



**ROGUE
AngelTM**
Alex
Archer
CRADLE OF SOLITUDE

A treasure of the revolution...or of ruin?

“Do you have any idea why the thieves would be interested only in our Confederate friend’s remains?”

Annja frowned. “That’s all they took?”

“They were only interested in the skeleton and the documentation pertaining to it that you and Professor Reinhardt assembled. Nothing else was touched, including items of considerable value that were in plain view in Dr. Reinhardt’s office.”

That put an entirely different spin on things. Breaking and entering to steal museum pieces worth millions was one thing; doing so just to make off with the recently recovered remains of a Confederate captain no one even knew existed was another.

Her thoughts turned immediately to the shadowed figure she’d encountered in the catacombs the night before.

There was more going on here than she’d realized.

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Rogue Angel™

Alex Archer

CRADLE OF SOLITUDE



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THE LEGEND

...THE ENGLISH COMMANDER TOOK JOAN'S SWORD AND RAISED IT HIGH.

The broadsword, plain and unadorned, gleamed in the firelight. He put the tip against the ground and his foot at the center of the blade. The broadsword shattered, fragments falling into the mud. The crowd surged forward, peasant and soldier, and snatched the shards from the trampled mud. The commander tossed the hilt deep into the crowd. Smoke almost obscured Joan, but she continued praying till the end, until finally the flames climbed her body and she sagged against the restraints.

Joan of Arc died that fateful day in France, but her legend and sword are reborn....

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

Richmond, Virginia
April 2, 1865

The choir had just begun the “Hallelujah” chorus when the door to the church flew open with a bang. Confederate President Jefferson Davis, seated at the front of the church next to his wife, Varina, turned and watched as a man raced down the center aisle toward him.

That he had come from the front lines was obvious; his face and hands were covered with dirt and soot, while his uniform looked as if it hadn’t been washed in a month. A bloodstained scrap of bandage encircled his head just below the hairline, but since it didn’t seem to slow him, Davis guessed that the wound it covered was at least a few days old. Rank insignia on his uniform indicated the man was a captain, though Davis couldn’t remember the man’s name.

Reaching him, the soldier leaned against the end of the pew, took a moment to catch his breath and then stammered, “G-G-General Lee’s line at Petersburg has broken, sir, and he intends to fall back and evacuate the city immediately.”

Shocked murmurs erupted as those within earshot repeated what was said to those around them. Even the Episcopalian minister presiding over the day’s worship services came down from his lofty perch on the pulpit to hear the news.

Davis ignored everyone but the messenger.

“How long can Lee hold them, Captain?”

The man shook his head. “Not long, sir. He bid me to urge you to hurry. He can give you a few hours, but expects that the enemy will be inside the city limits by nightfall.”

Nightfall. That gave them five, maybe six hours at most. If they were going to get the government out of Richmond, never mind save what was left of the treasury, they had to get started immediately.

“Convey my regards to General Lee and tell him that we will execute our retreat plan. Godspeed, Captain.”

As the messenger hurried from the church, Davis turned to his wife and made his apologies. There was no way he could sit through the service now, not with the evacuation of the entire city to plan and carry out in less than half a dozen hours. He caught the eye of his aide-de-camp and the two of them rose and rushed down the aisle.

Time was of the essence and Davis didn’t intend to waste any of it.

Fifteen minutes later the president was ensconced with the vice president and several members of his cabinet in the living room of the house on the corner of Twelfth and K streets that served as both the executive mansion and his family residence. An evacuation plan had not been

established, for neither Davis nor any of the other members of his administration had foreseen the fall of the city. The rest of the day would be spent trying to correct that oversight. The executive mansion held thousands of documents that might give the Union a leg up in their push to destroy the Confederacy and aides were immediately set to the task of burning as many of them as possible. The vast warehouses of stockpiled supplies also had to be dealt with, for to allow them to fall into Union hands and be used against the very soldiers they had been intended for was completely unacceptable. Orders were given to deal with the problem. Perishable foodstuffs would be given away free of charge until sundown to any who arrived at the warehouses to claim them. The casks of rum and other liquors would be smashed open and poured out in the streets, to keep the public from indulging in a drunken frenzy when they most needed to keep steady heads on their shoulders. But it was the order to burn the tobacco warehouses that pained Davis the most, for the crop inside them represented the future for so many of the citizens he had sworn to protect. Losing their harvest would be devastating.

Of course, it paled in comparison to losing their homes. But at least he would do what he could to see that as many of them escaped ahead of the Union Army as was possible.

Lee was just going to have to hold on.

The night loomed ahead of them, growing more threatening by the minute.

THE TRAIN WAS LATE.

