

## ThR33-Stage Protocol

Camera flashes began to fire the street the moment the limo turned the corner. The stained windows reflected the lights, the chassis shaking under the weight of the door opening and closing. The men in black, with bulges sticking out of their jackets, surrounded Alastor as soon as he set foot on the red carpet to the *Grand Hyatt*.

Although stitched, his right eyelid still twitched at the loud sounds. His grey hair accentuated his green uniform, his medals matching with the golden arch at the entrance.

“*Ga dood!*” shouted a hooded individual, raising a gun at Alastor’s back.

None of the escorts were fast enough, but Alastor’s metallic arm clicked in a second, and with his silver pistol between fingers, he didn’t hesitate.

The cold body was moved out of the way, while Alastor holstered the weapon back in his leather belt. The crowd cheered from the top of their lungs, and he simply walked ahead.

*[Automated Message -To- Digital Watch]: Initiating “ThR33-Stage” Protocol...*

*: Connecting **Recipient** with **Operator** >*

The elevator doors slid open with a soft *ding*, and a round of applause bombarded Alastor once more. The entrepreneurs, the high-ranking militia, the scientists dressed fancy, drinking, and laughing like nothing was happening out there; all except an old *dog* in the corner. Emerald stars over golden bars on the shoulder strap.

“Chief Everett,” Alastor stretched out his real hand, even if it made the shake uncomfortable.

“General Blaze,” answered the old *dog*. “An honor to finally meet the man of the hour.”

“Likewise,” replied Alastor.

“Heard about your ‘encounter’ at the door. Unfortunate, don’t you agree?”

“I do,” said Alastor, distracted by the *ding* of his digital watch.

*[Live Chat]: Transcript of ongoing call between **Recipient** and **Operator**...*

*: Recipient > H3llo. Here the Communications Command3r.*

*: Operator > He7lo, Commander. Here the Main Operator.*

“OMG!” shouted a lady with a camera, running towards Alastor in a long dress and heels. “We are live, with the one and only, creator of the ThR33-Stage Protocol. How are you tonight?”

Alastor took a deep look at the camera and fixed a forced smile.

“I am fine, and yourself?”

“Living the dream! But now, what exclusive information can you share about the protocol? People are dying to know what the three stages are.”

“I am sorry that is classified.”

“OMG! I had to ask. Can you at least tell us about your experience in World War IV. If I’m not wrong, you were in the heated parts of it, right?”

“Correct. I was in the 65<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the Eastern regions.”

“Oh! That had to be terrible, seeing so much death.”

“You said it, young lady.”

“Well! Thanks for your service,” said the lady to the camera.

*[Automated Message]: “ThR33-Stage” Protocol...*

*: Target confirmed.*

*: Ongoing call...*

Alastor was pulled into a photo. The night city, lively as ever, served as a shining landscape for the young and smiling guests. Around their Gucci linen suits and Cartier bags, Alastor had no difficulty keeping a straight face; not a smile for prosperity.

*[Live Chat]: Ongoing transcript...*

*: Operator > Initiating background check. State your full name, badge number, and s3curity answer: In which Battalions have you served?*

*: Recipient > Olivia Blaze. B@dge number: 56983. I have never served in a Battalion. Your turn. Your mother’s maiden name.*

*: Operator > Informati0n confirmed. Felipe Rodriguez. ID: 40093. Mona.*

*: Recipient > !nformation confirmed. Initiating Stage I.*

Alastor snuck out of the photo and preferred to stay in one of the corners. It seemed ridiculous to celebrate while a vapor trail cut through the skylight, to the East.

“General Blaze,” stumbled a young soldier; his tie wrong, and dragging his words.

“Soldier...” Alastor waited for the boy to introduce himself properly.

“Soldier Thompson.”

*[Automated Message]: “ThR33-Stage” Protocol...*

*: Initiating Stage I.*

*: Preparations completed.*

*: “Soot” Missile launched.*

*: Impact successful.*

“How can I help you, Soldier Thompson?”

“Me? I’m just here to meett ‘the’ man.”

“Then, good evening,” answered Alastor, looking for a way out of the conversation.

“Did you kneww my father? General Thompson?”

“No. I do not recall that name.”

“Obviously,” said the soldier, bringing his hand to his pocket.

Alastor’s arm clicked immediately, but it was just a photo: a regular old man in undercover clothing.

“He wasn’t one of the front-page heroes in WWIV,” saluted exaggeratedly. “He died on a mission to stop the nuclear missile outburst, so you and your pals could continue playing soldier.”

