

## 6

### TOYS AREN'T US

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IN THE LONDON OFFICE, Mrs. Jones sat waiting while Alan Blunt read the report. The sun was shining. A pigeon was strutting back and forth along the ledge outside as if it were keeping guard.

“He’s doing very well,” Blunt said at last. “Remarkably well, in fact.” He turned a page. “I see he missed target practice.”

“Were you planning to give him a gun?” Mrs. Jones asked.

“No. I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“Then why does he need target practice?”

Blunt raised an eyebrow. “We can’t give a teenager a gun,” he said. “On the other hand, I don’t think we can send him to Port Tallon empty-handed. You’d better have a word with Smithers.”

“I already have. He’s working on it now.”

Mrs. Jones stood up as if to leave. But at the door

she hesitated. "I wonder if it's occurred to you that Rider may have been preparing him for this all along?" she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Preparing Alex to replace him. Ever since the boy was old enough to walk, he's been being trained for intelligence work . . . but without knowing it. I mean, he's lived abroad so he now speaks French, German, and Spanish. He's been mountain climbing, diving, and skiing. He's learned karate. Physically he's in perfect shape." She shrugged. "I think Rider wanted Alex to become a spy."

"But not so soon," Blunt said.

"I agree. You know as well as I do, Alan—he's not ready yet. If we send him into Sayle Enterprises, he's going to get himself killed."

"Perhaps." The single word was cold, matter-of-fact.

"He's fourteen years old! We can't do it."

"We have to." Blunt stood up and opened the window, letting in the air and the sound of the traffic. The pigeon hurled itself off the ledge, afraid of him. "This whole business worries me," he said. "The prime minister sees the Stormbreakers as a major coup . . . for himself and for his government. But there's still some-

thing about Herod Sayle that I don't like. Did you tell the boy about Yassen Gregorovich?"

"No." Mrs. Jones shook her head.

"Then it's time you did. It was Yassen who killed his uncle. I'm sure of it. And if Yassen was working for Sayle . . ."

"What will you do if Yassen kills Alex Rider?"

"That's not our problem, Mrs. Jones. If the boy gets himself killed, at least it will be the final proof that there is something wrong. At the very least it'll allow me to postpone the Stormbreaker project and take a good hard look at what's going on at Port Tallon. In a way, it would almost help us if he *was* killed."

"The boy's not ready yet. He'll make mistakes. It won't take them long to find out who he is." Mrs. Jones sighed. "I don't think Alex has got much chance at all."

"I agree." Blunt turned back from the window. The sun slanted over his shoulder. A single shadow fell across his face. "But it's too late to worry about that now," he said. "We have no more time. Stop the training now. Send him in."

Alex sat hunched up in the back of the low-flying C-130 military aircraft, his stomach churning behind

his knees. There were eleven men sitting in two lines around him—his own unit and two others. For an hour now, the plane had been flying at just three hundred feet, following the Welsh valleys, dipping and swerving to avoid the mountain peaks. A single bulb glowed red behind a wire mesh, adding to the heat in the cramped cabin. Alex could feel the engines vibrating through him. It was like traveling in a spin dryer and microwave oven combined.

The thought of jumping out of a plane with an oversize silk umbrella would have made Alex sick with fear—but only that morning he'd been told that he wouldn't in fact be jumping. A message from London. They couldn't risk him breaking a leg, it said, and Alex guessed that the end of his training was near. Even so, he'd been taught how to pack a parachute, how to control it, how to exit a plane, and how to land. And at the end of the day the sergeant had instructed him to join the flight—just for the experience. Now, close to the drop zone, Alex felt almost disappointed. He'd watch everyone else jump and then he'd be left alone.

“P minus five . . .”

The voice of the pilot came over the speaker system, distant and metallic. Alex gritted his teeth. Five minutes until the jump. He looked at the other men,

shuffling into position, checking the cords that connected them to the static line. He was sitting next to Wolf. To his surprise, the man was completely quiet, unmoving. It was hard to tell in the half darkness, but the look on his face could almost have been fear.

There was a loud buzz and the red light turned green. The assistant pilot had climbed through from the cockpit. He reached for a handle and pulled open a door set in the back of the aircraft, allowing the cold air to rush in. Alex could see a single square of night. It was raining. The rain howled past.

