

Ctrl+Z

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Ctrl+Z

by [Oceanbreeze7](#)

Summary

Yassen Gregorovich died in front of him, smiling and pale and bleeding out and then-*Reset*.

“Whoa mate!” Tom said, still riding the high of Alex’s sudden success. “You alright-.”

“No, I’m not.” Alex said. “Sit, watch the bird poop.”

“I’m resetting in time.” Alex said quickly, “yes, like Groundhog day. But it’s not. That’s how I got the quiz perfectly. I’m resetting in time randomly and I can’t control it and it’s just like a movie script. You told me to tell you that you got a 77 on Mrs. Blackey’s test.”

Tom’s eyes grew, staring at Alex quietly with a bit of wonder. “You’re....resetting?”

“Yes. It’s- *I’m going insane-*.”

Chapter 1

“Alex...”

Alex didn’t have enough strength left to be surprised. He turned his head slowly, the wrecked cabin swishing slightly in a haze of dizziness. He expected to see a gun in the Russian’s hand. It didn’t seem fair, that after all that chaos and madness he was to die *now*, having survived so long. Yassen had propped himself up against a table, or something that may have been one. He was covered in blood, coated in it so thoroughly Alex couldn’t tell where it was coming from. His memory reminded him of the sharp *bang* of Cray’s gun firing, and the strange sluggish flinch indicating Yassen *had* been shot. Logic said that it was his chest, there was too much blood to be anything else.

Yassen’s skin was pale, paler than usual and his eyes were glassy and washed out. Alex noticed for the first time, that there was a dull angry scar straight across Yassen’s throat. It was hard to see under the steadily pooling blood, only the crinkled edges stood out.

“Please...” Yassen’s voice was soft.

Alex didn’t want to, but he slowly crawled his way through the wreckage of the cabin and over to the man. Upturned seats and crushed metal protruded down around them like morbid stalactites. Alex felt his brain spin, his eyes struggling to focus. He felt like he had a concussion.

“What happened to Cray?” Yassen asked him.

“He went off his trolley,” Alex said, noticing the way Yassen’s head slumped back exhausted, “he’s very dead.”

Yassen nodded, pleased. “I knew it was a mistake working for him, I knew.” He fought for breath and narrowed his eyes, managing surprisingly well to remain composed. “There is something I want to tell you, Alex.”

Alex stared at him, unsure and hesitant. His neck was wet, his arm as well. He hadn’t been shot but some sort of flying wreckage had sheared off a good bit of skin and left him bleeding sluggishly.

“Why now?” Alex asked, knowing that, if anything, Yassen Gregorovich had only minutes left to live.

“Why not?” Yassen said, smiling slightly as Alex came closer still to hear his words better. “You won’t remember, and I want to know.”

“What?”

“I couldn’t kill you,” Yassen said, “I knew your father. We worked together.”

Alex froze, so close he could feel the blood soaking into his pants and see each heaving breath Yassen struggled for. “He worked with you? You mean....he was a spy?”

Yassen looked amused, tired, and low on time. “No, he was a killer. The best in the world. I knew him when I was nineteen.”

“What?” Alex said, only able to repeat numbly. “No, no he *couldn’t*...”

Yassen sighed, almost sad. “You always believe that, little Alex.”

He slumped forward slightly. They were so close that Yassen’s forehead bumped against Alex’s neck, rolling to his shoulder. It rested there, where Alex could feel the man’s wet breath and feel his weakening heartbeat. Blood spilled over blood, and Alex had not the heart to push away a dying man even when he couldn’t tell whose blood was whose. It stung, where Yassen’s forehead pressed into the weeping gouge in Alex’s shoulder, but the proximity alerted Alex to the Russian’s breathy whisper of “...maybe next time.”

There were sirens outside, and then-

(Reset.)

Alex flinched, knowing that if he had been standing, he would have fallen from the sudden shift in reality.

There was tea in front of him, sitting on a tiny dainty saucer steaming the pleasant smell of Earl Grey. Behind, over the railing of an artful terrace, Alex spotted the high peaks of a replica Eiffel Tower, the tall columns of the Colosseum in Rome. The Taj Mahal hid the sun behind it’s one hundredth the size of its larger namesake.

“Wha-.” Alex said, before he choked off his words and stared at his tea numbly.

“What was that?” Cray asked, “what do you think of it?”

Cray was standing next to him. Alex had *vividly* remembered the engine exploding, the scream of metal as the plane had flipped and turned everything around. Cray had exploded like liquified ground pork, splattering on the side of the plane like cheap spray paint. He was now standing next to Alex, observing a garden Alex had seen hours ago.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” Cray said, looking out fondly. They all looked like an insane miniature golf course, one that Alex thought he could fight his way through if necessary.

Alex looked slowly at his hands. His fingers were clean, unstained. No blood or burning in his arm.

He shakily picked up his tea and took a sip.

“Nothing?” Cray seemed disappointed, almost annoyed that Alex had nothing to say about his garden. “A shame.”

A shame like Cray riding his cart going out an inflated slide, then being sucked into a turbine and *exploding*.

It got worse, because more joined them.

Alex stared, feeling a little bit like laughing as Sabina ran over to him and threw her arms around his neck.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, “I should have believed you.”

He stared at her, unable to shake the twisting knot in his stomach that told him that this was all very wrong.

He sat, sipping his tea. It burned his throat, burned down into his stomach. He didn’t even like the taste of it that much, but he was afraid that the moment he stopped sipping he’d vomit violently on the nice paving.

“Well, here we all are,” Cray said happily, just as Alex knew he would. “One happy family.”

‘‘I don’t think you’ve met-.’

“I don’t think you’ve met Henryk,” Cray said, just as Alex remembered.

Alex gulped his tea.

“Oh, so quiet now,” Cray said, mocking and now off script. “You mustn’t be a bad loser, Alex. Henryk is very valuable to me, you’ll see. He flies jumbo jets.”

“So where is he flying you?” Alex said, feeling robotic and a bit sick. Cray smiled to himself, and said- “We’ll come to that in a moment. In the meantime, shall I be mother? It’s Earl Grey; I hope you don’t mind. And do help yourself to a biscuit.”

Cray refilled Alex’s tea. It was even hotter than before. Alex could feel his tongue blister, trying to chase away the sour taste in the back of his throat.

Alex bravely looked to his side. Past Sabina who was pale and clearly terrified. Yassen Gregorovich- *alive and unblinking*, sat calmly in his chair.

Alex nearly did a double take just to check; Yassen looked more comfortable than what Alex remembered. Or what he dreamed, or hallucinated- was the tea drugged?

“We have an hour before we have to leave, so I thought I might tell you a little about myself. I thought it might pass the time.”

Cray talked.

Exactly as Alex remembered.

The same speech, the same monologue. The same pauses, the smiles, the ugly sneer and face. Alex sipped his tea quietly, feeling faint.

Yassen looked at him, almost concerned. Alex didn't feel like talking.

Sabina was taking it well, sitting rigidly in her chair with her tea ignored. There was absolutely no colour in her face, but that didn't mean much since Alex was sure he was quite white as well. With Yassen's natural complexion, it was a tea party of ghosts.

Or a tea party of dead men, which Cray, Yassen, and Henryk were.

Cray finally stopped talking, and Alex hadn't heard any of it. The man pulled a biscuit, eating it contently as Sabina vibrated in withheld fury. She wouldn't attack him, not with Yassen so close.

"I..." Alex paused, clearing his throat in the small gap provided, "I have a couple of questions."

"Do, please, go ahead."

"My..." Alex trailed off slightly, "my first one is for Yassen Gregorovich."

'Why are you working for this lunatic?' Alex thought, and then violently threw that same question aside. "How much is he paying you?"

Yassen stared at Alex, unreadable. He didn't look uncomfortable, but there was something in his eyes that felt much darker than before- than he remembered? Something cold and sharp and predatory that felt...wrong.

Cray scowled, but did nothing. He flapped one hand, signalling for Yassen to answer.

Yassen paused, then he said simply, "not enough."

A squawk, and Cray looked absolutely furious before he spun, turning on Yassen. "*Excuse me?*"

"You agreed to pay half upfront." Yassen said, eyes unblinking and still on Alex. Cray was not a threat to this man, or he had no cares anymore. Henryk looked very very uncomfortable. "You failed to provide sufficient funds."

"I- I *did!* I paid you precisely the amount arranged..."

"...I do not believe so." Yassen said, finally looking at Cray. The man was flushed in raw fury, anger. Blood churning under his skin and filling his cheeks. "The situation has changed."

Alex felt something whistle in his ears, the faintest bit of memory. When he first met Yassen, he had the same look. The same expression that had shifted his face, the darkness in his eyes.

Then, he had shot Sayle and left him for dead and departed in a helicopter.

“The situation has *not* changed-.”

“The objective has changed.” Yassen said smoothly and calmly. Acting on orders that were *not there before*-.

Sabina screamed, hands flashing to her mouth as Yassen pulled a gun and shot Cray in the face. The back of his head exploded, showering Alex in gore and brain and bits of skull that rained in his hair and into his tea. He stared numbly forward, knowing that he was shaking.

Yassen looked at Henryk; Henryk slumped to the ground in a dead faint.

Things rapidly deteriorated from there. Chaotic in a flurry and contrasting directly with the still bright image of an engine exploding and Yassen blue eyes fading to silver. It seemed unreal, how Alex had felt the man against his shoulder and now he stood clearing out the other hired guards and carefully redirected attention from Cray’s corpse.

“Alex...” Sabina whispered, terrified. Alex said nothing, because somewhere along the way she didn’t feel any more real to him than Yassen felt redirecting a maid.

Sabina was...she had learned about the fate of her parents, but she hadn’t been on the plane with him. They hadn’t *been* on a plane. Sabina he knew had screamed and tackled Cray and stopped him from shooting Alex during takeoff. This Sabina had paled and flinched while having tea. An entire arc of epiphany...gone. It felt very fake, very wrong and unsettling to try and comfort her in a garden filled with fake buildings and structures; Alex was surrounded by a mockery.

“I’m leaving.” Yassen said, approaching them again. He looked so unassuming without the stiff neck body armor Alex had seen once before. He stared at Alex, sharp and curious but not saying so in words.

Sabina clung to Alex’s arm, still terrified. The entire ordeal had been quite a bit for her.

“Your glue,” Yassen said, flicking his wrist only so far, just enough to toss to Alex a heavily glued thumbstick. More coated and ruined than he had originally damaged. Yassen had damaged it more, for reasons beyond Alex’s understanding.

Alex wanted to argue, to demand answers to questions but he didn’t know if his questions were even *real*. If he had been drugged, then it would be nothing more than...his overactive imagination claiming that his *father* had been an *assassin*. Ian was ...already a stretch, twisting his frayed nerves but ...why would he have thought that up on his own?

Everything felt so real, and as Yassen turned to walk away out of sight, Alex wasn’t sure that he had woken up at all.

Nothing felt real. Everything felt distant, not entirely there. Something wrong or just flat of what it should actually be. On the plane ride back (already he miraculously ‘had’ a ticket), he kept doubting that he had even woken up at all.

What had Yassen meant? That his *father* had trained him? That implied that either Yassen Gregorovich had once worked outside of an assassin agency and then was recruited, or in some way Alex's *father* had worked for a terrorist organization. The idea of either option was sickening, so much that Alex had quietly requested a complementary puke-bag on the flight.

Two weeks had gone by and Alex was still waking up in the middle of the night, choking back a scream and scrambling across his face. The sensation of sweat was too similar to blood, his clammy skin looked too much like the pale shade Yassen had before he went limp. Yassen must have been lying, or Alex's brain was finally cracking under all of the stress. Alex wanted to believe it, but he had looked and saw Yassen *dying* and why would a dying man lie?

There were Yassen's words as well, the strange confused phrasing that left Alex scrambling to process. Had he meant that Alex would forget the incident? That Alex would somehow die shortly after? Did he mean that Alex would ignore the conversation and Yassen's words entirely? If that was the case then why would he have bothered to say them to begin with? Why would Alex *hallucinate that?*

Two weeks, and Alex was sitting calmly on a bench observing the Thames, just outside Richmond. Just outside London, with the illusion that he had gone somewhere much further than that. He could see fields and woodlands, distant lush green and he entertained the dazed thought of walking towards the forest and forgetting everything and anything behind him.

The swans were quite beautiful, but they were white and every moment Alex saw one flap their large wings, he kept seeing the ghastly pallor of Yassen's face behind his eyelids.

