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14 notes



"FOURTEEN NOTES"

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Part one

1.1

My name is Giuseppe and I am a humble man.

I wait patiently for the heavy door to open and archbishop Lucka to invite me to his office. Despite the time passing I don't feel restless. The very thought of feeling impatient seems insignificant. Here, in the very heart of the Eternal City, whose stones witnessed the passing centuries, time seems to pass differently. Slower. Each time I pass the majestic walls of the Vatican I have the impression that the eyes of history follow me around.

This specific tingling in the nape of my neck continues. I feel it now, as I wait on the bench in the hallway, in the north wing of one of the administrative buildings of the Holy See, waiting for my audience.

I examine the office door. I let my eyes slide among the simple, hard door frame and solid door panel made of dark mahogany and imagine what it would feel like to slide my finger along it. I think of the slick surface and warmth of the precious wood, managing to resist the urge to come closer and stretch my arm out. I know that I am being discretely watched and such behaviour would come off as ridiculous.

I don't have to imagine what is waiting behind the door. I remember every detail.

Someone once said that archbishop Lucka's office has the same character as its owner and in a way expresses his personality.

I couldn't agree more. It is probable the dignitary's every guest must have noticed this correlation.

I recall the sight of his office very clearly, as if I've been there yesterday. The spacious and elegant room has been decorated very tastefully; its host, despite his high position in the Vatican hierarchy, remained modest and resisted the

temptation to surround himself with luxury and splendour. Nevertheless, the office made a great impression on me the first time I was there.

The central place of the room which I am about to enter is occupied by a large desk. It is always empty. Archbishop Lucka is known for his fondness for order; just as in his everyday work he does not need to surround himself with unnecessary, distracting scraps of paper, he does not allow himself to clutter his mind. Despite the many years that have passed, he is still considered to possess one of the sharpest minds in the Vatican. I can see him sitting at his desk, upright, with his eyes narrowed, carefully wording the reply to a difficult question with a serious, grave look on his face.

He is a man of shadow. Every time I was in his office, and there have already been dozens of such visits, it was always dim and heavy curtains covered the windows. That I also find quite significant.

Few people realise how important a figure archbishop Lucka is due to his function as Head of Division Two of the Vatican State Secretary. He is the de facto counterpart of the state's Minister of the Interior. Not much happens behind the walls of the Vatican without him knowing; all strings come together in one place, behind that dark mahogany door. In the dimness of his office, archbishop Lucka takes decisions which are often of key importance to the functioning of the church-state. However, he never manifests what power he has and always keeps his distance. Just as he rarely lets sunshine lighten his office, he prefers to avoid being in the spotlight and, whenever possible, it is his personal secretary who handles all contact with media representatives. I can only guess whether it is caused by caution or just his reluctance towards public appearances.

The selection of paintings decorating the walls of his office is circumspect and symbolic. Along exquisite, in many instances centuries-old reproductions of works of masters of the Renaissance: Raphael Santi, Donato Bramante and Michelangelo, as well as Albrecht Dürer and Robert Campin (he would say that it did not seem proper to limit himself to Italian painters), archbishop Lucka would also include modern art.

I remember my first audience in his office. He noticed how surprised I was to see reproductions of Jackson Pollock's art and he laughed out loud.

'The fact that I wear a clerical collar does not mean that I am not interested in life outside the Church,' he said. 'And in art itself I see some sacredness, a divine element. The same one in all ages, just expressed by different means, a different artistic code..'

We chatted a bit about the history of painting, which helped us break the ice; we saw each other for the first time in a long while and I did not even attempt to conceal my intimidation, which was obvious particularly given the circumstances the previous time we met. The archbishop confessed that art history is one of his greatest passions, and contemplating exquisite paintings not only lets him relax and calms him down but is also a source of inspiration and energy that he needs for his work.

- Being around modern art is particularly valuable for a person in my position, dear Giuseppe - he said. - The Vatican cannot solely focus on celebrating the tradition, although, obviously, we must remember our origins. The Vatican must constantly face new challenges brought by the modern times, complicated as they may be. Hence the expressive abstractionist right next to the Renaissance masters. Art constantly reminds me of my tasks and responsibilities,

Giuseppe. It forces me time and again to think outside the box.

I had to agree with that. As a person close to the Vatican I knew how wrong everyone was who thought that the church-state was a rigid creation which could not keep up with the pace of the modern world. Respect for tradition and ceremony, though important, does not preclude making use of the latest technological achievements. The Vatican never was against science and progress, contrary to many unfavourable opinions, which are usually expressed by those who don't have the slightest idea about it.

From the room adjacent to archbishop Lucka's office come the sounds of computer keyboards and telephone conversation chatter is audible time and again. That is the Vatican's second face, usually unnoticed, and even if noticed, disdained.