Captain William Parker sat astride his horse near the end of the platform and stared worriedly down the tracks into the darkness. He could hear the Union guns in the distance, shelling Lee's lines, and he knew it wouldn't be long before the order was given for the retreat. The general could only hold out so long and he was already well beyond the time frame he'd given the president. Soon the front would fall, the Confederate troops would retreat through the city streets, and Richmond would fall into Union hands. When that happened, the chances of getting out of the city at all, never mind getting out with their cargo intact, would shrink considerably.

Where the hell is that train?

He turned and looked back at the squad of men he'd commandeered to help him carry out his mission, shaking his head at the sight. With every able-bodied soldier doing their damndest to keep the Yanks from entering the city limits, he'd been forced to make do with a group of midshipmen off the *Patrick Henry*, the thirteen-hundred-ton side-wheel gunboat he'd converted into a floating school for the Navy. Some of the "men" in his command weren't more than twelve years old!

God help me. How am I supposed to guard the treasury with schoolboys?

Thankfully, the plan was simple enough. A single rail line still stood open between Richmond and Danville. With two trains at their disposal, President Davis and his staff would be on the first one out, with Parker and his special cargo following in the other. Once in Danville, they'd go their separate ways.

Parker had no illusions as to why he and his cargo—about seven hundred thousand dollars worth of gold ingots, gold coins, silver bricks and Mexican silver dollars—were on the second train. As things became difficult farther down the tracks, the unspoken hope was that the Union soldiers would be more interested in the treasure than in securing the president, thereby allowing Davis to evade capture and escape.

It was a good backup plan, made better by the fact that it actually had some hope of success, and Parker approved of it despite the risk to himself and those under his command. The Confederacy might be able to replace the treasury, but it wouldn't recover from the capture of its beloved president.

A glance at his pocket watch told him that it was past eleven. The fact that they'd made

this late in the night without being overrun by the enemy was another of General Lee's miracles. He dug in just outside the city and withstood charge after charge, buying them the time they needed doggedly determined to keep the Yanks off the streets of the capital as long as possible. Lee's predicated deadline of nightfall had come and gone and still the Army of Northern Virginia held out. Parker didn't know how he did it; he was just thankful they had a man like Lee on their side.

But even Lee could not keep it up much longer.

A rumbling sound broke his reverie and he looked up to see the locomotive coming down the tracks toward them, smoke pouring from its stack. His feelings of relief quickly turned to concern however, when the engine drew closer and he saw the condition of the train.

Getting here hadn't been easy, it seemed. Great dents marred the smooth curve of the boiler and the sides of the cab had been shot full of holes. The roof of the tender had been torn away entirely, most likely the result of a well-placed cannon shot, and the engineer manning the coal shovel had a bloody bandage wrapped around his head and covering one side of his face. The cars beyond hadn't fared much better.

The train had already slowed considerably by the time it reached Parker and he watched it roll on and continue for a few more yards before coming to a stop with the hiss of brakes and a cloud of steam. No sooner had it done so than Army officers swarmed inside, checking it over. When the okay signal was given the boarding began, starting first with the president and his cabinet, followed by what was left of their staff.

Parker didn't have time to watch the parade, however, for the second train arrived on the heels of the first and he had work to do.

"Quickly now!" he shouted to the boys in his command and they snapped to, unloading the heavy chests from the wagons and carrying them aboard the train, stacking them against the rear wall of the car to which they'd been assigned.

Halfway through the job one of the midshipmen stumbled, dropping the sack he carried and spilling silver coins over the edge of the platform onto the tracks below.

Parker grabbed the boy as he readied himself to climb down and retrieve them.

"No time, son," Parker said. "Some lucky fool will no doubt pick them up, but it's not going to be you or me. Back to work now."

It took them just shy of an hour, but at last all of the cargo was loaded and the rest of the cars were filled with as many of the people fleeing the city as they could possibly pack into them. Parker gave up his seat to another passenger, finding a place on the roof of the car alongside his second in command, Lieutenant Jonathan Sykes, and two midshipmen whose names he could dredge up from memory in his exhausted state.

No sooner had he settled himself onto the roof of the car than the train lurched in motion without warning, the usual whistle being dispensed with so as not to alert the enemy to their escape. The train moved slowly at first, sluggishly pulling away from the platform, and Parker found himself silently urging it on, as if his thoughts could somehow propel the train faster down the tracks.

Refugees lined either side of the tracks, moving forward through the darkness like the wandering tribes of Israel headed for the promised land. Parker was thankful it was too dark to see their faces, for his own despair and dismay were enough for him; he didn't need to witness anyone else's.

As they rolled across the bridge at the city limits, Sykes suddenly shouted, "Look!"

Parker followed his pointing finger back toward Richmond and saw an angry red glow lighting the sky. The thunder of distant explosions reached his ears as the glow grew brighter spreading across the horizon.

Richmond was aflame.

