call it a false alarm.”

“Do I head out of town?”

The Sheriff grimly shook his head. “I haven’t found them, but it’s almost certain they already have overwatch on both ends of town. You could run into the hills, but they’d likely spot and report that. That introduces a level of uncertainty which I’d rather avoid.”

“Bishop told me to trust you. So what are your instructions?”

Another deputy pulled up, driving a military style civilian jeep, the kind with no windows except the front windshield itself. The Sheriff waved the deputy over. “I’m assigning him to you. He’ll stay linked up with me, and you two can use your weapons if needed. But I’ll keep you out of the main conflict.” He paused. “Father, there *is* one task–optional–which could greatly help me?”

“Tell me.”

“At a moment I’ll choose, I want you to drive straight out of town into the hills, using the old road to the quarry. Keep going until you see that we’ve launched a blue flare.”

Brian knew that in the military, you always repeated back important instructions.

“You or your deputy tell me, I head straight out of town in this jeep. Keep going until I see the blue flare. When I reach the quarry?”

“If you don’t see the flare by then, just keep going. There’s maps in the glove compartment. When you reach a town, call their sheriff and tell them this town’s in deep trouble.”

“Understood. God be with you.”

“Thank you.” The sheriff turned and strode away, several trucks with uniformed drivers pulling up to meet him.

Brian turned back to his place. “I’ll be right back with a go bag.”

The deputy nodded. “‘I wish I’d brought a smaller gun and less ammunition’, said nobody, ever, in a gunfight.”

“Big gun, lots of ammo. I can do that.” His weapons had arrived quite a while ago, transported by one of Patrice’s people rather than a commercial service.

“Some time, maybe Bishop will show you what a ‘big gun’ looks like.”

O.K. Corral

The sheriff and his men had met and dispersed in a confusing sequence. Brian realized that the Sheriff was allowing for hostile observers, and was making it hard for them to tell where his men were, or what they planned. Brian and his assigned deputy parked his own car and the jeep in a V pattern with the wall of the church at their back. They had a good view all along the main road, and towards town. Ducking behind the vehicles would hide them from targeting, and possibly deflect some incoming fire.

“We’re blind on the other side of this building,” Brian noted.

“It’s covered. *Well* covered,” the deputy answered.

They went back to waiting.

A droning grew, and presently they made out the sound of multiple prop airplanes. The Cessnas. They flew past, not high, and it sounded like one was slowing to land towards town. One—or was it two?—came back around, now also slowing to land on the road past the church and away from town. They were going to have a squad of unfriendlies on the road on either side of the church.

As the second landing plane quieted, they could hear the fourth plane fading off into the hills beyond the church.

“Engine trouble? Heading back?” Brian guessed.

The deputy had an earpiece in, and his eyes were distant for a moment.

“No, they’re landing on a rough road back there. It’s just over on the far side of one of the highest hills around here. They hump their M249 onto that hill, they can provide fire support over a big chunk of this area.”

“We didn’t try to shoot them down as they passed.”

“You noticed all their lights were off? But even so, the sheriff determined that flying unsafely is not punishable by the death penalty. They have to commit, *then* we can go hot.”

The night returned to the quiet of insects. The deputy was obviously hearing updates on his earpiece, but Brian held his curiosity back, and let him focus. Brian wished he had a see-in-the-dark watch; the light of a phone screen was out of the question. It felt like hours, but it probably was less than half an hour since the planes had landed.

Way far out beyond town, they heard automatic weapon fire, probably military AK-47. There was an answering barrage of *cracks*, likely AR-15. The AK-47 fire became sporadic.

From up on the hill well back from the church, a much, much louder automatic weapon opened up. They had gotten their M249 set up, apparently. The tracers in the bullet stream lanced out towards town. The deputy had swung around, and brought binoculars up to his face.

“Huh, looks like they even brought sandbags with them. I guess that’s why that plane had a short headcount. Well, we’d have a hard time suppressing them with aimed fire from down here.”

The top of the hill exploded in a flash, pieces of people and bits of sandbag briefly outlined as everything was thrown in tatters off the hilltop.

Brian’s eyes only saw purple splotches. “I can’t see *anything*.”

The deputy grunted. “I think the binoculars concentrated the flash. Are my eye sockets smoking?”

“Let’s hope the other side is busy being individual atoms.”

Their vision slowly came back. They had heard more gunfire near town, and then a firefight started up in the other direction. Both were still far away, but approaching. Brian and the deputy were desperate to get back decent night vision.

“How’d the sheriff make that emplacement go away?”

The deputy pondered. “We’re not supposed to know about it, but I think some of our, um, *innovative* citizens have experimented with drone support of law enforcement. I’d *guess*—totally not in a way that could be admitted in court—that

some explosives got delivered to the bad guys.” He paused. “More likely, they brought explosives and handled them unsafely. Now that I think of it, yes, that’s what it was.”

There was a *crack* and a *whoosh*, the latter coming from a point which moved overhead. A flare burned into existence, hanging from a parachute.

“Ugh. There goes my night vision. Again.”

The deputy was looking up the road in the direction away from town. “Oh boy, here we go.”

Courtesy of the overhead light from the flare, Brian could see that people were approaching. As they got nearer, the action became clearer.

It was Bishop, leading his men in a retreat. Bishop had claimed to be a paper pusher in the Army, but Brian realized he wasn’t watching an admin pogue. Bishop had broken his team in two, one on each side of the road. One would hunker down and fire back up the road, providing cover for the other team, which would dart to a new position further back, then prepare to take their turn providing covering fire.

Retreat under fire Brian thought. A very difficult military maneuver, easily collapsing into disaster given any misstep.

Bishop and his team made it look easy. Brian watched Bishop control his teams with brief but clear hand signals. They weren’t just leapfrogging backward; Bishop was choosing locations for each team’s jump to maximize their safety while letting them then concentrate suppressing fire into the pursuers. Bishop was easy to spot among his men, a giant, commanding figure. When he moved, it was with a smooth, catlike grace, his weapon always pointing where he was looking, always level and steady as he traversed the uneven ground. Several times he fired to deadly effect, keeping the enemy cautious.

At one point, Bishop seemed to have chosen a position to hold, using hand signals to keep a few probing shots while the teams held in position. The enemy’s fire stopped, and Bishop made a sharp motion with his hand, then a couple further arm movements. The further back team opened fire at full volume, and Bishop’s team sprang into motion to the next retreat position.

Brian realized that Bishop was playing chess. Each position in the retreat provided at least waist level protection from enemy fire, and could fit the whole team. What he had just seen was Bishop timing his motions against his enemy’s need to reload after emptying their weapons, exposing his people to the minimum of enemy fire.

The deputy had been keeping an eye in the other direction, but he still jumped when a figure emerged at a shockingly close position. Brian hadn’t thought there was enough cover near his church, but here was the Sheriff.

“Sheriff! Bishop’s in full retreat.”

“Yup. Are you ready, Father?”

“Jeep time?”

He nodded. “I can use my deputy back. Can you handle this on your own?”

“Sure. When do I go?”

“When they get to that telephone pole,” he pointed, “and are just passing that utility box by the road there,” he pointed again in the other direction, “then head straight out that dirt road. The quarry until you see the flare—you remember?”

“I do.”

The Sheriff dipped his head once in a nod. “See you in a little bit, Father.”

With that, the Sheriff-deputy in tow—rapidly faded away into the rough ground beside the church. Their cammo, apparently, worked fine. Brian climbed into the jeep, and started the engine. His head went back and forth like a tennis match, watching each direction up the road. The enemy was a pair of pincers, and they were going to close right about where he was.

Bishop’s pair of teams fired at full rate from both sides of the road, then were suddenly streaming away, breaking contact from the enemy at a fast run. They shot right past Brian without breaking pace, distracting Brian. He watched them also disappear into the rough ground, then looked to his left and jumped. The enemy was at the pole and—he looked the other direction—they were suddenly on the road, already past the utility box.

Brian slammed the jeep into gear, and accelerated as quickly as the little vehicle could go. He hunched forward, knowing what a target he was presenting, and his windshield suddenly starred, and then he heard several *spack!* sounds. Bullets hitting the jeep body.

The jeep was up to 50 MPH, and Brian had to brake at a curve, assuming that rolling the jeep was no part of the Sheriff’s plans. As he took the curve, he was slightly elevated, and could see the field of battle past the right hand door of the jeep.

The forces closing on his church from both sides had seen him run for it. As he had taken the dirt road which left the main road at a right angle, the forces took a shortcut across the open fields to try and reach him by cutting across the hypotenuse of the angle between the main road and his dirt one.

This left the enemy in the shape of an inverted “V”, pointed at him and his little jeep. Most of the forces were trying to fire as they ran at him, which probably saved his life—blessedly few bullets were actually hitting his jeep. He was almost to a hump in the road which would hide him from enemy fire.

Two lines of riflemen popped up from their concealing ditches, and opened fire on the “V” formation, each line in the “V” paralleled by soldiers who had laid hidden until the “V” had entered their killing ground. One line was led by

Bishop, the other by the Sheriff. The two lines, facing the “V”, were well clear of each other’s fields of fire. The fire, coming suddenly and right into the sides of the enemy forces (“enfilade”, he thought) was devastating. The predator was suddenly prey. Some of the enemy tried to hide down in lows in the ground. But both Bishop and the Sheriff had placed their lines at a slight elevation. There was nowhere to hide.

The jeep flew over the top of the road’s hump, and the view was cut off. Brian slowed, realizing that his pursuers were no longer an immediate danger. He kept driving, looking at the terrain beside this dirt road. That hillock back there was the enemy’s best hope to break contact with the trap. Bishop and the Sheriff would pursue and catch them, but it would be a fight if the enemy held the high ground of the hill, and men might well be lost.

Brian saw a large boulder, resting against a smaller one. There was a gap at the bottom, and Brian pulled the jeep around behind the rocks and got out to lay down, peering through the gap. He had a fine view of the crown of that hillock.

The flare was sputtering out over the battlefield. Brian got out his AK-47, and turned on its night vision scope, then lay prone on the ground, watching the rise. It was green and grainy in his scope. He could still hear gunfire, but it was now sporadic. Two figures scrambled into view around the side of the hillock. They flopped onto the ground, and crawled forward to peek over the crest, seeking targets for their rifles.

Brian did a range check, dialed it in, then started to settle the crosshairs on the back of one—and froze. If a couple of Bishop’s men were trying to flank the bad guys, he was about to make a tragic mistake. He used the scope’s optics to examine the men, keeping the crosshairs well off of the men. Dressed in uniformly dark clothing. As they scooted forward, some words were exchanged, and Brian saw they were both fully masked.

He examined their arms—no unit patch, nor USA flag. They were now bringing up their weapons, and there they were, something very like an Uzi. How had they not gone full auto and sprayed him?

Brian gave a brief nod of thanks to God. Bishop had told him the Sheriff forced all teams to exclusively deploy with AR-15’s; any member could pick up any other member’s weapon or supplies and use them. No Uzis. He let the crosshair drift to the left, onto the back of the first combatant, who had started firing down at targets apparently pursuing them.

He exhaled, his finger bringing in the slack in the trigger. His rifle fired, and he brought the scope over to the second figure in one short, smooth arc, firing again even as the target was starting to twist around to find the unexpected danger.

He swung back to the first figure. It was where he had left it, writhing a little. Brian shuddered, and swung again to check the second figure. This one had managed to roll on his back, his Uzi suddenly foreshortened and threatening in his view, pointing right at him. Brian fired, then fired again. He thought his

target had fired once, but—he checked, patting himself—he wasn’t hit. The figure was still, the deadly little weapon laying beside the body.

Brian moved the scope back and forth between the bodies. One part of his mind told him he should fire at least once more into each of them, but he suddenly was tired of this. He wasn’t a soldier, and the thought that he had now taken another two lives made him sick. He didn’t want to leave a danger for the Sheriff’s men, but. . . .

It would be tricky to stay here; the plan was for him to be well up this dirt road, heading toward the quarry until the flare recalled him. He could try to call out, but their ears would be ringing from gunfire. It would be really dumb to get shot by one of the Sheriff’s men.

Brian settled on the simplest solution. He climbed back into the jeep (it was still idling) and got back onto the dirt road. He drove slowly, realizing that crashing the jeep was a more likely danger now than any remnant force of attackers.

AAR

Brian rolled along in the jeep’s second gear, looking over his shoulder again and again for the flare. When it came, the blue glow lighted up the whole landscape. He slowed, turned around, and drove quickly back towards his church.

