



ALEX RIDER MISSION 5 : SCORPIA
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SCORPIA



ANTHONY HOROWITZ



For MN



For the two thieves on the 200cc Vespa scooter, it was a case of the wrong victim, in the wrong place, on the wrong Sunday morning in September.

It seemed that all life had gathered in the Piazza Esmeralda, a few miles outside Venice. Church had just finished and families were strolling together in the brilliant sunlight. Grandmothers in black, boys and girls in their best suits and communion dresses. The coffee bars and ice-cream shops were open, their customers spilling onto the pavements and out into the street. A huge fountain – all naked gods and serpents – gushed jets of ice-cold water. And there was a market. Stalls had been set up selling kites, dried flowers, old postcards, clockwork birds and sacks of seed for the hundreds of pigeons that strutted around.

In the middle of all this were a dozen English schoolchildren. It was bad luck for the two thieves that one of them was Alex Rider.

It was the beginning of September. Less than a month had passed since Alex's final confrontation with Damian Cray on Air Force One – the American presidential plane. It had been the end of an adventure that had taken him to Paris and Amsterdam, and finally to the main runway at Heathrow Airport even as twenty-five nuclear missiles had been fired at targets all around the world. Alex had managed to destroy these missiles. He had been there when Cray died. And at last he had gone home with the usual collection of bruises and scratches only to find a grim-faced and determined Jack Starbright waiting for him. Jack was his housekeeper but she was also his friend, and, as always, she was worried about him.

"You can't keep this up, Alex," she said. "You're never at school. You missed half the summer term when you were at Skeleton Key and loads of the spring term when you were in Cornwall and then at that awful academy Point Blanc. If you keep this up, you'll flunk all your exams and then what will you do?"

"It's not my fault—" Alex began.

"I know it's not your fault. But it's my job to do something about it, and I've decided to hire a tutor for what's left of the summer."

"You're not serious!"

"I am serious. You've still got quite a bit of holiday left. And you can start right now."

"I don't want a tutor—" Alex started to protest.

"I'm not giving you any choice, Alex. I don't care what gadgets you've got or what smart moves you might try – this time there's no escape!"

Alex wanted to argue with her but in his heart he knew she was right. MI6 always provided him with a doctor's note to explain his long absences from school, but the teachers were more or less giving up on him. His last report had said it all:

Alex continues to spend more time out of school than in it, and if this carries on, he might as well forget his

GCSEs. Although he cannot be blamed for what seems to be a catalogue of medical problems, if he falls any further behind, I fear he may disappear altogether.

So that was it. Alex had stopped an insane, multimillionaire pop singer from destroying half the world – and what had he got for it? Extra work!

He started with ill grace – particularly when he discovered that the tutor Jack had four years actually taught at Brookland, his own school. Alex wasn't in his class, but even so it was a moment of embarrassment and he hoped nobody would find out. However, he had to admit that Mr Grey was good at his job. Charlie Grey was young and easy-going, arriving on a bicycle with a saddlebag crammed with books. He taught humanities but seemed to know his way round the entire syllabus.

"We've only got a few weeks," he announced. "That may not seem very much, but you'd be surprised how much you can achieve one to one. I'm going to work you seven hours a day, and on top of that I'm going to leave you with homework. By the end of the holidays you're probably hate me. But at least you'll start the new school year on a more or less even keel."

Alex didn't hate Charlie Grey. They worked quietly and quickly, moving through the days from maths to history to science and so on. Every weekend, the teacher left behind exam papers, and gradually Alex saw his percentages improve. And then Mr Grey sprang his surprise.

"You've done really well, Alex. I wasn't going to mention this to you, but how would you like to come with me on the school trip?"

"Where are you going?"

"Well, last year it was Paris; the year before that it was Rome. We look at museums, churches, palaces ... that sort of thing. This year we're going to Venice. Do you want to come?"

Venice.

It had been in Alex's mind all along – the final minutes on the plane after Damian Cray had died. Yassen Gregorovich had been there, the Russian assassin who had cast a shadow over so much of Alex's life. Yassen had been dying, a bullet lodged in his chest. But just before the end he'd managed to blurt out a secret that had been buried for fourteen years.

Alex's parents had been killed shortly after he was born and he had been brought up by his father's brother, Ian Rider. Earlier this year, Ian Rider had died too, supposedly in a car accident. It had been the shock of Alex's life to discover that his uncle was actually a spy and had been killed on a mission in Cornwall. That was when MI6 had made their appearance. Somehow they had succeeded in sucking Alex into their world, and he had been working for them ever since.

Alex knew very little about his mother and father, John and Helen Rider. In his bedroom he had a photo of them: a watchful, handsome man with close-cut hair standing with his arm round a pretty, half-smiling woman. He had been in the army and still looked like a soldier. She had been a nurse, working in radiology. But they were strangers to him; he couldn't remember anything about them. They had died while he was still a baby. In a plane crash. That was what he had been told.

Now he knew otherwise.

The plane crash had been as much a lie as his uncle's car accident. Yassen Gregorovich had told him the truth on Air Force One. Alex's father had been an assassin – just like Yassen. The two of them had even worked together; John Rider had once saved Yassen's life. But then his father had been killed by MI6 – the very same people who had forced Alex to work for them three times, lying to him, manipulating him and finally dumping him when he was no longer needed. It was almost impossible to believe, but Yassen had offered him a way to find proof.

Go to Venice. Find Scorpia. And you will find your destiny...

Alex had to know what had happened fourteen years ago. Discovering the truth about John Rider would be the same as finding out about himself. Because, if his father really had killed people for money, what did that make him? Alex was angry, unhappy ... and confused. He had to find Scorpia, whatever it was. Scorpia would tell him what he needed to know.

A school trip to Venice couldn't have come at a better time. And Jack didn't stop him from going. In fact, she encouraged him.

