

# Z-Rex

Steve Cole

Random House Children's Books

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Map

Subject File

0: Hunter

1: Reality

2: Destruction

3: Survival

4: Mystery

5: Fugitive

6: Monster

7: Encounter

8: Assault

9: Departure

10: Flight

11: Homecoming

12: Intruder

13: Pursuit

14: Contact

15: Slaughter

16: Falter

17: Lost

18: Carnage

19: Cells

20: Secrets

21: Opportunities

22: Battleground

23: Death-Duel

24: Ending

Also by Steve Cole

Copyright

## About the Book

*You're a thirteen-year-old-boy on the run.*

A massive, man-eating dinosaur is after you.

Evil scientists want you both dead.

There's only one way out. You and the monster have to work together ...

It sounds like the set-up for an incredible new video game. But for Adam, gaming fan and ordinary guy, it's real life. And if Adam can't sort it out, it's GAME OVER. For good.

# **Z. REX**

**STEVE COLE**

RED FOX

*For Mike and Karen*





SUBJECT FILE

PROPERTY OF GENEFLOW SOLUTIONS INC

Name: Adam Adlar  
Age: 13  
Hometown: Edinburgh,  
Scotland  
Hair: Dark brown  
Eyes: Brown  
Skin: White  
Height: 1.6 metres  
Weight: 49 kilograms  
Build: Slim  
Family: Mother - deceased  
Father - William Adlar,  
creator of Ultra-Reality gaming  
systems  
Likes: Pizza, chips  
Dislikes: Becoming a fugitive  
Hobbies: Gaming  
MSM, bike-riding



CONFIDENTIAL



SUBJECT FILE ENCRYPTED Z=A Y=B X=C

PROPERTY OF GENEFLOW SOLUTIONS INC



Mzmv: Avmrgshzfifh ivc  
(nvznh prmt lu ivkgrovh zg  
srh avmrgs)  
Pmldm zorzhvh: A- Ivc  
Xloifi: Wzip tivvm  
Hrav: Trtzmgrx  
Dvrtsg: Levi hrc glmh  
Hgzgfh: Zxgrev yfg tlmv  
iltfv  
Hkvxrzo hprooh:  
zyov gl xlevi olmt  
wrhgzmrvh zg tivzg hkvvw,  
hgvzogs nlwv, rmyfrog  
tfrwzmxv zmw klhrglarmt  
hbhgvn, svrtsgvww hvnhvh,  
hfkvi-rmgvoortvmxv



**CONFIDENTIAL**



## **0: Hunter**

THE CREATURE HAD no name. There was nothing like it on Earth.

But tonight it would show everyone what it could really do.

Massive and powerful, the creature smashed a path through the moonlit forest. It tore apart the brushwood, uprooting tall trees that had been standing for hundreds of years. Its night vision gave a blood-red tint to the shadow landscape.

It was hunting.

Supernatural senses had already pierced the skin of its prey, like great invisible fangs. The creature scented hot blood coursing through veins; heard the stroke of limbs brushing together; felt the currents in the air swirling round its victim. With every splintering stride the picture became clearer.

The hunting creature did not know why its target had been chosen for death this night. But killing was something it did exceptionally well.

There. In the forest clearing, in the darkness, its prey was hiding. Keeping stock-still.

As if that might save it.

A triumphant roar built in the hunter's throat. The undergrowth exploded around it as it flew like a living

missile towards its victim, baring gleaming, knife-point teeth ...

Less than a second later, the creature held its prey in its snapped-shut jaws.

Mission accomplished.

The perfect kill.

A small group of people were waiting, watching, wondering, as the creature returned. 'An impressive result,' said one onlooker softly. 'We're ready to move to the next phase.'

The creature sensed the fear and excitement mingling in its audience. It turned away, looking back into the forest - a forest that it might once have called home, far away and long ago.

Then the creature stalked over to the man who had spoken, looming over him. With a flick of its thick tongue, it spat the remains of its victim at his feet.

# 1: Reality

ADAM ADLAR KICKED DOWN the door and burst into the darkness beyond it. He paused for a moment, marvelling that he felt no pain in his foot, only a pleasing thrill of strength. Then a low growl sounded from the thick shadows ahead of him. Something large had been cooped up in here, something deadly. But Adam knew he could take it. He knew—

‘DIE, INTRUDER!’ A monstrous, twisted figure lunged at him from out of the shadows, its red eyes glinting, its terrifying claws scrabbling for his face. Adam hurled himself under the creature’s arms. With his head tucked down he hit the stone floor on his shoulder, his momentum carrying him into a perfect forward roll that left him back on his feet a moment later. Exulting in his power and agility, he whirled back round and landed a brutal karate chop to the monster’s side, cracking its ribs.