A shadow fell across the bench. Alex caught the eye of his new company and instantly preferred the swans. The anxiety in his stomach tightened, tugging him even closer to losing his lunch. Mrs. Jones stood next to him, taking a pause before she too glanced at the swans circling in the river.

"Beautiful," she said. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"You already have," Alex said.

She sat down next to him, carefully adjusting her silk trousers on the bench. The swans glanced over before they investigated a small bed of floating algae. Alex heard that swans had very sharp teeth.

"Have you been following me?" Alex asked. "I thought I did everything right."

"You did. Your friend, Starbright, told me you'd be here."

Alex had said he was meeting someone. He didn't like to lie to Jack but he wanted time on his own to think. He didn't want to deal with MI6.

"You should have reported to Liverpool Street-."

“There’s no point.” Alex said. There wasn’t. He did everything perfectly. He threw Cray into a moving airplane, he survived the crash. He watched Yassen Gregorovich die. He watched Cray be shot through the head. Eagle Strike was avoided.

“I know you don’t want to talk to me, Alex. Will you please listen?”

Alex watched the swans, and nodded slightly.

“It’s true that we didn’t believe you when you came to us- and of course we were wrong. We were stupid. It just seemed so incredible that a man like Damian Cray could be a threat to national security. He was rich and he was eccentric; nevertheless, he was only a pop star with attitude. That was what we thought. But if you think we ignored you completely, Alex, you were wrong. Alan and I have different ideas about you. To be honest, if it had been my choice, we would never have gotten you involved.”

She kept talking. On and on, about Hyde Park, about Alex’s bicycle. She talked about Sabina disappearing at Whitchurch Hospital, and she talked about reports that Cray had been killed.

“What about Air Force One?” Alex said, “wouldn’t the CIA...”

Mrs. Jones paused, then looked at Alex with slight anxiety. “Well, the CIA found the jet and-.”

“Oh,” Alex said. The jet hadn’t taken off. Henryk hadn’t piloted the jet, which meant that Cray had been found with a bullet through his skull. Not as mincemeat.

“Jack is worried about you, Alex. So am I. It may be that you need help coming to terms with what happened. Maybe some sort of therapy.”

“I don’t want therapy. I just want to be left alone.”

“Alex, you witnessed a man be shot in front of you-.”

“I didn’t.” Alex said, “I pushed him out of the jet, and he fell into the engine. I watched him get tore up and splattered and I watched Yassen Gregorovich *die* and-.”

A shadow fell across the bench. Alex froze, curling his hands into fists across his thigh. The swans circled each other, considering moving to the floating algae. The anxiety in his stomach broke, his mouth soured with stomach acid and he forced it down with quick swallows.. Mrs. Jones stood next to him, taking a pause before she too glanced at the swans circling in the river.

“Beautiful,” she said again. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“You already have,” Alex said *again*.

She took it as an invitation, settling herself down again. And they had the same conversation. Again.

He met Sabina after the same words and play. He wished that he could argue more over her leaving, but somehow the tears in her eyes felt wrong and fake and he knew it was no fault of hers. She was upset, traumatized, but she wasn't *his* Sabina. She hadn't been on the plane with him, she hadn't been the one that saved his life. She was just a girl he came to rescue and in the end needed rescuing. He watched her walk out of his life, and wondered if he should be more upset over it happening.

He turned and followed the river, back along the bank into the city. He wanted comfort of something he knew, gentle love and affection wrapped up in fish and chips sold on the corner stores. The sight of Big Ben the appropriate size, not a tiny chess piece in a garden of *wrong*.

Yassen Gregorovich was still alive, Mrs. Jones had apologized for sending him and Sabina into that chaos. Sabina was now gone, and Alex was stuck in place with the realization that not once, but now *twice* he had jumped and remembered something that shouldn't happen.

He was exhausted, and he knew it showed. Jack couldn't keep all the worry off her face, even as she teased and poked fun at his scraped knees or the fluffy goose feather stuck to his shoe laces. He was quiet, because he didn't know who to tell or what to say. Was it even *real*? Was any of it real?

He went to bed, curled in blankets that were far too thick for the muggy British heat. It wasn't comfortable, but the weight helped. He thought that Jack read in one of her magazines how the weight was greater for overworked senses. He didn't know if a glitching imagination worked the same. Hours, until the glowing numbers on his clock changed steadily and the vaguest washes of sleep started to pull on his-

It was just after eleven at night when Alex sprang out of bed and hurried downstairs. He brushed past Jack, going straight to the sink while fishing a glass from the pantry.

“Alex?” Jack said, hurrying to her feet. She stayed up a bit later, reading under the lamp in the front foyer before going up to bed. “Alex? Did you forget something?”

“Couldn't sleep.” Alex said, gulping water like he had gone a day without. Jack pressed the back of her hand to his forehead, attempting to feel a fever.

“You didn't try for long,” Jack said, “you've only been up for maybe twenty minutes. You're not even warm.”

Alex stared forward blankly. He ignored her, and turned on the tap again.

He slept more than he thought he would, enough he felt like a live wire when morning came and birds screamed outside his window. Double the normal time he normally slept for, but was it sleep if it was only a dream? A hazy memory of something that hadn't happened?

Alex wasn't used to this sort of easy relaxation in his body. The dumb that came after sleeping so long when he had gone long without. He felt hazy with it, like it was a long weekend or he had taken a nap outside when Tom dragged him to another one of his practices. He didn't mind it, for once he didn't sleep through a class. Alex was forever behind in all his course work- being yanked away from lessons tended to do that and the principal wasn't very accommodating for child soldiers.

"Aw shite," Tom bemoaned sitting behind him. Alex heard the accompanying thump as his head hit the desk. A surprise quiz wasn't kind on anyone, even Alex knew he was going to fail a surprise test on biology.

"This is going to be rough," Tom grimaced, slouched forward as Alex felt the accompanying dread fill him. "Oh shite, you were out with that pneumonia right? Reckon you can get an extension?"

"No, probably not." Alex said, feeling dread fill his gut as the papers were passed back.
"We're in this together."

"Bloody right we are." Tom muttered, cursing quietly as Alex passed back the quiz. Alex stared at the entire test, twelve questions. He didn't know a single one. He didn't bother trying to answer something he didn't know- instead he started to doodle a rough drawing of a squirrel. They would likely pass the tests backwards to grade, maybe Tom would laugh at his drawing. After a small pause, he added sunglasses to the squirrel.

They passed the tests backwards, saw the answers on the board, and graded accordingly. Tom gave him a sympathetic pat as he carefully used a red crayon to mark a bold *0/12* on the top of the paper. He drew a heart next to the squirrel.

"That was the bloody worst." Tom bemoaned, scoring a few points better than him. "I hate when teachers make the ruddy answers in a pattern. Psychs you out, why would it be like that?"

"To throw idiots like you off your game." Alex teased. "You know, like a jerk."

"Jerks are right! Who even cares about genes and biology and shite. Punnett squares! Bah, I don't care about coloured pea flowers!"

"Never know when it'll be important. You know how quality genes are important in football."

"I don't and after that quiz, I'll never be able to look at genes again!"

"A shame," Alex said, "those jeans really denim in."

Tom looked at him with an expression of amusement and suffering. "Damn mate, glad to have you back. You've been a bit off recently, twitchy for a while. You okay?"

Alex paused, considering.

"No." Alex said. "I'm not okay."

Tom nodded, grabbing his arm and redirecting him out the side doors into the faculty parking lot. Nobody went out this way, not with how muggy the days were and the swarms of loud seagulls.

“Alright, lay it on me.” Tom said, climbing up a bench to sit on the backrest like a gangly bird in a school uniform. Alex took the more realistic seat, mindful of the bird poop. “What’s got you in a twist?”

“I’m not in a twist-.”

“An *emotional* twist. You’re like a bloody pretzel, come on. Pneumonia got your tongue?”

Alex smiled, and looked down at the ground. He thought about it, and he thought. He trusted Tom with his life, with *so much*, and there was only so much time and he didn’t know what was going on.

“What would you say...” Alex said slowly, “if I said I’m...in a time loop.”

Tom blinked, clearly not anticipating that sort of answer. “A time loop? Like that movie ah, woodchuck? No, uh...Groundhog? Groundhog day?”

“Yes,” he paused, “no. It’s...random. Like a rewind. Randomly...rewinding.”

Tom frowned, skeptic. “Right. And that’s why you bloody blew that pop quiz. If you aced it, well, *maybe* I would have believed that. Mate, that’s...movie script.”

“It’s true.” Alex said quietly, fiddling with his shirt. “I think I’m going crazy.”

Tom sighed, flopping down off of the bench back before he was sitting down right next to Alex, ignoring the bird poop entirely. “You’re *not* going crazy. Maybe you’ve still got a fever or...”

“Tom, I can’t control it. It just ...”

“Okay, okay so let’s say you *can* rewind. When did it first happen?”

“A man died next to me and then I blinked and he was alive again.”

Alex pointedly looked down at the ground, refusing to look at Tom’s equally horrified and confused face. It was a hard story to swallow, and Alex didn’t have any evidence. There was no proof to his story, even when it was real in a strange way. Tom didn’t know about MI6, about all of the missions and drama and Alex wasn’t ready to unload the bombshell of Yassen Gregorovich on him. Tom already had enough stress, he didn’t need to panic and get that fear that Jack felt every time he didn’t come home.

“Er...” Tom paused, and clearly had no idea where else to go.

“Tell me something I wouldn’t know otherwise.” Alex blurted. “In case I rewind. So I can convince you later.”

Tom looked a bit uncomfortable. They always said that when people hallucinate, not to entertain the hallucinations. Alex wondered if that was why Tom was struggling so much with what to do.

“Uh...” Tom said, scratching the back of his neck, “when you were gone, I got a 77 on Mrs. Blackey’s test? The one on Algebra or something?”

“Okay,” Alex agreed, “I can remember-”

Alex looked at his pencil, half done doodling a squirrel.

He looked at the pop quiz, and answered every question exactly as he knew the answers were. Poor Tom, his grade wouldn’t improve.

They passed back the test, and Alex felt numb as he corrected his classmate’s quiz that got the same score. The longer they graded the more Alex could feel Tom’s sheer confusion in how Alex got every question proper despite being gone and having just mentioned he didn’t know.

They left the room, Tom laughing about Alex’s sheer insane luck and guessing abilities. He grabbed Tom’s forearm, pulling him out into the faculty parking lot.

“Whoa mate!” Tom said, still riding the high of Alex’s sudden success. “You alright-.”

“No, I’m not.” Alex said. “Sit, watch the bird poop.”

Tom sat, looking more and more perplexed.

“I’m resetting in time.” Alex said quickly, “yes, like Groundhog day. But it’s not. That’s how I got the quiz perfectly. I’m resetting in time randomly and I can’t control it and it’s just like a movie script. You told me to tell you that you got a 77 on Mrs. Blackey’s test.”

Tom’s eyes grew, staring at Alex quietly with a bit of wonder. “You’re....resetting?”

“Yes. It’s- I’m going insane-.”

“And you can’t *control* it? It just...happens?”

Alex nodded, running his hands through his hair, down his face. Pressing sharp into his eyes to try and stave off the tears he felt prickling.

“Okay, have you *tried* controlling it?” Tom said, voice warbling unsure with just how surreal it all was. “Like...a...superpower?”

Alex looked at Tom, and confessed like the idiot he was, “...no.”

They skipped Tom's practice, instead heading out to an old football field that had been under renovation since the goal post had fallen in a storm a year back. The grass was long, the marking paint had long since been washed away but it was a nice flat area to set about and strip off their necessary school uniforms to lay in their blank shirts under the sun.

"Okay so uh, how do we test this?" Tom said, clearly not entirely believing Alex but a good enough friend to indulge in his apparent ridiculousness.

"I don't know?" Alex said, feeling a bit of stress and tension come back. "It just happened when I was sleeping, so I got a *lot* of sleep. And then during the quiz so I knew the answers-."

"You're a bloody cheat." Tom cursed, "okay, fine. Randomly yeah? Well uh, let's play trivia and kick a ball for a bit and maybe it'll happen? Then you answer the trivia?"

"I don't know, maybe? It could be like a muscle that only happens when...I'm stressed? But it happened when I was sleeping..."

"Well!" Tom said, standing and stretching, "*I'm* going to kick a ball for a bit. I'm skipping practice for you, you prick. Best you can do is help me with aim."