"It's exactly what you need, Alex. A chance to hang out with your friends and just be an ordinary schoolboy. I'm sure you'll have a great time."

Alex said nothing. He hated having to lie to her, but there was no way he could tell her the truth. Jack had never met his father; this wasn't her affair.

So he let her help him pack, knowing that, for him, the trip would have little to do with churches and museums. He would use it to explore the city and see what he unearthed. Five days wasn't a long time. But it would be a start. Five days in Venice. Five days to find Scorpia.

And now here he was. In an Italian square. Three days of the trip had already gone by and he had found nothing.

"Alex – you fancy an ice cream?"

"No. I'm all right."

"I'm hot. I'm going to get one of those things you told me about. What did you call it? *granada* or something..."

Alex was standing beside another fourteen-year-old boy who happened to be his closest friend at Brookland. He had been surprised to hear that Tom Harris was going to be on the trip, as Tom wasn't exactly interested in art or history. Tom wasn't interested in any school subjects and was regularly bottom in everything. But the best thing about him was that he didn't care. He was always cheerful, and even the teachers had to admit that he was fun to be with. And what Tom lacked in the classroom, he made up for on the sports field. He was captain of the school football team and Alex's main rival on sports day, beating him in the hurdles, four hundred metres and the pole vault. Tom was small for his age, with spiky black hair and bright blue eyes. He wouldn't have been found dead in a museum, so why was he here? Alex soon found out. Tom's parents were going through a messy divorce, and they had packed him off to get him out of the way.

"It's a *granita*," Alex said. It was what he always ordered when he was in Italy: crushed ice with fresh lemon juice squeezed over it. It was halfway between an ice cream and a drink.

and there was nothing in the world more refreshing.

"Come on. You can order it for me. When I ask anyone for anything in Italian they just stare at me like I'm mad."

In fact, Alex only spoke a few phrases himself. Italian was one language Ian Rider hadn't taught him. Even so, he went with Tom and ordered two ices from a shop near the market stalls, one for Tom and one – Tom insisted – for himself. Tom had plenty of money. His parents had showered him with euros before he left.

"Are you going to be at school this term?" he asked.

Alex shrugged. "Of course."

"You were hardly there last term – or the term before."

"I was ill."

Tom nodded. He was wearing Diesel lightsensitive sunglasses that he had bought at Heathrow duty-free. They were too big for his face and kept slipping down his nose. "You do realize that no one believes that," he commented.

"Why not?"

"Because nobody's that ill. It's just not possible." Tom lowered his voice. "There's a rumour you're a thief," he confided.

"What?"

"That's why you're away so much. You're in trouble with the police."

"Is that what you think?"

"No. But Miss Bedfordshire asked me about you. She knows we're mates. She said you got into trouble once for nicking a crane or something. She heard about that from someone and she thinks you're in therapy."

"Therapy?" Alex was staggered.

"Yeah. She's quite sorry for you. She thinks that's why you have to go away so much. You know, to see a shrink."

Jane Bedfordshire was the school secretary, an attractive woman in her twenties. She had come on the trip too, as she did every year. Alex could see her now on the other side of the square, talking to Mr Grey. A lot of people said there was something going on between them, but Alex guessed the rumour was probably as accurate as the one about him.

A clock chimed twelve. In half an hour they would have lunch at the hotel where they were staying. Brookland School was an ordinary west London comprehensive and they decided to keep costs down by staying outside Venice. Mr Grey had chosen a hotel in the little town of San Lorenzo, just ten minutes away by train. Every morning they'd arrive at the station and take the water bus into the heart of the city. But not today. This was Sunday and they had the morning off.

"So are you—" Tom began. He broke off. It had happened very quickly but both boys had seen it.

On the opposite side of the square a motorbike had surged forward. It was a 200cc Vespa Granturismo, almost brand new, with two men riding it. They were both dressed in jeans and

loose, long-sleeved shirts. The passenger had on a visored helmet, as much to hide his identity as to protect him if they crashed. The driver – wearing sunglasses – steered towards Miss Bedfordshire, as if he intended to run her over. But, a split second before contact, he veered away. At the same time, the man riding pillion reached out and snatched her handbag. It was done so neatly that Alex knew the two men were professionals – *scippatori* as they were known in Italy. Bag snatchers.

Some of the other pupils had seen it too. One or two were shouting and pointing, but there was nothing they could do. The bike was already accelerating away. The driver was crouched low over the handlebars; his partner was cradling the leather bag in his lap. They were speeding diagonally across the square, heading towards Alex and Tom. A few moments before, there had been people everywhere, but suddenly the centre of the square was empty and there was nothing to prevent their escape.

“Alex!” Tom shouted.

“Stay back,” Alex warned. He briefly considered blocking the Vespa’s path. But it was hopeless. The driver would easily be able to swerve round him – and if he chose not to, Alex really would spend the following term in hospital. The bike was already doing about twenty miles an hour, its single-cylinder four-stroke engine carrying the two thieves effortlessly towards him. Alex certainly wasn’t going to stand in its way.

He looked around him, wondering if there was something he could throw. A net? A bucket of water? But there was no net and the fountain was too far away, although there were buckets...

The bike was less than twenty metres away, accelerating all the time. Alex sprinted and snatched a bucket from the flower stall, emptied it, scattering dried flowers across the pavement, and filled it with bird seed from the stall next door. Both stall owners were shouting something at him but he ignored them. Without stopping, he swung round and hurled the seed at the Vespa just as it was about to flash past him. Tom watched – first in amazement, then with disappointment. If Alex had thought the great shower of seed would knock the two men off the bike, he’d been mistaken. They were continuing regardless.

But that hadn’t been his plan.

There must have been two or three hundred pigeons in the square and all of them had seen the seed spraying out of the bucket. The two riders were covered in it. Seed had lodged in the folds of their clothes, under their collars and in the sides of their shoes. There was a small pile of it caught in the driver’s crotch. Some had fallen into Miss Bedfordshire’s bag; some had become trapped in the driver’s hair.

