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Opening extract from

Snakehead

Written by

Anthony Horowitz

Published by

Walker Books Ltd

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First published 2007 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

This edition published 2015

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2007 Stormbreaker Productions Ltd
Cover illustration © 2015 Walker Books Ltd
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This book has been typeset in Officina Sans

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-6025-7

www.walker.co.uk

DOWN TO EARTH

Splashdown.

Alex Rider would never forget the moment of impact, the first shock as the parachute opened and the second – more jolting still – as the module that had carried him back from outer space crashed into the sea. Was it his imagination or was there steam rising up all around him? Maybe it was sea spray. It didn't matter. He was back. That was all he cared about. He had made it. He was still alive.

He was lying on his back, crammed into the tiny capsule with his knees tucked into his chest. Half closing his eyes, Alex experienced a moment of extraordinary stillness. He was motionless. His fists were clenched. He wasn't breathing. Already he found it impossible to believe that the events that had led to his journey into space had really taken place. He tried to imagine himself hurtling around the earth at seventeen and a half thousand miles an hour. It couldn't have happened. It had surely all been part of some incredible dream.

Slowly he forced himself to unwind. He lifted an arm; it rose normally. He could feel the muscle working. Just minutes before, he had been in zero gravity. But as he rested, trying to collect his thoughts, he realized that once again his body belonged to him.

Alex wasn't sure how long he was on his own, floating in the sea somewhere ... it could have been anywhere in the world. But when things happened, they happened very quickly. First, there was the hammering of helicopter blades. Then the whoop of a siren. He could see very little out of the window – just the rise and fall of the ocean – but suddenly there was a palm slamming against the glass. A scuba-diver. A few seconds later, the capsule was opened from outside. Fresh air came rushing in, and to Alex it smelled delicious. At the same time, a figure loomed over him, his body wrapped in neoprene, his eyes behind a mask.

"Are you OK?"

Alex could hardly make out the words, there was so much noise outside. Did the diver have an American accent?

"I'm fine," he managed to shout back. But it wasn't true. He was beginning to feel sick, and there was a shooting pain behind his eyes.

"Don't worry! We'll soon have you out of there..."

It took them a while. Alex had only been in space a short time but he'd never had any physical training for it, and now his muscles were turning

against him, reluctant to start pulling their own weight. He had to be manhandled out of the capsule, into the blinding sun of a Pacific morning. Everything was chaotic. There was a helicopter overhead, the blades beating at the ocean and forming patterns that rippled and vibrated. Alex turned his head and saw – impossibly – an aircraft carrier as big as a mountain looming out of the water less than a quarter of a mile away. It was flying the Stars and Stripes. So he had been right about the diver. He must have landed somewhere off the coast of America.

There were two more divers in the water, bobbing up and down next to the capsule, and Alex could see a fourth man leaning out of the helicopter directly above him. He knew what was going to happen and he didn't resist. First a loop of cable was passed around his chest and connected. He felt it tighten under his arms, and then he was rising into the air, still in his Ark Angel uniform, dangling like a blue-suited puppet as he was winched up.

And already they knew. He had glimpsed it in the eyes of the diver who had spoken to him. The disbelief. These men – the helicopter, the aircraft carrier – had been rushed out to rendezvous with a module that had just re-entered the earth's atmosphere. And inside, they had found a boy. A fourteen-year-old had just plummeted a hundred miles from outer space. These men would be sworn

to secrecy, of course. MI6 would see to that. They would never talk about what had happened. But nor would they forget it.

There was a medical officer waiting for him on board the USS *Kitty Hawk*, the ship that had been diverted to pick him up. His name was Josh Cook and he was forty years old, black with wire frame glasses and a pleasant, softly spoken manner. He helped Alex out of his tracksuit and stayed with him when Alex finally did throw up. It turned out that he'd dealt with astronauts before.

"They're all sick when they come down," he explained. "It goes with the territory. Or maybe I should say terra firma. You've certainly come down to earth. You'll be fine by tomorrow morning."

"Where am I?" Alex asked.

"You're about a hundred miles off the east coast of Australia. We were on a training exercise when we got a red alert that you were on your way down."

