

COBRA Z

Book 1 of the Necropolis Trilogy

Sean Deville

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Cobra Z

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“If thou openest not the gate to let me enter, I will break the door, I will wrench the lock, I will smash the door-posts, I will force the doors. I will bring up the dead to eat the living. And the dead will outnumber the living.”

— The Epic of Gilgamesh

Important Characters

British Government

David Osbourne MP – Prime Minister

Arnold Craver – Head of the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (MI5)

Bill Dodson – Prime Minister's Private Secretary

Mitchell Tanner MP – Chancellor of the Exchequer

Sir Peter Milnes – Metropolitan Police Commissioner

Claire Miles MP – Home Secretary

Sir Nicholas Martin – Chief of the Defence Staff

Sir Michael Young – Head of MI5

Sir Stuart Watkins – Head of MI6

'Davina' – Interrogator MI6

Jeremy Smith – Sergeant, Metropolitan Police

British Military

Major David Croft – Investigating Officer for the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure

Captain Lucy Savage – Head of Biomedical Science, Porton Down Research Centre

Captain Mark Grainger – Grenadier Guards

Captain Lewis Hudson – SAS

Sergeant Craig O'Sullivan – SAS

US Government

General Roberts – Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Ben Silver – White House Chief of Staff

Keith Johnson – CIA Director

Damian Rodney – President of the United States

The Sons of the Resurrection Cult

James Jones – The Chief Cleric
Abraham – Cult Leader
Fabrice Chevalier – Warrior of Truth

British Civilians

Jack Nathan
Gavin Hemsworth
Owen Patterson
Elizabeth Holden

The Daily N

Sunday, May 11, 2014

Esteemed Professor Found D

Yesterday, Professor Clive Cook, Nobel Prize winner and Visiting Professor at Oxford University was found dead near his holiday home in Dunvegan Scotland. The esteemed geneticist, who in 2003 was awarded the Nobel prize for his revolutionary research in Recombinant DNA, was reported missing three days ago by his wife.

Police have yet to release the details of his death, but it is thought the 38 year old Professor took his own life. The scientific community across the UK and the world has reacted with shock at the news. The death of a man who many have labelled "a genius to rival Einstein" will be seen as a significant set back to the revolutionary field of cancer research he founded

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Ref: FGu5867th

Top Secret



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The Civil Contingencies Committee Command
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Confidential Report on Project
Z43851-5

Report by the Joint Intelligence Organisation

Ref: FGu5867th

Date: 21.04.14

At roughly 8PM on the 17th of April 2014, there was a containment breach at the BSL-4 genetic laboratory facility at the Hirta Island Research Complex, designation RESURRECTION. Although the breach was ultimately contained, 17 people lost their lives, including facility director Professor Clive Cook and head of security Stewart Goldsmith. It is as yet not known where a pathogen this virulent came from, how it escaped containment into the general facility, how it spread so rapidly, or why those infected manifested the symptoms that resulted in the tragedy. What is known is that the security lockdown prevented the contagion from escaping into the outside environment, and that the incident has now been deemed to be contained.

The following is a transcript of the final video log of Professor Clive Cook. This was sent via Intranet to the secure server at the facility where it was retrieved after the event, along with the video logs of the surveillance cameras. Many of Professor Cook's words were inaudible due to the background noise. Some of the details have also been redacted as they fall outside the security clearance of many on the Civil Contingencies Committee.

"The virus got out [INAUDIBLE] know how. I've barricaded myself in [INAUDIBLE] not hold for long. Their strength is incredible. We never imagined [REDACTED] beyond all recognised scientific norms [INAUDIBLE] ... and most of my research team are dead. Oh God, what have we done? How did this happen? You must not open up the facility. The lockdown must stay in place. All my research has been uploaded to the central server, but please, I implore you, this research must be abandoned. I was wrong, I was so very wrong. [INAUDIBLE] cannot be repeated. [REDACTED] ignored my advice. I told him we were rushing this, and I told him [REDACTED] would be a disaster. Oh God, they are breaking through; I can hear them ... I can feel them. I was bit ... I can feel them in my mind. Why does this itch so bad? In my head ... they are in my head. They are so hungry. Why is my mind on fire? Fire, yes, fire, that's what I meant to say. I tried to activate the fire sterilisation system, but it malfunctioned. Activate it from the outside, cremate everything in here [INAUDIBLE] ... I can see them. They are [REDACTED]."

