

NOT MY BUSINESS

Alex Rider lay on his back, drying out in the midday sun.

He could feel the salt water from his last swim trickling through his hair and evaporating off his chest. His shorts, still wet, clung to him. He was, at that moment, as happy as it is possible to be; one week into a holiday that had been perfect from the moment the plane had touched down in Montpellier and he had stepped out into the brilliance of his first Mediterranean day. He loved the South of France – the intense colours, the smells, the pace of life that hung onto every minute and refused to let go. He hadn't any idea what time it was, except that he was getting hungry and guessed it must soon be lunch. There was a brief burst of music as a girl with a radio

walked past, and Alex turned his head to follow her. And that was when the sun went in, the sea froze, and the whole world seemed to catch its breath.

He wasn't looking at the girl with the radio. He was looking past her, down to the sea wall that divided the beach from the jetty, where a yacht was just pulling in. The yacht was enormous, almost the size of one of the passenger boats that carried tourists up and down the coast. But no tourists would ever set foot on this craft. It was completely uninviting, cruising silently through the water, with tinted glass in the windows and a massive bow that rose up like a solid white wall. A man stood at the very front, staring straight ahead, his face blank. It was a face that Alex recognized instantly.

Yassen Gregorovich. It had to be.

Alex sat perfectly still, supporting himself on one arm, his hand half buried in the sand. As he watched, a man in his twenties appeared from the cabin and busied himself mooring the boat. He was short and apelike, wearing a string vest that showed off the tattoos which completely covered his arms and shoulders. A deckhand? Yassen made no offer to help him with his work. A third man hurried along the jetty. He was fat

and bald, dressed in a cheap white suit. The top of his head had been burnt by the sun and the skin had turned an ugly, cancerous red.

Yassen saw him and climbed down, moving like spilt oil. He was wearing blue jeans and a white shirt open at the neck. Other men might have had to struggle to keep their balance walking down the swaying gangplank, but he didn't even hesitate. There was something inhuman about him. With his close-cropped hair, his hard blue eyes and pale, expressionless face, he was obviously no holidaymaker. But only Alex knew the truth about him. Yassen Gregorovich was a contract killer, the man who had murdered his uncle and changed his own life. He was wanted all over the world.

So what was he doing here in a little seaside town on the edge of the marshes and lagoons that made up the Camargue? There was nothing in Saint-Pierre apart from beaches, campsites, too many restaurants and an oversized church that looked more like a fortress. It had taken Alex a week to get used to the quiet charm of the place. And now this!

"Alex? What are you looking at?" Sabina murmured, and Alex had to force himself to turn round, to remember that she was there.

"I'm..." The words wouldn't come. He didn't know what to say.

"Do you think you could rub a little more sun-cream into my back? I'm overheating..."

That was Sabina. Slim, dark-haired, and sometimes much older than her fifteen years. But then she was the sort of girl who had probably swapped toys for boys before she hit eleven. Although she was using factor 25, she seemed to need more suncream rubbed in every fifteen minutes, and somehow it was always Alex who had to do it for her. He glanced quickly at her back, which was in fact perfectly bronzed. She was wearing a bikini made out of so little material that it hadn't bothered with a pattern. Her eyes were covered by a pair of fake Dior sunglasses (which she had bought for a tenth of the price of the real thing) and she had her head buried in *The Lord of the Rings*, at the same time waving the suncream.

Alex looked back at the yacht. Yassen was shaking hands with the bald man. The deckhand was standing near by, waiting. Even at this distance Alex could see that Yassen was very much in charge; that when he spoke, the two men listened. Alex had once seen Yassen shoot a man dead just for dropping a package. There was

still an extraordinary coldness about him that seemed to neutralize even the Mediterranean sun. The strange thing was that there were very few people in the world who would have been able to recognize the Russian. Alex was one of them. Could Yassen's being here have something to do with him?

"Alex...?" Sabina said.

The three men moved away from the boat, heading into the town. Suddenly Alex was on his feet.

"I'll be right back," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"I need a drink."

"I've got water."

"No, I want a Coke."