“Damn Yanks have fired the city!” One of the midshipmen cursed.

~~Parker knew better, but he didn't bother correcting the young man. Morale was bad enough; the men in his command didn't need to know that the fire was the result of a direct order from the president, designed to ensure that nothing of value would be left for the Union troops to use against them. The warehouses along the waterfront had been full of powder and shot, too much to be moved swiftly, and rather than allowing it to fall into the hands of the enemy, Davis had ordered the entire lot to be set alight.~~

With the skyline glowing brightly behind him and the enemy's guns echoing in the distance, Parker set his gaze forward and settled in for the ride.

It was only one hundred and forty miles from Richmond to Danville but the slow-moving train overburdened as it was with excess cargo and the need to constantly stop and repair the track in front of it, required the night and most of the day to get there. A light rain was falling as they pulled into the station, but Parker was so tired that he barely even noticed.

The president's party had come and gone by that time, but orders had been given and four wagons were waiting alongside the platform, guarded by a pair of infantrymen. They approached and Parker disembarked and one of the men handed him a folded piece of paper.

The note was from George Trenholm, secretary of the Treasury, ordering Parker to use any and all means necessary to evade the Union troops in the area and see his cargo safely to the U.S. Mint in Charlotte, North Carolina. It also let Parker know that the Union cavalry had been spotted in the area and that he was to avoid contact wherever and whenever possible.

Parker laughed aloud upon seeing the final order.

What does he think I'm going to do? Stage an attack on General Sheridan's cavalry column with a handful of midshipmen and half a dozen muskets?

The very notion was absurd. Still, these were desperate times and Parker had little doubt there would be some in his position who might just be daring enough to do something like that. Sometimes a bold move at just the right moment...

He shied away from the thought, before he could be tempted. Glory be damned, he told himself. Get the treasury to Charlotte. That's the goal.

But Charlotte was a long way off and the chances of meeting the Union cavalry on the main road seemed pretty high. Sticking to the lesser known byways and backcountry roads would decrease his chances of running into the enemy but it would also slow him down.

Opt for speed and take the main road, praying they didn't run into anything they couldn't handle, or take the slower, surer route and chance arriving too late to do any good with the money they had in their care?

It was a difficult choice and one that needed some thought.

Concerned that a wagon train full of bulging money sacks and wooden chests stamped with the words *Richmond Loan and Trust* would be too tempting a target, Parker sent his men out to scavenge for containers they might use to hide the contents of their true cargo. It took well over two hours to make the switch, but when they were finished the treasure was hidden in barrels and crates that had once held sugar, flour, tea and other consumables. With the lids hammered tight, there was nothing to tell the casual observer that the financial future of the Confederation was contained within.

By the time the wagons were loaded and the men ready to head out, Parker had made his decision.

The money they carried was needed to keep the regiments in the field equipped with

enough food, powder and shot to continue operating, never mind being able to pay the men for the service. They'd take the fast road and hope they arrived in time to do some good with the cargo entrusted to them.

They were in decent spirits when they left Danville behind, despite the steady rain. Parker, Sykes and one of the midshipmen, Daniels, were in the lead wagon, while the other men were spaced evenly among the rest. They kept a tight formation and managed to make decent progress for the first hour, covering nearly ten miles, but then the weather took a turn for the worse. What had started as a light drizzle turned into a downpour, soaking the men to the bone and turning the road into little more than a muddy track. It became difficult to see that the horses pulling each wagon were tied to the back of the one before them, ensuring that none of them fell behind and got lost.

They barely managed another mile during their second hour on the road and Parker was starting to consider where they might find a place to hole up for the rest of the night when they were confronted by several figures who suddenly loomed out of the rain ahead as they rounded a bend in the road.

"Whoa!" Parker cried, and pulled up quickly on the reins, stopping them a few dozen yards apart.

At this distance it was hard to see anything for certain, but Parker thought there were at least a dozen men in the party ahead of them. Three or four on horseback, it seemed, and another ten or so on foot.

They weren't significantly outnumbered, which was good, but given the level of experience of the men under his command, even that wouldn't be too much of a blessing.

He glanced at Sykes. The other man held his musket lightly, the muzzle pointed forward. Not enough to be overtly threatening, but ready to be used if things went south.

Sykes must have sensed his attention, for he turned his head and gave Parker a slight nod, letting him know he was ready for whatever was to come.

He was a good man, Parker thought.

Before Parker could do anything, however, one of the riders ahead kicked his horse into motion. Parker let him close half the distance between them and then shouted, "That's far enough! Identify yourself or my men will open fire!"

The rider pulled his horse up short.

"Easy, Captain," the man called out. "Didn't mean to startle you."

Parker knew the voice, but sheer surprise kept him from responding right away, and while he struggled to find his voice the other man unveiled the lantern in his free hand, letting the light fall upon him.