A field hospital was set up in front of his church. Mrs. Brenton had apparently cast off her isolated ways, for the door to her rooms was open, the light from inside spilling out across the cars, tents, and people hurrying about. Brian pulled up, killed the jeep’s engine, and climbed out. There was a large tent structure with one side open. Inside were four cots with men lying on them, IV trees beside each. Mrs. Brenton was wearing scrubs and surgical mask, working on a terrible-looking wound on shoulder of one of the men.

“The last general should die by the last bullet of the last battle of the last war.”

Brian turned around to face the Sheriff. The man was begrimed, his clothing filthy. But it was all like dust which had settled on something untouchable; the man underneath was unchanged, immune.

“Patton?”

The Sheriff nodded. “A bit of a paraphrase, I think. But no doubt he’d agree.”

Brian saw Bishop drifting toward them, but focused on the Sheriff. “What’s the butcher’s bill?”

“The four wounded you see here. Mrs. Brenton says all four will recover fully. Three dead, all from that machine gun they put up on that hill. I had planned for it, but they had a jammer, so we had to abort the drone’s run and lay it in a second time. The delay let them fire on my people that one time.”

“I’m very, very sorry. Their side?”

Sheriff looked him in the eye. “No survivors.” He paused. “Thanks for taking care of those two up on the hill. It took us a few extra minutes to set up our approach, only to find them already handled. Next time we’ll give you a radio so you can let us know when you handle something.”

Bishop had reached them, but merely stood and watched.

“Great. Next time it’s going to be... what? Tanks?”

“Probably APC’s.” There was no sign the Sheriff was joking.

Brian felt exasperated. “Why’d they send all these men after me? Why would they send APC’s or tanks or whatever? Why are they after me?”

The Sheriff burst out in laughter. He patted Brian on the shoulder, and walked off, still chuckling. A couple of his men, waiting back respectfully, hurried to consult with him on post-action decisions.

The Bishop patted Brian on his other shoulder. “See? Hardly anybody can break him out of his shell. The magic of the Roman Catholic priesthood.”

“I think you Mormons are just too subtle for me. What did I just miss?”

Bishop smiled at him. “Padre, you just have a little touch of what’s known as *egocentrism*. This wasn’t about you, which is why you gave Sheriff a chuckle. Our intel said they were coming because Sheriff and myself would ‘maintain civilian posture contrary to federal emergency dictates’. Which is Fed-speak for disarming us, quartering troops, taking our food, travel papers, putting people in concentration camps. Things like that.” Bishop patted him again. “Don’t get me wrong, you got added as a mission objective once they knew you were here.”

Brian’s stomach unclenched just a bit. “It’s selfish, but I *am* a little relieved to know that it wasn’t just my presence which brought this trouble.”

Bishop smiled wanly. “I tell myself that they aren’t even coming for *me*. They’re coming for my people, and people like myself and our sheriff are just in the way.”

The Storm Arriving

Sweeping It Under the Rug

Deputies were busy all night; Brian realized that they were cleaning up all signs of the conflict. With a few hours of night left, Brian saw a pair of rigs pulling flatbed trailers heading out of town. Large tarped shapes rode on back, puzzling Brian until he guessed they had removed the wings of the airplanes, and loaded all of it to be trucked out rather than flown.

The heavy gun emplacement which had been blown up was simply marked off with yellow safety tape. Aside from that site, by morning all other remnants were gone, including the medical care tent and its patients (all four were going to be fine). Somebody had come by and mentioned that every window in the

area was being cleaned. Brian blanked for a moment, then realized that replaced windows would otherwise stand out. He got busy cleaning his church's windows.

At about 10 in the morning, a black SUV pulled up in front of his church. A deputy who had been tailgating the SUV pulled to the side of the road across from the church. The deputy rolled down his window to stare expressionlessly at the SUV.

The driver and passenger climbed out, along with a man who'd been riding in the back seat. It was as if the FBI now did casting calls to get the right look for their agents, who were in spec FBI suits with spec sunglasses and spec haircuts. The back passenger approached Brian, the other two closing in behind him, hands inside their jackets.

Brian had been sitting on his porch, reading and seeing if there was going to be anything else interesting happening today. *I guess I got my answer* he thought as he marked his place and put his book aside. He already had a tape recorder—old school—on the table, and pushed its record button.

“Father Linse?”

“Yes?”

“I'm special agent Mooney. Can I speak with you?”

“Please go ahead. I am recording this conversation.”

“As are we.” The man hesitated. “Can we speak inside?”

“No; this is fine. How can I help you?”

“You can start by telling the lackey across the street to get on with his duties.”

Brian looked across the street, then back. “Not my lackey. I have no authority over law enforcement. Was that all?”

The agent swept off his sunglasses. His eyes were small and fierce. “Do you want to do this the hard way? I can arrange that.”

“I'm sorry, Agent Mooney. I can't order deputies around. You haven't asked any other questions?”

The agent just continued to stare at Brian. Brian mused that this probably used to work all the time, but at this point, everybody knew about the technique. Brian settled back, and let his mind wander.

The agent exhaled. “What happened here last night?”

Brian nodded. This was a trap; telling any sort of untruth was a felony. Even failing to speak with the intention of misleading a federal agent was a felony. Basically, every person ever interviewed by the FBI could be convicted as a felon and put in prison. You'd lose your life savings, your liberty, your civil rights. No more second amendment. Brian stopped looking into the distance, and stared the agent straight in the face.

“I’m going to reach into my right, rear pocket.” Brian looked across the street, and raised his voice, “I’ve told them I’m reaching into my right, rear pocket. I’ll be pulling out my wallet.”

The deputy also raised his voice, “That’s a very reasonable thing to do, Father. Thank you for letting me know. Be advised that my cruisers surveillance system also recorded that.”

Brian slowly reached back, and pulled out his wallet as promised. He slid out a card, and offered it to the agent.

The agent looked at it with distaste. “What is it?”

“My lawyer. She can represent me in the details of making my testimony available to you.”

The agent raised his hands in mock surrender. “Ok, Father. Now that you’ve invoked the Fifth Amendment, you’re protected. So, off the record, can you please help us with just a few details from last night?” He pulled out a small device—a recording device, apparently—and ostentatiously turned it off.

Brian smiled. He knew that “off the record” was meaningless, that there were certainly more recorders running, that the agents could record notes which could be used as evidence in court, and that the agent was free to lie. But if _Brian lied—prison. Unfair, but that was life for you.

“You’re probably not *a* lawyer, and you’re certainly not *my* lawyer. I’ll make sure she reviews your legal theories for me.”

There was menace in his voice. “So that’s how it’s going to be?” The two agents behind him stepped forward on either side, now facing Brian three abreast.

Cars screeched into the church parking area from both sides. The deputy across the street was suddenly pulling his car into the lot, too. The Sheriff climbed out of his car, and around a dozen deputies filled in behind him.

The three agents had been intimidating enough facing Brian as he sat. They were even taller and wider than the Sheriff, but as they turned to face the wall of local law enforcement, Brian realized that they were afraid of this trim, cold, deadly man.

Brian spoke up, “Sheriff, meet Agent Mooney. Of the FBI, I guess, but I don’t think he said.”

The Sheriff faced the agents squarely. “Did they show ID, Father?”

“Why no, I don’t believe they did.”

The Sheriff nodded. “Show ID *now*, or I’m arresting you for impersonating a law enforcement officer.”

“This is a Federal matter. Walk away.”

“Subjects are uncooperative.”

This, apparently, was a keyword. The three agents were suddenly on the ground, each pinned by a pair of deputies. Two more deputies visited each “agent” in turn, patting them down and removing law enforcement paraphernalia along with guns—each had a primary weapon and a backup one in an ankle holster.

The Sheriff leafed through the extracted wallets and ID cases. “Handing out false names, agent *Bryant*? And what are the US Capitol Police doing out here? Wrong turn at Albuquerque?” He addressed his men, “Let them up.” He turned to them as they climbed back on their feet. “Your refusal to identify yourself forced me to take action.”

Agent Bryant *nee* Mooney held out his hand. “Return *all* of our possessions, now, and then leave. If I see you again, I’ll arrest you.”

The Sheriff shook his head. “Your behavior is unprofessional and irrational. There isn’t a member of Congress within a hundred miles of here, hasn’t been for years. The preponderance of evidence suggests you are off the reservation. Your possessions will be returned as you leave my jurisdiction. In the meantime, I can provide security for you while you pursue any *legitimate* law enforcement activities in my county.”

The agent’s eyes were ugly. “We’ll see all of you a little bit later. Count on it.”

The agents climbed into their vehicle. The Sheriff turned to his men, pointing to one. “Follow them to the county limit, then return all their possessions.” He pointed to a second. “Follow both of them, hold back a bit, and if the agents try to use lethal force, you are to respond in kind. This is my instruction as sheriff, and I take full responsibility.”

The cars cleared the parking lot, heading away from town. The Sheriff sent the rest of his units on their way, and he and Brian stood quietly, waiting until the parking lot was empty and quiet.

“Father, it’s going to get hairy around here. The last bits of the rule of law are on their way out, which makes it hard to ensure your safety.”

Brian pondered. “I don’t think I’m supposed to go hide in the hills. I also don’t want you to put your men in an untenable position, trying to provide security for me. I’m not sure what my people’s goals are for me, but my best guess is I should stick it out here at this church, and accept some risk.”

The Sheriff’s eyes were inscrutable. “You’re no fool, Father. Once you wrap your head around your mission, you’ll understand how I can help.”

Brian looked sharply at the Sheriff. “You sound like you know more about my mission than *I* do.”

The Sheriff shook his head. “Just some notions, thought’em up for myself.” He started towards his vehicle. “I’d better go make sure my men saw off those thugs OK.”

Storm Arrives

The Feds had been seen off without incident, but everybody knew that there was a timer running, and it was going to reach zero in the near future. The Sheriff was rarely seen, but deputies were busy, zipping past Brian's church with a rushed purpose. Bishop came by—Brian had not had a chance to speak with him since that terrible night—and Brian asked if there was anything he should be doing.

They were sitting on Brian's porch, and Bishop leaned back to ponder for a bit, his eyes studying the brown hills. "The Sheriff told me about your chat with him. You keep doing your priestly things, that's more help than you can know." He chuckled. "I sure wish you had been born here, though. But I guess the stresses your Catholic management puts on you is paid for by the stresses you put back on them. And we're all Christians—the rest is probably minutia from God's point of view."

Brian caught it again, that same undercurrent the Sheriff had hinted at. There was a recurring theme of something sought. "Hidden in plain sight", that old concept came to his mind as he tried to guess at what he was missing.

A radio clipped to Bishop's belt crackled to life. Brian heard a deputy's voice.

"North end, inbound heavy. Helos, too."

The Bishop grunted, and got to his feet. "Guess I'll go meet our liberators."

Brian stood, too. "Any danger they'll just throw us in jail?"

"Yes. The Sheriff's already made himself scarce. We'll find out a lot by what they do next. I'm the most obvious target, and then you're a secondary target. We're doing a scientific experiment here, and you and I are marks on the meter."

They shook hands, and the Bishop drove off. Brian could hear the thumping of helicopters in the distance. He sat down to wait.

We're From the Government

The thumping grew louder, and a pair of Apache helicopters flew by low and slow, following the road, heading towards town. The pair of hard points on each side of the helicopter were loaded with FFAR rockets, a potent weapon against "soft" targets like people. These two attack helicopters could destroy the entire town, and there was basically nothing the people living in the area could do to even slow them down.

Presently, a column of armored vehicles came rolling down the road. The Sheriff's comments had led Brian to do a little research, and he recognized most of these as M1296 "Dragoon" armored personnel carriers. An unmanned 30mm cannon sat on top of each; the leading unit pointed to the right, and was centered on Brian, tracking even as the vehicle rolled past. The second APC's cannon was pointed to the left, covering any possible threat on that side. The next APC

was back to pointing at Brian's side of the street, and this cannon also locked on Brian as it rolled by.

This sequence repeated until all six APC's had passed. They were followed by some covered military trucks—doubtless supplies for this convoy—and various smaller vehicles, all painted military drab green. A trio of APC's followed as the tail, one pointing left, one right, and the final one pointing straight back to catch anything trying to come up on them from the rear.

It was the most intimidating thing he'd ever seen. He had always been aware of his country 'projecting force' into foreign countries, and had even made some effort to understand what kinds of military hardware were used, and why. But this casual demonstration of implacable, overwhelming, impersonal force was outside his experience. The implications of having the might of his own country turned against itself was... sobering.

The noise of the convoy faded as it headed towards town. Brian listened, and was thankful to not hear any weapons firing. Once or twice he heard the angry whine of an Apache gunship as it suddenly appeared low over a hillside; there was no warning whump-whump of most helicopters. Presently even these finished their apparent patrol, and the usual quiet resumed.