The green light began to flash. The assistant pilot tapped the first pair on their shoulders and Alex watched them shuffle over to the side and then throw themselves out. For a moment they were there, frozen in the doorway. Then they were gone like a photograph crumpled and spun away by the wind. Two more men followed. Then another two. Wolf would be the last to leave—and with Alex not jumping he would be on his own.

It took less than a minute. Suddenly Alex was aware that only he and Wolf were left.

“Move it!” the assistant pilot shouted above the roar of the engines.

Wolf picked himself up. His eyes briefly met Alex’s

and in that moment Alex knew. Wolf was a popular leader. He was tough and he was fast—completing a thirty-mile hike as if it were just a stroll in a park. But he had a weak spot. Somehow he'd allowed this parachute jump to get to him and he was too scared to move. It was hard to believe, but there he was, frozen in the doorway, his arms rigid, staring out. Alex glanced back. The assistant pilot was looking the other way. He hadn't seen what was happening. And when he did? If Wolf failed to make the jump, it would be the end of his training and maybe even the end of his career. Even hesitating would be bad enough. He'd be binned.

Alex thought for a moment. Wolf hadn't moved. Alex could see his shoulders rising and falling as he tried to summon up the courage to go. Ten seconds had passed. Maybe more. The assistant pilot was leaning down, stowing away a piece of equipment. Alex stood up. "Wolf . . ." he said.

Wolf didn't hear him.

Alex took one last quick look at the assistant pilot, then kicked out with all his strength. His foot slammed into Wolf's backside. He'd put all his strength behind it. Wolf was caught by surprise, his

hands coming free as he plunged into the swirling night air.

The assistant pilot turned around and saw Alex. "What are you doing?" he shouted.

"Just stretching my legs," Alex shouted back.

The plane curved in the air and began the journey home.

Mrs. Jones was waiting for him when he walked into the hangar. She was sitting at a table, wearing a gray silk jacket and trousers with a black handkerchief flowing out of her top pocket. For a moment she didn't recognize him. Alex was dressed in a flying suit. His hair was damp from the rain. His face was pinched with tiredness, and he seemed to have grown older over the past two weeks. None of the men had arrived back yet. A truck had been sent to collect them from a field about two miles away.

"Alex . . ." she said.

Alex looked at her but said nothing.

"It was my decision to stop you from jumping," she said. "I hope you're not disappointed. I just thought it was too much of a risk. Please. Sit down."

Alex sat down opposite her.

“I have something that might cheer you up,” she went on. “I’ve brought you some toys.”

“I’m too old for toys,” Alex said.

“Not these toys.”

She signaled and a man appeared, walking out of the shadows, carrying a tray of equipment that he set down on the table. The man was enormously fat. When he sat down, the metal chair disappeared beneath the spread of his buttocks, and Alex was surprised it could even take his weight. He was bald with a black mustache and several chins, each one melting into the next and finally into his neck and shoulders. He wore a pin-striped suit, which must have used enough material to make a tent.

“Smithers,” he said, nodding at Alex. “Very nice to meet you, old chap.”

“What have you got for him?” Mrs. Jones demanded.

“I’m afraid we haven’t had a great deal of time, Mrs. J,” Smithers replied. “The challenge was to think what a fourteen-year-old might carry with him—and adapt it.” He picked the first object off the tray. A yo-yo. It was slightly larger than normal, black plastic. “Let’s start with this,” Smithers said.

Alex shook his head. He couldn’t believe any of



this. "Don't tell me," he exclaimed, "it's some sort of secret weapon. . . ."

"Not exactly. I was told you weren't to have weapons. You're too young."

"So it's not really a hand grenade? Pull the string and run like hell?"

"Certainly not. It's a yo-yo." Smithers pulled out the string, holding it between a pudgy finger and thumb. "However, the string is a special sort of nylon. Very advanced. There's thirty yards of it and it can lift weights of up to two hundred pounds. The actual yo-yo is motorized and clips onto your belt. Very useful for climbing."

"Amazing." Alex was unimpressed.

"And then there's this." Mr. Smithers produced a small tube. Alex read the side: ZIT-CLEAN. FOR HEALTHIER SKIN. "Nothing personal," Smithers went on, apologetically. "But we thought it was something a boy of your age might carry. And it is rather remarkable." He opened the tube and squeezed some of the cream onto his finger. "Completely harmless when you touch it. But bring it into contact with metal and it's quite another story." He wiped his finger, smearing the cream onto the surface of the table. For a moment nothing happened. Then a wisp of acrid smoke

twisted upward in the air, the metal sizzled, and a jagged hole appeared. "It'll do that to just about any metal," Smithers explained. "Very useful if you need to break through a lock." He took out a handkerchief and wiped his finger clean.