Even through the downpour Parker recognized the face of their benefactor, secretary of the Treasury, George Trenholm.

Still, Parker was cautious. "Be ready for anything," he told Sykes as he handed over the reins. "If this looks like a trap, get the wagons out of here as best you're able."

Sykes never took his eyes off the men ahead of them. "You can count on me, sir."

Parker climbed down from the wagon and walked forward to where Secretary Trenholm was waiting for him. As he drew closer the other man dismounted, as well, which helped put Parker at ease.

Trenholm extended his hand and the two men shook.

"Good to see you, Captain. I was starting to think we'd missed you."

"The rain, sir. You know how it gets."

Parker didn't know much about Secretary Trenholm's history, but it seemed a safe bet that the man had never had to lead a wagon train through a torrential downpour. Trenholm came from

money, and old money at that.

But war has a way of leveling social classes, Parker knew, and he found it mildly ironic that the two of them were to meet here, in the midst of a muddy track that could barely be called a road, the rain beating down on both their heads with equal abandon.

Oblivious to his subordinate's thoughts, Trenholm went on. "There's been a change of plans, Captain. I'm to escort you to an important meeting where you will receive your new orders. You would come with me..."

Parker frowned. "My men, sir?"

"About a hundred yards up the road there's a place where they can get off the main thoroughfare and wait for your return. I'll leave several of my own men to stand guard with them. On a night like tonight, I doubt they'll run into any difficulties."

Trenholm was probably right, but that didn't make Parker feel any better about leaving his men in the middle of nowhere, particularly given their level of inexperience. Still, an order was an order.

"Yes, sir. Give me a moment to explain the situation."

He returned to Sykes and let him know what was going on. The young lieutenant wasn't thrilled with the situation, either, but there was very little that they could do about it. Parker ordered him to keep his eyes open and wait for his return.

One of Trenholm's men loaned him a horse and five minutes later they were under way. Trenholm led him a mile or so through the woods on a narrow track that was little better than a game trail really, until they came to a clearing. Parker could see that several campaign tents had been erected there and men in Confederate uniforms were moving about.

Trenholm took him to a larger tent set slightly off from the others and asked him to wait inside.

"Someone will be along shortly to give you further instructions."

Ever the dutiful soldier, Parker complied.

He found the tent was sparsely furnished, with just a pair of camp chairs on either side of a makeshift table made from a few scraps of wood and a blanket-covered cot off to one side. It was warm inside, thanks to a camp stove that was burning in the far corner, and Parker soon found himself literally steaming as the heat sucked the moisture out of his clothes.

He didn't mind. Being out of the rain, even if only for a few minutes, was a welcome relief.

When, after fifteen minutes, no one had yet arrived to deliver his new orders, he dragged one of the camp chairs closer to the stove and sat down.

I'll take a few minutes of rest, that's all, he thought.

He must have dozed off, however, for he came awake with a start when he heard someone enter the tent behind him. He leaped to his feet and spun about.

He didn't know who he expected to see waiting there for him, but President Jefferson Davis himself was not on his list of possibilities.

So surprised was he that for several long moments all he could do was stand and stare. The president didn't seem to notice.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Captain," he said as he laid the books and papers he was carrying on the desk and hung his coat on the back of the other chair before dragging it closer to the stove. "Please, sit down."

Parker nodded, then found his voice at last as he waited for Davis to sit down before doing so himself. "Thank you, Mr. President."

"Don't thank me yet," Davis said, his expression darkening at some private thought. "No"

until you've heard why I've called you here, at any rate."

~~An aide came in bearing two glasses of brandy on a tray. He gave one to the president~~
then offered the other to Parker.

Drink in hand, President Davis turned to him and said, "I have a very special assignment
for you, Captain."

Paris, France
Present day

Annja came out of the dojo's locker room drying her long hair with the towel she kept in her gym bag for just that purpose. She was startled to find a man waiting outside the door for her. He was of medium build, with a short, dark beard, and was dressed in a nicely fitted suit of a deep chocolate brown.

He stepped forward as she approached.

"Excuse me. Miss Creed?"

He had a strong French accent.

"Yes?" she replied.

She searched her memory, but she was pretty sure she didn't know him. Having strange people approach her was nothing new. People often recognized her from *Chasing History's Monsters*, the cable television show she cohosted, but something told her this guy wasn't a fan looking for a quick autograph.

"Please forgive the interruption. I am Commissaire Laroche, of the Police Nationale."

Annja knew the Police Nationale was the main civil law enforcement agency in France. Commissaire was a commissioned officer rank, sort of analogous to a senior detective in the United States. In other words, this guy was a heavy hitter in the local police community. Annja was alarmed. She'd stayed out of trouble while on vacation and hadn't done anything to elicit interest from the police.

