RUSSIAN ROULETTE

BY

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A CROSS-CURRICULAR RESOURCE FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

alexrider.com/horowitzlive

WALKER BOOKS

Photograph © Jon Cartwright
**Russian Roulette** by Anthony Horowitz
A cross-curricular resource for secondary schools

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**Introduction**

For fans of Anthony Horowitz’s Alex Rider series, *Russian Roulette* is the long-awaited prequel to the spy crime series, which sees its villain, Yassen Gregorovich, relentlessly pursuing the teenage spy Alex, in between eliminating his targets on behalf of the murderous criminal organisation, Scorpia.

Readers have long asked the question: What happened in Yassen’s past to cause him to become the evil assassin they all know and loathe? *Russian Roulette* answers that very question. As you would expect, it delivers a narrative brimming with adventure and action, recounting Yassen’s childhood from the time he lived in the Russian village of Estrov, through the harrowing years he spent in captivity, to his initial missions for Scorpia. What they may not expect is the pang of sympathy you can’t help but feel for Yassen.

New readers of the series will also not be disappointed, as the plot stands firmly on its own two feet, whilst wooing you on to the first book in the series, *Stormbreaker*. So whether your students are long-standing enthusiasts of Alex Rider, devotees to the spy crime genre or simply interested in human stories involving struggle and adventure, they will undoubtedly enjoy this book.

To celebrate the publication of *Russian Roulette* in paperback, Anthony Horowitz is holding a live-streamed fan event at 2.00 pm on 16th June 2014. The event will include a reading and a fan Q+A session and will be beamed out to thousands of schools across the UK and beyond. If you are unable to tune in on the day, it will be available to download from [www.alexrider.com/horowitzlive](http://www.alexrider.com/horowitzlive) after the event.
This cross-curricular resource has been created to complement the live event. It contains ideas for activities focusing on the plot themes, characters and the different settings within *Russian Roulette*. In its entirety, it could be used to inspire and support the planning and delivery of a collapsed timetable day or half day, with the streamed event providing a final stimulus, or as an event to launch your study. However, if you are unable to dedicate as much time and organisation as this, the activities could be run as standalone sessions in a one-off lesson or a lunchtime or after-school reading club.

Given the themes which arise from the story, the book can be used as a focus for both literacy and subject-specific outcomes across the curriculum, as well as in English and library sessions. The first section of this resource explores a range of overarching themes, as well as those which are specific to the characters and the intricate relationships they have with one another. Following this, there is a section for librarians, including activities which are suitable for lunchtime and after-school clubs, as well as library lessons.

The remainder of the resource is dedicated to discrete activities and enquiry-based approaches in key subject areas: English and Drama; History; Geography; Science, Modern Foreign Languages and Art and Design. Whilst the resource does not cover all curriculum subjects, the book does have the potential to link in with other subject areas not mentioned, such as music and PE (a leg-kicking Russian folk dance for example!).

**Literacy outcomes**

A cross-curricular study focussing on one whole text enables students to achieve both subject and literacy outcomes. This resource has been designed with these outcomes in mind. Subject-specific outcomes are detailed in the cross-curricular map on the next page and alongside each subject’s section. Most of the subject approaches suggested are centred around an enquiry-based investigation involving text analysis, research, the organisation of data, as well as the presentation of findings through creative writing or drama. It is hoped that students will have the opportunity to achieve some or all of the following learning objectives:

**Retrieve information**
- Use a range of techniques to retrieve information and contextualise learning
- Respond to events in a story through discussion and creative writing
- Engage in exploratory talk to explore and test ideas

**Create an enquiry**
- Formulate key questions
- Engage in exploratory talk to explore and test ideas

**Research**
- Understand and use organisational devices in a range of texts

**Analyse characters and events**
- Use a range of strategies to interpret information, compare contrasting views, debate key issues
- Sequence cause and effect of characters’ actions
- Adopt different character roles in order to understand motivations and actions
• Engage in exploratory talk to explore and test ideas
• Interpret different points of view, speculate and justify opinions
• Use informal and formal debating techniques

Organise data
• Summarise findings
• Use a range of devices to order, prioritise and link data
• Restructure and model data in alternative formats

Present/report findings
• Write for an agreed purpose and audience
• Give a short speech or presentation, expressing their own ideas and keeping to the point

Importantly, it should not be forgotten that activities around *Russian Roulette* provide an ideal opportunity to motivate students to read for enjoyment and have the potential to generate a school-wide buzz around reading and the Alex Rider series of books. The opportunities are bountiful and infinite!

**Cross-curricular outcomes**

**Geography**
- To understand how Venice was formed and the effect of climate change on the city
- To understand how Moscow became urbanised

**History**
- To understand the historical concept of cause and consequence, make connections between events and draw conclusions to gain historical perspective.

**Science**
- To understand the science of gases used in chemical weapons
- To understand the effect of scientific advances on society, e.g. chemical warfare

**Modern Foreign Languages**
- To develop your understanding of Russian culture
- To be able to introduce yourself in Russian
- To understand the conventions of the Russian alphabet

**Art and Design**
- To be able to use perspective to draw 3D shapes, using two point perspective
- To be able to draw a rural/urban landscape

**English and Drama**
See range of literacy outcomes detailed on previous page

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[3]
Themes to explore

Whilst his journal is fictional, Yassen’s turbulent life story gives the reader an insight into the history of Russia at the turn of the 21st century, as well as the dark underworld of assassins, crime and political corruption. The activities proposed in this resource draw upon these overarching themes and provide a possible structure for a ‘Russian Roulette day’.

1. Life in Russia at the turn of the 21st century
   This novel takes place during the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. Therefore, it is a tale set against a backdrop of significant political, economic and societal change in Russia. This facilitates the opportunity to explore some of the following areas across the curriculum with your students: the disintegration of the Soviet Union; the Russian economic depression and poverty in the 1990s; the privatisation of state agencies and the emergence of Russia’s billionaires and the election of President Putin in 2000. Furthermore, research and discussion about the era in which Russian Roulette is set could provide an opportunity to support students to develop a greater understanding of the current political situation and issues in Russia and former Soviet states.

2. Modern-day slavery
   In the chapters Russian Roulette, Silver Forest and The Mechanic, we learn of the years in which Yassen was imprisoned by his billionaire captor Sharkovsky. During this period he was forced to work long hours, undertaking both arduous and dangerous activities. This section of the book provides an opportunity for students to develop their understanding of the abolition of slavery and the continued existence of modern-day slavery. Given Yassen’s age when he was forced to work in Sharkovsky’s compound, this section of the book also lends itself to a study focusing on the issue of child labour in parts of the world.

3. Chemical weapons and nuclear disasters
   In the chapters Home and Crocodiles, Yassen’s village Estrov is destroyed by the military as a result of the lethal chemical anthrax being leaked into the air, following an accident in the laboratory. Whilst a fictional event, this subject area allows you to explore the subject of chemical weapons around the world, their role in chemical warfare, the science of explosives and gases used in weapons, as well as the cause and effect of nuclear disasters, such as Chernobyl and Fukushima.