They played, shouting random bits of trivia that they both didn't know or Tom pulled up on his phone. Random things, like the melting point of bronze, or how many quills were on a porcupine.

"Take a seat, mate!" Tom howled, laughing as Alex tripped into a groundhog hole which isn't ironic in the slightest. He flopped on his belly, moaning about the injustice of large rodents as Tom tried to bounce the ball off his head.

"This is fun," Tom teased, "it's been a while since we had a moment."

"I'm remembering why I tried to avoid your blasted practices." Alex moaned into the grass, unable to stop smiling. "Stay there, I'm going to try meditating."

"Get it Rider!" Tom whooped happily, "get that zen! Open your chakra! Do Pilates!"

Alex closed his eyes, flipped Tom off, and breathed.

'Reset' he thought, trying to relax his muscles and his mind. 'Reset. Reset-.'

The sun was nice, the smell of grass was strong and his chin itched a bit from where the weeds had scraped by in his downwards spiral. Tom was shouting victoriously a short ways away, managing to break his record from head spiking the ball up and up.

Alex was relaxed, happy for once. He didn't feel that pressing heavy weight that left him screaming from nightmares. He felt warm and happy and *there-*.

'Okay, I'm ready.' Alex thought contently. 'Reset.'

Alex blinked, stumbling a bit from where he was walking, further down the field.

“-nd a porcupine apparently has-.”

“*Thirty-Thousand!*” Alex shrieked, voice cracking from the suddenness of his voice.

Tom cursed, fumbling and dropping his phone. The ball rolled away, and Tom stared at Alex in absolute mystifying awe.

“No bloody way.” Tom said, gaping. “No *bloody way*. You’re from the future? You’re from the *goddamn future*? ”

Alex laughed, bright and delighted and keenly aware of the groundhog hole up ahead. “Mate, you break your headbutt record.”

“Yes!” Tom cheered in delight, “how far? Twenty minutes? Ten?”

“Maybe a half hour? It’s like going cross eyed, that little buzz in your head.”

Tom grinned, looking a bit excited. “This is *so cool*. Can you do it again?”

Alex *could* do it again. He did it, resetting back a short way that slowly became smaller and smaller increments. What had been half an hour reset to twenty minutes. Then ten. By the time Tom was hungry for dinner, it had been nearly four hours for Alex and a fraction of that time for Tom.

“This is so bloody cool.” Tom was buzzing with excitement, “it’s like your superpower. Mate, you’re going to be the god of pop quizzes now.”

“I still don’t know why this is *happening*. It just... *did*. ”

Tom looked a bit focused, kicking the ball ahead of them as they slowly made their way to Alex’s house. Jack was in the kitchen, not alarmed that it had been so late in the day when Alex came home. She poked her head out, looking relieved beyond words that Tom was there accompanying him.

“Oh, hello!” Jack chirped, diving back into whatever pasta mess she was attempting. “You dragged him away after school?”

“Not hard to!” Tom shouted back, flopping backwards on the couch and relishing in the cool delight of air conditioning. “Jack! Alex can rewind time!”

“Not subtle,” Alex muttered sourly. Pausing and exhaling carefully.

‘Reset.’

“Not hard to!” Tom shouted back, flopping backwards on the couch. Alex followed over, slapping one hand over Tom’s mouth the moment he started to say a word. Tom rolled his eyes, still looking delighted but a bit peeved. Alex grimaced as Tom went so far as to lick his palm.

“Thanks for it!” Jack shouted back, appearing from the kitchen with freshly washed hands. She came over, dropping in the nearby chair as she watched Tom quickly turn Alex’s gag into more of a squabble. They fought over the couch, both yelping as they slipped off the cushions and dropped onto the floor with a hollow thud.

“How was school?” Jack asked, unable to help her smile. Alex hadn’t been this active in a while.

“Good,” Alex said, “Jack ...I have something to tell you.”

Jack looked quickly from Tom to Alex, and back to Tom. Alex could tell the question in her eyes, the one that Alex shook his head slightly to. Tom had no reason to know MI6. As far as Alex could tell, this problem was completely unrelated to that.

“It’s weird,” Alex warned, “but I can prove it. I can rewind time.”

Finally, Tom jerked his mouth away from Alex’s hand. Instead of saying anything, he just gave a somber serious nod.

Jack blinked, then anxiously giggled with a clearly uncomfortable smile.

“No, seriously it’s bloody cool.” Tom said.

“Uh, I’m...Do you mean like... *time travel*? ”

Alex shook his head quickly “it’s...like rewinding on the telly. A short bit. I couldn’t control it at first and I didn’t understand, but I think I’ve got a handle. I can rewind a bit or longer and remember what happened first time.”

“Watch!” Tom beamed, “Jack, what are you making for dinner?”

Jack looked towards the kitchen, then back. “Pasta. Meat sauce with some tomatoes. There’s garlic bread in the oven?”

“Okay,” Alex said, exhaling and trying to relax carefully.

‘Reset.’

“Watch!” Tom beamed, “Jack, what are you-.”

Alex interrupted quickly, “pasta with a meat sauce and tomatoes. And you have garlic bread in the oven.”

Jack's face blanched, her eyes jumping back and forth from Tom to Alex.

"Told you!" Tom grinned, "Jack, isn't it cool?"

"How did this happen?" Jack asked. Her voice was shaky, unsure and very overwhelmed.

It wasn't normal, and Alex knew that. He didn't know how it happened, and after the first few times he confessed what had happened nobody reacted right. Jones had blanched and seemed perplexed when Alex said Yassen died- but it wasn't relief it was something else. Something like fear, but why would she be afraid? Why would Yassen dying be something MI6 didn't want? When Alex told Tom he saw someone die, he acted horrified. Jack already worried enough. He couldn't let her know what he had seen.

"I don't know." Alex said truthfully.

Dinner was a nice casual affair, Tom stayed for a while and they watched a movie. No resetting happened, nothing was wrong. Alex was happy. It was such a gentle comforting warmth, that Alex could almost imagine that MI6 was a bad dream. That Yassen bleeding and dying and the ghostly shade of his eyes. It was almost enough to keep the nightmares at bay.

Alex went to bed long after, Tom agreeing to spend the night since they had a guest room anyways. Tom didn't go to bed nearly as early as Alex did, instead he sprawled on Alex's bed laughing and joking on his phone as the clock turned to midnight, then longer. Somewhere after, Alex fell asleep and was in the middle of pleasant dreaming-

Alex jumped so hard, he fell off his bed.

"Bloody hell mate!" Tom yelped, peering over the edge worried. "What? Cold shiver?"

"No." Alex gasped out, heart hammering a mile a minute, "I- I didn't-."

Tom's face quickly softened in realization. He looked uncomfortable at his phone, then at the clock. "It's uh, just past eleven. Did I show you something uh, bad or..."

"No." Alex breathed horrified. Dread and nausea churned in his gut. His hands were shaking. "I- I was asleep...It- It was almost six am."

"Oh, oh shite." Tom echoed.

Alex shakily stood, trying to stop the shaking limbs. He had practiced this, he didn't want to do this. He had spent all day working to make sure this doesn't happen again. Tom didn't understand, he didn't *understand* and Alex was *terrified*.

Swallowing down the vomit and guilt, Alex weakly smiled and said, "no I uh, just wanted more sleep. I'm uh...I'm going to crash."

Tom left, and Alex lay awake well into the night until he eventually fell asleep.

He learned, rather quickly, that just because he practiced and could seemingly control minor resets, he still couldn't stop the massive major shifts. The unexpected moments where everything seemed fine and then it was four hours early. The moments where he walked, and blinked, and found himself across town brushing his teeth again.

MI6 was ruthless. Eventually prying the story from him no matter how many times he tried to ignore them. Again and again, and although he carefully twitched and shifted his words and phrasing depending on the facial expression of the poor agent sent to interrogate him.

The story was simple. He arrived *with the stick already ruined* and then haggled for Sabina *who was taken without Alex's knowledge* and he found Yassen *already working behind the scenes* and then Cray died *because Yassen had planned it*.

It was a mixture of lies and words and exactly what MI6 wanted. They called it a perfect mission, one that they didn't understand. Alex had inferred, that he had a special talent for fucking things up.

"Maybe we'll use you more if your missions end up like this." Jones said, looking a bit regretful but so very pleased of Alex. Alex wondered if this was what hell felt like.

He was sent out again, much to Tom's confusion. It wasn't pneumonia, instead apparently Alex was on a week long internship somewhere else. A prospective eye had picked him up, which was baffling considering his grades had plummeted except he now got perfect scores on pop quizzes much to the school's confusion.

It was...liberating. A breath of fresh air. The idea and concept of time itself no longer affected Alex. It didn't affect him because *he* controlled time. He controlled interaction, responses, emotions if he wanted. He could say anything he wanted, *do anything he wanted*, and blink and it never happened at all.

He was supposed to follow a lead and he didn't. He went to a store and shoplifted a drink because he was thirsty in the Italian sun and the juice helped. The security guards shouted in Italian, racing after him and he looked up at the clouds and thought, '*Reset.*'

He followed the lead, still thirsty because drink and sensation didn't transfer properly because that meant physical liquid in his stomach and he learned that didn't work. But the memory was nice, and he found his target and traced along and discovered through only two resets, where the weapon exchange was going down.

He waited casually, because time doesn't matter anymore. He didn't have a good look inside the warehouse where the deal was going down, so he walked casually, took a nice look and ignored the fourteen guns aimed at him and the angry shouting, and thought, '*Reset.*'

He crouched behind the crates, a safe distance away and thought of how to avoid all fourteen of those guns that had no memory of him ever being there at all.

It reminded Alex of video games, the ones he and Tom used to play where they took turns running into take out enemies. Respawning over and over, because they would always fail but try and try again. His enemies were computer generated grunts, ones that would always spawn in the same location and Alex could try and try again and again.

Time obeyed him, so he waited casually bored and tired and wishing that he had taken a sandwich earlier as well so the memory could tide him over. Something exploded, four buildings erupted in fire and flame. Oh, they were working with bombs.

“I can handle that,” Alex said, yawning tiredly as fire brushed his skin and the heat burned his eyes. “People don’t like it if they blow up too.”

He stood, stretching his arms over his head to pop his shoulders and spine and ignore the screaming sirens of fire trucks racing through old Italian streets. Alex popped his jaw, and thought, ‘Reset.’

“Hands up!” Alex shouted, using the buildings own intercom system to cause the armed guards to jump where they stood. “Mani! Uh, Alto! Wait- *shit*-.”

‘Reset.’

“Hands up! Mani in Alto!” Alex shouted, using the buildings intercom system to cause the armed guards to jump. This time, it went much better given that he had shouted in butchered Italian.

They started mumbling, stepping back from what Alex knew was a box full of bombs. He had the better hand here, bluffing was what he needed to do, and luckily Alex was a fantastic bluffer.

“Okay, step away from the bombs. Or I’m going to blow this entire sky high and all of you inside as well.” Alex warned.

Everyone, naturally, jumped back. Nobody wanted to die, or be exploded. Alex learned that from personal experience. If he hadn’t known that the building contained bombs, he would have rushed in with the gadgets Smithers had supplied. Using the elephant strength silly string to clog the guns, to tie people up. He’d likely get shot, or almost shot. He’d likely accidentally activate a bomb, and be forced to huddle inside his (hah hah) fireproof bombers jacket.

Instead, he sat back, shouting out the 7 practiced Italian phrases he had rehearsed a few times and drawn on the back of a McDonald’s receipt that warned *Step away! Unload your guns! Eyes forward! This is not a joke! I see what you’re doing Angelo* (this one had taken a while since he had to guess names and finally the man was so angry he screamed his actual one).

The cops arrived, took the guns and bombs, and Alex was walking away unharmed for the first time in his life. He was in very dire need of a sandwich.

On the plane back to England, he blinked and stumbled and nearly fell out of his seat when he found the plane going down the runway. A three hour reset. He leaned back, head thumping on the headrest as he mentally cursed out his ridiculous power. Whatever Tom said, it was pure shite.

Mission brief took a few adjustments, phrasing and emotions. At one point the interrogator had jumped, shouting at him due to Alex's seeming calm about handling dangerous explosive material. Alex stared at him, and contemplated the value of punching the man in his face. After all, he wouldn't remember it.

Jones smiled at him, said softly that she was *very proud* of him. Alex reset twice, just to hear it a few more times. It was soft, gentle and kind, and Alex knew that it would only be a short matter of time before he was sent out again and again to get more info or recover objectives because he was a child and he was valuable and now nobody was getting hurt unless Alex thought it was necessary- well. Nobody got hurt and remained hurt. Alex could fix it, Alex could change it.