A truck came from the direction of town—not military. Brian waited, and presently it pulled into his lot to stop in a spray of dirt and gravel. Joe Wilson, who owned the hardware store in town, slammed open his door and jumped down to approach Brian, a sheaf of papers in his hand. His face was white with rage.

"'Emergency requisition', they say. They pillaged my hardware and lumber, and told me to file a request with the DoD." He waved the papers. "They took \$20,000 of goods if they took a penny, and I get to file to ask for \$5,000 back."

Brian accepted the papers, keeping his face mild; Joe was angry enough for both of them. He looked through the papers, and concluded Joe was reading it right. This acknowledged that the military—given the exigency of the emergency—had taken \$5,035.22 worth of goods.

"You sure about them taking more than this, Joe?"

"Sure as anything! And I tried to capture pictures of all the stuff they were taking, and they tackled me, took my phone and smashed it, then added \$25 to the total for it. They were laughing."

Brian sighed. "Can you do an inventory when they're done? Get a documented amount that way?"

"They say they're taking possession of my store 'for the duration'. So, for now, I can't do a thing."

"Well, they'll probably talk to either me or Bishop. Have you told him?"

"No, I don't know where he is. I figured I could reach you quicker."

“Let me take a copy, and if I see Bishop first I’ll let him know. They have *way* heavier guns than us, so we’re going to need to finesse this.”

They went inside, and Brian set up his printer/scanner to make copies. The first page was just finishing when the power went out.

Brian grunted, and went out back to start up the generator.

Joe had headed out, a little bit calmed, and Brian returned to his seat out front. He didn’t want to miss *anything*. That seemed to be his new job.

And We’re Here to Help

When Brian went to bed, the power was still out. He got up the next morning, and tried a light. Still out. He’d run the generator last night just long enough to help Joe, plus charge up a few things, including his cell phone. The generator had a decent size tank, and he had several 5 gallon tanks with stabilized fuel. Still, he was in no way ready for long term off-the-grid living.

His small fridge ran from a 100 gallon propane tank, so everything was still OK there. He had to go dig out a camp stove he’d spotted in one of the utility buildings, glad that some companion propane cylinders had been stored with it. After coffee and eggs with toast (it took a steady hand to toast bread over a stove flame!), he went back out front with a second cup of coffee to watch the road and see if anything was happening.

He was half done with his cup when a family van drove by, heading out of town. He’d seen the van around, and knew it belonged to a decent sized Mormon family. But he didn’t know them, and the driver—the father—was looking straight ahead as they drove past.

Twenty minutes later, the van came back towards town. The van slowed, then turned into Brian’s parking lot. The van stopped, and Brian saw the mother in the passenger seat, and a peek of some kids seated in the rest of the van. The man jumped out, face flushed.

“Father.”

“Good morning.” Brian was still a little new to the social niceties of the LDS folk, and was going with “brother” being appropriate only between fellow church members.

“The road out of town’s *closed*. They have a barricade and a couple soldiers with M-16’s. If you don’t have a travel pass, you can’t leave your home area.”

“Did they say where you’d get a travel pass?”

The man shook his head angrily. “They said the radio station will be broadcasting instructions on how to file a request for permission.”

“Well, I was going to head into town to find out about the power outage. I guess I can add this to my list of questions. Also, they’ve taken over Joe’s inventory,

and it's not clear if they're going to pay for what they've used. Let's not jump to any conclusions until we know a little more."

"My conclusion is this is looking like something the Soviet Union would do! Do they think they're the only ones with guns?"

"You haven't heard my sermon on how this is the best of all possible worlds." Brian held out his hand to stop an outburst. "I know, but it's quite a sermon, and you'd find it persuasive. But being in the best of all possible worlds doesn't mean you don't put your shoulder to the wheel. So I'll go into town and see what they have to say." Brian gave him a pointed look. "In the meantime, don't do anything foolish. I don't want to see us locals use guns, and I surely don't want to see their *military* weapons used, either."

Brian drove into town, traversing its length without stopping so he could lay eyes on the high school and big hardware store just on the far side of town. The football field was a military camp now, and they'd even added concertina wire to the top of the fence around the school's perimeter. There was a guard post to enter the high school's parking lot, and a pair of armed guards gave him the cold eye as he drove past.

On the other side of the road was the hardware store. All the windows were boarded up, which probably meant they knocked out all the glass. All by itself, that was more than \$5,000 worth of damages. Up on the roof Brian could see both front corners of the store had been converted to emplacements, with sandbags stacked to create a breastwork, with a squad machine gun looking out at each corner. It would provide a potent overwatch on the guarded gate across the street, but Brian immediately wondered if somebody could come up the far side of the building and destroy—or even take over—these crewed weapons. They had a fine field of fire across the whole military camp.

For that matter, their placement was *terrible* for purposes of defending the camp. Most threats they could fire on would have the camp's defenders in the background. You always tried to arrange angles so you could fire on the bad guys without having good guys beyond them. Who was in charge in there?

Brian had stayed on the road as he'd passed all this, and now he turned around and drove back, to pull into the driveway of the high school. One of the guards stepped into the middle of the road with his hand held up to order a stop. His companion stepped towards Brian's side of the car, and pointed his weapon directly at Brian's head.

Brian had rolled his window down before pulling into the driveway, but his thought had been to easily talk with the guard. Giving some pissant PFC a clear head shot really hadn't been in the plans. Brian carefully kept both hands on the steering wheel, trying to ignore the hothead and focus on the guard who was apparently in command. He was glad he had dressed in full clericals.

"Corporal, my name is Father Linse. I'm here to address some details of civilian organization with whoever has responsibility in these matters."

“Do you have a weapon on your person or in this vehicle?” The corporal had a pronounced Boston accent, but at least he wasn’t pointing a gun.

“No guns, knives, or bludgeon weapons.” He pondered. “Well, there’s a tire iron in the kit, but that’s stowed way in the back under the spare tire.”

“Exit the vehicle.”

Brian watched while the corporal searched his car, the PFC continuing to point his gun at him. The corporal even took out the spare, and confiscated his tire iron.

“That really is needed in case of a flat.”

“It will be returned as you exit.”

As the corporal continued to search his vehicle, Brian’s eyes wandered to the school’s football field. The nearest part was now an airfield, with the two parked Apache’s looking menacing, even when stored on the flight line. A smaller helicopter was also there, drab green military, but with no obvious weapons. Somebody important had arrived, apparently.

A jeep pulled up, and the corporal turned to Brian. “Follow this jeep. If you deviate, we will respond with lethal force.” The PFC was positioned a little back, his gun still trained on Brian’s head.

A sergeant climbed out of the arrived jeep. “Corporal! Is this visitor armed?”

“No, sergeant!”

“Then why is the private pointing a loaded and un-safed M-16 at our visitor?”

“Sergeant, the safety of this installation. . .”

“Shut up.” The sergeant looked at the PFC, whose weapon was drooping. “Private, safe that weapon, and PORT ARMS.”

The PFC fumbled a bit, but Brian was relieved to see the weapon now held against the private’s body, the barrel pointing up into the air.

The corporal turned to Brian, his eyes cold with hate. “Follow that jeep. If you deviate, we will use lethal force.”

“I understand.”

The sergeant, satisfied that the immediate danger from the private was past, stepped over to them. “Corporal, return to guard duty.”

“Sergeant.” The corporal stepped away stiffly.

“You must be Father Linse.”

“Sergeant. I was hoping to talk with some sort of authority over this operation?”

“Of course.” The sergeant was an African-American with thickly muscled arms and a “high and tight” haircut. He hesitated, and his face smoothed. In the

uncanny fashion of NCO's, he communicated without saying anything which would violate orders—he was not happy with any of this. “Follow me, and I'll try to jump in front of any bullets my *fervent* soldiers might fire.”

“Thanks, sergeant. I'll do my best not to get your boys excited.”

“That's boys and *girls*, sir. Please be inclusive.”

They drove, but it would have been just as easy to walk, since this was just a modest improvised camp. The high school and its property just wasn't all that big. There *were* quite a few field tents, large and green. They passed several, and finally stopped in front of one with a post flag out front.

The sergeant jumped out and Brian made sure he was right beside his car door before he opened it gingerly. No bullets.

“This way, sir.”

Brian followed the sergeant inside. It was the usual military office configuration, with an enlisted at the front desk, and a (closed) door to the officer's inner sanctum. A corporal at a terminal looked up as they entered.

“Civilian liaison to see the... old man.”

Brian picked up on the hesitation. That NCO thing again, providing information while staying inside the lines.

The corporal's lip curled. “Local civil coordination is below the cut line. Ask the... priest... to request a scheduled appointment.”

The sergeant leaned over the desk, his face suddenly close to the corporal's, who drew back in alarm. “When I want your opinion, corporal, I'll beat it out of you. Shall I take it from here?”

The corporal skidded his chair back enough to stand up from the desk, and entered the inner office, closing the door behind him. Momentarily, he came back out, and motioned for them to enter.

Brian entered, the sergeant following. There was an officer behind a large wooden desk, and he remained seated as they entered. Brian's eyes went to the officer's rank insignia; he didn't have the muscle memory of a military service member, but he could decode most of them. His eyes, froze, then went back to look again.

A butterbar. This was a second lieutenant. Brian looked around the office, but there was no other officer. Second lieutenants were proto-officers, tended by their NCOs and slowly filling in their knowledge so that, in the future, they could intelligently lead. Promotion to first lieutenant generally happened in a year or so. What was this newbie doing at the top of the local chain of command? With APC's and attack helos?

He studied the man. A *mustang*? Some members went far in the enlisted ranks, then switched over and passed Officer Candidate School. But no, this guy couldn't possibly buy a beer off-base. Maybe twenty years of age.

“Sergeant, you’re dismissed.”

“Sir. Op regs require security presence.”

“Very well.” He waved his hand, “Remain and keep watch.” His attention moved to Brian. “Father, the demands on my time are tremendous right now. In due time, we’ll have a briefing for you civilians. If that’s all?”

Brian was tempted to just sit down uninvited. Antagonizing this twit would be fun, but he wasn’t here for his own fun. “Lieutenant, thank you for your time. There are just a few critical items which would benefit from immediate answers. When does the power go back on? When will the community have access to critical repair supplies, now that the hardware store is unavailable? How soon until civilian travel is possible? Without a hardware store, the option to travel to a still operating store would be invaluable.”

The lieutenant waved his hand. “You Mormons are all stocked for a year, a well-known fact which we’ve included in our plans. Well within that timeframe, we’ll have some answers for you. In the meantime, please pass along our thanks for your understanding.”

Brian stared. “You mean, we aren’t allowed to travel, and you’ll have an update within a *year*?”

The lieutenant frowned. “If you hadn’t made such a mess, we wouldn’t be here in the first place. Your *minor* inconvenience has been acknowledged, but is a consequence of your own choices.” He made an attempt at a winning smile. “Off the record, it could be a good bit less than a year.”

“You know that the year’s supply is a *guideline*? There are many Mormon families who, due to financial limitations, don’t have those sorts of long term supplies stowed away.”

“Then the famed Mormon community spirit will no doubt carry the day.” The officer looked past Brian’s shoulder. “Sergeant, this priest is leaving now. Please see him off the base.”

“Off the *camp* sir. Yes sir.”

The lieutenant appeared ready to take umbrage at the sergeant’s correction, but the sergeant smoothly continued just before the outburst, “Father, if you’ll follow me?”

Brian turned and followed the sergeant out of the office. As they reached the cars, the sergeant faced Brian. “Follow me out, Father, and have a good afternoon. Perhaps I’ll *see you again*.” With that, the sergeant stepped to his jeep and pulled out onto the vehicle path. Brian followed him back to the gate.

The sergeant’s jeep pulled to the side, and the same corporal at the gate waved him onward, pointing out to the road. “Move! Move! Move!”. Brian saw the PFC with the M-16 thinking about pointing it at him again, and he drove past the military gate, heading back to his church.

“I *knew* they’d keep my tire iron,” he muttered.

What an NCO Knows

Brian had noted the emphasis: *see you again*, and left his front door unlocked that night. Thinking about it, he also unlocked the rear door. Somebody with a little training could make it to visit him without being seen.

But just because he knew who he *hoped* would visit. . . . He kept a pistol near at hand as he sat back in a comfortable chair and waited. A single small LED lamp in the far corner of the room provided the only illumination. It was quiet, and Brian got up to open windows to the front and the back. He sat again, and let his brain get used to the ambient night noises.

