

# BEHIND THE DOOR

ALEX SWAM FORWARD slowly, completely blind, afraid that at any moment he would crack his head against rock. Despite the dry suit, he had long ago felt the chill of the water and knew that he had to find his way onto dry land soon. His hand brushed against something, but his fingers were too numb to tell what it was. He reached out and pulled himself forward. His feet touched the bottom. And it was then that he realized he could see. Somehow, from somewhere, light was seeping into the area beyond the submerged tunnel.

Slowly, his vision adjusted itself. Waving his hand in front of his face, he could just make out his fingers.

He was holding on to a wooden beam, a collapsed roof support. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. The darkness had retreated, showing him a crossroads cut into the rock, the meeting place of three tunnels. The fourth, behind him, was the one that was flooded. As vague as the light was, it gave him strength. Using the beam as a makeshift jetty, he clambered onto the rock. At the same time, he became aware of a soft throbbing sound. He couldn't be sure if it was near or far, but he remembered what he had heard under Block D, in front of the metal door, and he knew that he had arrived.

He stripped off the dry suit. It had served him well.

The main part of his body was dry, even though ice cold water dripped out of his hair and down his neck

His shoes and socks were sodden. When he moved forward his feet squelched and he had to take off his shoes and shake them out before he could go on. Ian Rider's map was still folded in his pocket, but he no longer had any need of it. All he had to do was follow the light.

He went straight forward to another intersection, then turned right. The light was so bright now that he could actually make out the color of the rock-dark brown and gray. The throbbing was also getting louder, and Alex could feel a rush of cool air streaming down toward him. He moved forward cautiously, wondering what he was about to come to. He turned a corner and suddenly the rock on both sides gave way to new brick with metal grills set at intervals just above the level of the floor. The old mine shaft had been converted. It was being used as the outlet for some sort of air-conditioning system. The light that had guided Alex here was coming out of the grills.

He knelt beside the first of these and looked through into a large white-tiled room, a laboratory with complicated glass and steel equipment laid out over work surfaces. The room was empty. Tentatively, Alex took hold of the grill, but it was firmly secured, bolted into the rock face. The second grill belonged to the same room. It was also screwed in tight. Alex continued up the tunnel to a third grill. This one looked into a storage room filled with the silver boxes that Alex had seen being delivered by the submarine the night before.

He took the grill in both hands and pulled. It came away from the wall easily, and looking closer, he understood why. Once again, Ian Rider had been here ahead of him. He had cut through the bolts holding it in place. Alex set the grill down silently, glad that he had found the strength to go forward.

Carefully, he squeezed through the rectangular hole in the wall and into the room. At the last minute, lying on his stomach with his feet dangling below, he reached for the grill and set it back in place. Provided nobody looked too closely, they wouldn't see anything wrong. The ground was a long way away, at least twice his own height, but that wasn't going to stop him now. He dropped down and landed, catlike, on the balls of his feet. The throbbing was louder, coming from somewhere outside. It would cover any noise he made. He went over to the nearest of the silver boxes and examined it. He found two catches on the lid and pressed. The box clicked open in his hands, but when he looked inside, it was empty. Whatever had been delivered was already in use.

He checked for cameras, found none, then crossed to the door. It was unlocked. He opened it, one inch at a time, and peered out. The door led onto a wide corridor with an automatic sliding door at each end and a silver rail running its full length.

"Nineteen hundred hours. Red shift to assembly line. Blue shift to decontamination."

The voice rang out over a loudspeaker system, neither male nor female; emotionless, inhuman. Alex glanced at his watch. It was already seven o'clock in the evening. It had taken him longer than he had thought to get through the mine. He stole forward. It wasn't exactly a passage that he had found. It was more an observation platform. He reached the rail and looked down.

Alex hadn't had any idea what he would find behind the metal door, but what he was seeing now was far beyond anything he could have imagined. It was a huge chamber, the walls—half naked rock, half polished steel—lined with computer equipment, electronic meters, machines that blinked and flickered with a life of their own. It was staffed by forty or fifty people, some in white coats, others in overalls, all wearing armbands of different colors: red, yellow, blue, and green. Arc lights beamed down from above. Armed guards stood at each doorway, watching the work with blank faces.

For this was where the Stormbreakers were being assembled. The computers were being slowly carried in a long, continuous line along a conveyor belt, past the various scientists and technicians. The strange thing was that they already looked finished ... and of course they had to be. Sayle had told him. They were actually being shipped out during the course of the afternoon and night. So what last-minute adjustment was being made here in this secret factory? And why was so much of the production line hidden away?