Alex looked out at the swans, they now had little babies floating around them happily, and wondered if this was what it felt to be God.

The fine resets, the slip of a hand to shift what was and what wasn't. A backspace on a keyboard, a pause to avoid brushing an electric fence as he vaulted over it. A fraction of a second more, a fraction of a second less.

Sneaking past dogs were hard, they were quick and angry and animalistic. A single movement would trigger their heightened senses and instincts but luckily, Alex could practice forever how to avoid them, and how to pass by casually unheard of and out of sight.

He was both more reckless and less. Was it *actually* dangerous if he would never remained injured? If the feeling of sharp teeth sinking into his thigh and shoulder remained only as a ghostly memory? He heard of amputees, the ghost limb where the brain thought something still existed and burned and throbbed in agony when the sensation wasn't received. He walked, untouched and pristine with a clenched jaw and tearful eyes because a dozen dog bites and a ripped throat was deeper than just skin.

Bosnia, beautiful and mixed in both history and ethnicity. Architecture that gorgeous and gleaming in the night. The air was cool and fresh from the Mediterranean, and Alex reclined back against the edge of a high spire with his feet dangling over the edge.

He was given a scouting unit for once, just a few people that had cameras and wires and could help with locating exact places of whoever they were after now. Some sort of esteemed trafficker of intelligence. Finding and dealing in secrets or stolen blueprints or something Alex didn't know much about with his Pre-Algebra background. Maybe if he had taken Art Class, he would have known the term for the fancy blue paper they were looking for.

“Agent, can you come back from there?” The tech guru said, gnawing anxiously on the pen cap as he stared with wide eyes at Alex. The latter was sitting on the edge of the peak, visible from the edge of the balcony where he swung his legs over the edge. They were so high up, mostly to have a better reception of signals.

Alex peered down, feeling incredibly bored, stir crazy, and reckless for a few seconds.

“Hey, guru.” Alex said, turning his head enough to comfortably lounge on the eight inch railing. “How long do you think it would take to hit the bottom?”

The guru paled, looking absolutely horrified. “Ah, p-perhaps...forty seconds?”

Alex peered over the edge, considered it, and started counting. The guru *screamed*, lunging after him and Alex rolled his eyes. He hadn’t ever played in zero space before, the weird rush like skydiving but different with nothing but his shirt and pants flapping-

‘Reset.’

“Actually It’s fifty three seconds.” Alex said contently. “Close though.”

The guru stared at him, snapped the pen cap in his teeth. Alex huffed, climbing down and into the air conditioned room. It felt much stuffier without the breeze.

“How’s the target anyways?”

“Uhh...” The guru said, tapping on the screen. ““Oh, oh *no*. We have new information- can you get Echo?”

Alex groaned, climbing to his feet to walk over to the master bedroom that Echo, the woman spy, had claimed as her own. She said it was necessary for her *disguises*, but Alex thought she was just a jerk.

“Echo,” Alex said, pushing the door with one shoulder before slumping in the doorway. “New info.”

Echo, the older spy groaned from her spot on the bed. She looked older than she was, clearly matured quickly and passed off for a variety of ages. She was french, and more bratty than the High School girls.

“Don’t you know how to *knock!*” She spat, rising from her sprawled spot on the bed before loping out with big bouncing strides. Alex rolled his eyes, and convened around the tech guru to look at the new information.

“A new threat?” Echo asked, huffing almost like the information had offended her. “Like *that’s a problem!*”

“How old again are you?” Alex asked, “because I’m really doubting I’m the youngest here.”

Echo glared, and guru ran the grainy security footage from headquarters.

And *oh*, that certainly changed things. Alex knew that man, that face, even decorated in a fancy suit and bowtie due to the type of function they were attempting to infiltrate and find out what their target knew. This made everything much harder.

“He doesn’t look *that* bad.” Echo sniffed, clearly raking her eyes up and down, “kinda cute.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.” Alex said, feeling nausea churn. His stomach twisted, his eyes felt strange. “This is from Jones?”

“Uh, yes. She sent it here with directions for you to see it-.”

“Yeah.” Alex said, needing to sit down quickly. “That’s Yassen Gregorovich.”

The room quieted, nice and silent. Alex imagined he could hear the ocean from here even though it wasn’t true. Echo in particular looked a bit pale. She had been brought in as a distraction after all, just to entertain and provide a decoy cover for the target, who was a proven womanizer. She wasn’t prepared to deal with a *world class assassin*.

“Right.” She said, sitting down very quickly on the other chair. “I thought this was...just an info recovery mission. I didn’t sign up for dealing with *killers*.”

“Yeah well, I didn’t sign up either.” Alex said.

The tech guru, quickly fumbled to chew on another pen. The guy didn’t even have to *deal* with threat. He was just supposed to find the locations and coordinate Echo while Alex did the actual hard stuff.

“So...do we pull out?”

“Oh *please*.” Echo huffed sourly, “just means I’ll have to be *more* of a snack. Ugh, assassins make everything messy.”

Alex didn’t want to think about Yassen Gregorovich. Yassen Gregorovich who was bleeding out and pale eyes and the warm wet slurp of skin and guts and-.

Yassen Gregorovich who lied over Alex’s father, who said wasteful things in a dream and somehow, *somehow*, Alex saved his life.

“Don’t bother me,” Echo sniffed, pointedly looking at Alex before she stormed off to get dressed in the massive attached bathroom. An hour later where Echo patiently applied makeup and prosthetic to change her appearance to that of a woman a decade older but still attractive. If not for her natural sharp voice, Alex would have mistaken her. He knew, that she too would change that for some sort of accent that Alex didn’t know.

They arrived at the gala where the target was at, his work of operations on a higher floor. Alex quickly walked away, ignoring Echo’s whispered insults to *not fuck things up!*

He ignored her, went around the corner- walked right into a waiter-

Alex ignored her, went around the corner. He stepped to the side and snatched a small drink from a waiter's tray before he kept going. With any luck, the kitchen staff would mistake his a dishwasher returning in a very inefficient way.

The elevator needed a password, but there were only four buttons which left an annoying amount of combinations. The tech guru assigned to Alex wasn't actually helpful, because namely- MI6 were jerks, so Alex fished around and just dealt with squinting at the buttons and guessing that the second one must be used first due to the stains.

So, process of elimination. Guessing was always good, and his namely luck meant he only had to reset *twice* before he got the elevator to go up to the top floors where he would likely have to find a stairwell. Even information stealing womanizers needed to abide by building codes.

The stairwell was nice, and Alex began his long slow climb upwards hoping somewhere, Echo got a plate of shrimp cocktail down her sleazy dress.

The stairwell went up higher and higher, and Alex had to hope that they really did have the security cameras under control. Otherwise this would be over very quickly and Alex didn't want to deal with that.

The main door was, once again, locked. Smithers had given him a small bug- one that looked like a cute little stuffed animal beetle, that instantly adhered and started scrambling the lock. Somehow, the fabric messed with the hand sensor although Alex really didn't know how. The little beetle gave a cute ringtone, the light flashed green, and Alex plucked it from the scanner and snuck inside.

He found the information, reading it over quickly. It was color coordinated and in alphabetical order which was hubris but also commendable. The category on stolen technology from England was impressive. Poor Apple though, they were going to have a rough few years.

Alex considered taking everything, but he didn't really have the time or space. He did settle for picking up the bronze bust of their target to bash open the desktop casing and plucking out the hard-drive. Thank goodness computer hard-drives had gotten smaller over the years, it only looked moderately obscene when he tucked it into his pants and fumbled to set something on fire. Hopefully, all of the plans would be destroyed, that ghastly bronze bust would hopefully melt, and Alex would get to see Echo furious from the sprinklers.

Of course, that didn't happen. Because the scanner outside the door started beeping, alerting to an override code that Alex was *not* ready for. He bolted, sprinting and barely managing to slide behind one of the long decorative velvet curtains that the idiot thief had in his office. It looked like a New Vegas strip club honestly.

The door opened, Alex stopped breathing as he heard the barely there footsteps approach the desk with the busted computer case. The slight shifting of plastic and metal as whoever it was noticed that the hard-drive had been removed. The rest of the plans were still there. A normal agent wouldn't leave the room without getting rid of the plans, not when the hard-drive being stolen was so obvious.

The intruder knew that as well, which meant the likely outcome meant that the new thief was still in the room.

"Come out." A familiar voice, and Alex wanted to *cry*. "Come out, little Alex."

No no no no, Alex was *not* ready for this. He needed to- he couldn't...

"I know you're here." Yassen Gregorovich said very calmly, not moving from where he stood near the desk. Alex had no belief that the man was bluffing either. "You can step aside willingly, or I will make you."

Alex remembered, the amused near adoring smile, the blood and wreck of the plane. Mincemeat and crying and Yassen's scar throat and head thumping against his shoulder. No, Alex couldn't, he couldn't face this-

'Reset.'

Alex didn't put down the bust, instead he turned, smashing the casing off of the power outlet that had been plugged into the computer. He yanked out the power cord, breaking his nails as he peeled the edges of wires back and jammed it into the open outlet. Sparks flew, one blueprint caught fire easily and spread rapidly over the shag carpet and velvet drapes.

Alex wasted no time, shoving the hard-drive in his pants, threw the bust at a window, and leapt as fast as he could over the edge. He could take as many tries as he needed to somehow survive the fall.

It took twice until he slammed into a couple railings, slowing his fall but sending him into a dangerous spiral that managed to get him to smash into a gargoyle and feel something crunch in his chest. Broken bone likely, but he didn't want to try and reset the landing with that sort of pain inhibiting him.

He limped inside the building, kicking in a window and trying to stifle his whimpers. The smoke alarms were screaming, the sprinklers activated building wide. The stairwells were active and with only a minor choked sob at being jostled, Alex managed to escape in the throes of panicking people.

Echo found him, her makeup running and fiercely angry but seeming to recognize that Alex was injured in some way. She pulled her clutch, yanking out a handkerchief to dab at her running mascara as the fire department rolled up.

“Hottie alert,” Echo muttered, wrapping a large towel complimentary of the fire department around her body.

“I’m going under cover.” Alex blurted, dropping to his knees to scrunch into a small ball and hide under her towel- and under her dress. Echo stiffened, obviously furious with his attempt to get out of sight of Yassen Gregorovich. Alex was small and gangly, even with a few broken bones he wasn’t going to let a wet cat stop him from hiding.

The gargoyle smashed into Alex’s collarbone and this time, he couldn’t stop the abrupt broken howl of pain. He landed, rolling onto the small landing with contorted limbs and frantic breathing.

No, *no*. He didn’t demand the reset, he didn’t make it happen. Why now, why *now*? He just...he just had to follow exactly what he had done, and hopefully not run into Yassen Gregorovich in his crippled exhausted state.

The window broke a second time, this time more clumsy under Alex’s fiercely throbbing chest. The fire escape was crowded, he blended with people and stumbled only twice on the steps. He found Echo, already fishing for a handkerchief with how long Alex took on the stairs this time.

He didn’t say anything, instead diving right under her dress with the towel before she could say a word. He felt her legs tense the moment she spotted Yassen, the tiny shifting on her tall heels that signified she was ready to run if necessary.

No more shifting occurred. It was an inconvenient major shift, one of the uncontrollable ones that Alex was terrified of. He waited, hearing people bustle around and Echo adopted a fake foreign accent and broken structured English. It was a good act, she could have been a successful actor if she wasn’t working for the government.

Eventually, she squeezed her legs and Alex’s shoulders and brought a new spike of pain. He crawled out from under her dress, noticing that the fire trucks had managed a nice wall that gave them privacy.

Echo glared at him, but said nothing. She stomped away angrily, fishing for car keys as Alex limped after, left arm clutching his chest.

“You could have *warned me!*” She hissed, smacking his head with her clutch.

I did, Alex almost said. He forgot he hadn’t the second time around.

They made it back to the hotel room, where the tech guru squealed over the find and looked at Alex in awe and sympathy over the massive bruise swelling over his chest. Echo went so far as to let him have her massive bed when she caught sight of the deep purple bruising spanning from various points of impact from his tumble out the window.

“What did you *do*?” Echo asked, scowling and tossing over some of her cream. This one apparently helped by numbing, although it was normally used for wrinkles or something else. There was a point on the outside of his thigh, his knee, his forearm and his clearly busted collarbone. It was a large knob, a walnut out of place that distorted his skin.

