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Opening extract from

Alfred Kropp III The Thirteenth Skull

Written by

Rick Yancey

Published by

Bloomsbury

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First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
36 Soho Square, London, W1D 3QY

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7475 9553 3

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processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.alfredkropp.com

To Sandy—I love you

Countdown to Final Extraction Interface

(in days, hours, minutes, seconds):

13:20:48:29

BEGIN TRANSMISSION.



Integrated Security Interface System

[ISIS]

User Warning: Use of this interface is restricted to Company personnel with security clearances of A-17 or above.

Any unauthorized access of this system will result in immediate termination and forfeiture of all rights and privileges granted to personnel under Section 1.256 of the OIPEP Charter.

For security protocols related to use of ISIS, see Section 4 of the Charter.

User Login:
DIRSMITH

Password:
••••••••

Welcome DIRSMITH!

Please Choose a Task:

Authorized Interfaces:

SES
Dossiers
SATCOM System
Current Operations
Archived Operations
Company Directory
Medcon Protocols
Locator Services
Special Weapons & Tactics Division

ISIS
Secure Special
Subject Dossier-System
[SSS D-SYS]

ENTER DOSSIER NUMBER OR CODE NAME:
05-5867564

[click HERE for Search Function]

DOSSIER # 05-5867564
SUBJECT: ALFRED KROPP
CODE NAME: little big lance
KNOWN ALIASES: NONE
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: U.S.
CURRENT RESIDENCE: KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

Vitae: Subject is orphaned son of deceased special subject Bernard Samson, code named *Lionheart* (cf. Dossier #05-5847631). Reputedly the last remaining descendant of Lancelot Du Loc, subject materially involved as unrecruited third party in Sub.Sub.Sec.Op. Sword of Kings (cf. Main File 05-3128-01, Op SOK).

Subject is currently ward of special subject Samuel St. John, code named *Fallen Father* (cf. Dossier #80-4891207), and formerly the Company's operative under Section 9 of the Charter.

Subject Kropp is in possession of the Great Seal of Solomon (cf. Main File 06-5464-01) and has rejected all Company overtures for its return. Since the Company possesses the Lesser Seal, no operation (Sec., Sub-Sec. or Sub-Sub-Sec.) is currently being contemplated for its recovery BY ORDER OF THE DIRECTOR (cf. DIRORD #06-90876)...

Subject has NO SECURITY CLEARANCE

DEO WARNING: The following material in this Dossier is restricted to DIRECTOR'S EYES ONLY (DEO), with exception granted to the Company Operative Nine [see S. 2345 (d) and S. 9 (f) of the Charter].

ENTER DIRECTOR ACCESS CODE (DAC)
OR OVERRIDING SEC. NINE PASSWORD (ORSECNINE)



DIRECTOR'S EYES ONLY!

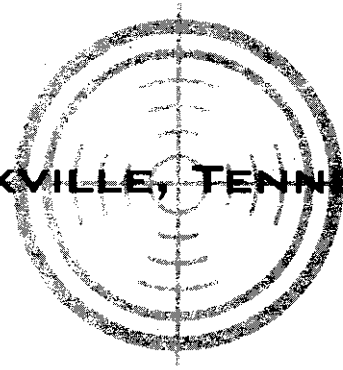
(DEO)

ITEM OF SPECIAL INTEREST

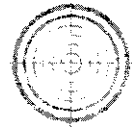
At some point during Op. Sword of Kings, Subject Kropp became endowed with special ability to heal, cure, and perhaps resurrect through application of his own hemoglobin.

Subject's blood showed promising results as an active agent in containment and control of intrusion agents during operation referenced in Main File 06-5464-01.

All efforts to replicate this active agent through synthetic or biotechnical means have failed.



KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE



I parked the Koenigsegg CCR sports car, with its bicompression centrifugal supercharging system and twin parallel mounted Rotrex compressors in the garage beneath Samson Towers, in the space marked RESERVED. Beneath the word was the very dire warning that all violators would be towed at their own expense.

After taking the private elevator from the garage to the main floor, I walked through the huge atrium, past the waterfall gurgling and splashing in the center. The guards behind the metal scanner and X-ray machine waved me through with a smile, and the guy at the security desk gave me a respectful nod, and I thought of my uncle Farrell, who'd had the same job before my life got really weird.

I took the express elevator to the penthouse suite, twisting the Great Seal of Solomon on my finger, a nervous habit I couldn't seem to break. I was thinking about putting it on a chain to wear around my neck or maybe stashing it in the

hidden compartment beneath my father's desk, where I'd found Excalibur about a thousand years ago.

