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opening extract from

Jimmy Coates: Target

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ELEVEN YEARS PREVIOUSLY...

THE ONLY THING that distinguished this man from everyone else on the bridge was his stillness. His collar was turned up against the wind of a typical Parisian autumn and his hat was pulled down to his eyes. Nobody noticed him. Then, with one deep sigh, he marched through the fog towards the Île St Louis. *I hope nobody will have to die today*, he thought.

He reached a familiar wooden door. A sharp jab with his elbow snapped the old lock and he slipped through unobserved. Around him was a small courtyard he didn't bother to inspect. Instead, he eyed the fourth floor of the adjacent building. Drizzle slicked the drainpipe when he clasped it, but he heaved himself up, strong and persistent. He hauled himself on to the balcony, careful to land silently, and drew his gun. It felt familiar yet horrible in his grip. *It's just a precaution*, he told himself.

After only a moment, he burst through the flimsy balcony doors. "*Levez les mains!*" he shouted.

An elderly man sat proudly at his desk among piles of papers. "There's no need to speak to me in French, Ian," he announced with just a hint of an accent as he raised his hands above his head. "And there's no need to point a gun at me. If you're going to shoot, shoot. If not, let's talk."

"You should have run further away, Doctor."

"Where could I have gone that NJ7 wouldn't find me?" Still the gun pointed at the doctor's head, but neither man blinked. Dr Memnon Sauvage rose slowly and edged round his desk.

"You know I can't come with you," he continued. "What I've done can't be undone, no matter what Hollingdale does to me."

"Turn round and put your hands behind your back," the other man replied flatly.

"How's Helen?" The doctor stayed facing the way he was. "Has the baby been born? It must be any day now." Despite huge effort, Ian Coates's face flickered.

"Ah," exclaimed Dr Sauvage with a dry smile. "Congratulations. A father for the second time!"

Ian Coates was scowling now, trying hard to detach his anger from his trigger finger. "Do as I say or I *will* shoot you."

"Go ahead. Shoot me," Dr Sauvage snapped back. "Then NJ7 will never know what France is capable of."

"Then turn around and put your hands behind your back."

"So you can march me back to London? Back to NJ7? Back to your wife?"

At that, Coates slapped his hand viciously across the old man's face. The blow sent him straight to the floor.

"Hollingdale can do nothing without me," barked Dr Sauvage, spitting blood. "Tell him that! And tell him this: the day he finds out what I've done will be the day it kills him."

Ian Coates approached slowly, leading with his gun. But Dr Sauvage crawled backwards, round his desk, and stopped at the foot of a huge bookcase. The two men stayed like that for what seemed like for ever. Dr Sauvage's blood dripped from Ian Coates's knuckles. Then the doctor's glance flicked for a moment towards the papers on his desk. Coates followed his gaze, but immediately regretted it. In that instant, Sauvage heaved on the bookcase.

"No!" cried Ian Coates, dropping his gun and lunging forwards. He was too late. The huge books hit Sauvage like a prizefighter's punches. Then the bookcase itself crushed his wiry frame.

Coates was stunned. Only the doctor's head was visible. Coates reached down to the man's neck and felt for a pulse – out of habit, not in hope. A cloud of dust settled on the body.

Coates didn't panic. He rifled through the stacks of papers on the desk. Everything was in code, of course, but he discarded the files at the top as obvious decoys.

He paused when he came to a bright orange flash drive, the sort you could simply plug into a computer to make vast amounts of data portable. It was marked simply 'ZAF-1'. The same initials recurred on documents, sometimes in bold. It meant nothing to him.

He snatched up his gun and stuffed as many of the files as he could under his arm, slipped the flash drive into his pocket. He ran out of the room and followed the staircase to the roof. From there he bounded across to the next building, shoving the papers into his coat so his hands were free. *ZAF-1*, he thought, trying to shut out the image of the doctor's death. *What could it mean?*

He leapt to a balcony below, then down again, catching the arc of a lamp-post. Finally, he let himself drop into the back alley and away he ran.

