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Russian Roulette

Written by

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BEFORE THE KILL

He had chosen the hotel room very carefully.

As he crossed the reception area towards the lifts, he was aware of everyone around him. Two receptionists, one on the phone. A Japanese guest checking in ... from his accent, obviously from Miyazaki in the south. A concierge printing a map for a couple of tourists. A security man, Eastern European, bored, standing by the door. He saw everything. If the lights had suddenly gone out, or if he had closed his eyes, he would have been able to continue forward at exactly the same pace.

Nobody noticed him. It was actually a skill, something he had learned, the art of not being seen. Even the clothes he wore – expensive jeans, a grey cashmere jersey and a loose coat – had been chosen because it made no statement at all. They were well-known brands but he had cut out the labels. In the unlikely event that he was stopped

by the police, it would be very difficult for them to know where the outfit had been bought.

He was in his thirties but looked younger. He had fair hair, cut short, and ice-cold eyes with just the faintest trace of blue. He was not large or well built but there was a sort of sleekness about him. He moved like an athlete – perhaps a sprinter approaching the starting blocks – but there was a sense of danger about him, a feeling that you should leave well alone. He carried three credit cards and a driving licence, issued in Swansea, all with the name Matthew Reddy. A police check would have established that he was a personal trainer, that he worked in a London gym and lived in Brixton. None of this was true. His real name was Yassen Gregorovich. He had been a professional assassin for almost half his life.

The hotel was in King's Cross, an area of London with no attractive shops, few decent restaurants and where nobody really stays any longer than they have to. It was called The Traveller and it was part of a chain; comfortable but not too expensive. It was the sort of place that had no regular clients. Most of the guests were passing through on business and it would be their companies that paid the bill. They drank in the bar. They ate the "full English breakfast" in the brightly lit Beefeater restaurant. But they were too busy to socialize and it was unlikely they would return. Yassen preferred it that way. He could have stayed in central London, in the

Ritz or the Dorchester, but he knew that the receptionists there were trained to remember the faces of the people who passed through the revolving doors. Such personal attention was the last thing he wanted.

A CCTV camera watched him as he approached the lifts. He was aware of it, blinking over his left shoulder. The camera was annoying but inevitable. London has more of these devices than any city in Europe, and the police and secret service have access to all of them. Yassen made sure he didn't look up. If you look at a camera, that is when it sees you. He reached the lifts but ignored them, slipping through a fire door that led to the stairs. He would never think of confining himself in a small space, a metal box with doors that he couldn't open, surrounded by strangers. That would be madness. He would have walked fifteen storeys if it had been necessary – and when he reached the top he wouldn't even have been out of breath. Yassen kept himself in superb condition, spending two hours in the gym every day when that luxury was available to him, working out on his own when it wasn't.

His room was on the second floor. He had thoroughly checked the hotel on the Internet before he made his reservation and number 217 was one of just four rooms that exactly met his demands. It was too high up to be reached from the street but low enough for him to jump out of the window if

he had to – after shooting out the glass. It was not overlooked. There were other buildings around but any form of surveillance would be difficult. When Yassen went to bed, he never closed the curtains. He liked to see out, to watch for any movement in the street. Every city has a natural rhythm and anything that breaks it – a man lingering on a corner or a car passing the same way twice – might warn him that it was time to leave at once. And he never slept for more than four hours, not even in the most comfortable bed.

A DO NOT DISTURB sign hung in front of him as he turned the corner and approached the door. Had it been obeyed? Yassen reached into his trouser pocket and took out a small silver device, about the same size and shape as a pen. He pressed one end, covering the handle with a thin spray of diazafluoren – a simple chemical reagent. Quickly, he spun the pen round and pressed the other end, activating a fluorescent light. There were no fingerprints. If anyone had been into the room since he had left, they had wiped the handle clean. He put the pen away, then knelt down and checked the bottom of the door. Earlier in the day, he had placed a single hair across the crack. It was one of the oldest warning signals in the book but that didn't stop it being effective. The hair was still in place. Yassen straightened up and, using his electronic pass key, went in.

It took him less than a minute to ascertain that

everything was exactly as he had left it. His briefcase was 4.6 centimetres from the edge of the desk. His suitcase was positioned at a 95 degree angle from the wall. There were no fingerprints on either of the locks. He removed the digital tape recorder that had been clipped magnetically to the side of his service fridge and glanced at the dial. Nothing had been recorded. Nobody had been in. Many people would have found all these precautions annoying and time-consuming but for Yassen they were as much a part of his daily routine as tying his shoelaces or cleaning his teeth.

