

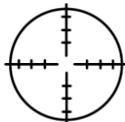
The Diary of the Writer on the Run – Part One

Prologue

I was a struggling writer, holding down a normal job by day and writing by night. My true identity was the one I realised at night, penning fantasies and thrillers, the kind I loved when growing up and still enjoy now.

But something disturbing was happening to me. I was being watched, followed by someone who never left any evidence of their presence. Whatever I did, wherever I went, I just couldn't escape them.

I was about to become a character in one of my own stories, faced with danger that came straight out of my books. My life was going to change forever. So was my writing. What you are about to read is how it all started and how I became the Writer on the Run.



PART ONE

1.01 It's been a slow few months. The day job's been busy. I've had to move a few times, which is unfortunate. Just unpacking my things in my new flat now. It's small, but that works for me in more ways than one. This place is comfortable. It will feed my imagination. I can't wait to start writing again and get my first book out into the world.

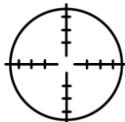
1.02 Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. Why did I think another move would make any difference? I haven't slept in weeks. I can barely think straight. It's the same as the last place I lived – and the three before that. I just want a good night's sleep. I want to write.

1.03 I was a zombie at work. I think people are starting to notice. My days at this place are numbered. Normally I wouldn't care, but I can't think clearly or function well enough to get another job after this one.

1.04 It happened again. I lay awake in bed for hours last night, staring into the darkness. I couldn't see anything, but I could feel someone's eyes on me. I turned over and over, trying to ignore it, but it was no use. I was sure I could sense a presence moving about in my flat. I wasn't alone.

I did the only thing I could think of. I called in sick. I drank a load of coffee.

And I turned my flat inside out. I tore the place apart.



1.05 I haven't moved since my last post. It's dark again already. Everything I own sits in heaps on the floor around me. I haven't found anything. No cameras. No listening devices. No holes in the walls, floors or ceilings. The doors and windows are secure.

But someone is watching me. I know they are.

1.06 It happened. My imagination fired up. I grabbed my laptop and I wrote furiously, my fingers pounding on the keys, trying to keep up with the ideas flooding from my brain. I wrote until the sun rose. Then I collapsed and slept on the floor.

I went to work today. The boss took one look at me and said I should have stayed at home. But I had to be there.

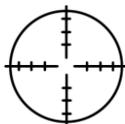
Sitting at my desk, I could feel someone's eyes watching me, taking in my every move.

I stayed late and waited until everyone else had gone. I ransacked the office, then put everything back as it was.

Nothing. I found nothing.

1.07 I need food. I haven't eaten in days. No chance of an expensive takeout and I can't afford a sugar or carb crash, so it needs to be something quick and healthy.

I don't know how he does it but he's everywhere – at work, in my home and anywhere in-between. What does he want with me? One thing I know for certain is that he isn't going away anytime soon.



I sat down at my desk and managed a serious writing session without his presence distracting me, but I've read it back and I'm still not happy with my work. I wonder what he thinks about what I write. I know he was watching.

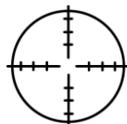
This diary was just going to be about my struggle as a writer, but it is much more than that now. I can't tell anyone what is happening to me because they would never believe me. But I have to get this out there as soon as possible, so if anything does happen to me, someone else will be able to put the pieces together. Whatever he has planned for me, it won't be long now.

1.08 I woke up with a jolt and sat bolt upright. I stared into the darkness until my bedroom materialised in front of me. My eyes trained on a shape that shouldn't have been there. A figure. A person standing in front of my bed.

I froze with fear, staring at the intruder, not even daring to blink. Then he took a step back. I couldn't see him anymore. I scrambled for the torch on my bedside table and flashed the beam around the room. He was gone. But I wasn't imagining it. I know he was there.

I was too afraid to get out of bed. I lay there, my heart hammering in my chest, waiting for him to return. I didn't sleep.

1.09 I went to bed the next night certain the intruder would return, my hand strapped to a torch so I was ready. I lay awake for hours, jumping at the slightest noise from outside. When I did sleep, I dreamed of him appearing in my flat and I jerked awake, flashing my torch around the room like an automatic reflex.



I don't know how, but I knew he was there, standing at the foot of my bed. I reacted in an instant and aimed the torch beam to identify him at last.

But even in the light, all I could see was a dark figure, a shadow. I stared at him, waiting for identifying features to become clear, but none did. Then he stepped back into the shadows and vanished.

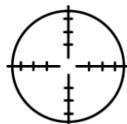
1.10 Next night, I was ready for him. I didn't even try to sleep. All I could do was run through my plan in my mind again and again, rehearsing and preparing for every possible outcome. What choice did I have? I couldn't let the torture continue.

He melted out of the shadows.

I sprang out of bed fully clothed and leapt at him. He moved so quickly. In a flash, he grabbed me while I was in midair and slammed me to the floor. Pain shot through my body. I lay helpless on the carpet. He crouched over me. I looked up at him - to finally see his face.

There wasn't one. He had no distinct features. He was just the vague shape of a man. A three-dimensional shadow. I waited for him to make his next move, to reveal what he wanted with me. But he stepped back into the shadows and vanished.

1.11 The second I woke up, I knew I had to get out of the flat, so I showered, got dressed and left as quickly as I could. I took a train, desperate to get as far away as possible, and found somewhere for breakfast. I wandered around, doing anything I



could think of to wipe it all from my mind. But I had to go back eventually. And the intruder was all I could think of.

He appeared again. I was waiting, but I didn't move once I saw him. I simply sat up in bed and watched.

After staring each other down for what felt like hours, he strode to my desk and produced a piece of paper. He left it there. Then he was gone.

It was a simple note written in ink with a quill pen. He hadn't written the note himself – it was written about him.

“His name is ShadowAspect.”

1.12 I now believe whoever wrote the note is the one following me – and they mean me no harm. The shadowy figure in my flat, apparently called ShadowAspect, is just a messenger.

I still don't know what he wants. But I have come to terms with the fact that he won't leave me alone and plans to be around for a long time.

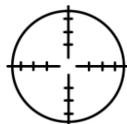
I tried to write, but I wasn't happy with it. I gave up.

I need to know what he wants with me.

ShadowAspect appeared again. He left another note written with quill and ink.

“You want to be a writer?”

1.13 Of all the things he could have started with, why that one question? What does it mean? Is it the beginning of a conversation or a demand for specific information?



I sat at my desk and stared at the note for hours, struggling to come up with my next move or some kind of response. But I had nothing. I was late for work.

An evening spent staring at it produced nothing either. I didn't bother staying up to wait for ShadowAspect. I fell asleep, assuming he would wake me if he wanted something.

It was late morning when I woke up. I suppose my lack of sleep in recent weeks is taking its toll. There was another note. This time it wasn't a question, it was a demand.

“Tell me you want to be a writer.”

1.14 It was a demand and an ultimatum. I knew the same demand would keep coming until he got the answer he wanted. And the answer I gave would change everything.

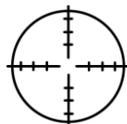
We were at a point of no return. I was left with no other choice. There was no point lying because he already knew everything about me anyway.

I stood at my desk and looked all around me – as if I suddenly expected to see him. I took a deep breath. I spoke.

“Yes. I want to be a writer. More than anything.”

1.15 I woke up with a start. I jumped.

ShadowAspect stood over me, still just a tangible black shadow. He pointed to my desk. The lamp was on, shining on what looked like a dense pile of paper.



I sat down at my desk, my heart pounding, my stomach turning with nerves.

On top of the pile was another note.

“You work for me now.”

Underneath were two manuscripts. Under them was a set of instructions.

I didn’t bother going back to bed. I made myself some coffee and got started.

1.16 I called work at 8.30 and quit. The boss told me he was about to fire me anyway. I didn’t care. I work for someone else now.

The instructions were detailed. He wanted to tell his stories, which were thrillers and fantasies, and I was to be his mouthpiece.

I was to work through the manuscripts, which were both first drafts, and make any changes I wanted to make, provided the stories themselves weren’t altered.

Once both stories were published online, more would come my way. The instructions told me to work on the manuscripts straightaway and publish as soon as possible – within three weeks.

The countdown has begun.

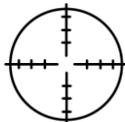
The first title was under my name:

Atticus Crayle: The Accidental Spy by Jason Rybak.

The second was in his name:

Henry Frey and the Elf King by Sarasin Shade.

I finally know his name. Sarasin Shade.



PART TWO

2.01 I didn't realise so much time had passed. I haven't slept. I don't remember drinking or eating anything, but the empty plates and coffee mugs around the place suggest I must have.

Sarasin Shade's manuscripts lit a fire under me. I've read, reread, written and rewritten. I've never accomplished so much in such a short period. I can't wait to get these stories out into the world.

It took me ages to notice ShadowAspect standing there. Maybe it says something for my state of mind that he brought me pizza and it doesn't seem weird to me. After I write this, I'll stop and eat before I keel over.

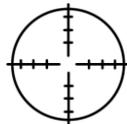
ShadowAspect placed a small pile of money on the desk. I remembered I hadn't thought to mention payment at the time. Then he placed a note in front of me.

"You have two weeks."

2.02 I woke up slumped over my desk, my ribs pressed against the edge, my face on the keyboard of my laptop. I didn't remember falling asleep. I had no idea how long I'd slept or how long I had worked since I'd slept last.

Thinking back to what I remembered, I was coming to the conclusion that both books were pretty much ready, when I noticed something on my desk next to my laptop. It was a note.

"Check your computer."



I found artwork for the front covers of both books – emailed to me from an account I couldn't identify. All I knew for sure was that Sarasin Shade agreed with me.

They're ready. It's nearly time to publish.

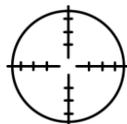
2.03 After days of hard slog with ShadowAspect looking over my shoulder, the books were finally finished. I let him take them back to his cave while I prepared to publish.

I didn't sleep well that night. I woke up with a jolt in the early morning and realised what was nagging at me. I could see it in my mind's eye without even looking at the page – something I didn't like. And the effects of one alteration on one page would ripple through several more.

After a recall and a halt to publication, I made the changes with ShadowAspect pacing frantically behind me and sent him back with it when I was satisfied. I'm not sure I'd dare do that again. He might just beat me to death with my laptop.

2.04 When had I last left my flat? I had no idea. It had been so long since I'd spoken to or had any contact with humankind, I was starting to feel like a different species. What if I wandered out and they saw right through me?

Somehow, it was early November. With a hat on under my hood, I ventured out under cover of darkness and lingered among the crowd watching the fireworks. I could feel every passing glance, every curious gaze in my direction. But all they saw was one guy in a hood standing alone in the night.



2.05 I ran out of food. Now I would have to leave my home during daylight hours. I showered and tried to make myself look normal, certain that everyone else would see me for what I really was.

I took the long way round, wandering around some other shops, beginning to believe that I belonged among humankind again. I could feel every time someone noticed me, but no one found me interesting enough to look in my direction for more than a second or two.

But when I left the supermarket, my eye was drawn to a car on the opposite side of the street. A pair of eyes inside the car lingered on my face like an itch. Shooting the odd glance, I couldn't see through the tinted windows. I picked up the pace.

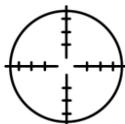
I stopped down the road from my flat and pretended to tie my shoelace. The same car was parked twenty metres further back.

I hurried up to my flat and made sure the door was locked and bolted. I peered through the window. The car was gone.

Of course it was gone. No one was following me. It was just my paranoia. Being watched will do that to you.

But I've discovered the identity of the fantasy being stalking me. I'm writing now. I'm working with him. I'm safe, right?

2.06 "I'm just being paranoid, aren't I?" I say to the ceiling and the walls, expecting ShadowAspect to appear from somewhere. "Being watched by you has made me



hyper-vigilant, which is why I feel every look and every gaze. But tell me I'm safe."

No reply.

I ventured out the next day. My skin prickled every time someone looked at me, but I soon got used to it. As I made my way through town, I felt a gaze loaded with intent, which was aimed at me like a sniper rifle.

I strode on, glad I was just wearing a hat and not a hood so I had better peripheral vision.

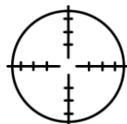
I caught sight of it out of the corner of my eye. The same car. Someone inside was watching me. I ducked into a shop, my mind flying in different directions.

One thought hit home. I had to be ready for anything. I made my way to a cash machine and took out as much as I could. Keeping my head down, my eyes scanned every face as I went home the long way. There was no sign of the car, but the further I went, the stronger the sensation in my back became. Someone was following me.

I took a series of sudden turns and ran for it.

By the time I made it home, I was certain I had lost whoever it was. Locked in my flat, I worked by the window, but saw no sign of anyone watching me.

2.07 I didn't want to leave the flat again, but I had to. I needed to know if I really was in danger and I was getting no help from Sarasin. Worse still, I was having problems with my laptop. The fan was blowing louder and louder and the screen



would black out once or twice before it stayed on. It wasn't going to last much longer and without a laptop, my writing would die a sudden but painful death.

Heart pounding as I hurried into town, my eyes took in every movement, every walker, every passer-by. There wasn't much of a selection, but staring at computer specs in a store with plenty of people in it gave me a chance to look out for anyone following me. No one in the shop gave me a second glance, but I decided to prepare myself for a sudden getaway. I made my way to the cash machine again to take out as much money as I could. I typed in the amount I wanted. I waited. Nothing happened. My blood ran cold.

Then a message appeared on the screen.

“Don't take out any cash again. They know what you're doing.”

I stared at the screen open-mouthed.

A second message appeared.

“Yes, Jason Rybak. I'm talking to you.”

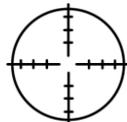
My money and my card slid out and I pocketed them.

Another message.

“Go home the long way. Maybe look at some more computers.”

The screen went back to normal.

As I turned to head for home, something caught my eye. The same car – parked across the street. And I could feel someone inside it watching me.



2.08 I couldn't just go home, so after buying some more coffee, I perused books for a while. Then I realised what that uncomfortable feeling was. Someone in there was watching me, but doing it subtly out of the corner of their eye.

