



ALEX RIDER MISSION 4 : EAGLE STRIKE

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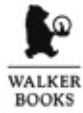
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EAGLE STRIKE



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The Amazon jungle. Fifteen years ago.

It had taken them five days to make the journey, cutting their way through the dense suffocating undergrowth, fighting through the very air, which hung heavy, moist and still. Trees tall as cathedrals surrounded them, and a strange, green light – almost holy – shimmered through the vast canopy of leaves. The rainforest seemed to have an intelligence of its own. Its voice was the sudden screech of a parrot, the flicker of a monkey swinging through the branches overhead. It knew they were there.

But so far they had been lucky. They had been attacked, of course, by leeches and mosquitoes and stinging ants. But the snakes and scorpions had left them alone. The rivers they had crossed had been free of piranhas. They had been allowed to go on.

They were travelling light. They carried with them only their basic rations: map, compass, water bottles, iodine tablets, mosquito nets and machetes. Their single heaviest item was the 88 Winchester rifle with Sniperscope that they were going to use to kill the man who lived here in this impenetrable place, one hundred miles south of Iquitos in Peru.

The two men knew each other's names but never used them. It was part of their training. The older of the two called himself Hunter. He was English, although he spoke seven languages fluently that he could pass himself off as a native of many of the countries he found himself in. He was about thirty, handsome, with the close-cut hair and watchful eyes of a trained soldier. The other man was slim, fair-haired and twitching with nervous energy. He had chosen the name of Cossack. He was just nineteen years old. This was his first kill.

Both men were dressed in khaki – standard jungle camouflage. Their faces were also painted green, with dark brown stripes across their cheeks. They had reached their destination just as the sun had begun to rise, and were standing there now, utterly still, ignoring the insects that buzzed around their faces, tasting their sweat.

In front of them was a clearing, man-made, separated from the jungle by a ten metre high fence. An elegant colonial house with wooden verandas and shutters, white curtains and slowly rotating fans stood at the heart of it, with two more low brick buildings about twenty metres behind. Accommodation for the guards. There must have been about a dozen of them patrolling the perimeter and watching from rusting metal towers. Perhaps there were more inside. But they were lazy. They were shuffling around, not concentrating on what they were supposed to be doing. They were in the middle of the jungle. They thought they were safe.

A four-seater helicopter stood waiting on a square of asphalt. It would take the owner of the house just twenty steps to walk from the front door to the helicopter. That was the only time he would be visible. That was when he would have to die.

The two men knew the name of the man they had come to kill, but they didn't use that either. Cossack had spoken it once but Hunter had corrected him.

"Never call a target by his real name. It personalizes him. It opens a door into his life and, when the time comes, it may remind you what you are doing and make you hesitate."

Just one of the many lessons Cossack had learnt from Hunter. They referred to the target only as the Commander. He was a military man – or he had been. He still liked to wear military-style clothes. With so many bodyguards he was in command of a small army. The name suited him.

The Commander was not a good man. He was a drug dealer, exporting cocaine on a massive scale. He also controlled one of the most vicious gangs in Peru, torturing and killing anyone who got in his way. But all this meant nothing to Hunter and Cossack. They were here because they had been paid twenty thousand pounds to take him out – and if the Commander had been a doctor or a priest it would have made no difference to them.

Hunter glanced at his watch. It was two minutes to eight in the morning and he had been told the Commander would be leaving for Lima on the hour. He also knew that the Commander was a punctual man. He loaded a single .308 cartridge into the Winchester and adjusted the Sniperscope. One shot was all he would need.

Meanwhile Cossack had taken out his field glasses and was scanning the compound for any sign of movement. The younger man was not afraid, but he was tense and excited. A trickle of perspiration curved behind his ear and ran down his neck. His mouth was dry. Something tapped gently against his back and he wondered if Hunter had touched him, warning him to stay calm. But Hunter was some distance away, concentrating on the gun.

Something moved.

Cossack only knew for certain it was there when it climbed over his shoulder and onto his neck and by then it was too late. Very slowly, he turned his head. And there it was, at the very edge of his field of vision. A spider, clinging to the side of his neck, just underneath the line of his chin. He swallowed. From the weight of it he had thought it was a tarantula – but this was worse, much worse. It was very black with a small head and an obscene, swollen body, like a fruit about to burst. He knew that if he could have turned it over, he would have found a red hourglass marking on its abdomen.

It was a black widow. *Latrodectus curacaviensis*. One of the deadliest spiders in the world.

The spider moved, its front legs reaching out so that one was almost touching the corner of Cossack's mouth. The other legs were still attached to his neck, with the main body of the spider now hanging under his jaw. He wanted to swallow again but he didn't dare. Any movement might alarm the creature, which anyway needed no excuse to attack. Cossack guessed that this was the female of the species: a thousand times worse than the male. If it decided to bite him, its hollow fangs would inject him with a neurotoxic venom which would paralyse his entire nervous system. He would feel nothing at first. There would just be two tiny red pricks on his skin. The pain – waves of it – would come in about an hour. His eyelids would swell. He would be unable to breathe. He would go into convulsions. Almost certainly he would die.

Cossack considered raising a hand and trying to flick the hideous thing off. If it had been anywhere else on his body he might have taken the chance. But it had settled on his throat, as fascinated by the pulse it had found there. He wanted to call to Hunter, but he couldn't risk moving the muscles in his neck. He was barely breathing. Hunter was still making the final adjustments, unaware of what was going on. What could he do?

In the end he whistled. It was the only sound he dared make. He was horribly aware of the creature hanging off him. He felt the prick of another leg, this time touching his lip. Was it about to climb onto his face?

Hunter looked round and saw at once that something was wrong. Cossack was standing unnaturally still, his head contorted, his face, underneath the paint, completely white. Hunter took a step so that Cossack now stood between him and the compound. He had lowered the rifle, the muzzle pointing towards the ground.