It was twelve minutes past six when he sat down at the desk and opened his computer, an ordinary Apple MacBook. His password had seventeen digits and he changed it every month. He took off his watch and laid it on the surface beside him. Then he went to eBay, left-clicked on Collectibles and scrolled through Coins. He soon found what he was looking for: a gold coin showing the head of the emperor Caligula with the date AD11. There had been no bids for this particular coin because, as any collector would know, it did not in fact exist. In AD11, the mad Roman emperor, Caligula, had not even been born. The entire website was a fake and looked it. The name of the coin dealer – Mintomatic – had been specially chosen to put off any casual purchaser. Mintomatic was supposedly based in Shanghai and did not have Top-rated Seller status. All the

coins it advertised were either fake or valueless.

Yassen sat quietly until a quarter past six. At exactly the moment that the second hand passed over the twelve on his watch, he pressed the button to place a bid, then entered his User ID – false, of course – and password. Finally, he entered a bid of £2,518.15. The figures were based on the day's date and the exact time. He pressed ENTER and a window opened that had nothing to do with eBay or with Roman coins. Nobody else could have seen it. It would have been impossible to discover where it had originated. The message had been bounced around a dozen countries, travelling through an anonymity network, before it had reached him. This is known as onion routing because of its many layers. It had also passed through an encrypted tunnel, a secure shell, that ensured that only Yassen could read what had been written. If someone had managed to arrive at the same screen by accident, they would have seen only nonsense and within three seconds a virus would have entered their computer and obliterated the motherboard. The Apple computer, however, had been authorized to receive the message and Yassen saw three words:

KILL ALEX RIDER

They were exactly what he had expected.

Yassen had known all along that his employers would insist on punishing the agent who had been

involved in the disaster that the Stormbreaker operation had become. He even wondered if he himself might not be made to retire ... permanently, of course. It was simple common sense. If people failed, they were eliminated. There were no second chances. Yassen was lucky in that he had been employed as a subcontractor. He didn't have overall responsibility for what had happened and at the end of the day he couldn't be blamed. On the other hand, they would have to make an example of Alex Rider. It didn't matter that he was just fourteen years old. Tomorrow he would have to die.

Yassen looked at the screen for a few seconds more, then closed the computer. He had never killed a child before but the thought did not particularly trouble him. Alex Rider had made his own choices. He should have been at school, but instead, for whatever reason, he had allowed the Special Operations Division of MI6 to recruit him. From schoolboy to spy. It was certainly unusual – but the truth was, he had been remarkably successful. Beginner's luck, maybe, but he had brought an end to an operation that had been several years in the planning. He was responsible for the deaths of two operatives. He had annoyed some extremely powerful people. He very much deserved the death that was coming his way.

And yet...

Yassen sat where he was with the computer in front of him. Nothing had changed in his

expression but there was, perhaps, something flickering deep in his eyes. Outside, the sun was beginning to set, the evening sky turning a hard, unforgiving grey. The streets were full of commuters hurrying home. They weren't just on the other side of a hotel window. They were in another world. Yassen knew that he would never be one of them. Briefly, he closed his eyes. He was thinking about what had happened. About Stormbreaker. How had it gone so wrong?

From Yassen's point of view, it had been a fairly routine assignment. A Lebanese businessman by the name of Herod Sayle had wanted to buy two hundred litres of a deadly smallpox virus called R5 and he had approached the one organization that might be able to supply it in such huge quantities. That organization was Scorpia. The letters of the name stood for sabotage, corruption, intelligence and assassination, which were its main activities. R5 was a Chinese product, manufactured illegally in a facility near Guiyang, and by chance one of the members of the executive board of Scorpia was Chinese. Dr Three had extensive contacts in East Asia and had used his influence to organize the purchase. It had been Yassen's job to oversee delivery to the UK.

Six weeks ago, he had flown to Hong Kong a few days ahead of the R5, which had been transported in a private plane, a turboprop Xian MA60, from Guiyang. The plan was to load it into a

container ship to Rotterdam – disguised as part of a shipment of Luck of the Dragon Chinese beer. Special barrels had been constructed at a warehouse in Kowloon, with reinforced glass containers holding the R5 suspended inside the liquid. There are more than five thousand container ships at sea at any one time and around seventeen million deliveries are made every year. There isn't a customs service in the world that can keep its eye on every cargo and Yassen was confident that the journey would be trouble-free. He'd been given a false passport and papers that identified him as Erik Olsen, a merchant seaman from Copenhagen, and he would travel with the R5 until it reached its destination.

But, as is so often the way, things had not gone as planned. A few days before the barrels were due to leave, Yassen had become aware that the warehouse was under surveillance. He had been lucky. A cigarette being lit behind a window in a building that should have been empty told him all he needed to know. Slipping through Kowloon under cover of darkness, he had identified a team of three agents of the AIVD – the Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst – the Dutch secret service. There must have been a tip-off. The agents did not know what they were looking for but they were aware that something was on its way to their country and Yassen had been forced to kill all three of them with a silenced Beretta 92, a pistol he particularly

favoured because of its accuracy and reliability. Clearly, the R5 could not leave in a container ship after all. A fallback had to be found.