“Jumped out the window.” Alex groaned into a pillow. Everything hurt. “I was under a killer threat.”

“I don’t know if that was a pun or you’re being dramatic.” Echo said.

“There was *bloody Yassen Gregorovich!* I thought you were going to distract him!”

Echo looked offended, towel drying her hair. It was a good shade of blonde, professionally dyed or natural. She rolled her eyes, huffing. “I *did*. He said his wife was calling, you didn’t tell me he was Norwegian! Super nice too, kinda hunky you know?”

Alex *screamed* into his pillow.

“Did you *really* need to shove the computer in your pants though?” Echo continued, “it looked horrible.”

“Oh, sorry, where else do you put your *precious cargo*? ”

Echo sniffed angrily.

“I know, I was *packing*, ” Alex continued, because if he was in pain so did she. “Such a *prickly* decision.”

“Guys?” the tech man said, looking very uncomfortable, “uh, we should move to the rendezvous...”

“No.” Alex said, “I am taking a nap, because *I* am the one with *broken bones*. ”

The tech guy scuttled out, Echo complained, and Alex slept blissfully unaware although that may have been due to the painkillers and cold medicine. They boarded the train the next day, meeting up somewhere in Croatia for the plane that would take them to England and avoid the formal international incident. Alex did his job well, so he slept and had access to better painkillers via IV once the medics confirmed that yes! He *broke* his collarbone. Also hairline fractured his leg from smashing into a railing.

The interrogation went a little bit better, although Jones was very upset that he had injured himself so. Another *perfect mission*, avoiding Yassen Gregorovich was just another benefit.

Alex went home, months of bedrest to heal his bones, and sleep off the exhaustion. Apparently Jones felt so bad for his injuries, various bags of fresh produce ended up on the front porch. Even the school felt bad for his ‘Internship Injury’ that had occurred when ‘unsecured machinery’ moved. Codename for doing a leap of faith off a skyscraper to avoid confronting a scary Russian. A standard plot point in almost any action movie.

He had a sling to help secure his arm, and a nice cart to drag his books around. Tom, the jerk, went so far as to put his things in the same basket and even sliding in a pillow for when ‘Alex’s arm hurts!’. The liar just slept through History.

There were more gaps, more leaps in time that correlated around the entire school day. If Alex hadn’t been inspired to actually pay attention, it was much worse the second time through. Nights *and* days were reset. Soon, Alex was more exhausted simply for being awake for so long and demanded naps as soon as he got home.

He managed to get through so many television shows and series, Jack refused to watch anything with him. IT wasn’t fair, she claimed, when he sat down, watched five minutes of some documentary then changed to another because he had *already finished the movie*.

“I need to take up a hobby.” Alex demanded out of the blue when watching another mindless episode of something. “Jack, help me find a hobby.”

“What sort of hobby?” Jack asked, barely pausing and taking it all in stride.

Alex stared upwards, frowning. “What do old retired people do when they’re bored?”

“Join a book club,” Jack suggested.

Alex joined a book club, because sure sometimes there was an inconvenient reset, but he only had to find his page again and keep reading. Videogames lost their love and challenge, because losing progress was just as bad as losing a memory card. There was no more joy in it. Tom called him a grouch, a loser because now there was ‘Bad Boy Alex Rider’ with his head deep in some sort of thick book.

“You know, you’re going to ruin your reputation.” Tom teased him, “reading all those books but still failing finals.”

“You don’t know the fury, of finishing an essay only to reset.” Alex told him flatly, barely looking up from where he was deep into some sort of fantasy book Tom recognized faintly. “Reading is easier.”

“What *is* that?” Tom asked, finally peering over at the old English. “The bloody hell? Elves? Is this that Lord of the Rings thing?”

Alex made a noise of agreement, comfortable as he reclined back. “I’m confusing the librarians since I return them so fast. Maybe I should learn elvish.”

“Maybe you should learn a *real* language.” Tom teased him pointedly. “Ladies love a man who speaks with an accent.”

“Tom,” Alex said, “you are a genius.”

Alex *did* learn a language. The school library had various old editions of older school textbooks. Alex already knew quite a few languages courtesy of Ian and their many television channels. Passing Japanese, better than passing now Italian, and his fluency in Spanish, and French. German could use some work.

Now though, he had nothing but time. How different was Catalonian from Spanish? How different was Portuguese? His Italian had improved, but there were Italian books from old abandoned school coursework.

Catalonian was similar, Portuguese even more so. From there, Italian followed the same similar structure. By the time he could claim fluency in Italian with a lack of basic noun definitions, he could likely survive on his own in Barcelona without getting lost.

The resets started to slow, more distanced and longer in between. Alex's collarbone finally healed over, the bruise fading from sight just as Alex challenged himself with trying to listen to anime without subtitles. He had long since given up attempting to learn Kanji of any sort, but conversational Japanese he could likely work on especially with so many multiple meanings. That, and practically all Japanese names were puns in some sort and Alex could *not* go without that new weapon in his arsenal.

Anime, he quickly learned were very short easy episodes with a nice wide variety of words and conversational structures. If the reset happened- that's fine. Hop forward a good half dozen episodes and keep going. He still couldn't comprehend any sort of the written word but he was nearly to the point where he could mimic entire conversations as the show ran next to him. Tom found this unsettling, which was completely fair. Tom ended up tackling him only when Alex succumbed to mimicking the poor female love interest and gushed about *senpai!*

"Tom, spin the globe and pick somewhere." Alex said.

Tom pointed and landed on Saudi Arabia. Alex stared, Tom stared. Alex hunkered his shoulders with a wince and said, "Well, how hard can Arabic *really* be?"

"Alex, what's with the globe?"

'Oh thank god.' Alex thought. "Nothing, I'm just thinking. I think i'm going to learn Russian."

Alex did, because he thought *why not*, and it seemed that the majority of maniacs he had to chase down knew Russian in some way or form. MI6 had mentioned concerns occurring over in the Kremlin, and Alex playfully denied anything and claimed he had the flu and couldn't come to the door. For emphasis, he flipped off every security camera he could find.

The school therapist hunted him down, because apparently outside of Tom he had been acting oddly for quite a while. Seemingly not comprehending things, awkward conversations. Ignoring or saying one word only to walk away instantly after. He wouldn't answer questions, or when he did he cut people off in conversation and said nothing after. He didn't act in a way that 'accommodated other people' or 'thought about his actions would hurt other people.'

The school sent a memo to his home address, Jack telling him that the school wanted to *drug test him* to see if he was under some sort of substance. He was offended, but he couldn't

really deny that other people didn't hold his interest anymore. People that didn't *know* didn't matter anymore. If a group member got in a fight- *rewind*, and then say something else. Always say the right thing, always find what you need to know and that's that. Other people weren't a factor anymore, because they were all dependent variables and Alex alone changed how they reacted.

“Are you taking drugs?” Jack demanded.

“No, this amount of emotional suffering is organic.” Alex said, and that was that.

His Russian was coming along nicely, especially the hilarious way in which diminutives were used. Would he be abusing this? Absolutely. Was he going to antagonize Tom with calling him *Tomasha*, especially since Tom claimed it sounded like a reject hybrid fruit.

His next mission wasn't even *hard*. Well, it was hard because SCORPIA was involved, but his main enemy wasn't hard. He was tall, had vitiligo which Alex thought would impede an assassin's ability to hide but this guy seemed to be doing just fine, and had *swords*.

“Oh, that's cool.” Alex confessed, staring at the fairly short swords or *very* long knives. “I recognize that saying how badass those are is beside the *point* but hey I like being a bit *sharp*.”

The man squinted at him, giving him a once over before his expression lit up. “Wait, young, MI6, does puns- are you *the* Alex Rider? No way!”

Alex shouldn't have lit up. “You know me?”

“You're legendary! Of course I know you, you're one of my role models you know. Heard about your work, very innovative.”

“Thank...you?”

The SCORPIA agent grinned, big and toothy and terrifying with the swords. He couldn't have been *that* much older. “No, really. I heard you yeeted yourself out a window to get away from Tall'n'Grumpy.”

Alex blinked, feeling very overwhelmed and a bit shy under all the attention.

“Some of your mission reports- I mean the mission reports *we* have after *you're* on them, make my days better. I think you're the reason for premature baldness in quite a few people. We have a code for you! A stamp and everything.”

“A...a *stamp*? ”

The man nodded quickly. Despite his obvious cheer and enthusiasm, not once did his hands waver. “I think they made it after you set that one boat on fire, while you were *on* the boat. Classic Rider situation.”

Alex snorted. “Yeah, before that weird Russian billionaire tried to adopt me as his kid?”

“Ahh, Russians. Gotta love the prickly bunch.”

Alex beamed, “I’m learning Russian just to piss them off more.”

“You! I *knew* I’d like you! My name’s Nile. Bah, you know the drill.”

Alex nodded along eagerly. “The whole spiel about how you can’t let me past to ruin your plans? Or something about your employer?”

Nile grinned, twirling one knife expertly so before resting in perfect posture again. “You’re such a bright kid, man, I see why they banned Cossack from being on missions we know you’re on. For some reason, *every* time you show up, our missions fail and we don’t get paid. Let me get paid, Rider. I’ve got to support my family of two plants.”

“You make a compelling argument,” Alex said, “but I don’t get paid anything, so I’m living on pure spite and the power of having no impulse control.”

Nile nodded slowly in agreement. “Ah, classic Rider Situation.”

Alex *did* ruin Nile’s day, because he *did* manage to steal the new serum for carrying the black plague in rats (honestly, *really*?), by...releasing...the immune rats into the wild. Off they went, beautiful and free into the great beyond to breed a whole new generation of rats that don’t carry disease.

“I think you made the world a better place!” Alex shouted down as the building started to self destruct (*Classic Rider!*).

“Fuck you!” Nile shouted up, using his sword shoved in his fist to mimic a large shiny middle finger. “Maybe I should go full Cossack and just murder the damn employer!”

“Love you too Nileshunya!” Alex shouted, blowing a kiss and a wink. Nile laughed, despite the fact that the building was literally starting to fall apart and *the rats were loose!* Plus the black death had long since been *cured* but Alex didn’t want to point that out unless he had to.

MI6 didn’t like his mission report, because they were boring and normal and the same. Every time, they were the *same*. Same people, same places, the same forms and questions and even if Alex said something wrong he could reset and fix it. Sometimes he caved and told them the truth instead of what they wanted to hear, just to see their faces. He always reset, because playing by what was mission perfect was always easier than being himself. Alex was *tired* of this.

““Alex, are you *paying attention!*” Jones shouted, like she had before, and before, and before.

“No,” Alex said honestly, “because I’ve heard this before. You’re going to scold me for not giving this proper focus, for seeming to not care about something that’s important. If you’ll look, I’ll have already *done* the paperwork, even using your acronyms you like to use to pretend that other people can’t decode it.”

Jones stared at him, then opened the file that Alex had done on the plane over, because he was tired of doing it in MI6 when he could have been sleeping at home. The report was

perfect, proper codenames, proper acronyms, proper everything. If he wrote a mistake, rewind and rewrite it. Perfect handwriting.

“This is done in pen.” Jones said flatly, “this was a first draft.”

It was perfect, Alex knew that. Jones closed the folder quietly, and waved him on. Alex got up, and he left.

“Ma’am.” said the small desk jockey. He looked at her, nodding in the clinical case psychologist and profiler who had watched from behind the glass. This meeting, and countless before as well as other testimony.

“What do you think?” Jones asked.

“It’s quite something,” the psychologist confessed, waving and smiling. A small kettle of tea and two cups were brought in. “If I hadn’t seen this development myself over time, I wouldn’t have believed it. Alex Rider’s personality has completely changed.”

Jones closed her eyes, sighed, and poured herself some tea. She took a sip tiredly, already knowing a report was written but she was too tired to read it.

“He has quite the tendency to intimidate people with his presence,” the psychologist continued quietly, “he’s calm, and increasingly difficult to read. I can’t tell if it’s self control or a dissociative state. He’s...he cannot be intimidated or impressed by anyone else anymore. His emotional state is...is *impossible* to discern. The cameras and bugs suggest that he still holds affection for his caretaker, but even then there are periodic episodes of this behaviour.”

“So it isn’t a front.” Jones summarized. “It’s legitimate. Not just for us.”