4. Assassins in society
   Students may have some knowledge of what an assassin is and does through their knowledge of books such as the Alex Rider series, James Bond films or high profile assassinations of significant people such as Osama Bin Laden or President JF Kennedy. Yassen’s story, and Scorpia as an organisation more broadly, provide an opportunity for discussion and activities about the existence of assassins in the world and the moral questions that surround their work: can an assassination ever be legal?
5. The Secret Intelligence Service (or MI6)

We discover in the chapter *Power Plus* that John Rider is a double agent, also working for MI6 (officially known as the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS)). The SIS also plays a prominent role in other books in the Alex Rider series. Whilst both John Rider and the activities he undertakes in this story are fictional, the SIS is of course an important organisation in this country which works to make the UK a safer and more prosperous place to live. There are lots of different ways in which you can use this book to develop literacy activities that enable students to develop their understanding of the intelligence services in this country.

6. Crime and political corruption

Criminal activity and political corruption permeate this story, from life in Estrov to the final scene on the skyscraper roof in London. Of particular interest is the cover-up by the Russian Government following the anthrax leak at the laboratory. These events, whilst fictional, could be an important stimulus for discussion and exploration of your students’ attitudes to certain crimes (for example, the controversy surrounding the publication of sensitive information on WikiLeaks), as well as key historical examples of political corruption around the world.

7. Urban poverty and crime

In the chapters *Moscow, Tverskaya* and *Fortochnik*, Yassen is hungry, thirsty and has no shelter. He has little choice but to live in squalid conditions with Dima’s gang which then leads him to enter a dark underworld in Moscow, where he engages in criminal activity. This is an intense subject to shine a spotlight on, but an important one, due to the continuing prevalence of these issues all over the world and the work of governments to reduce crime rates and poverty in cities.

8. Journeys

Yassen recounts a personal journey, where he began as an unworldly innocent school boy and metamorphosed into a heartless assassin. The theme of journeys is one which recurs in different guises in the story, representing the evolution of characters, but also actual physical journeys, where characters traverse a myriad of landscapes and countries: through the rainforest in Brazil; from Kirsk to Moscow; from the Island to mainland Venice. An exploration of these different journeys could provide stimulus for a range of interesting literacy activities.

A spotlight on characterisation

There is a wealth of significant character themes which are developed throughout *Russian Roulette*. Many of them are related directly to our protagonist, Yassen Gregorovich, particularly through the prism of his relationship with other key characters, such as John Rider and Vladimir Sharkovsky. As with the cross-curricular themes described on the previous pages, these character themes are embedded within a number of the activities suggested in this resource. Therefore, when planning your literacy activities around this text, consider how you can draw them out through your discussion, text analysis, drama and writing activities.
1. **Trust and deception:** We learn how Yassen spends the first fourteen years of his life living in the village, where he trusts those around him. From the moment his village is destroyed, along with all those whom he loved, his implicit trust of others is called into question, as he experiences deception time and time again. As an adult assassin, what does trust mean to him and can he ever really trust anyone again?

2. **Nature vs nurture:** Yassen seems to battle with the inevitability that he will become a paid assassin. However, this would have been an unthinkable profession for the boy growing up in the village of Estrov. Or would it? Was he always destined to become an assassin and did he always possess those personality traits? Or is it entirely the result of his life experiences which have led him down this path?

3. **Friendship:** It is interesting to explore the theme of friendship and what it means to Yassen as he grows up. How are his friendships with Leo, Dima and John Rider all different? Are they all friendships? Are the Scorpia assassins capable of true friendship?

4. **Moral conscience:** Crimes are committed in abundance throughout the novel by characters such as Sharkovsky, Dima, Grant and ultimately Yassen himself. Are the perpetrators of these crimes affected by their actions? As he grows up, Yassen seems persistently engaged in battle with his moral and ethical conscience, from stealing in Moscow, to resisting assassinating his target in New York, crimes which contrast so starkly with his upbringing in Estrov. Does his moral conscience change as the story progresses? What causes this change? Do other characters in the book battle with their moral consciences in the same way?

5. **The transition from childhood to adulthood:** Yassen’s transition into adulthood is troubled and unconventional. At what point does he become an adult? What are the events in his life which allow us to define this passage? How does his adolescence compare to Ivan Sharkovsky’s teenage years? Despite his experiences, is there any part of him which is still always the boy from Estrov?

6. **The role of family:** Yassen’s birth family is all killed at an early stage in the story. Throughout the book, he is a key member within several groups of people: Dima’s gang, Sharkovsky’s workforce and Scorpia. Do any of these groups represent a family for him in any way? Or is he simply an individual in a group fighting for survival? Would Dima, Sharkovsky or the Head of Scorpia perceive the people they live or work with as their family?

7. **Self-identity:** Yassen’s view of himself is constantly evolving, based on the increasing hardship which he suffers. How does he view himself at different stages in the story: a victim; a criminal; a village boy or an assassin? Who and what changes in him to shape his final self-identity and personality?

8. **Revenge:** Yassen is a victim of other’s crimes and corruption for much of the story. What effect do the actions of others have on him? To what extent are his actions motivated by revenge in different parts of the story? Is his quest for revenge justifiable at any point?

9. **Survival:** The quest for survival is a recurring theme throughout the story: Yassen’s parents working in the factory; Dima and his gang on the streets of Moscow; the Scorpia assassins and Yassen’s life from the moment Estrov is
destroyed. How do these different characters “survive” (or not) and which actions and decisions demonstrate this?

10. **Power and control:** Many of the characters’ lives seem blighted by the lack of power and control to determine their own fate, whilst others possess it in abundance. Which key factors influence the balance of power between characters in the book, and does this balance change as the story and relationships progress?

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**School library-based activities**

Your school library and school librarian will play a key role in maximising the impact of your *Russian Roulette* focussed-day or sessions. You may well be the school librarian reading this, having decided to develop a raft of stimulating activities to enable students to celebrate and deepen their understanding of this gripping story. Or you may be working in partnership with subject teachers, supporting students to develop their information literacy skills. Or both! Whichever scenario, below are a selection of ideas to inspire and support you in that process.

**Please note:**
- All uses of the term ‘school library’ are intended to include the term Learning Resource Centre
- All uses of the term ‘school librarian’ are intended to include the term Learning Resource Centre Managers/the person responsible for your library

**Raising the profile of your Russian Roulette event**

The following ideas will help to raise the profile of a *Russian Roulette* event or book group you are running.

- Create a PowerPoint presentation with quotes from the book and details of your event. Run it on a loop it on your library screen (if you have one) or on the school screen. Quotes might include:
  - “…now I am asking you to prove it. I need to know that I can rely on you. Either you will pull the trigger or you will not.” (Sharkovsky, page 178)
  - A car came hurtling towards me, bumping over the track…I took in the bullet holes all over the bodywork and the fact that the front windscreen was shattered. But it was only when it stopped that I saw the shocking truth. (Yassen, page 39)
  - “Where are we going?” I asked for the second time. “To Venice,” Rykov said. “And to Scorpia,” he might have added. The most dangerous criminal organisation in the world. And I was about to walk right into its arms. (Yassen, page 239)

- Task a small group of students with filming students’ reactions to *Russian Roulette*, to the Alex Rider series more widely, or to a specific question such as “Can you describe Yassen Gregorovich in three words?” They can then edit the footage to create a short film of which the last frame is an advert for your event.

- Ask Alex Rider series fans to name three words to describe Yassen Gregorovich before they read the book. Then create a digital word cloud, with the most popular words appearing as the most prominent. Display the word
cloud under a thought-provoking question or statement such as: “Think you know Yassen Gregorovich? It’s time for him to tell you his story”, as well as the details of your Russian Roulette book group or event.

Reading groups

Russian Roulette, and the Alex Rider series more broadly, lend themselves to lively book/reading group sessions, for fans as well as those who are new to the series. Below are some sample questions for stimulating discussion, as well as suggestions to add some extra excitement to your session.

