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Written by Simon Toyne

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THE TOWER

SIMON TOYNE

HARPER

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I

All things are full of gods

Plato

PROLOGUE

The basement is dark and quiet.

A figure, stripped to the waist and kneeling takes the blade in his right hand and draws it across the skin at the joint of his left arm and shoulder, tracing the scar of a previous cut. The blade is sharp and the scar opens easily, letting blood run down skin quivering at the bite of the knife.

'The first,' he says, his voice low in the darkness. 'This blood binds me in pain with the Sacrament. As it suffers, so must I, until all suffering will end.'

He switches the blade to his left hand and repeats the cut on his right shoulder.

'The second,' he says, continuing the ritual learned from a hospital worker in the southern Turkish city of Ruin, a man loyal to the cause who had faithfully recorded everything the dying Sancti said through their delirium and suffering. The knife continues to cut, drawing fresh blood from old wounds, carving the same pattern he has seen on the bodies of the sacred monks, captured on a camera phone by the same spy after their suffering had finally ended. It is a ceremony that remained secret and locked in the Citadel at the heart of Ruin for thousands upon thousands of years. The enemies of the Church believe that the death of the Sancti and the breaching of the Citadel mark the end of the old ways.

They are wrong.

When the ceremony is over he cleanses his wounds, flushing them with saline solution before drying them and sealing them with superglue that stings as it binds the flesh back together. The pain sharpens his mind, and so does its purpose. Only through suffering can redemption be reached, and only through sacrifice can the enemy be beaten.

He dresses quickly, buttoning his high-collared shirt to hide the scar on his neck and fixing his tie. Only a very few know him by the name he wears, down here in the dark: Novus Sancti, *keeper of the sacred flame.*

But he is not alone in the shadows. There are others, many others like him who have devoted themselves to the silent and secret protection of God's sacred mission on Earth. They are everywhere, woven into the fabric of society – law makers, politicians, opinion formers – the crosses round their necks the only sign that they serve a higher law than those of the lands they live in. They are Legion, for they are many, an army waiting to be mobilized when judgement day draws near.

And that time is now. He knows this to be true, for he has seen the signs and felt the call inside him. God has spoken to him and now he will answer.

He slips on his jacket then mounts the stairs back up into the modern world like a man rising from the dead.

Reborn.

Renewed.

Ready.

1

Merriweather looked up at the bank of screens.

Something was wrong.

He glanced behind him though he knew he was alone in the control centre. Everyone else was at the inter-departmental party they threw each year to mark the start of the Christmas holidays. Merriweather wasn't big on parties. He didn't drink and couldn't do small talk so he'd volunteered for the caretaker watch to garner some points with colleagues on the Flight Ops Team and bag a little heavy-duty processor time to crunch the deep space data he was working on for his PhD.

He leaned forward in his chair and cocked his head to one side, listening to the chatter of the hard drive. Some people could listen to a car engine and tell you what was wrong with it, others might hear one bum note in a symphony played by a sixty-piece orchestra, Merriweather knew computers – and this one definitely sounded hinky. There was a hitch in the processing tone, like a broken tooth on a clock wheel or a fresh scratch on one of the classic 45s he liked to collect. He stroked his knitted tie nervously as he considered what to do. Unlike the other techs at the Goddard Space Center, Merriweather was strictly old school. He wore a tie every day, along with pressed trousers, horn-rimmed glasses and neatly combed hair – just like his boyhood heroes, the Houston mission controllers of the sixties and seventies. He also liked rules and order. He didn't like it when things went wrong.

A tap on his keyboard banished the Pillars of Creation

screensaver, the most famous image taken by the Hubble telescope, controlled from this room and currently orbiting Earth six hundred kilometres above Merriweather's head. He ran through the standard checklist of the latest telemetry: temperature normal, speed steady, all systems green, no fluctuation in the solar wind – nothing abnormal.

He typed in a string of commands and the big screen on the wall flashed up an updated image from the main reflector feed. It showed the luminous swirl of Cosmos-Aztec6, thirteen point four billion light years away – the furthest system ever observed from Earth.