It is the face of a methodical professional, radiant due to the glow of the computer screen rather than eternal light. Room Two, as it's usually referred to, is filled with people. Many wear clerical collars, but not all of them; the archbishop also contracts many lay people. They live in various districts of Rome and when they enter the walls of the Vatican, they swipe their access magnetic cards. There are women among them. What is more, there are non-believers among them - when hiring employees to Section Two, the Vatican applies completely different criteria altogether. It is the elite, the best analysts, graduates of top schools, often with experience in international corporations. They perform their work diligently and professionally and for that they are handsomely rewarded. They collect and aggregate information crucial for the work of the head section of the Secretary of State. They sometimes joke among themselves at coffee breaks that they work in the most powerful enterprise of all: God's Corporation.

I wandered what was occupying archbishop Lucka so much. Never before did I have to wait so long for an audience, usually I was ushered in at exactly the agreed hour. Meanwhile it was already a quarter past the appointment time.

The issues bothering the hierarch most certainly were not something mere mortals should be pondering about. On the other hand, in our curt conversation over the phone the archbishop insisted how important it was to meet today, so he must have been pressed for time.

I had never thought about it before. Was something extraordinary happening? Suddenly I have the impression that telephones in Room Two ring half a tone quieter than usually. The tapping sound of the keyboards strikes me as more nervous, arrhythmical, interrupted. Through the half-open door I can see people getting to their feet time and again. I can hear the thumping noise of chairs being moved.

But it's probably just my imagination. A bit weary due to the waiting, although far from impatient. Who am I, anyway, to rush archbishop Lucka, be it even in my thoughts? Obviously, I simply started making up dramatic scenarios.

No need for that. I should, after all, remain calm and sharp.

And there I go: the dark door to the archbishop's office opens. His personal secretary and assistant, Casemiro is at the door. The clerical collar almost glares against the backdrop of his elegant black shirt. With a polite gesture Casemiro invites me inside.

I enter the room, suddenly convinced that this meeting would be more important than all the previous ones.

1.2

All the details are there; the office looks exactly the way I remembered it. God blessed me with exceptional memory.

The archbishop is behind his desk. The drawn curtains bar the afternoon sunlight; only single light beams cut through the dusk. Strong, concentrated light from a lamp falls on the desk. Covering the windows despite the sunny weather is another sign of caution, is the archbishop afraid that spies with the right equipment could photograph the documents he is working on from afar? The curtains constitute a countermeasure against listening-in. Lasers reading the delicate vibrations of glass induced by sound of speech constitute regular working tools of secret services.

The hierarch rises from behind his desk and smiles mildly when he sees me. I move forward, accompanied by Casemiro's watchful gaze and the inscrutable stares coming from the pictures on the walls. I still feel the tingling in the nape of my neck, which it is impossible to get rid off in the Vatican.

'Giuseppe,' says archbishop Lucka, reaching out his hand. We greet each other; he embraces me and gives me a pat on the back. I don't reciprocate the gesture; I am far too humbled for that.

'Your Excellency,' I reply. My voice sounds stiff, far from natural; I'm surprised at myself.

The archbishop points me to the chair and I sit in front of him, with the smooth surface of the precious wood between us.

'I am sorry to have kept you waiting. Certain... events took place which somewhat disrupted my plans,' the smile left his face. 'That is why, yet again, I must ask for your assistance.'

'Whatever you need, Excellency.'

The archbishop looked up, looks deeper into the room, towards the door. I don't turn around and just hear fast footsteps and hasty words, someone came up to Casemiro and handed him something.

After a moment the assistant approaches the desk and stands next to me. He is holding a stack of print-outs.

'Please forgive me, Your Excellency,' Casemiro says. His smooth voice is unobtrusive and blends in well. This is the reviewed annex to the latest report prepared by group one.

The archbishop nods. He takes the pile of papers from the assistant and places it on the desk.

'Forgive me, Giuseppe. I absolutely must read this document immediately.'

It seems to me that the hierarch is slightly nervous, maybe concerned.

'But of course, Your Excellency,' I say. 'I understand perfectly. I will wait outside...'

I want to get up, but archbishop Lucka stops me with a gesture.

'It will take just a moment, my friend. Casemiro, please serve some water, our friend must be thirsty.'

I am not thirsty at all but I don't dare to refuse.

The archbishop starts reading. His focused gaze covers whole parts of the text like a scanner - quickly and methodically. For a moment the hierarch stops reading, looks me in the eye, sighs and goes on reading.

I realise that the situation must indeed be exceptional.

I don't know any other person whose gaze would be that sharp and penetrating; a gaze there is no running away from.

I remember the first time I saw that gaze twenty years ago perfectly.

On that particular spring day I had tried to kill myself.

Being young, naïve and desperate, I was convinced that nothing could stop me from taking my life. I thought that the world had clearly showed me how unnecessary it finds me and continuing the farce that was my life was pointless.