Even as he swept up his T-shirt and pulled it over his head, Alex knew that this was not a good idea. Yassen Gregorovich might have come to the Camargue because he wanted a holiday. He might have come to murder the local mayor. Either way, it had nothing to do with Alex and it would be crazy to get involved with Yassen again. Alex remembered the promise he had made the last time they had met, on a rooftop in central London.

You killed Ian Rider. One day I'll kill you.

At the time he had meant it – but that had

been then. Right now he didn't want anything to do with Yassen or the world he represented.

And yet...

Yassen was here. He had to know why.

The three men were walking along the main road, following the line of the sea. Alex doubled back across the sand, passing the white concrete bullring that had struck him as bizarre when he'd first come here – until he had remembered that he was only about a hundred miles from Spain. There was to be a bullfight tonight. People were already queuing at the tiny windows to buy tickets, but he and Sabina had decided they would keep well clear. "I hope the bull wins," had been Sabina's only comment.

Yassen and the two men turned left, disappearing into the town centre. Alex quickened his pace, knowing how easy it would be to lose them in the tangle of lanes and alleyways that surrounded the church. He didn't have to be too careful about being seen. Yassen thought he was safe. It was unlikely that, in a crowded holiday resort, he would notice anyone following him. But with Yassen you never knew. Alex felt his heart thumping with every step he took. His mouth was dry, and for once it wasn't the sun that was to blame.

Yassen had gone. Alex looked left and right. There were people crowding in on him from all sides, pouring out of the shops and into the open-air restaurants that were already serving lunch. The smell of paella filled the air. He cursed himself for hanging back, for not daring to get any closer. The three men could have disappeared inside any of the buildings. Could it be, even, that he had imagined seeing them in the first place? It was a pleasant thought, but it was dashed a moment later when he caught sight of them sitting on a terrace in front of one of the smarter restaurants in the square, the bald man already calling for menus.

Alex walked in front of a shop selling post-cards, using the racks as a screen between himself and the restaurant. Next came a café serving snacks and drinks beneath wide, multicoloured umbrellas. He edged into it. Yassen and the other two men were now less than ten metres away and Alex could make out more details. The deck-hand was pushing bread into his mouth as if he hadn't eaten for a week. The bald man was talking quietly, urgently, waving his fist in the air to emphasize a point. Yassen was listening patiently. With the noise of the crowd all around, Alex couldn't make out a word any of them were

saying. He peered round one of the umbrellas and a waiter almost collided with him, letting loose a torrent of angry French. Yassen glanced in his direction and Alex ducked away, afraid that he had drawn attention to himself.

A line of plants in wooden tubs divided the café from the restaurant terrace where the men were eating. Alex slipped between two of the tubs and moved quickly into the shadows of the restaurant interior. He felt safer here, less exposed. The kitchens were right behind him. To one side was a bar and in front of it about a dozen tables, all of them empty. Waiters were coming in and out with plates of food, but all the customers had chosen to eat outside.

Alex looked out through the door. And caught his breath. Yassen had got up and was walking purposefully towards him. Had he been spotted? But then he saw that Yassen was holding something: a mobile phone. He must have received a call and was coming into the restaurant to take it privately. Another few steps and he would reach the door. Alex looked around him and saw an alcove screened by a bead curtain. He pushed through it and found himself in a storage area just big enough to conceal him. Mops, buckets, cardboard boxes and empty wine bottles crowded

around him. The beads shivered and became still.

Yassen was suddenly there.

"I arrived twenty minutes ago," he was saying. He was speaking English with only a very slight trace of a Russian accent. "Franco was waiting for me. The address is confirmed and everything has been arranged."

There was a pause. Alex tried not to breathe. He was centimetres away from Yassen, separated only by the fragile barrier of brightly coloured beads. But for the fact that it was so dark inside after the glare of the sun, Yassen would surely have seen him.

"We'll do it this afternoon. You have nothing to worry about. It is better for us not to communicate. I will report to you on my return to England."

Yassen Gregorovich clicked off the phone and suddenly became quite still. Alex actually saw the moment, the sudden alertness as some animal instinct told Yassen that he had been overheard. The phone was still cradled inside the man's hand, but it could have been a knife that he was about to throw. His head was still but his eyes glanced from side to side, searching for the enemy. Alex stayed where he was behind the beads, not daring to move. What should he do?