After analysis of the situation, Major Croft has stated he is in agreement with the position put forward by Professor Cook, and as the surveillance feed showed no uninfected survivors, the sealed-off sections of RESURRECTION were fire sterilised as per SOP on his orders. It is the government's position that research into project Z43851-5 be terminated due to the unexpected nature of the outcome and the potentially catastrophic infectious nature of what occurred. It is notable that none of the research data on the official server shows any indication that this was a result of the research officially being performed at the facility.

Video feeds of the event as it transpired have been uploaded and will be available during the briefing. Attached, you will find summary data on the reasons for the research and the results Professor Cook had hoped to achieve. You will also find the report by Major Croft, which details the events that occurred and the steps he felt necessary to secure the situation.

Yours Sincerely,

James Flynn, Prime Minister's National Security Advisor

Report on the 17.04.2014 containment breach at the BSL-4 genetic laboratory facility at the Hirta Island Research Complex, designation RESURRECTION

Ref: FGu5867th

Date: 19.04.14

Upon arrival at the facility, I found the lower-level laboratory area sealed and intact. Due to the nature of the apparent contagion, and the fact that all personnel in the quarantined zone were verified (via biometric data transmitted from their implanted microchips) as being either dead or “infected” (I use this word as an assumption as to the cause of the incident), I ordered immediate thermal sterilisation of the laboratory area on my authorisation as granted by s.5(1c) of The Civil Contingency Act 2004. As you are aware, the laboratory is supplied by two filtered positive pressure air vents and one access door. All three were sealed prior to sterilisation, and action is underway to permanently block off these potential access points with concrete, as whatever occurred is deemed too dangerous to risk exposure to the outside world. It is my recommendation that this facility never be re-opened, and a quarantine zone is being erected around the facility that supplies the laboratory under my authorisation as granted by s.5(1b) of The Civil Contingency Act 2004. The four-level subterranean structure above the laboratory is planned for controlled implosion to ensure nobody can access the sealed area in the future.

Through analysis of the surveillance feeds and the biometric readouts, I have not ascertained the source of the outbreak. It does not pertain to any of the research recorded in the official logs. I, therefore, suspect and deduce that there was unsanctioned research being done. I have, however, been able to ascertain patient zero. Dr. Johansson, the senior virologist at the facility, was the first to experience visible symptoms of the virus. His biometric readings show a spike in blood pressure and temperature, followed by a massive breakdown at the genetic level, with a rapid and violent

expulsion of bodily fluids. He was seen on surveillance in the canteen area drinking coffee several minutes before he underwent seizure. Dr. Smith and Dr. Carter, along with three junior scientists, were all present when this occurred and went to his aid. The seizures stopped and then Dr. Johansson attacked his colleagues, biting three of them. The time stamp showed that they too underwent seizure within 5-10 minutes, indicating a virulent pathogen with a very short gestation period. They each went on to attack multiple individuals. The ensuing chaos saw the facility overrun. The video of Professor Cook shows compelling evidence that we are indeed dealing with a new form of pathogen.

Those affected show very specific symptoms of uncontrolled rage, increased strength, and an almost insatiable desire to attack other species, not just humans. One of the affected individuals was seen on video attacking the caged rhesus monkeys. He was able to rip the locked cage door from its hinges, losing a finger in the process, indicating they have a negligible reaction to pain stimulus. These symptoms follow a brief period of illness, including vomiting, abdominal and head pain, with diarrhoea and loss of bladder control. As witnessed on the various videos taken by the CCTV, those affected also have distinctly bloodshot eyes that seem to bulge out.

There is nothing in the computer logs to indicate what this potential pathogen is. The facility was reportedly working on the early stages of the Methuselah cure, an artificially manufactured gene coding virus that it was hoped could slow the ageing process. None of the test animals showed similar symptoms, and there is no indication in any of the research that this eventuality could occur, and as already stated, I believe this was either unsanctioned research or research sanctioned outside the normal chain of command that was being done in secret. Even so, it is unknown how any manufactured pathogens could escape the BSL-4 containment protocols set up at the facility. Fortunately, the quick acting nature and the virulence of the pathogen meant its affects became apparent before it could escape the BSL-4 lab. The control computer designated TRQ did what it was designed to do and sealed the facility.