CHAPTER ONE - UNO STOVORSKY

"ALL RISE!" EVERYBODY in the courtroom obeyed the sombre instruction except two bowed figures.

"This isn't fair!" shouted Olivia Muzbeke, her voice thin with fear and fatigue. Her husband tried to move a hand across to comfort her, but his wrists were chained to a metal bar in front of him. A guard dragged them both to their feet.

The stern-faced judge eased himself into his chair. "This is as fair as it gets for bad citizens," he mumbled.

Neil Muzbeke looked across the courtroom to where the jury used to sit, in the days when a jury was still part of the legal system. Inside, he felt as empty as those benches. He was past shouting. He had given everything. He had protested, he had pleaded and now he was resigned to whatever fate the judge had been told to pass down to them. Any other thoughts were eclipsed by the image of the son he might never see again.

"You knew that the dangerous criminal, Jimmy Coates, was a fugitive from the authorities," the judge intoned, "yet you shielded him and then helped him to escape, putting the life of Prime Minister Ares Hollingdale at risk. Not only that, but your own son..." he scoured his notes for the name, "...Felix Muzbeke, even at the age of eleven, has shown himself to be an enemy to the Neo-democratic State of Britain."

The judge wheezed and adjusted his glasses. Then, without even looking up, he passed sentence.

"Incarceration," he announced. "At the discretion of the Home Office." He slammed down his hammer to make the decision final. That noise killed any lingering faith Neil Muzbeke had had in his country's justice system.

At the back of the courtroom stood a woman who seemed too attractive for such miserable proceedings. But she was satisfied with the result of the trial and the speed at which it had been conducted.

"Release the news," she whispered to a young man in a black suit, who trembled at the woman's complete authority. "Make sure it reaches France."

"Yes, Miss Bennett."

Jimmy was hardly conscious of the thud as the helicopter touched ground. The oleopneumatic shock absorbers of the EC975 were designed for the

smoothest of landings. What woke him was the change in the noise of the rotors. The steady drone that had surrounded them since they left London was dying now.

Jimmy shook off his nightmare. As always, he had no recollection of what he had been dreaming, only shortness of breath and a thumping heart – the remnants of his terror. He pulled his blanket tighter round him. What did he have to be afraid of? In the past fortnight he'd crashed through brick walls, breathed underwater and caught a bullet in his hand. Even stabbing a knife into his wrist had done no serious damage. The bloodless slit would heal abnormally fast. The bandage (which his mother had wound too tight) was unnecessary, but it was a comfort to him now. Nevertheless, he feared what might be out there waiting for him.

NJ7, Britain's most secret intelligence agency, could be anywhere. Their scientists had designed Jimmy to be an assassin when he reached eighteen then sent him to kill seven years too soon. As soon as Jimmy had disobeyed that order, struggling against his physiological destiny, he had become an enemy. And there could be no less desirable opponent than NJ7.

Perhaps even more than that, Jimmy feared what was inside him. He felt so human, but now he knew that part of him was an inhuman power, created to kill.

Everyone else in the cabin was asleep. Christopher Viggo stepped out of the pilot's seat and stretched, his

lithe physique outlined beneath the creases in his shirt. He turned to meet Jimmy's gaze, gave a tired nod then stalked away. That was the man NJ7 had sent Jimmy to eliminate.

Viggo was fighting to make Britain a democracy again. Under the unlikely cover of running a Turkish restaurant, he had been building an organisation that might one day be able to oppose the Government. It had taken all of Jimmy's mental strength to reject his first mission and join Viggo's cause.

Now they had landed, the others quickly woke up. The wind whipped around them as they alighted from the helicopter. Jimmy could almost taste the countryside air, so different from the city they had escaped. They were in the middle of a field and the only building between them and the horizon was an ancient, half-timbered farmhouse, with its upper floor projecting out over the lower one.