"So what happens now?"

"Now you have a shower and get some sleep. You're in luck. We've got a mattress made out of memory foam. It was actually developed by NASA. It'll give your muscles a chance to get used to being back in full gravity."

Alex had been given a private cabin in the medical department of the *Kitty Hawk* – in fact a fully equipped "hospital at sea" with sixty-five beds, an operating theatre, a pharmacy and everything else

that five and a half thousand sailors might need. The cabin wasn't huge, but he suspected that nobody else on the *Kitty Hawk* would have this much space. Cook went over to the corner and pulled back a plastic curtain to reveal a shower cubicle.

"You may find it difficult to walk," he explained. "You're going to be unsteady on your feet for at least twenty-four hours. If you like, I can wait until you've showered."

"I'll be OK," Alex said.

"All right." Cook smiled and opened the main door. But before he left, he looked back at Alex. "You know – every man and woman on this ship is talking about you," he said. "There are a whole pile of questions I'd like to ask you, but I'm under strict orders from the captain to keep my mouth shut. Even so, I want you to know that I've been at sea for a long, long time and I've never encountered anything like this. A kid in outer space!" He nodded. "I hope you have a good rest. There's a call button beside the bed if you need anything."

It took Alex ten minutes to get into the shower. He had completely lost his sense of balance, and the roll of the ship didn't help. He turned the temperature up as high as he could bear and stood under the steaming water, enjoying the rush of it over his shoulders and through his hair. Then he dried himself and got into bed. The memory foam was only a few centimetres thick but it seemed to mould itself to the shape of his body exactly.

He fell almost instantly into a deep but troubled sleep.

He didn't dream about the Ark Angel space station or his knife fight with Kaspar, the crazed eco-terrorist who had been determined to kill him even though it was clear that all was lost. Nor did he dream about Nikolei Drevin, the billionaire who had been behind it all.

But it did seem to him that, in the middle of his sleep, he heard the whisper of voices which he didn't recognize but which, somehow, he still knew. Old friends. Or old enemies. It didn't matter which, because he couldn't make out what they were saying; and anyway, a moment later they were swept away down the dark river of his sleep.

Perhaps it was a premonition.

Because three weeks before, seven men had met in a room in London to discuss an operation that would make them millions of pounds and would change the shape of the world. And although Alex had never met any of them, he certainly knew who they were.

Scorpia were back.

"DEATH IS NOT THE END"

It was the sort of building you could walk past without noticing: three storeys high, painted white, with perfectly trimmed ivy climbing up to the roof. It stood about halfway down Sloane Street in Belgravia, just round the corner from Harrods, and was one of the most expensive addresses in London. On one side there was a jewellery shop and on the other an Italian fashion boutique – but the customers who came here would no longer be needing either. A single step led up to a door painted black, and there was a window which contained an urn, a vase of fresh flowers and nothing else.

The name of the place was written in discreet gold letters:

Reed and Kelly
FUNERAL DIRECTORS
Death is not the End

At half past ten on a bright October morning, exactly three weeks before Alex landed in the Pacific Ocean, a black Lexus LS 430 four-door saloon drew up outside the front entrance. The car had been carefully chosen. It was a luxury model but there was nothing too special about it, nothing to attract attention. The arrival had also been exactly timed. In the past fifteen minutes, three other vehicles and a taxi had pulled up briefly, and their passengers, either singly or in pairs, had got out, crossed the pavement and entered the parlour. If anyone had been watching, they would have assumed that a large family had gathered to make the final arrangements for someone who had recently departed.

The last person to arrive was a powerfully built man with massive shoulders and a shaven head. There was something quite brutal about his face, with its small, squashed nose, thick lips and muddy brown eyes. But his clothes were immaculate. He was wearing a dark suit, a tailored silk shirt and a cashmere coat, unbuttoned. There was a heavy platinum ring on his fourth finger. He had been smoking a cigar, but as he stepped from the car he dropped it and ground it out with a brilliantly polished shoe. Without looking left or right, he crossed the pavement and entered the building. An old-fashioned bell on a spring jangled as the door opened and closed.