What Alex had seen as he crept around Sayle Enterprises had only been the tip of the iceberg. The main body of the factory was here, underground.

He looked more closely. He remembered the Stormbreaker that he had used and now he noticed something that he hadn't seen then. A strip of plastic had been drawn back in the casing above each of the screens to reveal a small compartment, cylindrical and about five inches deep. The computers were passing underneath a bizarre machine—cantilevers, wires, and hydraulic arms. Opaque, silver test tubes were being fed along a narrow cage, moving forward as if to greet the computers: one tube for each computer.

There was a meeting point. With infinite precision, the tubes were lifted out, brought around, and then dropped into the exposed compartments. After that, the Stormbreakers were accelerated forward. A second machine closed and heatsealed the plastic strip. By the time the computers reached the end of the line, where they were packed into red-and-white Sayle Enterprises boxes, the compartments were completely invisible.



A movement caught his eye and Alex looked beyond the assembly line and through a huge window into the chamber next door. Two men in space suits were walking clumsily together, as if in slow motion. They stopped. An alarm began to sound and suddenly they disappeared in a cloud of white steam. Alex remembered what he had just heard. Were they being decontaminated? But if the Stormbreakers were based on the round processor there couldn't possibly be any need for such extremes—and anyway, this was like nothing Alex had ever seen before. If the men were being decontaminated, what were they being decontaminated from?

“Agent Gregorovich, report to the biocontainment zone. This is a call for agent Gregorovich.”

A lean, fair-haired figure dressed in black detached himself from the assembly line and walked languidly toward a door that slid open to receive him. For the second time Alex found himself looking at the Russian contract killer, Yassen Gregorovich. What was going on? Alex thought back to the submarine and the vacuum-sealed boxes. Of course. Yassen had brought the test tubes that were even now being inserted into the computers. The test tubes were some sort of weapon that he was using to sabotage them. No. That wasn't possible. Back in Port Tallon, the librarian had told him that Ian Rider had been asking for books about computer viruses.

Viruses.

Decontamination.

The biocontainment zone ...

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Understanding came and with it something cold and solid jabbing into the back of his neck. Alex hadn't even heard the door open behind him, but he slowly straightened up as a voice spoke softly into his ear.

“Stand up. Keep your hands by your sides. If you make any sudden move, I'll shoot you in the head.”

He looked slowly around. A single guard stood behind him, a gun in his hand. It was the sort of thing that Alex had seen a thousand times in films and on television, and he was shocked by how different the reality was. The gun was a Browning automatic pistol and one twitch of the man's finger would send a 9mm bullet shattering through his skull and into his brain. The very thought of it made him feel sick.

He stood up. The guard was in his twenties, pale faced and puzzled. Alex had never seen him before, but more importantly, he had never seen Alex. He hadn't expected to come across a boy. That might help.

“Who are you?” he asked. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm staying with Mr. Sayle,” Alex said. He stared at the gun. “Why are you pointing that at me? I'm not doing anything wrong.”

He sounded pathetic. Little boy lost. But it had the desired effect. The guard hesitated, slightly lowering the gun. At that moment Alex struck. It was another classic karate blow, this time twisting his body around and driving his elbow into the side of the man's head, just below his ear. The guard didn't even cry out. His eyes rolled and he went limp. Alex had almost certainly knocked him out with the single punch, but he couldn't take chances and followed it through with a knee into the groin. The guard folded, his pistol falling to the ground. Quickly, Alex dragged him back, away from the railings. He looked down. Nobody had seen what had happened.

But the guard wouldn't be unconscious long and Alex knew he had to get out of here, not just back up to ground level but out of Sayle Enterprises altogether. He had to contact Mrs. Jones. He still didn't know how or why, but he knew now that the Stormbreakers had been turned into killing machines. There were less than twenty-four hours until the launch at the Science Museum. Somehow Alex had to stop it from happening.

He ran. The door at the end of the passage slid open and he found himself in a curving white corridor with windowless offices built into what must be yet more shafts of the Dozmary Mine. He knew he couldn't go back the way he had come. He was too tired, and even if he could find his way through the mine, he'd never be able to manage the swim a second time. His only chance was the door that had first led him here.

It led to the metal staircase that would bring him to Block D. There was a telephone in his room. Failing that, he could use the Game Boy to transmit a message. But M16 had to know what he had found out.

He reached the end of the corridor then ducked back as three guards appeared, walking together toward a set of double doors. Fortunately, they hadn't seen him. Nobody knew he was here. He was going to be all right.

