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Opening extract from

Revenge

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CHAPTER ONE - THE VISITOR

Jimmy's eyes opened before he even realised he was awake. His head was throbbing – another nightmare that vanished before he could grasp it. When he was asleep, his programming took over his brain completely. It grew like a vine, reaching into every part of his psyche. It spread dangerous knowledge and developed his amazing skills. Day by day Jimmy found himself becoming more lethal – and there was nothing he could do about it. Time was turning him into a killer.

What had woken him, he wondered. Judging by the eerie half-light it was the early hours of the morning. Jimmy didn't dare move his head from the pillow in case someone was watching him, but he listened, analysing every sound. He felt a familiar agitation in his chest – a paranoia he could never shake off. It was part of his nature now and he had learned to trust in it.

His right calf twitched under the duvet. Was that a

sign? It could be nothing. He realised that his muscles probably trained while he slept. How long had it been since NJ7, the most covert and advanced military intelligence agency in the world, had burst into his house to take him away? It felt like forever, but might not even have been more than a fortnight.

Since then, he'd had to live with the knowledge that NJ7 had manipulated human genetics to grow him – an organic assassin, designed to reach active-service capability when he was eighteen. It was crazy. Jimmy still thought of himself as a normal human boy. But he was far from normal. He was only 38 per cent human.

He pictured millions of tiny electric pulses emanating from his brain to the tips of each limb, making them ever more resilient. But the sensation he had now was something more than just his programming.

A drop in temperature. There was a draught from somewhere. The window had been shut when they went to bed. Jimmy was facing away from it now, so he couldn't check it. But how could anybody have broken the window without waking everybody?

He scanned what he could see of the room, his eyes quickly enhancing every shape, enabling him to see in the semi-dark. Three beds stuck out into the middle of the room, their headboards against the wall. In the bed next to Jimmy's, his friend Felix Muzbeke was fast asleep. A slow thread of drool trailed from his lips, glistening like a spider's web in the rain.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jimmy could discern the end of the third bed. His sister's feet made a reassuring bump in the duvet. *OK*, he thought, *so Felix and Georgie haven't been abducted. That's a good start.*

Jimmy was constantly aware that it wasn't just his own life under threat. As well as Georgie and Felix, there was Jimmy's mother. They'd all arrived at the Bed and Breakfast the night before, on the run from NJ7. Felix's parents, Neil and Olivia, had already been in hiding there.

Deep inside, Jimmy's human self was now starting to wake up. With this came a surge of anger, brought on by the thought of his own father – or at least the man he had always believed was his father. The man's words would never leave Jimmy's head: *"You're not my son."* To him, Jimmy was nothing but an enemy of the State. He had been ever since overcoming his programming and refusing to kill for NJ7. Now Ian Coates, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, wanted him eliminated.

Then Jimmy heard it. A sound so faint that Felix's drooling almost drowned it out. Immediately, an image popped into Jimmy's head that identified the noise – grease trickling down wood. It told him two things. One: the room had definitely been breached. Two: whoever had broken in was highly dangerous.

They've found me, he thought. Terror shook his entire body, but with it came a blast of confidence – the

artificial self-assurance of his programming. It seemed to flick away the fear. Before he could even think about it, Jimmy exploded into action.

He kicked his right leg up and back, sending his duvet flying towards the window. It wrapped itself around an approaching figure. In the same movement, Jimmy flipped up into a handstand by his pillow – just in time. The intruder slammed the duvet back on to the mattress, then rolled to his feet on the other side of the bed.

Jimmy used his bare feet to push himself off the wall. He cartwheeled over and landed, standing, opposite his attacker. They had both moved without a sound. Felix and Georgie hadn't stirred. Now, for the first time, Jimmy was able to look at the person who had broken in. He was small – only just taller than Jimmy, in fact – and his physique was slight. His face was masked by a black balaclava, which matched the black combat uniform. On his chest Jimmy noticed three small vertical stripes. Even though his night-vision made it hard to distinguish colours, Jimmy knew that they had to be green – a green stripe was the emblem of NJ7. But why were there three of them? He shrugged off the inconsistency and noticed the contrast between the black military outfit in front of him and the Kermit pyjamas that he'd been forced to borrow from the B&B owners. He shivered, suddenly aware of his vulnerability.