Possible discussion or debate questions

- Was Yassen always destined to become an evil villain?
- Were his parents right to keep their secret from him?
- Was Yassen justified in killing Vladimir and Ivan Sharkosvky?
- Is John Rider a father figure to Yassen?
- Was it a wise decision for Yassen to seek out Dima after having been pickpocketed by him?
- Was Yassen right to sell his parents’ jewellery?
- Who has the greatest influence on Yassen throughout his life?
- Do you think Yassen would change his past if he could?
- Do you think he is the victim or villain of the story?
- What are Yassen’s most positive and negative characteristics?

Creative extras

To add extra excitement to your session, you could:

- Bring in Russian food for students to try
- Hold the session in a secret location, giving students clues in advance of the day
- Play Russian music from the era the book was set in
- Create a password (maybe a Russian word) or signal which students are notified about before the event and which they have to say/perform when they arrive at the session
- Give students an Alex Rider/hero or Yassen/villain card before the session and ask them to bring an object with them which they think their hero/villain would consider invaluable
- Decorate the area where you will hold the session as a crime scene, one which Yassen has just left, having assassinated his latest target

Anthony Horowitz fan event

Why not hold a special screening of the Anthony Horowitz fan event in the library for fans, issuing invitations, bring-a-friend cards and providing popcorn (if permitted in school)? If you are using this resource in advance of the screening, work with this group to identify the burning questions they have for the author about Yassen and his life-story.

Design your own version of the book cover

Anthony Horowitz chose two simple questions for the book’s cover: “Alex Rider – too young to die?” and “Yassen Gregorovich – too young to kill?” During your session, set students the task of designing their own book cover, based on their interpretation
of the story. You could hold a competition, where students ‘pitch’ their book cover and then all vote for their preferred choice. Offer prizes and display as many of the entries as possible in the library.

**A school library makeover or themed displays**
Work with a small group of students to decorate your library, focusing on a theme related to *Russian Roulette*, such as spies, Russia or heroes and villains. These decorations and displays could be the dedicated theme for a full half term, with a launch event linked to the Anthony Horowitz live-streamed/downloaded fan event.

**Bookmark production**
During a library session, set students the task of designing a bookmark for them to keep or to tuck inside library books when they are borrowed. Suggested themes could include:

- ‘**Hero vs Villain**’, featuring Alex Rider and Yassen Gregorovich.
- ‘**If you enjoyed this book, why not read…**’ This would include suggestions for other books in the Alex Rider series, as well as other spy genre series, such as the Young James Bond series by Charlie Higson or the CHERUB series by Robert Muchamore.
- ‘**Questions to make you think**’, specifically related to *Russian Roulette*, or other books in the Alex Rider series. Questions such as the examples in the themes section of this resource may help get the ball rolling for students. For example: what does trust mean to Yassen and could he ever really trust anyone again?

**Drop Everything and….Listen**
Adapt the traditional Drop Everything and Read format and organise for fans of the book to stand in front of their class and read an exciting extract of the book for a few minutes during tutor time/registration. Support those students to improve their storytelling technique in advance of their reading and encourage them to use their reading as an opportunity to promote the fan event or borrowing this series of books from the library.

**Mapping Yassen’s life**
Hold a session where students are given the resources to enable them to plot the journeys that Yassen takes during the story on a map (inventing where both Estrov and Kirsk are). This will help them to develop a spatial and visual understanding of the story. Extension activities could include: labelling each ‘pin’ with details of his activities in that place or calculations related to the number of miles travelled between each town/city. Display these maps in the library, with a catchy title such as: “Yassen Gregorovich had to travel around the world to become a true villain”.

**Book reviews and beyond**
During a library session, set students the task of writing a book review for *Russian Roulette*. To enhance students’ engagement with this activity, why not:

- Create a [school blog](#) specifically for reviews about *Russian Roulette*. If you know of any other schools who are focusing on the book too, why not create a
more formal group and set up a system where each school in turn comments on the blog entries of another school.

- Encourage students to create *shelf-talkers* and *belly bands* for the Alex Rider books you have in the library, with succinct catchy messages which will encourage others to borrow them.
- Encourage students to create their reviews in the format of *Tweets*, allowing them 140 characters maximum to get their view across. Tweet the best reviews via your school’s Twitter account and/or create a visual display of the Tweets in the library.

**A spy-themed treasure hunt (after-school activity)**
Set the library up as crime scene, one where Yassen has just killed his latest target. Through a treasure hunt, with clues placed around the school, students must solve the crime and find the location of Yassen’s hiding place. Clues based on locations in the school could be linked to the book or knowledge students have gained related to the themes mentioned earlier in this resource. For example: “What was Yassen’s main job in the Sharkovsky compound and where did he carry out these duties?” (leading students to the canteen).

**Collaboration with other Departments**

- **Themed book box or dedicated resource area within the school library**
  Identify resources related to the themes that the book covers and create a dedicated area within the school library. This could for example include books about Russian history, the UK Secret Information Services, as well as other books from the young adult spy genre. If working with English and other subject teachers, you may have the resources to create a themed book box for them to use with classes when delivering their *Russian Roulette* themed lessons.

- **Research sessions**
  Meet with subject staff in advance of their *Russian Roulette* lesson(s) and plan how students will use the library’s resources (digital, as well as books) in order to research their investigation questions and develop their information literacy skills.

- **Creative writing activities**
  There are lots of different types of creative writing tasks and drama activities which this book inspires. Examples of these can be found below, in the English section of this resource.

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**English and Drama**

**Theme: Text analysis, creative writing and Drama**

**English outcome(s)**
See literacy outcomes outlined in the introduction of this resource (page 2).

The suggested activities for your English lessons are based around an investigation into key questions, related to the narrative and characters in *Russian Roulette*. It is
assumed that these activities are picking up at the point where students have already read the book and have taken part in a starter activity to set the scene for their work ahead.

This starter activity could be an initial discussion where students explore their overall views on the book in groups, using Aidan Chambers’ *Tell Me* grid:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Dislikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What did you like about this book? Why? What especially caught your attention? Were there any aspects you would have liked more of?</td>
<td>Was there anything you disliked? Why? How would you have liked this part to have been written?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Puzzles</th>
<th>Connections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was there anything that puzzled you? Do you have any questions you would want to ask Anthony Horowitz? Was there anything that took you completely by surprise?</td>
<td>Were there any patterns or themes that you noticed? Were there any connections that you made with real life or any other books you have read?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the investigation, five example questions have been suggested, although of course, with such a rich text, there is the potential for many more to arise, including some of those in the themes section at the start of this resource.

For each key question, one or more extracts have been selected to provide a text stimulus for students. Following this, Direct Activities Related to the Texts (DARTs) are proposed based on the theme that the question is asking students to explore.

Finally, there are two creative writing or drama activity choices suggested, through which students can present their findings and in essence, their answer to the question. Whilst the DARTs and creative writing/drama ideas are categorised under each specific question, this is only intended as a guide and many of them can be adapted and used for other questions.

**Key question one:**
What skills do you need to be a Scorpia assassin?

**Suggested extract(s)**

- Whole chapter – *The Island*
- Page 351 (“I’m thinking about New York.”) to page 352 (“I’m just laying out the options.”)
- Page 370 (“I didn’t want to answer”) to page 371 (“Forget all this ever happened.”)