For the pigeons, the bag thieves had suddenly become a meal on wheels. With a sonic explosion of grey feathers, they came swooping down, diving on the two men from all directions. Suddenly the driver had a bird clinging to the side of his face, its beak hammering at his head, ripping the seed out of his hair. There was another pigeon at his throat, and a third between his legs, pecking at the most sensitive area of all. His passenger had two on his neck, another hanging off his shirt, and another half buried in the stolen bag. And more were joining in. There must have been at least twenty pigeons, flapping and batting around them, swirling cloud of feathers, claws and – triggered by greed and excitement – flying splatters of

white bird droppings.

The driver was blinded. One hand clutched the handlebars, the other tore at his face. Alex watched, the bike performed a hundred and eighty degree turn so that now it was coming back, heading straight towards them, moving faster than ever. For a moment he stood poised, waiting to hurl himself aside. It looked as if he was going to be run over. But then the bike swerved a second time and now it was heading for the fountain, the two men barely visible in a cloud of beating wings. The front wheel hit the fountain's edge and the bike crumpled. Both men were thrown off. The birds scattered. In the brief pause before he hit the water, the man riding pillion yelled and let go of the handbag. Almost in slow motion, the bag arced through the air. Alex took two steps and caught it.

And then it was all over. The two thieves were a tangled heap, half submerged in cold water. The Vespa was lying, buckled and broken, on the ground. Two policemen, who had arrived when it was almost too late, were hurrying towards them. The stall owners were laughing and applauding. Tom was staring. Alex went over to Miss Bedfordshire and gave her the bag.

"I think this is yours," he said.

"Alex..." Miss Bedfordshire was lost for words. "How...?"

"It was just something I picked up in therapy," Alex said.

He turned and walked back to his friend.

"Now, this building is called the Palazzo Contarini del Bovolo," Mr Grey announced. "Bovo is the Venetian word for snail shell and, as you can see, this wonderful staircase is shaped bit like a shell."

Tom Harris stifled a yawn. "If I see one more palace, one more museum or one more canal," he muttered, "I'm going to throw myself under a bus."

"There aren't any buses in Venice," Alex reminded him.

"A water bus, then. If it doesn't hit me, maybe I'll get lucky and drown." Tom sighed. "You know the trouble with this place? It's like a museum. A bloody great museum. I feel like I've been here half my life."

"We're leaving tomorrow."

"Not a day too soon, Alex."

Alex couldn't bring himself to agree. He had never been anywhere quite like Venice – because then there was nowhere in the world remotely like it, with its narrow streets and dark canals twisting around each other in an intricate, amazing knot. Every building seemed to compete with its neighbour to be more ornate and more spectacular. A short walk could take you across four centuries and every corner seemed to lead to another surprise. It might be a canalside market with great slabs of meat laid out on the tables and fish dripping blood onto the paving stones. Or a church, seemingly floating, surrounded by water on all four sides. A grand hotel or a tiny restaurant. Even the shops were works of art, their windows framing exotic masks, brilliantly coloured glass vases, dried pasta and antiques. It was a museum, maybe, yet one that was truly alive.

But Alex understood what Tom was feeling. After four days, even he was beginning to think he'd had enough. Enough statues, enough churches, enough mosaics. And enough tourists all crammed together beneath a sweltering September sun. Like Tom, he was beginning to feel overcooked.

And what about Scorpia?

The trouble was, he had absolutely no idea what Yassen Gregorovich had meant by his last words. Scorpia could be a person. Alex had looked in the phone book and found no fewer than fourteen people with that name living in and around Venice. It could be a business. Or it could be a single building. *Scuole* were homes set up for poor people. La Scala was an opera house in Milan. But Scorpia didn't seem to be anything. No signs pointed to it; no streets were named after it.

It was only now he was here, nearing the end of the trip, that Alex began to see it had been hopeless from the start. If Yassen had told him the truth, the two men – he and John Rider – had been hired killers. Had they worked for Scorpia? If so, Scorpia would be very careful, very concealed ... perhaps inside one of these old palaces. Alex looked again at the staircase that

Mr Grey was describing. How was he to know that these steps didn't lead to Scorpia? Scorpia could be anywhere. It could be everywhere. And after four days in Venice, Alex was nowhere.

"We're going to walk back down the Frezzeria towards the main square," Mr Grey announced. "We can eat our sandwiches there and after lunch we'll visit St Mark's Basilica."

"Oh great!" Tom exclaimed. "Another church!"

They set off, a dozen English schoolchildren, with Mr Grey and Miss Bedfordshire in front talking animatedly together. Alex and Tom trailed at the back, both of them gloomy. There was one day left, and, as Tom had made clear, that was one day too many. He was, as he put it, all cultured out. But he wasn't returning to London with the rest of the group. He had an older brother living in Naples and he was going to spend the last few days of the summer holidays with him. For Alex the end of the visit would mean failure. He would go home, the autumn term would begin, and...

And that was when he saw it, a flash of silver as the sun reflected off something at the edge of his vision. He turned his head. There was nothing. A canal leading away. Another canal crossing it. A single motor cruiser sliding beneath a bridge. The usual facade of ancient brown walls dotted with wooden shutters. A church dome rising above the red roof tiles. He had imagined it.

But then the cruiser began to turn, and that was when he spotted it a second time and knew it was really there: a silver scorpion decorating the side of the boat, pinned to the wooden bow. Alex stared as it swung into the second canal. It wasn't a gondola or a chugging public vaporetto, but a sleek, private launch – all polished teak, curtained windows and leather seats. There were two crew members in immaculate white jackets and shorts, one at the wheel, the other serving a drink to the only passenger. This was a woman, sitting bolt upright, looking straight ahead. Alex only had time to glimpse black hair, an upturned nose, a face with no expression. Then the motor launch completed its turn and disappeared from sight.