Hunter saw the spider.

At the same moment, the door of the house opened and the Commander came out: a short, plump man dressed in a dark tunic hanging open at the collar. Unshaven, he was carrying a briefcase and smoking a cigarette.

Twenty steps to the helicopter – and he was already moving briskly, talking to the two bodyguards who accompanied him. Cossack's eyes flickered over to Hunter. He knew the organization that he employed them would not forgive failure, and this was the only chance they would get. The spider moved again and, looking down, Cossack saw its head: a cluster of tiny, gleaming eyes – half a dozen of them – gazing up at him, uglier than anything in the world. His skin was itching. The whole side of his face wanted to peel itself away. But he knew that there was nothing Hunter could do. He had to fire now. The Commander was only ten steps away from the helicopter. The blades were already turning. Cossack wanted to scream at him. Do it! The sound of the gunshot would frighten the spider and it would bite. But that wasn't important. The mission had to succeed.

It took Hunter less than two seconds to make a decision. He could use the tip of the gun to bruise away the black widow. He might succeed in getting rid of it before it bit Cossack. But by then the Commander would be in his helicopter, behind bulletproof glass. Or he could shoot the Commander. But once he had fired the gun, he would have to turn and run immediately, disappear into the jungle. There would be no time to help Cossack; there would be nothing he could do.

He made his decision, swept up the gun, aimed and fired.

The bullet, white-hot, flashed past, cutting a line in Cossack's neck. The black widow disintegrated instantly, blown apart by the force of the shot. The bullet continued across the clearing and through the fence and – still carrying tiny fragments of the black widow with it – buried itself in the Commander's chest. The Commander had been about to climb into the helicopter. He stopped, if surprised, put a hand to his heart, and crumpled. The bodyguards twisted round, shouting, starting into the jungle, trying to see the enemy.

But Hunter and Cossack had already gone. The jungle swallowed them in seconds, although it was more than an hour before they stopped to catch their breath.

Cossack was bleeding. There was a red line that could have been drawn with a ruler across the side of his neck, and the blood had seeped down, soaking into his shirt. But the black widow hadn't bitten him. He held out a hand, accepting a water bottle from Hunter, and drank.

"You saved my life," he said.

Hunter considered. "To take a life and save a life with one bullet ... that's not bad going."

Cossack would have the scar for the rest of his life. But that would not be a very long time. The life of the professional assassin is often short. Hunter would die first, in another country, on another

mission. Later it would be his turn.

Right now he said nothing. They had done their job. That was all that mattered. He gave back the water bottle, and as the sun beat down and the jungle watched and reflected upon what had happened, the two men set off together, cutting and hacking their way through the mid-morning heat of another day.

Alex Rider lay on his back, drying out in the midday sun.

He could feel the salt water from his last swim trickling through his hair and evaporating off his chest. His shorts, still wet, clung to him. He was, at that moment, as happy as it is possible to be; one week into a holiday that had been perfect from the moment the plane had touched down in Montpellier and he had stepped out into the brilliance of his first Mediterranean day. He loved the South of France – the intense colours, the smells, the pace of life that hung onto every minute and refused to let go. He hadn't any idea what time it was, except that he was getting hungry and guessed it must soon be lunch. There was a brief burst of music as a girl with a radio walked past, and Alex turned his head to follow her. And that was when the sun went in, the sea froze, and the whole world seemed to catch its breath.

He wasn't looking at the girl with the radio. He was looking past her, down to the sea wall that divided the beach from the jetty, where a yacht was just pulling in. The yacht was enormous, almost the size of one of the passenger boats that carried tourists up and down the coast. But no tourists would ever set foot on this craft. It was completely uninviting, cruising silently through the water, with tinted glass in the windows and a massive bow that rose up like a solid white wall. A man stood at the very front, staring straight ahead, his face blank. It was a face that Alex recognized instantly.

Yassen Gregorovich. It had to be.

Alex sat perfectly still, supporting himself on one arm, his hand half buried in the sand. As he watched, a man in his twenties appeared from the cabin and busied himself mooring the boat. He was short and apelike, wearing a string vest that showed off the tattoos which completely covered his arms and shoulders. A deckhand? Yassen made no offer to help him with his work. A third man hurried along the jetty. He was fat and bald, dressed in a cheap white suit. The top of his head had been burnt by the sun and the skin had turned an ugly, cancerous red.

Yassen saw him and climbed down, moving like spilt oil. He was wearing blue jeans and a white shirt open at the neck. Other men might have had to struggle to keep their balance walking down the swaying gangplank, but he didn't even hesitate. There was something inhuman about him. With his close-cropped hair, his hard blue eyes and pale, expressionless face, he was obviously no holidaymaker. But only Alex knew the truth about him. Yassen Gregorovich was a contract killer, the man who had murdered his uncle and changed his own life. He was wanted all over the world.

So what was he doing here in a little seaside town on the edge of the marshes and lagoons that made up the Camargue? There was nothing in Saint-Pierre apart from beaches and campsites, too many restaurants and an oversized church that looked more like a fortress. It had taken Alex a week to get used to the quiet charm of the place. And now this!

"Alex? What are you looking at?" Sabina murmured, and Alex had to force himself to turn

round, to remember that she was there.

“I’m...” The words wouldn’t come. He didn’t know what to say.

“Do you think you could rub a little more sun-cream into my back? I’m overheating...”