Jimmy picked out the intruder's eyes – their pale blue was intensified by his night-vision. The eyes looked Jimmy up and down.

"They're not my pyjamas," Jimmy insisted. "I usually sleep in a T-shirt and..."

"What's going on?" Felix interrupted. His face was scrunched up like a new-born piglet and he was peering around blindly. For him, it was too dark to see.

Jimmy only glanced at him for an instant, but he knew straight away it was a mistake. In that split-second, the masked figure dived at him. Jimmy dropped to the floor and slid out of the way on his back. He went straight under Felix's bed and out the other side.

"Is that you, Jimmy?" Felix asked, with no clue what was going on.

The intruder landed with a roll, then sprang up and leapt at Jimmy again – right over Felix's head.

"Morning, Felix," Jimmy grunted, flipping himself up, feet first. He caught his attacker in mid-air – with his knees locked around the intruder's neck. "Bit of help would be nice."

The two fighters tumbled over each other across the floor. The noise woke Georgie.

"Jimmy, you OK?" she whispered frantically. There was no answer. She jumped out of bed and stumbled for the light switch.

Jimmy clung on to the attacker with every bit of strength he could muster. They twisted together, a

flurry of limbs wrestling for control. Jimmy's programming was serving him well. He wrenched one arm free and clamped a hand down on top of his assailant's head. With one twist, he threw him off balance. The intruder's face hit the floor and the balaclava came away in Jimmy's fist.

Jimmy pounced, holding him down. Except, he gradually realised – it wasn't a him. There was a tickling sensation on Jimmy's lips. Stray hairs fluttered around his face. He spat them away, conscious of not loosening his hold. There was a strange smell in the air. Was that coconut shampoo?

Finally, Georgie found the light switch – but it didn't work. She clicked it on and off frantically. The room remained dark. Instead, she went for the door handle. In a burst of strength, the intruder performed a back flip so powerful it took Jimmy along too. She landed on him, knocking the wind out of him, and immediately launched herself at Georgie.

As Georgie pulled the door open a centimetre, the intruder slammed into the small of her back. The door banged shut, with Georgie's face pressed against the wood. She tried to scream for help, but before the breath even reached her lungs, she was pulled away and flung back on to her bed. The mysterious figure wrapped the duvet across Georgie's face and spun her over like a log down a hill. Georgie tried shouting again, but the bedclothes completely muffled the noise. She

was rolled up so tight she couldn't move her arms from her side.

Jimmy was slightly dazed, but he shook it off and hurled himself at the base of Georgie's bed. It knocked into his attacker, throwing her off-balance. Immediately, Jimmy rolled under the bed, out the other side and slammed into her ankles. He tried to pin her to the floorboards again, but she spun like a break-dancer, planting a foot in Jimmy's face with each revolution.

Felix was out of his bed now, tentatively shuffling across the room with his arms outstretched. When he reached the wall, his hands felt about for the light switch, not knowing Georgie had already tried that. From inside her duvet-cocoon, she hollered and squirmed, gradually wriggling her way out.

"Don't worry, Jimmy," Felix announced. "I'm coming." Then, at the top of his voice, he yelled, "Help!"

"Quiet, Felix," Jimmy snapped, crawling backwards to avoid another kicking. The last thing he wanted was the neighbours arriving. That would give away their hideout to NJ7 in no time. "Get out and get my mum."

Felix went for the door, but the intruder turned to stop him. That was the distraction Jimmy needed. He flipped on his front and hooked his legs underneath the empty bed behind him. Then, with a thrill flooding his muscles, he bent his knees and heaved the bed off the floor. He lifted it right over his head with just his legs. It scraped

the ceiling, then came crashing down in front of him. One leg snapped clean off and the frame smashed into splinters. The bed had landed upside-down – right on top of Jimmy's opponent.

Finally, Jimmy dragged her out. He dug his knee into her spine and his elbow into the back of her neck. She wasn't getting out from his hold this time.

"I'm on your side!" came her muffled shout. The tension in Jimmy's gut eased slightly, but he was far from relaxed.

"It's a trick," Georgie urged. She had made it out of the duvet at last.

