

Magnificat tells the story of the 'Pazzi Conspiracy'. 1478:Florence and the Medici dazzle the world. The Pope lusts after Florence for himself and resorts to murder to achieve her. The continent plunges into war. Only a miracle saves Florence.

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Magnificat

A Novel by Jack Rein

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Prologue) The Republic of Florence April, 1478
The Bargello

There was no day or night in the prison. The passage of time was kept by sound. A dull, far sounding metallic echo told the prisoner that the shift had changed. Soon he would hear footsteps on the pavement as fresh guards made their rounds. The small opening at the top of the door would open briefly; dull torchlight, an eye. The opening would slam shut. Something in the form of food may or may not appear sometime later. The condemned ate irregularly. Why waste the food? It always ended-up as a mess on the floor, one-way or the other. In any case the prisoner had no appetite. He sat in cold filth, unbound, his head resting upon his knees. He had been dozing fitfully. The comfort of full sleep was impossible. He had spent at least three days in the cell, possibly more. They would be coming for him soon. He returned to prayer, surrounded by silence.

There had been no magistrate to hear his plea, or judicial hearing of any kind for the prisoner. Once the battle had ended in the Piazza Della Signoria, Lorenzo's men extracted quick confessions from the conspirators they captured. They demanded names, and by crushing a few bones, got them. The executions started immediately. The Medici supporters spread through the city looking for those who had been named.

The prisoner had made a half-hearted effort to escape the city. In retrospect it was almost pitiful. He spent the first two days huddled under smelly tarps and nets on a small boat anchored near the Ponte Rubicone. As Lorenzo's net drew closer he decided on simplicity. He broke into a cloth merchant's store that second night and roughly constructed a loose tunic. Discarding his own more fashionable clothing and dressed in this simple pilgrim's garb he tried to walk, ironically, through the Porta Justicia. A finger was pointed. Guards fell on him; he offered little resistance. He felt vaguely relieved as they bound him, almost as if a horrible weight had been lifted off his chest. As they frog-marched him to the Bargello the city still rang with the sound of rioting. Lorenzo would stop it soon. But not too soon.

They didn't kill him immediately. It testified to the fact they wanted information. Well, that made sense. He was the Pope's man. They knew it; at least he was fairly certain that they did. In his first few hours of confinement he wondered who had revealed him, and how had the information been presented to Lorenzo? It was a painful realization for the prisoner. His knowledge... no. He chastised himself. Call it what it was...his *participation* in the conspiracy must have been yet another wound for Lorenzo to deal with. The prisoner continued to pray, as he had throughout his confinement, asking a silent, distant Savior for forgiveness.

A new sound from somewhere in the prison lifted the prisoner's head from his knees. Soon footsteps came down the hall. Several men. Voices. The ratchet on the door rattled and the room was washed in torchlight. The voices fell silent. There were five men. Two stepped into the cell and forcefully pulled the prisoner to his feet. Rough hands pushed his arms behind his back and pinioned them together, tying them with coarse hemp. He would have been pleased, if they had been his own men, noting that they were quick and efficient. Pulling him out into the corridor he vaguely recognized one of the guards. He had been among the number of butchers that plied his trade in one of the filthy shops along the Ponte Vecchio. The prisoner had a quick recollection of offal being emptied into the Arno. Butcher indeed. Soon he, too, would be dumped into the river. He smiled to himself. How many pieces would there be?

The guards let the prisoner walk at his own pace, knowing his legs would be stiff from confinement and shaky with fear. He kept his head down, noticing they were slowly ascending stone steps, the light and smell changing. They passed through another armed doorway into the noisy great hall of the prison. It was a dramatic change from the almost monastic silence of the prison cell, and the explosion of sound made the prisoner's head jerk up. The terrible violence over the course of the last few days had dramatically increased the prison's population. Now incessant, insistent shouting rang through the hall as women screamed at stoic and staring soldiers for news of their husbands and sons. The prisoner looked up and saw a young artist standing on a scaffold that

butted up against the wall, busy with paints and brushes. Even in prison art thrived. He recognized the young man from Lorenzo's household. He was painting small portraits in frescoe on the wall. The prisoner searched his memory and remembered the boy's name. Botticelli. A memory spark from Lorenzo's reception flashed through the prisoner's mind. As he sat in his cell there had been much time to think. The reception, and the way the Medici had welcomed him into their circle of friends, had been yet another source of the prisoner's profound regret.