My eyes swept the shop. I couldn't see anyone suspicious. I hurried out and into the electronics store, only to feel the same gaze in my back. I shot a glance behind me. Nothing. I hurried into the department store and tried looking at some clothes, keeping an eye out just in case.

A hand grabbed my arm. I jumped. I almost shouted out. Then I realised the one holding my coat sleeve was a kid.

He wore a dark hat and coat. Looked to be about twelve years old. I was about to tell him to get lost, but one look at the grim expression on his face told me this was no joke. He was the one who had been following me.

"What do you want? I ventured.

"You know who I am?" the boy whispered.

"I don't think so."

The boy squeezed my arm harder. He had a grip like a vice. But it wasn't a threat or an intimidation tactic. More of a natural response. He saw what he was doing and let go.

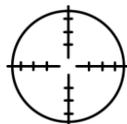
"You're writing about me, aren't you?" he said.

"I...I...I don't know."

The boy rolled up his right sleeve to reveal a tattoo on his forearm

#6.

I stared at it. I had seen it before – or at least something very similar.



“Do you know me now?” he said – like he already knew my answer.

“Not really.”

“But you’ve read about me.”

“I’ve seen #6 before.”

“What’s my name?” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“You must,” the boy said desperately. “You’ve read the manuscript. What’s my name?”

It dawned on me.

“You don’t know it either, do you?” I said.

“No. Haven’t you seen it?”

“Not in what I’ve been sent so far.”

The boy looked frustrated - like I had been his last hope.

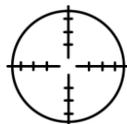
“How did you find me?” I asked.

“Easy,” the boy shrugged. “They’re all looking for you. You’re writing about hidden worlds and people living secret lives who are all desperate to remain hidden. The more you write, the more danger you will be in.”

My blood ran cold. My head fogged over. I found myself looking wildly around the room for signs of anyone spying on me. I looked down.

The boy was gone.

2.09 I hurried home without even glancing over my shoulder, then locked my door and ran to the window. The same car was parked up the street from my flat. I



could just see it if I pressed my face to the net curtains. For the first time, I was glad I hadn't got rid of them – they made it a lot harder for people to see in.

My writing had slowed down. I sat at my laptop but barely got anything done. I flicked through the pages Sarasin had sent.

There he was – #6. I didn't understand it. He doesn't even appear in the next book and he's only a supporting character in the one after. How did he even know to look for me? And why would he be looking for me – of all people?

I thought back to what I remembered of him. The seriousness of his face – like someone who has lived a lot more than most boys his age. The strength in the grip. The skill to tail someone like me and remain unnoticed. What happened to him that would make him hunt me down and not even remember his own name?

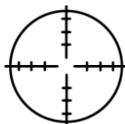
I stared at the pages. I flicked through them again and again, hoping his name would leap out at me. But he was only ever known as #6.

A character in a book I hadn't even published yet had found me in a shop. For some reason, it didn't completely weird me out. Not that a boy named #6 was the strangest thing I'd come across recently. I think I'd always assumed some of Sarasin's material was based on his own experiences.

The car stayed parked where it was. It was a blue Audi.

I wish I'd thought to make a note of the number plate.

It happened just after midnight. I paced in my flat trying to ignite my imagination and wandered into my bedroom. It was dark outside and the curtains were still open.



Something dropped past the window. As I ran to get a better look, it swooped and landed beyond the communal garden and shot out of sight.

I sat still on my bed, trying to retain the image in my mind's eye and make sense of it. As far I could tell, I had just seen a vampire - or Batman. A figure in black clothes and a cloak - who could drop from the roof of a building and glide to the ground.

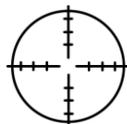
There was no answer from Sarasin. Whatever I saw, I'm pretty sure he knows more about it than I do.

2.10 My computer died. Unbelievable. These things always happen at the worst possible time. I had no choice but to go out and buy a new one. Nothing I'd seen the day before did anything for me, so I took the train into the city and found a bigger store with a better selection. I bought one that wasn't as good as the old one, but it was a bargain.

I trudged back to the train with a pair of eyes burning a hole in my hood. There was no sign of the car, but something felt wrong. I climbed the stairs to my flat wondering why I had never thought to buy a weapon – or more kitchen knives.

The door to my flat was locked, but my eyes were drawn to the tiny scratch marks around the lock. Someone had picked it.

I crept inside, heart pounding. No one in sight. No one behind the door. I placed my new computer on my desk and crept through the flat, straining every sense for some sign that the intruder was still there.



I kicked open the bathroom door. It banged against the wall. No one there. Nobody in the bedroom. Whoever it was had gone.

What had they taken? I ran instinctively for my desk. My computer and manuscripts were still there.

With a jolt I felt eyes watching me. I wheeled around to see ShadowAspect behind me. Something about him was different. I couldn't work out what it was. Before I could say anything, he handed me a note:

“Leave now. Grab what you can't live without and run for it.”

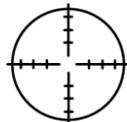
No time to think. Instinct told me to do as instructed and do it now. I shoved a few things in a rucksack and was about to leave - when a faint noise outside the front door made me stop dead.

2.11 I should have ducked for cover. I should have hidden and hoped ShadowAspect would take care of it. Instead an instinct snapped awake inside me. I was more than a writer now. I was a part, a protector of something bigger, which had to be kept safe at all costs.

ShadowAspect vanished.

I crouched under the table. The first thing I saw was a silencer on a handgun nose through the door. A dark shape crept in. A second followed.

Without even looking, I could feel their gazes sweep the room over my head like prison spotlights. The first crept right past me. The second headed towards the window. A third slipped in, his gaze aimed at my desk.



The adrenaline pumped. My legs pushed me up from the floor and threw me at the door. My shoulder slammed the door into the arm of the fourth. My fingers clamped around the edge of the door. With all the strength in my arms, shoulders and legs, I smashed it into his face. His gun bounced on the carpet. I dived and fumbled for it. Two silenced gunshots slapped into the wall above my head.

A dark shape dropped from the ceiling. ShadowAspect disarmed the first and kicked the gun from the hand of the second. Kicks and punches flew. Bullets zipped through the room and smashed kitchen cupboards. Their contents spilled and shattered on the laminate floor.

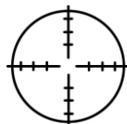
I gripped the gun in both hands. Gunman number three stood with his back to me, looking for ShadowAspect, who had disappeared. Now was my chance. My work on Atticus Crayle meant I knew how to squeeze the trigger. But I knew I couldn't do it.

ShadowAspect materialised in the shadows clinging to the wall by the window. He shot forward and flattened the guy.

He hauled me to my feet and shoved my bag in my hands, then pointed to the door. He was moving awkwardly. His left side was stiff, his arm clutched to his chest.

"You're hurt," I whispered.

He pushed me out of my flat, hauled gunman number four inside and shut the door on me.



I had no other choice. I had to run, knowing that wherever I was, Sarasin would find me. And for the first time since I had started running from the supernatural being stalking me, that was a good thing.

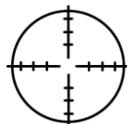
2.12 My head was spinning. I didn't know where I was going. I ended up at the train station and jumped on the first train without even checking where it was going. I told myself it was fine – that if I didn't know my final destination, no one else could either.

It was dark outside already. The train was quiet. Too quiet. I leaned back against the window so I could see anyone coming, starting slightly every time a new figure appeared at the edge of my vision.

After changing trains a couple of times and drinking a few cups of tea to keep me awake, alert and calm at the same time, my head started to clear. I took a bus travelling along a busy main road and got off at a motel by a petrol station and a roundabout. I booked myself in for a week, locked myself in my room and sank down on the bed.

There was a loud knock. I crept to the door, my heart pounding. Had they found me already? Peering through the peephole, I saw the receptionist who had booked me in. I eased open the door, half-expecting to see a gun in her hand. But instead, she handed me a parcel, saying it had just been delivered. On the package was my name, the address of the hotel I was staying in and my room number.

I locked my door again. Who would send me a parcel late at night? And what was it? After all that travelling, how did they find me so easily?



2.13 I stared at the parcel in my hands. It had my name written on it with the hotel's address and my room number. I'd only just got there myself. How was that even possible? Had someone been following me the entire time?

A thought hit me. What if it's a bomb? What better way to take me out without getting their hands dirty. It must be a bomb. A small one – just big enough to kill me without bringing down the entire hotel.

I heard a muffled buzzing sound. I felt a vibration coming from inside the package. I froze with terror. The vibrating stopped. I held my breath. I squeezed my eyes shut and braced myself to be blown apart.

Nothing happened.

The buzzing started again. I could feel the vibrations in my hands. Then it stopped. It started buzzing again. I unwrapped the parcel and opened the box. It was a mobile phone.

There was one text message waiting for me. Nothing else. No other texts. No missed calls.

I read the message:

“Keep this phone. They can't trace it.”

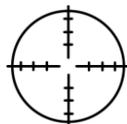
I texted back:

“Who are you?”

“A friend.”

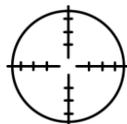
“How do I know?”

“It was me at the cash machine.”



“That proves nothing. I need more.”

“Sarasin sent me. You met ShadowAspect. I’m the other guy.”



PART THREE

3.01 It's February. This is my first entry in quite a while. It's taken a long time to get my head around what happened to me – and the world of Sarasin Shade. He wasn't my enemy, but being connected to him had already made my life more dangerous. As you are about to read, the fantastically mind bending peril Sarasin Shade brought with him wasn't enough to stop me almost losing myself in it.

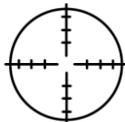
3.02 It feels like a dream. I run through everything that happened, every sight, every sound, every feeling and every sensation to remind myself that it really took place the way I remember it. I'm terrified of talking myself into believing that it was just a dream.

Christmas just kind of crept up on me. Before I knew it, I was lying on my bed on Christmas Eve with no plans at all. I didn't dare leave without word from my new mobile phone friend and I couldn't involve anyone else. I couldn't put more lives in danger – even if I wanted to hear from certain people.

ShadowAspect appeared suddenly – melting out of the darkness shrouding the walls beyond the dim light over my bed. Before I could say anything, he took hold of my arm and hauled me up.

I flew at the wall. It vanished.

I'd left my room behind.



3.03 The first thing that hit me was the silence. The second was the darkness – darker and heavier than anything I’d experienced before. Someone lit a few candles, which bathed the rough stone walls in a dim flickering light. My eyes began to adjust to my surroundings. I was in a cave.

A young woman smiled back at me. She had a friendly face, brown hair tied back in a ponytail and blue eyes. Just one look in them told me she was a lot older than she seemed. There was more history, experience, intelligence and perception than I had seen in anyone before.

“Do you know where you are?” she asked – like she had been expecting me and knew just who I was.

“I think so.”

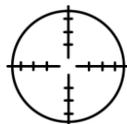
“Well, come this way and see it for yourself. I’m afraid this is not a permanent visit, but I couldn’t have you spend Christmas alone on our account.”

She led me into a bigger, adjoining cave.

Bright blue light met my eyes from the far end.

“My name is Arvalane,” she said with a warm smile. “And over there, with his eyes glued to the Infinistra as always, is Sarasin Shade.”

3.04 It should have been cold. I was still just in my jeans, shirt, jumper and trainers. Not prepared for the cold conditions of an underground cave. The black stone walls glittered with tiny specks of the same bright blue light coming from the far end. As I held out my hand, I could feel the warmth emanating from them.



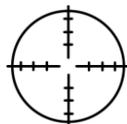
One candle sat on the corner of a wooden desk in the middle of the cave. A man in black Victorian clothes, his dark hair tied back in a ponytail with a black ribbon, sat writing at the desk, not even acknowledging my presence as I stood over him. He wrote with a quill pen and ink. I recognised the handwriting. He had pale, plain features. His face was expressionless.

“His name is GhostWriter,” Arvalane introduced him. “He doesn’t speak.”

3.05 My eyes were drawn to the far end of the cave. At a glance, it looked like someone staring at a giant screen. As I edged nearer, his unblinking eyes remained fixed on the screen.

He was huge. He reclined on what looked like a large beanbag propped against a wall, his legs splayed over the floor. His many chins hung over his neck and sagged on his chest. Massive folds of fat from his arms, his stomach, his backside and his thighs spread over the stone. His skin was blotchy and red. The face was expressionless. It almost looked bored. For the first time, I was seeing my employer: Sarasin Shade.

The screen in front of him was about four metres wide and three metres high. It was framed in a bright blue light. From the side it was micro thin, hanging in the air in front of the cave wall. It was intangible – like a hologram – but the pictures were crystal clear. It was filled with different images, some really big, some tiny. The closer I looked, I could see each large picture was made of hundreds of tiny ones and they all moved. Everything I could see was happening somewhere right there and then.



“The Infinistra,” the figure reclining on the floor said, eyes still fixed on the screen. “It shows me everything. The bigger the picture, the more important it is.”

Looking closer, I could see even the tiny pictures were made up of even smaller ones.

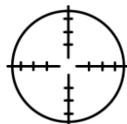
“How can you see all of this?” I asked.

“My brain is well-equipped for the job. It used to take everything I had. Now I find it easy. And my eyes are far better than any human’s and they have no blind spot, so I never miss a thing.”

3.06 I couldn’t take my eyes off the Infinistra. Stories. Stories everywhere. I flitted eagerly from one image to the next. I saw thousands of normal people going about their lives, all making up bigger pictures of war, crimes and deaths taking place as I watched. I could see inside homes, palaces and government buildings. I watched top secret meetings and briefings.

As I edged from right to left across the Infinistra, the lives I was spying on became stranger. They were more hidden, more secretive. People and organisations working away from the public eye. Murders, fraud, spies and undercover cops.

I couldn’t help myself. I was seeing incredible things. The volumes of non-fiction bestsellers I could write just on what I had seen already. But I had to see more. What else was there?



At the far end, I caught glimpses of worlds, castles and battles that should have belonged in fantasy novels and comic books. I watched figures in black cloaks preparing for war. They looked like the figure I saw drop past my window.

Then something else caught my eye. I stepped up and explored the smaller images making up the larger one and those clustered around it. I was watching people I recognised. I knew their descriptions from the manuscripts Sarasin had sent me, from books I had written and worked on.