The processor crunched again, making Merriweather wince, then something happened that he had never seen before. An application auto-loaded on to his desktop, a large window filled with numbers.

'Virus,' he said. 'We have a virus!'

No response. No one there.

The numbers remained on screen for a few seconds then disappeared. Merriweather tapped the keyboard and shook the mouse. He kicked back, rolling his chair away from the desk and across the floor to another workstation. Same thing: frozen screen, frozen keyboard. The processors chattered feverishly as they continued to feed on whatever digital poison had somehow found its way into the pristine system.

The main screen flickered and Merriweather looked up. The image was beginning to shift and disintegrate. Whatever had locked him out was now taking control of the guidance systems. The telescope was moving.

He fumbled for a desk phone, knocking the receiver to the floor, pulling it up by the cord and stabbing a button marked 'Dr Kinderman – cell phone'. On the screen the image continued to break up as the telescope turned. In his ear the ringing tone began. Somewhere down the hall a Marimba tune rang in synch with it.

Merriweather clamped the phone under his chin and went

through every reboot command he could think of to try and unlock the keyboard. Nothing. The ringing tone continued in his ear. He dropped the phone on the desk and launched himself towards the exit.

Outside in the corridor the Marimba was louder. It was coming from Kinderman's office. He arrived at the door, knocked once out of habit then opened it.

The state of the office came as a complete shock: wrenched-open drawers, papers everywhere, books all over the floor. The cell phone was on the desk. It shimmied a couple of times, vibrating in time to the ring, then stopped. In the silence that followed Merriweather heard the crunch of the pernicious code coming from Kinderman's terminal. He moved cautiously into the room, wading through drifts of paper, until the monitor came into view. He stopped dead when he saw the message on the screen:

MANKIND MUST LOOK NO FURTHER

2

Shepherd took a deep breath then let it out slowly, trying not to make a sound as he edged forward down the dark corridor, gun first towards the solitary door. It was open slightly, the splintered timbers around the lock evidence of how many times it had been kicked in over the years. Somewhere above him the Virginia winter wind moaned through broken windows, filling the derelict townhouse with whispering voices. It was two below outside, probably colder in here, but he was sweating beneath his body armour.

He stopped a foot short of the door and leaned against the wall, feeling the flex in the plasterboard and timber frame – not much good for stopping bullets. He hunkered down below eye-level like he'd been taught and slipped his scoping mirror from his belt then past the edge of the doorjamb.

Daylight leaked in through high, narrow windows sketching the outline of a room: another door set into the far wall, a table in the centre spilling over with various items – a man and a woman standing directly behind it.

The skin tightened on Shepherd's scalp. The man's eyes, framed by safety goggles, seemed to be staring straight at him. He saw a hand clamp tighter across the face of the terrified woman, held in front of him like a shield, saw the other hand rising up.

He leaped away just as gunfire shattered the cold silence and bullets smacked into the wall where he had been resting. He rolled into a new position further down the corridor and levelled his gun at the door. 'FBI!' he shouted. 'Drop your

weapon and come out slowly with your hands on your head. We have the building surrounded.'

Not true.

He was a lone agent following a cold lead that had just gone volcanic.

He heard noises coming from the room, something clattering to the floor then footsteps scuffing away. He moved forward in a crouch, gun just below his line of sight, free hand reaching for a stun grenade on his belt. He pulled the pin and tossed it round the doorframe.

The grenade clattered across the floor, clanged against the metal leg of the table then detonated with a lightning flash that Shepherd saw even behind his closed eyelids. A sharp, percussive boom-shook the wall and he was up and into the room.

No one there. Far door open.

He ran through the white magnesium smoke, performing a quick inventory of the table as he passed: 9-volt batteries, wire cutters, soldering iron, duct tape, vacuum packs of plastique. Bomb-making equipment.

The smart move would be to regroup and call for backup, but the suspect knew he was cornered. He had fired shots and fled, even after Shepherd had identified himself as FBI. He was desperate, and therefore unpredictable.