And then the alarms went off. A siren wailing electronically along the corridors, leaping out from the corners, echoing everywhere. Overhead, a light began to flash red. The guards wheeled around and saw Alex.

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Unlike the man on the observation platform, they didn't hesitate. As Alex leaped headfirst through the nearest door, they brought up their machine guns and fired. Bullets slammed into the wall beside him and ricocheted along the passageway. Alex landed flat on his stomach and kicked out, slamming the door behind him. He straightened up, found a bolt, and rammed it home. A second later there was an explosive hammering on the other side as the guards fired at the door. But it was solid metal. It would hold.

Alex was standing in a metal passageway leading to a tangle of pipes and cylinders, like the boiler room of a ship. The alarm was as loud here as it had been in the main chamber. It seemed to be coming from everywhere. He leaped down the staircase, three steps at a time, and skidded to a halt, searching for a way out. He had a choice of three corridors, but then he heard the rattle of feet and knew that his choice had just become two. He wished now that he had thought to pick up the Browning automatic. He was alone and unarmed. The only duck in a shooting gallery with guns everywhere and no way out. Was this what M16

had trained him for? If so, two weeks hadn't been enough.

He ran on, weaving in and out of the pipes, trying every door he came to. A room with more space suits hanging on hooks. A shower room. Another, larger laboratory with a second door leading out and, in the middle, a glass tank shaped like a barrel, filled with green liquid. Tangles of rubber tubing sprouted out of the tank. Trays filled with test tubes all around.

The barrel-shaped tank. The trays. Alex had seen them before—as vague outlines on his Game Boy. He must have been standing on the other side of the second door. He ran over to it. It was locked from the inside, electronically, with a glass plate against the wall. He would never be able to open it. He was trapped.



Footsteps approached. Alex just had time to hide himself on the floor, underneath one of the work surfaces, before the first door was thrown open and two more guards ran into the laboratory. They took a quick look around without seeing him.

“Not here!” one of them said.

“You’d better go up!”

One guard walked out the way he had come. The other went over to the door and placed his hand on the glass identification panel. There was a green glow and the door buzzed loudly. The guard threw it open and disappeared. Alex rolled forward as the door swung shut and just managed to get his hand into the crack. He waited a moment, then stood up. He opened the door. As he had hoped, he was looking out into the unfinished passageway where he had been surprised by Nadia Vole.

The guard had already gone on ahead. Alex slipped out, closing the door behind him, cutting off the sound of the siren. He made his way up the metal stairs. They led him back to the glass corridor that joined Blocks C and D. Alex was grateful to be back above ground. He found a door and slipped outside. The sun had already set, but across the lawn the airstrip was ablaze, artificially illuminated by the sort of lights Alex had seen in soccer stadiums. There were about a dozen trucks parked next to each other. Men were loading them up with heavy, square red-and-white boxes. The cargo plane that Alex had seen when he arrived rumbled down the runway and lurched into the air.

Alex knew that he was looking at the end of the assembly line. The red-and-white boxes were the same ones he had seen in the underground chamber. The Stormbreakers, complete with their deadly secret, were being loaded up and delivered. By morning they would be all over the country.

Keeping low, he ran past the fountain and across the grass. He thought about making for the main gate, but he knew that was hopeless. The guards would have been alerted. They’d be waiting for him. Nor could he climb the perimeter fence, not with the razor wire stretched out across the top. No. His own room seemed the best answer. The telephone was there. And so were his only weapons, the few gadgets that Smithers had given him four days—or was it four years?—ago.

He entered the house through the kitchen, the same way he had left it the night before. It was only eight o’clock, but the whole place seemed to be deserted. He ran up the staircase and along the corridor to his room on the first floor. Slowly, he opened the door. It seemed his luck was holding out. There was nobody there. Without turning on the light, he went inside and snatched up the telephone. The line was dead.

Never mind. He found the cartridges for his Game Boy, his yoyo, and the zit cream and crammed them into his pockets. He had already decided not to stay here. It was too dangerous. He would find somewhere to hide out. Then he would use the Nemesis cartridge to contact M16.

He went back to the door and opened it. With a shock he saw Mr. Grin standing in the hallway, looking hideous with his white face, his ginger hair, and his mauve twisted smile. Alex reacted quickly, striking out with the heel of his right hand. But Mr. Grin was quicker. He ducked to one side, then his hand shot out, the side of it driving into Alex’s throat. Alex gasped for breath but none came. The butler made an inarticulate sound and lashed out a second time. Alex got the impression that behind the livid scars he really was grinning, enjoying himself. He tried to avoid the blow, but Mr. Grin’s fist hit him square on the jaw. He was spun into the bedroom, falling backward.