The small portraits the young man was painting on the *intonaco* were the faces of other conspirators, men who the prisoner knew. Their names were written beneath each portrait. Salviati. Bracciolini. Perugino. Franzesi. The portraits were very good. Being painted on the wall of the prison meant that the men had been executed. The artist concentrated furiously, and never looked down at the prisoner. The guards pushed him toward the front gate.

Full sunshine made the prisoner wince and draw his shoulder up against the light as the small party stepped outside. Squinting through the light he saw they had prepared a cart.

For the first time he spoke to his guards. "Where are you taking me?" The former butcher turned and leered at the prisoner. "The Palazzo", he grunted, and shoved him toward the cart. Which palazzo? Whose? The other guards quickly half-lifted, half-pushed him into the back. "My Lord, lie down and do not move. There are many in the city who would see you dead". The one who spoke seemed by his demeanor and slightly better clothing to be in nominal charge of the group. The prisoner was slightly surprised that the guard, by saying "my Lord," had entitled him. The others climbed in, one taking the reins and cracking the ox. The cart rumbled into motion.

Although he couldn't know exactly what time it was he knew it was early. It was a cool spring morning and the wind freshened from the direction of the mountains. It had recently rained, and there was the splash of water as the animal and cart lumbered through a puddle. The city was quiet. Through the slats in the cart he could see few people on

the streets. A light breeze occasionally carried the smell of ash and fire. He saw a body hanging from a gibbet in one of the empty squares they passed through, although he could not know if it was a victim of the riots or simply a thief's execution.

He marveled briefly at the fact he seemed so serene in the face of his own impending session. He examined his feelings. He supposed he had faced death so often in battle that the deep base note of fear that was vaguely present was more a feeling of comfort than dread. And besides, he had been in profound conversation with God and his conscience over the past few days. His soul stood upon the precipice and waited for its leap into eternity. He hoped they would give him a chance to talk to Lorenzo before he died.

They drew into the shadow of the cathedral, its burnt-umber dome catching the full light of morning, turning its color to rose. He turned on his side as they passed the glorious building, and thought about the horror that had begun there, when? Was it only last Sunday? "What day is it?" he asked. The driver looked back and down at him, "Friday". Five days then. He shuddered a little in the chill of the morning. Or was it the first rush of nerves? As they drew past the church he admired for what he thought would be the last time the serenely beautiful dome and clean line of the simple stone façade. It was not yet clad in the gorgeous colored tile it would become known for. Although Florentines referred to the church simply as the Duomo or the Cathedral, its formal name was Santa Maria Del Fiore, Holy Mary of the Flower. Older citizens, traditionalists, called the church by its ancient name, Santa Reparata. As so often happened in the cities of Italy the church occupied a space where an ancient roman building once stood. In this case the site of the Basilica had once been the house of a roman senator.

The prisoner began to tremble violently. With an effort of will he stopped himself, taking a few deep breaths. Not now...not now, he told himself.

Suddenly the tower of the government palace shaded the cart. Was he to appear before the Signoria? A few moments later the cart squealed to a halt, the journey over.

The men jumped out, two pulling the prisoner by his legs to the edge of the cart, then pulling him to a sitting position and finally out and up on his feet. The prisoner darted a look around the piazza. Normally it was a place that bustled with activity. Now, nearly deserted but for a stray dog that pawed through some trash, it was littered with the wreckage of the short, violent battle and subsequent waves of rioting that had taken place there. He noted that a platform had been erected near the south corner of the palazzo, the fresh wood confirming this was to be a new place of public punishment and correction. He looked up and saw eight bodies dangling from the tower battlements. The prisoner noted one of the swaying corpses wore the vestments of a Bishop. After a few days they had become unrecognizable, their heads swollen like rotten fruit in the nooses, turning their faces black and giving them somewhat comical expressions, as if they were wearing carnival masks. The flies and the birds were working on them. The guards let the prisoner look for a few moments, then pushed him forward towards the palace. Heavily armed men guarded the entrance. The color of their clothing and the 6-ball heraldic device on their breast and shoulder patches identified them as Lorenzo's men. One stepped forward and stood in front of the prisoner, staring, cold. Someone came up behind him and threw a noose around his neck, as if it were a mantel of office, letting the knot dangle between his shoulder blades. Now more of Lorenzo's men came forward and pushed the prisoner through the archway and into the building.

