

Prologue

Buenos Aires, The Man called Plato

San Telmo at night—dancing lights, people singing, bright colors. Tourists and residents sitting close together in the numerous restaurants, talking, laughing, eating the best steaks in the world and drinking overpriced Malbec. At night, the bohemian quarter of Argentina's capital Buenos Aires was a virtual kaleidoscope for the eyes, ears, and nose. It was a place of joie de vivre, of exuberance, of generosity—as many a waiter in the noble restaurants of the trendy quarter would say.

The man who called himself Albatross took no notice of any of this. Thanks to his ability for tunnel vision, which he had trained for years, he was not distracted by the garish, seductively inviting atmosphere of the vacation hotspot. After all, Albatross was not here for fun. He had a job to do.

His target had been inside the Cafe Juan dos Carlitos for the past two hours. It was one of those restaurants in San Telmo that looked shabby and run-down on the outside, but served some of the best dishes in all of Argentina. The target was sitting in the restaurant's newly opened outdoor area together with a business partner. After a sumptuous five-course meal, they chatted for what felt like an eternity. Albatross sat in the restaurant across the street with a direct view of his target through the exuberant stream of passers-by.

To avoid attracting attention, he had foregone his usual black functional clothing for this job, opting instead for a more touristy pair of beige cargo shorts and a navy-blue polo shirt. He had long finished the light salad he'd ordered and had been nursing a glass of water for over an hour. If his guy didn't leave soon, Albatross would probably be turned out on the street before long. His target was American. Yankee. In his early forties. He had recently reached the top in terms of money, power, and influence but had stupidly stepped on a few people's toes on his way up the ladder.

The wrong people. People who didn't hesitate in hiring a man like Albatross to get rid of this new hotshot. Albatross's hand automatically moved to the Les Baer .45 with silencer at his hip; its shape unnoticeable due to the cut of his loose-fitting shorts. This had been his weapon of choice for the past ten years—it had never disappointed him.

Shortly before midnight, the target finally started moving. Albatross rose, paid his bill in Argentine pesos, left a handsome tip on the table, and followed his target like a shadow through the crowds of people. The further they moved away from the row of restaurants, the emptier the streets became. Albatross had been shadowing his target for the last two weeks he'd been in Buenos Aires. He knew the way to the man's hotel by heart; knew the route he always took. And even if he did lose sight of him, Eagle 1 was following them from the rooftops, the target always in his sights. Around a quarter past twelve, the target turned into Calle Defensa, one of the top addresses in San Telmo. Antique stores and art dealers lined the cobbled street like nowhere else in the world. During the day, this street was clogged with people, but now after midnight, it was practically abandoned. Albatross had watched in wonder for quite some time that, despite his position in the company, his target, whether on vacation or not, did not seem to have a bodyguard. The way he wandered these godforsaken streets alone late at night, it was almost as if he'd wanted to make it as easy and as pleasant for Albatross as possible.

“I have a clear shot,” a barely audible male voice said in his ear. It was Eagle 1, who trailed them like a cat along the rooftops and probably had the target lined up with the crosshairs of his silenced M21 sniper rifle.

“Negative,” Albatross returned quietly. “I’ll do it myself.”

“Roger.”

The target suddenly turned off Calle Defensa into a dark side street. Albatross stopped in surprise—this alley didn’t lead to the hotel. Was it a trap?

“Eagle 1?” he asked softly. “Do you see him?”

“Affirmative,” returned Eagle 1. “He’s leaning against the wall puking his guts out. Guess his steak was a little too rare.”

“Is he alone?”

“Roger that.”

“All right, I’ll do it now.”

Albatross reached into his waistband and took out the silver Les Baer. For a moment, he closed his eyes and rid his mind of all thoughts and feelings. When he opened his eyes again, they were filled with cold determination that demanded death. He hastened to the side street where the target had disappeared but into which the street light didn’t stretch. Through the darkness, he could see the target twenty yards away leaning against the wall, retching. As Albatross approached him, he released the safety and raised the gun...