**Suggested DARTs**

- Whilst reading the extract(s), ask students to highlight characteristics that are essential for an assassin. Create a table with three columns colour-coded green, orange and red. List the qualities they have highlighted which are the most essential under green and the least important under the red column. They can add their own based on their knowledge from the rest of the book.
• After having read the extract(s), students could complete a cloze text activity which helps them to identify the key qualities for an assassin.

**Suggested presentation formats: creative writing or drama**

• Create a job description for a new post as an assassin which has just come up at Scorpia. Provide students with example job descriptions so that they are able to categorise the key competencies which they have identified when completing the DARTs above.

• Write a script for an interview between a hopeful candidate and Julia Rothman. Students can then practise their interviews in pairs, with some pairs performing them in front of the class. You may also want to visit the section of the book where Julia Rothman invites Yassen to become an assassin (page 255-258).

**Key question two:**

**Following Leo’s death, Yassen never experiences friendship again. Do you agree?**

**Suggested extract(s)**

• Page 142 (“We sat next to the window”) to page 143 (“The two of us were friends.”)

• Page 123 (“But perhaps Dima was the answer”) to page 128 (“Sure why not”)

**Suggested DARTs**

• Ask students to brainstorm the essential criteria needed to consider someone a friend. Select Dima as an example ‘friendship’ to analyse and ask students to complete a “Point – Evidence – Explain” table based on the information Yassen provides in the extracts studied.

• Through focused exploratory talk, ask students to discuss their views on whether Dima was a true friend to Yassen when he was in Moscow.

**Suggested presentation formats: creative writing or drama**

• Write a new chapter in the book which recounts what happened to Dima after Yassen broke into Sharkovsky’s house. Write it from Dima’s point of view. What did he do? How did he feel directly after the event and then several days or weeks after the event?

• Work in groups of three and write the script for a police interview with Dima, where the authorities are questioning the teenager about the break-in and Dima’s relationship with Yassen. Give students the opportunity to rehearse the sketch and choose groups to perform in front of the rest of the class, ideally groups who have different interpretations regarding how loyal Dima is to Yassen.

**Key question three:**

**Yassen has complex relationships with many characters in the book. Who has the most significant influence on him?**

**Suggested extract(s)**
• John Rider – Page 351 (“I’m thinking about New York.”) to page 352 (“I’m just laying out the options.”)
• Dima – Page 142 (“We sat next to the window”) to page 143 (“The two of us were friends.”)
• Sharkovsky
  o Page 390 (“Sharkovsky could only watch,”) to page 391 (“…it is not what I want.”)
  o Page 177 (“I’ll do whatever you want,”) to page 181 (“You can leave now,” he said)
• His parents – page 40 to page 50 (“I broke away. I ran.”)

Suggested DARTs
• Ask each group to complete a “Point – Evidence – Explain” table for one influential character, using the extracts as an initial stimulus and then their wider knowledge to provide evidence as to how that character positively or negatively changed Yassen’s life.
• Following the PEE analysis activity, get students to jigsaw so that they have the opportunity to hear the views and evidence for different characters. At the end of the session, the original groups can reform and decide who was the most influential character based on what they have heard from other groups throughout the session.

Suggested presentation formats: creative writing or drama
• Write a letter from Yassen (the adult) to the most influential person in his life. In the letter, explain why he had the most impact on him when he was growing up and how he still continues to influence him today.
• Imagine Yassen is an old man, having just been released from prison, where he served 30 years for his murders. Write a script for a TV interview between the interviewer and Yassen. Students should focus on one section of the interview – the exploration of who had the greatest impact on Yassen when he was growing up and how he perceives that person today.

Key question four:
Was Yassen always destined to become an assassin?

Suggested extract(s)
• Page 256 (“But you’re different…”) to end of chapter
• Page 306 (“I was trying to take out the gun…”) to page 307 (“I might have committed murder.”)
• Page 351 (“I’m thinking about New York.”) to page 352 (“I’m just laying out the options.”)
• Page 370 (“I didn’t want to answer”) to page 371 (“Forget all this ever happened.”)
• Page 403 (“You killed Ian Rider…”) to end of chapter

Suggested DARTs
• Create a “destiny” graph for Yassen where key points in his life highlighted in the extracts are plotted on the x axis, against the probability of him becoming
an assassin on the y axis. Then get students to list these from most probable to least probable in a PEE table, providing evidence and an explanation for their rating.

- Hot seat Yassen’s character at the different key stages in his life in the extracts. Students should plan and ask questions to Yassen which will reveal how much he was influenced by his external environment and the extent to which he must have had always had the potential to become an assassin.

Suggested presentation formats: creative writing or drama

- Divide the class into small groups and get each group to run a debate, with one side arguing that being an assassin was part of his nature and the other advocating the negative influence of his experiences in Moscow and life circumstances as a teenager as the cause. You could also ask specific students to make guest cameos as John Rider, Yassen’s mother and Julia Rothman.

- Create a storyboard or graphic novel which tells a part of Yassen’s story in a parallel universe, where Estrov was not destroyed. Encourage students to ask themselves key questions when planning their plot. Would he have encountered Scorpia at some point in his life regardless of where he grew up?

Key question five:
Why does Yassen spare Alex Rider’s life at the end of the story?

Suggested extract
Page 400 (“It was time to make the kill”) to end of chapter

Suggested DARTs

- After reading the extract, ask students to highlight the sentences which specifically relate to his thoughts around fulfilling his mission to kill Alex Rider. Provide a table with two columns – in one column students can sequence his thoughts about Alex and in the other the reason why this might have influenced his decision (example below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex looked like John Rider</td>
<td>Even though John betrayed him, he still admired him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex wasn’t afraid</td>
<td>He admires him because he is courageous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex was the same age Yassen was when he was forced to leave the village</td>
<td>He empathises with him and the responsibility he is facing at such a young age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex’s parents were also dead</td>
<td>He feels sorry for him</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Ask students to answer reading comprehension questions, for this activity providing the key thoughts and sentences Yassen says to Alex, asking them to reflect on why he has these thoughts and the effect they have on his final decision to allow Alex to survive.

Suggested presentation formats: creative writing or drama

- Write a letter from an elderly Yassen to Alex, explaining why he did not kill him on that office roof forty years earlier. Provide an insight into his thought
processes, as well as an insight into how Yassen believed they were similar or different people.

- Write a script for a conversation between Yassen and another Scorpia assassin (colleague/friend – see question two) where Yassen is justifying why he didn’t fulfil his mission and kill Alex Rider. Students pair up and choose one of the scripts, acting out the role play scenario. Choose a handful of pairs to perform their sketch in front of the rest of the class.

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**History**

**Theme:** 20th century Russian history

**History outcome(s)**
To understand the historical concept of cause and consequence, make connections between events and draw conclusions to gain historical perspective.

**Suggested extracts to study:**

- **Rural Russia in the 1990s:** Page 23 (“Yasha! We’ve run out of water.”) to page 26 (…didn’t even bother to stop there.”)
- **Moscow:** Page 98 (“Kazansky Station.”) to page 101 (“This was where you had to start.”)
- **Chernobyl, Ukraine:** Page 61 (“We all knew about Chernobyl…”) to page 62 (“…so long as things were kept quiet?”)
- **Lenin in Kirsk:** page 84 (“Lenin had once visited Kirsk.” to “Folklore Museum of Kirsk”)

In the early stages of the book, we learn about life in Russia in the 1990s, as Yassen makes the journey from his village, Estrov and tries to survive in Moscow. Through Horowitz’s descriptions, we build a picture of the poverty which gripped the country during this decade of economic depression, as well as the emergence of the newly rich through characters such as Sharkovsky. Although later than the era covered traditionally in the history curriculum, exploring this period of Russian history would complement a study of early 20th century Russian history. Furthermore, given the current military and political issues in Russian and former Soviet states, it could facilitate a topical historical enquiry.