It was a little past 11:30PM when he heard the insect noises diminish out back. He brought his pistol to hand, and listened even more closely. Presently, he heard a quiet scratch on his back door. A pause, and the latch was operated. After another pause, the door opened a little bit.

“Please don’t shoot me.”

Brian smiled. “Without thinking, name the battle which gave rise to ‘Devil Dogs’?”

“That’s Marine stuff, Father. The Battle of Belleau Wood. But Wikipedia says that it was a made up story.

“I’d like to see some hollow-chested Wikipedia dweeb go to the site of Tun Tavern and run his mouth until the next marine showed up. See how that works out for them.”

The sergeant opened the door wider and entered the dim room. “You’re not a marine. Your father?”

“Right in one. Come in, sergeant. . . .?”

“Sergeant Bearson. Thomas Bearson. By the way, here’s your tire jack.”

Brian thanked him, then motioned to a pair of beers, unopened, on the table by his chair. Bearson nodded, and Brian opened both, sliding one to the sergeant.

Brian started, “This is off the record. I won’t recount this to *anybody*. But I need to know what is going on, because what I saw today was alarming.”

Bearson took a sip. “You remember years ago the stand down and political vetting? From the outside, it looked like a witch hunt—find extremists, and eject them from the armed services.”

“I remember.”

“That was just the cover. They were building a personality index, so that a given mission could be matched with officers who could and would give the

orders. With that built, they have quietly inserted it into the officer development sequence, so they have a master matrix against all officers on active duty.”

“Why do I have a bad feeling about what kind of orders they might want to be giving?”

“That second lieutenant wouldn’t make it a week, leading a squad in the jungles of Viet Nam. But his career’s on a meteoric rise, because it’s a certainty that he would order an Apache strike on a domestic home, or an artillery fire mission onto a group of civilians.”

“So a military of second lieutenants is going to launch a domestic pogrom?”

“Oh, heck no, Father. It’s weird, because there’s plenty of first lieutenants, and then it starts to thin out, getting pretty darn thin when you reach colonel. After that, the more stars, the more you’re onboard. Generals who are bound by the constitution are an endangered species.”

“I see. But we’re small potatoes, so we get a newbie. He loses, it’s a small amount of people and equipment. He commits atrocities, it’s a small grass fire, easily put out. Blame a junior officer, or, more likely, hide it behind censorship.”

“You want to run, Father, nobody’s going to think less of you.”

“Except myself. But thank you.”

“Look, Father, even in this environment I *do* get some contact with noncoms across the army. You know how the Chinese broke the Tienanmen protests?”

“It was city students protesting, so they brought in army units from the rural districts. No sympathy.”

“And here we are, a unit from Boston,” (he pronounced it ‘baw-stun’), “so it’s East coast versus Westies, *and* city versus rural. It’s the Chinese playbook, except city units putting down the rurals. And this pattern is present in all the deployments I’ve been able to check. Rural troops to cities, and city folks heading out to places like this.”

“I’m on a tight commo budget right now, but I’ll certainly send this up the chain as soon as I can.” Brian wondered if the sergeant guessed that this was more than just a diocesan email.

They finished up soon after, and the sergeant faded away into the night. Brian locked up, then sat in his dark room, thinking.

Bad to Worse

The New Normal

The power came on a few days later. Cell, phones, and Internet had been down as well—which Brian considered a hidden blessing—but it had resulted in a large

amount discontent in the county. Dial tone showed up for the few remaining landline customers, and the cell towers went back online as well. However, they could only call among other numbers in their county, or 911.

The roads remained blocked, but of course some locals took to the back roads to get news and supplies from the outer world. They came back with stories of county after county in the same state of lockdown, and then a few of them were arrested. Word came down from the Sheriff—Brian hadn't had direct contact since the attack—to stop trying to reach the outside world, because drones were now in play. And, indeed, the sound of engines overhead was often present.

The Internet had stayed down, including even the satellite providers. It finally came back several days after power, but people discovered they could reach *only* a number of the most major sites. A few intrepid souls tried to post updates on their situation, or solicit information from friends, and their accounts were immediately locked out.

Brian decided that he needed to confirm his status into his associates, and broke out his secret communication device.

County lockdown by military
No commo
Supplies for military only

He watched the little device, and presently it answered:

Understood
National
Go RX only, intercept danger
Wife fine

Brian sighed. He was glad to hear about his wife, but otherwise it sounded like they would be on their own for now. He clicked the little device shut and put it back away.

Can You Hear Me Now?

Brian was up early, luxuriating in the simplicity of making a cup of coffee now that power was back on. Where coffee was concerned, he was a rabid prepper; he'd be living off of his many five pound bags of coffee beans long after the food was gone. He mused that at least *this* priority in the crazy new world made sense. Out front, he heard wheels crunching on the gravel of his parking area as a car arrived. Brian peeked out the side of a curtain, and saw it was Mrs. Wilson, the wife of the man who ran the hardware store. Brian unlocked the front door and stepped out to greet her.

"Father, is your computer OK?"

"I haven't done anything on my computer this morning. Let me check."

He stepped back inside, and opened his laptop.

Zero day. Alt OS only.

He clicked the OK button, and the screen flickered for a few seconds, then displayed a command line Linux environment.

Mrs. Wilson stood at the door, watching Brian. Brian looked up.

“Something hurt my computer, and an anti-virus level has kicked in. What happened to your computer?”

“Not just computers.” She held up her phone so he could see the screen.

Mandatory community meeting.

Main road in front of high school.

9PM.

Attendance will be taken.

Brian read it, then looked up at her. “On your home machine too?”

“And Joe’s phone, and the kids’. It won’t go away, even a reboot just shows that.”

Brian realized that whatever sorcery Soror had done to his devices back when all this had started was still going strong. He probably had the only working computers aside from the military. Unless the Bishop and Sheriff, with their unguessable resources, also had something which wasn’t compromised.

“You’ve checked with others?”

“All my neighbors, all their devices. Everybody Joe checked had the same story too.”

A truck pulled up. Brian suddenly knew what he’d be doing today. “It’s probably everybody, even in neighboring counties—if we could check them. We’ll need to get a public safety plan together.”

Mrs. Wilson nodded to Bishop as she climbed in her car.

“Bishop.”

“Padre.”

“All your computers and phones down, too.”

“Well, the personal and departmental ones. We have some off-the-grid equipment running. As soon as any of those units touch the public network, they get locked down, too. We have some of our tech types studying it. Initial read is it’s a trojan cooked right into the silicon of both the radio modules as well as the main CPU.”

“Police radios down?”

“Down hard. You have any ham equipment?”

Brian went to his closet and dug into the bottom of one of his boxes, bringing out an elderly Yaesu handie talkie. Brian turned with it in hand, and jumped. Bishop, shockingly silent on his feet for such a big man, was right there watching him.

“Sorry, Padre.”

“We need to put bells on you.”

“You could *try*—not that I’m threatening violence against a man of the cloth.”

Brian inserted a battery and powered on the rig. The battery had mostly discharged from sitting in storage, but had enough power for a quick test. “What frequency?”

“146.61, tone 88.5.”

Brian configured the radio, then keyed up, “K6AJV test”.

The repeater came up and identified. The squelch closed, but Brian noticed there was still a signal on frequency. He held the button to enable the audio, and heard a digital hash which finally quieted.

“Does that repeater have a digital mode?”

Bishop shook his head. “That’s something else on frequency. When any of those nice, cheap Chinese-made radios hear it, they lock up.” He looked at Brian’s rig approvingly. “Old school Yaesu, made in Japan. We have a stash of such stuff, which we’re handing out to deputies and others who can help handle public communication needs. Welcome to the club.”

“Thanks.” Brian dug out the charging cradle, and sat his rig in it to top up the battery. He brought out three more battery packs, planning to get them all charged as soon as possible. If power to the house stayed on.

“Our friends are going to notice our ham stuff is still on the air, won’t they?”

Bishop shrugged. “We let them know that *all* our radio services were down. Complained about how helpless it made us, which seemed to make them happy. They’re probably running some automated jamming appliance, so it might be a while before anybody notices there are still radio operators. I’d like to believe that an enlisted might even look the other way. You going to the ‘mandatory’ meeting?”

“Seeing as they went to so much trouble sending out those invitations. . . .”

Community Meeting

Starting at 7PM, people started to assemble outside the high school. At first people parked along the curb, but as cars, trucks, and jeeps kept arriving, they gave up and just filled the entire road with vehicles. The crowd was initially a little tense and quiet, but as more and more people came and recognized

friends and family, a festive atmosphere emerged. Somebody had a speaker and amplifier in the bed of his pickup truck, and brought out a guitar to perform some folk music.

At 9PM sharp, a climbing whine, similar to a jet engine, rose into a growl. From behind one of the buildings, a tank rolled forward, its headlights blazing forward and blinding everyone out on the road. Brian squinted through the light to watch the tank's treads driving the machine forward, and—as he expected—watched the asphalt of the high school's road being ground into gravel. They were going to have to re-pave the high school's surfaces, just so these bozos could show off that they had a tank.

“How'd that get in here?” somebody wondered.

“A big convoy came in from the south yesterday” came an answer.

The tank pulled right up to face the road, its main gun pointing directly at the center of the crowd, its companion machine gun above sweeping right and left, covering sectors of the attendees in turn. This was extraordinarily bad weapon discipline, and Brian assumed they were trying to make a point—or intimidate the crowd. He listened, and wondered if the commanding lieutenant would be pleased to hear the kind of comments being aired.

“Whatcha say, Joe? How hard would it be to dart in and pop those tracks?”

“Dunno, Tom. You have to have the right *training* to deal with those tracks. But, come to think of it, you and I did depot-level tank maintenance. Huh, how about that?”

“On the other hand, it sure wouldn't take much thermite to combat loss that barrel. Some Young Gentleman's NCO apparently didn't teach him about the importance of infantry support.”

There were more comments in the crowd, but at that moment, a shockingly loud amplified voice boomed out from the tank.

“Citizens. Your attention please.”

Everybody hastily plugged their ears. They not only had a tank, but they had dug up one of those military “psyop” speakers, and mounted it up there on the cupola. *Stupidly loud* just didn't do it justice.

“Your president is faced with an unprecedented threat to our democracy, and has taken action to protect you, our citizens.”

Somebody shouted “It's a *Republic*, you Nazi!” before the announcement continued.

“Your computers will be restored to a state suitable for this emergency. A ‘citizen dashboard’ will let you easily cooperate with the government during this time of emergency. You can submit travel requests, schedule shopping, and fill in your family profile so that a suitable food ration can be allocated to you.”

“Travel is *restricted*. During the initial phase of your new status, we treated transgressions as a *law enforcement* issue. You are advised that any further illegal travel activities will be treated as an *insurrection*. Our response will be military.”

“As a sign of good will, we will finish with a special allocation for you citizens. Please stop by the table beside the tank to receive an extra food ration.”

The tank’s lights dimmed, then went dark. The psyop speaker on the tank had a residual hiss which went off with a *click*. The crowd was still, then a few people went forward to see what they were handing out.

A man came back, shaking his head. In his hand was a packet of peanuts, the kind given out in coach during a plane flight. He held out his hand, showing a blue index finger.

“They make you dab your finger, so you don’t get back in line to get another packet.”

Almost everybody drifted away, declining the military’s generosity.

The Next Meeting

When Brian returned home, he opened his laptop and found the screen unchanged, just his Linux prompt. No “citizen dashboard”. Which was fine; if you used a dashboard to ask for permission to travel or eat, you were definitely not a citizen any more.

He made some dinner, running his eye over his food supplies. He was good for one week of enjoyable food, and then three of increasingly ad hoc meals. He checked his phone, which was also free of government influence. A furtive peek at his spy messaging device showed nothing there, either.

He still had power and water. That was something.

The next morning, he made a cup of coffee and sat outside facing the road. He *could* try to get some local news from his caretaker, Mrs. Brenton. But, acknowledging his weakness in the face of a superior force, he avoided her and hoped for a visitor.

Before long, Joe Heaton came driving by in his pickup, spotted Brian, and pulled into the lot. He was one of the pair with detailed knowledge on disabling tanks, which was a solid recommendation in Brian’s opinion.

“Morning, Joe.”

“Hi, Father.”

“My computers didn’t ever seem to get that ‘citizen dashboard’. Is your computer telling you anything new?”

Joe handed Brian a phone without comment. Brian looked at the screen.

Mandatory meeting #2

9PM tonight

“No dashboard, huh? I guess new orders are more important.”

Joe shrugged. “If you ask to travel, they’d probably say ‘no’. If you ask for food, they’ll probably *continue* to say ‘no’. So this is about as useful as anything else.”