"Anything else?" Mrs. Jones asked.

"Oh yes, Mrs. J. You could say this is our *pièce de resistance*." He picked up a brightly colored box that Alex recognized at once as a Nintendo Color Game Boy. "What teenager would be complete without one of these?" he asked. "This one comes with four games. And the beauty of it is, each cartridge turns the computer into something quite different."

He showed Alex the first game. Nemesis. "If you insert this one, the computer becomes a fax/photo-copier, which gives you direct contact with us and vice versa. Just pass the screen across any page you want to transmit and we'll have it in seconds."

He produced a second game: Exocet. "This one turns the computer into an X-ray device. Place the machine against any solid surface less than two inches thick and watch the screen. It has an audio function too. You just have to plug in the earphones. Useful for eavesdropping. It's not as powerful as I'd like, but we're working on it."

The third game was called Speed Wars. "This one's a bug finder," Smithers explained. "You can use the computer to sweep a room and check if somebody's trying to listen in on you. I suggest you use it the moment you arrive. And finally . . . my own favorite."

Smithers held up a final cartridge. It was labeled BOMBER BOY.

"Do I get to play this one?" Alex asked.

"You can play all four of them. They all have a built-in games function. But as the name might suggest, this is actually a smoke bomb. This time the cartridge doesn't go into the machine. You leave it somewhere in a room and press START three times on the console, and the bomb will be set off by remote control. Useful camouflage if you need to escape in a hurry."

"Thank you, Smithers," Mrs. Jones said.

"My pleasure, Mrs. J." Smithers stood up, his legs straining to take the huge weight. "I'll hope to see you again, Alex. I've never had to equip a boy before. I'm sure I'll be able to think up a whole host of quite delightful ideas."

He waddled off and disappeared through a door that clanged shut behind him.

Mrs. Jones turned to Alex. "You leave tomorrow for Port Tallon," she said. "You'll be going under the name of Felix Lester." She handed him an envelope. "The real Felix Lester left for Florida yesterday. You'll find everything you need to know about him in here."

"I'll read it in bed."

"Good." Suddenly she was serious and Alex found himself wondering if she was herself a mother. If so, she could well have a son his age. She took out a black-and-white photograph and laid it on the table. It showed a man in a white T-shirt and jeans. He was in his late twenties with light, close-cropped hair, a smooth face, the body of a dancer. The photograph was slightly blurred. It had been taken from a distance, possibly with a hidden camera. "I want you to look at this," she said.

"I'm looking."

"His name is Yassen Gregorovich. He was born in Russia, but he now works for many countries. Iraq has employed him. Also Serbia, Libya, and China."

"What does he do?" Alex asked.

"He's a contract killer, Alex. We believe it was he who killed Ian Rider."

There was a long pause. Alex had almost managed to persuade himself that this whole business was just

some sort of crazy adventure . . . a game. But looking at the cold face with its blank, hooded eyes, he felt something stirring inside him and knew it was fear. He remembered his uncle's car, shattered by bullets. A man like this, a contract killer, would do the same to him. He wouldn't even blink.

"This photograph was taken six months ago, in Cuba," Mrs. Jones was saying. "It may have been a coincidence, but Herod Sayle was there at the same time. The two of them may have met. And there is something else." She paused. "Rider used a code in the last message he sent. A single letter. Y."

"Y for Yassen."

"He must have seen Yassen somewhere in Port Tallon. He wanted us to know . . ."

"Why are you telling me this now?" Alex asked. His mouth had gone dry.

"Because if you see him, if Yassen is anywhere near Sayle Enterprises, I want you to contact us at once."

"And then?"

"We'll pull you out. It doesn't matter how old you are, Alex. If Yassen finds out you're working for us, he'll kill you too."

She took the photograph back. Alex stood up.

"You'll leave here tomorrow morning at eight

o'clock," Mrs. Jones said. "Be careful, Alex. And good luck."

Alex walked across the hangar, his footsteps echoing. Behind him, Mrs. Jones unwrapped a peppermint and slipped it into her mouth. Her breath always smelled faintly of mint. As head of Special Operations, how many men had she sent to their deaths? Ian Rider and maybe dozens more. Perhaps it was easier for her if her breath was sweet.