The author also briefly weaves the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl and the political leader, Vladimir Lenin into the narrative, two potential spotlights for your lesson.

**Textual analysis**

Put the students into pairs and collectively read one of the first two suggested extracts from the book. Give each member of the group the text analysis grid to fill out individually. Each member of the pair then gets together to share their information with the other and complete one whole grid.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story/plot</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is this extract about?</td>
<td>Who are the main characters in this scene?</td>
<td>Where is the action taking place?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once pairs have filled out the grid, either facilitate a whole-class or table discussions around their text analysis.

**Investigation**
Put students into groups of three and support them in choosing a question to investigate. You could encourage them to choose one of their own or alternatively set your own questions, for example:

- What was life like for the typical citizen in Russia in the 1990s?
- What caused the economic depression in Russia in the 1990s?
- How does late 20th century Russian life compare to life in Russia now?

Provide access to sources to enable students to research the subject and answer their key questions. Support students to record the information they think is pertinent in a table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discovered information (highlight key vocabulary)</th>
<th>What was the cause of this event/fact?</th>
<th>What was the result of this event/fact? What happened next?</th>
<th>How does it link to your question and any other information you have discovered?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Presentation**
Once students have collected sufficient information to answer the questions they have chosen/been given, give them the creative freedom (time permitting) to present their findings. Possible formats could include:

- **A diary/journal entry** with one version written by Yassen as an adult to himself as a boy living in Estrov, explaining how life in Russia has changed in the intervening years. An alternative could be the creation of a journal entry from Yassen describing the destruction of Estrov, compared with the Government records regarding what happened to the village.

- **A storyboard/comic** which tells the story of a period of Russian history from the point of view of different characters.

- **A quiz** where questions have a focus on cause, consequence and links between events.

- **A stopframe animation/digital presentation** which focuses on a particular aspect of Russian history.

- **The creation of a piece of drama/role play** which explains how Ivan and Dima came to lead the very different lives they did, drawing upon fact and bias related to causes around the economic depression at the time.
• A breaking newspaper article or television news feature reporting on the leak of anthrax in Estrov, comparing it to the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl.

Geography

Themes:
1) The impact of climate change on Venice
2) The urbanisation of Moscow

Geography outcome(s)
To understand how Venice was formed and the effect of climate change on the city
To understand how Moscow became urbanised

Suggested extracts to study:

• Extract to study: page 244 (“There is simply nowhere in the world like it”) to page 245 (“I am glad I have never killed anyone there”)
• Extract to study: page 98 (“Kazansky station. Moscow.”) to page 101 (“This was where you had to start.”)

Textual analysis
Put the students into pairs and collectively read the chosen extract from the book. Give each member of the group the text analysis grid to fill out individually. Each member of the pair then gets together to share their information with the other and complete one whole grid.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story/plot</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is this extract about?</td>
<td>Who is the narrator in the extract?</td>
<td>What setting is the extract describing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do we learn about Venice/Moscow?</td>
<td>How does his history affect the way he interacts with the setting?</td>
<td>What visual images, sounds and smells does the text conjure up in your mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this a key part of the story? Why?</td>
<td>Can you relate to how he feels about his surroundings, why?</td>
<td>What signposts about the setting can you find?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once pairs have filled out the grid, either facilitate a whole-class or table discussions around their textual analysis and what they have learnt about Moscow/Venice, highlighting any questions which link to your key questions (see section below).

Investigation
Display your key questions on the interactive whiteboard. You will be able to think of many more, but example questions might include:

• Venice – What is the current and potential future impact of climate change on Venice?
• Moscow – How was Moscow urbanised following World War II?

Put students into groups of three or four and ask them to choose one of the questions, which will form the basis of their enquiry.
Provide access to other information sources to enable students to research their chosen subject and answer their key question. For example, the BBC website story: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-17445936 (Venice) or http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/world/06/urbanisation/html/urbanisation.stm (Moscow).

Support students to record the information they think is pertinent in a table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discovered fact</th>
<th>Key vocabulary</th>
<th>What have you learnt about urbanisation/climate change?</th>
<th>How does it link to your question?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Presentation**

Once students have collected sufficient information to answer their question, give them creative freedom (time permitting) to present their findings. Possible formats could include:

- A ‘before-and-after’ visual representation of Venice, now and in the future.
- A debate/discussion focusing on:
  - the advantages and disadvantages of rapid population growth (Moscow)
  - how Venetians are going to need to adapt their way of living in the future as a result of climate change
- A newspaper article or television news feature reporting from Venice in the future.
- A Government campaign leaflet written in the future encouraging people to move from Moscow to the countryside
- A diary/journal entry written from the point of view of somebody who lived through Moscow’s most intense period of urbanisation.

In this resource, we have suggested a focus on Moscow or Venice. However, Yassen travels to many other countries and cities throughout the story and these locations may provide stimulus for a wide range of geographical studies:

- New York – page 286 to 308
- Paris – page 356 to 371
- Iquitos (Peru) and the Amazon rainforest - page 335 to 355
- London – page 398 to 399

**Science**

**Theme: Chemical weapons**

**Science outcome(s)**

To understand the science of gases used in chemical weapons

How science works: the effect of scientific advances on society, e.g. chemical warfare
Suggested extract to study:

• Page 42 (“We never told you about the factory”) to page 44 (“It will protect you…”)

In this extract, Yassen’s parents explain to him that in recent years they have been producing a deadly chemical weapon, anthrax, for the military. But there has been a leak and the whole village is now contaminated. His only chance of survival is to accept the antidote which his parents want to give him.

Textual analysis

Put the students into pairs and collectively read the extract from the book. Give each member of the group the text analysis grid to fill out individually. Each pair then gets together to share their information with the other and complete one whole grid.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story/plot</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is this extract about?</td>
<td>Who are the main characters in this scene?</td>
<td>Where is the action taking place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do we learn about chemical weapons?</td>
<td>What kind of relationship do the characters have with one another? How do you know?</td>
<td>How does the setting affect what happens in the scene?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What questions now come up in your mind about chemical weapons?</td>
<td>Choose a character you relate to. How do they feel in the extract and why?</td>
<td>What signposts about the setting can you find?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once pairs have filled out the grid, either facilitate a whole-class or table discussions around their text analysis.

Investigation

Put students into groups of three and support them to create their own investigation question. Alternatively, set your own questions, for example:

• What are the main properties of anthrax?
• What effects does it have on people exposed to it?
• To what extent has anthrax been used as a chemical weapon?

Provide access to information sources to enable students to research the subject and answer their key questions. For example, the BBC website story: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/1590859.stm or the young adult novel, Private Peaceful (page 153 to 155).

Support students to record the information they think is pertinent in a table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discovered fact</th>
<th>Key vocabulary</th>
<th>What is the science?</th>
<th>How does it link to your question?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Presentation
Once students have collected sufficient information to answer the questions they have chosen/been given, give them the creative freedom (time permitting) to present their findings. Possible formats could include:

- **A storyboard** which recounts the process of producing anthrax or the effect of the factory leak through the eyes of Yassen’s parents.
- **An interactive diagram/digital presentation** which describes the chemical make-up of anthrax (and/or other chemical weapons) and its dangers.
- **A breaking newspaper article or television news feature** reporting on the chemical production and leak of anthrax in Estrov.
- **A diary/journal entry** written from the point of view from somebody who has survived a chemical attack and the impact it had on their health and surrounding environment.

Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)

**Theme: Exploration of Russian and languages spoken in other countries in the story**

**MFL outcomes:**
To develop your understanding of Russian culture
To be able to introduce yourself in Russian
To understand the conventions of the Russian alphabet

As the story *Russian Roulette* is set in no less than six countries around the world, it lends itself to a raft of language-based activities which will engage your students. Here are a few suggestions to get the ball rolling. Given Yassen’s nationality, many of the activities focus on the exploration of Russian. Some of these activities may suit smaller groups/language clubs, rather than whole-class activities.

**Using your Russian speakers**
You may have Russian-speaking adults and students in your school who are willing to get involved and run taster Russian activities, talk about the Russian language and their culture more broadly (of course, with traditional food and refreshments being a great ice-breaker). Try and use these young people and adults as part of your activities, in both MFL lessons and other subjects.

**Decoding the Russian alphabet**
Using an alphabet poster (which you can find easily online), introduce students to the Russian alphabet and the corresponding phonemes. Use Google Translate or other translation software, so that students can listen to and practise saying the names of the book’s chapters which Anthony Horowitz has written in both Russian and English on the Contents page.

**Labelling work produced in other lessons**
If you are running a collapsed timetable day, it is likely that students are going to have produced work about Russia during History, Geography, Art and Design, English and in library sessions. If time permits, use your subsequent MFL
lesson/club to give students the opportunity to label their work with key words using the Russian alphabet, for example Moscow, Venice or the title of the book Russian Roulette.

**A phrase book for Yassen**

We know that Yassen speaks languages other than his own, yet he may still benefit from a phrase book when arriving in Venice, Peru and Paris. Depending on which of these languages are taught in your school, organise an activity where students can create a phrase book for the protagonist in one of his destinations (where the second language is English!). Work with students to help them identify key language and phrases he will need to know to help him on his mission (this could include a “random” code phrase which he needs to relay to a fellow assassin).

**A quiz**

Provide students with a list of key questions related to the Russian language and culture, as well as a suggested list of websites and books which will help them to expand their knowledge of the country and its people. Then hold a quiz, where teams compete to put their newly-acquired knowledge into practise.

**Russian television and music**

As a taster activity, give students the opportunity to listen to extracts of Russian songs or watch Russian television programmes. Whilst they are listening, ask them to make notes, or fill in a grid about their impressions of the ‘tune’ of the language – where they think the majority of the sounds are produced in the mouth; its tone and any similarities with other languages they may know. As an extension activity, it could be interesting to then show/listen to a clip from another language featured in the book (French, Spanish or Italian) and compare the ‘tunes’ of the two (or more) languages.

**Taster Russian lesson**

Enlist the help of a Russian speaker to deliver an introductory Russian lesson, teaching them how to introduce themselves, or ask their partner how they are and respond accordingly. To tie in with the book, ask students to role play two characters from the book when they meet for the first time, for example when Yassen meets Dima.

**Code-breaking bookmarks**

The author includes a number of Russian words in the text to add to its authenticity. Ask students to make a note of these words as they are reading the book. Then as a class/group, run an activity where students translate or explain these words. Students could then design bookmarks for future readers which feature translations/definitions of the key/most frequent Russian words.
Art and Design

Theme: Urban and rural landscapes

Art outcome(s)
• To be able to use perspective to draw 3D shapes, using two point perspective
• To be able to draw a rural/urban landscape

Suggested extracts to study:
• Estrov: page 23 ("Yasha! We've run out of water!") to page 33 ("It's not such a bad place")
• Moscow: page 98 ("Kazansky station. Moscow.") to page 101 ("people are willing to put up with it.")

Textual analysis
Put the students into pairs and collectively read the extract(s) from the book. Give each member of the group the text analysis grid to fill out individually. Each pair then gets together to share their information with the other and complete one whole grid.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story/plot</th>
<th>Character</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is this extract about?</td>
<td>Who is the narrator in the extract?</td>
<td>What setting is the extract describing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do we learn about life in Estrov/Moscow?</td>
<td>How does his history affect the way he interacts with the environment he is describing?</td>
<td>What visual images, sounds and smells does the text conjure up in your mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this a key part of the story? Why?</td>
<td>Can you relate to how he feels about his surroundings, why?</td>
<td>What signposts about the setting can you find?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once pairs have filled out the grid, either facilitate a whole-class or table discussions around their text analysis and the images which the author’s words conjure up in their minds. You could create a digital word cloud of these words and display it in the classroom.

Related activities
1) Put students into groups and provide them with photographs, paintings or drawings of Moscow and/or a rural Russian town/village. Encourage them to observe how the artist/photographer has created perspective through the use of 3D boxes, as well as other artistic devices employed to create atmosphere in the work.
2) Model how to draw 2D boxes and turn them into 3D boxes (and then with two point perspective) to create sketches depicting an industrial landscape or a more rural settlement.
3) Set students the task of using what they have learnt in order to draw/paint a larger landscape picture of Moscow or Estrov.
4) Ask students to review their art work. To what extent does it reflect the images the text conjured up and the word cloud you created as a class?
Other suggested activities
Below are a selection of other activities which you may like to develop in the classroom or during an art club session.

- An investigation into the life and works of famous Russian artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky
- An activity where students design their own book cover for *Russian Roulette*, based on their interpretation of the story.
- A portrait-focused lesson during which students draw, paint or create a collage of one of the characters in the story.
- An activity where students draw and write a storyboard/comic based on a section of the book, or their own ‘extras’ scene.
- Creating 3D models of Estrov, Moscow or any of the other landscapes in the story. This activity could include a focus on texture: the industrial man-made materials in the cities; the waterways of Venice or the diverse vegetation in Estrov or the Amazon rainforest.

“I knew exactly what I had to do…”, Yassen Gregorovich
Whether you are planning to run a cross-curricular *Russian Roulette* day or a one-off library/English session, we hope that this resource has inspired you with a range of ideas to make your day a success.

If you are planning your approach around Anthony Horowitz’s session, we hope that the live event ([www.alexrider.com/horowitzlive](http://www.alexrider.com/horowitzlive)) provides you with an opportunity to reward and celebrate all the students’ hard work in developing their understanding of the book and its themes. If you are using this resource after 16 June 2014, then the recorded event can be downloaded from the Alex Rider series website.

After the success of your *Russian Roulette* activities, we suggest reviewing and reflecting upon the success of your approach with colleagues to support the development of future whole text cross-curricular enquiries. It is also a fantastic opportunity to make the most of your students’ increased motivation for reading (which we are sure will be the result of your activities). Your school librarian will be key in talking with students and running activities to encourage them to read other books in the Alex Rider series, as well as the action adventure genre more widely.

Good luck!

For information related to the live event and all Alex Rider series news and updates, visit [www.alexrider.com](http://www.alexrider.com), [www.anthonyhorowitz.com](http://www.anthonyhorowitz.com) or [www.facebook.com/AlexRiderBooks](http://www.facebook.com/AlexRiderBooks).

