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opening extract from

Alex Rider: Crocodile Tears

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REFLECTIONS IN A MIRROR

Alex Rider took one last glance in the mirror, then stopped and looked a second time. It was strange, but he wondered if he recognized the boy who was looking back. There were the thin lips, the slightly chiselled nose and chin, the fair hair hanging in two strands over the dark brown eyes. He raised a hand and, obediently, his reflection did the same. But there was something different about this other Alex Rider. It just wasn't quite him.

Of course, the clothes he was wearing didn't help. In a few minutes he would be leaving for a New Year's Eve party being held at a castle on the banks of Loch Arkaig in the Highlands of Scotland – and the invitation had been clear. Dress: black tie. Reluctantly Alex had gone out and rented the entire outfit: dinner jacket, black trousers and a white shirt with a stick-up collar that was too tight and dug into his neck. The one thing he had refused to put on was the pair of polished leather shoes that the shop assistant had insisted would

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make the outfit complete. Black trainers would have to do. What did it all make him look like, he wondered, as he straightened the bow tie for the tenth time. A young James Bond. He hated the comparison but he couldn't avoid it.

It wasn't just the clothes. As Alex continued his examination, he had to admit that so much had happened in the last year, he'd almost lost track of who – and what – he was. Standing in front of the mirror, it was as if he had just stepped down off the merry-go-round that his life had become. He might be still but the world around him was spinning.

Just two months ago he had been in Australia – not on holiday, not visiting relatives, but, incredibly, working for the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, disguised as an Afghan refugee. He had been sent to infiltrate the people-smuggling gang known as the snakehead, but his mission had taken him much further than that, setting him against Major Winston Yu and the potential devastation of a huge bomb buried deep inside a fault line in the earth's crust. It had also brought him face to face with his godfather, the man he had known only as Ash. Thinking about him now, Alex saw something spark in his eyes. Was it anger? Grief? Alex had never known his parents and he'd thought Ash would somehow be able to explain where he'd come from, to make sense of his past. But his godfather had done nothing of the sort and their meeting had led instead to betrayal and death.

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And that was really it, wasn't it? That was what the boy in the mirror was trying to tell him. He was still only fourteen years old but this last year – a year whose end they were about to celebrate – had almost destroyed him. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel Major Yu's walking stick smashing into the side of his head, the crushing weight of the water under the Bora Falls, the punishment he had taken in the Thai boxing ring in Bangkok. And those were just the most recent in a string of injuries. How many times had he been punched, kicked, beaten, knocked out? And shot. His wounds might have healed but he would still be reminded of them every time he undressed. The scar left by the .22 bullet fired into his chest by a sniper on a rooftop in Liverpool Street would always be with him. And the memory of pain. They say that never leaves you either.

Had it changed him? Of course it had. Nobody could survive all this and stay the same. And yet…

"Alex! Stop admiring yourself in the mirror and get downstairs!"

It was Sabina. Alex turned and saw her standing in the doorway, wearing a silver dress with lots of glitter around the neckline. Her dark hair – she had grown it long – was tied back. Unusually for her, she was wearing make-up: pale blue eyeshadow and glossy pink lipstick.

"Dad's waiting. We're about to leave."

"I'll be one minute."

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Alex twisted the bow tie again, wondering what he had to do to stop the damn thing going crooked. He looked ridiculous. Nobody under the age of fifty should have to dress like this. But at least he'd been able to resist Sabina's suggestion that he should go to the party dressed in a kilt. She'd been teasing him about it since Christmas.

Despite everything, the last six weeks had been fantastic for Alex Rider. First of all, Sabina and her parents had unexpectedly arrived in England. Edward Pleasure was a journalist. He had almost been killed once, investigating a pop star called Damian Cray. Alex had blamed himself for that, and when, at the end of it all, Sabina had left for America, he had been certain he would never see her again. But now she was back in his life and although she was a year older than he was, the two had never been closer. It helped perhaps that she was one of the few people who knew about his involvement with MI6.