That was Sabina. Slim, dark-haired, and sometimes much older than her fifteen years. But then she was the sort of girl who had probably swapped toys for boys before she hit eleven. Although she was using factor 25, she seemed to need more suncream rubbed in every fifteen minutes, and somehow it was always Alex who had to do it for her. He glanced quickly at her back, which was in fact perfectly bronzed. She was wearing a bikini made out of so little material that it hadn’t bothered with a pattern. Her eyes were covered by a pair of fake Dior sunglasses (which she had bought for a tenth of the price of the real thing) and she had her head buried in *The Lord of the Rings*, at the same time waving the suncream.

Alex looked back at the yacht. Yassen was shaking hands with the bald man. The deckhand was standing near by, waiting. Even at this distance Alex could see that Yassen was very much in charge; that when he spoke, the two men listened. Alex had once seen Yassen shoot a man dead just for dropping a package. There was still an extraordinary coldness about him that seemed to neutralize even the Mediterranean sun. The strange thing was that there were very few people in the world who would have been able to recognize the Russian. Alex was one of them. Could Yassen’s being here have something to do with him?

“Alex...?” Sabina said.

The three men moved away from the boat, heading into the town. Suddenly Alex was on his feet.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Where are you going?”

“I need a drink.”

“I’ve got water.”

“No, I want a Coke.”

Even as he swept up his T-shirt and pulled it over his head, Alex knew that this was not a good idea. Yassen Gregorovich might have come to the Camargue because he wanted a holiday. He might have come to murder the local mayor. Either way, it had nothing to do with Alex and it would be crazy to get involved with Yassen again. Alex remembered the promise he had made the last time they had met, on a rooftop in central London.

You killed Ian Rider. One day I’ll kill you.

At the time he had meant it – but that had been then. Right now he didn’t want anything to do with Yassen or the world he represented.

And yet...

Yassen was here. He had to know why.

The three men were walking along the main road, following the line of the sea. Alex doubled back across the sand, passing the white concrete bullring that had struck him as so bizarre when he’d first come here – until he had remembered that he was only about a hundred miles from Spain. There was to be a bullfight tonight. People were already queuing

at the tiny windows to buy tickets, but he and Sabina had decided they would keep well clear. "I hope the bull wins," had been Sabina's only comment.

Yassen and the two men turned left, disappearing into the town centre. Alex quickened his pace, knowing how easy it would be to lose them in the tangle of lanes and alleyways that surrounded the church. He didn't have to be too careful about being seen. Yassen thought he was safe. It was unlikely that, in a crowded holiday resort, he would notice anyone following him. But with Yassen you never knew. Alex felt his heart thumping with every step he took. His mouth was dry, and for once it wasn't the sun that was to blame.

Yassen had gone. Alex looked left and right. There were people crowding in on him from all sides, pouring out of the shops and into the open-air restaurants that were already serving lunch. The smell of paella filled the air. He cursed himself for hanging back, for not daring to get any closer. The three men could have disappeared inside any of the buildings. Could it be even, that he had imagined seeing them in the first place? It was a pleasant thought, but it was dashed a moment later when he caught sight of them sitting on a terrace in front of one of the smarter restaurants in the square, the bald man already calling for menus.

Alex walked in front of a shop selling postcards, using the racks as a screen between himself and the restaurant. Next came a café serving snacks and drinks beneath wide multicoloured umbrellas. He edged into it. Yassen and the other two men were now less than ten metres away and Alex could make out more details. The deckhand was pushing bread into his mouth as if he hadn't eaten for a week. The bald man was talking quietly, urgently, waving his fist in the air to emphasize a point. Yassen was listening patiently. With the noise of the crowd all around, Alex couldn't make out a word any of them were saying. He peered around one of the umbrellas and a waiter almost collided with him, letting loose a torrent of angry French. Yassen glanced in his direction and Alex ducked away, afraid that he had drawn attention to himself.

A line of plants in wooden tubs divided the café from the restaurant terrace where the men were eating. Alex slipped between two of the tubs and moved quickly into the shadows of the restaurant interior. He felt safer here, less exposed. The kitchens were right behind him. To one side was a bar and in front of it about a dozen tables, all of them empty. Waiters were coming in and out with plates of food, but all the customers had chosen to eat outside.

Alex looked out through the door. And caught his breath. Yassen had got up and was walking purposefully towards him. Had he been spotted? But then he saw that Yassen was holding something: a mobile phone. He must have received a call and was coming into the restaurant to take it privately. Another few steps and he would reach the door. Alex looked around him and saw an alcove screened by a bead curtain. He pushed through it and found himself in a storage area just big enough to conceal him. Mops, buckets, cardboard boxes and empty wine bottles crowded around him. The beads shivered and became still.

Yassen was suddenly there.

"I arrived twenty minutes ago," he was saying. He was speaking English with only a very slight trace of a Russian accent. "Franco was waiting for me. The address is confirmed and everything has been arranged."

There was a pause. Alex tried not to breathe. He was centimetres away from Yassen.

separated only by the fragile barrier of brightly coloured beads. But for the fact that it was so dark inside after the glare of the sun, Yassen would surely have seen him.

“We’ll do it this afternoon. You have nothing to worry about. It is better for us not to communicate. I will report to you on my return to England.”

Yassen Gregorovich clicked off the phone and suddenly became quite still. Alex actually saw the moment, the sudden alertness as some animal instinct told Yassen that he had been overheard. The phone was still cradled inside the man’s hand, but it could have been a knife that he was about to throw. His head was still but his eyes glanced from side to side searching for the enemy. Alex stayed where he was behind the beads, not daring to move. What should he do? He was tempted to make a break for it, to run out into the open air. No. He would be dead before he had taken two steps. Yassen would kill him before he even knew who he was or why he had been there. Very slowly, Alex looked around for a weapon, for anything to defend himself with.

And then the kitchen door swung open and a waiter came out, swerving round Yassen and calling to someone at the same time. The stillness of the moment was shattered. Yassen slipped the phone into his trouser pocket and went out to rejoin the other men.