He found himself in a wood-panelled reception

room, where an elderly, grey-haired man sat with folded hands behind a narrow desk. He looked at the new arrival with a mixture of sympathy and politeness.

"Good morning," he said. "How can we be of service?"

"I have come about a death," the visitor replied.

"Someone close to you?"

"My brother. But I hadn't seen him for some years."

"You have my condolences."

The same words had already been spoken six times that morning. If even one syllable had been changed, the bald man would have turned round and left. But he knew now that the building was secure. The meeting that had been arranged just twenty-four hours earlier could go ahead.

The grey-haired man leant forward and pressed a button concealed under the desk. At once, a section of the wooden panelling clicked open to reveal a staircase leading up to the first floor.

Reed and Kelly was a real business. There once had been a Jonathan Reed and a Sebastian Kelly, and for more than fifty years they had arranged funerals and cremations until, at last, the time came to arrange their own. After that, the undertaker's had been purchased by a perfectly legitimate company, registered in Zurich, and it had continued to provide a first-class service for anyone who lived – or rather, *had* lived – in the area. But that was no

longer the only purpose of the building in Sloane Street. It had also become the London headquarters of the international criminal organization that went by the name of Scorpia.

The name stood for sabotage, corruption, intelligence and assassination: its four main activities. The organization had been formed some twenty years before in Paris, its members being spies and assassins from different intelligence networks around the world who had decided to go into business for themselves. To begin with, there had been twelve of them. Then one had died of cancer and two had been murdered. The other nine had congratulated themselves on surviving so long with so few casualties.

But recently things had taken a turn for the worse. The oldest member had made the foolish and inexplicable decision to retire, which had, of course, led to his being murdered immediately. But his successor, a woman called Julia Rothman, had also been killed. That had been at the end of an operation – Invisible Sword – which had gone catastrophically wrong. In many ways this was the lowest point in Scorpia's history, and there were many who thought that the organization would never recover. After all, the agent who had beaten them, destroyed the operation and caused the death of Mrs Rothman had been fourteen years old.

However, Scorpia had not given in. They had

taken swift revenge on the boy and gone straight back to work. Invisible Sword was just one of many projects needing their attention, for they were in constant demand from governments, terrorist groups, big business ... in fact, anyone who could pay. And now they were active once again. They had come to this address in London to discuss a relatively small assignment but one that would net them ten million pounds, to be paid in uncut diamonds – easier to carry and harder to trace than banknotes.

The stairs led to a short corridor on the first floor with a single door at the end. A hidden camera had watched the bald man on his way up. A second followed him as he stepped onto a strange metal platform in front of the door and looked into a glass panel set in the wall. Behind the glass, there was a biometric scanner which took an instant image of the unique pattern of blood vessels on the retina in his eye and matched it against a computer at the reception desk below. Had an enemy agent tried to gain access to the room, he would have triggered a ten-thousand-volt electric charge through the metal floor plate, instantly incinerating him. But this was no enemy. The man's name was Zeljan Kurst and he had been with Scorpia from the beginning. The door slid open and he went in.

He found himself in a long, narrow room with three windows covered by blinds, and plain white

walls with no decoration of any kind. There was a glass table surrounded by leather chairs and no sign of any pens, paper or printed documents. Nothing was ever written down at these meetings. Nor was anything recorded. There were six men waiting for him as he took his place at the head of the table. Following the disaster of Invisible Sword, there were now just seven of them left.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Kurst began. He spoke with a strange, mid European accent. The last word had sounded like "chintlemen". All the men at the table were equal partners but he was currently the acting head. A new chief executive was chosen as fresh projects arrived.

Nobody replied. These people were not friends. They had nothing to say to each other outside the work at hand.

"We have been given a most interesting and challenging assignment," Kurst went on. "I need hardly remind you that our reputation was quite seriously damaged by our last failure, and as well as providing us with a much-needed financial injection following the heavy losses we sustained on Invisible Sword, this project will suffice to put us back on the map. Our task is this. We are to assassinate eight extremely wealthy and influential people five weeks from now. They will all be together in one place, which provides us with the ideal opportunity. It has been left to us to decide on the method."