Better still, the Pleasures had invited Alex to join them for New Year at the house they had rented in the West Highlands of Scotland. Hawk's Lodge was a Victorian pile that had been named after an obscure poet rather than the bird. It stood three storeys high on the edge of woodland with Ben Nevis in the background. It was the sort of house that needed roaring log fires, hot chocolate, old-fashioned board games and too much to eat. Liz Pleasure, Sabina's mother, had supplied all of

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this and more from the moment they had arrived. In the past few days the four of them had gone hillwalking and fishing. They had visited ruined castles and isolated villages and strolled along the famous white sands of Morar. Sabina had hoped it might snow – there was good skiing over at Cairn Gorm and she had brought her gear with her – but although it was freezing outside, so far the weather had only managed a few flurries. There was no television in the house and Edward had banned Sabina from bringing her Nintendo, so they had spent the evenings playing Scrabble or Perudo – the Peruvian game of liar dice which Alex nearly always won. If there was one thing he had learnt in his life, it was how to lie.

Meanwhile, Jack Starbright, Alex's housekeeper and in many ways his closest friend, was in Washington. She had been invited up to Scotland too but had decided to go home for New Year to see her parents. As he followed her out of the house, it had crossed Alex's mind that one day she would go back to America for good. Her parents and the rest of her family were there. He wondered what would happen to him when she did. She had looked after him since his uncle had died, and as far as he knew there was nobody to take her place. As if reading his thoughts, she had given him a hug while the taxi driver loaded her cases.

"Don't worry, Alex. I'll see you in a week. Just try and have a good time in Scotland. See if you

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can make it past New Year without getting into trouble. Don't forget, school starts on the sixth."

And that was another reason to be cheerful. Alex had managed to complete almost half a term at Brookland without getting kidnapped, shot at or recruited by one of the world's security agencies. He had begun to feel like an ordinary schoolboy again, being told off for talking in class, sweating over his homework, listening out for the bell that meant the end of day.

He took one last look in the mirror. Jack was right. Forget James Bond. He'd had enough of all that. He was leaving it behind.

He went down two flights of stairs to the wood-panelled hall with its rather gloomy paintings of Scottish wildlife. Edward Pleasure was waiting with Sabina. It seemed to Alex that the journalist had got quite a lot older since they had last met. There were definitely more lines in his face. He now wore glasses all the time. And he had lost a lot of weight. He also limped, supporting himself with a heavy walking stick, metal-tipped and with a brass handle shaped like a duck's head. His wife had bought it for him in an antique shop in London. She had joked that if any of the people he wrote about ever tried to attack him again, at least he'd have something he could use to defend himself.

That was what Alex liked most about this family. They stuck together and, no matter what happened,

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they always seemed to be cheerful. He had found it easy spending time with them, slipping into their routine. And Alex liked to imagine that in many ways his parents would have been just like Edward and Liz.

The journalist had also put on black tie for the evening but Alex saw at once that there was a problem.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Mum's not coming," Sabina replied. She was looking frustrated. Alex knew she had spent hours getting ready for the party. Now, at the last minute, something had gone wrong.

"She says she's not feeling up to it," Edward explained. "It's nothing serious. Just a touch of flu."

"Then I think we should all stay," Sabina said.

"That's nonsense, Sabina. The three of you go and enjoy yourselves." Liz Pleasure had appeared at one of the doorways. She was a pleasant, easy-going woman with long, straggly hair. She didn't care how she looked and she liked to run a house without rules. Right now she was wearing a baggy jersey and jeans, holding a box of tissues. "I don't much like parties anyway and I'm certainly not going out in this weather."

"But you don't want to be here for New Year on your own."

"I'm going to have a hot bath with some of that expensive oil your dad bought me for Christmas.

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Then I'm going to bed. I'll be asleep long before midnight." She went over to Sabina and put her arm round her. "Honestly, Sab, it doesn't bother me. We can celebrate New Year tomorrow and you can tell me what I've missed."

"But, Mum, we won't enjoy it without you."

"Of course you will. You love parties. And you look terrific – both of you." Liz Pleasure had made up her mind. "You have to go. Your dad's got the tickets and they're worth a fortune." She beamed at Alex. "You look after her, Alex. And remember. This is a party in a real Scottish castle – Hogmanay and all the rest of it. I'm sure you're going to have a fantastic time."