As reported in my last briefing, I strongly suspect that this is another act of deliberate sabotage. I believe persons unknown have used this facility as a production site and/or a test ground for a new bio-weapon. I have no information on how this could occur. Close inspection of the computer log shows voids in the data, suggesting manipulation and deletion of files. I would advise a thorough re-vetting of all staff at similar government facilities, and immediate investigation of all staff employed at this facility since its conception, by the intelligence service MI5. One thing of note, the number of bodies in the BSL-4 lab is one short of the designation for that facility. There is no record of any other individuals working there, but the facility is definitely one personnel member short, and there are indications of manipulation of the employee files, the entry and exit logs, and the data files themselves. This suggests to me that somebody left the facility prior to the event occurring. This might very well explain the disappearance of the transport helicopter from the island the day before. Search and rescue has not located it, the assumption being made that it crashed into the Atlantic.

It is not beyond the realms of possibility that whoever this was sent a blueprint for the pathogen electronically via what might well be a compromised network. I do not believe they would have been able to smuggle a physical sample out – not with the security procedures in place. As you are aware, transport from the BSL-4 laboratory level requires the discarding of all clothing, and the full body scans would have detected a foreign object, even if in a body cavity. On sight interviews with surviving facility personnel has not shone any light into the identity of this unknown individual, although there are some who do remember a Caucasian male who is not on the list of the dead. An artist's impression has been attached.

A full diagnostic examination of the operating systems of all facility command and control computers is now warranted, and I ask the home secretary to authorise this.

Major David Croft, investigating officer

Analysis of the cause of the 17.04.2014 containment breach at the BSL-4 genetic laboratory facility at the Hirta Island Research Complex, designation RESURRECTION

Ref: FGu5867th

Date: 20.04.14

This is a preliminary analysis of the data collected by Major David Croft and from the servers of the TRQ computer. Conclusions may be subject to change.

A full audit of the biological material stored and used at the facility does not correlate with the symptoms that manifested at the facility. There are to date no known natural or artificial pathogens that create these symptoms in a human host, and there is no indication that the manipulations of the test strains for the Methuselah cure resulted in this. Indeed, the viral strains being investigated were still only in the computer-modelling stage and had yet to undergo fabrication. The biological data collected from the implanted microchips prove that this was not a psychosomatic event and that some sort of infection was involved. We believe that, whatever the cause, it was created (or at the very least perfected) on site and in secret. This would require several personnel to be involved. I can only, therefore, assume that it was done with Professor Cook's knowledge, which does seem to correlate with his last video entry. This does also implicate someone in the upper echelons of either government or the country's security apparatus.

The pathogen itself seems highly contagious, although we do not believe it to be airborne. More likely it is spread by direct physical contact with body fluids, definitely through bites and blood-to-blood transmission, but also probably by getting bodily secretions on the skin and mucous membranes, such as the mouth and the eyes. Although direct analysis of the pathogen would have been preferable, I totally support the decision to sterilise the site. Better to eradicate the unknown than face this in the outside world.

It is my contention that patient zero was deliberately infected, most likely via his insulin which would have been freely available in the medicines fridge. I suspect the person responsible left the facility several days prior. Supply logs show Dr. Johansson only had two days of insulin left on his prescription and would have had to leave the BSL-4 level to retrieve more from the facility's pharmacy. His microchip recorded him taking his insulin 10 minutes before the symptoms developed.

With my knowledge of contagious disease, I believe this to be an artificially created pathogen and that the Hirta Island incident was a covertly ordered test run of what can only be a weaponised virus. This poses a very real threat to the stability and the security of this country.

**Captain Lucy Savage, Head of Biomedical Science, the
Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, Porton
Down**

Prologue

**6.02PM, 16th April 2014. Hirta Island Research Facility, BSL-4
Containment level access tunnel**

It really shouldn't be this easy. It shouldn't be this easy to kill 17 people and get away with it. Setting his bags down for a moment, he took something out of his inner pocket and zipped up his weatherproof overcoat. He pulled up the hood, tying its laces tight around his face, bracing himself for the icy Atlantic that waited outside. Placing his travel bag over his shoulder, he held his ID badge with his right hand and picked up his suitcase again with his left. The corridor ahead turned left, and he walked along it towards the secure exit. As usual, there were no guards present, and he stepped up to the door, placing his ID badge against the reader. Hidden cameras scrutinised his biometrics, ensuring he was actually the owner of the card. After a moment, the reader flashed green, and the door unlocked itself, his departure authorised by the central computer. Putting the ID in one of the coat's outer pockets, he pushed the door open with his shoulder. Deep within the facility's computer system, a Trojan virus began to eradicate all data related to the card and its owner. By the time the door closed behind him, it was as if he hadn't even existed.