There was a movement ahead of him and he saw that the parachutists had gotten back from their jump. They were walking toward him out of the darkness with Wolf and the other men from K Unit right at the front. Alex tried to step around them, but he found Wolf blocking his way.

"You're leaving," Wolf said. Somehow he must have heard that Alex's training was over.

"Yes."

There was a long pause. "What happened on the plane . . ." he began.

"Forget it, Wolf," Alex said. "Nothing happened. You jumped and I didn't. That's all."

Wolf held out a hand. "I want you to know . . . I was wrong about you. You're all right. And maybe . . . one day it would be good to work with you."

"You never know," Alex said.

They shook.

"Good luck, Cub."

"Good-bye, Wolf."



Alex walked out into the night.



## 15

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### ELEVEN O'CLOCK



ALEX BURST OUT of the house and stopped in the open air, taking stock of his surroundings. He was aware of alarms ringing, guards running toward him, and two cars, still some distance away, tearing up the main drive, heading for the house. He just hoped that although it was obvious something was wrong, nobody would yet know what it was. They shouldn't be looking for him—at least, not yet. That might give him the edge.

It looked like he was too late. Sayle's private helicopter had already gone. Only the cargo plane was left. If Alex was going to reach the Science Museum in London in the fifty-nine minutes left to him, he had to be on it. But the cargo plane was already in motion, rolling slowly away from its chocks. In a minute or two it would go through the preflight tests. Then it would take off.

Alex looked around and saw an open-topped army



Jeep parked on the drive near the front door. There was a guard standing next to it, a cigarette slipping out of his hand, looking around to see what was happening—but looking the wrong way. Perfect. Alex sprinted across the gravel. He had brought a weapon from the house. One of Sayle's harpoon guns had floated past him just as he left the room and he'd snatched it up, determined at last to have something he could use to defend himself. It would be easy enough to shoot the guard right now. A harpoon in the back and the Jeep would be his. But Alex knew he couldn't do it. Whatever Alan Blunt and MI6 wanted to turn him into, he wasn't ready to shoot in cold blood. Not for his country. Not even to save his own life.

The guard looked up as Alex approached and fumbled for the pistol in a holster at his belt. He never made it. Alex used the handle of the harpoon gun, swinging it around and up to hit him, hard, under the chin. The guard crumpled, the pistol falling out of his hand. Alex grabbed it and leaped into the Jeep, grateful to see the keys were in the ignition. He turned them and heard the engine start up. He knew how to drive. That was something else Ian Rider had made sure he'd learned . . . as soon as his legs were long

enough to reach the pedals. The other cars were closing in on him. They must have seen him attack the guard. Meanwhile, the plane had wheeled around and was already taxiing up to the start of the runway.

He wasn't going to reach it in time.

Maybe it was the danger closing in from all sides that had sharpened his senses. Maybe it was his close escape from so many dangers before. But Alex didn't even have to think. He knew what to do, as if he had done it a dozen times before. Maybe the training he'd been given had been more effective than he'd thought.

He reached into his pocket and took out the yo-yo that Smithers had given him. There was a metal stud on the belt he was wearing and he slammed the yo-yo against it, feeling it click into place, as it had been designed to. Then, as quickly as he could, he tied the end of the nylon cord around the bolt of the harpoon. Finally, he tucked the pistol he had taken from the guard into the back of his trousers. He was ready.

The plane was facing down the runway. Its propellers were at full speed.

Alex wrenched the gear into first, released the hand brake, and gunned the Jeep forward, shooting over the drive and onto the grass, heading for the airstrip. At the same time there was a chatter of machine-gun fire.

He yanked down on the steering wheel and twisted away as his wing mirror exploded and a spray of bullets slammed into the windshield and door. The two cars that he had seen coming up the main drive had wheeled around to come up behind him. Each of them had a guard in the backseat, leaning out of the window, firing at him. And they were getting closer.

Alex tried to go faster, but it was already too late. The two cars had reached him, and for a horrible second, he found himself sandwiched between them, one on each side. He was only inches away from the guards. Looking left and right, he could see into the barrels of their machine guns. There was only one thing to do. He slammed his foot on the brake, ducking at the same time. The Jeep skidded to a halt and the other two cars flashed past him. There was a chatter as both machine guns opened fire. Alex looked up.