A scorpion decorating a motor launch.

Scorpia.

It was the most slender of connections but suddenly Alex was determined to find out where the boat was going. It was almost as if the silver scorpion had been sent to guide him to whatever it was he was meant to find.

And there was something else. The stillness of the woman. How was it possible to be carried through this amazing city without registering some emotion, without at least moving your head from left to right? Alex thought of Yassen Gregorovich. He would have been the same. He and this woman were two of a kind.

Alex turned to Tom. "Cover for me," he said urgently.

"What now?" Tom asked.

"Tell them I wasn't feeling well. Say I've gone back to the hotel."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll tell you later."

With that Alex was gone, ducking between an antiques shop and a café up the narrowest of alleyways, trying to follow the direction of the boat.

But almost at once, he saw that he had a problem. The city of Venice had been built on over a hundred islands. Mr Grey had explained this on their first day. In the Middle Ages the area had been little more than a swamp. That was why there were no roads – just waterways and oddly shaped bits of land connected by bridges. The woman was on the water; Alex was on the land. Following her would be like trying to find his way through an impossible maze in which their paths would never meet.

Already he had lost her. The alleyway he had taken should have continued straight ahead. Instead it suddenly veered off at an angle, obstructed by a tall block of flats. He ran round the corner, watched by two Italian women in black dresses, sitting outside on wooden stools. There was a canal ahead of him, but it was empty. A flight of heavy stone steps led down to the murky water but there was no way forward ... unless he wanted to swim.

He peered to the left and was rewarded with a glimpse of wood and water churned up by the propellers of the motor launch as it passed a fleet of gondolas roped together beside a rotting jetty. There was the woman, still sitting in the stern, now sipping a glass of wine. The boat continued under a bridge so tiny there was barely room to pass.

There was only one thing he could do. He swivelled round and retraced his steps, running as fast as he could. The two women noticed him again and shook their heads disapprovingly. He hadn't realized how hot it was. The sun seemed to be trapped in the narrow streets, and even in the shadows the heat lingered. Already sweating, he burst back out onto the street where he had begun. Fortunately there was no sign of Mr Grey or the rest of the school party.

Which way?

Suddenly every street and every corner looked the same. Relying on his sense of direction, Alex chose left and sprinted past a fruit shop, a candle shop and an open-air restaurant where the waiters were already laying the tables for lunch. He came to a bend and there was the bridge – so short he could cross it in five steps. He stopped in the middle and leant over the edge, gazing down the canal. The smell of stagnant water pricked his nostrils. There was nothing. The launch had gone.

But he knew which way it had been heading. It still wasn't too late – if he could keep moving. He darted on. A Japanese tourist was just about to take a photo of his wife and daughter. Alex heard the camera shutter click as he ran between them. When they got back to Tokyo, they would have a picture of a slim, athletic boy with fair hair hanging over his forehead, dressed in shorts and a Billabong T-shirt, with sweat pouring down his face and determination in his eyes. Something to remember him by.

A crowd of tourists. A busker playing the guitar. Another café. Waiters with silver trays. Alex ploughed through them all, ignoring the shouts of protest hurled after him. Now there was no sign of water anywhere; the street seemed to go on for ever. But he knew there must be a canal somewhere ahead.

He found it. The road fell away. Grey water flowed past. He had reached the Grand Canal, the largest waterway in Venice. And there was the motor launch with the silver scorpion nose.

fully visible. It was at least thirty metres away, surrounded by other vessels, and moving further into the distance with every second that passed.

Alex knew that if he lost it now he wouldn't find it again. There were too many channels opening up on both sides that it could take. It could slip into the private mooring of one of the palaces or stop at any of the smart hotels. He noticed a wooden platform floating on the water just ahead of him and realized it was one of the landing stages for the Venice water buses. There was a kiosk selling tickets, and a mass of people milling about. A yellow sign gave the name of this point on the canal: SANTA MARIA DEL GIGLIO. A large, crowded boat was just pulling out. A number one bus. His school party had taken an identical boat from the main railway station the day they had arrived, and Alex knew that it travelled the full length of the canal. It was moving quickly. Already a couple of metres separated it from the landing stage.

Alex glanced back. There was no chance he would be able to find his way through the labyrinth of streets in pursuit of the motor launch. The vaporetto was his only hope. But it was too far away. He had missed it and there might not be another one for at least ten minutes. A gondola drew past, the gondolier singing in Italian to the grinning family of tourists he was carrying. For a second Alex thought about hijacking the gondola. Then he had a better idea.

He reached out and grabbed hold of the oar, snatching it out of the gondolier's hand. Taken by surprise, the gondolier shouted out, twisted round and lost his balance. The family looked on in alarm as he plunged backwards into the water. Meanwhile Alex had tested the oar. It was about five metres long, and heavy. The gondolier had been holding it vertically, using the splayed paddle end to guide his craft through the water. Alex ran. He stabbed down with the blade, thrusting it into the Grand Canal, hoping the water wouldn't be too deep.

He was lucky. The tide was low and the bottom of the canal was littered with everything from old washing machines to bicycles and wheelbarrows, cheerfully thrown in by the Venetian residents with no thought of pollution. The bottom of the oar hit something solid and Alex was able to use the length of wood to propel himself forward. It was exactly the same technique he had used pole-vaulting at Brookland sports day. For a moment he was in the air, leaning backwards, suspended over the Grand Canal. Then he swung down, sweeping through the open entrance of the water bus and landing on the deck. He dropped the oar behind him and looked around. The other passengers were staring at him in amazement. By the time he was on board.