He walked out of the research facility, into the driving rain that some might think was sent as a divine force to drive him back within the building that was soon to become an illustration of hell. God it was cold up here, and he pulled his weatherproof overcoat tighter. Cold it might be, but better to be up here than to fall victim to the heat that would incinerate the whole lower level several hours from now. If he was honest with himself, he didn't want to do this. They were his friends down there, his co-workers, people he had known for years. But none of them were true believers; none of them felt the spirit of the One True God in their hearts. Most of them were atheists, and deep down, he knew that ending their sin now would only lessen their torment in the afterlife. So in a sense he was, some could argue, doing them a favour. He still struggled with the logic of that one.

The helicopter was already landing, unsteady in its descent as the wind relentlessly buffeted it. But it was not to be defeated, and it finally landed. The side door opened, ready to embark its three passengers; the other two already stood patiently at the heliport's edge. Of course, the computer logs and the transport logs had already been doctored. By whom he didn't know, but he had faith in Brother Abraham. Brother Abraham had

powerful followers, true believers in the One True God, hiding deep in the heart of government. The travel log would say there were two passengers, but of course, the helicopter would never reach its destination, so there would be no witnesses to his travel. Running over to the helicopter, hand on his hat to stop the Atlantic from stealing it, he glanced back at what had been his home for the last three years, unaware of the merciless death that awaited him less than thirty minutes from now. He paused. He realised he was going to miss the people down there, but he had trust in the word of the Lord. For as Brother Abraham always said, God came first.

8.45PM, 17th April 2014. Hirta Island Research Facility, BSL-4 Containment level access tunnel

He ran. He ran and he bled. Bathed in the hypnotic orange flashing emergency lights, he propelled himself down the subterranean corridor, the howls of the damned echoing all around him. He didn't dare look back, didn't dare risk seeing what he knew was relentlessly pursuing him, the insane eyes and the blood-stained mouths. And he bled, oh how he bled. His once white, pristine lab coat was now soiled, thick with the crimson artwork that seeped from the wound on his torn and lacerated neck. He stumbled and almost fell, a wave of dizziness and nausea crashing over him, and he knew that it wasn't just from the loss of blood. He could feel it, feel it working away inside his mind. The virus was in him, ravaging and raping his cells. But still he ran, because what else was he to do with the insanity that pursued him?

He was running with such determination, fuelled by masses of adrenalin, that he couldn't slow himself down in time, and he hit the door at the end of the corridor with panicked force. He almost didn't feel the impact. Behind him, the racing footsteps of his tormentors could be heard getting ever closer. On the edge of losing what little sanity was left to him, his blood-slicked hand tried to punch in the door's access code on the control panel illuminated blue at the side of it.

"Come on, come on." The panel flashed red in response, making what on an ordinary day would be an irritating error noise and an annoying wait for technical support. Today, that noise was a death sentence, and a calm, almost reassuring computer voice spoke to him from the access panel

**Security Lockdown
Access denied**

“Fuck, fuck...” He tried his code again, only to get the same response, his hands now slick with sweat as well as his own blood. And the blood of others. His mind still had difficulty registering the mass of guts and flesh he had fallen into when he had fought off the woman who had attacked him, the one who had bitten him ... the one who had infected him. Was that how it spread?

The door mocked him; there was no way through it. It was designed for one purpose, to stop what was coming from escaping into the outside world, to keep the population safe from the mistakes made down in this once sterile and ordered environment. He should know – he helped design the security protocols, insisting that multiple layers of security be put in place to prevent the unthinkable.

It was at that moment all hope left him, and he did the only thing left to him. He turned, putting his back to the door he had walked through hundreds of times before. And then he saw his true reality. There were dozens of them, and seconds away from what he knew to be one of the worst fates imaginable, his bladder opened, and his lungs exploded in a scream that mingled with the hungry roar of the damned. Then they were upon him, and his last minutes became a savage torture of teeth, of gouging fingers, of kicks and of punches, and he collapsed to the floor, insanity mercifully stripping what was left of his scientific, logical mind. Their brutality and their viciousness were matched by only one thing: their insatiable hunger for human flesh.