“I am sorry for your loss.”

*[Live Chat]: Ongoing transcript...*

*: Operator > Initiating casualty report of Stage I.*

*: Recipient > “Soot” Missile was successful. 67.6 million km<sup>2</sup> of the Eastern region are now deprived of 90% of incoming sunlight.*

*: Operator > Estimated blackout time?*

*: Recipient > Still pending confirmation but it should last through the entire protocol.*

*: Operator > Information confirmed. Initiating Stage II.*

“General Blaze,” greeted a scientist with a white coat fixed elegantly. “Let me introduce you to Aegis Dynamics’ C.E.O., Jessica Smith.”

“Alastor! The one person I wanted to shake hands with,” said the woman in the blue suit, received halfway by Alastor’s metallic arm. “I’m glad to see my money was put to good use. The board is very happy with the protocol.”

“Good evening,” answered Alastor. “You said it, Ms. Smith. The results are as expected.”

“In fact, they are so happy... They are pushing your promotion! You should go talk to your old chief.”

“Those are news, indeed, Ms. Smith,” replied Alastor, distracted by the numerous alerts on his digital watch.

*[Automated Message]: “ThR33-Stage” Protocol...*

*: Initiating Stage II.*

*: Preparations completed.*

*: “Pump” Missiles launched.*

*: Impacts successful.*

“General Blaze,” added the scientist, “You have worked hard. It’s time to back down from war and rest.”

When Alastor looked at his digital watch, two of the three boxes had a check mark.

*[Live Chat]: Ongoing transcript...*

*: Operator > Initiating casualty report of Stage II.*

*: Recipient > “Pump” Missiles were partially successful. 80% of all usable and drinkable water sources in the Eastern region have been evaporated. The missiles were unable to penetrate the reserve tanks.*

*: Operator > What are the percentages of human casualties?*

*: Recipient > Slightly over the target percentage. 20%.*

*: Operator > Information confirmed. Initiating Stage III.*

“Chief Everett,” Alastor interrupted the old *dog*’s solitude.

“General Blaze. How’s the party going?”

“As well as it can.”

“I see,” the old dog lowered his drink. “Soldiers, huh? We aren’t made for celebrations.”

“You said it, sir.”

“Did you know this is my third world war?” smiled the old dog, the wrinkles around his eyes.

“I did not,” answered Alastor, the clock firm in his hand.

*[Automated Message]: “ThR33-Stage” Protocol...*

*: Initiating Stage III.*

*: Preparations completed.*

*: Pending confirmation.*

“Well, yes. In the last one, I was the General of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Lots of death, but nothing close to what I saw in World War III.”

“Were you on the front line against the Russians?”

“Not at all. I was a COMMS intern.”

“I do not follow,” said Alastor as he slipped the digital watch into his jacket.

*[Live Chat]: Ongoing transcript...*

*: Recipient > Wh@t is the delay, Operator? Why haven't we launched the "Nitrogen" Missile?*

*: Operator > General Blaze's confirmation is still p3nding.*

*: Recipient > Have y0u tried to contact him?*

*: Operator > Multip7e times. If he does not confirm soon, the protocol will have to be cancelled.*

*: Recipient > Canceled? No! If we cancel it now, General Blaze's entire protocol will be ruined... All his hard work.*

*: Operator > I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do.*

*: Recipient > I'm General Bl@ze's second in command and next of kin, can I not override his confirmation?*

“You see, my team faced firsthand the damage caused by the Russian techno virus. While we killed ten soldiers per minute, they turned off a hundred ventilators, artificial hearts, traffic lights per second.”

“I do remember reading the file,” Alastor swallowed hard. “The country seemed to be on fire. The people were scared.”

“So you see? Sometimes a button is more lethal than a bullet.”

“Sir, I...” Alastor tried to speak but the words won’t come out of his throat.

“Congratulations on the promotion.”

*[Live Chat]: Ongoing transcript...*

*: Recipient > It must b3 a glitch. My father would never throw his protocol into the garbage.*

*Operator, let me override his confirmation.*

*: Operator > T-Minus 3 seconds to protocol c@ncellation.*

*: Recipient > Please! This has to 6e mistake.*

*: Operator > T-Minu5 2.*

*: Recipient > P7EASE! Don't!*

*: Operator > T-M!nus 1...*

Alastor took his time looking at the digital watch, at the unmarked box, before raising his head: The lady with the camera, the drunk soldier, the CEO, and the *old* dog. He took a deep breath.

A single *click*, and he slipped the clock into his jacket, and smiled.

THE END.