“No, not just for us. His entire personality has shifted after some sort of event we don’t know. He’s...extremely resourceful, highly intelligent and seems to be advancing at an exponential speed. You were right to remove his clearance to firearms, I truthfully believe that assassinations or murder would only accelerate this strange development.”

Jones rubbed her eyes, not sure what to do. Sometimes she was thankful Blunt hadn’t retired—if the plane on Air Force One *had* managed to lift off, then perhaps he would have had to retire. But now, she was still second in command and could allow moments of weakness.
“What is his education rate?”

“Ah, the school reports show his disinterest. Apathy, reduced social interaction. Overall, cold and disconnected from others with exception to his friend. His scores are...they do not reflect the level of academic curiosity he displays at home.”

“How many languages does he know now?”

The psychologist looked at her cup of tea, clearly uncomfortable with where the questions were going. They both knew that the conversation was not good.

“...His original file stated fluency in three and basic in two, this was due to his...Uncle, I believe?”

“Ian Rider, deceased.”

“Yes Ma’am. Alex Rider has recently displayed fluency levels in his original three languages, English, French, and Spanish. He has recently developed fluency in...Italian, Catalonian, Portuguese, several dialects of South American Spanish, advanced comprehension of Japanese standard, and Russian”

Jones inhaled, and exhaled smoothly. “You’re saying that in perhaps several months, Alex Rider has become fluent in *four* new languages and is nearly fluent in *two more*? ”

“He’s a very intelligent boy, ma’am. He likes to read.”

Jones nodded and dismissed the psychologist. Alex Rider’s file, was beginning to look more and more like a certain very concerning profile. One, that although they had never interacted for *long*, posed certain problems.

Why was Alex Rider going to such lengths all of the sudden? He had severe injuries from trying to *avoid* Gregorovich, why would he be attempting to mimic him now?

Jones was *sure* that Gregorovich never had the opportunity to talk to Alex about his family history. There was no time or possibility for that, even now that they tended to send Rider off with bugs on him. Even when Rider was on mission, he acted cold and disinterested and unsettling. Jones was one mission away from forcing Rider to take an entire examination for possible mental health disorders, or even a personality disorder suddenly presenting itself. She was certain he had PTSD after the incident both with Sayle, and now Cray.

What was it with Yassen Gregorovich that had transferred to Alex? What sort of chaotic water did they both drink and now suddenly were turning into apathetic machines with a very cruel sense of humor. Jones would have almost sighed in relief just to hear him joke around, but now it was just a bunch of odd staggering, blank faces, and an intimidating ability to know exactly when to do things and *how*. The boy rarely made mistakes anymore, his first try was always the best try. Beginners luck turned *weaponized*.

It felt almost like looking at John again, the way he was fiercely determined and terrifyingly capable. Jones hoped that they knew what they were doing.

Alex’s next mission was a test, because they wanted a comparison. A shock factor, and within one simple psychological test in the field, they made their fatal mistake.

Rider had been doing a bit worse, a bit more ruthless and callous over things he saw. Storming past ruins and corpses without blinking, as if he knew they were there and didn’t care. He needed no time to accommodate, because they meant nothing to him. So they sent him somewhere horrible, somewhere with the assumption that war and death would zap *something into him*.

They calculated wrong, because the Middle East had always been SCORPIA’s preferred dealing area with the Taliban and various terrorist organizations. They hadn’t expected Yassen Gregorovich to be there for- for some sort of *field training*, but only learned the

moment that satellite images confirmed what appeared to be SCORPIA agents Nile, and Cossack in a Taliban area testing out missile launchers on rock formations.

Alex couldn't be called back, because Alex Rider *didn't do commands*.

The day that Alex Rider literally *stumbled* into the middle of a Taliban camp on the back of a dusty motorcycle carrying three days worth of gasoline on the back, and a big tank of water-well, he wasn't really expecting that sort of reception. There was a lot of confusion, a lot of looking at each other, and a lot of Alex internally cursing that he never did take up Arabic.

They stared at one another, until very slowly one agent came closer and Alex could see a dirty stick hanging from his belt.

“*Nile?*”

The headwrap came off, showing a familiar toothy grin. “No way! Rider! What brings you out here!”

Alex stared numbly, because at this point it was simply a cosmic entity that was forcing him and SCORPIA's greatest idiot to unite. “I think MI6 is trying to traumatize me.”

“Really? That's a new tactic. They didn't try waterboarding?”

“*Nile.*” Alex said. He smiled, amused and a bit happy to see the manic despite the fact there were several guns pointing directly at Alex. “Seriously, can you point me in the direction of civilization? Or a camel? Or *something*? ”

“Oh *hell no*, we haven't had a Rider Situation in forever! Come on, my life was getting boring.”

Alex rolled his eyes, dismounted from his bike slowly and lifted his arms in the air. The Taliban clearly, did not know at all what to do. Nile walked forward, clean lithe grace that the sand couldn't stop, and managed to punch Alex across the head.

“Ouch! What the hell!” Alex spat, ducking back and wincing. His eyes were watering from how much it hurt.

“Standard treatment, you're only special in my heart, not in the real world.”

“Wow, to think your compassion is *imaginary*. ”

Nile snorted and shouted something in Arabic, from around the corner a man with rope appeared. Alex already was bemoaning his poor wrists.

“Can we not do this?” Alex asked quietly, “I'm really tired, and I don't even have a weapon on me, unless you consider I really have to pee a weapon. Well, with how dehydrated I am it probably is a chemical weapon.”

“Sorry Rider!” Nile cheered, and punched him again this time in the mouth.

Alex slumped, entire face spinning as his vision swam. Blood filled his mouth and tooth clearly came loose in a glob of mucus and saliva. His fucking *canine tooth broke*.

“Oh fuck no.” Alex gurgled with a slur.

‘Reset.’

“Sorry Rider!” Nile cheered, and Alex arched his back.

The fist missed, which was fairly surprising to poor Nile who continued to punch forward and accidentally punched the motorcycle. It toppled slowly, landing chaotically on Nile’s boot which was too armored to actually injure him. Nile pouted, looking sadly at his foot while the Taliban proceeded to tie Alex’s arm behind his back. Alex’s tooth, thankfully, was safe.

Someone new spoke, a harsh guttural Arabic from behind a headdress. Everyone stepped back, even *Nile* paused and looked over his shoulder. They said something, back and forth. The sand was getting in Alex’s eyes now that he had removed his scarf.

Nile paused and looked at Alex, then looked back. He looked torn, but slowly stepped away. The new one stepped forward, a careful grace held in their movements. Smaller body, less defined muscles and trapezoids compared to Nile. Actually, they made Nile’s walk look like an awkward newborn deer compared to the liquid leopard stalk.

“Oh shit,” Alex said around a chalky mouth still tasting phantom blood, “don’t kill me?”

The man approached, stood tall and looked down to where Alex was on his knees with his arms tied behind his back. One hand grabbed Alex’s jaw forcefully, his glove smelled like gunpowder. He tilted Alex’s head slightly, then pulled back a fist slightly and smashed it into Alex’s head.

Alex slumped to the ground, not unconscious but curling fetal as he tried to comfort the *agony* of his face. Something had ground and crunched, broken and shattered in a well placed pointed punch. His left eye was burning painful, his whole face *hurt* and his couldn’t see from his left eye.

Nile shouted something in alarm, looking clearly taken aback. Alex whimpered into the dirt, wiggling pathetically. He had a horrible gut churning idea, that his cheekbone had been punched at such an angle, the bone chips entered and pierced his eye. In simple terms, Alex was *blind*.

No, no no, he was *not* going to settle. He would easily barter, try to argue or figure something- he could always push himself further back and try to get to a time where he was actually *on* the bike. What he wouldn’t do for an untimed big jump right around now.

‘Reset.’

Nile looked down at his foot with a sad look. Alex's tooth was safe, he was still able to see and his arms were just *now* being tied behind his back.

The man behind Nile, the one wrapped in scarves still who had broken his *face*, staggered. It was such an unexpected movement, Nile even glanced over in alarm before he scanned the surrounding areas quickly.

"No." The man said, muffled behind his scarves. He instantly started yanking, dropping the dusty fabric to the ground as he *stared* at Alex in absolute horror.

"What?" Nile said, looking back from Alex to- to *Yassen Gregorovich*. "What? It's just-."

"*Alex Rider*." Yassen said, voice coming out tinted with something Alex had never heard and found himself terrified to be the cause of it. What did he do? He hadn't done *anything*. This wasn't going according to how it should, the man- *Yassen* should be trying to break his face again.

"Uh, yep." Nile said, still a bit lost. "Is this bad?"

Yassen kept staring, approaching slowly and, dare Alex think it, *shyly*. He reached out, much more gentle as he gripped Alex's chin and tilted his face away. Right so Yassen could stare where he had broken Alex's face, but hadn't.

"Men! Clear out!" Nile shouted, shifting to Arabic again once Yassen made no movements to punch. The Taliban grumbled but slowly started to filter, leaving Yassen, Nile, and Alex.

"Cossack, what is it?" Nile urged quietly, staring at Alex with something sharper and darker. "I already found the bug on him. MI6 isn't good at disguises."

"*Alex Rider*." Yassen repeated, sounding almost as if he was in awe. " *You* are the reason."

"I swear I didn't do anything this time." Alex defended himself, feeling very terrified. "I didn't do *anything*, I *promise*."

"Oh you brilliant child, you've done *everything*." Yassen murmured instead, glancing around Alex over and over. "You've changed *everything*."

Nile looked at Alex, making eye contact so they could both exchange a frantic *what the fuck?* Expression. Yassen stood quickly, smoothly like liquid metal. He hauled Alex to his feet, one arm around Alex's waist before he looped him up and over his shoulder in a hostage fireman carry.

"Uh." Nile said, and then went silent.

"You are coming with us." Yassen said smoothly. "Do not reset. I will always find you."

Alex *froze*. "You know? You know what's happening to me?"

Yassen started walking smoothly, towards somewhere where helicopters were covered with tarps. “Yes. You’ve been annoying, little Alex. All those sudden resets.”

“Oh, fuck off *Yassen*.” Alex snarked, trying to wiggle aggressively to show how furious he was at being carried. “You broke my *face*!”

“He did *what* now?” Nile gawked, clearly confused.

“I had to make sure.” Yassen said.

“Yeah, well...” Alex wiggled more angrily, “stop! Put me down! Yassen! Uh, Yas- Yasska! No, Yasik- Ya...Yashka!” Alex landed on what would be interpreted as an offensive cutesy name. “Put me down *Yashka*!”

Yassen twitched, a sudden jolt of surprise before he gave a single bark of a laugh. Nile started as well. Yassen laughing was like seeing a unicorn. Alex’s plan to be annoying had clearly backfired.

“You reset, due to me I believe.” Yassen said, setting Alex down so he and Nile could take the tarps off one helicopter and start its engine. “I have noticed incidents since Cray. You came into this power then?”

“Power? Power?” Nile said, sounding a bit like he was laughing. “Oh god, what sort of Rider Situation *is this*? ”

“A kidnapping.” Yassen said. “Perhaps fate, perhaps not. Rider, you have been cursed as well, and I refuse to let you go now that I have seen the cause of my perceived loss of control.”

They started the helicopter, threw Alex in the passenger seat while Nile took the back. Better to make sure Alex didn’t make a jump for it or try to escape. Even with his arms restrained, Yassen took careful time to strap Alex in, buckling him and providing a headset for communication as the helicopter lifted off.

They flew for three hours in complete silence before Alex whispered very quietly and very terrified, “I don’t know why you’re doing this.”

Yassen paused, and turned in his seat. He let go of the controls, regardless of Nile’s complaints, and turned to face Alex. Alex stared, still restrained and shaking and held hostage against his will-.

“I am doing this,” Yassen said.

“-because you are like me.”

“Huh?” Nile asked, peering around from the backseat curiously. It was quiet, there were no headsets, or any background sound. Alex paled. He froze and gasped and stared out the

window.

The helicopter had not taken off yet.

Interlude

Chapter Summary

An outside perspective on normal life, or, the blissfully unaware.
Oh yeah, and some angst.

Chapter Notes

Meheuheuheu

Nile had seen many things, and admittedly he had done many things as well. Horrible *horrible* things, the type that self explained why he had 'kill on sight' orders in fourteen countries.

Nile liked to pretend, or believe that somewhere in the corrupt monstrosity of a human soul, he still had redeeming qualities. Not enough to make babies stop crying, but enough perhaps to grant him minor peace when he felt he needed it.