His eyes flickered around the table as he waited for a response. Zeljan Kurst had been the head of the police force in Yugoslavia during the 1980s and had been famous for his love of classical music – particularly Mozart – and extreme violence. It was said that he would interrogate prisoners with either an opera or a symphony playing in the background and that those who survived the ordeal would never be able to listen to that piece of music again. But he had guessed that one day his country would break up, and he had decided to quit before he was out of a job. And so he had changed sides. He had no family, no friends and nowhere he could call home. He needed work and he knew that Scorpia would make him extremely rich.

"You will have read in the newspapers," he continued, "that the G8 summit is taking place in Rome this November. This is a meeting of the eight most powerful heads of government, and as usual they will talk a great deal, have their photographs taken, consume a lot of expensive food and wine … and do absolutely nothing. They are of no interest to us. They are, in effect, irrelevant.

"However, at the same time, another conference will be taking place on the other side of the world. It has been arranged in direct competition with the G8 summit, and you might say that the timing is something of a publicity stunt. Nonetheless, it has already attracted much more attention than G8. Indeed, the politicians have almost been forgotten.

Instead, the eyes of the world are on Reef Island, just off the coast of north-west Australia in the Timor Sea.

"The press have given this alternative summit a name: Reef Encounter. A group of eight people will be coming together, and their names will be known to you. One of them is a pop singer called Rob Goldman. He has apparently raised millions for charity with concerts all over the world. Another is a billionaire, considered by many to be the richest man on the planet. He created a huge property empire but is now giving his fortune away to developing countries. There is an ex-president of the United States. A famous Hollywood actress, Eve Taylor. She owns the island. And so on." Kurst didn't even try to keep the contempt out of his voice. "They are amateurs, do-gooders – but they are also powerful and popular, which makes them dangerous.

"Their aim, as they put it, is 'to make poverty history'. In order to achieve this, they have made certain demands, including the cancellation of world debt. They want millions of dollars to be sent to Africa to fight Aids and malaria. They have called for an end to fighting in the Middle East. It will come as no surprise to those of us in this room that there are many governments and businesses who do not agree with these aims. After all, it is not possible to give to the poor without taking from the rich; and anyway, poverty has its uses.

It keeps people in their place. It also helps to hold prices down.

"A representative from one of the G8 governments contacted us six weeks ago. He has decided that Reef Encounter should end the moment it begins – certainly before any of these meddlers can address the television cameras of the world – and that is our assignment. Disrupting the conference is not enough. All eight are to be killed. The fact that they will all be in one place at one time makes it easier for us. Not one of them must leave Reef Island alive."

One of the other men leant forward. His name was Levi Kroll. He was an Israeli, about fifty years old. Very little of his face could be seen. Most of it was covered by a beard and there was a patch over the eye which he had once, by accident, shot out. "It is a simple matter," he rasped. "I could go out this afternoon and hire an Apache helicopter gunship. Let us say two thousand rounds of 30mm cannon fire and a few Hellfire air-to-ground laser-guided missiles, and this conference would no longer exist."

"Unfortunately it isn't quite as straightforward as that," Kurst replied. "As I said in my opening remarks, this is a particularly challenging assignment because our client does not wish the Reef Island eight to become martyrs. If they were seen to be assassinated, it would only add weight to their cause. And so he has specified that the deaths must seem accidental. In fact, this is

critical. There cannot be even the tiniest amount of doubt or suspicion."

There was a soft murmur around the table as the other members of Scorpia took this new information on board. To kill one person in a way that would arouse no suspicion was simple. But to do the same for eight people on a remote island that would doubtless have a tight security system – that was quite another matter.

"There are certain chemical nerve agents..." someone muttered. He was French, exquisitely dressed with a black silk handkerchief poking out of his top pocket. His voice was matter-of-fact.

"How about R5?" a man called Mikato suggested. He was Japanese, with a diamond set in one tooth and – it was rumoured – yakuza tattoos all over his body. "It's the virus we supplied to Herod Sayle. Perhaps we could feed it into the island's water supply."

Kurst shook his head. "Gentlemen, both of these methods would be effective but still might show up in the subsequent investigation. What we require is a natural disaster, but one that we control. We need to eliminate the entire island with everybody on it, but in such a way that no questions will ever be asked."