8.52PM, 17th April 2014. Hirta Island Research Facility, BSL-4 Containment level. Office B7

Quiet, don't make a sound. If they can't hear you, they can't find you. If they can't find you, maybe they will just leave you alone. Locked in her office, cowering in the corner on the plush carpet she had demanded be installed just a month earlier, she let fear overwhelm her. This wasn't supposed to happen. This was the thing of movies and TV – this wasn't real life. How was this even possible? She could hear them now, their howls far off in the facility. They were searching, running ... hunting.

She could feel their anger, their desire, their hunger. Wait, that didn't make any sense; how could she know these things? Looking at her hand, she saw the teeth marks that bled and throbbed and ... no, it couldn't be that. This was madness, her scientist's mind told her. But the little girl inside her knew the truth. The child who had escaped a life of emotional abuse into the maze-like wonder of the library, who had devoured any book she could find knew the truth that logic failed to admit.

Something twitched in her mind. Something pulled her, dulled her, seduced her. Despite her fear, she realised she didn't want to be alone. She had witnessed what the others had done, had witnessed them attack, rip, bite and scream. Witnessed them kill those who she classed as friends, and yet she felt drawn to them. There was a pain behind her eyes that grew with every passing moment. Was pain the right word? Perhaps not; it was more a feeling of pressure that seemed to block out her thoughts, her reasoning. Then she vomited, and her bowels opened. And the pain hit her anew in ever-increasing waves.

Something thumped onto the outside of the door to her office, and she jumped in terror, despite the agony that coursed through her system. She could almost picture the crazed maniac on the other side, blood-smeared hands clawing at the wood that was her only barrier. The sight in her left eye blurred, and she gasped as her stomach suddenly churned, threatening to expel its contents all over her once again.

"Join us." Who said that? The voice, more a collection of voices, seemed to come from inside her head.

"Join us, feed with us, kill with us." No, I won't, I won't. But despite her protestations, she found herself standing up. Staggering to her feet, using the wall for balance, she felt a part of her die. The pain in her hand was being replaced by a warmth, a warmth spreading throughout her body, and as the warmth spread, pieces of who she was simply slipped away – it happened that quickly. A spasm rocked through her, nearly sending her back to the floor, and her head twisted to the side as the muscles of her neck contracted violently. The warmth grew, and with it came the hunger. She had never felt anything like it. She knew it would be insatiable; she knew it would be relentless. As the last of her human mind evaporated, as the last of her independence was burned away by the virus, her mouth drooled, and her body shook with the urgency of what she had to do.

"Join us."

"Yes, yes I am yours," she said. Did she say that out loud? She didn't know; she didn't care. All she cared about was the hunger, and she scrambled to the door, unlocking it and sending it wide. Three of them were waiting for her on the other side. They did not attack, but they embraced her, pulling her into the corridor.

"Feed with us," the voices in her head demanded.

"Yes, yes I will feed." And, those being the last words she would ever utter, she joined them in their hunt for the living.

8.35PM, 17th April 2014. Hirta Island Research Facility, Security Command Room

He watched them die. Standing with the three men tasked with monitoring the evening security of one of the country's most secure and secret biological research facilities, he watched and listened to the dying minutes of the people they knew and worked with. At least the alarm claxon had been shut off.

It happened so quickly. One minute, he was sat at his desk going over the latest scheduling report, the next he was running from his office as the worst sound in the world bellowed in his ears. Why the hell had he decided to pull another all-nighter? Why hadn't he just listened to his wife for once and left early instead of deciding to burn the midnight oil? He could have been out there, in the cool night's breeze, breathing unfiltered air. And without the dread that within hours he might be burned alive.

"Attention! Biological hazard detected. Containment lockdown initiated."

Right now, he was utterly helpless, helpless to help those in the lower level. Powerless to help anyone else in the facility should the lockdown spread. Powerless to help himself. The computer would determine everything. It would collect and collate all the data, the very data it had used to initiate the lockdown, and determine its recommendation for who lived and who died.

"We'll be okay. Whatever it is, it hasn't breached containment. We should be okay." He said this to nobody in particular, perhaps trying to convince himself more than anything. They were on the ground level, and the lab was now completely contained. The computer monitored everything, scanning for deadly microbes in the filtration systems and in the bodies of the people who worked throughout the facility. They called the computer TRQ, which stood for "The Red Queen" after the homicidal computer in the film *Resident Evil*. He didn't feel that joke was so funny now.

