

PROLOGUE

“From that time on, Judas began looking for an opportunity to betray Jesus.”

Matthew 26:16

1900 – Zulu Time 06DEC2016 (2100 CEST Paris, France)

Magnus stood in the dark recesses of the Trust building, across the street from the La Maison Favart hotel. The steely-eyed, former Special Air Service (S.A.S.) operative stuffed his hands into the pockets of his woolen trench coat, focused on the evening’s prey. Twin silenced pistols pressed into each side of his torso under the weight of his upper arms. He had it on good authority the black-market art collector he sought would soon be arriving. Magnus O’Keefe would not be leaving until the location of *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* painting was known. There would be no loose ends in tonight’s endeavor. He knew Ibrahim Mohammad was captured by the Americans, but he had to continue his family’s work at all costs. Ever since Mohammad fell off the grid, the Welshman hid in plain sight, maintaining a less-extravagant profile.

Unbeknownst to Mohammad, Magnus created a photocopy of the Knights Templar journal, known to some as the *sermita in armis*. The terrorist remained blinded by the fruit of his desires, never questioning why the journal was given up so freely. Magnus had spent enough time down range to know about contingencies, even in the face of success.

The O’Keefe family exploited many secrets of the journal over the years, and with choice technological developments underway, a crucial part of the ultimate weapon was almost ready.

A plot dating back to the 1960's secured the Knights Templar journal into the O'Keefes' possession, but Mohammad's capture earlier in the year seriously jeopardized their continued anonymity.

Magnus spent years decoding information leading him to the weapons of Christ, known as Arma Christi. Distinct pieces were needed to activate the ultimate weapon. Without the necessary guidance of the Knights Templar elders, the O'Keefes' discoveries were limited and often unsuccessful. The O'Keefes' failed to anticipate the journal's cryptic supernatural-like qualities. Unlike during his past attempts, tonight his confidence was high, and he was sure of the intelligence already gained.

Only after Magnus bled the information out of a few conspirators was it confirmed that Jackson Oliver currently owned the painting. The artwork would finally reveal if his father was right all along. The notion of science colliding with the Arma Christi presented many prosperous opportunities for Magnus. The part-time arms dealer had already made a fortune from others' misery, but this would create something much more sinister and exciting. The notion of possessing the ultimate power swelled his mind with thoughts of grandeur.

Magnus quickly became laser-focused on his goal, and a slight, evil grin emerged on his face. He adjusted the two holstered weapons under his jacket, watching with vigilance for the former U.S. Senate candidate. Oliver would arrive with the same three-man security detail he had used in Europe numerous times in the past. Magnus knew one of the men from his days in the service, but he didn't particularly care for him – not anymore. He stopped caring about anything but his own needs after they kicked him out. The world had become his mischievous playground, with the promise of riches fueling his desire. No one would ever control him again, and the devil himself dare not mess with the salty Welshman.

The dank corridor flickered as he lit up a cigarette. The flaming glow turned to a soft orange tint, and he inhaled the smoke. Seconds turned into minutes, and finally the two-car motorcade stopped in front of the hotel. Magnus threw the remnants of his smoke to the ground, keenly watching the four men unload from the vehicles. The well-trained operative never lost focus, watching Jackson Oliver exit the second car.

“There you are...”

The three obviously armed men encircled Jackson as they entered the double front doors of the hotel. Magnus thought it a standard escort position for the principle, and a sign they were unaware of his presence. With a step on the still burning cigarette, he strolled across the street in order to maintain surveillance on his target. By the time he made it to the front doors, the detail had entered the elevator of the hotel.

He moved into the lobby of the historic building and continued walking casually toward the stairs. Only after he was sure no one looked on, he charged up the steps as fast as he could. Magnus rounded the second floor, seeing no movement at the lift. He then slowed his approach to the third floor, catching Oliver exit the elevator with his detail. The men escorted him a few steps down the hallway, opposite the stairwell. Magnus intently watched them all enter the room, and then he slowly crept into the hallway.