There was no point in any further argument, and twenty minutes later, Alex found himself being driven along the twisting roads that led north to Loch Arkaig. The weather had got worse. The snow that Sabina had been hoping for was falling more heavily, swirling in front of the headlights as they cut through the night. Edward Pleasure was driving a Nissan X-Trail which he had rented at Inverness Airport. Alex was glad he had chosen a four-by-four. The snow was already settling. Any thicker and they would need the extra traction.

Sabina was stretched out in the back, untangling her iPod. Alex was in the front. It was the first time he had been alone with Edward Pleasure since the South of France and he felt a little uncomfortable. The journalist must have known

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about his involvement with MI6; Sabina would have told him everything that had happened. But the two of them had never discussed it, as if it was somehow impolite.

"It's good to have you with us, Alex," Edward muttered. He was deliberately keeping his voice down so that Sabina, plugged into Coldplay, wouldn't hear. "I know Sab was really glad you could tag along."

"I've had a great time," Alex said. He thought for a moment, then added, "I'm sorry about tonight, though."

Edward smiled. "We don't have to stay too long if you don't want to. But what Liz said was right. Nobody celebrates New Year like the Scottish. And Kilmore Castle is quite a place. Dates back to the thirteenth century. It was torn down in the first Jacobite rising and stayed more or less in ruins until it was bought by Desmond McCain."

"Isn't he the man you're writing about?"

"That's right. He's the main reason we're going. The Reverend Desmond McCain." Edward reached down and flicked a switch, blowing hot air over the windscreen. The wipers were doing their best but snow was still sticking to the glass surface. It was warm and cosy inside the car, in marked contrast with the world outside. "He's an interesting man, Alex. Do you know anything about him?"

"Not really."

"I thought you might have read about him in

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the papers. He was brought up in an orphanage in east London. No parents. No family. Nothing. He'd been abandoned in a supermarket trolley, wrapped in a plastic bag – McCain Oven Chips. That's how he got his name. He was fostered by a couple in Hackney, and from that moment things started going better for him. He did well at school ... at least in sport. By the time he was eighteen, he had become a famous boxer. He won the WBO middle-weight title twice and everyone thought he'd make it a hat-trick, except he got knocked out in the first round by Buddy Sangster in Madison Square Garden in 1983."

"Didn't something happen to Sangster?" Alex asked. He'd heard the name somewhere before.

"That's right. He died a year later. He fell under a train in the New York subway. They showed his funeral on TV. One of his fans even sent him a hundred black tulips. I remember hearing that..." Edward shook his head. "Anyway, Desmond McCain wasn't boxing any more. His jaw had been smashed up pretty badly. He went to some plastic surgeon in Las Vegas but it was a botch job and it never healed properly. To this day he can only eat soft food. He can't chew. But it wasn't the end of him. He went into business – property development – and he was very good at it. There were a dozen families in Rotherhithe, down on the River Thames, and somehow he persuaded them to sell cheaply to him and then he knocked down their houses and

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put up a bunch of skyscrapers and made a fortune.

"That was about the time that he became interested in politics. He'd donated thousands of pounds to the Conservative Party and suddenly he announced he wanted to be an MP. Of course, they welcomed him with open arms. He was rich, he was successful – and he was black. That was part of it too. And the next thing you know, he managed to get himself elected in a corner of London which hadn't voted Conservative since the nineteenth century, and even then it was only by mistake. People liked him. It was the typical rags to riches story – you could say plastic bag to riches in his case. He got a big majority, and a year later he was a minister in the department for sport. There was even talk that he could one day become our first black PM."

"So what went wrong?"

Edward sighed. "Everything! It turned out that his business hadn't been doing as well as people thought. One or two of his developments had fallen behind schedule and he had huge financial problems. The bank was closing in and it looked as if he might go bankrupt – and of course you're not allowed to be a member of Parliament if that happens. God knows what he was thinking, but he decided to set fire to one of his properties and claim on the insurance. That was his way out of the mess. Well, the property in question was a twenty-four-storey office block overlooking

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St Paul's, and one night it simply burned to the ground. The next day, McCain put in a claim for fifty million pounds. Problem solved."