There were very few ticket collectors on the water buses in Venice, which was why there was nobody to challenge Alex about his unorthodox method of arrival or demand a fare. He leant over the edge, grateful for the breeze sweeping across the water. And he hadn't lost the motor launch. It was still ahead of him, travelling away from the main lagoon and back into the heart of the city. A slender wooden bridge stretched out over the canal and Alex recognized it at once as the Bridge of the Academy, leading to the biggest art gallery in the city. He had spent a whole morning there, gazing at works by Tintoretto and Lorenzo Lotto and numerous other artists whose names all seemed to end in o. Briefly he wondered what he was doing. He had abandoned the school trip. Mr Grey and Miss Bedfordshire would probably already be on the phone to the hotel, if not the police. And why? What did he have to go on?

A silver scorpion adorning a private boat. He must be out of his mind.

The vaporetto began to slow down. It was approaching the next landing stage. Alex tensed. He knew that if he waited for one load of passengers to get off and another to get on, he would never see the motor launch again. He was on the other side of the canal now. The streets were a little less crowded here. Alex caught his breath. He wondered how much longer he could run.

And then he saw, with a surge of relief, that the motor launch had also arrived at its destination. It was pulling into a palace a little further up, stopping behind a series of wooden poles that slanted out of the water as if, like javelins, they had been thrown there by chance. As Alex watched, two uniformed servants emerged from the palace. One moored the boat, the other held out a white-gloved hand. The woman grasped the hand and stepped ashore. She was wearing a tight-fitting cream dress with a jacket cut short above the waist. A handbag swung from her arm. She could have been a model striding off the cover of a glossy magazine. She didn't hesitate. While the servants busied themselves unloading her suitcase, she climbed the steps and disappeared behind a stone column.

The water bus was about to leave again. Quickly Alex climbed out onto the landing stage. Once again he had to work his way round the buildings that crowded onto the Grand Canal. But this time he knew what he was looking for. A few minutes later, he found it.

It was a typical Venetian palace, pink and white, its narrow windows built into a fantastical embroidery of pillars, arches and balustrades, like something out of *Romeo and Juliet*. But what made the place so unforgettable was its position. It didn't just face the Grand Canal. It sank right into it, the water lapping against the brickwork. The woman from the boat had gone through some sort of portcullis, as if entering a castle. But it was a castle that was floating. Or sinking. It was impossible to say where the water ended and the palace began.

The palace did at least have one side that could be reached by land. It backed onto a wide square with trees and bushes planted in ornamental tubs. There were men – servants – everywhere, setting up rope barriers, positioning oil-burning torches and unrolling a red carpet. Carpenters were at work, constructing what looked like a small bandstand. More men were carrying a variety of crates and boxes into the palace. Alex saw champagne bottles, fireworks, different sorts of food. They were obviously preparing for a serious party.

Alex stopped one of them. "Excuse me," he said. "Can you tell me who lives here?"

The man spoke no English. He didn't even try to be friendly. Alex asked a second man, but with exactly the same result. He recognized the type: he had met men like them before. The guards at Point Blanc Academy. The technicians at Cray Software Technology. These were people who worked for someone who made them nervous. They were paid to do a job and they never stepped out of line. Were they people with something to hide? Perhaps.

Alex left the square and walked round the side of the palace. A second canal ran the full length of the building and this time he was luckier. There was an elderly woman in a black dress with a white apron sweeping the towpath. He went up to her.

"Do you speak English?" he asked. "Can you help me?"

"*Sì, con piacere, mio piccolo amico.*" The woman nodded. She put the broom down. "I spent many years in London. I speak good English. Who can I do?"

Alex pointed at the building. "What is this place?"

"It is the Ca' Vedova." She tried to explain. "Ca' ... you know ... in Venice we say *casa*. means palace. And *vedova*?" She searched for the word. "It is the Palace of the Widow. Ca' Vedova."

"What's going on?"

"There is a big party tonight. For a birthday. Masks and costumes. Many important people come."

"Whose birthday?"

The woman hesitated. Alex was asking too many questions and he could see that she was becoming suspicious. But once again age was on his side. He was only fourteen. What did it matter if he was curious? "Signora Rothman. She is very rich lady. The owner of the house."

"Rothman? Like the cigarette?"

But the woman's mouth had suddenly closed and there was fear in her eyes. Alex looked round and saw one of the men from the square standing at the corner, watching him. He realized he had outstayed his welcome – and no one had been that pleased to see him in the first place.

He decided to have one last try. "I'm looking for Scorpia," he said.

The old woman stared at him as if she had been slapped in the face. She picked up the broom and her eyes darted over to the man watching them. It was lucky he hadn't heard the exchange. He had sensed something was wrong, but he hadn't moved. Even so, Alex knew it was time to go.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Thank you for your help."

He made his way quickly up the canal. Yet another bridge loomed ahead of him and he crossed it. Although he didn't know exactly why, he was grateful to leave the Widow's Palace behind him.

As soon as he was out of sight, he stopped and considered what he had learnt. A boat with a silver scorpion had led him to a palace, which was owned by a beautiful and wealthy woman who didn't smile. The palace was protected by a number of mean-looking men, and the moment he had mentioned the name Scorpia to a cleaning lady, he had suddenly become as welcome as the plague.

It wasn't much to go on, but it was enough. There was going to be a masked ball tonight, a birthday party. Important people had been invited. Alex wasn't one of them, but already he had decided. He planned to be there all the same.

The full name of the woman who had entered the *palazzo* was Julia Charlotte Gleny Rothman. This was her home – or one of them, anyway. She also had a flat in New York, mews house in London and a villa overlooking the Caribbean Sea and the white sands of Turtle Bay on the island of Tobago.

She walked along a softly lit corridor that ran the full length of the building from the jetty at one end to a private lift at the other, her high heels clicking on the terracotta tiles. There was not one servant in sight. She reached out and pressed the lift button, the white silk of her glove briefly touching silver, and the door opened. It was a small lift, barely big enough for one person. But she lived alone. The servants used the stairs.