Alex let out a huge sigh of relief.

What had he learnt?

Yassen Gregorovich had come here to kill someone. He was sure of that much. *The address is confirmed and everything has been arranged.* But at least Alex hadn’t heard his own name mentioned. So he was right. The target was probably some Frenchman, living here in Saint Pierre. It would happen sometime this afternoon. A gunshot or perhaps a knife flashing in the sun. A fleeting moment of violence and someone somewhere would sit back, knowing they had one enemy less.

What could he do?

Alex pushed through the bead curtain and made his way out of the back of the restaurant. He was relieved to find himself in the street, away from the square. Only now did he try to collect his thoughts. He could go to the police, of course. He could tell them that he was a spy who had worked, three times now, for MI6 – British military intelligence. He could say that he had recognized Yassen, knew him for what he was, and that a killing would almost certainly take place that afternoon unless he was stopped.

But what good would it do? The French police might understand him, but they would never believe him. He was a fourteen-year-old English schoolboy with sand in his hair and a suntan. They would take one look at him and laugh.

He could go to Sabina and her parents. But Alex didn’t want to do that either. He was on holiday here because they had invited him, and why should he bring murder into their holiday? No. That they would believe him any more than the police. Once, when he had been staying with her in Cornwall, Alex had tried to tell Sabina the truth. She had thought he was joking.

Alex looked around at the tourist shops, the ice-cream parlours, the crowds strolling happily along the street. It was a typical picture-postcard view. The real world. So what the hell was he doing getting mixed up again with spies and assassins? He was on holiday. This was none of his business. Let Yassen do whatever he wanted. Alex wouldn’t be able to stop

him even if he tried. Better to forget that he had ever seen him.

Alex took a deep breath and walked back down the road towards the beach to find Sabina and her parents. As he went he tried to work out what he would tell them: why he had left so suddenly and why he was no longer smiling now that he was back.

That afternoon, Alex and Sabina hitched a lift with a local farmer to Aigues-Mortes, a fortified town on the edge of the salt marshes. Sabina wanted to escape from her parents and hang out in a French café, where they could watch the locals and tourists rub shoulders in the street. She had devised a system for marking French teenagers for good looks – with points lost for weedy legs, crooked teeth or bad dress sense. Nobody had yet scored more than seven out of twenty and Alex would normally have been happy sitting with her, listening to her as she laughed out loud.

But not this afternoon.

Everything was out of focus. The great walls and towers that surrounded him were miles away, and the sightseers seemed to be moving too slowly, like a film that had run down. Alex wanted to enjoy being here. He wanted to feel part of the holiday again. But seeing Yassen had spoiled it all.

Alex had met Sabina only a month before, when the two of them had been helping at the Wimbledon tennis tournament, but they had struck up an immediate friendship. Sabina was an only child. Her mother, Liz, worked as a fashion designer; her father, Edward, was a journalist. Alex hadn't seen very much of him. He had started the holiday late, coming down on the train from Paris, and had been working on some story ever since.

The family had rented a house just outside Saint-Pierre, right on the edge of a river, the Petit Rhône. It was a simple place, typical of the area: bright white with blue shutters and a roof of sun-baked terracotta tiles. There were three bedrooms and, on the ground floor, a airy, old-fashioned kitchen that opened onto an overgrown garden with a swimming pool and a tennis court with weeds pushing through the asphalt. Alex had loved it from the start. His bedroom overlooked the river, and every evening he and Sabina had spent hours sprawled over an old wicker sofa, talking quietly and watching the water ripple past.

The first week of the holiday had disappeared in a flash. They had swum in the pool and in the sea, which was less than a mile away. They had gone walking, climbing, canoeing and once (it wasn't Alex's favourite sport), horse-riding. Alex really liked Sabina's parents. They were the sort of adults who hadn't forgotten that they had once been teenagers themselves and more or less left him and Sabina to do whatever they wanted on their own. And for the last seven days everything had been fine.

Until Yassen.

The address is confirmed and everything has been arranged. We'll do it this afternoon...

What was the Russian planning to do in Saint-Pierre? What bad luck was it that had brought him here, casting his shadow once again over Alex's life? Despite the heat of the afternoon sun, Alex shivered.

"Alex?"

He realized that Sabina had been talking to him, and looked round. She was gazing across the table with a look of concern. "What are you thinking about?" she asked. "You were miles away."

"Nothing."

"You haven't been yourself all afternoon. Did something happen this morning? Where did you disappear to on the beach?"

"I told you. I just needed a drink." He hated having to lie to her but he couldn't tell her the truth.

"I was just saying we ought to get going. I promised we'd be home by five. Oh my God! Look at that one!" She pointed at another teenager walking past. "Four out of twenty. Aren't there *any* good-looking boys in France?" She glanced at Alex. "Apart from you, I mean."

"So how many do I get out of twenty?" Alex asked.

Sabina considered. "Twelve and a half," she said at last. "But don't worry, Alex. Another ten years and you'll be perfect."

Sometimes horror announces itself in the smallest of ways.

On this day it was a single police car, racing along the wide, empty road that twisted down to Saint-Pierre. Alex and Sabina were sitting in the back of the same truck that had brought them. They were looking at a herd of cows grazing in one of the fields when the police car, blue and white with a light flashing on the roof – overtook them and tore off into the distance. Alex still had Yassen on his mind and the sight of it tightened the knot in the pit of his stomach. But it was only a police car. It didn't have to mean anything.

But then there was a helicopter, taking off from somewhere not so far away and arcing into the brilliant sky. Sabina saw it and pointed at it.

"Something's happened," she said. "That's just come from the town."

Had the helicopter come from the town? Alex wasn't so sure. He watched it sweep over them and disappear in the direction of Aigues-Mortes, and all the time his breaths were getting shorter and he felt the heavy weight of some nameless dread.