Suddenly it all dawned on me. Why I was in hiding and why I was being followed. It wasn't just the boy called #6. All the people I was writing about were real. I was publishing fiction about real people who existed in real, dangerous worlds and who would stop at nothing to silence me.

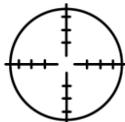
3.07 I should have turned and run from the cave as soon as I saw them, as soon as I realised I was writing about dangerous people living in the same world as me – or, more precisely, that I now occupied the same world they did.

I was just a writer. I should have run for safety.

But I couldn't. I had to stare into the Infinistra. I had to see more stories.

I found myself sitting on the floor next to Sarasin. The longer I watched, the more I was able to see and take in.

Then Arvalane stood with us and pointed to the far left of the Infinistra - in time to see a sleigh drawn by nine reindeer shoot out of a screen of ice. The ancient elf driving it made his way across the screen, appearing in thousands of



images over the Infinistra. He was too quick for my eyes to follow. But as I watched, he seemed to slow down, like time itself was slowing down around us.

Eventually ShadowAspect hauled me to my feet and wrenched me away from the Infinistra. The moment my eyes left it, my head swam. The cave span around me. I felt like I wanted to throw up. I collapsed to my knees and blacked out.

3.08 “Take it easy in future,” came Arvalane’s voice from just beyond my right ear. “That thing’s not meant for you.”

I came to, lying on a mattress in the adjoining cave.

“You’ve been asleep a while, but it’s time you got up. You need to see this.”

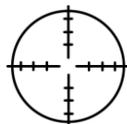
Arvalane helped me to my feet. “Merry Christmas.”

I saw hundreds of happy children opening their presents. The images grew in number and spread over the Infinistra. Then one cluster of images homed in on thousands of awestruck elves watching from their snow-covered city – like in Sarasin’s book.

My attention turned to other familiar characters. I realised I had a choice to make.

New Year’s Eve was amazing. Fireworks everywhere. I saw every spectacular show on Earth. And a few from somewhere else altogether – I couldn’t bring myself to ask.

Next thing I knew I’d been there three weeks, sitting on the floor, staring at the Infinistra, gazing at one unfolding real life story, then quickly scouring the images for a better one.



Right then, I knew it. I had to be a writer. I needed the stories. If I backed out now, I would never forgive myself. I was scared of the danger that still lurked around every corner, but I had no choice.

The conflict could make me a better writer – and give me my own story to relate to my readers. Whatever the danger, I had to use Sarasin’s stories. I had to see more. I couldn’t stop now.

3.09 I woke up one morning and realised I was back in my hotel room. It felt like a crazy dream. I couldn’t work out if it had really happened or not.

Turning on the TV told me I was into the second week of January. Either I’d been in a coma for a few weeks – or I’d really spent all that time down in Sarasin’s underground home.

My phone buzzed.

“How was the cave?”

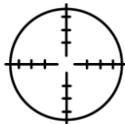
Confirmation. Even from some anonymous contact on a phone, it already felt like I maybe wasn’t going crazy.

“Who are you?”

“A friend.”

“Tell me something. I know nothing about you.”

“I’m a friend. I emailed you the manuscripts. I’m an expert in all things technology-based. I can’t keep all the men with guns away, but I’m doing what I can to remove your digital footprint, create a false trail of breadcrumbs and



generally make you a lot harder to find. Other than that, the less you know the better.”

I leaned back and felt a wave of relief wash over me. It was nice to know I wasn't totally alone and actually had a human friend for once. No one else I've been in contact seems to be – even Arvalane. And she was by far the most normal of anyone down there. I spent the day writing down as much of my experience of the cave and the Infinistra as I could remember.

3.10 A loud knock at the door woke me up with a start the next morning. My mobile phone buzzed on my bedside table with a text message:

“Don't worry. It's from me.”

The same receptionist was at the door. Her name was Vivian. She had a bigger parcel with my name on. I locked my door and unwrapped it once I was on my own. It was a laptop. It was already set up with an email waiting for me and another manuscript attached.

“Let's email from now on if we can.”

“Who are you? At least give me your name.” I needed to know something.

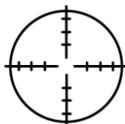
“Silas.”

“Is that your real name?”

“Of course.”

“What do I do now?”

“Stay put. I'm scoping out new places for you to stay. Be ready to pack and go at a moment's notice.”

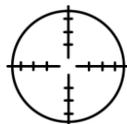


3.11 Without having met him, I was already thinking of Silas as a friend. He understood just what it was like being cooped up here like a prisoner. The TV wasn't much. I could follow a few favourite TV crime dramas and thrillers, but having to limit my online activity meant I couldn't order or stream anything, so he sent me some DVDs to keep me entertained. Turns out we have similar taste in crime, spies, assassins and murder: I always write with something on the TV anyway, so I soon felt more at home and was able to get on with my work.

Living in a hotel, I was cut off from the world. I almost forgot that there were people out there looking for me.

3.12 If I'd had to guess what Silas would send me next, it wouldn't have been stuff involving a zombie apocalypse. Didn't see that coming at all. Zombies were never really my thing. But I tried it anyway and was pretty much hooked from the first episode. All the while, I was working on the material from Sarasin, writing, rewriting and editing.

Trouble was, after seeing the real thing, watching the stories as they happened, just making do with Ghostwriter's written material didn't seem enough anymore. In spare moments, I'd find myself thinking about what I'd seen and imagining what Sarasin would be watching right now. Then I started taking longer and longer getting to sleep at night, my mind sorting through the images I'd seen in the Infinitra, working out what those people were doing now and if I'd ever



recognise them in one of my books. I couldn't help thinking Sarasin did it on purpose. Now he knows I'm hooked – and I always will be.

3.13 It's amazing how soon you get used to the image of the undead tearing through living human veins, tissue and muscle with their teeth. Between that and the crime dramas I love, I always had something to write to. Something visual always helps and I didn't have anything outside to go on. I hoped the next place Silas found for me had a view – or at least one within walking distance. When watching something new, I like to give it my full attention. After that, just stick it on in the background and it really sets the mood. I hardly ever write in complete silence.

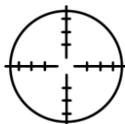
Weeks passed by like that. I'd become set in my routine and even knew a few of the hotel staff by name. About as much human contact as any writer on the run can expect. The place was feeling like home. And pretty safe. After all, surely no one could get to me without the staff seeing.

One night my curtains moved. At first I thought it was just my imagination – seeing as the windows were locked and sealed shut. But then they were filled with blowing wind.

A dark figure stepped through them.

It wasn't ShadowAspect.

3.14 He wore a black hooded cloak and he was taller than any man I had ever seen. I knew where I had seen his kind before. The black breastplate under his cloak and



the sword belted to his waist confirmed my worst fears. But the sword stayed in its sheath.

“Are you here to kill me?” I ventured.

“I’m not here to kill you,” a gruff voice growled from under the hood. “But I could change my mind.”

He took a few paces in my direction, studying me. He towered over me – muscular and athletic – like he could tear me apart with his bare hands.

“You will do something for me. You will do exactly what I tell you.”

“What if I can’t? Or I refuse?”

The hitman touched his gloved hand to his sword.

“They’ll never find your body – not even Sarasin.”

3.15 The more I watched the killer in front of me, the more certain I was that I recognised him. Sitting there, numb from the skull down, my mind wandering somewhere inside, I couldn’t work out what was more terrifying – what he was going to make me do – or that he found me and got to me so easily.

“You’re not unique,” the Vudrian hitman said. “If I kill you, Sarasin simply recruits another just like you.”

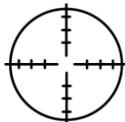
I felt a jolt. Sarasin would replace me just like that?

“You really thought you were the only one?”

I shrugged, caught off guard.

“Do you know what the Cardinal Rule of my world is?”

Nothing would come out if I tried to speak, so I just shook my head.



“That your world never finds out about mine. Anything happens to you now and it will look like someone has something to hide.”

I cleared my throat.

“But if I keep writing and publishing, it could all be a story,” I croaked.

“Everyone out there has to believe that,” he said. “The more you write, the more it will look like a fantasy. And the more detail you throw in, the more unbelievable your readers will find it.”

“That’s what you want me to do? Write more?”

I took one look at him and knew the worst was still to come.

3.16 The Vudrian hitman picked up a pile of ShadowAspect’s notes and drafts.

“It must kill you – having seen the real thing, but making do with secondary material.”

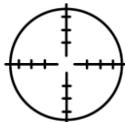
“What do you mean?” I shifted in my chair.

“I know an addict when I see one. You’ve looked into the Infinistra. Now you’re stuck in a room wanting more. Very clever of Sarasin.”

“Nothing I can do about it now,” I snapped.

“I can’t find Sarasin,” he said flatly. “And I don’t have the time to waste hunting him down. Killing you would set him back, but not for long, so I need to know you’re going to hide the facts in the fiction.”

“I was going to anyway,” I shrugged.



“My planet has its own problems. But you’re in the middle of two worlds that are about to collide. There is a real danger of harmful information coming out and I need it kept secret.”

“Unless it’s presented as fantasy, you mean?”

“Some of it is about to be presented as fact. And once it is out, there will be no stopping it.”

He advanced on me. I really didn’t like where this was going.

“You need to get to it first. There is a file of information hidden somewhere and you need to find it before anyone else does. Then you must use it in your stories. If someone tries to present it as truth later on, no one will believe them.”

“How do I do that?” I spluttered. “What am I looking for?”

“Ask your friend Silas about a dead cop. Then you’ll know what to do.”

“What if he won’t help?”

“Tell him he can hide all he likes. I know how to find him.”

With that, he parted the curtains, stepped through the window like it was water and vanished.

I ran to the window, but he was gone.

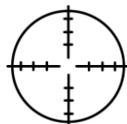
3.17 “How did he find me, Silas?”

“I don’t know. But there’s nothing someone like me can do to stop him.”

“So everything I’ve seen and written is true?”

“What do you think?”

“Do you know about the dead cop?”



“I’m just here to hide you.”

“Can’t you tell me anything?”

“I’m not supposed to be helping you.”

“You already are.”

“But I can’t give you any information. It would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“How?”

“Doesn’t matter how. You can’t ask me things like that.”

“The hitman said he can find you. I guess that’s not true then.”

“If anyone can, it’s him. At least that’s what Sarasin tells me. It’s alright for him. He’s pretty much the only being this guy can’t get to.”

“Are you that hard to find? Are you hiding as well?”

“I’m not hiding, I’ve just made myself hard to find.”

“Why? Who are you?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“But you do have access to the information I need?”

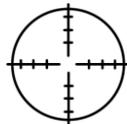
“Technically.”

“How? What do you do?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“If I don’t do what this guy says, HE IS GOING TO KILL ME. That wasn’t an empty threat. He is actually going to do it. But if I find this information and hide it in my writing, no one will be any the wiser.”

“It’s still a big risk.”



“Bigger than whatever the cop had getting out into the public domain? You know I can be trusted.”

“If I give you something, it can’t ever get out that it came from me.”

“It won’t.”

“I’ll think about it. Keep an eye out for the post.”

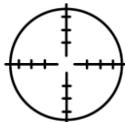
3.18 Who was Silas really? How did he have access to all that information? He knew about the dead cop and expected an information leak would lead back to him. So what did he do and was he really hiding somewhere?

I knew he was afraid of the hitman finding him. Strange how a hitman from another world would intervene on something that didn’t seem to directly concern him. And stranger still that Sarasin didn’t send ShadowAspect to protect me. Was I really that expendable? Or was Sarasin scared of him too?

I believed the hitman’s threat – that he would find me and kill me. But how did he expect me, a writer, to get out there and do a spy’s job? Even if I managed to find the information, how on earth would I get back alive when I was being hunted myself?

I paced the room for hours with my head in my hands – panicking.

Then the panic and mind-numbing fear subsided. What did that cop have? I had to wonder what story led to a cop being killed and a killer from a parallel world being so afraid of what he had that he had to get involved. That was a story I had to see for myself. I had to know more.



I knew then. I needed to see the cop's information. I had to write the story. The addict had taken over.

3.19 The hotel suddenly became a lot noisier. It was like having my home invaded. I was told a couple of school groups were staying for a few nights as part of some educational trip – cheaper than staying more central. I don't mind noise when it's under my control, but when it's happening at all kinds of strange hours, thinking clearly is a lot harder.

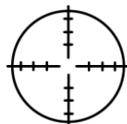
I decided to take a walk. Even though I couldn't help wondering if my enemies out there were closer to finding me, surely I would blend in among a bunch of teachers. The young, cool ones at least.

Coming back through a corridor of noise, a bunch of kids were gathered near my room. A few of them glanced up and moved aside for me. But three of them were right in front of my door. I could have sworn one of them was trying the handle. Then they saw me and hurried away, giggling to themselves.

I opened my door, locked it behind me and ran to my desk, rifled through all my notes and papers, running through in my mind everything I expected to see.

Nothing missing. I was just being paranoid. No one was going to send a schoolgirl to break into my room.

3.20 I thought back to my encounter with #6 – it's the only name I could come up with for him. He was into something, but I hadn't seen him since. I didn't even



know if his predicament had anything to do with me or not. Or he was just crazy. No. A few girls on a school trip didn't make a hit squad.

"They're leaving tomorrow," Vivian murmured to me as she brought me my lunch. "And we can't wait. Those kids are everywhere. I found three of them behind the reception desk. Our chef had to kick one out of the kitchen."

"It's always fun exploring a new place," I grinned.

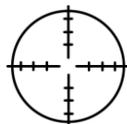
"Even our crappy hotel."

As soon as I'd finished my lunch, I started to feel drowsy. My head was so cloudy and heavy, I had to lie down. I collapsed onto the bed. The room span around me and my stomach turned. I felt sick. I felt really ill.

My mind churned over in the few seconds before I passed out, running over what Vivian had said. I knew she was okay, because Silas did a check on everyone working in the hotel. But she'd said the kids were in the kitchen and behind the reception desk.

Reception – the one computer where my financial records could be accessed, as well as the credit card information for my employer, who with Silas's help, was paying for my room and all my meals. Then Vivian said the kids were in the kitchen, the perfect place to poison my lunch and take me out. The next time they tried to break into my room, I wouldn't be able to stop them.