He hesitated.

“Look, Father. You’re not one of us, but we were told you were a valued guest. So I guess it’s OK to let you know—Bishop passed the word to not attend tonight. They can amuse themselves tearing up our parking lot with their tank, but we don’t have to watch.”

That night, Brian heard the turbine whine of their tank, and the sky lit up in the distance. He wondered how many people had followed the Bishop’s instructions, and he wondered what the consequences would be. He didn’t have to wait long; it was a bit after 10PM when he heard a truck pulling up, and opened the door to see Joe had come by again.

“Father, seeing as how you don’t have a working computer. Well, working for *them*...” He offered his phone’s screen to Brian.

Consequences for non-compliance.

Mandatory meeting next week.

All shopping closed and travel forbidden until meeting.

Brian read it, then looked to Joe. “How are supplies holding up in the community?”

Joe laughed. “They’d better bring walkers for their old age if they plan to wait us out.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

But What About Father Linse?

The next morning, Brian made breakfast and coffee, and looked at his own supplies with some concern. After breakfast, he braced himself and stepped over to ‘his’ church’s office. He knocked on Mrs. Brenton’s door, aware that he had still yet to see any part of the actual offices.

She opened the door wide enough to look at him.

“There’s no food to be had at the store.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Father.”

“I know that your own Church charges its members with keeping an emergency supply. Please tell me that we’ve done the same?”

“As I’m so often reminded, this is a *Catholic* institution.”

“Even Catholics eat once in a while.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Father.”

Brian stared at his obstinate caretaker. She stared back. Brian was just beginning to consider cannibalism when he heard a large pickup truck pull up, and out climbed Bishop to join Brian and Mrs. Brenton.

“Hello, Bishop. I was just discussing my lack of dinner plans—and lack of dinner—with my caretaker and church secretary.”

Bishop frowned at Mrs. Brenton. “You’ve had your fun. Now show the good Padre his portions.”

She sniffed, and backed into the room. Brian and Bishop stepped into the entry room, Brian looking around with curiosity. And a little dread, since he was seeing a corner of his domain for the first time.

What he saw was a simple church office, set up along the lines of the ones he had seen and run previously. But most church offices had at least a little chaos around the edges. Truthfully, most of them had chaos *everywhere*, including the edges. But this one was spotless.

Mrs. Brenton had continued to the back wall of the office space, which had a row of filing cabinets. She opened the top drawer of the middle cabinet, reaching inside to pull a hidden handle. There was a metallic *click*. She then pulled on the far right cabinet, and the whole bank of filing cabinets rolled open like a door, hinged on the edge of the far left cabinet.

Pivoted open, the wall behind the cabinets was exposed. In the center of it was a low opening with stairs which descended. The opening of the cabinets had turned on some lights, and Brian could peer down the stairway to see a storage room down below. Brian looked up to see Mrs. Brenton and Bishop watching him expectantly, so he crouched down and went down the stairs.

Once past the wall and stepping downward, he could straighten. At the bottom of the stairs, he could see the hidden room. It was quite large, 20 feet by 40 feet or so, filled with metal shelving with just enough room between shelving units to let Brian shuffle sideways.

All the shelves were filled with metal boxes. Each box had a tag hanging off a wire tied to the clasp on the box. Brian read labels which said “beans”, “rice”, “spices”, “dried fruit”, and—his day was made—“coffee”. He pulled that box out; it was tricky in the narrow confines between the shelves, but by twisting it and carrying on its side he managed it.

He brought it back to the stairs, and opened the pair of clasps holding the box shut. Inside, the box was filled top to bottom with vacuum sealed bags of coffee beans. He recognized the brand, one he’d happily drink.

He looked up the stairway to see Bishop and Mrs. Brenton watching him. Bishop was grinning, Mrs. Brenton was her usual imperturbable self.

“So they’re going to starve out a Mormon community?”

Bishop laughed. “Bunch of city punks. They have tanks and attack helicopters, but they should’ve traded them in for some of God’s sense.”

Occupied Utah

Trouble

The week passed quietly. All of town was closed—restaurants and cafes, seeing where this was going, had shuttered. The owners had quietly emptied out all food items, padlocked their doors, and taken their supplies home for the duration. Several owners had then set up to offer dining and espresso from out of their homes or outbuildings. One time a jeep full of soldiers had pulled up to a place, stating that they had heard there was good food to be had. The owner, an older woman, stared coldly at them without speaking. She finally said “There is nothing here for you. Don’t come back.”

The soldiers were obviously considering making a more forceful request for service, but two men with AR-15’s showed up to their left rear. The driver jerked around, and saw two more behind him. He looked out the other side of the jeep and saw multiple windows of the nearby building with riflemen in them. They drove away without another word.

The next “mandatory” meeting came and went, again without a single attendee. Everybody’s screen now announced *another* mandatory meeting, and that all LDS church properties were closed and off limits. Brian’s own church, cut off from all the catholics who had driven from multiple counties over, apparently didn’t have enough attendance to warrant closure.

Bishop and Brian had settled into a routine, sharing a meal at Brian’s every Thursday night. Brian understood that his posting here was an interlude, and that Bishop had been tasked with preparing him for some nebulous future. Their conversations were delightful, covering theology, psychology, even military science. Bishop had a wealth of experience, and a brilliant mind which distilled his experiences into deep and pithy observations.

This night, they were relaxing, enjoying a last sip of wine (illicit on Bishop’s side) before Bishop hit the road. They heard a vehicle go by at very high speed.

Bishop had broken off, listening closely. “HMMWV, running hard.”

Brian was listening too. “Siren. Are there still patrols?”

“No, the military just hassled’em. We keep LEO here and there, available with a radio call.”

The siren screamed past the church, in the same direction as the HMMWV, towards town.

“I don’t like the sound of this, Padre. Let’s go.”

They jumped in Bishop’s truck, and he gunned his big vehicle hard.

“It’s going to be the military camp, bet you \$20.”

“No takers.”

A Mustang blew past them, clearly joining the chase. Brian could see a few pairs of headlights behind them.

“Did you bring your radio, Padre?”

“Sorry, no.”

“In the glove compartment.”

Brian dug out an old ham rig, and clicked it on after a little fiddling. There were a number of voices on the frequency, tense and talking too fast. Brian keyed up.

“Break for Bishop”

Things slowed down, and finally one voice on the radio said “Go, Bishop”.

Brian considered. “Senior church member on frequency, sitrep?”

Another pause, and an older man’s voice came on. “Thompson place. The menfolk are dead, and the rest... hurt.”

Bishop cursed. Brian keyed up quickly, “Stand by all on frequency, I’m consulting.” He paused, “This is Father Linse, I’m with the Bishop.” He stopped transmitting, and turned to Bishop. The military camp was coming up fast. “How do you want to play this?”

Bishop held his hand out, and Brian gave him the radio. “This is your Bishop. If you’re not already in town, don’t come. The rest of you, follow my lead. Keep guns out of sight.”

They pulled up to the entrance gate at the military camp. The bar was down, and a patrol car, lights still flashing, was stopped right up at the gate, with that Mustang beside it. The deputy was out of his car, shouting at the gate guard.

Bishop screeched to a halt with his bumper almost touching the patrol car, and climbed out smoothly, reminding Brian of how he handled himself while leading his men in that fighting retreat. He was in combat mode. Brian climbed out, too, feeling inadequate to this situation.

The deputy turned to Bishop. “They killed half the family, Bishop! And they...” He choked in rage.

Bishop held his hand up. “Stand *down* deputy.” He turned to the gate guard, who was holding an M16 at low ready. A second soldier in the background also had an M16 ready. A car, and then another car, braked to a halt behind them, tires skidding. Brian realized this could go wrong in the blink of an eye.

Bishop turned to the guard. “I need to talk to your MP’s.” Military Police handled law enforcement matters where the military was involved.

“There are no MP available, and none are needed. Nobody has been in or out for hours.”

More cars were pulling up, and a ring of men were assembling like an arc around the guard and his gate. Brian forced his eyes to scan the background, and froze. Two APC’s from the original convoy were sited back about 100 feet to either side of the gate, mostly hidden in the shadows. Their top-mounted machine guns pointed right at the crowd of angry Mormons.

Brian nudged Bishop, who had been berating the guard. He flicked his eyes in the direction of the two APC’s, and Bishop suddenly took in the death trap he had walked into.

“Heck, Sheriff’s never gonna let me live down walking into this.” He turned his back on the guard, and commanded in his loudest, booming voice, “Everybody, on me. Back to Padre’s place for debrief.”

Bishop and Brian both climbed back into his truck, half expecting the APC’s to open fire and kill them all. Bishop put it in reverse, even though there was another truck behind them. He honked, and vehicles started backing out and heading down the road. They finally got back on the road and Brian watched the military camp shrink in their rearview mirror.

Debrief

Brian stood beside Bishop, right outside Brian’s front door. All the people who had been with Bishop at the gate were here now, and several times that number had also arrived, with more coming in. There was once again an arc of Mormons, but this time it was just Bishop at the focus of it.

Bishop’s voice boomed out. “Normally, this would be a law enforcement situation, and we’d get the officer’s reports in private.” The audience gave a low, dangerous sound. “But in the military, we’re taught to never give an order which won’t be obeyed. So now we have to do a little talking, and I need to *know* that none of you are going to fly off and get yourself—and probably a bunch of us—killed.”

The crowd quieted. A drone’s hum could be heard above them.

“Now, I need you to not just control yourself. If your buddy’s going to go flying off—tackle him. Doesn’t matter if you haven’t ever been in the military, this is military stuff. You do *not* get to do what you want.”

Bishop gave them a hard, level look.

“Deputy Mortensen. You were at the house?”

A young, uniformed man swallowed. “Yes, Bishop. The men folk were all shot dead, and the women folk were assaulted.” His breath was shaky. “Even the

young ones.”

“Mrs. Brenton’s already there?”

“Yes, sir, she got called right away.”

Bishop turned back to the crowd. “You’re mad. I got caught up, too. But this was a *set up*. They had heavy caliber automatic weapons pre-positioned to take us in a cross fire. If we had fired a single shot, they would’ve cut us down in less than a minute.” He shook his head. “I have *no* idea why they didn’t just open fire anyway, then lie about it. Maybe there’s still some rule-of-law stuff out there.”

A voice called out from back in the crowd. “Where’s the Sheriff?”

“If you don’t know where he is, it’s because you don’t need to know,” snapped Bishop. “But you can be sure that our top law enforcement officer knows about this. You all just need to stay alive, so you can help when you receive the call.”

“It’d better be soon.”

Bishop flushed. “Bring him forward. Who said that?”

The crowd rippled, and rough hands pushed forward a young man. He was flushed and sweaty, his eyes glazed. Drunk, and possibly with some pills in him as well.

“Timmy Tobler, it figures.” Bishop’s voice became commanding. “He goes out and takes a couple pot shots. Probably misses, since he’s juiced to the gills. And then our military protectors,” his voice dripped with contempt, “get to go weapons free on us.”

His eyes focused on a pair of men beside Timmy. “Keep him under control. Knock him down, tie him up, and call me if needed. There’s a right way to deal with this mess, and Timmy here is no part of it.”

The men nodded, and guided their drunk friend away.

Some anger finally reached Bishop’s voice. “There are right ways, and there are wrong ways, to pursue justice. We *will* get justice. I will get that justice, or die trying. You have my word.”

The gathering broke up, people filtering out and away into the night.

The Quiet

Brian slept poorly, expecting something terrible to happen. He finally gave up at 5AM, and started his morning coffee routine. He sat outside, still waiting to hear sirens, or gunshots, or explosions. All he heard was the military’s drones coming by. They seemed to have plenty of them, all up in the air.

He presently felt boredom, and went inside to read. Was this trouble worth breaking communication silence with his secret messaging? Probably not.

A few people swung by, but Brian knew even less than them. He asked about their computers, and found out they were all locked and simply announcing the next mandatory meeting everybody would ignore. The “citizen dashboard”, insulting as the notion was, had never been seen by anybody. Locked computers and meeting announcements was it.

Mrs. Brenton had never returned, no doubt busy providing medical care. She seemed to have serious medical training, but was too forbidding for Brian to ever strike up a conversation and find out what it was. The hours passed slowly. The quiet should have let him pursue any number of projects, but he couldn't concentrate. Behind this quiet was something ugly waiting to happen.

He went to bed, and slept better simply because he was exhausted by his poor sleep from the previous night, and the day full of waiting tension.

In the morning, he was back out front sipping coffee, thinking of the movie Groundhog Day. Two jeeps and an APC roared by, heading out away from town towards their checkpoint at the county border. Brian listened, but heard nothing.

