

THE
PROTOCOL

A James Acton Thriller

Also by
J. Robert Kennedy

Depraved Difference

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J. ROBERT KENNEDY

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ISBN: 1463689292

ISBN-13: 978-1463689292

Second Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Espie, Niskha, Mom and Dad.

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PREFACE

The crystal skulls referred to herein are real and have been confirmed to be of unknown origin and unknown method of manufacture by top scientists at Hewlett-Packard.

“And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha: Where they crucified him, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst.”

John 19:17-18 King James Version

“All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act out their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.”

Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Lawrence of Arabia

PROLOGUE

London, England, 1212 AD

“Papa! Help me, please help me!”

His daughter’s desperate cries tore through the night like a dagger, slicing through the tortured wailing surrounding him as fire engulfed home after home. With the smoke choking him, the heat searing his lungs, he held the sleeve of his tunic over his mouth and raced toward the pleas of his precious daughter. Tears streaked the soot on his face, his eyes irritated by the smoke, and the mental image of his daughter’s plight overwhelming him.

As he pushed through the carnage and destruction, he wondered what could possibly remain of his family home, a home paid for in blood six years earlier. Saving King John’s mistress from brigands had earned him the King’s thanks, and a Lordship over a small plot of land. As a member of the council he kept a home in London and with the taxes he now collected from his new territory, it afforded him the luxury of improving their lot, the result the modest home they now enjoyed.

He had been in the council chambers, meeting with the elders to discuss the latest discovery, when a terrific explosion had leveled the once mighty walls. He had been one of only a handful to survive. He was in the process of trying to rescue those still trapped in the chamber when word had reached him of what was happening outside. Then his only thought was to get home to his daughter and wife.

What he had found rendered him speechless. As far as the eye could see almost every structure had been flattened. Twisted bodies lay strewn about. Fires sprung up all around him and spread fast, lighting the thatched roofs of the houses left standing.

He rounded the smoldering embers of what was once a proud stand of trees to see flames devouring the last remaining section of his house that hadn’t been knocked over by the blast. His servants were desperately trying to douse the flames with water from the nearby well, but it was of no use.

The house was a loss, the hellish flames consuming every surface, as if possessed by an unquenchable thirst.

His daughter's screams reached him from inside.

"Lord Baxter!" yelled his valet. "Thank the Good Lord you are all right. I had feared the worst."

"My daughter—"

"She is trapped inside, m'Lord, and we are unable to reach her. I'm afraid your wife was killed in the initial conflagration."

Richard cautiously approached the roaring fire, trying to shield himself from the intense heat with his hand, but the roaring flames licked the night air, as if searching for another taste of the blood it had already claimed.

"Papa!" The pain and desperation in her voice tore at his heart. He ran toward the entrance of the home, determined to save his daughter, but was grabbed by two of his servants.

"M'Lord, 'tis suicide to enter!" one cried. "You will surely die!"

Wresting himself free, he neared the door when the front wall collapsed inwards, silencing the terrified voice. He fell to his knees and sobbed, his fists slamming into the ground. The two servants pulled him to safety, and to the body of his beloved wife. He looked upon her still form, her lower body charred from the flames, and wept as he pictured the agonizing death she must have endured. He gazed upon her face and noticed her neck, twisted and broken, and prayed it happened before the burning. This small comfort lessened his anguish only slightly as his chest heaved with sobs, his family wiped from existence with one swing of an unforgiving, and unknown, broadsword of evil. He raised his hands to the heavens and prayed for God to care for their souls, and to eventually reunite them all.

His valet cleared his throat behind him. Rising to his feet, he wiped the tears off his face before turning to his manservant. "Yes, what is it?"

"I am so sorry to intrude in your hour of grief, m'Lord," he said quietly, his head bowed, "but the council page has said that your presence is required immediately. I told him that you were unavailable, but he was most insistent."

Richard raised his hand, cutting him off. "Tell him I will be along in a moment." He turned back to his wife, knelt down and placed one last

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tender kiss upon her forehead, then rose to fulfill his greater duty, a duty handed down for over a thousand years.

London, England, Present Day

Clive sat at the central security station with his black-Nike-shod feet crossed at the ankles on a corner of his desk and his chair tilted precariously back, his long ponytail suspended in the air. His bony hands were clasped behind his head, revealing the beginning of yellow sweat stains under the armpits of his almost threadbare shirt. His mother had told him to replace it, but he hadn't seen the need. When he had his jacket on, which was all of the time when outside of this room, nobody could see his armpits anyway. He had told her to mind her own business then wondered why he'd ever agreed to move back into the old family house.

The room hummed with the fans of the computers, almost drowning out the annoying buzz of the overhead fluorescent lighting. Banks of monitors surrounded him, each alternating between different areas of the British Museum. Various entrances and exhibits flashed by, security guards on patrol, empty corridors and lonely displays. Clive had worked here so long that the priceless works of art and the artifacts of mostly forgotten ancient civilizations had lost their allure and fascination.

The only screen that interested him, now, was the one showing the Man-U football game.

So engrossed was he that he didn't notice the car pull up to the Montague Place entrance or its lone occupant dash to the maintenance door, sheltered from the incessant English rain by the jacket pulled over his head. He rang the buzzer.

Clive nearly fell out of his seat. He killed the game and looked at the monitor demanding his attention. The jacket protected the hunkered over figure from both the rain and the camera. Clive punched the intercom button.

"The museum is closed, sir."

"Clive, it's me, Rodney! Let me in, I'm freezing my bollocks off!"

Clive laughed and tapped in the code to open the maintenance entrance. A buzzer sounded and he watched the door open as Rodney

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pushed against it. A moment later his friend appeared on the inner corridor camera, shaking the rain from his jacket and running his hands through his hair, the water puddling around his discount-store Oxfords. Rodney flashed a grin then mouthed something at the camera prompting Clive to punch up the audio.

