

THE HIDDEN GENES OF PROFESSOR K

A gripping medical mystery thriller

Jack Rogan Mysteries Book 3

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Part II
De Medicina

“Surgeons can cut out everything except cause.”

Herbert M. Shelton

Deep in the jungle, Yucatan Peninsula:

1355 AD

The drums stopped beating and the conch shell trumpets fell silent. Mesmerised, the worshippers watched in awe as the Tlacatecuhtli lifted his arms up high and looked up at the stars blazing in the night sky above. Even the jungle appeared to obey his command and for a moment, held its noisy breath.

‘Let it begin,’ said the Tlacatecuhtli, looking like a god in his resplendent cloak of ocelot skins and feathers. As warrior-priest, astrologer, healer and ‘chief of men’, he presided over all the important ceremonies in the land, especially human sacrifices.

Another priest wearing a tall helmet shaped like the beak of a bird of prey stepped out of the shadows, knelt down in front of him and held up a basket. The Tlacatecuhtli lifted the lid, looked inside and smiled. He always felt a surge of tremendous excitement race through his veins every time he set eyes on the sacred skull. It was his link to the gods and the source of his power. He reached inside the basket and touched the skull with trembling fingers. Then, holding the heavy skull with both hands, he lifted it carefully out of the basket.

The worshippers gasped. Carved out of solid crystal and transparent like glass, the spectacular skull looked almost alive as the Tlacatecuhtli held it up for all to see. According to legend, the crystal skull was a gift from the gods, and the Tlacatecuhtli was its custodian.

The Tlacatecuhtli turned slowly around and, holding the crystal skull above his head, began the steep climb to the top of the stone pyramid looming large and ominous in the dark, like a stairway to an angry heaven. The worshippers began to chant, their voices rising like a prayer pleading with the gods to save their hero.

The altar at the top was surrounded by torches wedged into gaps between the large stones, sending flickering shadows gliding across the polished blocks like an army of ghosts rushing into battle to face the demons of the night.

The Tlacatecuhtli reached the narrow platform high above the impenetrable forest canopy and, catching his breath, looked around. A naked young man – drugged and in a stupor – lay on the massive stone altar with his arms tied firmly to the slab. The Tlacatecuhtli walked over

to him and carefully placed the crystal skull next to his head. *The living and the dead*, he thought, admiring the lifelike skull reflecting the dancing flames of the torches.

Everything needed for the procedure was laid out next to the young warrior on the slab, as tradition demanded. As an experienced healer, the Tlacatecuhtli knew exactly what was required. The large, black, razor-sharp knife fashioned out of obsidian – volcanic glass – sparkled like the eye of a malevolent demon waiting for a sacrifice. Usually, the demon would not have been disappointed. As chief priest in charge of sacrifices, the Tlacatecuhtli had used the knife countless times before to cut out many a living heart to appease the cruel gods lusting for human blood.

This time, however, he was facing a much more difficult and dangerous task. Instead of extinguishing life, he had to save one. And not just any life. He had to use his powers and his skills as a healer to save the life of the king's son – a celebrated hero. The young warrior had fought and won many a battle for his people and provided armies of defeated enemies needed to feed the bloodthirsty gods. And all of these captives had been sacrificed on the very same altar upon which he was now awaiting his own fate.

A terrible illness had struck him down the year before. His powerful body had almost withered away and something inside his head was sending him mad. Another priest, a famous magician, had opened up the young hero's skull, thereby easing the pressure on the brain caused by a large tumour. At first, all had seemed to go well. The young warrior recovered and quickly regained his strength. The people rejoiced. However, a few months later, the dreaded illness returned, more vicious than ever. This was seen as a sign that the gods were displeased. The magician was put to death.

The Tlacatecuhtli knew exactly what was at stake. If he failed to save the young warrior's life, he would forfeit his own. That was the law. However, unlike his hapless predecessor, he had a secret, powerful army of helpers – medicinal jungle plants – he could call upon to defeat the dreaded enemy inside the young man's head. With the help of sacred knowledge carefully guarded by the Tlacatecuhtli through the ages and handed down from generation to generation, he would succeed where the magician had failed. In the cruel world of the Aztecs, violent death and oblivion were never far away. Human life was cheap, and pleasing the gods was the only way to survive.

The Tlacatecuhtli let his splendid ocelot cloak slip from his shoulders and took off his headdress. He was ready to begin the operation. First, he reached for a torch and purified the knife with fire until it was almost too hot to touch. Then, holding the patient's shaved head with one hand, he slowly traced the outline of the previous incisions with the sharp tip of the knife and carefully applied pressure until he could feel the blade cut through the bone. The patient moaned and opened his eyes, staring unseeingly at his tormentor before his eyes rolled back and his mind retreated into the merciful darkness within.

Working quickly now, the Tlacatecuhtli completed the incisions. Then he folded back the skin, removed a square piece of bone and exposed the brain. The large tumour was right there in front of him. Normally, that would have been the end of the procedure, but not this time. The Tlacatecuhtli reached for a small stone bowl on the slab next to him. It contained a thick paste the colour of mud, which he spread evenly over the open wound with the tip of the knife. Satisfied, he applied another soothing salve and covered the head with large, medicinal leaves, which he tied together at the back of the patient's neck like a bandage. The operation was complete.

The Tlacatecuhtli rose, his naked chest covered in tiny beads of perspiration glistening like pearls, and held up the crystal skull once more for all to see. As the mighty roar of the jubilant worshippers rose like thunder from below, the Tlacatecuhtli glimpsed immortality, and for a fleeting moment, he felt like a god.

The wound healed and the king's son made a full recovery. Due to the secret paste the Tlacatecuhtli had applied, the tumour retreated and did not return. This momentous event was recorded in a sacred text, which was placed next to the crystal skull in a hidden chamber deep inside the pyramid. It was also commemorated with a relief cut into the stone altar that paid homage to the Tlacatecuhtli as one of the great healers of his time. It depicted the operation and a heart-shaped jungle plant, the root of which had been ground into a thick paste, which had killed the tumour and saved the young warrior's life.

****** End of Chapter Excerpt ******

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