The woman with whom I had wanted to grow old walked out on me. She left me. She made it clear that she was leaving for

good. I realised that there was no point in fooling myself anymore and that there was no hope left. Paradoxically that brought me some relief by ending the emotional struggle I had been experiencing for weeks. I had nothing to fight for anymore. The realisation that it can't get any worse can offer such strange, bitter comfort.

However, when I thought that all I had to do is endure the pain, waiting for time to heal the wounds, the Piccola Lirica theatre where I worked decided to let me go. Due to drastic budget cuts for the new season, the theatre's profile was being changed. The classic repertoire was to be abandoned and my countertenor, although supposedly "quite possibly the most superb in the whole of Italy", was no longer needed. I couldn't possibly imagine myself doing anything else. Piccola Lirica was my second home. Naturally, finding employment in another theatre would just be a matter of time but that was not the point. I loved that stage, that backstage, the audience. I loved it all like you love a woman.

Today I obviously realise how limited I was at that time, but I felt unmistakably that I had just lost the two cores of my whole world and that I was falling into a dark, infinite abyss. Arduous rehearsals, voice tuning practice and endless repeating of the practiced songs and then looking forward to the première of a new show; the evening meetings with my beautiful Editt, her smile which made the cheap wine we drank taste like divine ambrosia - that was my whole life. Editt and Piccola Lirica defined me, made me who I was. By losing them I lost myself completely.

The sun was still low when I descended to the Termini subway station. The morning rush hour was over but it was still quite crowded, trains were arriving and departing, commuters were getting on and off. People preoccupied with their own affairs were headed towards the city; others were running towards the train station. Everything was happening

somewhere beside me, as if behind thick glass and it didn't concern me in any way. I was sitting on a bench, numb as a lizard after a cold, sleepless night.

At one point I felt an impulse; something told me I had nothing to wait for anymore. I got up from the bench. The loudspeakers had just announced the arrival of a train, the speaker asked the passengers to step away from the edge of the platform. A small crowd of luggage-bearing passengers had already gathered.

Moments later red headlights flickered and the subway train appeared.

How tempting it was, one jump and that's it. The huge wheels would obliterate all my despair and all my pain. I wouldn't even have time to scream.

I headed towards the edge like a sleepwalker. The train was approaching inevitably, the navy blue face of the train growing with every second. I had reached the very edge of the platform and was one step away from the tracks. I knew that if I chickened out, if I let the front of the train pass me, it would be too late and I would not gather up the courage to try again.

I closed my eyes for all my worth. I got a grip and flexed my muscles.

I jumped.

It's not true what they say about your whole life passing through your eyes, about that movie made up of your memories. I didn't feel anything.

At the last moment someone caught my arm and pulled me back onto the platform with a decisive move. I lost my balance and fell. At the same time the train, coming to a stop, slowly rolled passed me with a deep roar; it was slow by that time, hundreds of thousand kilograms were reluctantly losing momentum.

I realised what had just happened. I knew I wouldn't have it in me to give it another try. I got up slowly.

The man who saved my life was standing next to me. He was looking at me with a focused gaze, slim-built, around forty. He was wearing a clerical collar.

I felt weak, as if I was about to faint. He approached me, firmly but politely and led me to a bench. I didn't say a word.

He sat next to me. He was silent for a moment and then said:

'The world is huge, son. Much greater than we usually realise. The fact that you can't find a place for yourself just now does not necessarily mean that it is actually like that.'

He paused for a moment; the train departing from the neighbouring platform would have obscured the sound anyway.

'My name is Lucka,' he reached out his hand.

I shook it, although I could hardly do it. I was drenched in sweat.

'Giuseppe.'

'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' I lied.

'I don't believe in coincidence,' he said. 'God wanted us to meet today. My train from Milan was half an hour late. If it did come on time, I would have left the station over a quarter ago. In which case you wouldn't have been around either, would you?'

I nodded.

'And therefore,' he continued. 'God must have plans for you, son.'

'I am not particularly religious...'

He smiled.

'Do you think God ever minded that?'

We sat a few minutes more, talking. The priest was interested in me working for the theatre and performing in operettas; it turned out we appreciated the same outstanding vocalists.

Father Lucka gave me his business card. We said goodbye and I promised I would get in touch with him.

That is how our incredible acquaintance started; on that day I met archbishop Lucka and my life started anew.

I am still in his debt.

The archbishop puts down the documents he had just read. He observes me for a moment and nods thoughtfully. Then he speaks, in an unusually gentle voice. It creates a strange dissonance given how dark his words were:

'Dear Giuseppe... It seems that we are in grave danger. We are starting to lose control over what is happening in the Vatican.'