Samuel came out of my father's old office wearing a worried expression. "Oh, there you are," he said. "I was getting concerned."

He followed me into the inner office and closed the door behind us.

I told him about the meeting with Abigail Smith in the old church.

"She's the new director of OIPEP," I said. "She didn't seem too thrilled about it."

"This is very grave news, Alfred," Samuel said. "As the director, Dr. Smith will be under great pressure to obtain the Seal from you. And the Company, as you know, can be ruthless."

"Sometimes good people have to do bad things," I said.

He nodded.

"Well, I'm still not sure I buy that argument, Samuel." I sank into the fat leather chair behind my father's desk.

Samuel sat across from me, clearly worried. "Perhaps I should not have left the Company."

"But if you stayed I wouldn't have a legal guardian. Well, I guess I would, but it might be Horace Tuttle, and I really don't like Horace Tuttle."

"I will do all within my power to guard you, Alfred." Samuel got very serious, which was a lot more serious than most people get. "I will never abandon or betray you, though hell itself contend against me."

"Don't say that." I laughed. "We've been down that road before."

He nodded, and a dark look passed over his features.

My face grew hot. I shouldn't have said that. It didn't come out right and now it was too late to take it back.

"Anyway, I told you to forget about it," I added quickly. "I know why you thought you couldn't come with me to face Paimon. That wasn't you at the Devil's Door."

"Oh, that is the terrible thing, Alfred, the thing I must live with until I live no more: it *was* me, and I have wasted many hours trying to convince myself otherwise. Too often we blame the temptation itself for our succumbing to it."

I winced. "Please, don't talk about temptation."

I got up and went to the window, turning my back to him. I stared down at the street thirty-three stories below.

A delivery truck was parked in the loading zone in front of Samson Towers. A guy dressed in a brown uniform was unloading boxes from the back onto a dolly. The day was sunny but very cold, and the man's breath exploded in curling white plumes over his head while he worked.

Nearly two months had passed since my final showdown with the demon king named Paimon, but the memory of what it offered me was still glittering and sharp.

A little house on a shady street. A kind older man and his pretty wife. And me. I went to school and hung with my friends. And that's about all I did. No adventures. No saving the world from total annihilation. Just a normal life.

Nearly every morning since that day I woke with a little stab of regret for turning down the demon king's offer.

A black SUV pulled up behind the delivery truck as the guy in the brown jacket and slacks wheeled the dolly toward the front doors, disappearing from view. A man in a dark suit emerged from the SUV, talking on a cell phone. One of the guards came out, pointed at the SUV and made a little waving motion with his hand, while the guy on the cell phone tried to juggle his phone conversation with the one happening with the guard.

Behind me, Samuel said, "Whatever the future holds, I will never forget this second chance you've given me, Alfred."

Before I could say anything, a car sped around the corner, screeched onto Gay Street on two wheels, and then accelerated until it rammed into the rear of the SUV. The sound of the impact carried through the frigid air up to the penthouse. The man in the dark business suit fell forward, colliding with the guard as he stumbled backward.

Samuel's faint reflection appeared behind me at the window. "What happened?" he asked.

The car's hood had crumpled completely against the SUV's bumper, shattering the windshield and deploying the air bag. I couldn't see the driver.

"That guy just rammed into—"

A fireball leaped into the sky, and instinctively we jerked back from the window. The guy in the black suit and the guard faded out of sight toward the front of the building.

A second later they were back, joined by two other guards from the Towers and a few other people who tried to approach the burning car, but I didn't think there was any way somebody could have survived that.

A voice spoke behind us. "Hey, what's up?"

We both whirled around. Samuel reached inside his jacket for his gun.

It was the delivery man. He was holding a large tube wrapped in brown paper. It looked like the kind of packaging posters come in.

"I got a package for a mister"—the delivery guy consulted his clipboard—"Alfred Kropp."

"I'll take it," Samuel said. He took a step toward the delivery man.

"All right," the man said pleasantly. The package turned

end over end as it fell to the floor, like it was falling in slow motion, the clipboard falling with it.

The man in brown was holding a sawed-off shotgun. He pointed it at Samuel's chest and pulled the trigger.

I screamed, but my scream was buried under the roar of the blast.

Samuel fell forward, both hands clutching his chest.

The singing of sirens was floating up from the street below, but my mind barely registered them. I rushed the shooter.