Presently, one of the jeeps returned, running at its top speed, skidded into the church parking lot. The pair of Apache helicopters shot by overhead, heading towards the checkpoint. *Here we go* he thought.

The jeep stopped right at Brian, purposely spraying him with gravel. Brian's favorite private from the guardpost was driving, and there was that lieutenant as passenger. The only good news was to see Sergeant Bearson in the back seat.

The lieutenant jumped out, as did the private, who reached in the back to produce his M16. *He's going to point it at me again, sigh.*

“You F—. I'm going to—” the lieutenant was frantically angry. The torrent of swear words and threats poured from him, and Brian sat quietly, not wanting this to go any further off balance. The man finally quieted, panting heavily.

“Lieutenant, something has happened, I see that. But I do *not* know what it is. No idea.”

The lieutenant seemed about ready to start all over again, when the sergeant spoke up.

“Sir, you know how clannish those Mormons are. This man's not one of them. Why would they trust him?”

The lieutenant hesitated, studying Brian. “He's had contact with them.”

“You know they're always trying to recruit.”

“Question him,” the lieutenant ordered, then jumped back in the jeep. The sergeant climbed out as the private stowed his weapon, climbed behind the wheel, and the jeep raced off.

“Can I give you a ride, Sergeant?” They exchanged an understanding smile.

“Thanks, Father. You know we have checkpoints on this main road at both ends of the county. We also apparently had—not under my orders, but it happened—a ‘roving’ patrol out again last night. Both checkpoints are empty, and the patrol has disappeared entirely. No vehicles, no equipment, no brass, no discarded weapons, no bodies—nothing. The LT is pissed right now, but when he settles down and thinks about it, he’s going to be a little scared, too. You all should watch out when he gets to that point.”

“I have some skills, but taking out three armed and alert military squads is far beyond me. Nobody told me anything about this.”

“But we both know who could *easily* pull this off.”

“Sergeant, I just can’t comment on something like that when I have no information at all.”

“Fair enough, Father. Now, I’ll accept that offer of a ride?”

They drove into town, and Brian pulled up across from the military camp. The sergeant turned to Brian as he opened the car door.

“I wasn’t kidding about watching out once the LT has some time to think about this. If he decides it’s *go time*, I don’t think there’s anybody up the chain who would say him nay.”

“Thanks, Sergeant. I appreciate the help. And I hope I can help you in turn at some point in the future.”

Brian stayed at the curb, and got on the radio. Without telling how he had come to the conclusion, he warned that if anybody saw the military coming in their direction, assume the worst and run for cover. He got an acknowledgment without any questions. This told him they had already reached this conclusion.

and The Storm

He was about to start his car up when he heard the Apaches appear over the hills to the left. They flew right overhead, their shrill whine dopplering down in pitch rapidly as they passed. They were going far too fast for a landing at the camp. Brian watched with a sinking feeling.

The Apaches swerved left, and lined up with the LDS temple, its peak adorned with its distinctive golden angel. Brian could hardly believe his eyes when he saw both helicopters fire a full volley of rockets from the round pods under their stubby wings.

The rockets lanced across the distance in moments, and the structure disappeared in a flash. Although mostly obscured by smoke and flying debris, he could see successive waves of rockets reaching deeper into the structure as it was ripped open by the earlier rockets in the volley. The rockets finished, and time stood still. Then the rest of the structure collapsed in on itself, the golden angel falling down into the dark cloud of failed structure. He realized he was hearing the

rumble of the temple's death, a sound to be heard both literally and spiritually in the entire area.

"Oh, no."

The helicopters weren't done. They separated, one coming down his side of the main road, the other parallel on the other side. The Apache had a 30mm autocannon, mounted on the airframe roughly beneath the cockpit. Each house and barn received a stream of 30mm explosive shells, folding in even as it burst into flames. The gunships were obviously aware that they would be receiving ground fire, as they darted from cover behind one high point of ground to another. At one hill, he saw a man with a rifle who had guessed at the Apache's path. The gunship came up on the hill just as the man popped up and fired at the cockpit.

The autocannon, designed to track the pilot's head, darted to point at the rifleman in the blink of an eye. The pilot, obviously startled, unloaded enough 30mm fire to have taken out a tank. The hillside for a disk twenty feet across was just churned and smoking dirt. The Apache turned back to its murderous task.

Brian kept watching. He briefly considered abandoning his car for cover—but what cover? The gunships were destroying buildings, not cars. He was as safe here as anywhere in this suddenly deadly town. And he didn't want to see what was happening, but he still needed to know. The helicopters continued their task of destruction, slowly increasing the distance from Brian.

The helicopters ceased their attack. He guessed it was because they were out of ammunition, rather than any notion of mercy. The two helicopters turned back towards the camp, running low and fast to avoid ground fire. They reached the high school field in tandem, and flared side by side to settle towards the ground.

A dark shape popped over the roof of the high school gym, flying just clear of the building, then immediately dipping to fly mere feet off the ground. *One of the sheriff's drones*, Brian thought. It covered the distance to the Apache helicopters in a few more seconds, then turned into a bright flash of light.

The Apache farther from the explosion was flipped on its side, its main and tail rotors shredded against the ground, and its stubby wing on the ground side folding under. The Apache which had received the brunt of the explosion flipped all the way onto its back. Its fuel storage, designed to self-seal against enemy fire, was overwhelmed, and the whole aircraft erupted in flames.

Brian could hear sirens start up over at the military camp. Suddenly certain that they were going to shoot anything they could find, he pulled from the curb, did a U turn, and headed for his church at top speed.

Time to Bail

Brian reached the church, glad that it was too far out of town to have been a target of the Apache attack. Mrs. Brenton's door opened as he killed the ignition, and she stepped out to look at Brian questioningly.

"The military has decided to go weapons free on our population," Brian told her.

"I know."

"Why are you still here? The two helicopters doing the attack were destroyed, but they have plenty of ways to kill civilians."

"You Catholics cut a deal with those people. You'll be *fine*. I just stayed long enough to tell you I quit."

A car pulled up, driven by a young woman Brian didn't recognize. Mrs. Brenton threw a few bags in the trunk, climbed in the passenger side, and they drove off.

"I didn't cut any deal with them," Brian muttered, watching the car disappear in the distance.

It was time to go.

Brian went inside and quickly gathered his supplies. Including some of the food he kept for bug-out scenarios, his trunk was pretty full. He pulled onto the road, heading away from town and making a beeline for the county line. His lieutenant's assigned area stopped at that border, and hopefully there would be better options somewhere up the road. Since the sergeant said the guard's at the checkpoint were missing, he should be able to get through.

Not a great option, but he felt certain he was just about out of options here.

Brian kept craning his head around, expecting a helicopter to swoop in or just turn him and his car into a ball of fire. But the skies stayed clear. He was pretty sure nobody from the camp had headed out here to replace the border guard which had disappeared. With luck, the exit from the county was still unguarded.

He crested the final hill, and saw the border checkpoint. Manned. His foot came off the gas, and he thought about turning around and trying to find some other way out of the county. In his rear view mirror he saw a jeep pull onto the road from some side road where it had parked, hidden.

Trapped.

"Well, this is going to be great."

He continued forward, carefully slowing when the guard at the post held up his hand. An APC was parked across the road, its roof cannon pointed at Brian's car. A squad spread out on his side of the car, just off the right hand side of a PFC who stepped to the driver's side and motioned for him to roll down the window.

“Private.”

“Father. Travel papers?”

“None. They’re killing civilians, I’m a refugee.”

“Wait here.”

The private stepped away, and got on a radio. He spoke briefly, then returned to Brian.

“Kill your engine.” Brian did. “Wait in your car. If you start the engine, or leave the vehicle, we have orders to shoot you.”

“Understood.”

They all waited in silence. The old military aphorism “hurry up and wait” made military people very good at waiting. They all waited.

The sound of an engine reached them, and presently a HMMWV came into view, presumably from wherever they were set up to run the county he had hoped to reach. An officer climbed out of the passenger’s seat. A first lieutenant. *Probably commands nuclear bombers* Brian guessed, sourly.

“Out of the car. . . *Father.*”

Brian climbed out slowly. The squad with their M16’s were still there, making it feel like a firing squad. The lieutenant just stood there, staring at Brian. Brian looked back mildly.

The sound of another vehicle reached them, coming from Brian’s town. Great. Yet another HMMWV came into view and presently pulled up. The HMMWV was driven by Sergeant Bearson, and from the passenger side out climbed his favorite second lieutenant.

The day just kept improving.

“Lieutenant.”

“Lieutenant. Is this the person of interest?”

“Yes, thank you.” He turned his head, “Sergeant Bearson, handcuff him and ride in back to guard him.”

“Lieutenant.” There was a warning note to the words of the first lieutenant.

“Sir?”

“We have noted his condition. It is a matter of record. Are we clear?”

“Of course, sir.”

And off they went, back the way they had come.

Gloves Off

Enhanced Interrogation

Brian was expecting a return to the high school slash military camp, but they passed straight through town without slowing.

“You missed your turn.”

Nobody answered. Sergeant Bearson sat beside him, staring straight ahead, expressionless. Brian suddenly understood why that senior lieutenant had made it clear that the prisoner transfer was *documented*. He was guessing that shallow graves were on the menu, and that officer wanted no part of it. This was both comforting and alarming, that military personnel were reduced to such considerations.

They turned off the main road, and drove back a quarter mile to a mansion which the military had clearly taken over. A guard at the head of the driveway saluted as they passed, and they pulled off to the side of an outbuilding.

“Sergeant, bring him along.”

They trudged out to a pool house, and stepped inside to find a pair of men waiting. They were certainly military, but had on only t-shirts and drab pants. No names, no insignia. It occurred to Brian that he was joining the unhappy club of people who had suffered at the hands of tyrants.

“So do you guys study people like Stalin, or does this sort of thing just come to you naturally?”

He was expecting it, which didn’t really help when he took the kidney punch. Things went a little hazy, and he realized he was on the floor.

“Sir!”

“At *ease*, sergeant. The prisoner was resisting. You’re dismissed.”

There was a pause. “Sir.” Brian could see a figure departing the building.

Things after that became a blur. Back in the old days, Brian remembered the USA using waterboarding under the name of “enhanced interrogation”. Numerous people with personal experience had stated—even testified under oath—that it was torture. Brian joined the club of people ready to confirm this sentiment.

The strange thing was that they were pretending that this was an interrogation. But Brian knew absolutely nothing of interest to them, which made the whole exercise both unpleasant and absurd.

He had been bound to a stout, steel chair for the festivities. They’d come and go, often leaving him alone in the room. But this time, he realized that it had been quite a while since he’d seen or heard anybody. He was too sore to try

hard, but he tested his bonds and found everything perfectly tight. Being a prisoner was both terrifying and tedious.

A figure showed at one of the front windows of this pool house. *Here we go again* he thought.

The figure slunk past, alert and predatory. Brian was galvanized with a sudden hope. The figure came back, and the door was open and the figure in the room before he could even blink. Bishop cleared the room, then turned to Brian.

“Padre. Sorry about that, they had too many guards out. I can’t figure why they left, so I had to come in pretty slow and careful.”

As he spoke, Bishop was cutting ropes, then brought out a leatherman to deal with some restraining wires. Brian was suddenly free, and sagged. Bishop caught him, gently supporting him until he could gather a little strength.

“Mrs. Brenton?” Bishop called in a low voice.

A second figure came to the door, holding a large, dark bag. Mrs. Brenton entered, expressionless as usual. Brian was suddenly grateful for this one, unchanging part of the universe. She put her bag down beside Brian, then carefully checked him over, assembling a prioritized list of damages.

“He’s OK,” she pronounced.

She went back to work, stitching a few places, cleaning up a little blood.

“This’ll help with the pain, swelling, and bruising. Don’t go all manly on me and tell me you’ll tough it out.”

She gave him a shot. Brian realized he had seen her doing combat medic duty, field surgery, and now—in the big picture—minor boo-boo’s. She wasn’t a doctor, and was way beyond a nurse.

“18 Delta?” These were the famed medics of the US special forces. Operating well away from the regular military medical system, they were trained to treat and heal, rather than just stabilize and transport.

“My brother. I got access to some of the training.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry I lumped you in with your church. That wasn’t fair.”

“Consider us even. I know you didn’t have to be here.”

Brian realized that he’d lost track of Bishop, who was suddenly back in from the outside. He’d been keeping an eye on the security situation.

“Nobody around, but we should go. This should be a trap.”

Brian, with both of them supporting him, walked out to the front of the house. A black pickup pulled up, they all three climbed into the back, and off they went.