This time around, at least.

Seeing he had her attention, Laroche continued. "I'm looking for some assistance with a—how do you say...peculiar? yes?—situation. Your name was given to me by Monsieur Garrison at the embassy."

That, at least, was a name she recognized. She'd met Billy Garrison at a press junket she'd attended on behalf of the show the last time she'd been in Paris. He was on the ambassador's staff and had taken her to dinner a few nights later, but there hadn't been any spark and she'd declined his offer for a second date.

Being dateless was preferable to listening to Billy ramble on about French politics for hours again. Thanks, but no thanks.

"May I see some identification, Commissaire?"

He bowed slightly, an outdated but courtly gesture. "Of course, Miss Creed. And please call me Henri."

He handed over a leather case that contained his badge and ID. She glanced at it and confirmed that the man in the picture and the one standing in front of her were one and the same, then handed it back.

“Thank you. One can’t be too careful these days....”

“Of course, of course,” he replied, waving off her apology.

“So how is Billy?” she asked, more to gauge the inspector’s reaction to him than anything else.

He didn’t disappoint. “Monsieur Garrison is as long-winded as usual,” he replied, giving her a tight smile.

Yep, that was Billy.

“So what’s this peculiar situation that you need help with, Henri?” she asked.

Laroche hesitated, glancing over her shoulder as he did so. “Perhaps we might take this outside?” he asked.

When she followed his gaze and found the rest of the dojo’s students watching the discussion, Annja readily agreed.

She accompanied him out the door into the bright spring sunshine and fell into step beside him as he walked slowly up the street, explaining as he went.

“For the past several weeks construction teams have been working on the southern line of the Metro, widening the existing tunnels to make room for the new branch that will be added to the system in May.”

Annja was aware of the project, for the construction workers with their bright orange reflective vests were a familiar sight on the trains in and out of the area.

Laroche went on. “Late yesterday afternoon the floor gave way beneath a work crew in one of the newly expanded tunnels. Thankfully, only two of the men sustained injuries and in both cases they were minor ones. When the dust cleared the crew discovered that they had fallen into a previously unknown second tunnel, running parallel beneath the first. Further exploration revealed several antechambers just beyond, each one filled with stacks of human bones.”

Annja could scarcely believe what she was hearing. A previously undiscovered section of the catacombs? Her heart skipped a beat at the thought.

Prior to the creation of the catacombs in the mid-1700s, the dead of Paris were buried in small cemeteries alongside local churches. But as the city grew, the cemeteries ran out of space. Mass interments became common, often without caskets, and over time this led to the contamination of ground water as the bodies decomposed in the earth.

To deal with the problem, city officials moved to outlaw all burials within the city limits from that point forward. Existing graves were exhumed and the remains were relocated to a series of abandoned limestone quarries that were, at that time, on the outskirts of town. The process of disinterring the bones from their original resting places was carried out with reverence for the dead as well as consideration for the living. The quarry space was blessed, the long trains of carts moving the bones were accompanied by priests and the activity was always conducted at night. No attempt was made to identify or separate the individual bodies, but each set of bones was marked with a plaque indicating the cemetery from which they originated and the year they were moved. By 1860, when the relocation was completed, some five to six million skeletons had been moved to the catacombs.

Eventually, the city expanded and what had once been outside the city limits now lay hidden beneath its streets. Annja knew only a small section of the massive tunnel network was accessible to the public. That left close to two hundred miles of tunnels and caverns extending like a spider’s web beneath the city that only a handful of people had ever seen.

“Most of the men on the crew had seen the catacombs at one point or another in the

careers so the rooms full of bones were not at all surprising to them,” Laroche said. “However, the discovery of a fully intact skeleton, partially buried beneath a pile of those older bones, was.”

Annja considered that for a moment. “Sounds like a job for the police rather than an archaeologist,” she said.

“Ordinarily, I’d agree with you,” Laroche replied, “but this particular discovery turned out to be a bit more complex than first thought.”

They paused, waited for the light to change, then crossed, continuing walking along the other side of the street.

“When the crime scene unit arrived, it didn’t take them long to determine that the job would be better off in the hands of a forensic anthropologist. While arrangements were being made to bring one in, word of the find was also sent to the American Embassy.”

Annja was surprised. “The embassy? So your mysterious skeleton is that of an American?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

That’s like saying you’re kind of pregnant, she thought, but when she pressed him on it, Laroche wouldn’t explain any further.

“I’d rather not prejudice your opinion,” he said as they turned left onto another thoroughfare. Caught up in the puzzle he was laying out before her, Annja barely noticed where they were headed.

“What’s my opinion got to do with any of this?” she asked.

Laroche smiled. “Because of the nature of the find, it was agreed that a representative from the United States should be present when the skeleton is excavated. Mr. Garrison suggested that you would be ideally suited for the task.”