And then they turned a corner and Alex knew that his worst fears had come true – but in a way that he could never have foreseen.

Rubble, jagged brickwork and twisted steel. Thick black smoke curling into the sky. The house had been blown apart. Just one wall remained intact, giving the cruel illusion that not too much damage had been done. But the rest of it was gone. Alex saw a brass bed hanging at a crazy angle, somehow suspended in mid-air. A pair of blue shutters lay in the grass about fifty metres away. The water in the swimming pool was brown and scummy. The blast must have been immense.

A fleet of cars and vans was parked around the building. They belonged to the police, the hospital, the fire department and the anti-terrorist squad. To Alex they didn't look real: more like brightly coloured toys. In a foreign country, nothing looks more foreign than its emergency services.

“Mum! Dad!”

Alex heard Sabina shout the words and saw her leap out of the truck before they had stopped moving. Then she was running across the gravel drive, forcing her way between the officials in their different uniforms. The truck stopped and Alex climbed down, unsure whether his feet would come into contact with the ground or if he would simply go on, right through it. His head was spinning; he thought he was going to faint.

Nobody spoke to him as he continued forward. It was as if he wasn't there at all. Ahead of him he saw Sabina's mother appear from nowhere, her face streaked with ashes and tears and he thought to himself that if she was all right, if she had been out of the house when the explosion happened, then maybe Edward Pleasure had escaped too. But then he saw Sabina begin to shake and fall into her mother's arms, and he knew the worst.

He drew nearer, in time to hear Liz's words as she clutched hold of her daughter.

“We still don't know what happened. Dad's been taken by helicopter to Montpellier. He's alive, Sabina, but he's badly injured. We're going to him now. You know your dad's a fighter. But the doctors aren't sure if he's going to make it or not. We just don't know...”

The smell of burning reached out to Alex and engulfed him. The smoke had blotted out the sun. His eyes began to water and he fought for breath.

This was his fault.

He didn't know why it had happened but he was utterly certain who was responsible.

Yassen Gregorovich.

None of my business. That was what Alex had thought. This was the result.

The policeman facing Alex was young, inexperienced, and struggling to find the right words. It wasn't just that he was having difficulty with the English language, Alex realized. Down here in this odd, quiet corner of France, the worst he would usually have to deal with would be the occasional drunk driver or maybe a tourist losing his wallet on the beach. This was a new situation and he was completely out of his depth.

"It is the most terrible affair," he was saying. "You have known Monsieur Pleasure very long time?"

"No. Not very long time," Alex said.

"He will receive the best treatment." The policeman smiled encouragingly. "Madame Pleasure and her daughter are going now to hospital but they have requested us to occupy with you."

Alex was sitting on a folding chair in the shadow of a tree. It was just after five o'clock but the sun was still hot. The river flowed past a few metres away and he would have given anything to dive into the water and swim, and keep swimming, until he had put this whole business behind him.

Sabina and her mother had left about ten minutes ago and now he was on his own with the young policeman. He had been given a chair in the shade and a bottle of water, but it was obvious that nobody knew what to do with him. This wasn't his family. He had no right to be here. More officials had turned up: senior policemen, senior firemen. They were moving slowly through the wreckage, occasionally turning over a plank of wood or moving a piece of broken furniture as if they might uncover the one simple clue that would tell them why the accident had taken place.

"We have telephoned to your consul," the policeman was saying. "They will come to take you home. But they must send a representative from Lyon. It is a long way. So tonight you must wait here in Saint-Pierre."

"I know who did this," Alex said.

"*Comment?*"

"I know who was responsible." Alex glanced in the direction of the house. "You have to go into the town. There is a yacht tied to the jetty. I didn't see the name but you can't miss it. It's huge ... white. There's a man on the yacht; his name is Yassen Gregorovich. You have to arrest him before he can get away."

The policeman stared at Alex, astonished. Alex wondered how much he had understood.

"I am sorry? What is it that you say? This man, Yassen..."

"Yassen Gregorovich."

"You know him?"

"Yes."

“Who is he?”

“He’s a killer. He is paid to kill people. I saw him this morning.”

“Please!” The policeman held up a hand. He didn’t want to listen to any more. “Wait here.”

Alex watched him walk away towards the parked cars, presumably to find a senior officer.

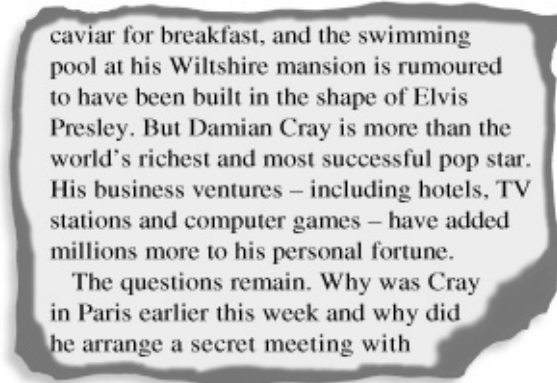
He took a sip of water, then stood up himself. He didn’t want to sit here watching the evening

from a folding chair like a picnicker. He walked towards the house. There was an evening

breeze but the smell of burnt wood still hung heavily all around. A scrap of paper, scorched

and blackened, blew across the gravel. On an impulse, Alex reached down and picked it up.

He read:



caviar for breakfast, and the swimming pool at his Wiltshire mansion is rumoured to have been built in the shape of Elvis Presley. But Damian Cray is more than the world’s richest and most successful pop star. His business ventures – including hotels, TV stations and computer games – have added millions more to his personal fortune. The questions remain. Why was Cray in Paris earlier this week and why did he arrange a secret meeting with

That was all there was. The paper turned black and the words disappeared.