A soft, golden light shined upon the art-covered walls, giving Magnus’s stern face a look of unrelenting resolve as he stalked down the corridor. The door to his right creaked open and the operative pleasantly nodded at the couple emerging from within the room. He looked back to see they were paying little attention to anything but each other. A few more steps and he saw the door to Oliver’s suite, knowing the security detail would exit after conducting a sweep. Magnus reached into his pocket, retrieving the micro-camera he carried for just such occasions. The device was expertly placed on the wall sconce outside the

room and switched on. A deadly game was now afoot, and Magnus walked away, pulling out his phone to connect the device. He retreated down the hallway and back to the stairwell, verifying the camera was transmitting as designed.

Once downstairs, Magnus entered the hotel bar to wait for his opportunity. He clutched the phone, feeling for the slightest signal from his motion-activated camera. The battery would only last for an hour, so the operative knew he could easily grab a cold pint in the meantime.

Magnus had taken his first sip of lager when the phone vibrated in his hand. He looked at the screen, seeing two of the three bodyguards leave the suite. An ominous smirk emerged across his lean face. After a few slugs of his beer, the same two bodyguards entered the bar. One of them was his former colleague from the Special Air Service. Magnus couldn't easily hide from view, catching the eye of the bodyguard almost immediately. A silent tension invaded the space, and the bodyguard couldn't hide the loathing in his words.

"O'Keefe? I thought you were in prison or something, bloke."

"I'm still here, mate," Magnus said, immediately annoyed at the statement.

"What brings you to Paris?"

Magnus stared intently at the man.

"Business... now how 'bout you piss off."

"No need to be a wank. I'll leave you to it then."

The man turned slightly suspicious of Magnus's presence, and walked deeper into the bar, toward a table. Magnus gulped the rest of the beer down his throat before dropping cash on the bar top. He stood up and turned, leaving the bar for a more mischievous goal. One remaining bodyguard upstairs wouldn't cause him any grief. He glanced at the other two sitting in the back of the room. A red-hot anger boiled up within him at the

disrespect shown by his former teammate. He figured if they showed up, he would kill them, too.

Death encircled Magnus as he climbed the stairs, while an ever-present darkness controlled his every action. It all started that fateful day in Mosul, Iraq, when everything went wrong. Life turned sour, just like his grandfather told him it would; there was no escaping his destiny. The Welshman's heart typically burned with rage and hatred for the world, but tonight he remained determined to find some relief through his success. He approached the door of Oliver's suite, pulling one of his weapons out and masking it behind his right leg. He tapped at the door.

“Mr. Oliver, I have a message from the desk, sir.”

The door swung open, and Magnus faced the lone bodyguard.

“What's the message?”

Magnus looked both ways down the hallway, gripping the silenced weapon tightly. His eyes betrayed his thoughts, and the door moved to close in response. Magnus delivered two shots from the pistol, and the door bounced off Magnus's foot in the doorway. The only remaining sound resonated from the *thud* of the man's body crashing onto the foyer floor. Magnus entered the suite, weapon at the ready, eyes scanning for threats, like he had done all his life. He heard the shower running in the rear of the suite, and he locked the door behind him. The bodyguard clung to life on the floor, but could not breathe. Magnus had skillfully shot him through both lungs.

A final round was fired heartlessly into the man's skull, ending his life.

“Should've worn your bloody vest.”

Magnus sneered at the man and crept to the corner of the foyer. The singing from the bathroom served as confirmation on Oliver's presence, and his quick clearing of the suite verified the interior was vacant. Two simple thoughts came to mind: time was a factor, and Oliver was alone. Magnus marched to the bathroom

and threw open the curtain, seeing Oliver showering without a care in the world. O’Keefe rapidly delivered a strike to the back of his head, collapsing the American real estate mogul to the base of the steamy shower.

It only took a minute for the trained operative to have Oliver hastily bound and gagged on the bed of his hotel suite. O’Keefe grabbed the ice container on the counter of the sink and filled it with water. He then walked into the bedroom, and slowly poured the water onto Oliver’s chunky face. The still wet, naked, and bound man struggled to consciousness, coughing out water through the material in his mouth. His eyes opened wide at the realization of his newfound predicament, moving his still-bleeding head in the direction of his captor. Oliver’s respiration was increasingly more labored as he tried to scream for help, only to feel a cold-steel silencer pressed firmly to his throbbing head.