He never even remembered hitting the floor.

# THE SCHOOL BULLY

THEY CAME FOR Alex the following morning.

He had spent the night handcuffed to a radiator in a small dark room with a single barred window. It might once have been a coal cellar. When Alex opened his eyes, the gray first light of the morning was just creeping in. He opened them and closed them again. His head was thumping and the side of his face was swollen where Mr. Grin had hit him. His arms were twisted behind him and the tendons in his shoulder were on fire. But worse than all this was his sense of failure. It was April 1, the day when the Stormbreakers would be unleashed. And Alex was helpless. He had let down M16, his uncle—and himself.

It was just before nine o'clock when the door opened and two guards came in with Mr. Grin behind them.

The handcuffs were unlocked and Alex was forced to his feet. Then, with a guard holding him on each side, he was marched out of the room and up a flight of stairs. He was still in Sayle's house. The stairs led up to the hall with its huge painting of Judgment Day. Alex looked at the figures, writhing in agony on the canvas. If he was right, the image would soon be repeated all over England. And it would happen in just three hours' time.

The guards half dragged him through a doorway and into the room with the aquarium. There was a high-backed wooden chair in front of it. Alex was forced to sit down. His hands were cuffed behind him again.

The guards left. Mr. Grin remained.

He heard the sound of feet on the spiral staircase, saw the leather shoes coming down before he saw the man who wore them. Then Herod Sayle appeared, dressed in an immaculate pale gray silk suit. Alan Blunt and Mrs. Jones had been suspicious of the Egyptian multimillionaire from the very start. They'd always thought he had something to hide. But even they had never guessed the truth. He wasn't a friend of England. He was its worst enemy.

"Three questions," Sayle snapped. His voice was utterly cold. "Who are you? Who sent you here? How much do you know?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alex said.

Sayle sighed. If there had been anything comical about him when Alex had first seen him, it had completely evaporated. His face was bored and businesslike. His eyes were ugly, full of menace. "We have very little time," he said. "Mr. Grin...?"

Mr. Grin went over to one of the display cases and took out a knife, razor sharp with a serrated edge. He held it up close to his face, his eyes gleaming.

"I've already told you that Mr. Grin used to be an expert with knives," Sayle continued. "He still is. Tell me what I want to know, Alex, or he will cause you more pain than you could begin to imagine. And don't try to lie to me, please. Just remember what happens to liars. Particularly to their tongues."

Mr. Grin took a step closer. The blade flashed, catching the light.



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“My name is Alex Rider,” Alex said.

“Rider’s son.”

“His nephew.”

“Who sent you here?”

“The same people who sent him.” There was no point lying. It didn’t matter anymore. The stakes had become too high.

“M16?” Sayle laughed without any sign of humor. “They send fourteen-year-old boys to do their dirty work? Not very English, I’d have said. Not cricket! What?” He had adopted an exaggerated English accent.

Now he walked forward and sat down behind the desk. “And what of my third question, Alex? How much have you found out?”

Alex shrugged, trying to look casual, to hide the fear he was really feeling. “I know enough,” he said.

“Go on.”

Alex took a breath. Behind him, the jellyfish drifted past like a poisonous cloud. He could see it out of the corner of his eye. He tugged at the handcuffs, wondering if it would be possible to break the chair. There was a sudden flash and the knife that Mr. Grin had been holding was suddenly quivering in the back of the chair, an inch from his head. The edge of the blade had actually nicked the skin of his neck. He felt a trickle of blood slide down over his collar.

“You’re keeping us waiting,” Herod Sayle said.

“All right. When my uncle was here, he became interested in viruses. He asked about them at the local library. I thought he was talking about computer viruses. That was the natural assumption. But I was wrong. I saw what you were doing, last night. I heard them talking on the speaker system.

Decontamination and biocontainment zones. They were talking about biological warfare. You’ve gotten hold of some sort of real virus. It came here in test tubes, packed into silver boxes, and you’ve put them into the Stormbreakers. I don’t know what happens next. I suppose when the computers are turned on, people die. They’re in schools, so it’ll be schoolchildren. Which means that you’re not the saint everyone thinks you are, Mr. Sayle. A mass murderer. A bliddy psycho, I suppose you might say.”

Herod Sayle clapped his hands softly together. “You’ve done very well, Alex,” he said. “I congratulate you.