I blacked out.



3.21 I was poisoned. It was the first thought in my mind as I slowly came to. There was a noise in my head. Then I realised it wasn't me – it was coming from inside my room. The poisoner was routing through my desk.

Opening my eyes was impossible at first. When I did eventually wake up enough to open them, everything was blurred. But the figure at my desk slowly sharpened into focus.

It was a girl.

“I thought you'd be more careful after you caught me breaking in here last time,” she said. “My fault really. I was too impatient. I'm always impatient. So impatient. When will I learn to take my time? How many missions will I ruin before I learn?”

“How old are you?” I said, my head still all over the place.

“Really? That's the first thing you felt the need to say in your position?”

“Yes.”

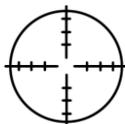
“Okay,” she shrugged. “I'm twelve.”

“How does someone so young end up doing this?” I mumble. “And without anyone else here having any idea?”

“Training. What else.”

She turned around to face me. There was a gun in her hand.

3.22 I was being held at gunpoint by a twelve-year-old girl. But she was no ordinary twelve-year-old. The gun handle grip fitted her hand perfectly. There was a silencer on the barrel and she held it with unwavering accuracy at my forehead.



She'd fired a gun before and the look in her eyes told me she'd have no problem firing hers now.

"Am I in one of your books?" she asked.

"I don't know. Who are you?"

She rolled up the sleeve of her hoodie to reveal a tattoo: #9.

"What's your name?"

"My name's Nine," she said.

"Did you ever have another name?"

She shrugged.

"Are you going to kill me?" I asked.

Why was I so calm? And why did I keep having to ask that question?

"I'm here for your stupid stories," she snapped.

"You might be in one soon," I suggested. "To be doing the job you're doing, there must be a story in there somewhere."

Her eyes hardened.

"Don't try to talk me out of it," she said in a precise way, her jaw clenched.

"It's possible," I shrugged. "You could be the main character in future."

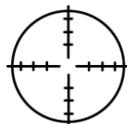
"It's possible I have to kill you because you're in my way."

"I'm not in the way."

"Then I'll do it because I want to. It doesn't matter. Even if I leave you alive, no one will believe a girl did this."

"It's simple, but clever," I said. "So who's your boss?"

"Who's my boss?" she sneered. "Shows how much you know. You..."



She stopped short. Her eyes fixed on someone who had crept into my room when we weren't looking. And he'd brought a gun with him.

The boy from the shop.

#6.

3.23 “What are you doing here, Six?” the girl, Nine, demanded.

“Stopping you,” Six replied shortly.

He advanced into the room, a stony expression on his face. His eyes darted from Nine to me and back to Nine again. His gun had a silencer and fitted his hand perfectly. It was aimed at Nine.

“If they know you're here, they'll kill you,” Nine said.

“We both know you're here alone,” Six replied. “You were placed in the school a month ago in a rush job to get to Mister Rybak. The adults in your group are just teachers. They sent you in with minimal preparation. You're alone.”

Nine blinked. Her jaw tightened. I wondered how cool under pressure she really was and how many times she'd had to deal with something going wrong before.

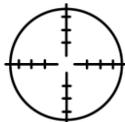
Silence.

They stared at each other, guns pointed.

I could see the shootout happening in my head – and two dead kids lying in my hotel room. It could only get worse after that.

They were both so tightly wound.

“If you put your guns down, we can all get out of here alive,” I said.



“And leave a traitor and an enemy alive with nothing to show for my mission?”

Nine snapped.

Crap. Maybe it wouldn't be quite that easy.

3.24 “So what are you?” I asked. They were there. They already had guns. Why not just say what I wanted? “Assassins? Spies? Secret agents?”

“Whatever they need us to be,” Six replied, his unblinking eyes boring into Nine.

“Who's “They”?” I probed.

“Never you mind,” Nine snapped.

“Are there lots of you?” I asked.

Silence.

“I'm guessing every one of you has a number on their arm,” I said. “What's the highest number you've seen?”

Silence.

“Twenty-Five,” Six said eventually.

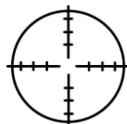
“Shut up,” Nine snapped.

“So you two are some of the very first then,” I surmised.

“You can count. Congratulations,” Nine said dryly.

“I bet hardly anyone out there knows about you and your organisation.” I watched Nine's face for a reaction, knowing I was more likely to get one from her than from Six. “You must be part of one. What's it called?”

“You'll never find out. And I'll kill you to make sure of it.”



She looked like she meant it.

3.25 “Trouble is,” I said. “If any kind of shootout goes down here and bodies and blood are found in this room, then questions will be asked. And I’m pretty sure your people are as keen to remain anonymous as I am. Probably keener.”

“I could just shoot you and the two of us leave,” Nine stated.

“Won’t happen,” Six said shortly.

“Look at you,” Nine said to Six, surveying him with a look of disgust on her face. “You’re dirty. You’re a mess. You should come back with me. Tell them you helped me kill him. They’ll be okay with that.”

“I’m never going back,” Six snapped.

“Traitor.”

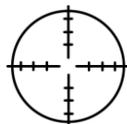
“Would they really just believe him?” I asked. “Come to think of it, whatever story you tell, will they really be that happy with you?”

I watched Nine’s face and posture for any shift or sign of discomfort. She swallowed and moved her feet. Trouble was, now I’d seen what I was looking for, I didn’t know what to do about it. I thought for a second.

Just keep going.

3.26 “Let’s think about this,” I said slowly – like we were all in it together. “The staff know there are kids here. And not many adults apart from staff, teachers, me and maybe another couple.”

“What’s your point?” Nine demanded.



“If either or both of you shoot someone here – or even fire your gun, it’ll only take a semi-competent crime scene investigator to work out what height the shots were fired from and the calibre of the gun. How long do you think it’ll be before someone says – “Maybe a kid did it”?”

Nine shot me a glance out of the corner of her eye.

“Now if your organisation are as set on remaining in the shadows as we all know they are, aren’t you justified in going back to them having not killed anyone or stolen anything because you prioritised secrecy and discretion? They have to see the sense in that – and maybe reward you for thinking on your feet. I mean, they can’t have expected Six – who I’m guessing is a kind of rogue agent now – to turn up here with a gun. Can they?”

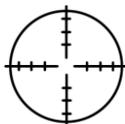
Silence.

3.27 “What if they don’t believe me?” Nine asked quietly, suddenly sounding more like a vulnerable little girl.

“Why wouldn’t they? Just tell them what happened. Every spy knows it’s often about knowing when not to fire your weapon. And if either of you turn up dead – or you suddenly disappear, just think of the questions that will be asked. And the police will have your face to start with.”

“He’s right,” Six agreed.

“So what do we do?” Nine said, trying to sound more confident than she really was.



“Six comes in towards me. You back away to the door and re-join your school group. We will stay in this room until you’re gone. The only time I’ll even open the door is when they deliver my dinner. And I would really appreciate not being poisoned. Not that it’ll help if they find Six dead in here as well.”

“Fine,” Nine uttered.

Without a word, Six edged in slowly and around the ensuite towards me. Nine backed away, her gun aimed at Six the whole time.

“Are you happy?” I asked suddenly, not knowing why.

She shrugged.

“If you ever want to leave, I’m sure I can get help for you.”

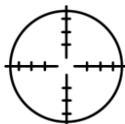
“I doubt it,” Nine snorted.

She eased the door open and backed out of it. The door shut silently behind her. She was gone.

I leaned back and let out a sigh of relief, my heart still pounding.

“Nicely done,” Six said, lowering his gun.

3.28 I found myself grabbing my laptop and furiously typing out everything that had just happened. A tiny voice in the back of my mind wondered why I wasn’t a jibbering, trembling nervous wreck curled up in a ball under my duvet clutching my knees. But another voice stated that this was now the way things would be. This was the world I lived in. After all I had been through, this was how I kept my head whatever the danger.



Then there was the voice of the killer in the black cloak – maybe I was a functioning addict, driven by the need for my next hit – even if I nearly was someone’s next hit.

Six had his ear pressed to the door, listening for sounds outside the room. Then he grabbed a chair, heaved it to the door, jumped up on it and peered through the peephole. Taking a closer look at him, I could see what Nine had seen. He was dirty. He looked cold, tired and hungry.

“No sign of her,” he muttered.

I could see the wheels turning behind his eyes, trying to work out what to do next.

“You stay here – at least until she’s gone.”

“Can’t do that.”

“Where do you live?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

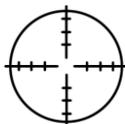
“When was the last time you had a decent meal?”

He shrugged.

I took the menu off my bedside table.

“Dinner is on my employer. Seems a shame not to make the most of it.”

I ordered extra, saying I was hungry. Six ate like he hadn’t seen food in months, then fell fast asleep. I worked through the night, jumping at every sound, knowing someone in the same hotel wanted me dead.



3.29 I'd never read sheer panic in an email before, but after I recounted all that had happened to Silas, I did. Despite the situation I was in, I was probably calmer than he was. If I wanted the stories, this was the way it had to be.

A crowd of young gabbling voices coming from outside drew me to the window. I watched the school parties slowly file into two coaches. My eyes scanned every person in sight, analysing every pupil, every teacher, in case I'd got it wrong yesterday. But no sign any of them knew I was watching. After all, if she was part of a team, I'd be dead already. So would Six. Then I saw her – one face, one intense pair of eyes gazing up at me.

“Is she there?”

“Just getting on the bus now.”

Six joined me at the window, staying hidden and just peeking out so no one else saw him and questioned what he was doing in my room.

“Did you know her? Did you train together?”

“We did everything together. She was my friend.”

“A good friend?”

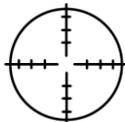
“My best friend.”

3.30 “What will happen to Nine?” I asked.

“They'll test her. Push her.”

“To make sure she's loyal?”

“And to punish her. They'll give her extra Education to make sure she's on their side.”



“Does it work?”

“Education kind of makes you forget everything else.”

I thought back to our brief conversation in the store.

“And you still don’t know your name?”

“No. None of us do.” He rolled up his sleeve to show his tattoo. “These are the only names we need now. I’m Six and Nine is Nine.”

“How long have you been Six?”

“Don’t remember being anything else,” he shrugged.

“How far back do you remember?”

“Long enough.”

He scowled and started to pace in a more agitated way. I eased off. Trying to get much more out of him was going to take time and patience.

“When you and Nine were friends, was she different to what she was like yesterday?”

Six nodded.

“Looks like they Educated everyone more after I ran away,” he said. “Just to make sure none of them run off as well.”

“Do you miss it?” I probed.

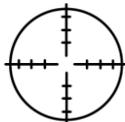
He wheeled around and glared at me.

“I’m never going back there.”

“Just making sure we know we’re on the same side.”

“I came to save you, didn’t I?” he retorted.

A knock on the door made us both jump. Six dived for his gun.



3.31 “Probably breakfast,” I mouthed to Six, gesturing to him to stay hidden.

I opened the door and took the tray from Vivian.

“Er, someone said they saw a second person in your room,” she said awkwardly.

“Really?”

“Yeah. A boy apparently.”

“Why would anyone say that? Who was it?”

“A teacher from the school group.”

“And they saw this second person themselves?”

Vivian shrugged.

“So it’s just you alone?” she said.

“I’ll let you know if I entertain any guests.”

“Sorry. Had to ask.”

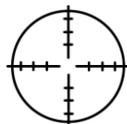
She left with an apologetic smile.

“It was Nine,” Six hissed. “She must have told her teacher.”

I got onto my emails while Six shovelled down most of breakfast.

“Silas. You need to get us out of here now.”

3.32 After taking a shower – at my insistence – Six spent the day standing at the window on the lookout or sitting by the door with his ear pressed against it. I worked at my desk, trying to work out how he fitted into what I had so far and attempting to glean more information from him.



“There’s a chair here if you want one,” I offered.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s not very comfortable on the floor.”

“It’s a soft carpet.”

“You’ve been sleeping rough, haven’t you?”

He raised his eyebrows.

“You mean on the streets?” he said – like I’d just said the dumbest thing ever. “I’m a kid. That’d get me way too much attention.”

“So you find a bed every night?”

“I don’t need to sleep every night. But I get a roof over my head. I slept on a roof once.”

“Sounds cold.”

A faint smile crept over his face – just when I didn’t think he knew how.

“You can see the world from up there. Or more of it than you see anywhere else. I never saw so much just standing in one place before.”

“So you never saw much of the world?”

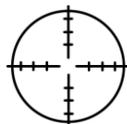
He shrugged. I didn’t push it.

As darkness fell outside, Six became agitated.

“They know we’re here,” he said. “They have to. They won’t wait long.”

3.33 With Six on high alert, pacing between the window and the door, I took my turn to sleep, my mind full of stories and spies.

A fight broke out. Guns were drawn. Punches landed. Furniture crashed.



It wasn't my dream – it was coming from inside the room.

I snapped awake with a jolt. Six stood with his back pressed against the wall near the window, his eyes wild, aiming his gun over the bed at the wall nearest me. It was pointed at a dark shadow, which moved towards me as I sat up.

ShadowAspect.

"It's alright. Don't shoot," I blurted out, my head still fogged with sleep.

"What the hell are you?" Six hissed. "No one can walk through walls." The more he studied ShadowAspect, the wider his eyes and mouth opened. "That's not a mask," he gasped. "That's not clothes. Where's his face?"

"As far as I know, the technical term for him is an Alius," I said, my head clearing. "Best just to suspend your disbelief and go along with it. He's on my side and he's saved my life a few times already."

"Didn't see him when Nine was here," Six muttered.

"I don't think I'm his master's only concern," I said with a touch of bitterness, thinking back to what the last figure in black had told me.

ShadowAspect pointed to my laptop – where an email was waiting for me.

"Time to go," was all it said.

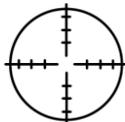
"Go where?" Six demanded, eyeing ShadowAspect with suspicion from behind his gun. "With that?"

Despite ShadowAspect's lack of features, I could tell his hackles were rising.