1.3

There is silence for a while. It seems as if the archbishop's words are echoing ominously within those elegant walls and yet I know that it must all be happening in my head.

I don't say anything. Archbishop Lucka sees the expression on my face although I do my best to conceal my emotions. He smiles. Was it not for my theatrical experience, I probably wouldn't be able to tell that it is an empty, forced smile. And yet it does do the trick: It nips my fear in the bud, before it really got to me.

'So far the power remains in our hands,' the hierarch speaks in a gentle, soothing voice. 'If we act calmly and reasonably, there is no way we could lose it. The stakes are very high and in such situations the winner is the one who is guided by reason. We must react fast and reasonably at the same time. Any mistake will immediately be used against us.'

I can't help but notice that when saying this, he is unknowingly drumming his fingers on the edge of the desk. After a moment he notices it and his hands freeze.

'Obviously, I am getting anxious,' he sees I've noticed; his smile gets wider. 'However I can assure you that we've developed a plan for such circumstances a long time ago. We are very well prepared.'

I am tempted to have a look at the papers lying on the desk, which obviously were the reason of all that agitation. I resist that urge. They were not written for my eyes to see. I would have understood very little anyway and no good would have come out of that, excessive curiosity was always frowned upon in the Vatican.

And I know my place. I am a humble man.

The hierarch speaks on:

'In a nutshell, your task, Giuseppe, will not be different from the previous ones. I am not asking you to do anything you haven't done before.'

The archbishop reaches out to a desk drawer. He takes out a flash drive, a small, inconspicuous USB memory stick and weighs it in the palm of his hand.

'Once again you are going to take data to the safe in the Monastery. Just like you've done dozens of times before.'

'Certainly, Your Excellency.'

He hands me the flash drive. I fiddle with it.

'In the beginning was the Word,' the archbishop says. 'And the Word was with God... The Word, that is information, is still the most potent power and is the basis of every act of creation... or destruction.'

I am holding what seems to be an ordinary flash drive which you can get for a few euro in every electronics store. Flash memory, a few gigabits, or maybe several terabits of virtual space are captured in that plastic cover.

The archbishop continues:

'Today, in the third millennium, we sometimes forget how great that power is. We are flooded by words from every direction and the media feed us with more information than we can imagine. We are drowning in this noise, we are becoming indifferent. And despite that there still exist words which, if said out loud, would strike with greater power than an atomic bomb. There is more and more information that has the power to change the world...'

A thought goes through my mind - how much can such a small cube weigh? Ten, maybe fifteen grams? Certainly not more.

'I am saying this so that you realise how important your task is, Giuseppe. The flash drive you received is sealed. Its content has to remain a secret, both for your safety and the best interests of our cause. What you need to know however is that never before has such important data reached the Monastery. There is no second integrated copy of this information. If it got into the wrong hands it would lead to a great misfortune. There is no one else I would entrust it with than you, Giuseppe.'

I am not asking any questions. It is obvious that the data in question must be of great importance. The less important data is transferred electronically; naturally after they have been encrypted multiple times; only the most important information is transported on actual data carriers. The threat must be significant if the archbishop decided to lock it in a safe in the Monastery. In a safe where it is bound to be secure. In a safe which can be opened with only one key.

And I am that key.

'You know how much I trust you,' he says. 'This time, however, for the sake of your safety, you will go with two companions.'

'Casemiro,' he addressed his secretary standing further in the office, that silent ghost, whose presence I have almost forgotten. 'Please fetch Davide and Klaus.'

Casemiro approaches the door without saying a word. He opens it and for a moment I can hear the muffled bustle in room two.

Soon after the door opens again. Archbishop Lucka rises from behind his desk; I get up as well and turn around.

Two tall, well-built men are standing next to Casemiro. Both are wearing cassocks, but their posture likens them more to sportsmen or soldiers than priests: broad-shouldered, with broad chests, they exude physical strength.

'God bless, Your Excellency,' they greet the host.

The archbishop introduces us.

'This is Giuseppe, and these are fathers Davide and Klaus.'

We greet, discretely and respectfully. Both of them grip my hand strongly.

Father Davide seems a bit older. He has long hair tied back in a ponytail, although his forehead is high and his temples are grey. The wrinkles on his face are not deep but quite distinctive; my guess is he might be around fifty. His dark eyes are penetrating and mysterious; you can tell by those eyes that not only are his muscles are strong but his mind is sharp as well.

Klaus on the other hand cannot be older than thirty-five. He is a bit taller and even more athletic. He doesn't look Italian. He has short, fawn-coloured hair and stubble. His grey eyes seem surprisingly cheerful, although his face is focused and serious.

Both of them look as if they weren't priests at all and have just dressed up in cassocks.

The archbishop turns to them.

'I would like you to accompany our friend on his way to the Monastery. The situation has become so serious that your knowledge and experience may prove necessary.'