And I feel you deserve a reward. So I’m going to tell you everything. In a way it’s appropriate that M16

should have sent me a real English schoolboy. Because, you see, there’s nothing in the world I hate more.

Oh yes...” His face twisted with anger, and for a moment, Alex could see the madness, alive in his eyes.

“You bliddy snobs with your stuck-up schools and your stinking English superiority! But I’m going to show you. I’m going to give you what you deserve!”

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He stood up and walked over to Alex. "I came to this country forty years ago," he said. "I had no money.

My family had nothing. But for a freak accident, I would probably have lived and died in Cairo. Better for you, if I had! So much better!

"I was brought here and educated by an English family. They were grateful to me because I'd saved their lives. Oh yes. And I was grateful to them too. You cannot imagine how I was feeling then. To be in London, which I had always believed to be the heart of civilization. To see such wealth and to know that I was going to be part of it! I was going to be English! To a child born in the Cairo gutter, it was an impossible dream.

"But I was soon to learn the reality..." Sayle leaned forward and yanked the knife out of the chain. He tossed it to Mr. Grin, who caught it and spun it in his hand.

"From the moment I arrived at the school, I was mocked and bullied. Because of my size. Because of my dark skin. Because I couldn't speak English well. Because I wasn't one of them. They had names for me.

Herod Smell. Goat-boy. The dwarf. And they played tricks on me. Pins on the chair. Books stolen and defaced. My trousers ripped off me and hung out on the flagpole underneath the Union Jack." Sayle shook his head slowly. "I had loved that flag when I first came here," he said. "But in only weeks I came to hate it."

"Lots of people are bullied at school—" Alex began and stopped as Sayle backhanded him viciously across the face.

"I haven't finished," Sayle said. He was breathing heavily and there was spittle on his lower lip. Alex could see him reliving the past. And once again he was allowing the past to destroy him.

"There were plenty of bullies in that school," he said. "But there was one who was worse than any of them.

He was a small, smarmy shrimp of a boy, but his parents were rich and he had a way with the other children. He knew how to talk his way around them ... a politician even then. Oh yes. He could be charming when he wanted to. When there were teachers around. But the moment their backs were turned, he was onto me. He used to organize the others. 'Let's get the goat-boy. Let's push his head in the toilet.' He had a thousand ideas to make my life miserable and he never stopped thinking up more. All the time he goaded me and taunted me and there was nothing I could do because he was popular and I was a foreigner. And do you know who that boy grew up to be?"

"No, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me," Alex said.

"I am going to tell you. Yes. He grew up to be the bliddy prime minister!"

Sayle took out a white silk handkerchief and wiped his face. His bald head was gleaming with sweat. "All my life I've been treated the same way," he continued. "No matter how successful I've become, how much money I've made, how many people I've employed. I'm still a joke. I'm still Herod Smell, the goat-boy, the Cairo tramp. Well, for forty years I've been planning my revenge. And now, at last, my time has come.

Mr. Grin..."



Mr. Grin went over to the wall and pressed a button. Alex half expected the snooker table to rise out of the floor, but instead, on every wall, a panel slid up to reveal floor-to-ceiling television screens that immediately flickered into life. On one screen Alex could see the underground laboratory, on another the assembly line, on a third the airstrip with the last of the trucks on its way out. There were closed-circuit television cameras everywhere, and Sayle could see every corner of his kingdom without even leaving the room. No wonder Alex had been discovered so easily.

“The Stormbreakers are armed and ready. And yes, you’re right, Alex. Each one contains what you might call a computer virus. But that, if you like, is my little April Fools’ joke. Because the virus I’m talking about is a form of smallpox. Of course, Alex, it’s been genetically modified to make it faster and stronger ... more lethal. A spoonful of the stuff would destroy a city. And my Stormbreakers hold much, much more than that.

“At the moment it’s isolated, quite safe. But this afternoon there’s going to be a bit of a party at the Science Museum. Every school in England will be joining in, with the schoolchildren gathered around their nice, new shiny computers. And at midday, on the stroke of twelve, my old friend, the prime minister, will make one of his smug, self-serving speeches and then he’ll press a button. He thinks he’ll be activating the computers, and in a way, he’s right. Pressing the button will release the virus, and by midnight tonight, there will be no more schoolchildren in England and the prime minister will weep as he remembers the day he first bullied Herod Sayle!”

“You’re mad!” Alex exclaimed. “By midnight tonight you’ll be in jail.”