"Sir, TRQ reports no sign of contagion outside the BSL-4 containment level," one of the security officers stated as he typed furiously on his computer. "Filters are clean, biologicals for all personnel outside the lab level green."

He didn't respond. It was a waiting game now. Each self-contained level was isolated from the next. The computer, based on the algorithms programmed into its software, would determine who would be released from the facility. On the large screen, he watched one of the lab technicians being chased down by three of her former colleagues. The video feed, in full colour, showed them ripping her apart, her white blouse turning crimson, arterial spray actually hitting the lens of the camera.

“Sir, confirmation Whitehall has been informed.” He knew what that meant. Within hours, a helicopter would descend upon this small island, and the man it brought would have a decision to make. Although TRQ could seal off the facility, it had not been given the power of life or death unless there was a breach of the outer doors. As long as the facility remained contained, the fate of those inside would be determined by one man, a man with a chequered past. A merciless man, a man who could make the decisions normal men could not. Until that man arrived, all he could do was wait. He didn’t like it, but he knew the risks when he took this assignment. But how the hell had this happened? There was nothing down in that lab that could cause this. The worst they had down there was bloody Ebola.

“Turn those monitors off. I don’t want to see any more of this.”

1.30AM, 18th April 2014, Waterloo Rd, London

Always the same fucking dream. The relentless heart-rending screaming of his men, the tearing physical pain and the blood and the flames. The complete feeling of failure and helplessness and the smell of the dead and the dying and the burning of flesh. Always the same dream that mutated into night terrors that woke him, drenched in sweat, his heart pounding, his mouth dry and his mind ripped open by fear and the blackness of the souls lost on his watch.

The psychiatrist told him it wasn’t his fault, and he knew that on a logical level, she was correct. It was a mechanical failure in the helicopter, the brutal irony of that fact not lost on him. Half his men lost, men who had survived nine months unscathed in one of the most hostile military environments known to man. Half his men killed because the bloody helicopter that was transporting them decided to give up the ghost and fall from the sky with them on board. Even though he was an officer, the men he had lost were friends. Sergeant O’Brian, who had saved his life twice in the field, who could drink any man under the table and still be there for the five-mile run in the morning. Corporal Hillier who had the gift of “feeling” when those Taliban scum were skulking in ambush at the side of the road, and had once pulled Croft away just as he had been about to step on a mine. Two short seconds later, and the pair of them would have been scattered in bits across the roadside, balls and legs shredded and useless. Seven heroes dead; seven men he had fought with, lived with, trained with and who he watched die through a haze of semi-unconsciousness, flames and agony. And the worst thing of all? He had lived to remember it all.

That had been eight years ago. The dreams came less frequently now, less than once a month. "Your mind will heal," they had told him. "It will adjust as it processes the trauma you went through," they said. And they were right; he no longer jumped half out of his skin at loud noises. He no longer broke down in tears for no apparent reason, or felt his heart pounding in his chest from some random stimulus. He was functional, effective and useful once again. No longer broken, but far from fixed. But the dreams still came. And invariably they were portents of doom, messengers of danger to come.

Sitting up, alone in his bed, he breathed slowly and let the terror subside, soaking in the normality of the darkness around him. He ran a scarred and calloused hand over his shaved head and sighed deeply. Alone he sat, the almost hypnotic thrum of London traffic the only noise audible in the bedroom air. No lover by his side, no children sleeping in the next room. Not even a cat to wake him in the morning. Why risk such loss again?

He didn't even jump when the telephone at the side of his bed rang. Part of him was almost expecting it. Here it was again, the call in the dead of night. The insistent voice stating that he must be dressed and packed in 10 minutes so as to be ready for the government car to pick him up. The call to duty. No time to shower, the overnight bag already prepared and sat by the side of his front door. His HK P8 pistol loaded and holstered, easily accessible in the gun safe, stripped and cleaned five hours before. Again, thought Croft. Here we go again. This was the sixth time in two years. What were these idiots doing now? What horrors had they unwittingly unleashed this time? Were they so intent on opening Pandora's Box, on destroying the world? But this is what they paid him to do, and so he went where they sent him. Although he was now a soldier in rank only, he still knew how to follow orders. After all, what else was there for him to do? Besides, somebody had to be there to clean up the mess those incompetent criminals in Whitehall created. It might as well be him.