The two guards had squeezed their triggers simultaneously. They had both been aiming at him, but with the Jeep suddenly out of their sights, they had ended up firing at each other. There was a yell. One of the cars lost control and crashed into a tree, metalwork crumpling against wood. The other screeched to a halt, reversed, then turned to come after him.

Alex slammed the car back into first gear and set

off again. Where was the plane? With a groan, he saw that it had begun rolling down the runway. It was still moving slowly but was rapidly picking up speed. Alex hit the tarmac and followed.

His foot was pressed down, the gas pedal against the floor. The Jeep was doing about seventy, but it wasn't fast enough. And straight ahead of him, the way was blocked. Two more cars had arrived on the runway. More guards with machine guns balanced themselves, half leaning out of the windows. They had a clear shot. There was nothing to stop them from hitting him. Unless . . .

He turned the steering wheel and yelled out as the Jeep spun across the runway, behind the plane. Now he had the plane between him and the approaching cars. He was safe. But only for a few more seconds. The plane was about to leave the ground. Alex saw the front wheel separate itself from the runway. He glanced in his mirror. The car that had chased him from the house was right on his tail. He had nowhere left to go.

One car behind him. Two more ahead. The plane was now in the air, the back wheels lifting off. The guards taking aim. Everything at seventy miles an hour.

Alex let go of the steering wheel, grabbed the harpoon gun, and fired. The harpoon flashed through the air. The yo-yo attached to Alex's belt spun, trailing out thirty yards of specially designed advanced nylon cord. The pointed head of the harpoon buried itself in the underbelly of the plane. Alex felt himself almost being torn in half as he was yanked out of the Jeep on the end of the cord. In seconds he was forty, fifty yards above the runway, dangling underneath the plane. His Jeep swerved, out of control. The two oncoming cars tried to avoid it—and failed. Both of them hit it in a three-way head-on collision. There was an explosion, a ball of flame and a fist of gray smoke that followed Alex up as if trying to seize him. A moment later there was another explosion. The third car had been traveling too fast. It plowed into the burning wrecks, flipped over, and continued, screeching along the runway on its back before it too burst into flames.

Alex saw little of this. He was suspended underneath the plane by a single thin white cord, twisting around and around as he was carried ever farther into the air. The wind was rushing past him, battering his face and deafening him. He couldn't even hear the

propellers, just above his head. The belt was cutting into his waist. He could hardly breathe. Desperately, he scrabbled for the yo-yo and found the control he wanted. A single button. He pressed it and the tiny powerful motor inside the yo-yo began to turn. The yo-yo rotated on his belt, pulling in the cord. Very slowly, an inch at a time, Alex was drawn up toward the plane.

He had aimed the harpoon accurately. There was a door at the back of the plane, and when he turned off the engine mechanism in the yo-yo, he was close enough to reach out for the handle. He wondered who was flying the plane and where he was going. The pilot must have seen the destruction down on the runway, but he couldn't have heard the harpoon. He couldn't know he'd picked up an extra passenger.

Opening the door was harder than Alex thought. He was still dangling under the plane and every time he got close to the handle the wind drove him back. The current was tearing into his eyes and Alex could hardly see. Twice his fingers found the metal handle, only to be pulled away before he could turn it. The third time he managed to get a better grip, but it still took all his strength to yank the handle down.

The door swung open and he clambered into the hold. He took one last look down. The runway was already a thousand feet below. There were two fires raging, but at this distance, they seemed no more than match heads. Alex unplugged the yo-yo, freeing himself. Then he reached into the waistband of his trousers and took out the gun.

The plane was empty apart from a couple of bundles that Alex vaguely recognized. There was a single pilot at the controls, and something on his instrumentation must have told him that the door was open because he suddenly twisted around. Alex found himself face-to-face with Mr. Grin.

“Warg?” the butler muttered.

Alex raised the gun. He wondered if he would have the courage to use it. But he wasn’t going to let Mr. Grin know that. “All right, Mr. Grin,” he shouted above the noise of the propeller and the howl of the wind. “You may not be able to talk, but you’d better listen. I want you to fly this plane to London. We’re going to the Science Museum in South Kensington and we’ve got to be there in less than an hour. And if you think you’re trying to trick me, I’ll put a bullet in you. Do you understand?”

Mr. Grin said nothing.

Alex fired the gun. The bullet slammed into the floor just beside Mr. Grin's foot. Mr. Grin stared at Alex, then nodded slowly.

He reached out and turned the joystick. The plane dipped and began to head north.