Sayle dismissed the thought with a wave of the hand. “I think not. By the time anyone realizes what has happened, I’ll be gone. I’m not alone in this, Alex. I have powerful friends who have supported me—”

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“Yassen Gregorovich.”

“You have been busy!” He seemed surprised that Alex knew the name. “Yassen is working for the people who have been helping me. Let’s not mention any names or even nationalities. You’d be surprised how many countries there are in the world who loathe the English. Most of Europe, just to begin with. But anyway...” He clapped his hands and went back to his desk. “Now you know the truth. I’m glad I was able to tell you, Alex. You have no idea how much I hate you. Even when we were playing that stupid game of snooker, I was thinking how much pleasure it would give me to kill you. You’re just like the boys I was at school with. Nothing has changed.”

“You haven’t changed,” Alex said. His cheek was still smarting where Sayle had hit him. But he’d heard enough. “I’m sorry you were bullied at school,” he said. “But lots of kids get bullied and they don’t turn into nutcases. You’re really sad, Mr. Sayle. And your plan won’t work. I’ve told M16 everything I know.

They’ll be waiting for you at the Science Museum. So will the men in white coats.”

Sayle giggled. “Forgive me if I don’t believe you,” he said. His face was suddenly stone. “And perhaps you forget that I warned you about lying to me.”

Mr. Grin took a step forward, flipping the knife over so that the blade landed in the flat of his hand.

“I’d like to watch you die,” Sayle said. “Unfortunately, I have a pressing engagement in London.” He turned to Mr. Grin. “You can walk with me to the helicopter. Then come back here and kill the boy.

Make it slow. Make it painful. We should have kept back some smallpox for him, but I'm sure you'll think of something much more creative."

He walked to the door, then stopped and turned to Alex.

"Good-bye, Alex. It wasn't a pleasure knowing you. But enjoy your death. And remember. You're only going to be the first..."

The door swung shut. Handcuffed to the chair with the jellyfish floating silently behind him, Alex was left alone.



# DEEP WATER

ALEX GAVE up trying to break free of the chair. His wrists were bruised and bloody where the chain cut into him, but the cuffs were too tight. After thirty minutes, when Mr. Grin still hadn't come back, Alex had tried to reach the zit cream that Smithers had given him. He knew it would burn through the handcuffs in seconds, and the worst thing was he could actually feel it, where he had put it, in the zipped-up outer pocket of his combat trousers. But although his outstretched fingers were only a few inches away, try as he might he couldn't reach it. It was enough to drive him mad.

He had heard the clatter of a helicopter taking off and knew that Herod Sayle must be on his way to London. Alex was still reeling from what he had heard. The multimillionaire was completely insane. What he was planning was beyond belief, a mass murder that would destroy Britain for generations to come.

Alex tried to imagine what was about to happen. Tens of thousands of schoolchildren would be sitting in their classes, gathered around their new Stormbreakers, waiting for the moment—at midday exactly

—when the prime minister would press the button and bring them on-line. But, instead, there would be a hiss and a small cloud of deadly smallpox vapor would be released into the crowded room. And minutes later, all over the country, the dying would begin. Alex had to close his mind to the thought. It was too horrible. And yet it was going to happen in just a couple of hours' time. He was the only person who could stop it. And here he was, tied down, unable to move.

The door opened. Alex twisted around, expecting to see Mr. Grin, but it was Nadia Vole who hurried in, closing the door behind her. Her pale round face seemed flushed, and her eyes, behind the glasses, were afraid. She came over to him.

"Alex—"

"What do you want?" Alex recoiled away from her as she leaned over him. Then there was a click, and to his astonishment, his hands came free. She had unlocked the handcuffs! He stood up, wondering what was going on.

"Listen to me," Vole said. The words were tumbling quickly and softly out of her yellow-painted lips. "We do not have much time. I am here to help you. I worked with your uncle—Herr Rider." Alex stared at her in surprise. "Yes. I am on the same side as you."

"But nobody told me—"

"It was better for you not to know."

"But..." Alex was confused. "I saw you with the submarine. You knew what Sayle was doing..."

"There was nothing I could do. Not then. It's too hard for me to explain. We don't have the time to argue."

"You want to stop him or no?"

"I need to find a phone."

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"All the phones in the house are coded. You cannot use them. But I have a mobile in my office."

"Then let's go."

Alex was still suspicious. If Nadia Vole had known so much, why hadn't she tried to stop Sayle before? On the other hand, she had released him—and Mr. Grin would be back any minute. He had no choice but to trust her. He followed her out of the room, around the corner, and up a flight of stairs to a landing with a statue of a naked woman, some Greek goddess, in the corner. Vole paused for a moment, resting her hand against the statue's arm.