“-E-R-P! Double O-L, Liverpool F.C.!”

Clive pressed the intercom button. “United’s goin’ to kick yer arses!”

Rodney flipped him the bird then continued toward the security station. Clive laughed and turned the game back on, propping his feet on the desk corner again. A few minutes later he heard a knock at the station door. He reached under the desk and pressed the entry buzzer. The door opened behind him.

“Hey, Rodney, United’s up by one!”

He kicked off the desk, spinning his chair to face the door, keeping his eyes on the game as long as he could. As his chair completed its spin he turned his head around to see the barrel of a gun pointed at his chest. The gun fired and a stinging pain radiated from the center of his chest as he was hit. He slid from the chair into a heap on the floor. The last thing he saw before the world blackened around him was his friend of five years standing over him.

On one of the monitors, Liverpool tied the game.

Andes Mountains, Peru, One Week Earlier

Garcia swung the pickaxe against the cave wall. The clumped dirt and rock sprayed back at him, mixing with the sweat glistening on his head and soaking through his shirt. “Este trabajo de Puta me lleva al Diablo,” he muttered under his breath. *I feel like a mule. I don't see the Americanos getting dirty.* He swung again and another spray of dirt flew back from the wall. It was slow, hard work, but the professor had said there may be a secret room on the other side. Garcia respected the professor. *He gets dirty.* At first, he had only agreed to be a guide, his deeply ingrained superstitions being too strong to participate in disturbing the ancient home of the ancestors. But the professor had a way of making him feel at ease so he had agreed to help with the heavy labor. Now he was beginning to regret it. Another swing and this time the axe almost came out of his hands as he broke through.

Excited, he cleared away more dirt, exposing the other side. After a few minutes of digging with his hands he was able to stick his head through the hole he created. The pungent smell of centuries of rot and decay almost overwhelmed him. He couldn't see anything. Then he remembered the flashlight on his belt. He fumbled for it, his fingers numb from swinging the axe, his heart pounding in excitement. Finally finding it, he shone the light through the hole as he stuck his head back in. At first, he saw only more dirt, then, as he played the light around, it struck something shiny. He focused the light and gasped – two disembodied eyes glared at him.

Garcia jumped back and tripped over his axe. As he hit the cave floor his flashlight flew out of his hand. “El Diablo!” he muttered as he stared at the hole in horror. He scrambled to his feet. “El Diablo!” he screamed as he ran down the narrow passage back to the surface. “El Diablo!”

Professor James Acton was on his knees, carefully brushing dirt away from what looked like an intact clay pot. One of his students, working in the same grid, carefully sifted the soil for any small shards. Students in other grids, each cordoned off with twine staked at the corners, were

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painstakingly removing over five hundred years of earth burying what Acton hoped would turn out to be an ancient Incan city.

He had just straightened up and leaned back to stretch when he heard screams from the cave. He rushed to the other side of the camp as Garcia burst from the entrance and tumbled down the hill to the camp below, striking his head on a small rock, opening a small gash on his forehead.

“Señor Professor! El Diablo esta en la cueva! El Diablo is in the cave!”

Acton reached him as his eyes fluttered then shut.

“Get some water and a med kit over here, now!” He knelt beside the unconscious man, examining Garcia’s body for broken bones and finding none. A student arrived with a canteen of water and the medical kit. He opened it as he eyed the now moaning Garcia.

Acton soaked a cloth in water, then started to clean the wound. Garcia moaned louder, as the cool water revived him. Gradually, he came to and tried to sit up, but Acton held him down.

“Drink,” he ordered, holding a canteen to his lips. Garcia drank gratefully. “Now, tell me what you saw. And remember,” he said, looking down at Garcia with a gentle, reassuring smile, “you’re safe now.”

Garcia breathed a deep sigh. “Señor Professor, I see the Devil in the cave!” he said in his thick Peruvian accent, the fear still tingeing his voice despite Acton’s assurances of safety.

“Tell me exactly what happened.” Acton continued to smile as he tried to calm the man and stem the flow of blood.

“I was digging at the wall like you ask me to and I finally get through—”

“You got through?” Acton and the student looked at each other with excited smiles. “What did you see?”

“El Diablo, I see El Diablo! I look through the hole and I first could see nothing so I get my light and then I can see. I see two red eyes looking at me. It was the Devil, Señor. I swear! I run outta there.”

Acton was skeptical, knowing Garcia's superstitious nature. “Two eyes?”

“Yes. Come, I show you if you not believe me!” Garcia pleaded.

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Acton knew the best way to calm Garcia was to humor him. “No, you rest here with Tom. I’ll go and look myself.” Acton rose and started up the path leading to the cave entrance. He motioned for a couple of students to follow him. “Grab some gear.” They soon arrived at the entrance and crawled through the narrow opening of the cave, discovered the day before behind a heavy growth of bushes by a couple of amorous students. Once inside, the narrow passageway opened up allowing the professor and his two students to walk upright, but single file, deeper into the damp, dripping cave. Two hundred feet in, they found the hole Garcia had been laboring at all day. Acton shone his flashlight through, coughing at the overwhelming stench. At first, he, too, saw nothing. Then, he gasped.

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Fort Meade, National Security Agency Headquarters

Echelon chewed through, as was its mandate, every phone call, e-mail, fax and telex message sent either by land or satellite from its laboratory in the National Security Agency building. Its Dictionary watch list was programmed to listen and look for certain hot words such as “bomb” or “anthrax.” Any such messages or calls were flagged for review, which depending on the priority of the words and number of hits in a particular conversation or sequence of communication, meant either immediately reviewed, or put on a file to be reviewed possibly months later. The call from Peru at 17:52 Eastern Standard Time was immediately reviewed:

[CLASSIFICATION TOP SECRET UMBRA GAMMA PRIME]
[DICTIONARY HITS: CRYSTAL, SKULL, ACTON, NEW YORK]
[SOURCE ILC INTERNATIONAL LEASE CARRIER INTSAT-ALPHA]
[CALL ORIGIN: LIMA, PERU, ROAMING CELLULAR PHONE 212-555-7723]
[CALL DESTINATION: NEW YORK, NY, USA, LAND LINE 212-555-8838]
[# OF SUBJECTS = 2]
[SUBJECT IDENT: CALLER1 = ANDREWS, ROBERT IDENT SRC = TELCO]
[SUBJECT IDENT: CALLER2 = ANDREWS, JOHN IDENT SRC = TELCO]

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

[CALLER1] “John, it’s me, Robbie. Can you hear me?”