*Russian Roulette* by Anthony Horowitz is now available in hardback, paperback, audio and eBook format.
THE WHITE CARNATION

ANTHONY HOROWITZ
A further extract from the diary of Yassen Gregorovitch...
I have never forgotten a single assignment. There is a special intimacy between killers and the people that they kill and I think I almost owe it to my victims not to forget. Some of them have died bravely, some in tears. Many of them were completely unaware of me and were dead before they knew what was happening. A few have tried to bribe me, offering huge sums of money – four or five times my original fee – to spare them. Of course, I have never been tempted. It is not just a question of my reputation. I would hate anyone to think that I can be so easily bought, which may sound strange coming from a professional assassin but that’s how it is. I am true to my word.

I remember. Whether it is the bullet, the knife, or at close quarters with my own bare hands, each death has a special place in my memory. You could say there is an entire graveyard in my thoughts. But there is one incident I remember above all others. I cannot go to Rome without thinking of it. If I happen to pass a flower shop and see a white carnation, I am reminded of it. It is not good for someone in my profession to carry memories. It is better to keep my head clear for what lies ahead. But this is
something I would not wish to lose. I don’t know why. But it is important to me.

It was in Rome. I had come to this beautiful city with its seven hills, its classical ruins, its magnificent churches and its superb restaurants because I’d been paid to kill a woman I had never met. I had been contacted through my usual network of cut-outs. These were people throughout Europe and America who knew how to reach me but who did not know who I was or what I looked like. This was in the days before the Internet when I had to be extremely careful how I was contacted. Technology has made my work so much simpler … these days murder comes at the touch of a mouse. Most of my cut-outs were minor criminals who received a small amount of money every month. I am proud of the fact that only one of them ever tried to betray me to the police. I buried him close to the service station at Newport Pagnell – although I cannot confirm that he was actually dead at the time.

At any event, I had received an envelope containing a slip of paper with a rendezvous: Room fifty-six, the Hotel Majestic in the Via Veneto in Rome. Nine o’clock in the morning, three days from now. My contact would be booked in under the name of Monica Peretti. The envelope also contained confirmation that the sum of €50,000 – the first twenty-five per cent of my fee – had been paid into my account with the European Finance Group in Geneva. I was in Zürich at the time, having just finished another job and it would only be a short hop to Rome. I decided to take the train. I never much liked air travel – and this was long before airports were crammed full of the X-ray machines and metal detectors that now make life so difficult for someone like me.

I rented a flat in Rome. By this time, I had flats in almost a dozen major cities, all of them under false names. The flat
was in the Via Flaminia, a short distance from the city centre near the Villa Borghese and although it was small and plain, I loved the view over the parkland, the little balcony and the cool breezes in the height of summer. I was also fond of the DSR-1 German-manufactured bolt-action rifle which I had purchased on my last visit and which lay concealed beneath the floorboards. I looked forward to using it again.

At exactly nine o’clock, I knocked on the door of number fifty-six. In fact, I had already been at the hotel for three hours. I had eaten breakfast there ... delicious pastries and a cup of very strong expresso. I had sat in the lobby, reading a copy of La Stampa. I had wandered through the corridors as if I was looking for someone. And all the time I had been checking that I was not being watched, that everything was normal, that I had not just walked into a trap.

“Come in...” It was a woman’s voice. She had spoken in English.

The door was already unlocked. I walked into a suite that would have cost its occupant at least five hundred euros a night. The furniture was antique, the bed king-sized, the curtains sweeping down as if they covered a theatrical stage rather than a window. There was a woman sitting at a desk with her legs crossed. She was about thirty years old, simply dressed, with a string of pearls around her neck, and I thought at once that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Oh yes, there had been others. Julia Rothman had made an extraordinary impression on me when I first met her in Venice. I had rubbed shoulders with famous actresses and even supermodels. But this woman had a quality that all the others lacked. There was a sort of innocence about her. Without knowing quite why, I wanted to look after her. She had black hair which fell over her shoulders, slender arms,
a long neck. Everything about her was somehow fragile. Her face was so striking that it could have been lifted from the pages of any beauty magazine. Blue eyes? Yes. White teeth? Yes. Perfect skin? Of course. I wondered what she was doing here, alone in this hotel room. I wondered who she wanted me to kill.

I did not speak to her. First, I took out a small box that resembled a travel alarm clock and flicked a switch in the side. I glanced at the display. It told me that we were not being recorded and that there were no other types of surveillance devices in operation inside or outside the room. Without asking permission, I went into the bathroom, then checked the cupboards and under the bed. This may sound ridiculous, but if you rely too heavily on technology you can forget that there are more old-fashioned ways to listen in on a conversation.

The woman had watched me with amusement. “I see you are a careful man, Mr Forbes,” she said. She spoke with an Italian accent. “I like that.”

That was the identity I was using for this job. Daniel Forbes. I had a credit card, a passport, a driving license, a complete life in that name.

“How can I help you, Signora?” I asked. Her name was quite possibly as false as the one that I was using but I did not think so. I had already confirmed that she had used it to check in, and that there was a Monica Peretti with an account at the Banca Credita Italiano in Rome. My instinct told me that she had not tried to disguise herself and that was interesting. She did not care if I knew who she was.

“I am told that you are the best at what you do,” she said. “That you always succeed. You are extremely expensive. Is it true?”

“I am reliable.”

“There is someone that I want you to kill.” She half
smiled as if she had somehow managed to surprise herself, and the vulnerability I had felt when I came in still lingered. “There! I have said it. I have actually put it into words. Now, if you were a policeman, I suppose you could arrest me.”

“I am not a policeman. Who do you want me to kill?”

She paused. “My sister.” She looked straight at me. “Does that shock you?”

“No, signora. I am not easily shocked.”

“I suppose not.” She paused. “Do you want to know why I am asking you to do this?”

“Only if you wish to tell me.”

“Because I hate her. I have always hated her.” Something flashed in her eyes. “Even when we were little girls she made my life miserable. She bullied me. She made things up about me. But that’s not the reason. Three years ago I married, and I thought that at last I had found happiness. I was in love. I really was. And do you know what has happened? My husband has left me! He’s left me for her! My sister has stolen him from me and I have decided that enough is enough. We will never be happy while we are on the same planet so now one of us must leave it. Can you do this, Mr Forbes? Will you do this for me?”

I shrugged. “The reason is unimportant, signora. Do you have the rest of the money?”

She reached out and opened a slim leather attaché case. The locks clicked loudly as they disengaged. She lifted the lid and I saw the brand-new fifty euro notes in their neat bundles, stacked together.

“What is your sister’s name? Where can I find her?”

“You do not need to know her name and finding her will be easy. I have arranged to meet her this afternoon on the Spanish Steps.”

“This afternoon is too soon. I need at least twenty-four
hours to make my arrangements."

She considered what I had said. “That is not a problem. I can telephone her. We can change the meeting to tomorrow. Shall we say four o’clock?”

“Can you tell me what she looks like? Better still, do you have a photograph of her I can take?”

“You do not need a photograph. Nor do I need to describe her. The fact is – she is my twin.” She smiled at me. “Now I see that I have surprised you, Mr Forbes, no matter what you say. We are twin sisters. We look almost identical except that her hair is a little shorter than mine and she wears glasses. You will have no difficulty spotting her. She will be wearing a dark suit with a white carnation in her lapel.”

“How can you know that?”

“My sister works as the senior manager of the Hotel Condotti and it’s her uniform. It’s what she always wears.”

“And how can you be sure that she will come if you ask her?”

“It is my sister who has arranged this meeting with me. She wants to pay me off … to avoid any difficulties. That is the sort of person she is. She thinks that for a few euros, I will disappear from her life. But that’s not how it’s going to be Mr Forbes. I don’t need her money.” She waved a hand in the direction of the briefcase. “You can see for yourself. I’m a rich woman. Take the money – and do what I ask.”