As it happened, there was a Chinese Han class nuclear submarine in Hong Kong going through final repairs before leaving for exercises in the Northern Atlantic. Yassen met the captain in a private club overlooking the harbour and offered him a bribe of two million American dollars to carry the R5 with him when he left. He had informed Scorpia of this decision and they knew that it would dig into their operational profit but there were at least some advantages. Moving the R5 from Rotterdam to the UK would have been difficult and dangerous. Herod Sayle was based in Cornwall with direct access to the coast, so the new approach would make for a much more secure delivery.

Two weeks later, on a crisp, cloudless night in April, the submarine surfaced off the Cornish coast. Yassen, still using the identity of Erik Olsen, had travelled with it. He had quite enjoyed the experience of cruising silently through the depths of the ocean, sealed in a metal tube. The Chinese crew had been ordered not to speak to him on any account and that suited him too. It was only when he climbed onto dry land that he once again took command, overseeing the transfer of the virus and other supplies that Herod Sayle had ordered. The work had to be done swiftly. The captain of the submarine had insisted that he would wait

no more than thirty minutes. He might have two million dollars in a Swiss bank account but he had no wish to provoke an international incident … which would certainly have been followed by his own court martial and execution.

Thirty guards had helped carry the various boxes to the waiting trucks, scrambling along the shoreline in the light of a perfect half-moon, the submarine looking somehow fantastic and out of place, half submerged in the slate-grey water of the English Channel. And almost from the start, Yassen had known something was wrong. He was being watched. He was sure of it. Some might call it a sort of animal instinct but for Yassen it was simpler than that. He had been active in the field for many years. During that time, he had been in danger almost constantly. It had been necessary to fine-tune all his senses simply to survive. And although he hadn't seen or heard anything, a silent voice was screaming at him that there was someone hiding about twenty metres away, behind a cluster of boulders on the edge of the beach.

He had been on the point of investigating when one of Sayle's men, standing on the wooden jetty, had dropped one of the boxes. The sound of metal hitting wood shattered the calm of the night and Yassen spun on his heel, everything else forgotten. There was limited space on the submarine and so the R5 had been transferred from the beer barrels to less-protective aluminium boxes. Yassen knew that

if the glass vial inside had been shattered, if the rubber seal had been compromised, everyone on the beach would be dead before the sun had risen.

He sprinted forward, crouching down to inspect the damage. There was a slight dent in one side of the box. But the seal had held.

The guard looked at him with a sickly smile. He was quite a lot older than Yassen, probably an ex-convict recruited from a local prison. And he was scared. He tried to make light of it. "I won't do that again!" he said.

"No," Yassen replied. "You won't." The Beretta was already in his hand. He shot the man in the chest, propelling him backwards into the darkness and the sea below. It had been necessary to set an example. There would be no further clumsiness that night.

Sitting in the hotel with the computer in front of him, Yassen remembered the moment. He was almost certain now that it had been Alex Rider behind the boulder and if it hadn't been for the accident, he would have been discovered there and then. Alex had infiltrated Sayle Enterprises, pretending to be the winner of a magazine competition. Somehow he had slipped out of his room, evading the guards and the searchlights, and had joined the convoy making its way down to the beach. There could be no other explanation. Later on, Alex had followed Herod Sayle to London. He had already been responsible for the

deaths of two of Sayle's associates – Nadia Vole and the disfigured servant Mr Grin – despite little training and no experience. This was his first mission. Even so, he had single-handedly smashed the Stormbreaker operation. Sayle had been lucky to escape, a few steps ahead of the police.

KILL ALEX RIDER

It was what he deserved. Alex had interfered with a Scorpia assignment and he would have cost the organization at least five million pounds ... the final payment owed by Herod Sayle. Worse than that, he would have damaged their international reputation. The lesson had to be learnt.

There was a knock at the door. Yassen had ordered room service. It wasn't just easier to eat inside the hotel, it was safer. Why make himself a target when he didn't need to?

"Leave it outside," he called out. He spoke English with no trace of a Russian accent. He spoke French, German and Arabic equally well.

The room was almost dark now. Yassen's dinner sat on a tray in the corridor, rapidly getting cold. But still he did not move away from the desk and the computer in front of him. He would kill Alex Rider tomorrow morning. There was no question of his disobeying orders. It didn't matter that the two of them were linked, that they were connected in a way Alex couldn't possibly know.

John Rider. Alex's father.

Their code names. Hunter and Cossack.

Yassen couldn't help himself. He reached into his pocket and took out a car key, the sort that had two remote control buttons to open and close the doors. But this key did not belong to any car. Yassen pressed the OPEN button twice and the CLOSE button three times and a concealed memory stick sprang out onto the palm of his hand. He glanced at it briefly. He knew that it was madness to carry it. He had been tempted to destroy it many times. But every man has his weakness and this was his. He opened the computer again and inserted it.

The file required another password. He keyed it in. And there it was on the screen in front of him, not in English letters but in Cyrillic, the Russian alphabet.

His personal diary. The story of his life.

He sat back and began to read.