He was tempted to make a break for it, to run out into the open air. No. He would be dead before he had taken two steps. Yassen would kill him before he even knew who he was or why he had been there. Very slowly, Alex looked around for a weapon, for anything to defend himself with.

And then the kitchen door swung open and a waiter came out, swerving round Yassen and calling to someone at the same time. The stillness of the moment was shattered. Yassen slipped the phone into his trouser pocket and went out to rejoin the other men.

Alex let out a huge sigh of relief.

What had he learnt?

Yassen Gregorovich had come here to kill someone. He was sure of that much. *The address is confirmed and everything has been arranged.* But at least Alex hadn't heard his own name mentioned. So he was right. The target was probably some Frenchman, living here in Saint-Pierre. It would happen sometime this afternoon. A gunshot or perhaps a knife flashing in the sun. A fleeting moment of violence and someone somewhere would sit back, knowing they had one enemy less.

What could he do?

Alex pushed through the bead curtain and

made his way out of the back of the restaurant. He was relieved to find himself in the street, away from the square. Only now did he try to collect his thoughts. He could go to the police, of course. He could tell them that he was a spy who had worked, three times now, for MI6 – British military intelligence. He could say that he had recognized Yassen, knew him for what he was, and that a killing would almost certainly take place that afternoon unless he was stopped.

But what good would it do? The French police might understand him, but they would never believe him. He was a fourteen-year-old English schoolboy with sand in his hair and a suntan. They would take one look at him and laugh.

He could go to Sabina and her parents. But Alex didn't want to do that either. He was only here because they had invited him, and why should he bring murder into their holiday? Not that they would believe him any more than the police. Once, when he had been staying with her in Cornwall, Alex had tried to tell Sabina the truth. She had thought he was joking.

Alex looked around at the tourist shops, the ice-cream parlours, the crowds strolling happily along the street. It was a typical picture-postcard view. The real world. So what the hell was he doing

getting mixed up again with spies and assassins? He was on holiday. This was none of his business. Let Yassen do whatever he wanted. Alex wouldn't be able to stop him even if he tried. Better to forget that he had ever seen him.

Alex took a deep breath and walked back down the road towards the beach to find Sabina and her parents. As he went he tried to work out what he would tell them: why he had left so suddenly and why he was no longer smiling now that he was back.

That afternoon, Alex and Sabina hitched a lift with a local farmer to Aigues-Mortes, a fortified town on the edge of the salt marshes. Sabina wanted to escape from her parents and hang out in a French café, where they could watch the locals and tourists rub shoulders in the street. She had devised a system for marking French teenagers for good looks – with points lost for weedy legs, crooked teeth or bad dress sense. Nobody had yet scored more than seven out of twenty and Alex would normally have been happy sitting with her, listening to her as she laughed out loud.

But not this afternoon.

Everything was out of focus. The great walls

and towers that surrounded him were miles away, and the sightseers seemed to be moving too slowly, like a film that had run down. Alex wanted to enjoy being here. He wanted to feel part of the holiday again. But seeing Yassen had spoilt it all.

Alex had met Sabina only a month before, when the two of them had been helping at the Wimbledon tennis tournament, but they had struck up an immediate friendship. Sabina was an only child. Her mother, Liz, worked as a fashion designer; her father, Edward, was a journalist. Alex hadn't seen very much of him. He had started the holiday late, coming down on the train from Paris, and had been working on some story ever since.

The family had rented a house just outside Saint-Pierre, right on the edge of a river, the Petit Rhône. It was a simple place, typical of the area: bright white with blue shutters and a roof of sun-baked terracotta tiles. There were three bedrooms and, on the ground floor, an airy, old-fashioned kitchen that opened onto an overgrown garden with a swimming pool and a tennis court with weeds pushing through the asphalt. Alex had loved it from the start. His bedroom overlooked the river, and every evening he and

Sabina had spent hours sprawled over an old wicker sofa, talking quietly and watching the water ripple past.

The first week of the holiday had disappeared in a flash. They had swum in the pool and in the sea, which was less than a mile away. They had gone walking, climbing, canoeing and, once (it wasn't Alex's favourite sport), horse-riding. Alex really liked Sabina's parents. They were the sort of adults who hadn't forgotten that they had once been teenagers themselves, and more or less left him and Sabina to do whatever they wanted on their own. And for the last seven days everything had been fine.