"Him," I gently corrected Six.

"And does 'he' drive?" Six asked.

ShadowAspect shook his head.



Once my stuff was packed, ShadowAspect held out both hands to Six and me. I knew what was going to happen next and I was pretty sure Six wouldn't like it.

3.34 Six backed away into the corner, gun aimed at ShadowAspect.

"I'm not going anywhere with him," he insisted.

"He'll take us somewhere safe," I said.

"So him and your email friend are in it together?"

"They work for the same person. So do I - now."

Six eyed us both with suspicion.

I realised I had no idea what effect a bullet would have on ShadowAspect.

Would it kill him? Injure him? Would it even slow him down?

"This is the only way we can get out of here without being seen," I said.

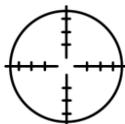
"I'll be fine on my own," Six snapped.

"You don't need to go on the run on your own," I replied. "We'll be safer together and I don't want you sleeping rough if I can help it." I don't know why I thought it was a good idea, but I moved slowly between ShadowAspect and the gun. "At least come and see where we end up next. I get a steady supply of food and DVD boxsets and I've travelled with ShadowAspect before."

Six lowered his gun and tucked it in his trousers – shooting a look at me that said it was all on me now.

Before I could say anything, ShadowAspect grabbed hold of both of us by the arm and hauled us into the shadows.

My hotel room vanished. I knew I'd never see it again.



PART FOUR

4.01 I heard shouts of alarm. Feet scrambled over a carpeted floor. Everything happened in the same small space as me.

I eased my eyes open and waited for the room to stop spinning.

The carpet was green. The room itself was just big enough for two armchairs, a bookcase and a TV. A roaring log fire crackled opposite me. The wooden beams close overhead made the room feel even smaller. To my left, a tiny corridor passed a narrow staircase and led into the kitchen.

The curtains were shut. I opened them to find a bay window. The key was in the front door next to it. I opened the door and stepped out onto a sloping narrow street lined with little terraced cottages. We were on a steep hill. The road curved downwards to my left and wound upwards to my right, which meant I couldn't see very far in either direction.

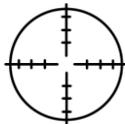
The street was quiet and dimly lit. There was no sign of another human being. I sniffed the air. It was cold and fresh. It smelled of salt and fish - and the seaside.

I backed into the house and locked the door. When I turned, a gun aimed at me from over the arm of one of the chairs. A pair of wide eyes stared up at me. I jumped, then took in a deep breath.

“What the hell did he do? Where am I?” Six demanded.

“I have no idea, but I'm guessing we're safe. Welcome to our new home.”

4.02 “We're by the seaside? How can we be by the seaside?”



Six paced, his eyes flashing wildly around the living room. He dashed to the window and peered through it. He looked at me.

“We were nowhere near the sea. How did it happen? Who was that? How did he do it? What’s he done to me?”

I closed the curtains and made sure the front door was locked.

“It’s fine. His name is ShadowAspect. He isn’t of this world and he can do things normal people like you and me can only dream of.”

Six still looked suspicious.

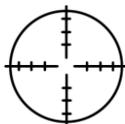
“He travels through the darkness and the night. He uses it to get from one place to another in just a second - no matter how far apart they are.” I smiled. “Once you get used to it, it actually makes getting around much easier. And we’re safe. No one saw us leave. No one could have followed us. And my friend on the computer scoped this place out beforehand and set it up for me.”

“It’s still freaky weird,” Six insisted with a shudder.

“And he’s on our side.”

“Good thing too,” Six said. He still had the same wild look in his eyes.

4.03 Passing the narrow stairs behind the living room, we found the kitchen. It had a table with chairs. The cupboards, fridge and freezer were packed full of enough food to feed us for a couple of months. After that sudden rush of adrenaline, I started to relax and my stomach growled with hunger. I made us something to eat and could see Six relax as well.



Once we were done, I had to get some fresh air. I'd barely been outside in ages and the thought of being out in open space without having to look for anyone hunting me down was just too tempting.

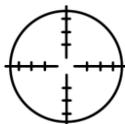
It was dark outside. There was just a dim light from a very meagre scattering of streetlights lining the narrow street as it wound down the hillside. Leaving Six locked inside, I wandered down over the cobblestones. I passed a couple of small shops set back from the street about halfway down and followed the street to the bottom where it opened out into a small harbour with a few fishing trawlers and a pebble beach stretching into the darkness to my right. It was mesmerising. I just stood there for ages and drank it all in.

When I got back there was no sign of Six. I traipsed up the narrow stairs to find a bathroom and two small bedrooms. Six was in bed in the smaller one, fast asleep.

All my things were on the floor in the other bedroom. On the bed was an envelope from Silas. But the sea air had done its job. That would have to wait until morning.

4.04 I awoke early, lumbered downstairs, grabbed some toast, poured myself some coffee and sat down with the envelope.

The first thing I pulled out were crime scene photos – of a body pulled from the Thames. A retired detective called Robert Gentry. The official verdict was suicide. Also included was an email from his former partner, Detective John Barnstable, insisting Gentry had been murdered.



Since retiring, Gentry had continued to investigate cases that had remained unsolved during his time as detective – only now it was more than a hobby.

Barnstable also wrote that his statement would be corroborated by Gentry’s wife – to whom he had been happily married.

This was it. My starting point. I just wished it hadn’t begun with such a tragic story.

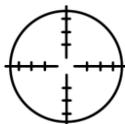
4.05 I found Robert Gentry’s address in the file, but it couldn’t be that simple, could it? Was the information I needed just there in his house?

Further down in the pile of papers was a statement from Mrs. Gentry saying she had been robbed and some of her late husband’s files had been stolen. The next pages were the reports filled out by officers and crime scene techs who turned up and found no evidence of a robbery.

After another cup of coffee, my first thought was that Mister Gentry had fallen into the river and his wife was just paranoid or confused. But a hitman from a parallel world had ordered me to find the information Gentry had hidden, which meant someone had probably killed him, stolen his files and covered it up.

4.06 Six emerged at lunchtime.

“Different kind of sleep,” he explained. “Normally you sleep with one eye open, or you’re primed to jump up at the slightest sound or movement. That was different. That was good.” He looked like he might even smile, but then he waved



a brown manila envelope in front of me and a scowl appeared instead. “Found this on the floor by my bedroom door. Was it you?”

“No.”

“So it was...him.”

“Open it,” I said.

Six emptied the envelope over the table. Out spilled a driver’s licence, a National Insurance card, a debit card and credit card. All in the same name: John Roberts. There were two passports. When I opened one, my own face stared back at me – under the name John Roberts. The other passport had Six’s picture and the name Simon Roberts.

“Fake passports.” Six looked impressed. “Good ones too.”

“And I’m supposed to be what? Your dad?”

“Yeah,” Six shrugged. “You’re old.”

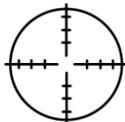
“Not that old,” I protested, examining the ages in the passports. “The age gap is only...the age my dad was when I was born. Great.” I sighed. “I guess when we’re in public you can call me Father.”

Six’s expression darkened. He backed away, his fists clenched.

“What? What did I say?” I said quickly. “Your dad?”

Six shook his head.

“The guy who trained us and gave the orders. He was our handler. We called him Father.”



4.07 I didn't get any more out of Six, so I gave up and showed him what I had looked at so far.

"No way," he said. "Whatever it is, you don't hide anything that important or valuable in your own home. Not if it can get you killed. No. The cop had another hiding place."

"Gentry kept his files in his office," I said. "What if the rest was in a hidden safe somewhere else in the house?"

"He was a cop," Six shrugged. "Why wouldn't he have one? Did he have a gun? They always have good hiding places for those. But I bet he hid the most important stuff somewhere else."

I checked Gentry's file, which Silas had sent with the other stuff. Not only was he licensed to carry a gun, but like his partner, John Barnstable, he had been a sniper in the army.

"Where's his gun?" Six asked suddenly.

"He didn't have one," I replied. "He's licensed, but he wouldn't have been allowed to carry one for work."

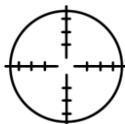
A faint grin crept over Six's features.

"Trust me," he said. "He had one."

Six picked up some of the crime scene photos and frowned.

"How did he die again?"

4.08 "If Gentry had a gun they didn't find, then he must have it hidden somewhere," I thought out loud. "Maybe this vital information he has is hidden with it."



“He took the same journey every Tuesday and always went to the cash machine first,” Six said, surveying the notes with a look of concentration fixed on his face.

“So where was he going?”

“He still wanted to be a detective and a sniper.” Six replied. “He was going to keep his skills up.”

“A detective slash sniper,” I laughed. “This guy sounds really cool.”

“He does,” Six agreed.

“Do gun ranges exist in England?” I asked.

“Officially? None where he was going. That’s why he paid with cash.”

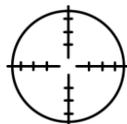
I looked to where Six pointed on the map – East London near the Thames.

“Is that even possible – without everyone hearing it?”

“They found a way,” Six shrugged. “He has something hidden there.”

“We’re looking for a secret underground gun range. How difficult can that be?”

4.09 We turned to police photographs of the crime scene and the body pulled from the Thames. There were pictures of the Millennium Bridge spanning the Thames between St. Paul’s Cathedral and the Tate Modern. Witness reports had placed Robert Gentry there for at least a couple of hours between 1am and 3am, which he seemed to spend leaning against the west railing, drinking from a takeaway cup of coffee. He’d been found a few hours later floating in the Thames near Waterloo Bridge.



“So they reckon he was standing there, thinking about jumping,” Six said. “He had a coffee and a Swiss army knife with him. More likely he was meeting someone.”

But no one else had been seen talking to him or even approaching him.

4.10 A few photos showed just where he had been standing. An empty coffee cup had been placed on the floor against the railing. Next to it was a Swiss army knife standing on its end, the blade pointing upwards. Both had Gentry’s fingerprints on them.

“Kind of looks like an arrow, doesn’t it?” Six said.

It looked like something was scratched into the handrail, but it was too small to tell what it was. But at the bottom of the pile of pictures was one that didn’t fit with the others. It hadn’t been taken by a crime scene tech. A note attached said “From Barnstable’s iPhone”.

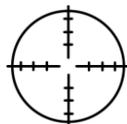
A close-up of what was scratched on the handrail. It looked like a 4. And we had no idea what it meant. But it had to mean something.

4.11 “That’s not a suicide note,” I concluded. “It’s some kind of message.”

“Or a clue,” Six said, sounding more enthusiastic.

“It’s a 4,” I shrugged.

“A weird looking 4. A guy who was a sniper has the accuracy and dexterity to carve one properly.”



“Look where they found his fingerprints,” I said, pointing to a report. “They’re all placed where they should be if he’s leaning. There are no scuff marks or footprints.”

“No fingerprints where he should have put his hands to climb over,” Six said. “If he went over on purpose, he’d have had to dive over the railing. He left the message because he knew someone was coming for him.”

“You’d only arrange to meet someone there at that time and wait over two hours if it was important.”

“Someone he couldn’t meet at home,” Six frowned. “Who couldn’t be seen.”

“So did they kill him or did someone else get to him first?”

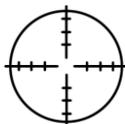
4.12 Once Six and I decided that former detective Robert Gentry had been murdered, we knew we would have to find the information he had hidden to have any idea who did it.

Silas had provided us with every piece of intel imaginable from Gentry’s use of his Oyster Card and a few shots from CCTV and security cameras. There was a bus stop in North London he travelled to at least once a week, usually really early in the morning or very late at night, but no camera shot could tell me where he went.

Six scoured through his financials.

“Former Detective Gentry was careful,” he said approvingly. “He used cash for everything. He would take some out just before he took those bus rides.”

“And we’ve no way of knowing what he was up to,” I sighed.



4.13 How much could I ever learn hiding away in some cottage by the sea? Once

Six had gone back to bed, I took a breath and lifted my head to the ceiling. I knew Sarasin Shade would be watching.

“What do I do now, Sarasin?” I said. “You must have seen something. What do you have? What can I use? With ShadowAspect’s help, I can get in and out of places like Gentry’s house and find what I need. Come on. You have to help.”

But there was no reply. ShadowAspect didn’t come back. We were on our own.

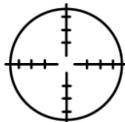
4.14 “Wherever it is, doesn’t matter how clever or careful he was,” Six said the next morning, shovelling in mouthfuls of cereal. “Someone will find it. If it’s people like me, they’ll find it quick. That other cop - Barnstable. He won’t let go. He’ll definitely find it if they don’t.”

“What do we do?” I said. “We’re in hiding. We can’t go running around the country trying to find whatever it is.”

“You said it’s a spy’s job.” A faint smile crossed Six’s features. “Maybe it’s time we acted like spies.”

I knew what Six wanted to do. He wanted to go to London and find everything out for himself. But we were both in danger as it was. People out there were hunting us. I’d had close calls already. I was in hiding. I was on the run.

But part of me had to know what Gentry had found. Being part of my own story meant my writing had stalled. I wasn’t sure I could just go back to it and



forget everything else. I needed that information. Then there was the hitman who'd come to kill me if I didn't get hold of it.

Life was going to get more dangerous. This time by the sea doing detective work was just the calm before the storm.

"We're not safe wherever we are," I shrugged. "Maybe it is time to move on."

4.15 I needed a walk and some fresh air, so leaving Six locked in, I went for a wander once it was dark.

"Someone's coming to kill me whatever I do," I muttered.

Still no word from Sarasin. I'd just have to work it all out for myself.

Following the dimly-lit cobblestone street as it wound its way down the hill, I found the harbour. The sound of the fishing trawlers rocking gently on the water and the smell of the sea relaxed me.

Without knowing why, I snapped awake suddenly and looked all around me.

Someone was watching me, hiding in the darkness. I could feel it.

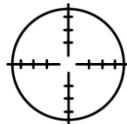
4.16 A chill crept up my spine. I froze.

Don't react. Stay calm.

My mind raced. Who was it? What did they want?

No. Someone was there. I just didn't know why they were there.

Shooting glances left and right, I didn't see anyone. I ambled along the harbour's edge to peer down at the water, then turned the other way. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a movement up the hill where I'd come from.



