

Alex Rider Extract

He grabbed hold of what was left of the office chair and began to carry it upstairs. It weighed less without its back and arms and he could manage it easily. He still had no idea if he was going to find what he was looking for and even if he did, he hadn't worked out the angles, the distances. He was just hoping that Julius Grief had done the work for him. Julius had manufactured the key. He must have believed it was actually worth the effort.

They came to the first landing. The doors were locked here too but to Alex's immense relief the same key opened them just as he had thought. The first led into the governor's bedroom with a king-sized bed covered in a pink duvet. Next to it there was a bathroom, then a guest bedroom, then a laundry room.

"You have one minute!" The same voice echoed from outside. "Give yourselves up or we're coming in."

Alex ignored it. He found the door he was looking for at the very end of the corridor. It opened onto a short corridor with a narrow flight of stairs leading up to the second floor. Carrying the chair, Alex clambered up and found himself walking through a series of empty storage rooms, some of them with slanted ceilings that followed the line of the roof. Alex was sweating. He could feel his shirt sticking to his shoulders and back. The welts on his neck had gone down a little but they were still hurting.

"There has to be a trapdoor!" he said.

"It's here." Freddy had already found it but from the tone of his voice he was in no hurry, as if he was enjoying wandering around the governor's villa in what might be the final moments of his life.

"Then open it!"

The trapdoor was in a ceiling high above them, with a handle clearly visible but far out of their reach. Looking around him, Alex saw a pole with a hooked end, propped up in a corner. He snatched it and threw it to Freddy who used it to reach up and catch hold of the handle. Freddy pulled. The trapdoor swung downwards, releasing a flight of metal steps, a ladder that unfolded all the way down to the carpet. Looking up, they could see the dark shadows of an attic.

"Thirty seconds!" the voice warned.

Freddy had already begun climbing the ladder with the gun tucked into the waistband of his trousers. Alex pushed the office chair over to him and, holding it awkwardly between them, the two boys carried it up into a narrow, uneven space packed with old trunks and boxes. There was a single window in front of them and as Alex went over to it, a cobweb brushed against him, depositing itself over his face.

The window wasn't locked. Alex pushed it open and climbed out. Freddy passed him the office chair and followed.

They found themselves on a small, lead-lined platform, hidden from the ground below, with a chimney towering over them and two red-tiled roofs, one on either side. The roofs were shaped like two ticks in an exercise book. They sloped down steeply, then rose for just a couple of metres at the end. One of them faced the compound, but the other reached out towards the electrified fence and the wall that stood next to it. Alex worked out the distances. The edge of the roof finished at least five metres away from the double barrier. Much too far to jump. But if he could get over the fence and the wall, he might have a chance. There was a small wood made up of pine trees on the other side and the nearest of them had several branches stretching out towards him.

Reach the branches and they could climb down. They would be on the outside of the prison, away from the guards. But they would need extra propulsion to get over the two barriers. If they hit the wall, they would electrocute themselves first.

Far below, somewhere in the house, Alex heard the crash of breaking wood. The guards had charged the front door. They were in!

Freddy knew what they were going to do and the idea delighted him. He had manipulated the chair so that it was at the top of one of the roofs — a rocket on a launch pad. Kneeling down, he lowered his body so that his stomach was on the seat. There was hardly any space left for Alex but he somehow managed to do the same so that they were now lying next to each other, one arm around each other's shoulders, the other holding tight to the chair.

There were shouts, echoing up from the hallway. The stamp of heavy boots on the main staircase.

From Nightshade by Anthony Horowitz