[CALLER2] “Barely, man. Where are you?”

[CALLER1] “I’m still in Peru, on the dig with Professor ACTON.”

[CALLER2] “Oh yeah? I didn’t think I’d hear from you until you got back. What’s up?”

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[CALLER1] "ACTON shut down the dig and sent us all to Lima for the night so I thought I'd call and see how you and Dad are doing."

[CALLER2] "We're fine. Dad's starting to recover from the stroke. I really wish you could be here but he understands how important getting to work for ACTON is. How're things going there? Why the shutdown?"

[CALLER1] "He found something. Something pretty cool but we're not allowed to talk about it. Only two of us have seen it."

[CALLER2] "What is it?"

[CALLER1] "I'm not supposed to tell, John. If ACTON found out I'd be kicked off the dig!"

[CALLER2] "How would he find out? I'm you're big brother man, come on!"

[CALLER1] "Okay, okay. We found a CRYSTAL SKULL, perfectly preserved in a hidden chamber. It's incredible John, I've never seen anything like it before."

[CALLER2] "A CRYSTAL SKULL? What the hell is that?"

[CALLER1] "According to the professor a few of them have been found around the world but nobody knows who made them. He was extremely excited when he first found it but then he seemed to get scared."

[CALLER2] "Scared?"

[CALLER1] "Yeah, I don't know why. Maybe he doesn't want to attract attention what with the problems down here. Anyways, my cell phone is starting to die so I'll say goodbye. Tell Dad I love him and I'll see him as soon as I'm back in NEW YORK."

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[CALLER2] "Okay, you be careful down there."

[CALLER1] "I will, bye."

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

Washington, DC

“What a day!”

James “Jimmy” Masters swirled his glass containing three fingers of an eighteen-year-old Ardmore single malt, the distinct aroma of smoke bringing back memories of his stay in Speyside, Scotland, several years ago with his wife. He raised the glass, toasting the empty rear of his limo, and took a long drag of the harsh liquid. He loosened his tie and undid the top button of his shirt as he felt his reward begin its job, his entire body enjoying the effects. He leaned back into the plush leather and closed his eyes as he let a long sigh escape.

His phone rang.

“Shit!” He put the leaded Steuben crystal glass on the drink tray and retrieved his phone from the breast pocket of his jacket that lay tossed on the seat beside him.

“Masters.”

“Sir, we have an Umbra Gamma Prime document here for immediate review.”

“I’ll be right there.” He hung up the phone and pressed the button to lower the glass partition separating him from the driver. “Jerry, turn us around, I need to get back to the office, fast.” His chauffeur of many years radioed the escort vehicles as he raised the partition, picked up his glass and gripped the overhead handhold.

The mini-motorcade’s lead Lincoln Navigator cut left, jumped the median and blocked oncoming traffic. The Town Car limo locked up its brakes and followed, jostling its well-prepared VIP as the trailing Navigator cut across, assuming the roll of lead vehicle. All three vehicles turned on their lights and sirens, leaving a trail of burnt rubber, smoke and a dozen confused drivers in their wake. Fifteen minutes later, he arrived at his office.

“Sir, here is the communiqué.” A Marine aide handed him the dossier and took his Director’s jacket. The dossier was sealed and tied with a red

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and white ribbon reading “TOP SECRET UMBRA GAMMA PRIME – DIR SPC OPS EYES ONLY.”

“No interruptions.” His aide closed the door as he entered and headed for his desk. Sitting down, his leather-backed chair exhaling under him, he glanced around the large office to make sure he was alone, then removed a device from his top desk drawer that resembled a small tape recorder. He pressed a button to activate the Radio Frequency Interference Generator to disrupt any visual or audio bug in his office, which, despite the device’s effectiveness, was swept three times a day and after any visitor. The Umbra Gamma Prime document in his hands, however, demanded every possible precaution of someone eavesdropping.

Breaking the seal, he opened the dossier and scanned the identified keywords. His eyes shot wide open. He skimmed the conversation then read it again, carefully, making sure he hadn’t misinterpreted it. Then he hit the intercom button on his phone. Static. Cursing, he turned off the jamming device then hit the button again. His aide answered.

“Yes, sir?”

“Get me Darbinger.”

“Right away, sir!”

The White House, Washington, DC

White House Chief of Staff Lesley Darbinger ran down the corridor leading to the Oval Office. He stopped just before the door, and took several gasping breaths. *This is ridiculous. I need to get back into shape.* He used to jog five miles a day, but not any more. No more time. *But winded at 200 feet?* These days he felt he did more running in the office than outside. *And it clearly isn't enough.*

“Is he in?” he panted as he stepped into the outer office.

The fifty-something woman behind the desk looked up and stuck a pencil in the tight bun on top of her head. “Yes, sir.” She picked up the phone. “Mr. Darbinger to see you, Mr. President.” She hung up and nodded toward the door. “Go on in, Mr. Darbinger.” A Secret Service agent opened the door to the oval office and Darbinger stepped through.

Stewart Alfred Jackson sat behind his desk reading a briefing paper. He tossed the paper on the oak desktop and laid his glasses down as Darbinger entered. They had met at Yale over thirty years ago and had been close ever since. Darbinger had worked on his gubernatorial, senate and presidential campaigns. With everything they had been through together over the years, Darbinger knew Jackson trusted him implicitly. He was his friend, his confidant, and his sounding board. He was the man he told all his secrets to. He was the man Jackson trusted more than his own wife.