I wandered across the harbour, my heart pounding. Then I caught sight of a shadowy figure ahead of me lingering on the beach. I blinked and tried to focus on that one point, but I couldn't see them anymore.

Taking my chance, I turned and slowly climbed the hill, trying to look as casual as possible.

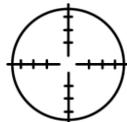
4.17 I didn't dare look back until I knew the terraced cottage was in reach. My walking pace had already quickened and I was marching up the hill. I shot a glance over my shoulder and caught sight of a dark figure almost hidden by the curve of the road. I didn't take in anything else about them – just that they were trying not to be seen.

By the time I reached the front door, I was almost running. My fingers fumbled for the key, which rattled in the lock before the door opened. I locked it behind me and drew in a deep breath.

A gun loaded somewhere close. I jumped. A handgun barrel and Six's face appeared from behind an armchair. I turned off the light and we both ducked down behind the furniture. We waited.

The silhouette of a hooded figure crept up to the window and peered through the glass, then moved on.

4.18 Six and I stayed stock still for ages, staring at the window, waiting for the dark figure to reappear and try to spot us inside. But whoever it was didn't come back.



After about two hours, I crawled to the window and drew the curtain. I moved to the kitchen with my laptop and shut the door behind me. Six positioned himself on an armchair with his gun aimed at the front door. The fact the whole town would hear if he did fire a shot didn't seem to worry him.

A hurried email took place between Silas and me.

“Silas, you need to get us out now.”

“Why?”

“Someone knows we're here.”

4.19 Silas: “Someone found you? That's not possible.”

Me: “I went out. Someone was watching me. They followed me home and even tried looking in through the front window.”

Silas: “That's not possible. I was so careful. I covered all your tracks. I know what I'm doing. How could someone find you?”

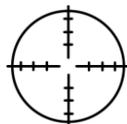
Despite the situation and the danger Six and I were in, I still laughed as I read Silas's email and pictured the panic. I'd never seen a type-o from him before and that many in one sentence – I could almost see the beads of sweat dripping onto the keyboard.

“We've been found,” I typed back to him. “You need to get us out of here and move us somewhere safer.”

“Hav you fried Sarasin?”

“I tried. No answer.”

There was a bit of a wait after that one.



“I’m not ready,” he wrote back eventually. “I looked at other places, but once you were in, I let the other bookings go. And without ShadowAspect, how do I move you?”

“You’ll think of something.”

Six and I didn’t dare leave the house. All we could do was wait.

4.20 A few hours later, I realised Six was watching me – or more likely studying me.

“You’re really calm,” he said eventually.

“I suppose so,” I replied. “Why?”

“Didn’t really expect you to be. But it’s good. You’ll need to be to get through what we’re going to do. Worst thing that can happen is someone you rely on panicking.”

“How did you manage in dangerous situations?”

“I dunno,” Six shrugged. “I guess I always could. It just came natural.”

“What did you do?”

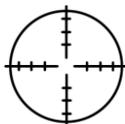
“Dangerous stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Hunting people down. Getting to people who needed getting to – wherever they were or whatever their security system was - no matter how many psychos they had guarding them.”

“You ever kill anyone?”

“I killed people,” Six said. “Wasn’t my usual job. Others were better at it.”



“What was your speciality?”

“Finding people. Getting to people no one else could get to. We could all do it – that was why they used us. But the really difficult or dangerous missions they gave to me.”

“And who was the one they sent to kill people?”

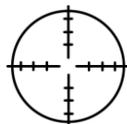
“He’s called Seven.”

4.21 Six refused to say any more after that. Remembering material I had worked on, I already knew something about the teenage hitman known as Seven – and why Six was determined to say as little about him as possible. What really worried me was that if Six and Nine had found me, how many others could track me down as well?

I emailed Silas to work out a plan of where we wanted to go and how we would get there. He really wasn’t happy with me heading into danger, but seeing as he had no idea how to protect me from an assassin from another world, he went along with it. Then it was down to Six and me to sort the most difficult part – getting out of the town alive.

4.22 Daylight was our friend. It had to be. Surely no one could get away with murdering us both in public.

We packed a rucksack each – as big and heavy as we could carry. Six found it a lot easier to pack light than I did – I guess he was used to living with the bare



minimum. But as well as clothes, I had a laptop, notes and manuscripts to truck around with me.

Just as well it was cold. We both wore coats, scarves and hats, then we left our cottage behind and trooped up the hill to the bus stop.

Ten of us got on the bus. As soon as I sat down next to Six, I knew it. I could feel someone's gaze in my back. There was a third person on our bus who was not who they were pretending to be.

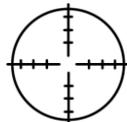
4.23 Six and I had already thought through and even rehearsed some of the things we might say to each other on our journey in public as we pretended to be father and son on holiday. Pretending to be the kid's father was galling, but there was no way around it. As we chatted casually in earshot of eight other passengers about where we had been and how he couldn't wait to tell his mum and his friends when he got back, we used our phones to communicate, typing unsent texts that the other could read.

"One of them is watching me," I typed.

"You can tell?" Six replied.

"Let's just say I'm used to being watched."

"No one reacted or reached for a weapon," Six typed. "Whoever it is, they're in it for the long run. Losing them won't be easy."



4.24 As we talked, we took it in turns to run through the people and faces we remembered from the queue. We were sitting at the front of the bus, which really set me on edge because I couldn't see anyone. I could tell Six didn't like it either.

Once we had listed the eight other passengers, I tried to narrow it down. There was an older couple who looked like locals on a shopping trip and another couple in waterproofs who we overheard say they had just retired. I wanted to rule them out, but Six insisted we couldn't trust anyone.

That left four: a tall skinny guy who got a student discount, a young woman in hiking clothes who appeared to be travelling alone and a couple in their thirties who looked like they were on a walking holiday.

I could still feel someone watching me.

4.25 I needed to know more about our fellow passengers, but I couldn't risk turning around when there was no obvious reason for it. If only there was a way of getting something to Silas. We would be stopping for lunch soon and would probably have Wi-Fi access.

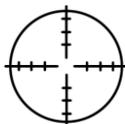
Then it hit me. I knew how to do it – I'd written about it before.

Pulling my iPhone from my pocket, I gave Six a nudge.

"We haven't taken any selfies today yet. Remember, you wanted pictures of us wherever we went."

Six shot me a strange look – like I was crazy.

But when I held up my iPhone for a photograph that also took in the people behind us, he grinned.



“Say cheese.”

4.26 The bus stopped outside a café in a small town and everyone got out for lunch.

Fish and chips all round with cups of tea.

Six played along, taking pictures of his lunch. Then we took a few more selfies in the café. I left my phone alone. Silas must have seen them already.

A text came a few minutes later.

“Got them all. Threat assessment coming up.”

Back on the bus, I flicked through the photos we had just taken – like a happy holidaymaker would. As well as the ones we’d taken, Silas had sent a load more – of the two of us in different locations in the area – probably from CCTV cameras.

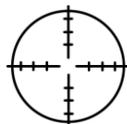
Then something else struck me. Six was smiling in all of them – like he was a different person.

4.27 A few hours later, the bus pulled up at its final stop – a small city popular with tourists. Six and I disembarked with everyone else, knowing we would fit right in.

Heading for our hotel, I could feel someone watching me again, but every time I stopped to survey the old buildings and quaint cobbled streets, I didn’t catch sight of anyone. Six and I even tried taking selfies and pictures of each other, but no one we recognised appeared in the background of any.

I checked us in while Six wandered around the reception area looking bored, then we locked ourselves in our room.

“Didn’t see anyone,” Six reported.



We ate in our room, looking over the photographs we had taken, using my laptop to enlarge them and study each one. Some faces from the bus appeared a lot more than others.

“Is it me?” I thought out loud. “Or do the same people happen to be looking away or down at their food in pretty much every picture?”

4.28 It looked like three of our fellow bus passengers were avoiding the camera. It happened so many times it couldn't be a coincidence.

“Some people just don't like having their photo taken,” I shrugged.

“And some have a good reason,” Six said.

“I'd have thought you'd be one of them,” I ventured.

“What do you mean?” Six shot back at me.

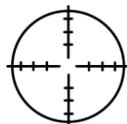
“You don't seem the type who likes being in pictures, yet you're grinning like a Cheshire cat in every one.”

“Yeah,” he said – like he was talking to the slow one in the room. “Wouldn't have worked any other way, would it?”

I looked at him.

“You were acting?”

“Kind of,” he shrugged. “I was being the kid on the bus. I wasn't me anymore. I wouldn't be very good at what I do if I couldn't be other people. I don't like being in photos, but that kid does.”



4.29 There was no point getting too relaxed or comfortable. We weren't going to be in the hotel very long. I had to take my chance.

“So who else have you had to be?” I ventured.

Six looked up sharply – as he always did when I asked questions about his past.

“Kids,” he shrugged. “Kids other kids like. Kids grownups like. Kids they trust enough to invite into their home or play outside on the street with. Kids who seem so unthreatening, that the target just lets their guard down, reveals something about themselves they wouldn't tell another grownup. Kids who come into their home and disappear off to the loo without them questioning if that's where they're really going.”

“You did all that?”

Six nodded.

“I thought your speciality was finding people.”

“That wasn't all I did. But to find someone, you have to understand them. That means getting in with friends and family. Doesn't matter who it is, someone else out there always knows something.”

4.30 My next question was a more dangerous one, but I couldn't help myself.

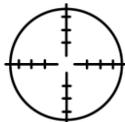
“So who else out there would know about you and miss you?”

Six's jaw set. He scowled.

“Seven. Nine. Eight.”

“But there must be someone else from your old life. Family? Parents?”

“I don't know,” Six shrugged.



“Wouldn’t your parents have missed you when you disappeared and joined your employers?”

“No,” Six said shortly.

A text arrived on my phone.

“I’ve eliminated five of them,” Silas texted. “Three of them have no digital footprint at all. No presence on social media. Not even a single photograph. The same three hiding in every photo you took.”

Once Six was busy studying the photos again, a second text arrived:

“Had a good look around for your friend Six. There was nothing. If someone out there is missing him, they’ve never said so.”

4.31 “No one?” I texted. “No parents looking for him?”

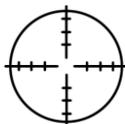
“No one.” Silas texted back. “I have no idea who he is. Same goes for the three on the bus we can’t identify. They could be anyone.”

I examined the pictures again. The three Silas couldn’t identify were the couple in their thirties on the walking holiday and the young woman travelling alone.

“Could any of them be after you?” I asked Six.

“I don’t recognise any of them,” he shrugged. “But they could be. We were always told the organisation we worked for was much bigger than us, that they had people everywhere. Sometimes they used it like a threat. You know, try running away and we’ll find you.”

Then, like it was just something on his to do list, Six pulled a gun from his coat and began taking it apart.



4.32 It was nearly time. I stood at the window, peeking every so often through a gap in the curtains at the street below. A couple of streetlamps cast a dim golden glow over the cobblestones. It was very quiet. There was no one around.

“If there was a sniper out there, they could have killed you a hundred times over,” Six said casually.

He had cleared everything off the coffee table, taken his gun apart and was now giving it a thorough cleaning.

I backed away from the window.

“What do you mean?” I uttered. “There’s a sniper out there?”

“Could be,” Six shrugged. “Anyone I know could have shot you from the rooftop opposite and you wouldn’t have even seen them.”

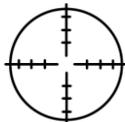
4.33 “We were all taught to shoot from distance. We were all trained as snipers,” Six explained, concentrating on the task of cleaning his gun. “The way you were looking out, any of us could have done it. I could. Seven could have taken you down with a handgun with one shot.”

“What did I do wrong?”

“You have to look quicker. And take everything in. Start where the danger’s most likely to come from. Rooftops and windows opposite, then the street below. And before they have time to get a shot away.”

Six finished cleaning his gun and put it back together really quickly.

“Where did you get the gun?” I asked him.



4.34 Six loaded the magazine and aimed down the sights. Wielding it looked like second nature to him. It fitted his hands perfectly and was light and small enough for him to carry it around undetected.

“Walther PPS,” he said suddenly, holding it up for me to see. “9mm rounds. Light enough for me and adapted for concealed carry. Automated trigger safety so I don’t accidentally blow my privates off.”

“Always good,” I grin.

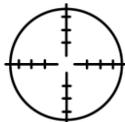
“This one’s been modified to fit my hands and so I can use a silencer. Most professionals use something bigger, but then most of them are bigger and older than me. I like it. I guess if I’m still doing this when I’m older, I’ll probably grow out of it.”

“So they gave you that?”

“That’s right. Done every job with this – or three other identical ones I have hidden around the place.”

“You mean like a go bag?”

“Three of them,” Six said. “I’ll need to visit one when we’re in London.” He got up and took a glance through the curtains. “We’re clear. We should go.”



PART FIVE

5.01 I left the hotel alone, passing the receptionist who had started the night shift well after we had checked in. He didn't know who I was. I wandered out the door and paused on the street, looking casually left and right like a tourist out for a nightly stroll.

Following the route we had planned, I wandered down some quiet streets. The only noise was when I passed a few bars that were still open for business.

Our meeting point was by the river. I stood, hidden in the shadows, jumping every time I thought I caught sight of movement in the darkness.

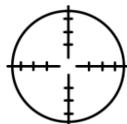
But nothing happened.

Six did not show.

5.02 The time we were supposed to meet had passed ten minutes ago. I could still hear Six's instructions in my head as clearly as if he were giving them right then.

"Don't linger there like some weird stalker. Doesn't matter how careful you are, someone will see you and you'll stick in their memory as the strange, creepy stalker guy."

Pulling the penknife I'd found in the cottage from my inside coat pocket, I scratched a symbol in the brickwork to show I'd been there and had moved on. Then I set off, heading for our second meeting point. Deep down, I knew something was wrong.



5.03 The background noise grew as I wandered down a street with a few bars and restaurants. A young couple headed out and walked past me, hand in hand. I didn't recognise them. They weren't on the bus. But once I couldn't see them, I felt both pairs of eyes burning into my back.