Ignoring the creature’s agonized scream, barely pausing for breath, Adam launched into his favourite fight-moves, which were now as natural to him as breathing: a stomp-kick followed by a jab-cross. He lashed out with his left foot, sending the creature staggering backwards, and followed up with right and left jabs in rapid succession, fists smacking into hard flesh. The monster wasn’t getting back up from that combo.

Every sense wired and buzzing, Adam charged onwards into the gloom and found another door. He booted it, feeling the jolt in his foot, but this time the door didn't open. He kicked again, and then again even harder, but the door wouldn't give an inch.

'Come on!' he yelled, frustration edging into fear as wet, scraping, slobbering noises started up behind him and the stench of rotten meat filled his nostrils. 'Dad, this isn't fair!' He spun back round, hoping to find another exit from the enemy's lair before it was too late. A low, gurgling chuckle carried from the dark. Taloned fingers closed round his throat, squeezed tighter, tighter. Adam felt a wave of nausea, a rush of oncoming darkness—

GAME OVER.

And Adam was back on the couch in the testing lab, soaked with sweat and panting for breath, half terrified, half ecstatic. Exiting *Ultra-Reality* was more like waking from a vivid, incredible dream than quitting a game. For a moment he wasn't sure which was reality, this windowless industrial unit in New Mexico or the dark, digital lair he'd left behind. But as his racing heart slowed Adam took in the *Ultra-Reality* console - its staring green bulb extinguished now - and his dad standing over him, carefully pulling the heavy headset from his temples and the sensor pads from his fists and feet.

'Wow,' said Adam groggily. 'That was awesome, the realest ever. You're a genius, Dad.'

'C'mon now, take it easy,' Mr Adlar soothed him in his warm Midwestern accent. 'Get your breath back.'

'You are, though.' Adam wasn't just being loyal; when the bugs were fixed, he knew that *U-R* would be the ultimate gaming experience. The console turned thoughts into computer commands, and game codes into things you could feel. Instead of using a controller or waving your arms, you could just *think* what you wanted a character to do, really become the hero. In an instant, Adam could go

from a skinny, dark-haired Edinburgh teen to a blond, muscular monster-slayer, surrounded by admiring girls and sidekicks. And thanks to the sensor pads you could even feel an impression of the impact of blows and footfalls. *Ultra-Reality* lived up to its name, and completely drew you in.

‘I was following your gameplay on screen.’ His dad looked concerned. ‘What happened with that door you couldn’t open?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Adam. ‘Was it me? Did your favourite test subject mess up?’

‘My *only* test subject,’ Dad reminded him evenly. ‘The Think-Send technology—’

‘Copyright and trademark, Bill Adlar.’

‘—was modelled on your brainwaves. Right now, the game wouldn’t work at all with anyone else playing it.’

Adam watched his father’s forehead furrow into deep, familiar creases. He remembered that when Mum was still around, his dad seemed always to be smiling. Each new triumph had sent him dancing around the room, playing air guitar till his glasses fell off. Although born in Michigan, he’d gone to Edinburgh to do his post-doctorate in computer science and fallen in love with the place – and with Adam’s mum. They’d started a family there, Mr Adlar had a nice income from dozens of patents, and life must have seemed pretty good.

*That was then and this is now*, Adam thought. Mum had died four years ago, and Dad had thrown himself ever further into his work perfecting *Ultra-Reality*. But developing a new games system wasn’t cheap, especially one as groundbreaking as *U-R*. And since the really big players had passed on it – ‘too ambitious’, they’d said – Mr Adlar had been forced to work with smaller companies. So far, these firms had always run out of funding before he could deliver the goods, and Adam had watched his dad grow greyer and gaunter with each setback.

'I dunno ...' Adam shrugged. 'Maybe I didn't imagine what I wanted to do hard enough?'

Mr Adlar shook his head. 'I'll go through the command translator log, see if any glitches jump out at me.'

'Do you think you'll be finished before we have to get back to Edinburgh?' Adam smiled. 'I mean, if it's any help, I don't mind missing the start of school ...'

'We've only got the lease on the apartment till the third week of August,' Mr Adlar murmured. 'Frankly, I doubt I'll still be here by then. There was a lot riding on today's test. If it's back to the drawing board ...' He forced a smile. 'Aw, what the hell, it's not the end of the world. I have other irons in the fire.'

Adam raised his eyebrows. 'You mean another company's interested in taking on *Ultra-Reality*?'

His dad hesitated. 'Well, in developing some of the key technology, anyway. It's a research centre called Fort Ponil - someone I used to work with got in touch. They're fairly local, based outside Los Alamos. We're meeting this evening with a couple of suits to discuss it.'