“Whatever you say signora.”

In fact, it would normally have taken me a great deal longer than twenty-four hours to set up a kill. It is not just a question of finding the right vantage point from which to take out your target. What is even more important – what is vital – is to ensure that you have your escape route planned. How long will it take the police to surround the building? How many stairways are there, how many emergency exits,
how many different streets leading away? If you do not know the answer to these questions, you are dead.

But even as I set about making my preparations, I was aware that I wasn’t being as careful as usual. It was all happening very quickly. Something about Monica Peretti made me keen to do as she wished even though I knew that there was something wrong. I could not put my finger on it but it was there, in the air. When you have been working for as long as me, you develop a sense for these things.

I went to the Spanish Steps. There are one hundred and thirty-five of them, with wide terraces, pilasters and great tubs of flowers, rising from the Piazza di Spagna to the church of Trinità dei Monti. They are one of the city’s most famous sights. As usual, the steps were crowded with tourists, sitting in the blazing sunshine, strolling up and down, taking photographs of each other. I walked around the area and quickly found what I was looking for. Just opposite was a half-empty office block with access to a flat roof. Better still, the roof connected with two others. The door that led in from the street was old, with a lock that would take me less than ten seconds to pick. Climb a few flights of stairs, and I would have the whole of the Spanish Steps in front of me.

On the day of the killing, I crossed Rome, carrying my sniper rifle and six rounds of ammunition in a cello case. It was as if I were a member of an orchestra on my way to a rehearsal. I know I must have looked ridiculous, like something from a comedy film, but it’s not easy to carry an assault weapon across a crowded city. I would have preferred almost any other location. Somewhere quieter. Somewhere less central.

I arrived at the steps at one o’clock when the sun was at its hottest and when most Romans were searching for the inside of a shady restaurant for lunch or going home to
enjoy a siesta. I looked around me, then quickly unlocked the door that I had marked out the day before. It opened into a shabby hallway with a flight of steps directly ahead. Nobody saw me. A few minutes later I was lying on the roof with my cello case beside me, out of sight from the street. It was three hours before my victim was due to arrive. Fortunately there was a canopy which provided me with shade.

I took my time preparing my weapon. I had of course already checked the trigger mechanism, the suppressor and all the other moving parts. I unfolded the bipod and made sure that the gun was properly balanced, with the stock fitting snug against my shoulder. I loaded it with the .338 Lapua Magnum bullets. One would be enough. I had no intention of firing wildly into a crowd of holiday makers. Lying flat on the warm tarmac, I looked through the optical sights (fully multi-coated, manufactured by Lynx in Japan, nitrogen-filled to prevent fogging). I could see everything that moved on the Spanish Steps – the individual petals of the flowers, fluttering in the breeze, the ticking hands of a watch on a tourist’s wrist, the hairs on the back of an Italian policeman’s neck as he strolled up the steps, completely unaware of what was about to happen.

The woman appeared a few moments before four o’clock. She was dressed just as Monica Perretti had said she would be – in a black suit, with black leather shoes, carrying a leather handbag and with a white carnation in her buttonhole. Her hair was shorter than her sister’s and styled differently, pinned back. Otherwise, the two women were remarkably similar. Put them on either side of a glass window and you would take it for a reflection in a mirror.

Emptying my mind, I allowed my sights to settle on the carnation. At the same time, my finger curled round the trigger. This was the moment that I knew so well.
There was always that sense of perfection. The contract was sealed. In one explosive second, life would become death.
The white petals filled my vision. If I fired now, the bullet would travel through the carnation and straight into her heart. The woman was standing still, almost as if she was waiting for her death. She was alone. She did not seem to be looking for her sister. She did not move.

And still I had that sense that something was wrong.

I lifted the barrel, allowing the sniper scope to travel up. I saw the pulse beating in the woman’s neck. I saw her lips, her nose and finally her eyes. She was wearing glasses just as I had been told ... and that was what gave her away. It was such a tiny detail. It should have meant nothing. But it is part of my training. I never miss anything. It is one of the reasons why I’m still alive.

Her clothes were expensive.
The shoes were expensive.
The handbag was expensive.
But the glasses were cheap. You could have bought them in any chemist shop for just a few euros, off-the-peg.

I made my decision. Nobody was going to die today. I unloaded and disassembled the DSR-1, then repacked it in the cello case. I made my way back down to ground level and took a taxi to my flat on the Via Flaminia. Nobody noticed me. Nobody said anything apart from the taxi driver who asked me which orchestra I played for.

“Camerata de’ Bardi,” I told him. It was the orchestra of the University of Pavia and it was currently performing in Rome.

The driver did not ask any more questions which was just as well. For him.

That evening I returned to the Hotel Majestic and knocked once again on the door of room fifty-six. I was not sure that Monica Peretti would still be there and I was both
surprised and pleased when I heard her voice asking me to come in.

She was packing, about to leave, the wardrobes open and her clothes spread out on the bed. She herself was wearing a coat and a headscarf. If I had come half an hour later she would have been gone. She saw me, standing in the doorway, and stopped what she was doing. She closed the lid of her suitcase and turned to me. “Why are you here?” she demanded.

“I did not do as you asked me,” I said.

“I know that. You told me yesterday that you were reliable. Why did you lie to me?”

“And why did you lie to me, signora? Or perhaps it would be simpler if I asked you another question. Why did you want me to kill you?”

I had already seen what I had known would be there. It was on the bed, next to the suitcase. The white carnation. Monica Peretti had been wearing it that afternoon when she had stood on the Spanish Steps. She had pinned it to herself as a target.

She did not reply, so I continued. “You do not have a sister. After I left you yesterday morning, you changed your hair and your clothes. You bought cheap glasses to change your face. You paid me €200,000 to kill a woman who did not exist. You wanted me to kill you. Why?”

Her lip curled. “It’s none of your damned business.”

“It is very much my business, signora. You used me. I want to know the reason.”

“Because I want to die.”

Her voice was heavy and suddenly there were tears in her eyes. “I am not going to explain myself to you, Mr Forbes. Why should I? I just have no wish to continue my life and I chose the fastest, the most painless – and frankly the most expensive way to rid myself of it. For some reason, you
decided not to fire the bullet. That makes you a failure and a thief. But now you can get out of here. I don’t want to see you again.”

“I never fail,” I said. “And I am not a thief.” I was carrying the attaché case she had given me and I placed it on the desk. “Here is your money back. I have kept the twenty-five per cent deposit to cover my expenses coming here to Rome. But as for the rest of it, its yours.”

I turned to leave, but stopped at the door.

“I have killed a lot of people who deserved to die, signora. I have killed people who had simply made enemies. You could say that I know a great deal about death…

“So let me tell you this. Whatever your problems, however unhappy you are, you are stupid. You have beauty. You have money. That alone makes you better off than half the world. But even if you had neither of these things, how could you not wish to see what tomorrow brings? How could you not want to feel the warmth of the sun on your skin, to eat ice cream in the Piazza Navona, to watch the children throwing coins into the fountain? When you came to me, you invited a monster into your life but if you paid me ten times what is in that briefcase, I would not do as you ask. There is no tunnel so long that it does not have light at the end. I would suggest you find it.”

I left her.

I do not know what became of her. I do not know if she lived or died. But when I remember all the people that I killed, I think of the one woman I may have saved and hope that she learned something from our encounter and that she still, sometimes, thinks of me.