He paused, then turned to the man sitting opposite him at the end of the table. "Major Yu?" he asked. "Have you given the matter your consideration?"

"Absolutely."

Major Winston Yu was at least sixty years old and although he still had a full head of hair, it had turned completely white – unusual in a Chinese man. The hair looked artificial, cut in a schoolboy style with a straight fringe above the eyes and the whole thing perched on top of a head that was yellow and waxy and that had shrunk like an overripe fruit. He was the least impressive person in the room, with circular glasses, thin lips and hands that would have been small on a young boy. Everything about him was somehow delicate. He had been sitting very still at the table, as if afraid he might break. A walking stick with a silver scorpion entwined around the handle rested against his chair. He was wearing a white suit and pale grey gloves.

"I have spent a great deal of time working on this operation," he continued. He had a perfect English accent. "And I am happy to report that although, on the face of it, this seems to be a rather difficult business, we have been blessed with three very fortunate circumstances. First, this island, Reef Island, is in exactly the right place. Five weeks from now is exactly the right moment. And finally, the weapon that we require just happens to be here in England, less than thirty miles from where we are sitting."

"And what weapon is that?" the Frenchman demanded.

"It's a bomb. But a very special bomb – a prototype. As far as I know, there is only one in existence. The British have given it a code name. They call it Royal Blue."

"Major Yu is absolutely right," Kurst cut in. "Royal Blue is currently in a highly secret weapons facility just outside London. That is why I chose to hold the meeting here today. The building has been under surveillance for the past month and a team is already waiting on standby. By the end of the week, the bomb will be in our possession. After that, Major Yu, I am placing this operation in your hands."

Major Yu nodded slowly.

"With respect, Mr Kurst." It was Levi Kroll speaking. His voice was ugly and there was very little respect in it. "I was under the impression that *I* would be in command of the next operation."

"I am afraid you will have to wait, Mr Kroll. Once Royal Blue is in our hands, it will be flown to Bangkok and then carried by sea to its final destination. This is a region of the world where you have no working experience. For Major Yu, however, it is another matter. Over the past two decades he has been active in Bangkok, Jakarta, Bali and Lombok. He also has a base in northern Australia. He controls a huge criminal network – his *shetou,* or snakehead. They will smuggle the weapon for us. Major Yu's snakehead is a formidable organization, and in this instance it is best suited to our needs."

The Israeli nodded briefly. "You are right. I apologize for my interruption."

"I accept your apology," Kurst replied, although he didn't. It occurred to him that one day Levi Kroll might have to go. The man spoke too often without thinking first. "Major?"

There was little left to be said. Winston Yu took off his glasses and polished them with his gloved fingers. His eyes were a strange, almost metallic grey with lids that folded in on themselves. "I will contact my people in Bangkok and Jakarta," he muttered. "I will warn them that the machine will soon be on its way. The delivery system has already been constructed close to Reef Island. As to this conference with its high ideals, you need have no worries. I am very happy to assure you that it will never take place."

At six o'clock in the evening, two days later, a blue Renault Megane turned off the M11 motorway, taking an exit marked SERVICE VEHICLES ONLY. There are many such exits in the British motorway system. Thousands of vehicles roar past them every hour and the drivers never give them a second glance. And indeed, the great majority are completely innocent, leading to works depots or police traffic control centres. But the motorway system has its secrets too. As the Megane made its way slowly forward and came to a shuddering halt in front of what looked like a single-storey office

compound, it was tracked by three CCTV cameras and the security men inside went into immediate alert.

The building was in fact a laboratory and weapons research centre, belonging to the Ministry of Defence. Very few people knew of its existence and even fewer were allowed in or out. The car that had just arrived was unauthorized and the security men – recruited from the special forces – should have instantly raised the alarm. That was the protocol.

But the Renault Megane is one of the most innocent and ordinary of family cars, and this one had clearly been involved in a bad accident. The front windscreen had shattered. The bonnet was crumpled and steam was rising from the grille. A man wearing a green anorak and a cap was in the driving seat; there was a woman next to him with blood pouring down the side of her face. Worse than that, there were two small children in the back, and although the image on the screen was a little fuzzy, they seemed to be in a bad way. Neither of them was moving. The woman managed to get out of the car, but then she collapsed. Her husband sat where he was, as if dazed.