So this is what France looks like, Jimmy thought to himself. He had never been out of Britain before. He had never even wondered what it was like anywhere else. Now he realised how strange that was. Perhaps he had always assumed everywhere else would be just like home. Anyway, he was too tired and scared to feel excited about finally being abroad. Besides, he wasn't on holiday. He was on the run.

Yannick Ertegun, the chef from Viggo's restaurant in London, led the way. Jimmy walked with his mother,

Helen, followed by the dark and beautiful Saffron Walden, who was Viggo's girlfriend and a vital part of his outfit in her own right. Jimmy's older sister Georgie followed with her friend Eva, and Jimmy's best friend Felix Muzbeke stumbled after them, his face scrunched up against the elements.

Viggo hung back from the rest of the group. As they walked through an orchard at the back of the farmhouse, he stopped to fill his arms with fallen branches. Already the internal struggle in Jimmy began again: the agent in him realised he should help Viggo to camouflage the helicopter, but the temptation of food and warmth kept him following the others towards the house. He held himself rigidly in line. Control meant everything.

At the farmhouse door was a tiny woman, who looked like the oldest person Jimmy had ever seen. Yannick bent down to kiss her on the cheek and she clipped him round the back of the head.

"Everybody, this is my mother," grinned the chef.

Jimmy smiled cautiously at the woman, who scowled as they all shuffled awkwardly into the building. Clearly, she hadn't been expecting visitors. Despite being large, the interior of the farmhouse was dark and austere. The ceiling dipped at unusual angles as if the central beam were reaching for the fire that dominated the room. It didn't seem to be doing much to heat the house, thought Jimmy, shivering.

A staircase lurched upwards out of the corner and there was a door at each end of the room. Yannick's mother trudged through one of them, revealing a glimpse of a large, old-fashioned kitchen. Yannick followed her, pleading and explaining as best he could without being indiscreet.

Soon they were all sitting round the fire with giant mugs of hot chocolate.

"When will we start looking for my parents?" Felix whispered in Jimmy's ear. Jimmy stared deliberately into the flagstones and shrugged. He had almost forgotten that Neil and Olivia Muzbeke had been arrested for helping him escape NJ7. He had been completely caught up in his own thoughts. He silently scolded himself for being so self-obsessed. Even at that moment, he could feel the ever-growing presence of his powers, deepening the split between his heart and his instincts, his mind and his body. He could control his powers for now, but only by succumbing to them. It scared him beyond anything he had ever felt before to think that he might be relinquishing his humanity.

Whenever Jimmy did think back, he could only relive the last time he had seen his own father. Jimmy could picture in alarming detail Ian Coates's face as he refused to escape from the British Government with Jimmy. The split inside him was forcing his family apart now too.

Felix started saying something else, but Jimmy hushed him and stood up. There was a tingle in his

stomach. The assassin's instinct again. He'd heard something outside.

"Does anybody else live here?" he asked Yannick quietly.

"No, just my mother."

"You're being paranoid," said Georgie calmly. Jimmy wished that could be true, but his killer instinct had been infallible so far. Then Jimmy's mother stood up as well.

"I heard something too," she said.

"It must be Chris coming in," whispered Saffron.

Jimmy shook his head. His insides were swirling now. "Move to the centre of the room."

Everyone did as he said except Eva. "This is ridiculous," she chuckled. "We're in the middle of the French countryside about a million miles from anywhere. How could they possibly find—"

CLUNK!

The door slammed open. A masked figure in black crashed through with a battering ram. Another one stormed in behind him and dropped to his knees. Almost blending into the black of his gloves and sleeves was a Beretta 99G pistol. Then a dozen identical figures ran in, filling the room.

"*Haut les mains!*" came a shout from somewhere. Then, in a thick French accent, "'Andz urp!"