The lift took her to the third floor and opened directly onto a modern conference room with no carpet, no pictures on the walls, no ornamentation of any sort. Stranger still, although it should have offered some of the most beautiful views in the world, the room had been built without a single window. But if no one could look out, nor could anyone look in. It was safer that way. The lighting came from halogen lamps built into the walls, and the only furniture in the room was a long glass table surrounded by leather chairs. There was a door opposite the lift but it was locked. Two guards were standing on the other side, armed and ready to kill anyone who so much as approached in the next half-hour.

There were eight men waiting for her around the table. One was in his seventies, bald and wheezy with sore eyes, wearing a crumpled grey suit. The man sitting next to him was Chinese, while the man opposite, fair-haired, wearing an open-necked shirt, was from Australia. It was clear that the people congregated in this place came from many different parts of the world, but they had one thing in common: a stillness, a coldness even, that made the room as cheerful as a morgue. Not one of them greeted Mrs Rothman as she took her seat at the head of the table. Nor did they bother looking at the time. If she had arrived, it must be exactly one o'clock. That was when the meeting was meant to begin.

"Good afternoon," Mrs Rothman said.

A few heads nodded but nobody spoke. Greetings were a waste of words.

The nine people sitting around the table on the third floor of the Widow's Palace made up the executive board of one of the most ruthless and successful criminal organizations in the world. The old man's name was Max Grendel; the Chinese man was Dr Three. The Australian had no name at all. They had come to this room without windows to go over the final details of an operation that would, in just a few weeks, make them richer by the sum of one hundred million pounds.

The organization was called Scorpia.

It was a fanciful name, they all knew it, invented by someone who had probably read too much James Bond. But they had to call themselves something, and in the end they had chosen a name drawn from their four main fields of activity.

Sabotage. Corruption. Intelligence. Assassination.

Scorpia. A name which worked in a surprising number of languages and which rolled off the tongue of anyone who might wish to employ them. Scorpia. Seven letters that were now on the database of every police force and security agency in the world.

The organization was formed in the early eighties, during the so-called Cold War, the secret war that had been fought for decades between the Soviet Union, China, America and Europe. Every government in the world had its own army of spies and assassins, all of them prepared to kill or to die for their country. What they weren't prepared for, though, was to find themselves out of work; and twelve of them, seeing that the Cold War would soon be over, realized that was exactly what they would be. They wouldn't be needed any more. It was time to go into business for themselves.

They came together one Sunday morning in Paris. Their first meeting took place at the Maison Berthillon, a famous ice-cream parlour on the Ile St-Louis, not far from Notre-Dame. They were all acquainted: they had tried to kill each other often enough. But now, in the pretty, wood-panelled room with its antique mirrors and lace curtains, and over twelve dishes of Berthillon's famous wild strawberry ice cream, they discussed how they might work together and make themselves rich. At this meeting, Scorpia was born.

Since then it had flourished. Scorpia was all over the world. It had brought down two governments and arranged for a third to be unfairly elected. It had destroyed dozens of businesses, corrupted politicians and civil servants, engineered several major ecological disasters, and killed anyone who got in its way. It was now responsible for a tenth of the world's terrorism, which it undertook on a contract basis. Scorpia liked to think of itself as the IBM of crime – but in fact, compared to Scorpia, IBM was strictly small-time.

Of the original twelve, only nine were left. One had died of cancer; two had been murdered. But that wasn't a bad record after twenty years of violent crime. There had never been a single leader of Scorpia. All nine were equal partners but one executive was always assigned to each new project, working in alphabetical order.

The project they were discussing this afternoon had been given a code name: Invisible Sword. Julia Rothman was in command.

"I would like to report to the board that everything is progressing on schedule," she announced.

There was a trace of a Welsh accent in her voice. She had been born in Aberystwyth. Her parents had been Welsh nationalists, burning down the cottages of English holidaymakers who had bought them as second homes. Unfortunately they had torched one of these cottages with the English family still inside it, and when Julia was six she found herself in an institution while her parents began a life sentence in jail. This was, in a way, the start of her own criminal career.

"It is now three months," she went on, "since we were approached by our client, a gentleman in the Middle East. To call him rich would be an understatement. He is a multi-billionaire. This man has looked at the world, at the balance of power, and he has decided that something has gone seriously wrong. He has asked us to remedy it."

"In a nutshell, our client believes that the West has become too powerful. He looks

Great Britain and America. It was the friendship between them that won the Second World War. And it is this same friendship that now allows the West to invade any country that pleases and to take anything it wants. Our client has asked us to end the British-American alliance once and for all.

"What can I tell you about our client?" Mrs Rothman smiled sweetly. "Perhaps he is visionary, interested only in world peace; perhaps he is completely insane. Either way, makes no difference to us. He has offered us an enormous sum of money – one hundred million pounds to be exact – to do what he wants. To humble Britain and America and ensure they cease to work together as a world power. And I am happy to be able to tell you that twenty million pounds, the first instalment of that money, arrived in our Swiss bank account yesterday. We are now ready to move into phase two."

There was silence in the room. As the men waited for Mrs Rothman to speak again, the faint hum of an air conditioner could be heard. But no sound came from outside.

"Phase two – the final phase – will take place in under three weeks from now. I can promise you that very soon the British and the Americans will be at one another's throats. More than that: by the end of the month both countries will be on their knees. America will be hated throughout the entire world; the British will have witnessed a horror beyond anything they could ever have imagined. We will all be a great deal richer. And our friends from the Middle East will consider his money well spent."

"Excuse me, Mrs Rothman. I have a question..."

Dr Three bowed his head politely. His face seemed to be made of wax and his hair – jet black – looked twenty years younger than the rest of him. It had to be dyed. He was very small and might have been a retired teacher. He might have been many things, but he was, in fact, the world expert on torture and pain. He had written several books on the subject.