My heart pounded. It took everything to not run, but to wander as casually as before. Suddenly it wasn't just the couple I'd passed on the street. There were more of them. I kept moving. I turned a couple of corners, but I could feel more eyes on me, following me. They were stalking me like prey.

I couldn't see anyone. There were no footsteps running up behind me. But I knew I wasn't being paranoid.

They were still watching me. What were they waiting for?

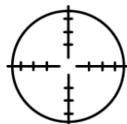
5.04 I had no choice. All I could do was trudge down one narrow street after another with my hands planted in my coat pockets. They couldn't find anything sharp in them that I could use as a weapon. I tried my trouser pockets instead. Nothing. Not even my keys.

Why didn't I get Six to give me a gun?

A chilly sensation crawled up my spine. They were still following me, whoever they were. I just couldn't see them and I couldn't lose them – even when I picked up the pace.

I made my way to a dimly lit open space dominated by the dark shape of the cathedral looming over me.

Our second meeting place.



But no sign of Six.

5.05 I pressed my back against the cathedral wall to hide in its shadow and make sure no one could creep up on me. Across the space I could just make out a couple of streets that led away from the cathedral in different directions.

Everything was silent.

A movement caught my eye. A shadow. A figure emerged from a street at the far end. Whoever it was, they were too big to be Six. They took a good look around them, then disappeared back down the street.

My ears caught a sound - a faint sound coming from the same street.

A silenced gunshot.

I crept along the wall, fixing my gaze on the street entrance, but I couldn't hear or see anything.

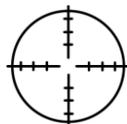
Then a noise over my shoulder made me start.

Before I could turn, a black hood was shoved over my head.

5.06 There was no time to react. My hands shot up to the hood over my head, but two pairs of hands grabbed my wrists and pinned them behind my back. A zip tie clamped my wrists together, digging painfully into my skin. I bruise like a peach at the best of times. If I ever got out of this, I'd be black and blue for ages.

A pair of hands shoved me face first into the cathedral wall and pinned me against it.

"Let's see you write your way out of this one," a male voice grunted.



My face wrapped in darkness, I strained my ears for every sound.

Someone approached from around the corner.

“We’re clear,” came a second voice.

“We found you a cave of your own,” the first voice said. “One where no one will ever find you.”

5.07 My first thought was – where the hell was ShadowAspect when I needed him?

Why wasn’t Sarasin Shade paying attention? Or I was just expendable. Maybe he was stalking another struggling writer at that very moment.

In total darkness with the hood over my head and my hands tied behind my back, two pairs of hands marched me around the corner of the cathedral and away from the meeting place I had arranged with Six.

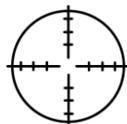
I heard something speed down a nearby street and skid to a halt just metres ahead of me. The side door of a transit van slid open and two or three people jumped out.

“Your chariot awaits, Mister Rybak.”

5.08 More pairs of feet ran towards us.

“We need to go now,” came a young woman’s voice. She sounded like she was panicking – less experienced than the others. Probably the woman from the couple I passed.

“Shut up,” the guy hauling me towards the van growled. “What was that gunshot I heard?”



“Didn’t come from any of us,” one guy replied. “I haven’t seen...”

“Don’t even think of saying it,” my guy cut him off.

We came to an abrupt halt.

“He has thirty seconds or he gets left behind.”

Silence.

No one dared argue with him. You could feel the tension in the air.

Maybe there was hope for me yet – arguing and a gunshot none of them could account for. I waited, hoping Six would spring from somewhere.

But then two pairs of hands shoved me in the van.

5.09 I rolled over the van’s metal floor, bouncing off my knees and my face, and collided with the far wall. I eased myself into a sitting position. I could just about hear my captors arguing in muttered voices outside.

Suddenly everything stopped.

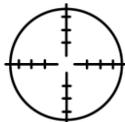
“What the hell was that?” one of them muttered.

Guns were drawn. Some of them scrambled for cover. Instructions were whispered. There were grunts of alarm.

I heard a silenced gunshot. Then a volley of silenced gunshots rang out. A couple of bullets clanged against the van’s panelled wall.

I heaved myself over and rolled away from the open sliding door. Last thing I needed was to catch a stray bullet.

5.10 With my hands tied behind my back, I couldn’t get the hood off.



A volley of silenced shots collided with the van wall close to my head. More silenced shots were fired outside. There were running feet. Punches and kicks landed. There were yelps and screams of pain. A body smashed into the side of the van. Something hit another body hard. There was a crunch. A bone cracked. A shout of pain was silenced with a snap.

Silence.

I waited, holding my breath, not daring to make a sound.

No one entered the van. I couldn't hear or feel anyone come near me.

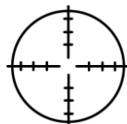
Something grabbed my ankle and hauled me over the van floor. Then I was yanked out of the van.

I landed on my feet. A blade sliced through the zip tie binding my wrists. I stood there, waiting for my rescuer to whip off the hood and say something, but nothing happened.

5.11 My hands reached for the hood. Whoever had pulled me out wasn't Six. They hadn't identified themselves. They had pulled me out without climbing into the van.

I took off the hood. I was alone. There was no one watching me, no one waiting to ask if I was okay. Whoever had helped me had gone.

My eyes were drawn to the scene around me. There were dead bodies scattered over the ground. One was slumped against the van, which was riddled with bullet indentations and spattered with blood. Some of them had been shot. The rest had been beaten to death. I recognised the couple I'd passed before among the dead.



They were all armed and trained. They were organised. So who took them down? And why didn't they let me see them?

5.12 I couldn't just stand there in case someone saw me. All I could do was head for the next meeting point and forget about what kind of hell was going to break loose when the mess I was standing in was discovered.

Taking care to step around the blood, I did a quick check to make sure there was no obvious trace on my clothes or shoes, then strode away.

A face peered around the corner I was heading for. It was Six. As I got closer, he had the same look on his face that I probably did. Confused. Stunned. Like something horrifying had happened. Knocked for six – so to speak.

I rounded the corner and we walked together in silence.

“What happened?” I asked eventually.

“Don't want to talk about it.”

5.13 We took a longer, roundabout route to our next destination, circling back on ourselves a couple of times just to make sure we weren't being followed.

“Gonna need more ammo,” Six grunted, a scowl on his face.

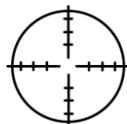
“You ran out?”

“Yep.”

“Can you get more?”

“When we get to London – I have some hidden in a few places.”

“You have ammo hidden around London?”



“And some other stuff.”

Six looked up at me before I could ask any more questions.

“I barely landed a shot,” he said pointedly. “That first guy I ran into – I didn’t get near him. Whoever he was – he was so quick. Then I made it to the cathedral as that team were shoving you in the van. I took a couple of them down, but then he attacked them and killed the rest.”

5.14 “So it wasn’t you who pulled me out of the van?” I asked Six.

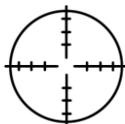
“I was on a rooftop,” he replied. “It must have been the same guy I shot at before. One of them got mixed up in our first shootout. Didn’t end well for him. But then I knew they were coming for you.” Six shook his head. “I saw him from the rooftop. So quick.” He shot me another look. “He could do things – things that should’ve been impossible. I tried shooting at him anyway and I still couldn’t hit him. He pulled you from the van without even touching you.”

“Did you get a look at him?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t know him if he passed us on the street right now.”

5.15 As we neared our next destination, our pace quickened. It felt like we were being followed again. I shot a glance over my shoulder and caught sight of a silhouette on a rooftop. I didn’t know who it was, but someone must have found the carnage I’d left behind by now.

Once the hotel we were supposed to be staying in was just a hundred metres away, I texted Silas.



“They found us. We need to get out – now.”

A text came back in seconds.

“Hotel carpark. Round the back. Lower ground floor.”

We hurried around the back of the hotel Silas had booked us in for the night, then down the ramp to the carpark.

An iron gate was shut across it. We were locked out.

5.16 The iron gate was floor to ceiling, stretching across the entrance and exit. There was no way of climbing over or breaking in.

“Now what?” Six demanded.

I stared helplessly at the gate. Did Silas think it would be open – or did he have some way to get us in?

My phone vibrated. A text from Silas.

“You’ll be needing this.”

His next text was a ten-digit number.

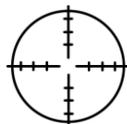
What was that for?

Then Six pointed to a keypad set in the wall. I typed in the number Silas had sent and the gate slid back.

I led the way inside the carpark, suddenly realising I had no idea what I was looking for. The text came.

“You’re looking for a grey Audi S3.”

5.17 I saw the grey Audi S3 at the back of the hotel carpark.



“Where’s the key?” I texted.

Silas’ next text included a link, which just looked like a load of numbers. When I tapped it, the car’s headlights flashed and I heard the doors unlock.

“How did you do that? Did you just hack into a car?”

“Doesn’t matter. Key’s under the passenger seat.”

When I came out of my text messages, every single text I had received or sent vanished from my phone.

No time to question why. I jumped in the driver’s seat, Six found the key under the passenger seat and climbed in.

A thought hit me.

“What is it?” Six asked.

“I haven’t driven for ages,” I said.

“You want me to?” he offered.

“You can drive?”

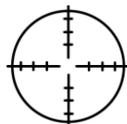
“Of course,” he shrugged. “I can lose a tail and come out best in a car chase. And we don’t have time to mess around, so decide now.”

I pulled out of our space and accelerated to the gate. I drove up the ramp to street level, then braked in a hurry.

Someone was running towards us – with a gun.

5.18 “That’s him,” Six uttered. “Picture the road ahead in your mind and get ready to duck down and drive at the same time.”

I jammed my foot down on the accelerator and braced myself.



The person running towards us didn't raise the gun and didn't fire at us.

Instead, I shot right by, turning to catch a look at who it was.

I recognised her straightaway. It was the young woman from the bus. She was the one who had been following us.

"It was definitely her," Six said. "Same clothes and trainers. I shot at her loads of times and I didn't get near her. She took down that team trying to kidnap you."

Speeding away, I glanced as often as I could into the wing mirror. She was watching us drive away, seemingly indifferent to the fact we'd left her behind.

She was dangerous and highly-skilled. Why didn't she kill me? What did she want? Who was she?

5.19 My eyes flitted from the road to the young woman in my mirror. She had shoulder-length, auburn hair. She wore a black leather jacket and dark blue jeans. Her handgun was pointed casually at the floor.

"Who is she?" I said.

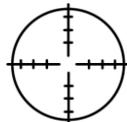
"I've no idea," Six replied. "No one can do what I saw her do. The others – they were from my old company."

"They keep finding me."

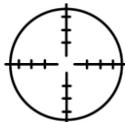
"They have people everywhere – and more kids like me. They have money and resources to throw at any problem in their way." Six looked at me. "You've written about them. It shouldn't be a surprise. It's why they want you dead.

Welcome to life as a spy."

I drove out of the town centre. There was no sign of the woman with the gun.



But the same car had been following me for a few minutes now. As I turned onto the main road and picked up speed, it stayed right behind me.



PART SIX

6.01 Looking in my mirror, I couldn't see who was driving. I slowed right down, hoping they would overtake and I would realise I was just being paranoid.

But the car slowed and drove just behind me.

I put my foot down and accelerated.

The car sped up.

It was the middle of the night. There were no other cars around. If anything happened to us, there would be no one else to see it.

“You want me to take over?” Six offered.

“No. Just takes one passing police car and that's our adventure over.”

“Whether they're honest cops or getting paid by the company,” Six agreed. “I heard they've got thousands on their payroll.”

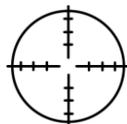
The headlights of another vehicle were heading our way. As it came closer, I could see it was a van – with a metal grid on the front.

Suddenly it veered across the road and sped right at us.

6.02 I stared in wide-eyed horror at the van tearing towards us. The car behind moved right up until it was almost touching the back bumper. We were heading for a collision. The bars on the front of the van would crush us inside the car.

Gripping the wheel, I froze. I didn't know what to do.

“Move over.”



Six grabbed the wheel. Before I knew it, he was driving and I was scrambling into the passenger seat.

He slowed right down. The car behind bashed into the Audi's rear bumper, throwing us around in our seats. Six swung left. The driver behind followed. The van altered its trajectory to charge right at us.

Then Six jammed his foot down and accelerated.

6.03 We shot right at the van, seconds away from a head-on collision.

Six swung the car right without warning, throwing me into the passenger door. My face slammed into the window.

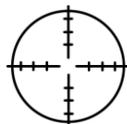
The van didn't turn in time.

We flew past it, just missing the van's front grill. Six hammered his foot down and accelerated again, operating the gearstick like a rally driver, his eyes fixed on the road.

I opened my eyes and glanced at the road, thinking that danger was past, but another car, a Porsche SUV sped right at us. A guy heaved himself through the passenger seat window with an assault rifle in his hand and opened fire.

6.04 The muzzle of the assault rifle flashed. Bullets bombarded the windscreen and the bodywork of the Audi Six was driving. But they clanged and bounced off the car like it was bulletproof.

Six ignored it all and drove straight at the Porsche Cayenne. The gunman's eyes widened in alarm. He ducked back into the SUV.



“Hang on,” Six uttered.

He accelerated. Then he heaved up the handbrake and hauled the steering wheel to the right. The car spun around. I clung on. As the SUV was about to hit us, the front of our Audi swung out of reach.

Then I was facing the opposite direction.

The car and the van had skidded to a halt behind us. It looked like they had just avoided crashing into each other. Then they turned around and set off after us.

We kept spinning until we faced the front again. The SUV screeched to a halt. It had just missed us.

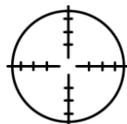
Six accelerated and we sped away. My stomach lurched back into my spine. But for now, I was still alive.

6.05 Six swerved the Audi off the main road at the first turn and accelerated down a narrow country lane away from the streetlights and into pitch black. The headlights were on a low beam, sweeping over the road and hedges flying past on both sides.

We saw the turn late. Six skidded the car over the ground and jammed his foot on the accelerator, throwing us down the lane.

My phone buzzed. I opened the link Silas had sent. It was a detailed map showing our current location and every country lane around us. It gave a route to a destination 50 kilometres away.