“I think you need to realize, you’re in no position to piss me off, mate.”

Oliver tried to talk but the gag prevented the words from making any sense. Magnus pulled out a serrated folder-knife, tapping the flat blade on the nose of his prisoner. Oliver’s eyes flared with intense horror as they followed the blade up and down.

Magnus said, “I’m willing to have a conversation, but if you try to call for help, I’ll cut something off of you, understand?”

The man nodded with desperation after observing the intensity of his captor’s ice-blue eyes. Magnus waited, staring at Oliver, and then removed the gag.

“I... I have plenty of money. Whatever you want, it’s yours.”

“I don’t want your money, I want something else.”

“Name it. Just let me loose and let me put some clothes on. We can be civilized about this.”

“Ollie, let’s not pretend you care about being civilized, and I won’t pretend your life is dangerously close to being forfeit.”

“I just want to get you whatever you need and for you to not hurt me,” Oliver said as his eyes began to water.

“I’m a simple man, Ollie. Tell me where *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* is hidden, and I’ll let you keep your body – intact.”

“Come on, why do you think I would know where it’s hidden?”

Magnus smiled, while shoving the gag back into Oliver’s mouth. The man started thrashing about on the bed, trying desperately to free his bonds. Magnus lifted the knife toward Oliver’s eyes showing the blade once again.

“I want you to know that I don’t have time for games. I know you have the painting.”

Magnus callously targeted Oliver’s left upper thigh, slicing into his flesh. He cut just deep enough to start filleting skin from muscle, stopping only after cutting away a chunky divot of flesh. The muffled screams of his victim fueled his intent, and Magnus’ eyes easily convinced Oliver there would be no more lies. He looked down on the now heavily sweating body of Oliver. His thigh quivered with pain, while Magnus wiped the serrated blade across the sheets.

“This is one of my games. Do you want to keep playing, or would you like to tell me where it is?”

Oliver’s eyes rolled back into his head while he screamed excessively into the gag. Unable to move, he gathered himself trying to ignore the burning sting of his leg. He nodded his head up and down; his eyes begged for mercy.

“Now, I told you, I’ll cut you up if you scream. Get a hold of yourself, and I’ll let you start over.”

The screams ceased and were replaced by Oliver’s labored breaths from the restrictions of the gag. The middle-aged

real estate mogul realized hell had arrived in his room. Magnus removed the gag, sliding his knife against Oliver's soft throat.

"Tell me where the painting is."

Oliver was in a full sweat and unable to fight the restraints any longer. "I'll tell you where it is, but just don't hurt me anymore."

Tears formed in Oliver's eyes from the emotional and physical strain. He remained unsure if he would live beyond the night. He just knew he didn't want to be filleted to death, but had little leverage in this evil business dealing. A single ambition remained: Oliver wanted the sins of his life to be forgiven in his darkest hour. Maybe he could live through the night and start anew. A desperate hope convinced the man he would survive this encounter and live to see his family again.

Magnus stared at Oliver.

"I enjoy hurting people, but only when I get something for it. Killing for the sake of killing... it's just daft without purpose."

"I bought the painting from a black market collector a few years ago. I still have it," Oliver confessed.

The door lock to the suite clicked, and Magnus leaped across the suite toward the foyer. He heard the voices between two men as they entered the room holding drinks in both hands. The lead man stepped in, looking back at Magnus's former colleague. One more step and the bodyguard tripped, tossing the drinks in the air while reaching down to brace his fall. Magnus entered the foyer pointing a weapon at his former S.A.S. teammate. The other man tried to recover to his feet, but Magnus drew his left side weapon, and fired three shots into the man's back. He continued to hold the other man at gunpoint, paying no attention to the life he had just extinguished.

"Hello again – bloke," Magnus said.

The bodyguard still held both glasses of whiskey in his hands. Magnus holstered the second pistol as fast as he drew it. He looked at the remaining bodyguard with focused intent.

“Step inside, with my compliments.”