Jimmy could feel the overwhelming power of his killing instinct drumming through his body. But his mind was serene. He stayed as still as all his friends and raised his

hands. One thought was utterly clear: *This is not NJ7.* If it had been, he would have been dead by now. Besides, NJ7 wouldn't have issued instructions in French.

The group backed towards each other. The shock on their faces changed instantly to puzzlement. Their gasps were drowned out by the protestation from Yannick's mother. She was screaming her head off in coarse French, while Jimmy was trying to concentrate.

"*Ferme-la!*" he shouted, then immediately clasped his hand to his mouth. *Oh my God,* he thought, *I speak French.*

The front door was flapping open and in strode three more men. Two were dressed in black combat gear just like the others, but they carried FAMAT F9 assault rifles. Jimmy knew this for certain, in the same way he now knew French. It was all part of his conditioning – buried in his head, coming to the surface piece by lethal piece.

Between the two soldiers was a short man with a grim expression. His hair was thin and his shoulders hunched towards his ears. His skin seemed to blend in with his grey city overcoat, which was totally unsuitable for the rustic surroundings.

"By authority of the French military," he declared in perfect English, "you are all under arrest on suspicion of espionage. Keep your hands above your heads and—"

"You're making a mistake." It was Viggo. He was holding a gun to the back of the Frenchman's head. "Drop your weapons!" he shouted.

Even before Viggo had finished his sentence, the soldier to his left spun round. His rifle pointed at Viggo and his finger squeezed the trigger.

"Non!" snapped the man in the overcoat – just in time. The soldier held fire, but maintained his aim. Nobody moved. "That sounds like Christopher Viggo," the man in grey continued, "but Christopher Viggo is not an enemy to France."

Then he calmly issued a stream of orders in French. As one, his team lowered their guns.

"Uno?" gasped Viggo, trying to peer round at the man's face. "Uno Stovorsky?"

"And only now do I see you've brought Saffron with you." The man shook his head in disbelief.

"Hello, Uno," Saffron called out, cool as ever. "How's the DGSE?"

"What's going on?" Felix whispered to Jimmy.

"The DGSE is the French Secret Service," he replied, but more than that he couldn't say. How come everyone seemed to know each other all of a sudden?

Viggo circled the man in the grey overcoat, his mouth hanging open in amazement. "Uno! I never thought..."

Then, without warning, Uno Stovorsky slammed his fist into Viggo's jaw.

"If I weren't on duty, I'd kill you right now," he growled.

Mitchell hoisted himself off the sofa, sweating. Another nightmare, but he had lost all memory of it now his eyes

were open. His alarm clock no longer worked, but he knew it was about 3.00 a.m. because he could hear the punters being thrown out of the club below the flat. He staggered to the bathroom and doused his face with the cold brown water that dribbled out of the hot tap.

His brother would be back soon. As usual, he'd come home, start a fight, then fall into bed, drunk. It made Mitchell angry just thinking about him. He had been forced to share this place since he and his brother had run away from their foster home. Sometimes, Mitchell wished he could go back there, but he knew what he really longed for wasn't possible – for his real parents to have come out alive from the crash.

Then he heard the click of the front door.

"Mitchell!" His brother sounded cheerful, but that wasn't necessarily a good sign. "Come here, mate, I have to do something."

Mitchell felt sick. He knew that greeting his brother face to face was the last thing he should do, but the flat was so small there weren't exactly places to hide. He heard his brother stomp into the living room and pictured precisely what he was doing. First, he'd throw something at the sofa – probably his shoe. Then, when there was no reaction, he'd pull off the blankets and take on that mystified look, unable to comprehend why Mitchell wasn't lying there, waiting to be harassed.

"Mitchell?" This time his brother sounded confused. Mitchell's stomach turned over. He scrabbled through

the bathroom cabinet for any medicine that wasn't out of date. "Listen, mate," his brother continued, still in the other room, "this guy said I could have ten grand, but, er..."