The barrel of the gun swung toward my face. My foot caught on Samuel's writhing body and I fell forward. Instinctively my left hand shot out and I shoved the barrel upward just as the guy pulled the trigger, sending the blast into the ceiling. I swung blindly with my right fist, landing a lucky punch square into the guy's Adam's apple. He countered with an elbow to my cheek.

I rolled to my right as he scrambled toward the doorway. I grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back. He kicked me in the groin with the end of his steel-toed boot. I curled up on my side, both legs jerking from the explosive pain of the blow and watched helplessly as he lunged through the open doorway into the reception area outside.

I crawled toward Samuel.

"Alfred," he gasped. "Don't let him escape . . ."

"No," I said. "I've got to get you an ambulance—"

He shook his head. "No! Must . . . find out . . . who sent him . . ."

He pulled out his 9mm semiautomatic and slid it across the floor. I picked it up.

Our eyes met.

"*Go.*"

I went.

The door to the stairs was clicking shut when I came into the hallway. I kicked it open. I had taken two steps toward the railing when something hard smashed into my lower back—I guess the heel of his boot—and that flung me toward the steps that led down to the next floor. The classic hide-behind-the-stairway-door trick. I should have seen it coming.

My gun skittered and flipped and bounced down the stairs until it reached the little landing and came to a rest.

Then Delivery Dude was on me.

I saw a flash of metal. The blade in his hand was at least a foot long, tapered, thin. It sliced along my forearm as he swung it toward my gut. I smacked his wrist with the back of my left hand while I brought my right fist down on the side of his head. He stumbled back a couple of steps.

First I had to neutralize the knife: one of my long-term goals was never to be stabbed to death again. So I grabbed his wrist and slammed his forearm down as hard as I could against the metal railing. The knife flew from his fingers and dropped down the shaft of the stairwell.

The next step was to neutralize *him*. Unfortunately, he had the same idea, only he executed it just a split second sooner. He threw his shoulder into my chest and drove me backward. My foot slipped off the top step and I dropped about a foot . . . a good thing, too, because he chose your classic head-butt-to-the-face move and my face wasn't there to butt.

As his head snapped forward, I wrapped my arm around his neck, sidestepped to the right, and flung him down the stairs to the first landing. It was a pretty good maneuver, since it gave me a few extra seconds to recover. It was also a pretty bad maneuver, because I had hurled him to the exact spot as Samuel's gun.

Fight or flight? If the other guy has a gun and you don't, nine times out of ten, I'd suggest flight.

This must have been the tenth, because I didn't fly.

I jumped.

He broke my fall, but it was too late. He already had scooped up the 9mm. When I landed on top of him, his chest slammed into the concrete, and the breath went out of him with a loud *whumph*! I lay on his back and wrapped both arms around his sides. He came back at me with a reverse head butt, this one landing true, against my nose. I heard a popping sound and blood began to pour.

It achieved the desired effect: my grip on him loosened and he tore free, bringing up the gun as he slid on his back down the stairs toward the next landing.

The muzzle flashed and my left shoulder jerked backward with the punch of the bullet.

I stumbled upward to the top landing, bleeding from my shoulder, my nose and cheek, my forearm; I was throwing off blood everywhere. The steps were slick with my blood. I slipped and tumbled to the same landing I had just vacated.

When I raised my head, he was standing over me, the end of the gun about two inches from my face. He was bleeding pretty badly too, but he seemed pleased with himself.

He sneered one word before he pulled the trigger. *"Pitiful!"*

"No," I said. *"Empty."*

I hoped I had counted right. I was pretty sure I had, but even simple things like counting can get complicated when someone is firing bullets at your head.

Snap. Then rapidly as he yanked the trigger over and over: *Snap, snap, snap . . . snap snap snap snap!*

I jumped up and landed a haymaker to the side of his head. Then another to the other side of his head. Then a gut

punch, as hard as I could throw it. He doubled over and my fists kept flying wherever I could land them: head, shoulders, arms, chest. He dropped the gun. It hit the edge of the landing and spun into the open space of the stairwell, disappearing from view.

He fell into me and we grappled like two exhausted prize fighters in the tenth round. He slowly drove me backward until I felt the metal bar of the handrail pressing against my lower back. I didn't need to look to know I was a foot away from taking a thirty-story tumble down the center stairwell.