Until Yassen.

The address is confirmed and everything has been arranged. We'll do it this afternoon...

What was the Russian planning to do in Saint-Pierre? What bad luck was it that had brought him here, casting his shadow once again over Alex's life? Despite the heat of the afternoon sun, Alex shivered.

"Alex?"

He realized that Sabina had been talking to him, and looked round. She was gazing across the table with a look of concern. "What are you thinking about?" she asked. "You were miles away."

“Nothing.”

“You haven’t been yourself all afternoon. Did something happen this morning? Where did you disappear to on the beach?”

“I told you. I just needed a drink.” He hated having to lie to her but he couldn’t tell her the truth.

“I was just saying we ought to get going. I promised we’d be home by five. Oh my God! Look at that one!” She pointed at another teenager walking past. “Four out of twenty. Aren’t there *any* good-looking boys in France?” She glanced at Alex. “Apart from you, I mean.”

“So how many do I get out of twenty?” Alex asked.

Sabina considered. “Twelve and a half,” she said at last. “But don’t worry, Alex. Another ten years and you’ll be perfect.”

Sometimes horror announces itself in the smallest of ways.

On this day it was a single police car, racing along the wide, empty road that twisted down to Saint-Pierre. Alex and Sabina were sitting in the back of the same truck that had brought them. They were looking at a herd of cows grazing in one of the fields when the police car – blue and

white with a light flashing on the roof – overtook them and tore off into the distance. Alex still had Yassen on his mind and the sight of it tightened the knot in the pit of his stomach. But it was only a police car. It didn't have to mean anything.

But then there was a helicopter, taking off from somewhere not so far away and arcing into the brilliant sky. Sabina saw it and pointed at it.

"Something's happened," she said. "That's just come from the town."

Had the helicopter come from the town? Alex wasn't so sure. He watched it sweep over them and disappear in the direction of Aigues-Mortes, and all the time his breaths were getting shorter and he felt the heavy weight of some nameless dread.

And then they turned a corner and Alex knew that his worst fears had come true – but in a way that he could never have foreseen.

Rubble, jagged brickwork and twisted steel. Thick black smoke curling into the sky. Their house had been blown apart. Just one wall remained intact, giving the cruel illusion that not too much damage had been done. But the rest of it was gone. Alex saw a brass bed hanging at a crazy angle, somehow suspended in mid-air. A pair of blue shutters lay in the grass about fifty metres

away. The water in the swimming pool was brown and scummy. The blast must have been immense.

A fleet of cars and vans was parked around the building. They belonged to the police, the hospital, the fire department and the anti-terrorist squad. To Alex they didn't look real: more like brightly coloured toys. In a foreign country, nothing looks more foreign than its emergency services.

"Mum! Dad!"

Alex heard Sabina shout the words and saw her leap out of the truck before they had stopped moving. Then she was running across the gravel drive, forcing her way between the officials in their different uniforms. The truck stopped and Alex climbed down, unsure whether his feet would come into contact with the ground or if he would simply go on, right through it. His head was spinning; he thought he was going to faint.

Nobody spoke to him as he continued forward. It was as if he wasn't there at all. Ahead of him he saw Sabina's mother appear from nowhere, her face streaked with ashes and tears, and he thought to himself that if she was all right, if she had been out of the house when the explosion happened, then maybe Edward Pleasure had escaped too. But then he saw Sabina begin to

shake and fall into her mother's arms, and he knew the worst.

He drew nearer, in time to hear Liz's words as she clutched hold of her daughter.

"We still don't know what happened. Dad's been taken by helicopter to Montpellier. He's alive, Sabina, but he's badly injured. We're going to him now. You know your dad's a fighter. But the doctors aren't sure if he's going to make it or not. We just don't know..."

The smell of burning reached out to Alex and engulfed him. The smoke had blotted out the sun. His eyes began to water and he fought for breath.

This was his fault.

He didn't know why it had happened but he was utterly certain who was responsible.

Yassen Gregorovich.

None of my business. That was what Alex had thought. This was the result.