Yassen Gregorovich was and is, an enigma. An absolute powerhouse with a presence more overwhelming than a hurricane. A monster, a lithe chaotic entity carved from marble and quenched in puppy tears. Or something else dramatically horrible. He had more layers than a one-hundred-and-four layer Damascus blade, and Nile *knew blades*.

Under all of that, and it had taken *years* to learn- Yassen Gregorovich was the most socially awkward individual Nile had ever met.

The assassin industry didn't lend much in the way of social interaction. They were forbidden from having pets, even *goldfish*, so Nile circumvented that problem by obtaining plants. Yassen it seemed, didn't comprehend the memo and accidentally crossed 'humans' on his list next to 'parrots' and 'centipedes' for *Do-Not-Interact*.

The man wasn't *tall*, but he towered over everyone. He stared far longer than necessary, not making eye contact but instead staring through people. Yassen's body was always relaxed, refusing to tense or clench even under gunfire. He was a dancer, practically twirling over corpses and raining bullets and hellfire.

Except, an unsure Yassen equated a terrifying Yassen. He would stare with the same long unblinking expression at a complex math problem, then turn and stare the exact same at a

baby goat. He would pause, start moving towards something only to gracefully come to a halt, and pivot away as if his resolve had completely changed or you weren't worth his time.

It was incredibly infuriating, because Yassen Gregorovich ghosted around on a flying carpet of superiority. Dismissive, uncaring, it was near impossible to evoke any sort of reaction from him. He had a sixth sense for awkward social situations, tending to somehow vanish far before the situation came to light. Nile had his fair numbers of having to settle drunken clients, or far too determined prostitutes. Yassen, *frustratingly*, had none.

It wasn't fair, because even when Nile *thought* about doing something drastic and started planning his approach, Yassen would find him with those seeing eyes and then calmly leave. Remove his presence entirely. The only way to trick Yassen was to completely embrace the fact that Nile never would act out, even though he wanted to with every fiber of his being. Nile became the exact definition of 'easy going', not *once* approaching or letting himself sling an arm over the Russian's back, or wiggle into his personal space.

Yassen was a cat, a feral barn cat that hated humans but *god dammit Nile was determined to gain his love*.

Slowly, over the course of *years*, Yassen began to open up. Baby steps, like Yassen willingly seating himself in the chair across the small hotel room they were stuck in, *baby steps*.

Yassen-Language is hard to learn, because it's the broken cues and abandoned movements that suggested that he was *about* to do something, but abandoned it entirely. The greatest catch; the original signs of movement were completely willing- no hesitation in the turn of his body, no pause before he physically inserted himself in a conversation....and then he said nothing and walked away. If Nile hadn't known better, he would have thought that Yassen was a *troll*.

He had considered investigating further, maybe looking for various cognitive disorders or sensory integration issues that Yassen never mentioned. The man hardly smiled, never laughed, tended to live in a chronic dissociative state but remained a live wire for reactions and reflexes. You couldn't ever surprise Yassen Gregorovich, but you were always surprised *by him*.

He was fiercely intelligent, so much that any game of chess would always result in a failure. In one mission report, Cossack managed to destroy an entire illegal gambling operation in a long game of poker. The man was terrifying, svelte and graceful like a large cat.

Similar to a large cat, specifically a cheetah, Yassen Gregorovich was the single most anxious individual Nile had met (and hadn't killed). The man was loose and relaxed only through forced training. If Yassen hadn't been trained to be an assassin, he could have been great at creating synthetic diamonds because he was such a goddamn tight-ass.

Nile spent *years* building Yassen's comfort with him, swearing abstinence of bodily affection. Internally he cried, but externally he also cried when Yassen very stiffly managed an entire conversation with him without weirdly walking away. Nile was attached to the man, and he was ridiculously proud with Yassen's jerky movements that only appeared when he *followed through on the body language*.

All of this, of course, seemingly flew out the window as Yassen's anxiety let misguided repressed paternal instincts take the wheel around Alex Rider.

Alex Rider was funny, cute and small in the way teenagers are with their weirdly long limbs and no coordination. Nile met the kid back a dozen missions, and witnessed first hand a legendary Rider Situation and from there, he was sold. Not because the kid fit right in with the dark humour, occupational hazard, and affinity for messing shit up, but because in his body and his face he had the *Yassen-tic*.

It wasn't so much the verbal cues that Yassen had, it wasn't the staring or the blank face. The way Rider ran made every cowbell in Nile's brain rattle out in warning. Rider ran from threats jerkily and scattered like his limbs refused to operate with his brain. He'd bolt one way, stumble to the side and narrowly avoid a fast moving pillar- keep running before backpedaling for *no reason*, then leap and take off like a deer who broke into a marijuana plantation. It was funny to watch, but also captivating because it should not work under any circumstances and yet, it did. He was the world's luckiest raccoon, stealing trash with his little weird finger-paws and escaping through laundry chutes.

Alex Rider laughed and joked like a mirror, but then he would stiffen and freeze and start those little aborted movements towards someone else. A gunman (who Nile thought had a stupid looking face) would shift uncomfortably from Alex Rider's intent focus, and Rider would make that little hop step forward before pulling back. A spooked little colt who had more Yassen-isms than Nile had ever seen.

It wouldn't be the first time Nile wondered about Rider and Yassen. The legacy and interaction was practically a dark secret, whispered quietly because Yassen tended to be sensitive about discussing it... and by sensitive Nile meant your face after Yassen broke your jaw.

Hunter had been...well, if he hadn't been a traitor (and *ouch*,) he likely would have had a big bronze statue made at Malagosto. Nile had been put through the ringer in his own training, he had heard about the man and grew his own healthy amount of hero worship when Hunter showed up one day to promptly school his class on proper firearm marksmanship. Nile had performed terribly and Hunter had shot his leg with a blank and the bruise took *months* to heal. Yassen had been the lucky graduate to be practically raised by Hunter, and Nile always wondered why. The Russian was young, the youngest to graduate or maybe that was Nile and honestly he didn't care enough to remember. Hunter had always been fond of Yassen. It took a lot of love to shoot through someone's throat and purposefully not kill them, and hit the target.

Nile's employer had also been obsessed with Hunter, a bit *too much* of the hero worship. Nile knew his way around the SCORPIA gossip rings, the poison toxicologists were the real loose lips, mostly because they tended to stay stuck in a chemistry lab and were so touch starved they likely would cuddle one of the vipers, but *still*. Nile liked them, and if you brought in the biohazard clean up crew it was just like a little girl's sleepover. They even painted each other nails with venom laced polish and Nile let them do his makeup *once*.

The idea that Yassen had become...something *more* to Hunter was always an unspoken concern. The fact now, that Alex Rider, Hunter's *son* was displaying the same physical and

verbal tics as *Yassen*, who he had never *met*... well, it left a lot of questions. Especially of the illegitimate son kind. Nile *knew* that it wasn't, mostly because blood types and how Hunter tanned in the sun and Yassen instead needed to grouchily put on cream cheese level sunscreen, but it was a nice conspiracy theory that Nile was now rethinking. Mostly because Yassen had randomly kidnapped a child.

"So," Nile said casually, since Yassen had done another tick and said the half end of a sentence while clearly forgetting he hadn't verbally *said* the start of the sentence- "any reason why we're *cradle* robbing?"

A pause, then Rider gave a small hysterical snort. "Cradle? Because- because we're in the Cradle of Civilization? Mesopotamia?"

"See, I knew I liked you for a reason, Rider." Nile confirmed, "you understand my jokes. You understand my genius and I've been sorely lacking."

Yassen turned on the helicopter, readying for takeoff. Nile had no idea where they were going, but they had guns and plenty of fuel so likely it would be a nice joyride. They were off for a month anyways, supposed to be going through new weapon training on new illegal firearm models and machinery with the Taliban. That, and Nile was still sporting one hell of a concussion that was healing decently but still left him veering to the right side of his targets.

"Right," Rider said, swaying dazed and tired. A very eventful day for the fetal spy. "Where are we going?"

"North. Makhachkala." Yassen said.

"Bless you." Alex said without any hesitation.

"Hah," Nile said, "no really, why *there*?"

Yassen's relaxed body stiffened a tiny bit, a tense line near the back of his neck. He rolled one shoulder in a shrug. Nile wanted to gasp in delight.

"Is Maka-m...Makachalawala a real place?" Alex asked in a very tiny voice, absolutely butchering the poor city name.

"Yes." Yassen said, relaxing now that they had ascended so high they could make a decent time. "It is the capital city of the Republic of Dagestan. It touches the western shore of the Caspian Sea. There is strong political and military upset, which aids us with heightened security."

Alex shrunk a little lower in his seat, staring out the window quietly. The poor kid had no idea what he was in for.

They kept flying, the steady sound of the chopper blades quiet outside the heavy earmuffs. They had a month, and Yassen was taking them to *Russia*. Nile wanted to laugh and wheeze over the man's choice of location, but Yassen had said so many sentences today and Nile didn't want to set his progress back.

They landed on the outskirts, in some sort of farming area where the poor owners looked scandalized with their arrival. Yassen walked out, speaking to the owners and coming to some sort of agreement. Alex watched with wide eyes, looking around the farm and the animals grazing in the distance.

“So...he took us to *Russia*.” Alex said, finally saying what Nile had been gnawing on for hours.

“I *know*,” Nile consoled. Alex’s mouth twitched in the smallest arc of a smile, he looked down shyly at his hands.

“....Russians right?” Alex said, quiet and weak but his smile and confidence brightened a bit when Nile managed a bark of laughter.

Yassen returned and roped Nile into helping him cover the helicopter with a massive tarp and drag the thing into an empty straw silo. The harvesting season wasn’t there yet, so it would be decent cover for a while yet. The poor owners very anxiously gave Yassen the keys to their car, in return Yassen handed over some sort of envelope that likely had more cash than they made in a year. The woman looked faint, and clutched one of her hens to her chest like a spoof of an old movie.

They piled into the car, helpfully tossing things out the window that they didn’t need. Alex slid into the backseat this time, the only one that could prove difficult when they got through the security borders and patrols. Luckily, everyone in the entire car spoke Russian, either out of necessity or being petty.

The border security *did* prove a challenge, or rather the anxiety of the situation caught up to Alex. The boy jolted a good half dozen times in the back seat, gnawing on his lower lip viciously before he slumped and played pretend sleeping spontaneously. Yassen didn’t look surprised, because Yassen could never be surprised. The border security barked out basic demands and questions. Where were they from? Where were they going? Where are their papers? Who is the boy in the back?

Yassen performed smooth and perfect and they rolled on through with Alex deflating from all his tense fake-sleep. The boy jolted up, peering around excitedly as Yassen very calmly parked the car outside a home purchasing agency, and went inside.

“Don’t worry, this is standard.” Nile assured Alex in English. It was unlikely that anyone here walking by would speak it. “Yassen likes to have an actual house for some reason. I’m more of an apartment person, but you know how it is.”

Alex clearly did not know how it was, because Yassen returned quick and casual and slid into the car, pulling out onto the road, then the motorway with far too much ease. Alex at least displayed his anxiety openly.

“...you didn’t *really* just buy a house, did you?” Alex asked quietly.

“No.” said Yassen, “I removed a furnished house from their system. Bank owned. They will not notice its absence from the market until we have vanished.”

They drove for quite a while, clearly the house Yassen selected was decided based on its location. Far enough away from the city that the security patrols and occasional riots wouldn't bother them. Not so far that they couldn't get back to their helicopter and flee—although Nile had a feeling that Yassen would just rob the nearest airport of a jet when the time came. The man had unquestionable ability to steal things like jets.

The house was nice, a few bedrooms and a cozy fireplace. Nile was skeptical of decorative pillows and hated how tiny the coffee table was, but Yassen settled in easily by hauling out the duffel bag filled with guns they brought from the Taliban, and set about securing the house. It was unlikely that anyone would have spies in this back corner of Russia, but Yassen was fond of setting up tripwires on the windows and cameras in the corner. Figures he'd be a helicopter parent.

Rider settled into the one bedroom, staring blankly at the furnishings before he awkwardly sighed and flopped on the bed. Nile couldn't blame him, he also didn't have anything else to change into and smelled like dust. Yassen wasn't normally the impulsive one, but really this was not coordinated at all.

"I'm going to take a bath," Alex announced loudly, "because I smell like feet."

So, Nile picked his bed and crashed. It wasn't the nicest bed, but it was better than sleeping in a bartered car that Yassen would likely destroy soon and find another one. Hopefully the bastard got groceries too.