Gathering Strength

Brian assumed they would head out into some dark, hidden Mormon cave where they'd never be found. Instead, they drive back towards Brian's church.

"Um, Bishop? You *know* they'll find me if I 'hide' at my church?"

"Padre, if they didn't want you free, they wouldn't have left you alone for us to pick up. Beside which, this is Saturday. You need to work on your sermon for tomorrow's service."

The Bishop's face was calm, serene even. Mrs. Brenton's face was back to being blank.

"No sick day, huh?"

Bishop turned to look at him with a hint of severity.

"They blew up our temple, Padre. You have the last church standing, so we're all looking to you for a little boost in our spiritual outlook. Where's your community spirit?"

Brian waved surrender as they pulled into his parking lot. His legs had cramped again, so they had to support him to his kitchen table. Mrs. Brenton checked him over again, with more care. He guessed he was fine, because then they helped him into bed, Mrs. Brenton fading back and Bishop helping him change. Brian lay back, exhausted.

"I forgot to work on my sermon."

"You know what you're going to say."

And, thinking about it, he did. He fell asleep.

Hours later, in those dark, silent hours of the night, he woke up in a panic. His heart was beating wildly, and he was back somewhere bad. A little light came in through his open door, and Mrs. Brenton was sitting beside his bed. She put aside a book and held his hand.

"Look at me, Mrs. Brenton. I'm not holding up much of a Catholic example for you big, tough Mormons."

She handed him a pill, and a glass of water. He took the pill, drank, then lay back in his bed.

"You're not bad for a Catholic, Father. And I could tell you stories."

Brian faded out, wondering about those stories.

The Sermon

He woke slowly. Whatever that pill was, it had let him sleep through the rest of the night, but he woke up without grogginess. He bolted upright, then saw it

was hours until his service. He lay back down, realizing that most of his aches and pains had faded.

Mrs. Brenton knocked, then opened his door and entered.

“There’s some breakfast ready for you, Father.”

By the time he got dressed and out to the kitchen, she was gone. But there were eggs and toast and coffee on the table, and he set to with a will. He then went over to his desk, and wrote out his sermon outline.

With about 45 minutes until the mass, he realized he was hearing a *lot* of car noises outside. He opened his door to see the entire lot filled with cars, people streaming towards his church. Somebody spotted him and saved, “Hi, Father!” Others joined in, it eventually becoming a cheer. He waved back, and closed the door, dabbing tears from his eyes. Good people.

The crowd kept building, people filling the parking lot and all the open space beyond. Somebody had brought a sound system, and speakers were set up in front of the church so everybody could hear. He used the side passage from his rooms to reach the sacristy, then finished putting on his robes, checking himself in the mirror. He thought he looked a bit like Rocky after the big fight in the first movie.

It was time.

He opened the door and stepped out of the sacristy and up to the chancel, bowing, then turning to stand at the altar, facing the crowd. A big crowd. The church was filled front to back and side to side. The doors in back were open, and a wall of people filled the parking area, too.

Everybody had obviously heard about his adventure in captivity, and his face was being studied with great care. Some people with shock, some with anger. A few of the country boys were looking at his beaten up face with a grin which said “boy, does that bring back memories?”. Brian smiled, suddenly feeling better.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

“Amen!”

The mass proceeded normally. Brian had no idea what percent of the audience was Catholic, but it seemed that every Mormon in the county had done a little studying, and they participated like a practiced Catholic congregation. Mrs. Brenton had been busy, and two of his congregation came up to act as lectors for the first and second readings.

The gospel was an interesting one; almost everybody knew about the original 12 apostles. This reading was about “the 72”, sent in pairs, to go out into the world to heal and teach that the Kingdom of God was at hand. And woe betide those who rejected them.

He stepped out to stand in front of all these faithful, and he let them study him for a few moments.

“I studied self defense for a few years. My lessons were with a great warrior, and a great teacher. I was a mediocre student, but he taught me what he could. One day he had us face each other, hands in, defensive.” Brian demonstrated.

“Then he told me to do attempt probing strikes; to try and tap him on a body part. I did, and he blocked. But he blocked *hard*; not to deflect, but with a hard *snap* which left a bruise. When you’re facing your Datu, you don’t break off or complain. You stay in the lesson until they *tell* you the lesson is finished.”

“So I kept attempting strikes, and taking big, painful bruises, for maybe a dozen times. We then moved on to other things.”

“Years later, I found an article by him in a martial arts publication. One of the things he talked about was teaching his students to stay in the fight after getting hit—even hit hard. And that was what he was doing that day: helping me learn what it’s like to get hurt, and helping me learn that being hurt is just part of the fight. You learn about it just like you learn strikes and blocks.”

“So Jesus sent out his 72, and I’m sure some of them had grateful hosts, and but others were treated badly. My knowledge of history lets me guess that some of them were treated *very* badly. But they were sent, and they kept the faith.”

“I’ve been beaten up by some thugs. We’ve had our community burned and blasted by more of the same thugs. We’ve taken some hits, haven’t we?” Brian twisted his head to show off both sides of his face. “But that hasn’t convinced me I’m done. In fact, it makes me realize that I’m only getting started. How about you?”

The church exploded in defiant cheers.

He led them through the Apostles Creed (which he figured was a little closer to Mormonism than the Nicene Creed) and was pretty sure he heard “the holy *Mormon* church” swapped in, but hey, you say “po-tay-toe” and I say “po-tah-toe”.

The remaining question in his mind was what would happen with Holy Communion. He didn’t advise visitors on the protocol, instead simply stepping to the front to receive any Communicants.

There was a stir in the crowd outside the back doors, and a rumbling voice ordering them to make way. Bishop stepped through the doorway, dressed in some sort of robes, and proceeded towards Brian.

That man sure can make an entrance Brian mused.

Bishop strode up the central aisle to about the halfway mark, knelt and crossed himself, then walked to stand before Brian. He watched Brian with a calm face, then held out his hand.

“The Body of Christ.” Brian handed him a Host.

“Amen.” Bishop ate the wafer, crossed himself again, then turned to sit in an open place which had suddenly appeared.

The whole crowd stood up and joined the line. Brian did some quick math, and quickly motioned to the two lectors. He quickly blessed them and commissioned them as Eucharistic ministers, then positioned them to the far left and right ends of the chancel. The word had passed to the crowd outside, and Brian was doing more math. They were totally going to run out of hosts, even once he tapped the reserve in the tabernacle. He held up his hand for the line to wait, then quickly stepped to each lector/minister. He used a low whisper.

“The host is equally valid in whole or part. Give each communicant the smallest bit, and it will still be fully valid. Otherwise we’ll run out.”

He had blessed—by far—the largest amount of hosts ever, but by the end he was taking minute pecks off the last handful of hosts. But they didn’t run out.

Everybody was back at their pews, and most were kneeling and praying. Brian was just finishing the clearing of the altar when when a *BOOM* went off in the distance. It was answered with a crackle of automatic weapons fire. Everybody got up, folded up the kneelers, and looked to Bishop, who stepped out in the aisle.

“Sorry, Padre. Please follow along.” His attention turned to his flock. “People, on me!” He turned and headed out of the church at a fast walk.

Bishop passed the frontmost pews, and the people in them streamed out to follow him. Each pew in turn filled in at the tail as all the previous people had passed. The church emptied in remarkably short period of time, Brian following at the very tail.

Outside, cars were filling up and pulling out. Brian just caught sight of Bishop’s big truck before it disappeared down the road, heading away from town. There was a solid wall of cars, across both lanes, all the the church and surrounding street parking clearing out.

Brian was still in his robes—no car keys, no wallet. He was just thinking of darting back into his bedroom for them when Mrs. Brenton pulled up in her own truck.

“Father, *in.*”

Brian got in. She accelerated hard out of the lot, quickly catching up with the rest of the cars.

Military Action

Mrs. Brenton looked sidelong at Brian, and took pity.

“There’s some caves out here, and we even let them know we have a *cache of weapons*.” she lowered her voice dramatically.

“How far?”

“Another mile. Unfortunately, there’s a pretty exposed valley before we get there. If they deployed their APC’s, their tank, maybe even sent in those new Apaches we don’t know they have available. . . .”

“The Sheriff.”

“You should put your faith in God, Father.”

“God can work *through* man. That sheriff probably is nobody to bet against.”

She laughed, the first time he’d seen her do that. They reached the top of a rise, and were looking down into the valley she had mentioned. Since they were at the very tail of the convoy, she was able to just pull to the side of the road and stop.

Below, the flow of cars had widened out to also use the shoulder on each side, a wall of vehicles four across, racing to get past the valley to safety in the caves. If anything showed up, this would be a shooting gallery. Brian saw three nearby hilltops, each with a single truck parked on top. A single figure sat inside each vehicle, probably waiting to jump out and provide cover for the people below.

One truck exploded, then the second, and then the third. Three fireballs, and pieces of truck raining down to earth in a wide radius.

“ROE satisfied, showtime.” Mrs. Brenton sounded satisfied.

Brian knew ROE was “rules of engagement”, and realized that killing those trucks with their drivers crossed some sort of line. One Apache helicopter floated up over the hilltop of its kill and swept forward. A second, then a third, then a fourth attack helicopter proceeded in a menacing line towards the convoy in the valley.

From a nearer hill to their left, a pair of APC’s gunned their engines to crest their own hill, and also started their run down towards the convoy. Brian’s attention was suddenly on a roaring whine accompanying the shuddering of the ground underneath their car. An M1A2 battle tank—probably the one from the camp—came into view, coming right up the road they’d used, in hot pursuit.

“Oh, —,” exclaimed Mrs. Brenton, using a word which was common among military people, but very rare indeed among Mormon woman. “Out!” she shouted, popping her door in a frantic rush.

Nobody had to tell Brian twice. They scrambled away from the car, Brian’s sacramental robes fluttering wildly with his desperate speed. They cut to a low which took them back around to a place where they could again see the valley, but with a low mound of dirt between them and their car and the tank.

The tank fired its main gun. It was so sudden and loud that they felt it as a physical punch. Things started raining down, and it took them a moment to realize it was the truck they had just abandoned.

The Apache's had advanced, probably very near to opening fire, when four dark blurs—moving far too fast to see any detail—intersected, one with each helicopter. All four burst into fire, parts flying as they dropped to the ground as wreckage. The tank they had run from, thankfully on the other side of this low rise, exploded. The sound was deafening—even louder than the demise of their vehicle. Brian couldn't imagine what it would have sounded like without the mound of earth between them and the tank.

They turned their eyes to the APC's, the last attack element in a suddenly depleted force. They heard the whup-whup of more helicopters, and a pair swept right past them. Brian could see that, unlike all the Apaches they had seen to this point, there were Hellfire missiles on one mount point on each side. Each helicopter fired a single missile, one per APC, and the missiles lanced across the distance, detonating each APC, which simply belched fire and fell to pieces.

The Apaches separated, each orbiting in defensive overwatch for the people in the valley below. A pair of jets screamed by at low altitude, answering the question of what had shot down the other Apaches. Single engine, so probably F-16's, Brian figured. They curved upward and also separated, doubtless providing their own higher overwatch.

Over the next hour, everybody got turned around, and all the cars headed back towards town. This time, it was only using the single legal lane, and nobody needed to speed.

A shiny truck pulled off to the side, and Bishop rolled down his window.

“Hey! One of those rotorheads called in that you lost your vehicle. C'mon, we can go shopping.” Bishop laughed. They climbed in, and were soon back at the church. They dropped off Brian, then Bishop and Mrs. Brenton headed onward into town. It struck Brian that it was entirely possible that he'd actually take her straight on to do some car (well, truck) shopping.

Debrief and Onward

Interlude at the Church

The figure of speech was “the quiet before the storm”, but this was “the quiet *after* the storm”. Brian tended his little garden, wrote some sermons, gave some masses. His face improved greatly, the bruises fading. Mrs. Brenton refused to take her job back, but came by and gave Brian a little medical care.

The Sheriff was around, although Brian had yet to lay eyes on him. Bishop came by, but could never stay long. He was very busy repairing all the damage, and helping families who had been harmed in the attacks. The good news was

that all of the houses—and the temple—had been evacuated well in advance of the military rampage.

“I’m sorry about those men in the trucks, though.”

Bishop snorted. “We had to get them to use military force against a civilian target which was presenting no immediate threat. *That* was the green light for using military force back against them. We leaked that some Stingers were on the loose, to tease them into shooting first and never asking questions. Those trucks did *not* have any missiles in them, but they *did* have dummies. Mannequins.”