“Is that so?”

Laroche grinned devilishly. “*Oui*. In fact, it sounded like he said something about you preferring the company of the dead over that of the living, but perhaps I misheard him.”

He is so going to pay for that one, Annja thought, before realizing that in order to carry out her threat, she’d have to see him again.

Perhaps he wasn’t as dim-witted as she’d taken him to be.

Putting the thought aside for the time being, she focused on the opportunity being offered to her. “So are you asking me to get my hands dirty or will this be strictly observational in nature?”

“You can get as dirty as you like, Miss Creed.”

“Am I being brought on as an official consultant?” she asked.

Reading between the lines, Laroche said, “The embassy has agreed to cover your costs and to provide a reasonable fee for your time. Monsieur Garrison would not discuss the specific details with me, but stated he would be happy to take your call so he could provide you with the specifics.” So Billy *wasn’t* so dim-witted, after all, she thought.

“Well, when do you want to get started?” Annja asked, chuckling to herself.

Laroche slowed, and then stopped. “As a matter of fact, I was hoping you would be free right now.”

Startled, Annja glanced around, only then realizing that they were standing in front of the Metro station. A pair of sawhorses stood in front of the entrance, holding a sign noting in French that the station was currently closed for repairs.

This time Annja laughed aloud. “You certainly know how to show a girl a good time, Henri!” she said. “You’ve piqued my curiosity and given me an intriguing puzzle to boot. How could I say no?”

“Excellent!” Laroche said.

They descended the stairs and entered the station proper, where Laroche used his badge to get them past the police officer stationed there.

Once past the turnstiles, Annja followed Laroche onto the subway platform and over to the far end, where a selection of equipment was stored under a tarp. The detective removed two lanterns from beneath the cover, turned them both on and passed one to Annja. Then he led her off the platform and onto the track.

The air was cool in the tunnel and Annja was glad she'd had the foresight to grab her sweatshirt when she'd left her hotel that morning. At the moment the change in the temperature felt refreshing after the heat of the bright sun above, but it wouldn't be long before the chill seeped into her bones if they spent any length of time down below.

She was starting to suspect they would.

As if hearing her thoughts, Laroche spoke. "The entrance to the catacombs is several hundred yards ahead. I'm sorry, but there is no alternative but to walk."

Annja smiled at his apologetic tone. "Walking's something an archaeologist gets used to very quickly. It's no problem at all."

They kept to the center of the track, where the pathway was reasonably clear of debris and the chance of one of them turning an ankle was reduced. Not that the chances of doing so were all that great in the first place; the subways in Paris were far cleaner than those back home in Brooklyn.

Annja had spent much of her professional life clambering around inside crumbling ruins and forgotten old tunnels, so the weight of all that earth above their heads didn't bother her in the slightest. The same couldn't be said about her companion, however. No sooner had they started down the tunnel than the conversation dried up and his repeated glances at the roof over their heads let her know just how uncomfortable he was. Figuring he'd say something if it got to be too much, Annja kept her thoughts to herself and simply walked along in his wake.

They'd been underground for about fifteen minutes when a faint glow could be seen coming from around a bend in the tunnel ahead of them. The light grew brighter as they approached until, rounding the curve in the tunnel, Annja could see that it was coming from a set of portable area lights that had been erected on stands near a hole in the tunnel floor. Several people were milling about, but didn't appear to actually be doing much of anything.

Waiting for the boss to return, Annja thought.

It turned out she was right. As soon as the group caught sight of the two of them approaching, they settled down and waited to be told what to do.

"Please wait here for a moment," Laroche said, and then stepped over to confer with his people. After listening to an update from one of his subordinates, the detective issued a flurry of orders, sending his people scurrying off in a variety of directions on several different tasks. Doing so seemed to help him forget the weight of all that earth above and it was a steadier man who rejoined her a few moments later.

"I'm told that Professor Reinhardt from the Museum of Natural History is already waiting for us below. As the official representative from my country, he will be in charge of the project though any actions that impact the remains directly must be approved through you. Will there be any problem with that?"

Annja shook her head. Bernard Reinhardt was an old friend. She'd worked with him on several projects and tried to find time to say hello whenever she was in Paris. His conduct in the field was impeccable; she couldn't have asked for a better partner.

"Let's get to it," she said.

Stepping over to the ladder that extended out of the hole in the tunnel floor, Laroche swung himself onto its rungs and started downward.

Annja gave him a moment, and then followed.

Lights had been strung along the ceiling of the tunnel and in their glare Annja could easily see the differences between this tunnel and the one above. It was narrower, for one, with walls of heavy limestone rather than concrete, and with a ceiling that was a good two feet lower than the previous passageway. Where they had been able to walk two abreast with room to spare in the tunnel above, down here they were forced to move single file down the narrow corridor. It was also quiet. Gone were the faint sounds of distant trains rumbling through the walls; the limestone surrounding them seemed to swallow up even the slightest echo, devouring it before it could move more than a few inches from its source.