And he had a hostage.

If Shepherd waited for other units to show, the suspect would probably kill the woman and make a run for it. But right now he was vulnerable, his ears ringing from the pressure wave of the grenade, his eyes useless in the gloom of the basement. Shepherd had the advantage, but it was slight and wouldn't last for more than the next few seconds. He had to make a choice.

He took a breath and swept his gun arm round the edge of the doorframe, following it into the second room. The suspect was in the far corner, backed up against the wall, the hostage still in front of him and terrified.

Shepherd stood square on, maximizing the cover of his body armour, his gun steady in a good two-hand hold, trying to fix the front sight on what he could see of the suspect's face. With his peripheral vision he sucked in the detail of the room: a single mattress on the floor; a low table next to it; a movie poster tacked to the wall with a burnt-orange sun and slashed white lettering. His mouth went dry as buried memories rushed out of his past.

The dank smell . . .

. . . the same sun on the same poster . . .

. . . a room just like this.

He tried to zone it all out, keeping his eyes on the suspect and his mind on the here and now, but the sun kept pulling at him with something like real gravity, dragging him back to that dark, dark place he had done everything he could to forget.

His hand began to tremble. The suspect was shouting but he couldn't make out what he was saying. Then he saw a hand rise up. Something in it. Some kind of button with a wire trailing down to the belt bomb wound around the hostage's neck.

Behind them the sun blazed on the wall like an omen of the explosion to come. Shepherd felt weak. He couldn't hold it together. His whole world condensed to the end of his gun and the suspect's face came into focus along with the words on the movie poster.

Apocalypse Now

He pulled the trigger.

Adjusted for recoil – everything muscle memory now, drilled in deep from hours on the range – squeezed off another round. Saw an explosion of red beyond his gun-sight. Then he watched in silence as both suspect and hostage fell in crumpled slow motion to the ground.

In the stillness that followed, Shepherd felt everything drain out of him. His eyes drifted back to the molten sun, his hand dropped to his side, the red-handled gun dangling from his

curled trigger finger. He didn't even feel the instructor take it from him, or register the fluorescent lights flickering into life above his head. In his mind he was still back there, staring at the same poster on a different wall – the room where she had found him and they had saved each other.

'*. . . Shepherd . . . !*'

The voice seemed to come from very far away.

'*SHEPHERD – YOU OK?*'

The granite face of Special Agent Williams slid into view, obscuring the poster and breaking the spell.

Shepherd blinked.

Nodded.

'You made some tactical errors.'

He nodded again.

'Get yourself over to The Biograph for a debrief.' The Practical Applications instructor slapped him on the back with a hand made solid from years of pulling triggers and turned to the two actors, already on their feet and tugging wet-wipes from their pockets to clean away the red dye from Shepherd's training pistol. They each had an impact mark on their forehead, just above the eye. Kill shots both.

'Back to initial positions,' Williams barked. 'Next trainee coming through in five.'

3

Shepherd stepped out of the front door of the townhouse into the teeth of a westerly wind straight off Chesapeake Bay and headed away along Main Street.

Hogan's Alley covered ten acres of the Marine Base in Quantico and was built as a microcosm of any-town America with its own bank, drug store, hotel, gas station – basically all the institutions criminals targeted out in the real world. Normally, the whole town echoed with radio buzz, shouted orders and the crackle of gunfire from FBI, DEA and other assorted law-enforcement officers as they learnt the art of urban tactical deployment. Today it was almost deserted, like everywhere else, as the whole base wound down for the Christmas holidays. Shepherd noticed a stuffed Santa dangling from an upper window of the Coin-Op Laundromat swinging in the strengthening wind like a hanged man. Someone had shot him in the ass with a paint-round: so much for the Christmas spirit.

He hunched his shoulders against the chill and looked up at the night sky out of habit. The evening star had already risen in the west and, as he looked at it, a huge flock of geese streaked across the sky, their loud honks making him pause. The ancients would have read much into the direction of the birds' flight and the position of the wandering star in the sky. But Shepherd knew it was just nature and that the shifting star was actually the planet Venus whose brightness had always been a comfort to him, even in his most desperate and lonely nights.