He freed his right hand, which he used to force my head back, his fingers slick with somebody's blood, mine or his, or maybe both. I grabbed his wrist, yanked his arm down, and pivoted to my left, spinning him around as I went. The momentum carried him over the handrail—and pulled me with him.

Then everything froze. He dangled there with me holding his wrist as I leaned over the railing, my face about a foot from his. There was no fear in his eyes. There was no emotion at all, not even disappointment.

My grip slipped: too much blood.

"I don't want to drop you," I gasped.

"You should," he gasped back.

He kicked hard with his legs and yanked free.

I watched him fall. About a couple stories down, the brown jacket tore away and the top of a parachute appeared, one of those small chutes you see stunt skydivers wear.

That was enough for me. I raced back up to the hallway and hit the button on the express elevator. There was no time to check on Samuel, not if I had any chance of catching this guy.

The elevator door slid open. "Sorry, Sam," I muttered, and stepped inside.

I dialed 911 on my cell phone.

"Nine one one, what is your emergency?"

"There's been a shooting at Samson Towers. Penthouse suite," I said. "You gotta send an ambulance down here right away."

"Someone's been shot?"

"You bet someone's been shot, otherwise why would I be calling you guys?" I shouted. I watched the floor numbers ticking down: *25, 24, 23* . . . They seemed to be moving in slow-motion.

I heard the dispatcher say something to someone else like, "Another one from Samson Towers! Yeah, that's what he says."

"Hello?" I shouted into the phone, watching the floors slide by: *15, 14, 13* . . . "You gotta send an ambulance! Samson Towers!"

"Sir, someone's already called for an ambulance at that location."

"That's probably for the dude in the explosion. This is someone else."

"Another explosion?"

"No, a shooting."

"A shooting! How many people?"

"One! Just one!" *5, 4, 3* . . . "Penthouse suite. He's in the inner office, farthest one back through the main doors."

The door slid open. I stopped a couple steps past the door to the stairs. He'd fooled me once with the hiding-behind-the-stairway-door trick. Maybe he thought I would think he wouldn't try it again, but if it were me I wouldn't race onto a street swarming with cops.

I kicked open the door and stepped inside. I found the discarded chute and harness, his jacket and, lying on the bottom step, the empty 9mm, but no Delivery Dude. I scooped up the gun and dropped it into my pocket. At some point, Samuel would want it back.

The lobby was swarming with people. I saw the red flash of emergency vehicle lights on the street outside and the red hulk of the fire engine beside the smoldering wreckage of the car.

I pushed my way through the crowd and spun through the revolving doors into the freezing air outside. The brown delivery truck was pulling away from the curb as a cop trotted beside it, shouting for the driver to stop. I stood there for a second, unsure what to do. Then the driver pulled into the center of the street and floored the gas.

The entire block had been roped off, but I didn't think Delivery Dude was going to let that plastic yellow tape concern him. His front bumper clipped the back of a cop car as he roared forward, sending the car spinning into the curb.

I didn't spend much time mulling over the options. My car was in the parking garage two stories below the pavement. I ran to the nearest police car and flung open the passenger door. A young cop sat behind the wheel, writing on a clipboard. I dropped into the seat beside him and shouted, "Follow that truck!"

He hesitated for a half second before answering, and then he said, "No way, kid."

I leaned over and pressed the muzzle of the empty 9mm against his temple.

"Follow that truck."

"Okay!"

"I'll take that," I said, and pulled the gun from his holster.

"The guy in that truck tried to kill me and it's important

I know who—and why," I shouted as we lurched from the curb. "Hit the siren!"

He did, and soon we were clocking eighty up Gay Street. The truck had a four-block jump on us though and I couldn't see it anywhere.

"It's gone!" he yelled over the wail of the siren. He looked only a couple years older than me and scared out of his mind. Maybe this was his first high-speed chase.

"He turned somewhere," I yelled back. "Slow down a little. You check left and I'll check right."

He glanced in the rearview mirror. I twisted in the seat and looked behind us. Two cops were giving *us* chase as cars swung into the curb to get out of their way.

"Don't stop!" I yelled at the young cop. "If you stop I'll shoot you!"

Of course there was no way that would happen, but he didn't know that. For all he knew, I was out of my mind. I wondered what he thought when he looked up and saw me sitting beside him, my face and clothes covered in blood and bruises.

"There, there, there!" I yelled, pointing down a narrow side street. "Turn, turn!"