The bodyguard stepped over his dead compatriots, entering the main living area of the suite. He shifted his eyes to the right, seeing his employer securely tied to the bed. Oliver’s alarmed look disturbed the bodyguard’s emotions, and Magnus ushered him into the middle of the room.

“O’Keefe, why are you doing this?”

“Why does everyone feel like they get to ask questions?”

Magnus cautiously reached to the bodyguard’s waistline and pulled out his pistol. He threw the weapon down on the floor toward the foyer. His former teammate was powerless to react. The bodyguard stood silently, stared blankly ahead, and offered the spare whiskey to Magnus in tribute. Magnus cautiously grabbed the glass, keeping some distance between him and the man.

The pistol-wielding Magnus motioned for the bodyguard to sit in the living room’s barrel chair. The Welshman sat across from him.

“I can’t even remember your name, mate.”

“Thomas... Thomas Heal.”

“Ah, now I remember. You were just coming up when I got – removed.”

“Aye, that’s about right. What the hell did you do – to get kicked out of the S.A.S. anyways?”

“I shot a load of innocents, at least in the eyes of some stupid bureaucrat. Like anyone over there is innocent.”

“Why’d you get out, Thomas?”

“Drawbacks. Getting a job hasn’t been easy these days... it looks like I’m a bugger of a bodyguard.”

Both men laughed uneasily. Magnus stared through the man with fiendish intent, like a shark to prey. The young man reflected on his life decisions and what could have been.

“Looks that way, mate,” Magnus said.

The two men tasted their whiskey and Thomas sat back in his chair feeling a little more confident, humanizing the situation. Thomas swallowed another drink and looked toward his captor.

“I hope...”

Magnus shot him in the head before he could utter another word.

“Shame, really. You should’ve stayed in the bar, mate.”

Magnus stood and turned toward Oliver who watched the execution take place. Terror overcame every inch of the portly man’s body, while a bitter feeling engulfed his senses. Oliver wanted to yell for help, but knew it was pointless. His bodyguards were dead. He had nothing but truth to bargain with.

“The painting is locked away in a well-hidden secret chamber I own in Nashville. You can have it. I’ll sign over the entire building if that’s what it takes.”

“Tell me where it is and how to get in.”

“If you look in my wallet, you will find an electronic keycard. On the card is the address of my building.”

Magnus walked over to the man’s pants lying on the floor and retrieved the wallet. He flipped through the contents and found the card. He held it up.

“That’s it. The card is also the key card to the apartment, elevator, and the lower entrance to the chamber,” Oliver said.

“You better not be jerking me around.”

“I promise you, I’m not lying.”

“If you are, I’ll kill your entire family, understand?”

“I swear... The chamber is part of an old tunnel system from the Underground Railroad. Once you exit the elevator, the access panel is built into one of the bricks. It’s marked with a

Freemason symbol, about halfway up the wall. Now, please let me go. I'll keep my mouth shut."

The wound from Oliver's leg continued to weep blood onto the sheets, and Magnus stared into the man's woeful eyes. He wanted to be sure he had everything he needed.

"So, you've told me everything about where the painting is located? Are there any alarms?"

"Yes, I have a silent alarm, but it comes straight to me. The card deactivates it. I can't afford anyone finding out that I have that painting."

"Right, it's very valuable," Magnus said.

"Yes, will you just go and take it, please. I've told you what you wanted."

Magnus leaned down to the man's face and reapplied the gag.

"How does it feel?"

Oliver thrashed around on the bed with what little energy he could muster. A bewildered look crept over the man's face, which soon turned into desperation.

Magnus grinned his intent.

The man's eyes streamed tears as he began screaming into the gag. The muffled sounds instantly extinguished by two shots to his forehead. Magnus stood in the suite with his only concern revolving around what cameras caught a glimpse of his visit. Luckily for him, he had planned the operation through to the finest detail, knowing all of the exits he could use off-camera. The prize he sought was in Tennessee, so he would have to go back to America, despite the hazards of getting caught. Mohammad's attack in Dallas caused him great grief the last time he visited the states, but with a subtle approach, Nashville would be a breeze.