“Isolated farmhouse,” Silas texted. “Change your car there.”



6.06 With me acting as navigator, Six took each turn like a rally driver, swerving down every turn at terrifying speeds. For once I was glad it was dark.

I shot a glance behind us every so often, looking for headlights following us, but there was no sign of anyone. I leaned back in my seat, allowing myself to relax a bit.

When we were less than a kilometre from the farmhouse, the headlights caught a dark shape moving ahead of us.

Six had seen it too. He pushed the brake.

The car sped up.

Six frowned and jammed his foot down hard on the brake pedal.

The car sped up again. Then it swerved violently.

Six gripped the steering wheel and hauled it back on course.

The car veered one way, then the other.

Six struggled with the wheel. His knuckles whitened. He gritted his teeth.

I reached over and clamped both hands on the wheel.

A force wrenched it out of our hands.

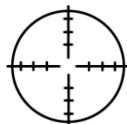
The car swerved. It shot straight off the road and ploughed through a hedge.

6.07 The car was stuck. Six gave up stamping on the accelerator and scowled. My shoulder and ribs sang from where the seatbelt had dug into them.

“How the hell did that happen?” he grated.

My phone vibrated.

“What happened?” Silas texted. “Why did you stop?”



“Something took control of the car and crashed it. We’re fine.”

“Get out of the car now. Take what you need and run. Leave files and computer – I have copies of everything. Check the boot.”

More typing errors. Silas was panicking.

I hated leaving my laptop and manuscripts, but I knew I couldn’t run with them. Six found guns, ammo and night vision goggles in the boot.

With the night vision goggles on, we left the car and ran over the field we had crashed into. It started flat, then rose up towards the silhouette of a church at the top of a hill.

I reached the church gasping for breath and leaned against the wall before my legs gave way. Looking back towards the car, I could see three figures skulking around it. They were searching for us.

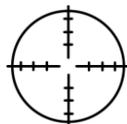
Six and I crept around to a graveyard at the back. It was like an army of stones standing to attention. Beyond the graveyard was a meadow leading to a dark cluster of buildings. It had to be the farm.

We picked our way through the gravestones, staying close to the biggest ones. Then Six stopped and pointed. I froze.

Across the graveyard someone was moving. A dark figure that looked like a man in a balaclava.

He stopped and lifted his face into the air like he was listening for something.

What happened next was so unreal, I don’t think I would believe it now – if Six hadn’t been there and seen it too.



The man in the graveyard spread his arms. He rose into the air. He hovered over the ground. Then he flew straight at us.

6.08 Six and I backed away through the gravestones.

The dark figure flew after us.

We changed direction, turned and ran, aiming for the back of the graveyard and the meadow beyond.

The dark figure veered in the air, sinking until his feet nearly touched the ground, then took off after us.

We ran hard, but the flying figure was catching us with every stride we made. Six pulled his gun, turned and fired two silenced shots at him.

The air shimmered in front of the flyer. The bullets zipped into the shimmering air and deflected into the night.

Six fired again.

The air shimmered again. The bullets ricocheted away.

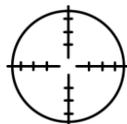
We backed away as Six kept firing. The bullets didn't get near the flyer.

The shimmering air concentrated in a cloud to the flyer's right. It was barely visible, but I was sure I could make out a second figure in the cloud.

The flyer wasn't deflecting the bullets himself. Someone was doing it for him.

6.09 Six and I kept running. Six looked over his shoulder every few strides and fired another shot. Then he reloaded so quickly I almost missed it.

He was slowing them down. We were getting away.



The second figure leapt in front of the flyer – as if it was taking too much energy to hide herself any longer. I could tell it was a woman. Like the flyer, she wore a mask and was dressed in all black. The shimmering air burst out from between her hands and enveloped them both like a shield.

Now they were moving quicker. Six's bullets disappeared in the night sky.

Six gave up trying to shoot them and we just ran for it. We reached the last rows of graves. I glanced over my shoulder. They were still right behind us.

The one wielding the bulletproof shield pushed her hands together, making a bright burst of power. She flung a blast out of her shield. The force hit me in the shoulder and blew me off my feet.

6.10 I landed on my back. Six jumped in front of me and fired a volley of bullets at the shield. None of them got through.

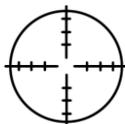
Our attackers inside the shield ran right at us. Six didn't move. He kept firing. The shield was going to hit him.

A shadowy figure shot past Six and through the shimmering shield like it wasn't there. The shield vanished. The new arrival punched the shield carrier to the ground. He leapt and grabbed the flyer's leg, yanked him down, then kicked him, sending him tumbling and crashing back into the graveyard.

He turned and pointed to the farm, ordering us to run for it.

ShadowAspect.

It was really good to see him again.



He couldn't have timed his intervention any better.

6.11 Six turned and ran for it. I scrambled to my feet and followed. I felt dazed and a little delicate from being hit, but I shook it off as I ran.

The farm was further away than it looked. Running in the darkness towards the shape of a group of buildings, I didn't dare slow down. Glancing over my shoulder, it didn't look like anyone was following.

6.12 Eventually we reached the farm and hid behind the wall of a barn. I collapsed to the ground, my lungs burning. My legs screamed in pain. My shoulder ached.

"Who the hell were they?" Six uttered. He wasn't even breathing heavily.

"Dunno," I gasped.

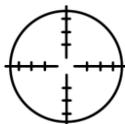
"They weren't like ShadowAspect," he thought out loud. "They were more like the woman who dodged my bullets." He peered around the corner. "We need to get out of here before any of them see what car we're driving."

Six led the way and I staggered after him. He found a barn by the lane leading out of the farm and hauled the door open.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Car doors unlocked in front of me. The lights came on inside the Ford Focus sitting in the barn.

Six jumped in the driver's side. I sank into the passenger seat. He accelerated and drove at breakneck speed out of the farm.

6.13 Six drove hard, sticking to quiet country roads. As it started to get light again, he skidded to a sudden halt. Without saying a word, he grabbed his phone and



spent ten minutes tapping away at it with a look of concentration fixed on his face. Then he handed it to me, telling me to flick between a map and what looked like a live camera feed of the inside of a house.

He drove on and a couple of hours later, parked in the garage of a cottage on the edge of a village close to London.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“Safe house. Officially it’s a holiday home. No one will think it’s strange that we’re here. We’ll be safe for a couple of nights and we can plan our next move.”

I recognised the interior from the camera feeds I’d been watching.

“This belongs to your employer? Won’t they look for you here?”

“It’s mine. No one else knows about it.”

Six wouldn’t answer any more questions. He set about checking his many hidden security measures and reported that no one had been there.

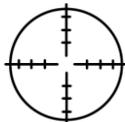
We were safe – for the time being at least.

6.14 It was about twenty-seven hours later when I realised that someone had been in the house while I was asleep and left things for us. There was a laptop containing every note and every manuscript I’d left behind in our crashed car.

My eye was drawn to some material I didn’t recognise – titled “URGENT”.

It showed what else ShadowAspect had been up to recently.

The first incident sent a chill up my spine.



6.15 The notes on the laptop ShadowAspect had left me didn't say when it had happened, but being marked "URGENT" suggested it had taken place recently.

ShadowAspect emerged in a central London street in the dead of night. It was darker than he'd expected. Over half the streetlights he could make out in either direction had failed to turn on. It was perfect for him – and anyone else not wanting to be seen.

Someone had taken out the lights on purpose.

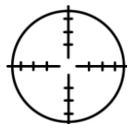
A car rolled down the street with its headlights turned off. It parked about fifty metres away.

ShadowAspect noticed something on the wall above. He stretched up the wall and touched his elongated fingers to the security camera belonging to the shop behind him. It wasn't working. Every other security camera on the street wouldn't be working either.

Someone didn't want to be seen. And they had the power to make that happen.

6.16 A man climbed out of the back of the Jaguar parked up the street. There was nothing special about him as far as ShadowAspect could see – just some normal-looking guy in jeans and a blazer - but he strode down the middle of the road like he owned it.

Two men jumped out of the front of the car and followed him. They were bigger and more imposing. They both wore body armour and carried guns.



Their boss strode past ShadowAspect and up to a darkened shop front. He gave a quiet knock. A few seconds later the door opened. All three men marched in.

6.17 ShadowAspect melted through a couple of walls and emerged in a small electronics shop that had been closed hours earlier. Heavy shutters hid what was happening inside.

The two men with guns lingered out of sight by the door. Their boss followed a woman dressed like a shop assistant to a door marked “Private”, then through a stockroom to a large bookcase covered in boxes set against the back wall.

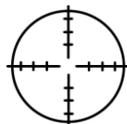
Slinking behind them, ShadowAspect had already seen seven tiny security cameras. They had all been turned off – apart from the one in the bookcase.

The bookcase swung open. They stepped inside and it shut behind them.

After waiting a few seconds, the heavy security door in front of them opened. The man made his way in alone and strode down a dimly lit corridor with impressionist paintings on the wall. Some were fake. Most were originals. The corridor opened out into a bright café with marble floor and walls.

A waiter with a Glock 17 holstered under his apron greeted him and showed him to a table under a skylight.

A glance around the room told the visitor that everyone there was armed – in one way or another. And they were all watching him.



6.18 One man sitting alone at his own table sipped his tea without looking up, his eyes fixed on the book he was reading. But the visitor knew he was watching every move made in the hidden café.

“Sit down,” the man at the table said – without so much as a glance in the visitor’s direction.

“Strange to see a man who spends his life hidden in plain sight is now just...hiding.”

“I like it here,” the man at the table replied. “It has a very exclusive feel. For most of the time, at least.”

The visitor gave a flat, humourless smile. He took a chair, placed it directly opposite the man at the table and sat down.

“The security cameras are an unusual touch for you,” he said.

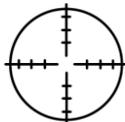
“I abhor technology, as you know. But it can have its uses.”

“I assumed you would have your waiters perform such a menial task.” The visitor leaned back in his chair and looked towards the bar. He surveyed the barman. “I am picturing the drink I desire in my mind’s eye right now. Let’s see how long it takes to arrive.”

The barman stood where he was, arms folded. Behind him, a bottle of Opus One removed itself from the rack, opened and poured into a glass. The bottle put itself back. The glass floated over to the table and set itself down.

The visitor applauded enthusiastically.

“The practical applications of what you people can do. Remarkable.”



6.19 The man at the table gazed at the visitor with contempt.

“I know you Gromas love to linger behind the scenes where no one can see you and revel in your genetic superiority,” the visitor said calmly. “But it makes you lazy and sloppy. I would take a well-trained ordinary, but talented human being any day of the week. You should spend more time in the real world.”

“You would not be in your position without people like us,” the Groma returned. “I would hate to see you lose everything you have built by starting a war with me.”

The visitor laughed.

“I would like to see you try. So far, your people have been as much use as your bartender’s little parlour trick. Our secret weapon in our war against the local criminal cooperative failed in spectacular fashion.” The visitor leaned forward. His jaw clenched. “And worst of all, your deficiencies and our defeat are soon to be made public – by a writer.”

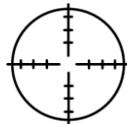
6.20 I slammed my laptop shut and bowed over in my chair, trying to suppress the urge to throw up. Two of the most dangerous men in the world, never mind just the UK, and I was their next topic of discussion.

I took a deep breath and read on.

“Jason Rybak,” the Groma said. “The second people start taking the content of his work more seriously, we will both be in trouble.”

“I attempted to have him killed,” the visitor replied. “As I know you did.”

The Groma scowled.



“But he has help,” the visitor continued. “I know nothing about this helper. None of my people have even seen his face. But their accounts suggest he belongs more in your world than mine.”

6.21 “Members of the security services are already beginning to suspect your existence and the work of your organisation,” the Groma said. He gave a sneering laugh. “Mondial. But they are unaware of mine and I need it to stay that way.”

“It is my understanding that there is a specialised agency dedicated to bringing you down.”

“Not for much longer,” the Groma replied. “As no one else knows about them, their demise won’t even make page eleven of the Evening Standard.” The Groma finished his tea, dabbed his mouth with a serviette and got to his feet. “I need the writer taken care of. In return, my people will provide assistance when you need it. I hope you gleaned everything you needed with this visit.”

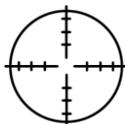
“I did,” the Groma smiled. “And Jason Rybak will be dead before his first book charting the exploits of your people hits the internet.”

6.22 The Groma nodded to the bartender. A file rose in the air from behind the bar. It flew across the room and dropped on the table in front of the visitor.

“What is this?” the visitor asked – without touching it.

“A retired detective who was asking a lot of questions.”

“About your people or mine?”



“Mine. They took care of him before he could cause any lasting damage. But there are rumours.”

“Concerning?”

“A file. Of evidence that he collected before his death. It has never been found. It is said to contain proof of my organisation’s activities and an accurate assessment of our goals.”

“This sounds like your problem,” the visitor shrugged.

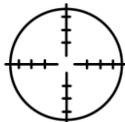
“If what I have heard is correct, it also contains evidence supporting his theory of a criminal organisation that trains teenagers as spies and killers.”

Silence. The visitor’s expression changed. He flicked through the file, then cleared his throat.

“I’ll look into it.”

“You should,” the Groma stated. “Jason Rybak is. And you do not want him locating the file before you do.” He moved towards a door behind him, then turned. “You can tell your snipers and armed response unit to stand down. Not that they would have been much use here anyway.”

6.23 I was in no hurry to go anywhere after reading all that and Six agreed that staying still is a good tactic sometimes. So Six spent his time sifting through the notes Silas had provided, looking for clues as to where retired detective Robert Gentry had hidden the file everyone was hunting. Like it or not, we were in a race to find it first.



Still, I took the chance to get some writing done. The view from some of the windows was the most inspiring I'd worked to in ages.

6.24 ShadowAspect had escaped the underground London café without being seen and visited a few other places that concerned Sarasin enough to send him there. A couple have already appeared in my books, some haven't. Seeing how many of them are on the brink of disaster or destruction, it was really more than I needed to know. I was in a load danger myself.

But I felt secure enough in our safe house.

Little did we know, someone had already found us.

THE END