And today, both of their lives were about to change, forever.

“What’s on your mind, Les?” Jackson asked as he circled the desk and motioned to one of the leather couches.

Darbinger sat down on a couch to his friend’s right and glanced around the office, making sure they were alone, and taking in the history represented by every object that adorned it at the same time. He leaned forward and lowered his voice as he realized he was about to add to that history.

“Mr. President, I just had a conversation with the Director of Special Ops.”

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“Jimmy Masters?” Jackson asked, as he sat on the opposite couch.

“Yes, Mr. President.” Darbinger lowered his voice further. “He thinks they found it.”

Jackson leaned forward. “Found what?”

“The final missing skull.”

17th Street, Washington, DC

Billy sat up in bed and looked around to see what had woken him, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. Sunlight poured through the window. A little too much sun for 6:00 a.m. A glance at his alarm clock showed a flashing 12:01.

“Shit!” He jumped out of bed, realizing it was the sound of nearly every electronic device in the apartment beeping as the power came on that had woken him. Running to the dresser, he grabbed his Tag Heuer watch. 8:15. “Shit!”

He ran to the bathroom and splashed some water on his face then ran his wet fingers through his sandy-brown hair, trying to make it look not too obvious he had skipped the shower. Swishing some mouthwash he found a clean pair of slacks on the floor and thrust his legs in. Running back to the bathroom he spat the mouthwash into the sink, grinned at the mirror to check his teeth for last night's dinner, then pulled on a pair of socks from the floor. He grabbed the dress-shirt hanging on the back of the bathroom door he had planned to iron the night before, but had put off, and tried to will the wrinkles out with his hands. Tossing a tie around his neck and a blazer over his shoulder, he bolted out of his apartment with his electric shaver, trying to shave a weekend's worth of growth off before his first day on the job. *This is all I need, to be late on my first damned day! Dad will kill me.*

He hailed a cab and jumped in.

“Where to, buddy?” asked the cabbie in a thick Middle Eastern accent.

“The White House.”

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

Command Sergeant Major Burt Dawson expertly flipped each of the several dozen burgers on the charcoal grill, while sweat glistened off his chiseled chest, partially revealed by a half-buttoned Hawaiian shirt. The aroma of grilled meat filled his nostrils and his stomach growled. *I love barbeque.* It was a perfect summer day. The sun shone down out of a crystal clear sky, a light breeze taking the edge off the heat. As he flipped the final burger something hit him in the back of the head.

He swung around, ready to defend himself.

“Sorry, Mr. Dog, I didn’t mean to hit you.” The small boy grabbed the beach ball that had gone astray and ran back to the group of waiting kids.

“No problem, Bryson,” he called after him. *Mr. Dog. Now that’s funny.* His buddies in boot camp over 20 years ago, had filled out his initials, B.D., to “Big Dog”. At first he couldn’t stand it, but eventually it grew on him. It was better than some of the other nicknames he’d heard over the years. He now led Delta Force’s Bravo Team; a team of the most highly trained black ops specialists the U.S. Military had to offer. The 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta, a.k.a. Delta Force, had been created in the 1970’s as an answer to the growing problem of international terrorism. Since the Iran Hostage Crisis debacle, which, if you asked insiders, had more to do with political interference than poor training, they had served with distinction in many operations the American public knew nothing about. This was their lot in life—to do spectacular things, under the radar, for no credit, and the promise of complete deniability if something went wrong.

Dawson had served with the Delta Force’s Bravo Team for over seven years and had been on missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Serbia, the Sudan, Syria, Iran and others. All had been successes in two ways. One, the mission was accomplished and two, nobody knew they had been there. His men were fiercely loyal to him, having been through hell together too many times to remember.

Today was one of many family barbeques the team hosted behind their unit in the secluded complex on Fort Bragg, where they could train away from the prying eyes of the public or regular forces. Normally, they weren't all able to be here, but today was a rare day. A roar of laughter erupted from one of the picnic tables, a reaction to a joke that likely couldn't be repeated in polite company, a.k.a. the wives and girlfriends, who sat at another table talking amongst themselves. He had only ever been married to the unit.

He checked the burgers again. *Almost ready.* He laid the buns out on the grill to toast them. More laughter from the table. He looked over and saw the comedian was one of the two new guys, Mickey. *Speaking of bad nicknames.* Mickey's huge ears stuck out of his head like Prince Charles. One comparison to Mickey Mouse during training and he had been saddled with "Mickey" ever since.

What's so funny? Sometimes he missed the old days when he wasn't the boss. He'd be sitting at that table with his men, laughing and telling one of his blue jokes from his extensive repertoire.

Shit! The cheese. He hastily peeled off slices of cheese from the stack next to the grill.

Mickey was laughing harder than he'd laughed in months. "So, what did Big Dog do?"

"Well, you'd never believe it, but Big Dog is a very chivalrous man," said Smitty, a long-time member of the team. This elicited several guffaws from the men. "So, anyways, this hostage just wouldn't stop screaming. He kept telling her to shut-up, that he was there to rescue her, but she wouldn't believe him."

"Yeah, and she had taken one of those self-defense courses," chimed in Red. "You can see where this is going, eh?"

"Don't tell me—"

"Yup, as soon as he cut her bindings she kicked him in the balls, kneed him in the nose then ran out of the building screaming at the top of her lungs," finished Smitty.

"Luckily I'd already taken out the H.T.'s so she was safe, but the local Yemini's had no fuckin' clue what she was saying," explained Niner, the

unit's sniper. Oriental, he had earned his nickname in a bar fight years ago. A redneck had called him "slant-eyed." Niner embarrassed him by slinging back a few of his own nicknames including "Nine Iron." The man was so irate he took a swing. The resulting brawl had resulted in several arrests—after the team had left the bar. From then on, he had insisted his nickname be "Nine Iron" which had been shortened to Niner over the years.