He turned the corner just as the streetlights flickered on in

response to the creep of night. At the far end of the block, more light leaked on to the sidewalk from the foyer of The Biograph, named after the movie theatre in Chicago where John Dillinger had been gunned down in the mid-thirties. The marquee above the entrance advertised *Manhattan Melodrama* starring Clark Gable and Myrna Loy, the last movie Dillinger had ever seen. Shepherd reached the unmanned ticket booth and pushed through the door into the space where the foyer should have been.

The classroom held a hundred students seated in concentric rows around a large screen that could be patched in to a number of audio-visual teaching aids as well as any of the sixty-two security cameras set up around the town. Right now it was showing the basement room of the townhouse with Shepherd in the middle of it, frozen in his two-handed stance, his gun pointing at the crumpled bodies on the floor. A man in a black suit stood before the screen, head to one side as if studying an exhibit in an art gallery. 'You see a ghost in there, Shepherd?' he asked without looking round.

'No, sir, I was just . . . it was a high-pressure situation.'

The man turned and gave Shepherd the same hard scrutiny he'd been giving the screen. 'They're all high-pressure situations, son – every one of 'em.'

Special Agent Benjamin Franklin was one of two active field counsellors permanently attached to Shepherd's class, there to give a practical dimension to each lesson, answer any questions and tell the new intake how it really was out in the real world. He was one of those solid, square-jawed types seemingly minted in a different time when men still called women Ma'am and cars were covered in fins and chrome. His short blond hair was receding and fading to ash above pale blue eyes like chips of ice that somehow still managed to convey warmth whenever he smiled, which he did now. 'Might I ask,' he said, 'would you fire again, given the same scenario?' His Carolina drawl gave his words a slow courtliness.

Shepherd thought back to the blur of action as he'd squeezed the trigger, the suspect in his sights but the wrong person ending up dead on the floor. 'No, sir.'

'How do you figure that?'

'Because . . . because I hit the hostage.'

Franklin started up the aisle towards him, buttoning the jacket of his suit and flashing an old, steel Timex. 'Take off your body armour, Shepherd, and walk with me a while.'

The night seemed darker after the brightness of the classroom and the wind had picked up. It was blowing leaves down the street and into Shepherd's face as he fell into step beside Franklin.

''Bout twelve years back,' Franklin said, peering at the darkening forest ahead as if he could see the lost years among the trees, 'I was part of a six-man task force running an investigation into a string of hit-and-run bank jobs across the Ohio–Indiana state line. In each case a lone, masked gunman stormed into a small out-of-the-way bank, grabbed a hostage – always a woman – and threatened to shoot her if anyone tripped an alarm. He was smart to a point because the size of the banks meant security wasn't top of the line so we didn't have any decent security camera footage. Also he never got greedy so was always out and away within a couple of minutes. And he always took the hostage with him, saying if he heard so much as a car alarm he would kill her.

'As you can imagine the local press shook up a hornets' nest of fear about it all but there was also a bigger concern: none of the hostages were coming forward afterwards. For about a week or so we lived in fear of getting a call from some hunter or dog walker who had stumbled upon the silenced corpse of one of our unfortunate bank customers. Then he hit another bank, third in a month, and we got fresh footage.'

Franklin directed Shepherd away from Hogan's Alley and towards the path through the forest that led to the main building complex beyond.

'This is how it went down. Woman walks into the bank,

talks to the door guard; gunman comes in and disarms the guard while he's distracted, grabs the woman, robbery ensues then perp leaves with a hostage. We could see by comparing the clear images of the new footage with the fuzzy older stuff we had that it was the same woman every time. Turns out she wasn't a hostage at all, she was one of the crew. That's why no one was coming forward afterwards.