They climbed the steps leading to the top of the tower. None spoke. The prisoner marveled at, and was thankful for, the calm that had settled over him. In truth his slight euphoria was caused by his body's nervous system. Powerful chemicals bathed his brain, natural painkillers against the cruelty he was about to endure.

They came to the top of the steps, and through the open door of another archway entered into a square whitewashed room. He saw a table and two chairs set in the middle, some blank sheets of vellum set toward one of the chairs. A small brazier glowed in another corner, but he knew it wasn't there for heat. One of the men began to place metal tools point-first into the coals, stooping down and blowing on them

quickly a few times. Their glow intensified. High up at the top of the room three large windows were opened, letting a cool breeze freshen the space. The sun shone brightly through one of the windows, bathing half of the room in brilliant light, dousing the other side in shadow, bisecting the table into light and dark. The effect was lovely. A pigeon cooed at the corner of one of the windows, and paced curiously back and forth on the sill. The men took the prisoner to the table and pushed him into a chair, tying the end of the noose loosely to one of the back legs. He sat in the sun. Now there were half a dozen men in the room. It was never hard to find men who wanted to watch, no matter how often they had witnessed similar scenes. Suddenly the bell from the basilica struck eight, filling the tower with sound. As the last deep note died away it seemed to the prisoner that the fading, ringing echo carried away all sense of passing time, as if the receding note was stealing away with his life. Fading...evaporating...nothing. Now everything was perfectly still.

Four more men entered quietly, almost as if borne on the air. They were dressed in rough black robes. Each wore a hood, although their faces were perfectly visible. They might have been friars, but the prisoner knew better. The brotherhood these men belonged to was not dedicated to God, although in the course of their work they would invoke His name freely, and the most fervent and frantic prayers of humankind issued as a result of their work. Two of them produced a circle of rope. They proceeded to thread one end of it into a pulley hanging in the corner of the room. One stood behind the prisoner, waiting. The last sat in the empty chair at the dark side of the table and, like a conjurer, produced a quill and a corked bottle of ink from beneath his robes. He arranged the writing instruments, opened the bottle of ink, examined the point of the quill, and then gently placed the pen again on the table. He slanted a piece of vellum near his right hand. Satisfied, he sat back and stared at the prisoner. He was a handsome man, older, almost distinguished looking, but for a white scar that ran from the corner of his mouth to the top of his cheek. Graying hair and a short, well-trimmed beard framed a lean face. Character creases at the mouth and eyes testified to advancing years. His eyes were clear and

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almost a pretty gray in color. He rubbed a dirty thumb against his lips, picked up the quill, took a deep breath. His voice was deep and soothing.

“Giovan Battista,” he paused, and the prisoner wondered if he would refer to him by his title. The interrogator’s gray eye’s bored in on the prisoner. “Giovan Battista... Count of Montesecco... Lately *condotierre* to His Holiness the Pope. ” Another small shudder. They knew everything. “You are accused of conspiracy, treachery and murder. Make now a clear and full confession and these implements”, he made a lazy gesture to the brazier, “need not be used to extract the truth.” Having used this preamble hundreds of times in his career it lacked conviction.

The prisoner looked around the room, his heart beginning to beat a little harder, some of his self- possession leaving him as the truth, the full reality of his situation, began to press in. He swallowed, tried to force himself to relax. “I didn’t expect this to happen here.”

“You are in the government tower” the interrogator nodded to the top of the room, “The windows are open so that the city can hear you scream.”

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