"What is it?" Alex asked.

"I feel dizzy. You go on. It's the first door on the left."

Alex went past her, along the landing. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her press down on the statue's arm. The arm moved ... a lever. By the time he knew he had been tricked, it was too late. He yelled out as the floor underneath him swung around on a hidden pivot. He tried to stop himself falling, but there was nothing he could do. He crashed onto his back and slid down through the floor and into a black plastic tunnel, which corkscrewed beneath him. As he went, he heard Nadia Vole laugh triumphantly, and then he was gone, desperately trying to find a hold on the sides, wondering what would be at the end of his fall.

Five seconds later he found out. The corkscrew spat him out. He fell briefly through the air and splashed into cold water. For a moment he was blinded, fighting for air. Then he rose to the surface and found himself in a huge glass tank filled with water and rocks. That was when he realized, with horror, exactly where he was.

Vole had deposited him in the tank with the giant jellyfish: Herod Sayle's Portuguese man-of-war. It was a miracle that he hadn't crashed right into it. He could see it in the far corner of the tank, its dreadful tentacles with their hundreds of stinging cells, twisting and spiraling in the water. There was nothing between him and it. Alex fought back the panic, forced himself to keep still. He realized that thrashing about in the water would only create the current that would bring the creature over to him. The jellyfish had no eyes. It didn't know he was there. It wouldn't ... couldn't attack.

But eventually it would reach him. The tank he was in was huge, at least fifteen feet deep and twenty or thirty feet long. The glass rose above the level of the water, far out of his reach. There was no way he could climb out. Looking down, through the water, he could see light. He realized he was looking into the room he had just left, Herod Sayle's private office. There was a movement everything was vague and distorted through the rippling water—and the door opened. Two figures walked in. Alex could barely make them out, but he knew who they were. Fraulein Vole and Mr. Grin. They stood together in front of the tank. Vole was holding what looked like a mobile telephone in her hand.

"I hope you can hear me, Alex." The German woman's voice rang out from a speaker somewhere above his head. "I am sure you will have seen by now that there is no way out of the tank. You can tread water.

Maybe for one hour, maybe for two. Others have lasted for longer. What is the record, Mr. Grin?"

"Ire naaargh aah!"

"Five and a half hours. Yes. But soon you will get tired, Alex. You will drown. Or perhaps it will be faster and you will drift into the embrace of our friend. You see him ... no? It is not an embrace to be



desired. It will kill you. The pain, I think, will be beyond the imagination of a child. It is a pity, Alex Rider, that M16

chose to send you here. They will not be seeing you again.”

The voice clicked off. Alex kicked in the water, keeping his head above the surface, his eyes fixed on the jellyfish. There was another blurred movement on the other side of the glass. Mr. Grin had left the room.

But Vole had stayed behind. She wanted to watch him die.

Alex looked up. The tank was lit from above by a series of neon strips, but they were too high to reach.

Beneath him he heard a click and a soft, whirring sound. Almost at once he became aware that something had changed. The jellyfish was moving toward him! He could see the translucent cone with its dark mauve tip heading toward him. Underneath the creature, the tentacles slowly danced.

He swallowed water and realized he had opened his mouth to cry out. Vole must have turned on some sort of artificial current. That was what was making the jellyfish move. Desperately he kicked out with his feet, moving away from it, surging through the water on his back. One tentacle floated up and draped itself over his foot. If he hadn't been wearing sneakers, he would have been stung. Could the stinging cells penetrate his clothes? Almost certainly. His sneakers were the only protection he had.

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He reached the back corner of the aquarium and paused there, one hand against the glass. He already knew that what Vole had said was true. If the jellyfish didn't get him, tiredness would. He had to fight every second to stay afloat, and sheer terror was sapping his strength. The glass. He pushed against it, wondering if he could break it. Perhaps there was a way... He checked the distance between himself and the jellyfish, took a deep breath and dived down to the bottom of the pool. He could see Nadia Vole, watching. Although she was a blur to him, he would be crystal clear to her. She didn't move, and Alex realized with despair that she had expected him to do just this.

He swam to the rocks and looked for one small enough to bring to the surface. But the rocks were too heavy. He found one about the size of his own head, but it refused to move. Vole hadn't tried to stop him because she knew that all the rocks were set in concrete. Alex was running out of breath. He twisted around and pushed himself up toward the surface, only seeing at the last second that the jellyfish had drifted above him.