"She was half-naked in the middle of a bunch of burqha clad women! The locals—" Red's face now matched his nickname as he tried to stifle his laughter to tell the story. Losing the battle, he motioned to Smitty to continue.

"Yeah, the locals were about to start stoning her when Big Dog comes stumbling out of the building she'd been held in, cupping his boys."

"So he grabs her, throws her into this piece of shit Toyota truck we'd commandeered, and drives away," said Red. "But the chick starts screaming again and tries to get out of the truck."

"Yeah, but this time Big Dog's not havin' any of it. He backhands her in the face and knocks her out cold!" said Niner.

"No shit?"

"No shit!" laughed Niner. "I'm tellin' ya, Mickey, I saw it through my scope. Out cold."

Smitty nodded so hard his sunglasses fell off their perch on top of his head. "Yeah, so after we get picked up at the rendezvous, she's nursing a bloody nose and Big Dog is nursing a set of sore balls. And you know what he said?"

"What?"

Everyone at the table said in unison, "From now on, I don't go anywhere without a cup!"

Dawson smiled as his men exploded in laughter. His boys twinged as he remembered the story.

"Burgers are up!" he announced. Cheers from the kids preceded their stampede to the grill as he rationed the burgers onto Styrofoam plates. He was about to fill up a plate for Bryson when his cell phone rang. *Shit!*

He flipped it open. "Speak."

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“Mr. Jones, I need you at the flower shop for a delivery.” The monotone voice on the other end signaled the pending end to the afternoon's festivities.

“Five minutes.” He snapped the phone shut and motioned to Red, his friend and comrade for over ten years. “I have to go, you take over.”

“No problem, B.D.” Red took the lifter from Dawson's hand and smiled at his boy Bryson as he held out his plate. “I'll hold down the fort 'til you get back.”

The White House, Washington, DC

Billy stood in a line that zigzagged like an international arrivals area and threatened to spill out into the hallway if any more arrived. Surrounded by the excited buzz of dozens of young interns getting to know each other, he was near the back of the line because of his tardiness, but soon realized he needn't have worried about being late his first day. Everyone was being fingerprinted, photographed, swabbed for DNA, and retinal scanned. Even a voice sample was taken. *Man, what's next, a semen sample?* His watch beeped NOON as he arrived at the front of the line.

"Name?" asked the bored clerk.

"William Augustus Guthrie."

"Guthrie?" The clerk snapped his gaze up. "As in the former Speaker of the House?"

Billy nodded and lowered his voice. "Look, I'd kind of like to keep that quiet."

The clerk nodded. "Yeah, good luck with that." He waved him on. "Next!"

Billy moved down the line and placed his hand on an electronic palm scanner. Giggles from behind him drew his attention. Two girls still in line ogled him. They giggled again. He blushed. One of them pointed at his feet. Looking down, his left pant leg was partially tucked into his sock. And it didn't match his other sock. *Shit!*

Headquarters, Fort Bragg, North Carolina

“What’s up, sir?” asked Dawson as he entered the Colonel’s office. An impressive array of medals and awards decorated the walls, an antique humidor occupied a prominent position on his desk revealing his one last vice. Colonel Thomas Clancy, the head of Dawson’s unit, sat behind his desk, fishing a cigar out of the humidor. Never being one for formality when within the confines of his office, he grunted an acknowledgement. He ran the cigar under his nose, inhaling the intoxicating smell.

“I don’t know.” Clancy motioned to the chair in front of his desk. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir.” Dawson sat down. “You don’t know?”

“You were specifically requested by Control.” Clancy snipped the tip off his cigar. “Beyond that, I have no idea. I’m out of the loop on this one, Sergeant.”

Dawson didn’t like the sound of this. “When do I get briefed?”

“He’s waiting now.” Clancy flicked his butane lighter and carefully lit the cigar, rapidly puffing until he was satisfied it was completely lit. Placing the lighter back on his desk, he took a long drag and exhaled, letting the smoke waft over his face, allowing him to enjoy the fragrance one more time. His ritual finished, he turned back to Dawson. “Report to the comm center and then don’t report back to me until Control says to. Understood?”

Dawson rose and snapped to attention. “Yes, sir!”

The White House, Washington, DC

Billy studied every room and corridor in awe, his chest pounding in excitement as the White House intern tour wound through the building. He had been here years before with his father, but had been too young then to appreciate it. When the administration changed, his father didn't take him back to the White House again. "When they're voted out and our people are in, then you can go back," he recalled his father saying. That had taken eight years. Now he was back, but to work. *Eighteen years old, working in the White House. Shit yeah!*

"Rough morning?" a voice asked from behind, startling him out of his reverie. He spun on his heel to see one of the girls who had been laughing at him earlier. Blushing again, he nodded.

"Yeah, my power went out, so...you know?"

"My name is Rachel," she said, extending her hand.

"Billy." He shook her hand nervously, realizing he was probably as crimson as a lobster.

"Next time you do the laundry, Billy, you should match your socks after they dry," she said smiling. "That way that doesn't happen," she said as she pointed at his feet. She laughed again and walked back to her friend who was trying to cover her laugh with her hand.

Bitches.

They giggled some more then he heard Rachel say, "But he *is* kinda cute!" to which the other one nodded and laughed again as she tugged her friend toward the group that had moved on.

Very hot bitches.

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

Dawson pulled up to the unit, not looking forward to what he was about to do. He strode up to the party and noticed a couple of burgers warming on the grill. Red walked up to him.

“Hey, B.D., burger?” he asked as he put one together. Red, nicknamed for his red hair he shaved off with a bowie knife whenever a hint of it showed, was actually named Mike Belme. Dawson had met him over a decade before and counted him as one of his closest friends. Dawson had been named godfather to his son Bryson. “What’s up?”