"How many people do you intend to kill?" he asked.

Julia Rothman considered. "It's still difficult to be precise, Dr Three," she replied. "But there will certainly be thousands. Many thousands."

"And they will all be children?"

"Yes. They will mainly be twelve and thirteen years old." She sighed. "It is, it goes without saying, very unfortunate. I adore children, even though I'm glad I never had any of my own. But that's the plan. And I have to say, the psychological effect of so many young people dying will, I think, be useful. Does it concern you?"

"Not at all, Mrs Rothman." Dr Three shook his head.

"Does anyone have any objections?"

Nobody spoke, but out of the corner of her eye, Mrs Rothman noticed Max Grendel shift uncomfortably on his chair at the far end of the table. At seventy-three, he was the oldest man there, with sagging skin and liver spots on his forehead. He suffered from an eye disease that made him weep constantly. He was dabbing at his eyes now with a tissue. It was hard to believe that he had been a commander in the German secret police and had once personally strangled a foreign spy during a performance of Beethoven's Fifth.

"Are preparations complete in London?" the Australian asked.

“Construction in the church finished a week ago. The platform, the gas cylinders and the rest of the machinery will be delivered later today.”

“Will Invisible Sword work?”

It was typical of Levi Kroll to be blunt and to the point. He had joined Scorpia from Mossad, the Israeli secret service, and still thought of himself as a soldier. For twenty years he had slept with an FN 9mm pistol under his pillow. Then, one night, it had gone off. He was a large man with a beard that covered most of his face, concealing the worst of his injuries. An eyepatch hid the empty socket where his left eye had once been.

“Of course it will work,” Mrs Rothman snapped.

“It’s been tested?”

“We’re testing it right now. But I have to tell you that Dr Liebermann is something of a genius. A boring man if you have to spend time with him and heaven knows I’ve had to do plenty of that. But he’s created a brand-new weapon and the beauty of it is, all the experts in the world won’t know what it is or how it operates. Of course, they’ll work it out in the end and I’ve made plans for that eventuality. But by then it will be too late. The streets of London will be littered with corpses. It’ll be the worst thing to happen to children in a city since the Pied Piper.”

“And what about Liebermann?” Dr Three asked.

“I haven’t decided yet. We’ll probably have to kill him too. He invented Invisible Sword but he has no idea how we plan to use it. I expect he’ll object. So he’ll have to go.”

Mrs Rothman looked around. “Is there anything else?” she asked.

“Yes.” Max Grendel spread his hands across the surface of the table. Mrs Rothman was surprised that he had something to say. He was a father and a grandfather. Worse than that, in his old age he had become sentimental.

“I have been with Scorpia from the very beginning,” he said. “I still remember our first meeting in Paris. I have earned many millions working with you and I’ve enjoyed everything we’ve done. But this project ... Invisible Sword. Are we really going to kill so many children? How will we be able to live with ourselves?”

“Rather more comfortably than before,” Julia Rothman muttered.

“No, no, Julia.” Grendel shook his head. A single tear trickled from one of his diseased eyes. “This will come as no surprise to you. We spoke of this the last time we met. But I have decided that enough is enough. I’m an old man. I want to retire to my castle in Vienna. Invisible Sword will be your greatest achievement, I am sure. But I no longer have the heart for it. It is time for me to step down. You must go ahead without me.”

“You can’t retire!” Levi Kroll protested sharply.

“Why did you not tell us about this earlier?” another of the men asked angrily. He was black but with Japanese eyes. There was a diamond the size of a pea embedded in one of his front teeth.

“I told Mrs Rothman,” Max Grendel said reasonably. “She’s the project leader. I felt there was no need to inform the entire board.”

"We really don't need to argue about this, Mr Mikato," Julia Rothman said smoothly. "Ma has been talking about retiring for a long time now and I think we should respect his wishes. It's certainly a shame. But, as my late husband used to say, all good things come to an end."

Mrs Rothman's multimillionaire husband had fallen to his death from a seventeenth-store window. It had happened just two days after their marriage.

"It's very sad, Max," she continued. "But I'm sure you're doing the right thing. It's time for you to go."

* * *

She went with him down to the jetty. The motor launch had left but there was a gondola waiting to take him back down the canal. They walked slowly arm in arm.

"I'll miss you," she said.

"Thank you, Julia." Max Grendel patted her arm. "I'll miss you too."

"I don't know how we'll manage without you."

"Invisible Sword cannot fail. Not with you at the helm."

She stopped suddenly. "I almost forgot," she exclaimed. "I have something for you." She snapped her fingers and a servant ran forward carrying a large box wrapped in pink and blue paper, tied with a silver bow. "It's a present for you," she said.

"A retirement present?"

"Something to remember us by."

Max Grendel had stopped beside the gondola. It was bobbing up and down on the choppy surface. A gondolier dressed in a traditional striped jersey stood in the back, leaning on his oar. "Thank you, my dear," he said. "And good luck."

"Enjoy yourself, Max. Keep in touch."

She kissed him, her lips lightly touching his withered cheek. Then she helped him into the gondola. He sat down awkwardly, placing the brightly coloured box on his knees. At once the gondolier pulled away. Mrs Rothman raised a hand. The little boat cut swiftly through the grey water.

Mrs Rothman turned and went back into the Widow's Palace.

Max Grendel watched her sadly. He knew that life wouldn't be the same without Scorpius. For two decades he had devoted all his energies to the organization. It had kept him young and kept him alive. But now there were his grandchildren to consider. He thought of the twin boys, little Hans and Rudi. They were twelve years old. The same age as Scorpius's targets in London. He couldn't be part of it. He had made the right decision.

He had almost forgotten the package resting on his knees. That was typical of Julia. Perhaps it was because she was the only woman on the executive board, but she had always been the one who was most emotional. He wondered what she had bought him. The parcel was heavy. On an impulse, he untied the ribbon, then ripped off the paper.