Two of the security men ran out to them. It was human nature. Here was a young family that needed help; and anyway, it wasn't that much of a security risk. The front door of the building swung shut behind them and would need a seven-digit code

to reopen. Both men carried radio transmitters and 9mm Browning automatic pistols underneath their jackets. The Browning is an old weapon but a very reliable one, a favourite with the SAS.

The woman was still lying on the ground. The man who had been driving managed to open the door as the two guards approached.

"What happened?" one of them called out.

It was only now, when it was too late, that they began to realize that none of this added up. A car that had crashed on the motorway would have simply pulled onto the hard shoulder – if it had been able to drive at all. And how come it was only this one car, with these four people, that had been involved? Where were the other vehicles? Where were the police? But any last doubts were removed when the two security men reached the car. The two children on the back seat were dummies. With their cheap wigs and plastic smiles they were like something out of a nightmare.

The woman on the ground twisted round, a machine gun appearing in her hand. She shot the first of the security men in the chest. The second was moving quickly, reaching for his own weapon, taking up a combat stance. He never had a chance. The driver had been balancing a silenced Micro Uzi sub-machine gun on his lap. He tilted it and pulled the trigger. The gun barely whispered as it fired twenty rounds in less than a second. The guard was flung away.

The couple were already up and running towards the building. They couldn't get in yet, but they didn't need to. They made their way towards the back, where a silver box about two metres square had been attached to the brickwork. The man was carrying a toolkit which he had brought from the car. The woman stopped briefly and fired three times, taking out all the cameras. At that moment, an ambulance appeared, driving up from the motorway. It drew in behind the parked Megane.

The next phase of the mission took very little time. The facility was equipped with a standard CBR air filtration system – the letters stood for chemical, biological and radiological. It was designed to counter an enemy attack, but now the exact opposite was about to happen as the enemy turned the system against itself. The man took a miniaturized oxyacetylene torch out of his toolbox and used it to burn out the screws. This allowed him to unfasten a metal panel, revealing a complicated tangle of pipes and wires. From somewhere inside his anorak he produced a gas mask which he strapped over his face. He reached back into his toolbox and took out a metal vial, a few centimetres long, with a nozzle and a spike. He knew exactly what he was doing. Using the heel of his hand, he jammed the spike into one of the pipes. Finally he turned the nozzle.

The hiss was almost inaudible as a stream of potassium cyanide mixed with the air circulating

inside the building. Meanwhile, four men dressed as paramedics but all wearing gas masks had approached the front entrance. One of them pressed a magnetized box no bigger than a cigarette packet against the lock. He stepped back. There was an explosion and the door swung open.

It was early evening and only half a dozen people were still working inside the facility. Most of them were technicians; one was the head of security. He had been trying to make an emergency call when the gas had hit him. He was lying on the floor, his face twisted in agony. The receiver was still in his hand.

Across the entrance hall, down a corridor and through a door marked RESTRICTED AREA: the four paramedics knew exactly where they were going. The bomb was in front of them. It looked remarkably old-fashioned, like something out of the Second World War: a huge metal cylinder, silver in colour, flat at one end, pointed at the other. Only a data screen built into the side and a series of digital controls brought it into the twenty-first century. It was strapped down on a power-assisted trolley and the whole thing would fit inside the ambulance with just inches to spare. But that, of course, was why the ambulance had been chosen.

They guided it back down the corridor and out through the front door. The ambulance was equipped with a ramp and the bomb rolled smoothly into the back, allowing room for the driver and

one passenger in the front. The other three men and the woman climbed into the car. The dummies were left behind. The entire operation had taken eight and a half minutes. Thirty seconds less than planned.

An hour later, by the time the alarm had been raised in London and other parts of the country, everyone involved had disappeared. They had discarded the wigs, contact lenses and facial padding that had completely changed their appearance. The two vehicles had been incinerated.

And the weapon known as Royal Blue had already begun its journey east.