Dawson looked at his friend's face as he took the burger and knew Red could tell something was wrong. He took a monster bite, suddenly realizing how hungry he was. “We’ve got a mission.”

“When do we leave?” asked Red, turning toward the group now in the third inning of a softball game.

“Now.”

“Okay, I’ll break the news.”

Dawson stopped his friend. “No, I’ll do it.” He walked into the group of operators, better halves and children. “Hate to break up the party, folks, but we’ve been called up.” A string of “aws” came from the kids, this not being the first time they had been disappointed. His men gave hugs to their families then headed into the unit to be briefed.

Darbinger Residence, Washington, DC

“What’s on your mind, dear?” Nora Darbinger looked at her husband of over twenty-five years with concern. She knew him well enough to know something was wrong. “Anything you can talk about?”

Darbinger swirled the cognac in his glass, watching the viscous fluid stick to the edges of the glass. *Good legs.* He looked up at his wife and smiled. “Oh, nothing wrong,” he reassured her. “Just finishing up some old business.”

“Old business?” She frowned and sat down beside him. “You don’t mean—”

He cut her off with his finger. “Remember, we don’t say their name. *Ever.*”

He could see the color drain from her face as she nodded, a look of fear clouding her eyes he hadn’t seen in years.

“Are we going to be okay?”

“They can’t touch us now,” he replied as he patted her hand. “But a thirty year journey may finally be about to end.”

“You promised me it was over before, Lesley,” she said, her tone firm. “After that Smithsonian incident, you promised me. I don’t want to go through that again.”

“Like I said,” repeated Darbinger, “they can’t touch us now.”

She rose and left him alone.

His thoughts drifted to the Smithsonian incident that had changed their lives almost ten years ago. Ten years of lies and deceit might finally be coming to an end.

Andes Mountains, Peru

Acton entered his cabin, followed by Robbie Andrews. Though austere, the cabin was the only bit of luxury in the camp. Its plywood walls had narrow gaps between each board that let the cold Andes wind whistle through during the night, his kerosene heater merely taking the edge off. Acton walked over to the only cabinet with a lock in the entire camp. Taking out the key, he unlocked it and carefully pulled out a case from the bottom shelf. Placing it on a table, he sat down at the lone chair and opened the case. Inside was a package carefully wrapped in cloth. He gently unwrapped it, revealing a translucent life-size crystal skull. Holding it up to the light, he gently caressed the smooth cranium.

“It’s beautiful,” gushed Robbie. He had returned earlier in the day and this was the first chance he had had to see the skull. Acton had sworn him to secrecy so he wasn’t even allowed to talk about it with the other students on the dig. After the evening campfire, where they ritually collected together and discussed the day’s discoveries, had broken up, he had pretended to need to talk to the professor about something so as not to raise suspicions. Acton saw through his intentions immediately, but decided to indulge his young protégé.

“Yes, it is.” Acton rotated the skull, the light from the gas lantern reflecting off the crystal, casting a breathtaking display of ever changing colors and iridescent shapes on the plywood walls.

“Can I hold it?” asked Robbie. Acton nodded and handed it to him. Robbie carefully took the skull with both hands and held it up to the light. Brilliant shades of red, orange and yellow resembling a stunning sunset on a perfect night collected in the eyes, the design of the crystal making it appear as if it were staring directly at him. Robbie shuddered. He handed it back to the professor, slightly shaken.

“Are you okay?”

Robbie nodded unconvincingly. “Yeah, just a little creeped out, that’s all. I can see why Garcia flipped out when he first saw it.”

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Acton nodded. “Yes, it can be very unsettling in the right light. It was probably used by ancient priests to instill fear in their subjects.” He carefully placed it back in the case then locked it in his cabinet.

“I have no doubt it worked,” said Robbie as he rose. “I’m going to go relieve Paul at the cave.”

“Okay, if Sandy doesn’t relieve you in two hours go get him,” said Acton. “You know he’s got a habit of sleeping through his alarm.”

Robbie smiled. “After seeing that thing, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep for awhile.” He opened the door and stepped outside. “Good night, Professor.”

“Good night, Robbie.” Acton closed the door behind him and lay down on his cot. He didn’t think he’d be able to get any sleep, either.

Somewhere Over the Pacific Coast

The Chinook MH-47E helicopter raced toward the Peruvian coastline. Its two Textron Lycoming engines pumped out four thousand shaft-horsepower and propelled it at over 180 miles per hour as Dawson, mission-designate Bravo One, took a knee amidst his men. He inhaled deeply through his nose, breathing in the intoxicating smell of the fumes, a smell he would never tire of. His men leaned in, each cocking an ear for their final briefing.

“This is the primary target,” Dawson bellowed over the thunder of the rotors and the rattling of the hold. He held out a photo labeled Professor James Acton. “He must be captured alive so that we can recover the item. Eliminate the guards and any other resistance. Use your AK’s if necessary so that it looks like local rebels.”

“What’s the item, Sergeant Major?” asked Mickey.

“Need to know, Bravo Six!”

“Yes, Sergeant Major!” Mickey flushed a little. Dawson eyeballed him for a brief second. Mickey had hesitated to carry out an order on the last mission and an enemy combatant had got the drop on Smitty. He had taken a round in the vest and survived, but three inches higher he would have been dead. It hadn't been necessary to chew Mickey out, he had learned his lesson. Dawson knew Mickey would never hesitate or question orders again.

“The primary objective is to capture the target alive and recover the item. Video will be sent to Control and they will determine if the remaining targets are on the Termination List. Intel has them as members of a militant cult. If they are on the Termination List they will be eliminated as well. No residual footprint, gentlemen. It must look like a rebel raid. The camp is lightly guarded with hired private security, poorly trained and most likely to either surrender immediately or run. They are to be eliminated first by Overseer who will be dropped off one mile from the camp. Understood?”