Alex realized what he was looking at. It must be a page from the article that Edward

Pleasure had been working on ever since he had arrived at the house. Something to do with

the mega-celebrity Damian Cray...

“Excusez-moi, jeune homme...”

He looked up and saw that the policeman had returned with a second man, this one a few

years older, with a downturned mouth and a small moustache. Alex’s heart sank. He

recognized the type before the man had even spoken. Oily and self-important, and wearing

uniform that was too neat, there was disbelief etched all over his face.

“You have something to tell us?” he asked. He spoke better English than his colleague.

Alex repeated what he had said.

“How do you know about this man? The man on the boat.”

“He killed my uncle.”

“Who was your uncle?”

“He was a spy. He worked for MI6.” Alex took a deep breath. “I think *I* may have been the

target of the bomb. I think he was trying to kill *me*...”

The two policemen spoke briefly together, then turned back to Alex. Alex knew what was

coming. The senior policeman had rearranged his features so that he now looked down at

Alex with a mixture of kindness and concern. But there was arrogance there too: *I am right*

You are wrong. And nothing will persuade me otherwise. He was like a bad teacher in a bad

school, putting a cross beside a right answer.

“You have had a terrible shock,” the policeman said. “The explosion ... we already know that it was caused by a leak in the gas pipe.”

“No...” Alex shook his head.

The policeman held up a hand. “There is no reason why an assassin would wish to harm your family on holiday. But I understand. You are upset; it is quite possible that you are in shock. You do not know what it is you are saying.”

“Please—”

“We have sent for someone from your consulate and he will arrive soon. Until then it would be better if you did not interfere.”

Alex hung his head. “Do you mind if I go for a walk?” he said. The words came out low and muffled.

“A walk?”

“Just five minutes. I want to be on my own.”

“Of course. Do not go too far. Would you like someone to accompany you?”

“No. I’ll be all right.”

He turned and walked away. He had avoided meeting the policemen’s eyes and the doubtless thought he was ashamed of himself. That was all right. Alex didn’t want them to see his fury, the black anger that coursed through him like an arctic river. They hadn’t believed him! They had treated him like a stupid child!

With every step he took, images stamped themselves on his mind. Sabina’s eyes widening as she took in the wreck of the house. Edward Pleasure being flown to some city hospital. Yassen Gregorovich on the deck of his yacht, gliding off into the sunset, another job done. And it was Alex’s fault! That was the worst of it. That was the unforgivable part. Well, he wasn’t going to sit there and take it. Alex allowed his rage to carry him forward. It was time to take control.

When he reached the main road, he glanced back. The policemen had forgotten him. He took one last look at the burnt-out shell that had been his holiday home, and the darkness rose up in him again. He turned away and began to run.

Saint-Pierre was just under a mile away. It was early evening by the time he arrived there and the streets were packed with people in a festive mood. In fact, the town seemed busier than ever. Then he remembered. There was a bullfight tonight and people had driven in from all around to watch it.

The sun was already dipping behind the horizon but daylight still lingered in the air as he accidentally left behind. The street lamps were lit, throwing garish pools of orange onto the sandy pavements. An old carousel turned round and round, a spinning blur of electric bulbs and jangling music. Alex made his way through it all without stopping. Suddenly he was on the other side of the town and the streets were quiet again. The night had advanced and everything was a little more grey.

He hadn’t expected to see the yacht. At the back of his mind he had thought that Yassen would have left long ago. But there it still was, moored where he had seen it earlier that day a lifetime ago. There was nobody in sight. It seemed that the whole town had gone to the

bullfight. Then a figure stepped out of the darkness and Alex saw the bald man with the sunburn. He was still dressed in the white suit. He was smoking a cigar, the smouldering tip casting a red glow across his face.

There were lights glinting behind the portholes of the boat. Would he find Yassen behind one of them? Alex had no real idea what he was doing. Anger was still driving him blind on. All he knew was that he had to get onto the yacht and that nothing was going to stop him.

The man's name was Franco. He had stepped down onto the jetty because Yassen hated the smell of cigar smoke. He didn't like Yassen. More than that; he was afraid of him. When the Russian had heard that Edward Pleasure had been injured, not killed, he had said nothing, but there had been something intense and ugly in his eyes. For a moment he had looked at Raoul, the deckhand. It had been Raoul who had actually placed the bomb ... too far from the journalist's room, as it turned out. The mistake was his. And Franco knew that Yassen had very nearly killed him there and then. Perhaps he still would. God – what a mess!

Franco heard a shoe scraping against loose rubble and saw a boy walking towards him. He was slim and suntanned, wearing shorts and a faded Stone Age T-shirt, with a string of wooden beads around his neck. He had fair hair which hung in strands over his forehead. He must be a tourist – he looked English. But what was he doing here?

Alex had wondered how close he could get to the man before his suspicions were aroused. If it had been an adult approaching the boat, it would have been a different matter; the fact that he was only fourteen was the main reason he had been so useful to MI6. People didn't notice him until it was too late.

That was what happened now. As the boy came closer, Franco was struck by the dark brown eyes set in a face that was somehow too serious for a boy of that age. They were eyes that had seen too much.

Alex drew level with Franco. At that moment, he lashed out, spinning round on the ball of his left foot, kicking with the right. Franco was taken completely by surprise. Alex's heel struck him hard in the stomach – but straight away Alex knew that he had underestimated his opponent. He had expected to feel soft fat beneath the flapping suit. But his foot had slammed into a ring of muscle, and although Franco was hurt and winded, he hadn't been brought down.

Franco dropped the cigar and lunged, his hand already scrabbling in his jacket pocket. He came out holding something. There was a soft click and seven inches of glinting silver leapt out of nowhere. He had a flick knife. Moving much faster than Alex would have thought possible, he launched himself across the jetty. His hand swung in an arc. Alex heard the blade slicing the air. He swung again, and the knife flashed past Alex's face, missing him by a centimetre.