The bathroom door creaked open and Mitchell caught sight of his brother's haggard face in the mirror.

"All right, bruv?"

"All right, Lenny." Mitchell turned to face his brother, but clutched his stomach. It felt like something in his belly was burning.

"Like I said," Lenny explained, blocking his brother in, "this bloke offered me ten grand. He had it there in a suitcase and everything."

It wasn't like him to talk so much, thought Mitchell. For some reason his brother had decided to make up some ridiculous story as a build-up to the violence. Then Lenny's face took on a leering grin. Mitchell knew what that meant.

"I have to knock you around a bit," Lenny chuckled. "Shall we do it in the living room?" He slapped Mitchell across the cheek then turned to go. Mitchell wasn't following. The blood rushed to his face and his breathing deepened.

"Come on," insisted Lenny and slapped Mitchell again, harder this time. It really stung. As Lenny turned a second time, Mitchell's strange stomach-ache intensified into a ball of energy. It quivered inside him and leapt up his throat.

Mitchell wanted to shout, but the energy hit him in the head with five times the force of his brother's slap. Lenny's back was turned and, without even realising he was going to do it, Mitchell pounced.

Lenny was a lot taller and three years older, but Mitchell yanked him backwards by the throat and they fell to the floor.

"Oi!" cried Lenny, elbowing Mitchell in the ribs.

"How stupid do you think I am?" shouted Mitchell through his teeth. He kicked his brother away and threw himself on top of him. He led with his knee and slammed it into Lenny's midriff.

"How do you like that?" Mitchell crowed.

Lenny rammed his fist towards Mitchell's face. Mitchell caught it. He had never had this strength before, but he was too angry to notice. Instead, he revelled in his new superiority.

"I'm sick of you!" he screamed as he pounded his fists into his brother's face. "This is how you make me feel!" Tears blurred his vision now, but fury kept his arms moving. He was numb inside. The pain that had built up all these years was pouring out. It felt like he wasn't even in the room, but watching from a distance.

Then something pricked his senses – a flash of blue reflected in the mirrors and tiles. It bounced around the bathroom and pulled Mitchell out of his frenzy. He sprang to his feet. His brother didn't move. His eyes were closed and blood covered his face.

That wasn't me, thought Mitchell, but at the same time, *What have I done?* He ran to the living room and smeared his hand across the window. Through the streaks of blood on the glass, he saw an ambulance waiting in the street below. It was surrounded by three police cars.

Then the door of the flat burst open and Mitchell spun round to see two beefy men in black suits. They were pointing guns at him. His mind went blank. His brother's battered face appeared before his eyes and he couldn't think clearly. What was going on?

Before he could even raise his hands, his knees bent without him telling them to. Then his legs snapped straight and his entire body recoiled backwards – through the window.

Glass peppered Mitchell as he fell and in his head he heard himself scream. Then he landed – but not on the ground. Something cushioned his fall. He saw a dozen men staring at him with blank faces. Mitchell was lying on some kind of air cushion – it felt like a bouncy castle. Had all this been set up, waiting for him?

Then one man, tall and broad with a face like a wrinkled toad, pulled Mitchell to his feet.

"Looks like someone didn't play nicely," he said, cracking his jaw. Mitchell could hardly hear for all the electricity running through his head. "You're under arrest for the murder of Leonard Glenthorne."

"Murder?" Mitchell gasped. His hands were shoved behind his back and roughly clasped in metal.

"Your brother's dead. Get in the car."

"But—" Mitchell's throat seized up. Nothing made sense. How had they come so quickly? How did they know Lenny was his brother? And worst of all, how could Lenny be dead?

Mitchell was grabbed on each side by two men. They rushed him to a long black car with leather seats and tinted windows. As his head was pushed down to guide him into the back seat, Mitchell saw a stretcher being wheeled out of the building. On it was a zipped-up, black body bag. On the side of the bag was a thin green stripe.