“Yes, Sergeant Major!” they answered in unison.

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“Five minutes to Overseer drop,” the pilot announced over the comm.

Dawson activated his tactical throat microphone. “Acknowledged.” Looking at his watch, he rose, ending the briefing. “Five minutes to the drop. Check your gear!”

Andes Mountains, Peru

Acton couldn't sleep. He was too excited by their find. With one final toss in his sleeping bag, he reached over to his Coleman lamp and turned up the gas. The cabin flooded with light, his belongings casting eerie shadows on the plywood walls. He climbed out of his sleeping bag, shook out his boots to rid them of unwanted visitors that might have crawled in during the night, and put them on. He unlocked the cabinet, removing the case. He'd just lifted the lid when a noise outside made him pause. Carefully closing the case, he turned down the light and went to the door.

About one mile away, Niner, designated Overseer, and his spotter, Jimmy, had been dropped off by the Chinook and were already double-timing it into position. Jimmy, who's name was actually Gerry, earned his nickname when the team found out he had been editor of his school newspaper. Red started calling him Jimmy Olson, and the name stuck. Jimmy wished they could have chosen another Superman character, but when Spaz joined the unit, he thanked his lucky stars.

The sniper team wore heavy Ghillie suits designed to make them undetectable to the enemy. Each was customized by the operator to their own liking. Since there was the potential of spending hours or days in these outfits, someone else's idea of a one-size-fits-all suit just didn't cut it. When they neared the top of the hill they hit the ground and crawled the rest of the way, the extra canvas in the front of the suits protecting them from the hard rock and dried brush underneath.

Niner quickly set up his weapon while Jimmy checked the camp below and completed his range card. In less than a minute, they were ready.

"Overseer in position," Niner said over the comm as they surveyed the camp, Niner through the scope on his rifle, Jimmy through his finder. They were far enough from the camp that any shot would reverberate through the valley below, making them almost impossible to locate. Several cabins were clumped together not far from a ring of tents. The dig site was

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cordoned off about three hundred feet south. Jimmy filled the details in on his range card and picked the first target.

The Chinook helicopter had sound dampening technology, but it was still loud. As they approached the camp from the north Dawson activated his comm.

“Bravo One to Overseer, proceed.”

“Roger that, Bravo One, Overseer beginning to oversee!” Dawson smiled inwardly at the barely contained glee in the young man’s voice. It took a special kind of person to be a sniper and this kid had it.

“Two targets, Target One, Sector A from TRP I right fifty add forty!” said Jimmy rapidly in a harsh whisper as he looked through his binoculars. Niner shifted slightly, the ground racing by in his scope as he searched for the target.

“Roger, Sector A, from TRP I right fifty add forty.”

“Single target, dark fatigues, smoking cigarette carrying AK.”

“Roger, single target, dark fatigues, smoking cigarette, carrying AK,” repeated Niner as he looked for the target through the scope of his M24A2 SWS Sniper Weapon System. He located the target just as he stamped out the cigarette. “Target One identified! I have two mils crotch to head, confirm.”

“Roger, two mils crotch to head, dial five-hundred on the gun.”

Niner adjusted his weapon. “Roger, five-hundred on the gun, indexed!”

“Wind left to right, three mph, hold one-eighth mil left.”

“Roger, wind left to right, three mph, hold one-eighth mil left,” he repeated as he dialed the final setting. He gently squeezed the trigger, the recoil hammering into his shoulder. He loved that feeling. The target collapsed in a heap. Niner smiled. “Broke one-eighth mil left.”

“Center hit, stand by,” replied Jimmy.

“Roger, center hit, standing by,” acknowledged Niner as he waited for the next target from his spotter.

“Target two, Sector B, from TRP I left sixty add twenty.”

Acton peered out the door to see what it was that had drawn his attention. He scanned the camp and didn't see anything out of order except one of the damned guards asleep on the job. Giggling emanated from one of the tents, clearly some extra-curricular activity going on in the shadow of the Andes. Several fires from earlier in the evening were now smoldering embers, wisps of smoke rising into the night sky. He looked to the other end of the camp where he knew a guard should be stationed. At first he didn't see him, but a moment later saw him walking along the perimeter, smoking a cigarette. Acton breathed a sigh of relief and was about to go wake up the other guard when the one he was looking at dropped to the ground in a heap. Then he heard the rotors of a chopper.

Niner had radioed the all-clear, so the team began their insertion at the campsite's edge. The chopper touched down and the team jumped out, crouching in a covering formation until the chopper pulled away. Dawson, using hand signals, sent his team off in twos in several directions to set up a perimeter. He, Red, Spaz and Mickey headed for the central cabin where Acton was supposed to be. In less than thirty seconds they reached it to find the door open.

Acton watched the chopper set down. He fought the instinct to warn his students, knowing there wasn't enough time and that he might get himself and others killed. So he ran. He knew the one reason they had come—the skull. He also knew that between the corrupt police and the various rebel factions, who were nothing more than gangs, there were plenty who would stop at nothing, including killing, to get their hands on something of value. That is why he had given the strict orders to his team to tell no one about their discovery. Someone had obviously not followed his order.

The best place to hide he figured was in the cave where the skull had been found. Behind the hole Garcia had dug had been a small chamber that led into a much larger one. If he hid in there he might have a chance. He took the long way to the entrance, a winding path shielded from the camp by brush and scattered trees. Running from tree to tree, he crouched in between each. Looking down at the camp, he saw the attackers setting up a perimeter as four of them raced to his cabin.

As he approached the cave entrance he saw Robbie sitting on the ground, leaning against a rock, sound asleep. *Won't be able to sleep for a while, eh?* Acton had wanted one of his own he could trust to make sure no one else, especially one of the hired guards, went in the cave looking for more valuables. He bent over and shook Robbie's shoulder.