He caught a quick movement out of the corner of the eye. A man jumped at him from the shadow of a recess in the wall, something metal flashed in his hand. A fraction of a second too slow, he turned to his right to aim at the attacker, but the man grabbed his arm and slammed him so hard against the wall that his weapon dropped. A jagged dagger came toward him. Fending off the blow, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his own military knife. The blade snapped open, and he thrust it at his attacker, a giant of a man, but he parried the blow. Returning with a left punch, the man’s right hand swung the knife, leaving Albatross with a painful, but superficial, cut across his ribs.

Albatross felt his legs being knocked out from under him, and he slammed with full force on the hard stone of the alleyway. His attacker leaned over him. Albatross could make out nothing more than the man’s black balaclava and his two cold eyes squinting with effort. He tried again to strike at the man, who blocked his attempts with ridiculous ease and broke his nose in one punch. Tears shot to Albatross’s eyes; tears of pain and of rage that he hadn’t seen the ambush coming—and with it, the simple trap that would seal his fate. Just then, the unmistakable sound of silenced shots resounded, quickly followed by the dull thud of two projectiles penetrating human tissue. The weight on Albatross’s chest soon became lighter as the attacker slumped to the side, dead, with two bullet holes in his left shoulder blade.

“You’re welcome,” said Eagle 1 in his ear.

“The target?” Albatross asked, unperturbed, pulling himself up with a groan and grabbing his Les Baer again.

“Lies before you,” Eagle 1 returned. And indeed. Before the target could escape, Eagle 1 had first put a bullet through his knee with surgical precision and then eliminated Albatross’s attacker. Their man lay moaning and groaning on the ground, desperately trying to crawl away. Albatross stomped toward the target with an angry, distorted expression. The man turned on his back and found himself staring into the muzzle of the Les Baer.

“Please don’t,” cried the American, with tears in his eyes and his suit wet with piss. That, by the way, was not something he passed judgement on—he had watched too many men die, even braver than this American, to know that this was not a sign of weakness. The fear of one’s own impending death was a fundamental mortal anxiety stronger than any human bladder.

“How much is he paying you?” the man asked in a panic-stricken voice. “I’ll give you three times the amount plus that. Honestly, if you could just—”

He didn’t get any further. The silencer suppressed much of the sound, allowing Albatross to put a bullet right between the target’s eyes. The man’s head made a dull thud as it fell against the cobblestone; his body went limp.

He had never been a fan of effusive talk. In his line of work, talkative men were dead men after a relatively short time. The faster and more resolute a job was completed, the better.

“Plato is dead,” he said into the small microphone on his lapel.

“Good, let’s get back to the hotel,” answered Eagle 1.

“Not yet. Don’t forget the message we’re supposed to leave behind.”

“Aw, that shit. Yeah, okay, go ahead. But make it quick.”

Albatross drew his knife. What now had to be done was ugly, but the client had paid for it. Tactically speaking, it was certainly not the smartest thing—but Albatross hadn’t been asked about his opinion. He pulled a pair of latex gloves out of one of the numerous pockets of his cargo shorts and slipped them on. He then leaned over the target’s lifeless body and began his bloody work.

Thirty minutes later, there was no trace of Albatross or Eagle 1. They had disappeared like ghosts. No one would ever know that they had been in Buenos Aires; that they’d murdered the man they called Plato. The two were less than a rumor, even less than a hunch. Nobody knew of their existence. But everyone would very well hear of their work.

When the first rays of sunshine caressed the sea off Buenos Aires at about five o’clock that morning, the city came to life—and with it, Calle Defensa. But the peaceful morning routine came to a standstill when a small, ten-year-old girl found the bodies of two men in the dim alleyway and almost unhinged the entire city with her fear-filled screams. One of the men had been shot from behind. The other had been decapitated—his head suspended from a wooden beam. The shaft of a long dagger protruded out of his wide-opened mouth—its tip had been rammed through the back of the skull and into the wooden beam. Next to the head, in the victim’s own blood, a name was written on the bare stone wall: *Kronos*.

Very few people in the world would make sense of it. Albatross, however, knew—just like his client knew—that this was only the first domino.