Croft picked up the phone and listened. "I'll be ready," he said to the faceless voice on the other end of the secure landline. Placing the phone back in the receiver, he stood from his bed and walked into the bathroom, the pain in his right knee a constant reminder of that fateful day in Afghanistan, the day he and his men were being shipped home. They all went home, just some went home in pieces, wrapped in a flag that now really had no meaning, dying for a dream of England that never really existed.

8.30AM, 18th April 2014, Hirta Island Research Facility

Yep, another goddamn mess for him to clean up. Another fuck up by genius scientists who lacked the common sense to know they shouldn't meddle with the forces of nature. Scientists who could calculate the nature of the universe but probably needed help to cross the road and tie a shoelace. There was a reason evolution occurred over millions of years, why nature made changes gradually and methodically. Why couldn't these idiots understand this? Just because you could do something, didn't mean that you should. And so here he was again, dragged out of his slumber to go to wherever the government needed him. And it seemed they needed him more and more these days.

David Croft felt his stomach lurch as the SA 330 Ouma military transport helicopter was buffeted by the winds coming off the merciless Atlantic Ocean. At least this facility wasn't on the bloody mainland, and at least this time, the incident had been contained quickly. That was what the emergency dossier on his secure tablet told him. Now stored away in his bag, it had briefed him on everything he needed to know to make the decisions those in power paid him to make. His job held no title and was unknown to all but a select few. This was what the Yanks called "Black Work". Dirty, unpleasant, and sometimes far from legal. But it was necessary, and he was needed so as to give those in power a sense of deniability. His job was to protect the clamouring, selfish and hypocritical masses from the inevitable mistakes his government and their minions made. This wasn't a job; it was a way of life, and he knew the very people he protected would scream for his incarceration if they learnt of the things he had been forced to do for their protection. They wouldn't understand, and they would turn on him and those who made him like a rabid dog turns on its owner. Sometimes, he wondered if the masses actually deserved saving, but he knew that this was not a decision for him to make. He was merely the hired help. And yet the price he paid for their safety was the soiling of his very soul.

Looking out of the window, he saw Hirta Island drawing closer. Another godforsaken rock. The helicopter buffeted again, and rain started to impact on the outside, obscuring the view of his destination, which got ever closer. Croft hated helicopters – understandable really, considering. It had been two years before he had been able to get near one without suffering chaotic palpitations and anxiety. And now all he seemed to do was fly about in the things.

"One minute to landing, Major," the voice of the co-pilot stated over the intercom. Thank Christ. Croft grabbed hold of the door handle and

readied himself for touch down. Even a cold, wet, barren rock in the Atlantic was better than this.

There were people waiting for him at the helipad ... but then there were always people waiting for him. That was his life now it seemed. Some carried worried faces, others had defiant eyes. Some even reeked of resentment, as if Croft's presence was an insult to their existence, to their competence. And in fairness, in a way it was. If he was anywhere on orders of Whitehall, it meant that someone or something had failed. Despite the safeguards, despite the systems, and despite the training, human error always crept in. That was one of the first things they taught him at Sandhurst, a message battered home in his SBS training.

"All plans fall apart upon engagement with the enemy."

And didn't he know that all too well. Hadn't he experienced that very thing time and time again? He held his breath as the helicopter touched down, and sighed internally as the motion stopped and the ground became his new home. Another bullet dodged. Another day to carry on living.

"You are safe to disembark, Major." Croft didn't respond; he undid his seat harness and opened the door, mindful of the rotors that were still spinning as they slowed their rotation. There were three people there this time, two struggling with umbrellas as the wind buffeted them, toyed with them. Grabbing his bag, he stepped from the helicopter and made his way over to where they stood anxiously. One of them saluted – the one who stood in the rain without protection, the soldier and the driver of the car that waited to take Croft to his latest massacre. He saw the hint of fear in the man's eyes, the look that told him the man had seen something no human being should ever see but lived to talk about it. Not that the man would ever speak a word of what he had seen here. That was what the Official Secrets Act was for. Croft saluted back, gave the man a nod that relayed respect. Nobody spoke for there was nothing that needed to be said, and they retreated quickly to the relative warmth of the car. The next 30 minutes would determine whether 47 people got to live or die. *All in a day's work*, thought Croft.