They came to a sharp bend in the road and Edward Pleasure slowed down. By now the whole road was snow-covered, with dark pine trees looming up on both sides.

"At least, that's what he thought," he went on. "Unfortunately the insurance company smelled a rat. They started asking questions. Like, for example, why had the alarms been switched off? Why had the security staff been allowed to leave early? There was a lot of gossip in the press – and then, suddenly, a witness appeared. It turned out there'd been a homeless person sleeping in the underground car park. He'd been there when McCain drove in with six gallons of petrol and a cigarette lighter. He was lucky to get away alive. Anyway, McCain was arrested. There was a fairly sensational trial, and he was sent to prison for nine years."

Alex had listened to all this in silence. "You called him the Reverend McCain," he said.

"Well, that's the strange thing. In a way, McCain's whole life had been bizarre – but while he was in jail, he converted to Christianity. He did a correspondence course and became a priest in some Church no one's ever heard of. And when he got out – that was five years ago – he didn't go back into business or politics. He said he'd spent

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his whole life being selfish and he wanted to put all that behind him. Instead he set up a charity. First Aid. That's what it's called. It provides a rapid response to emergencies all over the world."

"How much further?" Sabina's voice came from the back seat. She was still plugged into her iPod.

Edward Pleasure held up a hand and opened it twice, signalling ten minutes.

"You interviewed him?" Alex said.

"Yes. I've done a big piece for *GQ*. They'll be publishing it next month."

"And...?"

"You'll meet him tonight, Alex, and you can see for yourself. He has an enormous amount of energy and he's channelled it into helping people less fortunate than himself. He's raised millions for famine relief in Africa, bush fires in Australia, floods in Malaysia – even that accident in South India. Jowada."

Alex nodded. He'd read about it when he'd been working as a ball boy at Wimbledon. It had made the front pages. "The nuclear reactor," he said.

Edward nodded. "For a time it looked as if the whole city of Chennai could have been affected. Fortunately it wasn't as bad as that, but a lot of people were killed in the panic. First Aid were up and running the very next day, getting anti-radiation stuff to the women and kids, helping with supplies, that sort of thing. Nobody was quite sure how they got off the mark so quickly but

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that's how they work. Instant response. Their aim is to be the first charity in."

"And you really think this man, McCain, is genuine?"

"You mean ... do I think he's another Damian Cray?" Edward smiled briefly. It had been his article exposing Cray as a maniac that had almost got him killed. "Well, I did have my doubts when I first met him. I mean, even if he wasn't a crook, he was a Tory politician, which didn't exactly recommend him. But you don't need to worry, Alex. I did a lot of research into his charity. I interviewed him and I met people who knew him. I spoke to the police and I opened their old files. The truth is, I couldn't find anything bad to write about him. He really does seem to be a rich man who made a bad mistake and who's trying to make up for it."

"How come he owns a castle? If he went bankrupt..."

"That's a good question. After he went to prison, he lost all his money, everything. But he had powerful friends – both in the City and in the Tory Party – and they did what they could to help him out. Thanks to them, he managed to hang on to Kilmore Castle. He also has a London flat and he's the part-owner of a business somewhere in Kenya."

A car suddenly appeared in the road beside them, overtaking. Edward slowed down to let it pass. He watched as it was swallowed up by the

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whirling snow. "I'll be interested to hear what you think of McCain," he muttered.

"Did he invite you?"

"Yes. When I met him, I mentioned I was planning to be in Scotland for New Year and he gave me four tickets. And it's just as well. They actually cost three hundred pounds each."

Alex let out a low whistle.

"Well, it's all for charity. All the profits will go to First Aid. There'll be a lot of rich people there tonight. They'll raise tens of thousands."

There was another brief silence. The road had begun to climb steeply uphill and Edward changed down a gear.

"We never really talked about Damian Cray," Edward said.

Alex twisted in his seat. "There's nothing to say."

"My book about him sold a million copies. But I never mentioned you, or your part in what happened."