'Oh, right.' Adam couldn't hide his disappointment. 'So, I've got microwave pizza for one *again* tonight, huh?'

'Sorry.' Mr Adlar ruffled Adam's hair. 'But you know, it won't be for ever.'

Adam was soon outside on his bike in the afternoon glare, pedalling away from the ugly, steel warehouse unit. The asphalt roads shimmered in the heat like dark canals as he made his way back to the apartment, in a soulless, purpose-built modern block just outside the gates to the industrial park. Black Mesa, the vast, flat-topped mountain that straddled three states, loomed darkly over the arid plains beyond the chain-link fences.

The whole high-tech development felt out of place here in the epic wilderness beyond Santa Fe. Most of the buildings in these parts looked old even if they weren't.



He'd even seen petrol stations disguised as ancient Native American monuments, trying to blend in. It felt wrong, somehow, to see industry here on show in all its sharp-angled sleekness. Adam felt a twinge of longing for the rainy skies and blackened sandstone of Scotland - followed immediately by the fear that he might be flying back there alone. He was thirteen now, not a kid, and Dad had made mutterings in the past about sending him to boarding school or to distant relatives in England. Neither option appealed much to Adam, but what could he do? He never had much say in what Dad did.

He gritted his teeth and pedalled faster. Sometimes he wished he could just disappear into a virtual world, where he won all the fights, and just stay there.

Adam spent the night eating pizza and riffling through a bunch of new games for his Xbox. Five weeks here and he still wasn't comfortable. The second-floor apartment was more like a show-home than somewhere you'd actually live. Lacking in furniture as well as charm, it felt hollow, impersonal. No one else lived in the building, so when Dad was away the loneliness was overwhelming.

Mr Adlar finally made it back after midnight. Adam could tell at once that something interesting had gone down. His dad seemed distracted, a bundle of nervous energy, but he was trying not to show it. That had to mean he was hopeful - Adam knew his dad's moods better than he knew his own.

'So, how'd it go?' asked Adam, switching off the TV.

'Not much to tell at this stage,' Mr Adlar said cagily, perching on the edge of the sofa. 'But there could be. They're doing amazing things, things you wouldn't believe ...' He drummed his fingers on the arm of the sofa. 'The organization's bigger than I thought. They've got facilities all over the world - including one somewhere around Edinburgh.'

'Yeah?' Adam perked up. 'Sounds perfect!'

'Not exactly. First, I need to find out more about ... the project.' He looked at Adam. 'You can look after yourself, right, Ad? If I have to leave you on your own for a bit?'

*Here we go*, thought Adam. 'Why?'

'I've arranged a leave of absence with my current partners - 'cause if I want to secure a place with these guys, I've got to stay at Fort Ponil for a couple of nights. Work on some top-secret stuff. Show how indispensable I can be.'

*If it means we can both stay in Edinburgh, I'll put up with anything*, thought Adam. 'Look, I'm used to your work keeping you tied up for days. I can handle it. I'm big enough.'

'And ugly enough,' his dad agreed.

Adam grinned. 'Plus, it means I can stay up as late as I like. Bring it on!'

'Bring it on ... Right.' Mr Adlar stared into space. 'Thanks, Adam. It'll only be for two or three days, tops.'

Mr Adlar left the next morning in a big black Cadillac sent to collect him. Adam put on a brave face, horsed around, waved his father off. But he didn't like the look of the car. As it pulled away down the quiet, dust-blown street it reminded him of a hearse.

The sedan disappeared with his dad into the distant mountains, which were glowing blood-red in the morning sun.

## 2: Destruction

'DAD!' ADAM WOKE up from the nightmare, shouting for his father. Then he remembered how things were, and let his head fall back against the pillow. No sense in wasting his breath.

'Day nine on my own,' he muttered.

Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he padded through the darkened apartment to Dad's room, unable to resist checking. *Maybe he came back in the night*, Adam thought. *Maybe this time—*

The door stood wide open. The bed was empty and unmade. A brown leather briefcase lay where he'd kicked it the night before.

Nothing had changed. Dad still wasn't back.

Adam went back to his bedroom to work out his next move. It would probably involve playing his Xbox. He hadn't done much else since Dad had disappeared. He checked the clock. It was five a.m. He must have dozed off around one-thirty, still in his jeans and T-shirt. The High Scores league table filled the widescreen, his name alone listed again and again.

Adam knew his mates back home in Scotland would be jealous of the life he'd been living - his own place, own space, a cookie jar full of cash, an endless supply of delivery food, no nags or hassles or 'Time for bed's ... But right now, he was sick of freedom.