"Who are you?" Jimmy demanded. It was becoming clearer by the second that this person was not part of an NJ7 assault team. She dipped her hand in her pocket. Jimmy clenched his muscles again, ready for anything, but his opponent pulled out nothing more than a small round piece of black plastic. It looked like the remote locking device on a car key. She clicked the button and on came every light in the room.

Jimmy felt her muscles relax. It was as if she was deflating slightly. The fight was over. She was giving up – for now. Jimmy stood up and slowly backed away.

For the first time, the intruder's face was revealed. Jimmy, Georgie and Felix let out a gasp. The person on the floor in front of them was a girl about their age. A flurry of auburn hair tumbled around her face. Jimmy was astounded. Felix was mesmerised.

"I've come to have a conversation with you," the girl said. Her voice was soft, with a very faint accent that made her sound slightly exotic.

Jimmy remained deadpan. "If that's what you call a conversation," he replied, "I can't wait for us to argue."

CHAPTER TWO - SEEDS OF RETRIBUTION

"Was I too rough for you?" the girl pouted. "I'm sorry. I was playing. I wanted to see what you could do." She stood up, moving with a strange elegance that didn't seem to fit someone so young.

"If I'd wanted you dead, Jimmy Coates," she continued, "you would never have even known I existed. I could have killed you quietly, quickly and from a distance." She moved towards him, almost gliding across the floor, her eyes never wavering from Jimmy's. "I think I would have done it painlessly though. You seem nice." Then she winked. Jimmy lost all feeling in his cheeks for a second. He was a picture of astonishment.

"My name is Zafi Sauvage." The girl held out her hand, which was covered in a black leather glove. In a daze, Jimmy shook it. The whole thing felt so bizarre. He wouldn't normally shake hands with anybody – especially not some strange girl, and *especially* not one who, only seconds before, had been trying to break his neck.

Felix brushed the others aside and shoved his hand in Zafi's direction. "Yeah, hi," he started. "I'm, like, delighted to meet you." Jimmy grimaced at the unusually posh accent Felix was trying on. "Frightfully delighted. My name is Felix. And may I welcome you by saying that, frightfully and awfully, you're, like, a knockout."

"If you're not here to try to kill me..." Jimmy interrupted. He didn't finish his sentence. There were too many questions all bursting to get out at the same time. Who did this girl work for? What did she want? How had she found out where Jimmy and the others were hiding? Above all the others was one question that repeated in his head like a siren. *Is this girl a programmed assassin like me?*

"I can't believe it," Georgie whispered, echoing his thoughts. "Another one. A third assassin."

"Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?" Zafi said, raising one eyebrow. Felix immediately ushered her to the end of his bed.

"Don't mind them," he blathered. "They've forgotten their manners. Hey, look what I can do." He pulled out his top lip and, with his thumbs, shoved it into his nostrils. He glared at Zafi like this until she let out a high giggle.

"My, how attractive," Zafi laughed. "Look what I can do." She pulled off her glove and pressed her palm flat against her eye. She twisted her hand, which made a

weird sucking noise. Then she pulled her palm away and her eyeball popped out. It bounced around on the end of her optic nerve halfway down her cheek. She beamed with glee.

"Wow." Felix was so impressed that his voice quivered. Zafi calmly popped her eye back into its socket and flicked her hair behind her ear.

"Jimmy, look at this," Felix insisted. "It's so cool."

But Jimmy wasn't paying attention. He was examining the window to confirm what he suspected: the frame had been lubricated with some kind of grease. Zafi had opened the window expertly and with less noise than a shadow. But Jimmy didn't stop to admire her work.

He looked back at Zafi. Why did she look like she was about to smile, Jimmy wondered. Didn't she take any of this seriously? It was as if the corners of her mouth couldn't help curling upwards.

With the lights on, it was obvious that there was no green stripe on her chest. Instead, three vertical stripes formed an emblem just as powerful and just as proud. In his night-vision, Jimmy had assumed they were green, but one was blue, one white and one red. It was the Tricolore – the French flag. That seemed to answer the question of who she worked for.

Jimmy realised that because the French Secret Service, the DGSE, had helped him, relations between Britain and France were worse than they had been for

centuries. In fact, both had threatened war. Jimmy was starting to see that if Zafi was an enemy of Neo-democratic Britain, she could be an important ally for him. His curiosity became urgent now.

"Hey, you two lovebirds," he began, "stop messing about. I need to know what's going on."