The most striking difference, however, was the sense of age that filled the rough-hewn walls around them. This tunnel had been around for a long time, that much was obvious, and Annja found herself wondering just what it had seen and been witness to over the years.

“This way,” Laroche said as he led her down the tunnel. They’d only walked a dozen or so yards before the opening to a chamber loomed on their left. The string of lights led inside and Laroche and Annja followed them.

Entering the room, Annja stopped short, her eyes widening at what she saw.

The entire chamber was fashioned of bones.

Human bones.

Tibias and femurs by the thousands were stacked neatly side by side, interspersed regularly with rows of skulls, their empty eye sockets staring at her as if in accusation. Here and there the skulls had been arranged in artistic patterns, a cross being the most common. There were no intact skeletons, the goal of the arrangement clearly having been to make the best use of the space available, and Annja could only assume that the rib cages, spines and other bones that would have made up the rest of each skeleton had been used to fill in the spaces behind the larger bones. Most of the stacks rose to a height of about 5 feet and from what she could see they were a few yards deep in some places. To her left was a plaque noting the year the bones had been interred as well as the cemetery from which they had come.

Clearly they had entered the original catacombs.

“Annja!” an exuberant voice cried, pulling her away from her study of the skulls before her. She turned to find her colleague, Professor Bernard Reinhardt, emerging from the chamber just beyond, his hand extended in welcome. The smile on his face was outmatched only by the size of his handlebar mustache, which stretched a good inch past his cheeks on either side.

Reinhardt was a large, portly man in his early sixties, though he had the exuberant energy of a man half his size and age. He’d been known to work right through the night and into the next day while on an important dig, putting most of the graduate students who worked with him to shame. In the narrow confines of the underground passageway he appeared twice as big as usual and Annja found

herself having to stifle the urge to back away as he thundered toward her. He was dressed in a thick flannel shirt, jeans and solid pair of hiking boots, a far cry from the three-piece suit, complete with pocket watch and chain, that he liked to wear while at the museum.

Annja had met him several years before while in Paris for a symposium during which he delivered a presentation on the Saxon conquest of Normandy. She'd been so impressed with his quick mind and engaging delivery that she'd introduced herself after his talk. Despite the obvious differences in their ages and educational backgrounds, their shared love of European history had turned them into colleagues with genuine respect for each other's specialties.

"Hello, Bernard," she said, ignoring his outstretched hand and giving him a quick hug which earned her a hearty embrace.

"It is so good to see you, Annja," he said, releasing her. "Have they told you why you are here?"

"Just that they've discovered something of interest to both your government and mine," she replied.

Bernard grinned. "Well, then, if they didn't spoil the surprise, I'm not going to, either. This way, my dear."

He turned and led her through several other chambers, each one similar to the last. The stacks of bones seemed to go on and on; everywhere she looked, the walls were covered with them. Not that Annja was surprised. She'd heard it estimated that there were more than six million skeletons interred down here in the dark.

That's a lot of ghosts, she thought.

Ahead of her, Bernard came to a halt at the entrance to a side chamber.

"Is this it?" she asked.

He nodded, then extended a hand, as if to say, *After you.*

Her lantern held high, Annja entered the chamber.

The room was small, no larger than ten square feet, she estimated, and so it didn't take her long to pick out what she'd been brought there to see.

The skeleton was seated with its back against the wall of the antechamber, its legs stretched out before it. A cavalry saber was gripped in one hand, in the other, a Colt revolver. At first glance both weapons appeared to be in excellent condition. So, too, was the uniform the skeleton wore—wool trousers and a light shirt, both partially covered by a long frock coat that hung to midthigh. The three bars that designated the rank of captain had been sewn onto the coat's collar. A kepi hat was still perched atop the skull where it rested against the back wall.

The dirt and dust that had settled on the remains of the clothing made it difficult to determine the exact color of the uniform, but there was no mistaking the brass emblem of a wreath pinned to the front of the hat. The arms of the wreath rose on either side, surrounding the three letters nestled between them.

CSA.

As she stared at the emblem in surprise, Annja finally understood what Laroche had meant. They weren't questioning that the remains belonged to an American. Not at all. They were questioning his status because the America he'd belonged to no longer existed.

The Confederate States of America.

Annja walked over to the skeleton and settled into a crouch before it, her gaze moving slowly and carefully, taking in the details. Behind her, she heard Bernard step into the room.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” he said, his voice hushed, as if in reverence for the dead man before them. “To think he’s been down here for a hundred and fifty years, just waiting for someone to come along and find him.”