'We quietly spread the word among the state banks, so when they pulled another job ten days later in Des Moines, a teller tripped the alarm and the cops got there in plenty of time to pick 'em up. When he was cornered the gunman tried to pull the same hostage routine, said he was going to kill her if they didn't give him a car and a free pass. Cops just told him, "Go 'head, shoot her." All of which brings us back to your little situation. Tell me what you knew about your suspect from the mission brief?'

Shepherd dug his hands deep in his pockets and tried to focus on something other than how cold he was. 'The intel said he was on several international watch lists as a known terror suspect. Believed to be a Jihadist, trained in Afghanistan by Al-Qaeda.'

'And from your reading and case studies do terrorists and other religiously motivated individuals tend to give themselves up to officers of an enemy state they believe they are conducting a holy war against?'

'No.'

'No they do not.'

The trees parted to reveal the Quantico Hilton rising up in front of them, all square lines, slit windows and concrete. This was where the labs and active case teams were housed; proper on-going, messy cases with as-yet undiscovered solutions, not the clean textbook ones Shepherd was being weaned on. It could easily have passed for a small mid-western high-school campus had it not been for the sound of gunfire crackling out of the forest behind them. The next recruit must have made it to the basement. Shepherd hoped he or she was doing better

than he had. Hearing the shots reminded him of all the paperwork he needed to fill out back at the briefing room. The forms for discharging your weapon during an exercise were thorough, tedious and in triplicate for very good reason: it stopped the recruits from getting trigger-happy.

'Don't worry about the admin,' Franklin said, apparently reading his mind. 'I'll square it with Agent Williams. You can fill it in and file it after.'

After what? Shepherd wanted to ask, but Franklin was already halfway towards the glass doors of the main building.

'Never forget that you are a highly and expensively trained officer, son. In the currency of law enforcement that makes you an asset to Uncle Sam and a much-valued target to a terrorist. If you don't take the shot, odds are the bomber will push the button anyway and there will be three bodies to scrape out of that basement instead of two. The hostage dies either way. And, given the little story I just told you, how do you know the hostage was even friendly?' They moved from the frigid night into the brightness and heat of the executive building. 'You have to wonder what that woman was doing at dusk in a rat-hole basement with a known terrorist in the first place. I can understand you being upset that you shot someone who might be innocent, it's a credit to you, but don't lose sleep over it. You made the right choice, Shepherd. Though you do need to work on your marksmanship.'

They passed the honours board that dominated the glass atrium with the name of every top-of-the-class graduate written in gold, dating right back to 1972 when the doors first opened. Shepherd doubted his name would ever grace it. He was a good few years older than the average intake, which showed in his fitness scores, and his shooting was clearly letting him down. The things he really excelled at were not part of the five areas of ability that went towards his final mark; his expertise had not even been thought of when the FBI first came into being.

The elevator door opened and Franklin stepped inside, waited for Shepherd to join him then pushed button number 6. Shepherd's mouth went dry. The sixth floor was where the most senior personnel lived.

'You cannot have doubts out in the field,' Franklin said, his soft voice sounding conspiratorial in the confines of the elevator. 'Because if you hesitate in a situation like that, you die, or, worse still, your partner does and you end up carrying it around with you for the rest of your life. They don't put this sort of thing in any of the manuals but I'm telling you how it is, for your own sake and for mine – especially if we're going to be working together.'

The door swished open before Shepherd had time to respond and Franklin headed down the silent corridor, checking his watch as he passed all the heavy doors belonging to the sub-division chiefs. The corridor was arranged according to rank with the lesser chiefs nearest the elevator. Franklin swept past them all, heading straight for the door at the very end with Shepherd close behind, feeling like he was back in high school and had been summoned to the principal's office. Only here the 'principal' was one rung down from the Director of the FBI, who himself was just one down from the President of the United States of America. Franklin stopped outside the door, checked his watch one last time then rapped twice above a nameplate spelling out: ASSISTANT DIRECTOR.

In the softened silence of the corridor they sounded like gunshots.

'Come in,' a deep voice rumbled from the other side.

Franklin gave him the smile, only this time the warmth wasn't there and it occurred to Shepherd that maybe he was nervous too. Then he opened the door and stepped into the room.