"Didn't you see what she did with her eye?" Felix panted. Jimmy ignored him.

"What's this 'conversation' you wanted to have with me?" he insisted. But before Zafi could answer, Georgie marched towards the door.

"I wouldn't bother fetching your mother," Zafi whispered. "She's a little drowsy at the moment."

Georgie turned to her with horror on her face. Jimmy felt a double layer of confusion – first was a lurch of panic for his mother's safety, but beneath it came a reassuring warmth. To his programmed side, it made perfect sense. Felix's cry for help. The crash of the bed on the floor – the other people in the house must have been drugged somehow to keep them out of the way. Assigned Zafi's mission, he would have done the same. As the thought ran through his head, Zafi explained it to the others.

"I sent some sleeping gas under the necessary windows before I came through yours."

Georgie looked at Zafi with a mixture of disbelief and anger. Then she marched out of the room anyway.

"Doesn't she trust me?" Zafi asked with a cheeky sparkle in her eye.

That was enough for Jimmy. *How dare she make a joke of it*, he thought. Didn't she realise she was playing with people's lives? And she hadn't even started to explain what she was doing there. Jimmy gripped Zafi's shoulders and held her down on the bed.

"How can you do all this?" he hissed, his eyes only centimetres from hers. His face was turning red, but Zafi's only reaction was to open her eyes wide and give a little smile.

"What a silly question," she replied, ever so gently. "The same way you can, Jimmy Coates. I'm a genetically programmed—"

"No, I mean, how can you bring yourself to do it?" Jimmy was really seething now. "Don't you realise that attacking innocent people, drugging them, even killing them – it's wrong."

"It might be wrong," Zafi whispered back, "but it's not me doing it, is it? It's nothing to do with me. I watch it happen. Maybe I'm sad about it, maybe not. It's not my responsibility."

Jimmy wanted to scream right in her face. He felt like tearing her to shreds on the spot, but instead his grip melted to nothing. He slipped off her. If he'd demanded any more answers, he might have had to admit to himself that he envied her.

Georgie came back into the room. She didn't look happy. "I can't wake Mum," she announced.

"What about my parents?" Felix asked.

"I can't wake any of them, OK? It's like they're hibernating or something."

"They'll be asleep for a few more hours," Zafi said, sitting up and flicking her hair behind her ear. "They'll be fine by lunchtime."

Jimmy wanted to get up and reassure his big sister, but he was still distracted by a small question at the back of his mind – what would he be capable of if nothing was his responsibility?

Georgie started the questioning again. "You'd better explain what's going on."

Zafi sighed. "But this is so much fun," she said, too brightly. "It's like a sleepover."

Felix almost laughed, but only because he was nervous.

"I work for France," Zafi continued with a shrug. "My government expects that Britain and France might be drawn into a war."

"What?" Georgie gasped. "Why?"

Jimmy cut in to explain. "Yesterday, the French sent a fighter jet into British airspace."

"Only after NJ7 bombed a French farmhouse," Zafi added.

"But that wasn't to attack France," Jimmy sighed. "It's where we'd been hiding. NJ7 were trying to get us."

"Well, all they've got for themselves is trouble."

Zafi and Jimmy stared at each other.

"I've come to invite you to join the right side," Zafi announced.

"You want me to work for France against Britain – in a war?" Jimmy tried to keep his voice as calm as possible. Zafi nodded.

"Who says there's going to be a war?" Felix asked. "That's rubbish. Nobody's loony enough to start a war."

Jimmy wished his friend was right, but he was far from sure. He walked over to the window. It was still open from when Zafi had sneaked in. For a second, he hesitated. Perhaps something in his head was suggesting he could escape into the night and disappear forever. It only lasted a second. He slid the window shut. It closed as silently as it had opened for Zafi, but to Jimmy it felt like the portcullis on a castle coming down to trap him inside.

Did she expect him to give an answer straight away? He had already put everybody he loved in mortal danger to avoid working as an assassin for one government. Surely it was madness of the French to think he would kill for them.

So why was he still thinking about it? And why was his hand shaking?

"I came to you before," he began eventually. "To the DGSE, I mean. When we needed your help. I offered to co-operate then."

"To co-operate?" Zafi questioned. "Or to join us?"