"I prefer it that way."

"You saved Sabina's life."

"She saved mine."

"Can I give you some advice, Alex?" Edward Pleasure had to keep his eyes on the road but just for a moment he turned them on Alex. "Stay away from all that. MI6, intelligence, all the rest of it. I've a good idea what's been going on over the past year. Sabina's told me some of it but I have contacts in the CIA and I hear things. I don't want

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to know what you've been through but, believe me, you're better off out of it."

"Don't worry. I don't think MI6 are interested in me any more. They didn't even send me a Christmas card. That part of my life is over. And I'm glad."

The road was even steeper now and the trees had fallen away on one side to reveal an expanse of black water, Loch Arkaig, stretching out below. It was still snowing but the flakes didn't seem to be making contact with the half-frozen surface, as if the two were somehow cancelling each other out. The loch was said to have its own monster – a giant water horse – and, looking down, Alex could well believe it. Loch Arkaig had been left behind by the glaciers. Twelve miles long and in places a hundred metres deep, who could say what secrets it had managed to keep to itself for the past million years?

And there was Kilmore Castle looming up above him, almost invisible behind the sweeping snow. It had been built on a rocky outcrop above the loch, completely dominating the surrounding landscape, a massive pile of grey stone with towers and battlements, narrow slit-like windows, soaring archways and solid, unwelcoming doors. There was nothing about the place that had been built for comfort. It existed only to rule and to keep those inside it in power. It was hard to imagine how it had ever fallen or, for that matter, how it had been built. Even the Nissan X-Trail with its 2.2

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litre four-cylinder turbo diesel engine seemed to be struggling as it negotiated the tight hairpin bends that were the only way up. Had soldiers once come here on horseback? How could they possibly have penetrated those massive walls?

They were in a queue of traffic now, with other partygoers just visible behind the frosted windows of their cars. The last bend brought them to a wide open space which had been converted into a car park with attendants in Day-Glo jackets frantically signalling where to go. Two fiery torches had been placed on either side of the main entrance, the flames fighting the snow. Men and women in heavy coats, their faces lost behind scarves, were hurrying across the gravel and bundling themselves in. There was something almost nightmarish about the scene. It didn't look like a party. These people could have been refugees, running for their lives from some freak act of nature.

Edward Pleasure parked the car and Sabina took off her iPod.

"We don't have to stay until midnight," her father told her. "If you want to leave earlier, just let me know."

"I wish Mum had come," Sabina muttered.

"Me too. But you know she wouldn't want us to worry about her. Let's just have fun."

They got out of the car, and after the warmth of the interior Alex was immediately hit by the deep chill of the night, the snow dancing in front of his

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eyes, the wind rushing through his hair. He had no coat and broke into a run, hugging himself, using his shoulders to battle through the elements. It was as if the very worst of the winter had somehow been concentrated on this rocky platform, high above the loch. The flames of the beacons writhed and twisted. Somebody shouted something but the words were snatched away.

And then they had reached the archway and passed through into an inner courtyard where at least the wind couldn't penetrate. Alex found himself in an irregularly shaped space with high walls, cannons and a huge bonfire. About a dozen guests were crowded round it, feeling the warmth and laughing as they brushed snow off their sleeves. A second archway stood ahead of him, this one with carved eagles and an inscription in Gaelic, the letters glowing red and shimmering in the light of the fire.

CHA DÈANAR SGRIOS AIR NÀIMHEIDEAN
GUS AM BITHEAR FIOS AIR CÒ IAD

"What's that?" Sabina asked.

Edward shrugged, but next to him one of the other guests had overheard. "It's the motto of the Kilmore clan," he explained. "This was their ancestral home. They were here for three hundred years."

"Do you know what it means?"

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"Yes. 'You cannot defeat your enemies until you know who they are.'" The guest pushed forward and disappeared into the castle.

Alex stared at the inscription. He wondered if in some way it wasn't speaking to him. Then he dismissed the thought. A new year was about to begin and with it a new set of rules. There were no more enemies. That was what he had decided.

"Come on, Alex..."

Sabina grabbed his arm and together they went in.

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