Annja nodded. She was amazed that anyone had done so, frankly. The chances of the construction team finding the adjacent tunnel, never mind following the right series of chambers that wind up here, several hundred yards from the entrance, were astronomical.

“Any idea who he was?” she asked, looking back at her colleague.

Bernard shook his head. “Not a clue. But that’s why we’re here, my dear, to solve the mystery.”

And a mystery it was. Annja couldn’t think of a simple reason why a Confederate soldier, a captain no less, would have been wandering around down here in the catacombs miles from any known entrance. Had he simply gotten lost? Stumbled around in the dark, unable to find his way back out, until eventually he’d succumbed to a lack of food or, more likely, water?

If that was the case, what was he doing with a cutlass and pistol in hand? Just who, what, had he been defending himself against?

An interesting puzzle, to say the least.

And just the kind of thing that Annja lived for.

She reached into the bag at her side and pulled out her digital camera. She rarely went anywhere without it and it was times like this when she was thankful she’d adopted the habit. Eventually, she knew, they were going to have to remove the skeleton from the catacombs and take it back to Bernard’s laboratory for proper examination, but there were a lot of things they needed to do before that and documenting the site as they’d found it was the first priority. The position of items in relation to others and the context in which they were found were just as important to an archaeologist as the items themselves. The photographs would help them establish a record of where each item was in relation to all the others, allowing them to reconstruct the site down to the finest detail if necessary as their investigation progressed.

She started by taking several wide-angle shots, panning her way around the room until she had covered it all. They would be able to make a panorama-style shot from the photographs showing the entire room and even use them to create a three-dimensional computer model.

When she was finished with that task, she focused on the skeleton itself. She took several shots to establish its position against the wall, then moved in for close-ups. She’d taken about a dozen pictures and was about to call it quits when the light from the flash bounced off the uniform that the skeleton wore and highlighted something she hadn’t previously noticed.

Bernard must have seen her sudden tension.

~~“What have you got, Annja?” he asked as she leaned in closer to get a better look.~~

“Not sure yet,” she murmured, her gaze on the skeleton in front of her.

As the flesh beneath it had decayed, the uniform coat had folded down upon itself, hiding small stretches of fabric between the folds. The light from the flash had thrown back an oddly shaped shadow from one of them, suggesting that there was something else there. Annja withdrew a pen from her pocket and gently lifted the edge of the folded material, revealing what lay beneath.

The blackened edges of a bullet hole stared back at her.

Gently, Annja used her pen to lift the coat's edge away from the shirt beneath. The dark stain that covered the yellowed linen shirt beneath answered one question that had been nagging her.

The soldier, whoever he was, hadn't wandered down here, gotten lost and eventually died of thirst, as she'd first hypothesized.

He'd been shot in the chest.

And from the looks of it, he'd died pretty quickly thereafter.

This hadn't been an accident; it was murder.

Bernard crouched beside her and she showed him what she found.

“See the rounded edges of the bullet hole?” she asked, pointing with the end of the pen. “And the way the fabric is still intact all around it, rather than stretched or torn?”

Bernard nodded. “The musket ball was moving so fast that it didn't have time to do much damage to the material as it passed through. Must have been close range, then.”

“Just what I was thinking, as well.”

She sat back on her haunches and stared at the dead man in front of her. “He wasn't here by accident. We're too far away from any easily accessible entrance for that to be the case. He came here deliberately, perhaps to meet someone...”

“And whoever it was gunned him down where he stood,” Bernard finished for her.

“It's no longer an interesting archaeological puzzle,” Annja said as she climbed to her feet. “Now it's a homicide investigation.”

The police, however, wanted nothing to do with such an old murder. After a few quick calls back to headquarters, Laroche approached and informed Annja and Bernard that they were still in charge of the investigation, that their skills were going to be more valuable in terms of identifying the victim and perhaps even his murderer than anything the police could bring to bear on the problem.

Homicide or not, it was their problem to solve.

Several technicians from the museum arrived, summoned earlier by Bernard when he realized what it was they were dealing with. The technicians had a portable specimen case with them, essentially a long, flat box that looked like the case for an electric keyboard, and carried several toolkits of different shapes and sizes. Annja stepped out of the way to give them room to work in the narrow confines of the antechamber.

One of the technicians withdrew a video camera from the case he carried and, switching on the high-powered light attached to it, began to pan his way around the entire room in unwitting mimicry of what she had done earlier with the still camera.

When he was finished, he nodded at one of the other team members, who opened another case and began assembling an odd-looking device from the parts inside.

Annja was expecting the skeletal removal to be a long, drawn-out process of removing each bone piece by piece and then placing them into the specimen case, so she was surprised when the man she was watching picked up the device he'd been assembling and moved over to stand next to the skeleton. The device looked like a fire extinguisher, though the canister was blue rather than red, and

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