"I offered information. But Uno Stovorsky said he didn't need it. And he never suggested that I work for you."

"The DGSE didn't need you then, did we." Zafi explained haughtily. "We had me." At that she gave a sly chuckle. "But yesterday changed things. France needs you now."

Jimmy couldn't order any of his thoughts. "I don't understand," he started quietly. "I thought there were only two of us. Me and Mitchell. We're both English. How come you're also... like us, except that you're French?"

"I suppose you want a history lesson," Zafi sighed. "Well, the team of scientists that designed us fell out with each other twelve years ago. One of them was French and he escaped back to Paris when he realised there was going to be trouble."

"And he took you with him?" Felix gasped. His mouth was hanging open.

"Sort of." Zafi smiled at him fondly. "I wasn't born yet, was I. But he took with him all the files and the chip he needed to make me."

"So nobody at NJ7 knows about you?" Jimmy asked.

Zafi shook her head. "They've been looking for something called ZAF-1."

Jimmy recognised that name. He'd heard it inside NJ7 Headquarters, but he didn't know what it meant.

"You're... ZAF-1?" he suggested.

"You should pay attention more closely, Jimmy Coates." Zafi looked up at him and fluttered her eyelashes. "I said they're *looking* for ZAF-1. They think it's a Secret Service agency. But there's no such thing. There's only..."

"...Zafi." Jimmy completed the sentence for her.

"That's right – me!"

"They don't know anything about you," Jimmy exclaimed, the words tumbling out in his excitement. "I was there, in NJ7." He looked at Georgie, Felix and Zafi in turn. "I heard them talking about ZAF-1, trying to work out what it meant. They were scared of it, but didn't know what it meant..."

"Not yet," Zafi cut him off. "They will soon. They'll work it out from Dr Higgins' papers."

Dr Higgins – the scientist behind the original organic assassin project. The name still gave Jimmy an odd feeling. He wanted to hate the old man, but wasn't physically able to. The result was like being seasick, but enjoying it. Jimmy wondered where the doctor was these days. Higgins had gone on the run after doing some assassinating of his own. He could have been anywhere in the world. For all Jimmy knew, NJ7 had already found him and taken their revenge.

"I don't have any more time, Jimmy," Zafi said softly. She stood up and placed a hand on his wrist. "And nor do you." Jimmy tensed up. So did Georgie and Felix. "I did what I could tonight to help you," Zafi continued.

"What do you mean?" Georgie asked suspiciously.

"I created a diversion so they couldn't follow you out of London so easily." Zafi thought for a moment and smiled to herself. Jimmy couldn't stand the way everything seemed to amuse her. "I need you to come with me now."

Jimmy looked at his friend and his sister. He could see on their faces what they thought. The last thing they wanted was for him to leave them. But everything inside him was drawing him to go with Zafi. Surely he couldn't – up to now, he had done everything he could to avoid causing harm to anybody. The DGSE would almost certainly send him to kill. But who?

He closed his eyes and pictured Paduk, the huge Secret Service agent who ran the Prime Minister's 'Special Security'. He pictured Miss Bennett, who had pretended to be protecting Jimmy for so long as a fake form teacher at school. Then she had emerged as his most venomous enemy – Head of NJ7. They had stolen his life. They had tortured and tried to kill the people he loved. Was this the chance that he had wanted so badly? Was this the opportunity to get his own back and be working for a good cause at the same time?

Then Jimmy pictured Ian Coates.

"I'll do it," he rasped. His voice seemed reluctant to leave his throat. "I'll do it."

CHAPTER THREE - THWARTED

"Jimmy you can't!" Georgie shouted.

Jimmy was already moving towards the window. It was Zafi who stopped him.

"I presume we can leave by the front door, no?" she chuckled.

Jimmy felt himself laugh too, but it came out like a grunt. It didn't even sound like him. He turned to the door.

"Jimmy, stop," Felix ordered, grabbing his friend by the arm. Jimmy didn't look at him.

"Get off me," he growled.

"No way."

"Get off me, Felix," Jimmy said again. "You know I could snap you in two, don't you?"

"Jimmy, what are you saying?" Georgie yelled. She stepped between her brother and the door. Her face had gone white. "What's happening to you?"

"Let him come," Zafi insisted. "He wants to, can't you see?"