Brian felt his heart relax a little. “Between you and the Sheriff, you handled an overwhelming force with incredibly light casualties. And the military seems to have had a change of heart.”

The high school had been returned to the community, with some burnt patches where the helicopters had been destroyed, and a parking lot which was going to need a complete resurfacing. Amazingly, the military had scheduled some SeaBee’s to come in and restore the campus, plus start the process of rebuilding all the ruined houses.

They had offered to build a replacement temple, and had been assured that it would be blown up if they tried it. The military was going to instead be writing a big check, and the Mormons would take it from there.

Bishop shrugged. “We actually *did* have force superiority. But we couldn’t use it until they crossed the line. Which they very obligingly did. Beginner’s luck.”

“Hah! I’m not military, but even *I* can see the handiwork of professionals. I just can’t figure out if you happened to be here, or if some mastermind was at work.”

The Bishop’s smile was inscrutable. “You’ll have to take that up with the Sheriff.”

A Visit from the Diocese

Brian had played it pretty fast and loose with his last service before the big attack. He had hoped it could all be swept under the rug, lost in all the ensuing excitement. But one afternoon, he heard somebody knock at his door. He looked sideways past the curtain of the kitchen window, and saw a dark Buick parked out front.

“They don’t even *make* those things any more.”

He opened the door to find a severe man in black shirt and pants, with clerical collar.

“Mr. Linse?”

“*Father* Linse.”

“Hmm, yes. This is for you, *Mister* Linse.”

The man handed a small folder to Brian. He opened it, and discovered a declaration of nullity. For him. Theologically, things like marriage and Holy Orders were permanent. They were sacraments before God, and the Church had no power to dissolve them.

But, humans being humans, there were angles to play. The most common was to declare that the sacrament was invalid, and therefore had never occurred. Thus, although you couldn't say that it had gone away, you *could* say that it had never been.

The local Bishop had very kindly looked into Brian's affairs, discovered that his ordination was invalid, and sent it all the way up, ultimately reaching Rome. And it came all the way back down, with a copy now hand-delivered to Brian. In the corridors of power within the Catholic Church, he was not a priest—had never *been* a priest.

"You didn't think to involve *me* in the proceedings?"

The diocesan official smirked. "Due to the national emergency, your participation was not possible. The Bishop appointed an advocate to represent you. I assure you he did an excellent job, but the facts were incontrovertible."

"I bet."

"So. Here's another document for you."

He handed across an envelope. Brian opened it to find a notice of immediate eviction.

"I'll watch while you gather your possessions. And *only* your possessions."

For one brief moment, Brian wanted to punch this nasty little official right in the face. And then laughter and joy bubbled up, and his enjoyment of the absurd dissolved his anger. He took off his collar. They weren't really all that comfortable, so that was fine.

"I have to warn you—prepare to be bored."

And, indeed, his packing was entirely prosaic. The only moment of excitement was when Brian gathered his weapons. The official gave a little squeak.

His reassuring "relax, only my concealed carry is loaded" was met with a blank stare.

Brian dragged three duffels out to the curb.

"All the way off the property, please."

"This is the public right-of-way." He pulled the church keyring out of his pocket, and offered it to the official, who was standing a safe ten feet away from Brian.

"Keep them. We're changing all the locks anyway."

Brian laughed, and put the keys back away. “Thanks for the memento, then.” He heard a truck approaching, and was entirely unsurprised to see Bishop pulling up.

“Howdy, Padre! Need a lift?”

“I’m not a ‘padre’ any more.”

Bishop turned a cold stare on the little man in the background, who was now trying to be inconspicuous. “Like I care what that pencil neck thinks, *Padre?*”

Brian threw his dunnage into the back of the truck, then climbed into the passenger side. He waved goodbye to the petty diocesan tyrant as Bishop revved the truck hard, and Brian was pretty sure the little man from the diocese got sprayed with a plume of driveway gravel. He watched the church shrink and disappear in the rear view mirror—both literally and figuratively.

Saying Goodbye to the Bishop

Brian tried to keep his heart light, but that letter from the Catholic power structure stung. Bishop glanced at him from time to time, reading his mood, and giving him some silence to think. Finally he cleared his throat, and Brian looked over.

“Y’know, Padre. I know just a bang-up Church with some openings...”

“Thanks, Bishop. I really appreciate that. The Catholic Church thinks they’re done with me. They wish. Wait’ll they find out that I’ve only just started with *them.*”

“Looks like they’ve made their peace with the kind of people who would shoot up temples and residences. Your church building’s in one piece, which is no coincidence at all. They bought some protection from the kind of people who *sell* protection.”

“I know. Just like they made their peace with the Nazis. Less than a century later, and we’re right back to it. It’s a mess, but I still believe it’s worth fixing.”

“Let us know if you need help.” Bishop looked hard at Brian. “That’s not me running my mouth. That came right down the chain from the top.”

They pulled into Bishop’s driveway, and followed it a half mile to his house. It was a rambler, built with several generations of add-ons. There were other houses on the property; his older children and their families lived here, too. Brian had been here many times for meals, but he and Bishop usually did their talking at Brian’s place. Bishop’s compound hummed with the lives of all the parts of his family. Happy, but rarely quiet.

Bishop’s wife, Mary, came out to greet them.

“Brian! Did they give you the boot?”

“Mary!” Bishop yelled.

Brian smiled, and handed her his diocesan letter. She read it and handed it back, her face angry and dangerous. She looked at Bishop.

“*Nobody* goes to anything Catholic in our county. *Nobody*. You hear me, Clarence?”

Brian knew Bishop hated his first name being used, and suppressed a grin. But Bishop didn’t even notice the use of his name, just nodding.

“It’s already handled.”

There was wine—for Brian—and presently dinner. All the generations of the family gathered, nearly filling the very large dining room and table. The normalcy and cheerful business of this extended family was very comforting.

At one point Brian had a chance to speak a word to Bishop.

“You know, I wonder how they didn’t come here with their Apaches and ruin your day?”

“That rumor about Stingers... well, the thought of a shoulder launched missile just made them slow and careful. They would have gotten around to it, but we made them think they had more time than they actually had.”

Brian reached over for his wine glass. “Confusion to the enemy!”

He realized that everybody had raised their glasses, “Confusion to the enemy!” they all cheered.

Saying Goodbye to the Sheriff

Bishop had not offered to bring his bags in, so Brian wasn’t surprised when after dinner Bishop casually suggested they take a look at something of interest. They climbed in his truck, and set off out deeper into the country. It was dark and empty.

Presently they reached a long stretch of straight and level road, with a surface in excellent condition. A police car was parked on the shoulder up ahead.

“Whaddya think, Padre? I could blow past him at 120.”

Brian grinned. “I think the Sheriff would never let you live that down.”

They slowed down, and pulled alongside the cruiser. The Sheriff stepped out as Brian and Bishop climbed out of the truck. Brian faced the Sheriff as Bishop stepped away to unload Brian’s bags. Brian realized that although it was the Sheriff, his uniform was different. He scanned the shirt, the shoulders, then froze and looked again. Military. Army. Two... stars?

“Father? Walk with me for a moment.” The Sheriff turned to start walking alongside the road, Brian taking a few quick steps to take his place beside him.

“Congratulations on the promotion, general.”

The Sheriff shook his head. “Reactivation.”

Brian stayed quiet as they walked slowly, the night quiet around them except for the noises of insects.

“Father, it’s been an honor to have you as our guest.”

“Thank you. You and Bishop are a rare pair, even by Mormon standards.”

The Sheriff nodded. “You understand that we needed to draw out—make concrete—what the other side’s intentions were?”

“Thus the intersection of a very junior officer on their side with a bunch of military hardware, a deeply faithful community led by an infantry general and—unless I miss my guess—his trustworthy NCO. You gave them rope and let them tie their own noose.”

“Yes.”

“In that first encounter, before the official military even got there, you used me as bait. If those squads had used full auto fire, I wouldn’t have made it.”

“I *told* you the necessary timing. You delayed, and put yourself in additional danger. You still drew them into position for our enfilade fire, so the plan was fine. I would have regretted your death.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re being ironic, Father. Let me clarify a few things for you. First, you’re not a civilian any more. You’ve picked a side, and had your life put in jeopardy because of your choice. You need to stop thinking like a civilian.”

“Second, as a fighter of the cause, you *will* have your life in danger. I know about those assassins, and then under my protection you twice have been right up against deadly force fielded by the other side. Accept it. Sometimes you’ll be in danger, sometimes you’ll be a danger to the other side. It’s a justifiable, even noble, way to use your life.”

“Third, you left those two soldiers up on that hill crest when you continued your run to the quarry. A civilian can run away and leave the rest of the work to others. You used civilian thinking there, and that’s no longer acceptable. You take care of threats to our side, and you keep at it until the issue is *settled*. Clear, Father?”

Brian was taken aback. He caught his breath, and then answered, “Clear, General.”

“Good. That completes our verbal counseling session. In general, I find many promising aspects in your development.”

“Thank you, General. May I ask a question?”

“Proceed.”

“When our big group ran into that valley with Apaches and tanks closing in . . . what if your forces had been delayed even a minute? They could have dropped a *lot* of people.”

The General stopped, standing ramrod straight, and looked into the distance.

“This is *war*, Father. And I’m a *general*. Every officer knows the priorities: mission, men, me. The mission was to create an undeniable abuse of military force against civilians—*significant* force. Within that, I maximized the safety of the people under my care, and did that by having overwhelming force at hand. But if they had killed my whole community before my forces could respond, the mission would still be a success.”

Brian stared at him with shock.

“You’re starting to understand, Father. You’re familiar with the term a ‘doormat Christian’? That’s not me. I’m still trying to figure out if I can be any kind of Christian at all. Maybe I just win wars and then go to hell.”

He pivoted, and they began walking back towards the cars. A faint whisper of sound reached them, and Brian squinted his eyes, trying to spot something, anything, in the night sky. He finally made out a dark shape, detectable only by the stars in the sky which were briefly blocked as this *something* passed.

They reached the cars, and stood facing the road. A faint squeak reached them from the distance to their right, and as Brian peered into the night, a pitch black airplane rolled toward them up the road. It had a propeller which was still turning, but it made only the faintest humming sound. The body of the airplane was deep black, and all the surfaces were rounded.

“You keep us in your prayers, Father.”

The airplane pulled up, the humming propeller slowing. Brian could see an elongated canopy up top, and the back half of it slide back, exposing a place for a passenger to sit. The General guided Brian to the side of the plane, and pointed to the soft, black rubbery steps moulded into the body of the airframe. Companion handholds beside each step made it easy enough to climb up and reach the passenger seat.

Bishop came by, carrying Brian’s bags. He opened a compartment in the belly of the airplane, and stowed them away, using elastic bands to securely strap them in place.

Brian climbed up, and settled gingerly into his seat in the plane. The General had followed him up, and reached beside Brian to pull out some belts.

“Let’s get you set up, Father.”

As the General pulled and adjusted, he continued, “I know how to fight the coming war. I can *probably* win the coming war. But that’s the *kinetic* part of

it—you know, bullets and lanes of fire.” The General finished his adjustments, and looked at Brian. “In War College we called it the information war. But it isn’t even that, really. We’re losing the *spiritual* war, Father. I can’t believe the things which are accepted—embraced—by my fellow citizens.”

The General straightened up, prepared to climb back down off the plane, “I win my kind of war, we turn the clock back some years, and all of this mess will be back in a generation or two. Or we create that whole Handmaid’s Tale world they’re always accusing us of pursuing. Neither option is good enough.”

“You and your type need to go figure out how to fight and win a spiritual war, Father. Myself and Bishop just aren’t seeing how it can be done. We’ll win you some time, but you and the other recruits like you—you need to get busy.”

The General clambered down the plane’s steps, then pounded the flat of his hand on the side of the plane, BOOM-BOOM, then stepped away.

The canopy slid back into place, enclosing Brian. A mild rising hum reached his ears, and the plane accelerated down the road, picking up speed. The nose rotated up, and they lifted into the sky, an almost invisible black lozenge in the night sky.

Brian twisted in his seat to look out the side. He caught a glimpse of his own church—well, not *his* any more—and then they were out into dark countryside. He mused that he didn’t even know where he was going, and it didn’t worry him at all. He was going where he needed to be.

The End

Thanks for reading my book! As suggested by the subtitle, this is the first of a set of books—the current plan is a trilogy. I also have a trilogy of children’s books, with the first one written but begging for some chapter art. (I’m not an artist, so that means I need to go beg or buy some art for it.)

My HHP (Humble Home Page) is:

<https://vsta.org/andy/>

When Brian returns, expect the story to head South and West.