It was an executive briefcase, obviously expensive. He could tell from the quality of the leather, the hand-stitching ... and there was the label. It had been made by Gucci. His initials were on the label.

- MUG – had been engraved in gold just under the handle. With a smile he opened it.

And screamed as the contents spilled over him.

Scorpions. Dozens of them. They were at least ten centimetres long, dark brown with tiny pincers and fat, swollen bodies. As they poured into his lap and began to swarm up his shirt, he recognized what they were: hairy thick-tailed scorpions from the *Parabuthus* species, one of the most deadly in the world.

Max Grendel fell backwards, shrieking, his eyes bulging, arms and legs flailing as the hideous creatures found the gaps in his clothes and crawled inside his shirt and down under the waistband of his trousers. The first one stung him on the side of his neck. Then he was being stung over and over again, jerking helplessly, the screams dying in his throat.

His heart gave out long before the neurotoxins killed him. As the gondola floated gently on, being steered now towards the island cemetery of Venice, tourists might have noticed an old man lying still with his hands spread wide, gazing with sightless eyes at the bright Venetian sky.

That night, the Widow's Palace slipped back three hundred years in time.

It was an extraordinary sight. The oil-burning torches had been lit and the flames cast flickering shadows across the square. The servants had changed into eighteenth-century costumes with wigs, tightly fitting stockings, pointed shoes and waistcoats. A string quartet played beneath the night sky, sitting on the bandstand that Alex had seen being constructed that afternoon. The stars were out in their thousands and there was even a full moon. It was as if whoever had organized the party had managed to control the weather too.

Guests were arriving by water and on foot. They too were in costume, wearing elaborate hats and richly coloured velvet cloaks that swept the ground. Some carried ebony walking sticks; others had swords and daggers. But not a single face could be seen among the crowd making its way to the front door. Features were concealed behind white masks and gold masks, masks encrusted with jewels and masks surrounded by huge plumes of feathers. It was impossible to know who had been invited to Mrs Rothman's party – but not just anyone could walk in. The Grand Canal entrance to the palace was closed and everyone was being directed to the main door that Alex had seen earlier that day. Four security guards wearing the bright red tunics of Venetian courtiers were positioned there, checking each invitation.

Alex watched all this from the other side of the square. He was crouched behind one of the miniature trees with Tom, the two of them outside the pool of light thrown by the torches. It hadn't been easy to persuade Tom to come. Alex's disappearance before lunch had been noticed almost immediately, and Tom had been left to make up an unconvincing story about a stomach ache in front of an angry Mr Grey. Alex should have been in serious trouble when he finally met up with the group back at the hotel, and if it hadn't been for Miss Bedfordshire – who was still grateful to him for recovering her handbag – he would have been grounded for the night. Anyway, this was Alex. Everyone knew they could rely on him to act oddly.

But to disappear again! It was the last evening of the trip and the group had been given two hours' free time which they were meant to spend in San Lorenzo, in the cafés or the squares. Alex had other plans. He had found everything he needed in Venice that afternoon before he went back to the hotel. But he knew he couldn't do this alone. Tom had to come too.

"Alex, I can't believe you're doing this," Tom whispered now. "Why is this party such a big deal anyway?"

"I can't explain."

"Why not? I don't understand you sometimes. We're meant to be friends but you never tell me anything."

Alex sighed. He was used to this. When he thought of all the things that had happened to him in the last six months, the way he had been dragged into the world of espionage, a world of secrecy and lies, this was the worst part. MI6 had turned him into a spy. And at the same time they had made it impossible for him to be what he wanted – an ordinary schoolboy. He

had been juggling two lives, one day saving the world from a nuclear holocaust, the next struggling with his chemistry homework. Two lives, but he had ended up trapped between them. He didn't know where he belonged any more. There was Tom, there was Jacob Starbright and there was Sabina Pleasure – although she had now moved to America. Apart from them, he had no real friends. It wasn't his choice, but somehow he had ended up alone.

Alex made up his mind. "All right," he said. "If you'll help me, I'll tell you everything. But not yet."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"I'm going to Naples tomorrow to stay with my brother."

"Before you go."

Tom considered. "I'll help you anyway, Alex," he said. "Because that's what friends are for. And if you really do want to tell me, you can save it until we're back at school. OK?"

Alex nodded and smiled. "Thanks."

He reached behind him for the sports bag he had brought with him from the hotel. Inside were the various items he had bought that afternoon. Quickly he stripped off his shorts and T-shirt, then pulled on a pair of loose-fitting silk trousers and a velvet waistcoat that left his arms and chest bare. Next he took out a tub of what looked like jelly, except that it was coloured gold. Body paint. He scooped some out and rubbed it between his palms, then smeared it over his arms, neck and face. He signalled to Tom, who grimaced and then finished his shoulders. All his visible skin was now gold.

Finally he brought out gold sandals, a white turban with a single mauve feather, and a plain half-mask, just big enough to cover his eyes. He had asked the costume shop to supply him with everything he would need to become a Turkish slave. He hoped the overall effect didn't make him look as ridiculous as he felt.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Tom nodded, wiping his hands on his trousers. "You know, you do look a bit sad," he muttered.

"I don't care ... so long as it works."

"I think you're completely mad."

Alex watched as more people arrived at the palace. If his plan was going to work, he had to choose the right moment. He also had to wait for the right guests. They were still coming thick and fast, milling around the main entrance while the guards checked their invitations. He glanced over at the canal. A water taxi had just pulled in and a couple were climbing out. A man in a frock coat and a woman in a black cloak that trailed behind her. Both were masked. They were perfect.

He nodded to Tom. "Now."

"Good luck, Alex." Tom took something out of the sports bag and darted forward, making no attempt to avoid being seen. Seconds later Alex stole round the edge of the square, keeping to the shadows.

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