He yanked the wheel hard to the right. The back wheels locked and the car slung around. The two cars behind us slammed on their brakes and barely missed us as we accelerated through the turn. The truck made another hard right and I didn't have to tell the young cop this time; he matched the truck's arc, getting us so close the bumpers almost touched.

I rolled down my window.

"Keep us as close as you can!" I shouted over the sirens, the radio chatter and the icy wind blowing in my face. "I'm going for the tires!"

"That only works in the movies!" he shouted back.

I heaved myself through the open window, grabbed hold of the mounting bracket for the lights with my left hand, and opened fire. The truck had led us into a narrow cobblestone alley barely wider than the width of the truck. The brick walls of the buildings beside me passed in a red and black blur, about two inches from my cheek. I was concentrating on my shots, so I didn't see the big metal bins used for construction debris up ahead.

But Delivery Dude did.

The brake lights flashed. The significance of that was lost on me as I frantically yanked on the trigger, coming nowhere near to hitting a tire—maybe it does only work in the movies. An instant later the cop hit his brakes too and we went into a skid.

We hit the truck, the force hurling me from the car. I landed on a plastic mountain of garbage sacks stacked against the side of the building.

Delivery Dude threw the truck into reverse and pushed the cop car straight back as its wheels howled in protest. I scrambled to my feet and ran to the passenger door of the truck. I jumped onto the running board and grabbed the metal bar that held the side mirror. At that moment, the truck leaped forward.

Its nose swung hard to the left to get around the construction bin. I had to press my body against the door to avoid hitting the bins and, as I did, the window shattered. I could see the gun in his hand in the side mirror. Well, of course he would have a gun inside the cab—I know I would have. I ducked down as he kept firing out the busted window, and my feet kept slipping off the step while I hung on to the mirror for dear life.

We flew through an intersection at the end of the alley and

the truck went airborne about two feet. The force of our landing broke my grip and I swung crazily back and forth holding on with just my right hand, my cheek and shoulder ramming into the door as he slung the truck hard to the left in an attempt to dislodge me.

He floored the gas. My fingers had gone numb from the cold—I wouldn't be able to hold on much longer. If I let go now, I might be sucked under the carriage and the back wheels would finish me. If I tried to climb into the cab through the broken window, he'd blow my brains out. And if I tried to jump, I'd hit the pavement at sixty or seventy miles per hour.

The mirror above my hand shattered as he fired at the only part of my body visible to him.

That helped me decide. I grabbed the door handle with my left hand and let go with my right. My body swung around, and I dangled like this for a few seconds before I managed to gain a foothold again and get both hands around the door handle.

I saw them coming up fast behind us: three cop cars, lights flashing, sirens blaring. Looking ahead, I saw three more cop cars parked bumper to bumper, spanning both lanes, about four blocks away. They had him trapped.

Brakes, Delivery Dude, I thought. *Now would be a good time for the brakes . . .*

I thought they had him and the cops probably thought they had him.

They didn't have him.

He hit the gas and, as he picked up speed, barreling straight for the barricade, the cops opened fire.

Maybe they saw me hanging there by the door handle. I doubted it, though. They were more concerned with the two-thousand-pound truck coming straight at them.

Then he swerved, slamming on the brakes as he swung the nose of the truck hard to the left. The rear wheels locked and the truck went into a slide: I guessed the idea was to crush me against the cop cars.

Nowhere to go now but up.

I swung my right foot onto the window ledge, using it as a stepping stool to heave myself onto the roof. At that second, as I threw my body across the top of the truck, Delivery Dude hit the barricade of police cars.

The impact hurled me across the span of the roof and off the opposite side, right over the driver's window. I tumbled into empty space.

Lucky for me, one of the cop cars chasing us had rushed forward to box in the truck. I belly flopped onto the car's hood, my forward motion hurling me straight at the windshield.

I flipped off the hood at the instant the front bumper struck the side of the truck. I landed on my butt, sending a searing knifelike pain up my spine.

I looked up to see Delivery Dude looking right at me, wearing this strange, enigmatic smile. He was holding something in his hand as the cops swarmed the truck, guns drawn, all of them shouting for him to come out with his hands up.

Delivery Dude was holding a small black device in the middle of which, blinking red, was a button and, over which, his thumb hovered. And he was smiling at me.

He gave me a little nod as if to say, *Touché, Kropp.*

I screamed for them to get down, but nobody heard me. I took cover behind the cop car as his thumb came down.

The truck exploded in a blossom of boiling red fire. The shock wave knocked me backward and the heat from the blast sucked the last molecule of oxygen from my lungs.