12.47PM, 23rd April 2014, Hyde Park, London

The bench was bitterly cold, but Bill sat there nonetheless, his back resting firmly against the ancient wood. He was far from comfortable, but he ignored that as best he could. Seated, seemingly oblivious to the world around him, he pretended to read the newspaper on what many would

assume to be a lunch break for one of London's many white collar employees. This was, of course, not the case. A gentle breeze flirted with the newspaper, and the trees behind him whispered their secrets to each other, laughing at the stupidity of the fleshy creatures that dwelled around them. *Look at how important these pathetic monkeys think they are*, said the trees. *Look at how they run about their lives as if their lives actually mattered.*

He had done this numerous times before, but still he was nervous. No, that was the wrong word. He was almost sick to his stomach. He was risking so much for what amounted to little in the way of personal gain. He knew that at any moment a hand could drop on his shoulder, the agents dressed in black with well-oiled machine guns could pick him up off the street, or more likely from the illusory safety of his home in the dead of night. One minute, he would be safe in his own self-indulgence, the next, he would find himself trussed up in the back of a black van with a bag over his head and a boot on his throat. But still, he did what needed to be done because it was what the Lord demanded. And the Lord it seemed resorted to blackmail these days.

His instructions were clear, and he knew he was never to again meet the man who had given them to him. The man who Bill knew would give his life for his God. The thought depressed him, for Bill had never found such passion in life for anything, had never found a cause worth fighting for. No, but he had found frailty and weakness, which had allowed them to get leverage over him. So he had submitted, pledging his allegiance and his soul, prepared to betray his country and the man he worked for, the man who trusted him with the safety of these sacred isles, with the secrets that could bring governments down. Bill sat here, as he did every month, pretending to be mesmerised by the propaganda that the British Press called "News", pretending to be one of the sheep, one of the drones that worked the gears and oiled the machine that allowed society to run. He was trapped. If the secret of his affliction came out, he'd be ruined, most likely imprisoned. And if the secret of his betrayal did not come out, the same was likely to happen. There was nothing for him to do but do as he was told and hope, just hope that they would tire of him. He sat and he waited until the time his contact had given him.

He paid attention to those around him, every stranger scrutinised, mindful of the risks he was running and mindful of the forces lined up against him. He had to remember that he lived in a surveillance state that not even George Orwell could have imagined. Even here, in the heart of Hyde Park, there would be cameras and agents watching for those who went against the order of society. All wrapped up in the soft, loving blanket of safety and security. It was for the children after all; it was for

the next generation that the present surrendered their liberty to the ever-pervasive glare of the state. And most of them did it willingly, giving the agents of oppression the information they craved through their smartphones and social media. There was no denying what the country had become; he worked at its very heart after all. He saw how the people went about their daily lives under the illusion of some mystical freedom that they believed existed. Democracy, what a fucking joke. And deep down, they knew they were watched, they knew that data was being collected and stored, but there seemed to be some form of mass social dissonance that hid the truth from their eyes. So every day, the people of this country woke up and ignored the elephant in their living room. They went to work, they watched TV, and they paid their taxes. They drank their beer, raised what they thought were their children and groaned about how this incompetent government was ruining the country. If only he could shout to them that the government knew exactly what it was doing, that it was slowly stripping away their liberties to serve the vile forces of the Son of Perdition. The Devil dwelled below the surface of this warped and fetid society and shaped the living world to create his master plan. And by their acquiescence, they had all become his willing servants. But not Bill – no, he was apparently now a warrior of truth. Why did it have to be religious nutters who had discovered his secret?

Bill looked at his three thousand pound watch, and seeing the allotted time stood, folding the newspaper he had never actually read. Discarding it in the almost empty park bin that lived beside the bench he had briefly dwelled on, he picked up his black leather briefcase and walked away towards the nearest park exit. He didn't look back, didn't rush, and did nothing to draw attention to himself. But nor did he linger. That was how he lived his life. He did his official job to the best of his abilities, and then shared the secrets he learned from his job with God's right-hand man. It was not treachery he had been told, for how can the war against Satan be anything but just?

Bill Dodson, Private Secretary to the prime minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, did not see the park employee with the cart come along a minute later to empty the bin. He did not see the park employee pick out the newspaper, which contained taped to its inner pages a micro simcard. A micro simcard with photographs of everything that had crossed his desk in the previous month, courtesy of the smartphone Bill carried around with him. He didn't see the park employee place the newspaper in a separate part of his cart, before emptying the bin. And neither did anyone else of consequence. Another act of rebellion perpetrated right under the very nose of the state. But what was just another day's disloyalty when viewed against the months of sedition already committed?