Alex was unarmed. Franco had obviously used the knife many times before, and if he hadn't been weakened by the first kick, this fight would already have been over. Alex looked around, searching for anything he could defend himself with. There was almost nothing on the jetty – just a few old boxes, a bucket, a fisherman's net. Franco was moving more slowly now. He was fighting a kid – nothing more. The little brat might have surprised him with the

first attack, but it would be easy enough to bring this to an end.

He muttered a few words in French: something low and ugly. Then, a second later, his fist swung through the air, this time carrying the knife in an upward arc that would have cut Alex's throat if he hadn't thrown himself backwards.

Alex cried out.

He had lost his footing, falling heavily onto his back, one arm outstretched. Franco grinned, showing two gold teeth, and stepped towards him, anxious to finish this off. Too late he saw that he had been tricked. Alex's hand had caught hold of the net. As Franco loomed over him, he sprang up, swinging his arm forward with all his strength. The net spread out, falling over Franco's head, shoulder and knife hand. He swore and twisted round, trying to free himself, but the movement only entangled him all the more.

Alex knew he had to finish this quickly. Franco was still struggling with the net but Alex saw him open his mouth to call for help. They were right next to the yacht. If Yassen heard anything, there would be nothing more Alex could do. He took aim and kicked a second time, his foot driving into the man's stomach. The breath was knocked out of him; Alex saw his face turn red. He was half out of the net, performing a bizarre dance on the edge of the jettie when he lost his balance and fell. With his hands trapped he couldn't protect himself. His head hit the concrete with a loud crack and he lay still.

Alex stood, breathing heavily. In the distance he heard a trumpet blare and there was a scattered round of applause. The bullfight was due to begin in ten minutes. A small band had arrived and was about to play. Alex looked at the unconscious man, knowing he had had a close escape. There was no sign of the knife; maybe it had fallen into the water. Briefly he wondered if he should go on. Then he thought of Sabina and her father, and the next thing he knew he had climbed the gangplank and was standing on the deck.

The boat was called *Fer de Lance*. Alex noticed the name as he climbed up, and remembered seeing it somewhere else. That was it! It was on a school trip to London Zoo. It was some sort of snake. Poisonous, of course.

He was standing in a wide area with a steering wheel and controls next to a door on one side and leather sofas across the back. There was a low table. The bald man must have been sitting here before he went down for his smoke. Alex saw a crumpled magazine, a bottle of beer, a mobile phone and a gun.

He recognized the telephone. It was Yassen's. He had seen it in the Russian's hand back in the restaurant earlier that day. The phone was an odd colour – a shade of brown – otherwise Alex might have ignored it. But now he noticed that it was still turned on. He picked it up.

Alex quickly scrolled to the main menu and then to Call Register. He found what he was looking for: a record of all the calls Yassen had received that day. At 12.53 he had been talking to a number that began 44207. The 44 was England; the 207 meant it was somewhere in London. That was the call Alex had overheard in the restaurant. Quickly he memorized the number. It was the number of the person who had given Yassen his orders. It would tell him all he needed to know.

He picked up the gun.

He finally had it. Each time he had worked for MI6 he had asked them to give him a gun

and each time they had refused. They had supplied him with gadgets – but only tranquillizers, darts, stun grenades, smoke bombs. Nothing that would kill. Alex felt the power of the weapon he was holding. He weighed it in his hand. The gun was a Grach MP-443, black, with a short muzzle and a ribbed stock. It was Russian, of course, new army issue. He allowed his finger to curl around the trigger and smiled grimly. Now he and Yassen were equals.

He padded forward, went through the door and climbed down a short flight of stairs that went below deck and into a corridor that seemed to run the length of the boat, with cabins on either side. He had seen a lounge above but he knew that it was empty. There had been no lights behind those windows. If Yassen was anywhere, he would be down here. Clutching the Grach more tightly, he crept along, his feet making no sound on the thickly carpeted floor.

He came to a door and saw a yellow strip of light seeping out of the crack below. Gritting his teeth, he reached for the handle, half hoping it would be locked. The handle turned and the door opened. Alex went in.

The cabin was surprisingly large, a long rectangle with a white carpet and modern wooden fittings along two of the walls. The third wall was taken up by a low double bed with a table and a lamp on each side. There was a man stretched out on the white cover, his eyes closed as still as a corpse. Alex stepped forward. There was no sound in the room, but in the distance he could hear the band playing at the bullring: two or three trumpets, a tuba and a drum.

Yassen Gregorovich made no movement as Alex approached, the gun held out in front of him. Alex reached the side of the bed. This was the closest he had ever been to the Russian, the man who had killed his uncle. He could see every detail of his face: the chiselled lips, the almost feminine eyelashes. The gun was only a centimetre from Yassen's forehead. This was where it ended. All he had to do was pull the trigger and it would be over.

“Good evening, Alex.”

It wasn't that Yassen had woken up. His eyes had been closed and now they weren't. It was as simple as that. His face hadn't changed. He knew who Alex was immediately, at the same time taking in the gun that was pointing at him. Taking it in and accepting it.

Alex said nothing. There was a slight tremble in the hand holding the gun and he brought his other hand up to steady it.

“You have my gun,” Yassen said.

Alex took a breath.

“Do you intend to use it?”

Nothing.

Yassen continued calmly. “I think you should consider very carefully. Killing a man is not like you see on the television. If you pull that trigger, you will fire a real bullet into real flesh and blood. I will feel nothing; I will be dead instantly. But you will live with what you have done for the rest of your life. You will never forget it.”

He paused, letting his words hang in the air.

“Do you really have it in you, Alex? Can you make your finger obey you? Can you kill me?”