Robbie nearly jumped out of his skin. "Professor, what's wrong?" he asked as he removed his iPod ear buds. "I didn't hear you coming."

"I thought you were asleep." Acton helped Robbie to his feet.

Robbie shook his head. "You know me, Professor, I can't live without my tunes!"

Acton cut him off. "Listen, the guards are dead and a chopper just landed in the camp. I think they're here for the skull. Come with me." They ran inside the cave and once far enough in that he felt safe the flashlights wouldn't be seen from outside he turned his on and Robbie did as well.

"A chopper? Do you mean military? Whose?" asked Robbie as he ran behind Acton, his flashlight bouncing off the walls.

"I don't know. Rebels, Peruvian police. Definitely professional and well-equipped." Acton stepped through the hole and into the first chamber. It was perfectly cubic, ten by ten by ten feet. The walls as well as the floor and ceiling were made of one-square-foot tiles. Some of the ceiling tiles that had fallen centuries before lay broken on the floor. In the center was a tall, narrow altar on top of which the skull had been discovered.

"Why don't we just hide the skull and go back out? They'll never think to look in here."

"Because I think they're here to kill us."

Robbie stopped. "Kill us?" he stammered.

"They've already killed the guards and we've seen before where camps have been wiped out just so that no witnesses are left," replied Acton as he turned around and grabbed Robbie by the shirt to get him moving again. "That's why I gave strict orders to tell no one about this. It's too dangerous." Acton watched Robbie's face turn gray as if he were about to vomit. "What's wrong?"

Robbie hesitated. "It's my fault. I told my brother, John. He must have told someone."

Acton shook his head. "I doubt it, not unless he knows some Peruvian police or paramilitaries." Acton moved to what had once been a hidden chamber in the floor and placed the case inside. "Give me a hand." Together he and Robbie moved a large tile that had been pried away earlier in the day back over the hole in the floor. It had been discovered by accident when someone had dropped a canteen, the hollow sound underneath demanding further exploration.

With the skull hidden to his satisfaction, Acton grabbed a pickaxe left on the floor then began looking for a hiding place for him and Robbie. There was another chamber beyond this one, exactly twice its size. They went in and crouched behind a large stone altar that stood in the middle, the only structure in the room. They turned off their flashlights and listened, as the stench in the air made breathing difficult. Robbie's breaths came faster and faster as panic set in.

Dawson and Mickey searched the cabin while Red and Spaz stood watch outside. Dawson flipped over the cot as Mickey tipped the cabinet over to see if anything was underneath. A complete search for Acton and the package yielded nothing. Dawson radioed his other men. "Bravo One to Bravo Team, does anyone have eyes on the target?" A string of "negatives" replied. "Start rounding everyone up for interrogation. Bravo One out."

He triggered his comm and switched channels. "Bravo One to Control."

"Control here, go ahead, Bravo One."

"Bravo One to Control, package and target not located. Beginning interrogations, over."

"Bravo One this is Control. Targets are on the Termination List. Eliminate when interrogations complete, over."

Shit. This isn't going to be pretty. "Roger that, Control. Bravo One out." Dawson stepped out of the cabin to begin the grim task ahead of him.

Somewhere in the White House

Control smacked his fist on the desk in front of him as he watched the assault via a satellite feed from an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle ten thousand feet over the campsite. Its infrared sensors showed people being woken up from their tents and herded toward the center of the camp. On the screen one tried to run away and was soon shot, though not fatally; the form writhing on the ground. Two Bravo Team members dragged the green shape back to the group.

“Where could he be?” he wondered aloud, a hint of desperation in his voice. *If that thing falls into the wrong hands!* He stabbed a button in front of him and was immediately connected to the White House Situation Room where a select few actively managed the mission. None knew the true nature of the mission; they had been told it was an anti-terrorist operation. “Report! Where is he?”

“We confirmed with an over-flight before the assault that he was in his cabin,” answered General Norman J. Russell, a long time friend to the President. “We had some technical difficulties with the infrared sensors so we deployed a replacement drone. It didn’t arrive until the assault had already begun. At that time the Target was no longer in the cabin but he couldn’t have gone far.”

“How can you be sure?”

“All vehicles are accounted for and he’s in the middle of nowhere, sir,” replied Russell. “Rest assured, it’s just a matter of time.”

London, England

In a dimly lit, underground room on Fleet Street in downtown Old London, twelve people sat at a long, oval-shaped marble table. They faced a series of integrated eighty-inch plasma displays mounted on the wall at the foot of the table. Six high back leather chairs lined either side of the table with a thirteenth chair at the head. Behind that chair a large symbol had been carved into the slate wall—two thin horizontal lines on top of each other with a third, thicker and heavier line below, curved slightly upwards.

In the chair at the end of the table sat a tall, lean man with silver hair. He calmly puffed on his 1937 Cuban La Carona cigar as he watched the operation unfold in front of him. The unique aroma of the tobacco from Cuba's Veulta Abajo, a district that is to cigars what Bordeaux and Burgundy are to fine wines, filled the air. Eleven of the twelve other chairs were occupied with people in various levels of excitement.

"If they do recover it, what do we do?" one of them asked.

"You know what we do. We implement 'The Protocol' once again," answered another.

"The Protocol, isn't that a little bit of an overreaction?" exclaimed the first.

"Maybe, but we've kept the plans current."

"But we don't know their intent!"

"What the hell are you talking about? Of course we know their intent! Remember who we're dealing with! This is the same bastard—"

The man at the head of the table leaned forward. "We are the Triarii!" his booming voice grabbing everyone's attention, spinning them from the monitors. "Just as our forefathers did for generations, we swore an oath to do whatever it takes to prevent what may happen if they do successfully recover it. The Protocol may not have been executed in our lifetimes, but if it is to be executed, then it shall be. No matter what the cost to us, or to those who get in our way!"

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On the screen, one of those being interrogated fell to the ground, a green pool of infrared blood forming beside the body.