He screamed, bubbles erupting out of his mouth. The tentacles were right over his head. Alex contorted his body and managed to stay down, flailing madly with his legs to propel himself sideways. His shoulder slammed into the nearest of the rocks and he felt the pain shudder through him. Clutching his arm in his hand, he backed into another corner and rose back up, gasping for breath as his head broke through the surface of the water.

He couldn't break the glass. He couldn't climb out. He couldn't avoid the touch of the jellyfish forever.

Although he had taken all the gadgets Smithers had given him, none of them could help him.

And then Alex remembered the zit cream. He let go of his arm and ran a finger up the side of the aquarium. The tank was an engineering marvel. Alex had no idea how much pressure the water was exerting on the huge plates of glass, but the whole thing was held together by a framework of iron

girders that fitted around the corners on both the inside and the outside of the glass, the metal faces held together by a series of rivets.

Treading water, he unzipped his pocket and took out the tube. Zit-Clean. For Healthier Skin. If Nadia Vole could see what he was doing, she must think he had gone mad. The jellyfish was drifting toward the back of the aquarium. Alex waited a few moments, then swam forward and dived for a second time.

There didn't seem to be very much of the cream given the thickness of the girders and the size of the tank, but Alex remembered the demonstration Smithers had given him, how little he had used. Would the cream even work underwater? There was no point worrying about that now; he had to give it a try. Alex held the tube against the metal corners at the front of the tank and did his best to squeeze a long line of cream all the way down the length of metal, using his other hand to rub it in around the rivets.

He kicked his feet, propelling himself across to the other side. He didn't know how long he would have before the cream took effect ... and anyway, Nadia Vole was already aware that something was wrong.

Alex saw that she had stood up again and was speaking into the mobile phone, perhaps calling for help.

He had used half the tube on one side of the tank. He used the second half on the other. The jellyfish was hovering above him, the tentacles reaching out as if to grab hold of him and stop him. How long had he been underwater? His heart was pounding. And what would happen when the metal broke?

He just had time to take one breath before he found out.

Even underwater, the cream burned through the rivets on the inside of the tank. The glass separated from the girders, and with nothing to hold it back, the huge pressure of water smashed it open like a door caught in the wind. Alex didn't see what happened next. He didn't have time to think. The world spun and he was thrown forward, as helpless as a cork in a waterfall. The next few seconds were a twisting nightmare of rushing water and exploding glass. Alex didn't dare open his eyes. He felt himself being hurled forward, slammed into something, then sucked back again. He was sure he had broken every bone in his body. Now he was underwater. He struggled to find air. His head broke through the surface, but even so, when he finally opened his mouth he was amazed he could actually breathe.

The front of the tank had blown off and a thousand gallons of water had cascaded into Herod Sayle's office.

The water had smashed the furniture and blown the windows out. It was still falling in torrents through the holes where the windows had been, the rest of it draining away through the floor. Bruised and dazed, Alex stood up, water curling around his ankles.

Where was the jellyfish?

He had been lucky that the two of them hadn't become tangled up in the sudden eruption of water. But it could still be close. There might still be enough water in Sayle's office to allow it to reach him. Alex backed into a corner of the room, his whole body taut. Then he saw it.

Nadia Vole had been less lucky than he. She had been standing in front of the glass when the girders broke and she hadn't been able to get out of the way in time. She was floating on her back, her legs



limp and broken. The Portuguese man-of-war was all over her. Part of it was sitting on her face and she seemed to be staring at him through the quivering mass of jelly. Her yellow lips were drawn back in an endless scream.

The tentacles were wrapped all around her, hundreds and hundreds of stinging cells clinging to her arms and legs and chest. Feeling sick, Alex backed away to the door and staggered out into the corridor.

An alarm had gone off. He only heard it now as sound and vision came back to him. The screaming of the siren shook him out of his dazed state. What time was it? Almost eleven o'clock. At least his watch was still working. But he was in Cornwall, at least a five-hour drive from London, and with the alarms sounding, the armed guards, and the razor wire, he'd never make it out of the complex. Find a telephone? No. Vole had probably been telling the truth when she said they were blocked. And, anyway, how could he get in touch with Alan Blunt or Mrs. Jones at this late stage? They'd already be at the Science Museum.

Just one hour left.

Outside, over the din of the alarms, Alex heard another sound. The splutter and roar of a propeller. He went over to the nearest window and looked out. Sure enough, the cargo plane that had been there when he arrived was about to take off.

Alex was soaking wet, battered, and almost exhausted. But he knew what he had to do.

He spun around and began to run.