Alex was rigid, a statue. All his concentration was focused on the finger curled around the trigger. It was simple. There was a spring mechanism. The trigger would pull back the hammer and release it. The hammer would strike the bullet, a piece of death just nineteen millimetres long, sending it on its short, fast journey into this man's head. He could do it.

"Maybe you have forgotten what I once told you. This isn't your life. This has nothing to do with you."

Yassen was totally relaxed. There was no emotion in his voice. He seemed to know Alex better than Alex knew himself. Alex tried to look away, to avoid the calm blue eyes that were watching him with something like pity.

"Why did you do it?" Alex demanded. "You blew up the house. Why?"

The eyes flickered briefly. "Because I was paid."

"Paid to kill me?"

"No, Alex." For a moment Yassen sounded almost amused. "It had nothing to do with you."

"Then who—"

But it was too late.

He saw it in Yassen's eyes first, knew that the Russian had been keeping him distracted and the cabin door opened quietly behind him. A pair of hands seized him and he was swung violently away from the bed. He saw Yassen whip aside as fast as a snake – as fast as a ferocious lance. The gun went off, but Alex hadn't fired it intentionally and the bullet smashed into the floor. He hit a wall and felt the gun drop out of his hand. He could taste blood in his mouth. The yacht seemed to be swaying.

In the far distance a fanfare sounded, followed by an echoing roar from the crowd. The bullfight had begun.

Alex sat listening to the three men who would decide his fate, trying to understand what they were saying. They were speaking French, but with an almost impenetrable Marseilles accent – and they were using gutter language, not the sort he had learnt.

He had been dragged up to the main saloon and was slumped in a wide leather armchair. By now Alex had managed to work out what had happened. The deckhand, Raoul, had come back from the town with supplies and found Franco lying unconscious on the jetty. He had hurried on board to alert Yassen and had overheard him talking to Alex. It had been Raoul, of course, who had crept into the cabin and grabbed Alex from behind.

Franco was sitting in a corner, his face distorted with anger and hatred. There was a dark mauve bruise on his forehead where he had hit the ground. When he spoke, his words dripped poison.

“Give me the little brat. I will kill him personally and then drop him over the side for the fish.”

“How did he find us, Yassen?” This was Raoul speaking. “How did he know who we are?”

“Why are we wasting our time with him? Let me finish him now.”

Alex glanced at Yassen. So far the Russian had said nothing, although it was clear he was still in charge. There was something curious about the way he was looking at Alex. The empty blue eyes gave nothing away and yet Alex felt he was being appraised. It was as if Yassen had known him a long time and had expected to meet him again.

Yassen lifted a hand for silence, then went over to Alex. “How did you know you would find us here?” he asked.

Alex said nothing. A flicker of annoyance passed across the Russian’s face. “You are only alive because I permit it. Please don’t make me ask you a second time.”

Alex shrugged. He had nothing to lose. They were probably going to kill him anyway. “I was on holiday,” he said. “I was on the beach. I saw you on the yacht when it came in.”

“You are not with MI6?”

“No.”

“But you followed me to the restaurant.”

“That’s right.” Alex nodded.

Yassen half smiled to himself. “I thought there was someone.” Then he was serious again. “You were staying in the house.”

“I was invited by a friend,” Alex said. A thought suddenly occurred to him. “Her dad’s a journalist. Was he the one you wanted to kill?”

“That is none of your business.”

“It is now.”

“It was bad luck you were staying with him, Alex. I’ve already told you. It was nothing personal.”

“Sure.” Alex looked Yassen straight in the eye. “With you it never is.”

Yassen went back over to the two men and at once Franco began to jabber again, spitting out his words. He had poured himself a whisky which he downed in a single swallow, his eyes never leaving Alex.

“The boy knows nothing and he can’t hurt us,” Yassen said. He was speaking in English for his benefit, Alex guessed.

“What you do with him?” Raoul asked, following in clumsy English too.

“Kill him!” This was Franco.

“I do not kill children,” Yassen replied, and Alex knew that he was telling only half the truth. The bomb in the house could have killed anyone who happened to be there and Yassen wouldn’t have cared.

“Have you gone mad?” Franco had slipped back into French. “You can’t just let him walk away from here. He came to kill you. If it hadn’t been for Raoul, he might have succeeded.”

“Maybe.” Yassen studied Alex one last time. Finally he came to a decision. “You were unwise to come here, little Alex,” he said. “These people think I should silence you and they are right. If I thought it was anything but chance that brought you to me, if there was anything that you knew, you would already be dead. But I am a reasonable man. You did not kill me when you had the chance, so now I will give you a chance too.”

He spoke rapidly to Franco in French. At first Franco seemed sullen, argumentative. But as Yassen continued, Alex saw a smile spread slowly across his face.

“How will we arrange this?” Franco asked.

“You know people. You have influence. You just have to pay the right people.”

“The boy will be killed.”

“Then you will have your wish.”

“Good!” Franco spat. “I’ll enjoy watching!”

Yassen came over to Alex and stopped just a short distance away. “You have courage, Alex,” he said. “I admire that in you. Now I am going to give you the opportunity to display it.” He nodded at Franco. “Take him!”

It was nine o’clock. The night had rolled in over Saint-Pierre, bringing with it the threat of a summer storm. The air was still and heavy and thick cloud had blotted out the stars.

Alex stood on sandy ground in the shadows of a concrete archway, unable to take in what was happening to him. He had been forced, at gunpoint, to change his holiday clothes for a uniform so bizarre that, but for his knowledge of the danger he was about to face, he would have felt simply ridiculous.

First there had been a white shirt and a black tie. Then came a jacket with shoulder pads hanging over his arms and a pair of trousers that fitted tight around his thighs and waist but stopped well short of his ankles. Both of these were covered in gold sequins and thousands of

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