The Yassen-ticks all but disappeared, but Nile prepared himself for a whole new monster because never had he expected the *shy awkward Yassen*.

It was cute, but also very horrifying. Alex couldn't help but compare the slow very cautious movements and actions to that of a large lion trying to be gentle with its zookeeper. Yassen moved gracefully, but also paused and skittered on occasion. Bouncing on the balls of his feet indecisively, and not used to making such quick unprompted movements. He didn't know what to *do*, but clearly had a goal in mind. Yassen had an objective, and was second guessing how to get there for some unknown reason.

Except Alex *did* know, because Yassen somehow could *reset*. He didn't understand it, but he knew instantly that every occasion with the untimed, random hour resets....it had been *Yassen*. At night, he tended to reset from five in the morning to one, which meant that Yassen was getting a huge amount of sleep in only a fraction of the time. Yassen reset a few times during the day as well, on one occasion multiple times the same day. Had it been a mission going wrong? Had it been a situation where he didn't know what to do? Had *Alex* been the one to reset the day that Cray...or had it been *Yassen*?

If Yassen was resetting, that made a whole new perspective on the things he had done and seen. Alex had no illusions over the fact that Yassen had spared his life multiple times, but had he? Had Yassen ever *killed Alex*, and then decided he couldn't bare it and rewound just to save him? It would explain Sayle, the man that Yassen shot and left dead on a building. It would explain Cray, who Yassen shot in retribution after Cray had tried (and almost succeeded) in *killing him*.

Alex wanted to be angry, because so far Yassen's actions supported the idea that he had killed Alex before. Alex should be mad, because Yassen had *killed him*, but did it really matter if he didn't remember? Did it really count if it never happened? Alex could argue that the intentions behind the action did matter, but he too had felt the weird strange calm of knowing that everything you want is at your fingertips, and nothing existed to stop you. Alex had punched people, then not. He had stolen, and then not. Was he still guilty of a crime he never did? Was he still accountable for an action that never happened? If Alex were to blame and treat Yassen accordingly for *killing him*, then Alex was to be held responsible for....

"I killed Cray." Alex said out loud, and he hated the way Nile instantly perked his head up and looked over curiously.

"I killed Cray, and I've killed other people." Alex said. Staring forward blankly as horror washed through his bones and left him feeling empty. "I've killed a lot of people."

Nile stared at him, then slowly stood up and approached. He settled next to Alex, a warm heat radiating from his skin. Nile didn't reach out, but his presence was grounding.

"Well, I can't say it bothers me anymore," Nile started with a chipper tone, although Alex could tell he was serious. "But some people...it takes a while. Some people it cares a bit at them, and tears out little bits of them until it wrecks them. In our profession, we don't kill without *reason*. If we do, we're just psychotic or we're a serial killer. Don't get me wrong, some of our clients are deranged lunatics but *we aren't*."

Alex nodded slowly, feeling very overwhelmed with everything evolving so rapidly and out of control. "I killed people but I didn't mean to."

"You did what you had to do," Nile tried to console, "It doesn't get easier, but you can always try to fix that. If it wastes you away, then stop."

"You don't understand, I- I *can't*."

"Oh right," Nile said flippantly, "because MI6 blackmailed you into this and you don't get paid? Because your grades are suffering and you're traumatized so much you can't sleep anymore because you're being bossed around by a lot of pricks who won't leave you alone?"

Alex quieted, and Nile very slowly reached out to squeeze his knee gently. "You're doing great, kid. You've been dealt a super shit hand, but that doesn't mean you can't come out okay."

"You're really nice to me." Alex said.

"Well yeah," Nile said, "my closest friend is goddamn *Yassen Gregorovich*. He's the most anxious armadillo I know. Move to fast and *shhwoop!* There's that sweet repression!"

Alex smiled, looking a bit better, a bit happier with it all. "Thanks Nile."

"No problem kid."

Alex looked at him, *really* looked at him, then looked down at his knees. Shy, or deciding something Nile never thought he'd understand. Alex nodded, stood up, and walked off to the kitchen where the sink was working and had safe water. Nile smiled, because Alex really was a little Gregorovich.

Yassen came back with groceries, each from an assortment of different stores and in a brand new car. Nobody mentioned it, and Alex quickly melted into ravenously eating an entire loaf of bread. He reached out to something that looked like a bread pudding, then shuddered.

Yassen stumbled as well, clipping one hip into the nearest cabinet. He swung his head around, scowling slightly at a wide eye Alex holding his bread pudding guiltily.

“Alex, *not* when eating.”

Alex ducked his head, flushing clearly. Nile didn’t understand, but he didn’t need to. Yassen had brought all sorts of food, and he was fine with Yassen randomly scolding the child if it meant he got food.

After dinner, Alex had curled up on a couch reading a book that Yassen had also brought. The boy was stumbling through Cyrillic, apparently much better with the spoken word. Nile wished he had the time to read, instead of filling out online forms for extended leave and vacation. He had a feeling that Yassen wasn’t going to let go so quickly.

Nile knew Yassen was there before he saw him. His sixth sense buzzing as Yassen *very slowly* crept into the room. Not like his actual sneaking stealth way, but like his shy ‘I want to be included but don’t know how’ way. Normally, he’d make it just past the doorway, pause, and then walk away normally. This time, he *didn’t*.

Nile didn’t breathe as Yassen entered the room, eyes flickering around like a buzzing fly as he slowly padded to the couch nearest both he and Alex. Alex was still reading, woefully ignorant. Nile was pointedly staring at his phone, trying to not vibrate too much in his excitement. Yassen rounded the couch, pausing by the armrest, before he continued slowly around. He managed to find his seat, the one in the middle, and carefully sat down, pausing before pulling his legs up and tucking them around his side so he slouched backwards comfortably. He had nothing in his hands, instead he stared forward at a boring painting the house agency hung on the wall, and... *sat there*.

This was a big step for Yassen. A *very big step*. Nile resumed breathing, slightly shaky with excitement. The cat had entered the room, and *chosen to remain*.

“Yassen,” Alex said, looking up from the book with a small frown. “Your taste in books sucks.”

No, no! Don’t scare him away!

“Perhaps you do not admire classic literature.” Yassen said smoothly. Alex rolled his eyes, curling up a bit tighter as he turned the page of his book.

“So like, what do you guys *actually* do?” Alex asked, “I don’t think I can look on the internet for a job summary.”

“I normally show up, look cute, and boss people around.” Nile said. “I’m like...I bad group partner.”

“Ah, yeah I know your type.” Alex said. “Yassen...shows up and...kills employers?”

“*Hah!*” Nile laughed- but then Alex giggled quietly and Yassen stiffened like a very alarmed wide eye cat.

“Not in the living room, *Yassen!*” Alex said, voice mocking and scolding just from before. He then flipped a good twenty pages forward in his book, and continued to read. From that moment on, Yassen never jolted weirdly in the doorway, which was both hilarious and very odd to begin with.

Yassen’s anxiety and awkwardness only became more evident when in discussions, namely with Alex. When talking to Nile, he didn’t really talk that much. Which was completely fine considering that Nile talked enough for an entire unit and the helicopter pilot included. Alex though...Alex was *chatty*, and generally talked out loud to everyone and everything. He liked asking questions, fitting in dry sarcasm, and his dark humour was enough to make Princess Diana roll in her grave.

“So, why do you always leap so far?” Alex asked, looking over at Yassen who was working on more paperwork, or something that Nile didn’t care about. Maybe the man had finally taken up emotional poetry writing like the SCORPIA therapists all begged him to do.

“It’s easier.” Yassen said flatly. Not looking up. Nile said nothing but...yes? If you’re going to *leap*, you may as well jump far. It was practically in the name itself. Although Yassen *did* have long legs, so maybe Alex thought he would...no that didn’t make sense either.

“No it isn’t.” Alex argued. “*Further* is *harder*. Short stuff is easy.”

Yassen paused, and looked up at Alex with obvious curiosity. He instantly flickered his eyes away, staring just over Alex’s ear as once more, that pesky social awkwardness appeared.

“Leaping further is easier.”

“Uh, no. Not at all.”

“Further distances require more effort-.”

“You leap every *night!* Do you have any idea how *insane* that is?”

“Little Alex, you leap a half dozen times in an *hour*. *That*, throws off aim and calculations. It’s disorienting.”

Nile wondered, if he should possibly add jumping into his exercise routines. Or jumping jacks. Why was Yassen hopping while *shooting a gun*?

“Maybe *you*, are just bad at it.” Alex challenged. Yassen pulled his head back, looking like a dog that had sniffed something strong and foul.

“I am not. *You* are still a beginner...”

“You just said you can’t hop so many times in an hour!”

“You fail to leap further than a handful of hours-.”

‘*Jumping is measured by time?*’ Nile wondered, before ignoring it because the two were strange and should be best left alone. Maybe they were both...very passionate about jumping. Maybe Rider was on his school’s high-jump team. Competitive sack-races?

“Well, I can’t push it *far*-.”

“I have been successful with thirteen hours.”

Alex gasped, inhaling in surprise and awe. His eyes rounded like coins, and his jaw dropped ever so slightly before he noticed and fixed it. He shifted a little in his seat, suddenly exhibiting every symptom of ‘Yassen is *so cool*’ disorder like Nile saw in the new recruits. Poor kid.

“I can...” Alex floundered, looking around before he closed his book and held it up above his head. He was still sitting, so it wasn’t that high, but his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He inhaled slowly, and exhaled in a smooth controlled motion. He dropped the book.

Nile watched the book, expecting some sort of great feat. The book thumped to the ground, and Alex keeled over, heaving for breath and panting loudly. Nile thought, that he was an idiot.

“Impressive.” Yassen admitted, looking equally mystified and a little shy as Alex beamed toothily. “Five hops.”

‘*Correct that*,’ Nile thought, ‘*They’re both idiots.*’

“Have you applied this to fighting?” Yassen asked, tilting his head to *make actual eye contact*, before he fluttered and looked away quickly. Baby steps, gosh Nile was so proud of him.

“Uh, not more than the...wait until everything explodes, then hop down and disarm it?”

Nile wanted to ask how the hell Rider hadn’t died yet, but the first time they met things *had* done the same, so really he already knew. Weaponized beginners luck. No wonder Hunter was a beast if his son was *this*.

“I’ll show you tomorrow,” Yassen said, looking pleased, “not now. You need natural time to let your mind absorb your readings.”

“What do you want for food?” Nile offered, stretching out so his feet managed to flex right under Alex’s scrunched up nose, “I can make some pasta.”

“Pasta is fine!” Alex said happily.

Nile thought that life was good, that things were fine. They were most certainly *not fine*, because when they finished dinner and went off to bed, he woke up tired and cranky for his shift to learn, that Alex Rider, slept in.

Slept-in was a rare occurrence, the instances where you sleep so much you stay groggy and loose and happily relaxed. That normally was ten, maybe twelve hours. Not four like a certain Yassen Gregorovich monster.

“No,” Nile said in horror, “fuck you, *fuck you-*.”

“*Huh?*” Alex gurgled, slept in and choking on cereal at *four in the morning*.

“There’s two of you,” Nile said, “oh god there’s *two of them*.”

“Ignore Nile. He requires more than four hours of sleep.” Yassen advised, already dressed and fully functioning near the coffee pot.

“Oh, right,” Alex blinked, looking as if he had *legitimately forgot*, “he needs a lot of sleep right?”

“More than *four* you *vampires*.”

Alex laughed, his eyes crinkling up and the haze of tired extinguishing from the edges. Even Yassen looked happy, in a carefully hidden way. He was glowing, somewhere along the way of stealing a boy, a light had come back to Yassen. He seemed...so full of energy again.

“We’re going to go outside!” Alex let Nile know, sliding over the coffee helpfully, “don’t worry if you hear anything, no seriously, don’t worry.”

“Alex.” Yassen said fondly, “he is accustomed to it. No damage will result in our spar.”

“Yassen no,” Nile blurted, “you’re going to kill that kid.”

“*Yeah* he will.” Alex agreed contently. “He already smashed my face in, but you knocked my tooth out.”

“What? *When!*”

“In my dreams.” Alex shrugged it off, “come *on!* Lets go beat each other up already! Or are you still tired, *Yashka!*”

Yassen’s smile was a sharp baring his teeth. He didn’t seem alarmed in the slightest, in fact he seemed more indulgent when Alex snatched two steak knives from the cupboard.

“Not a *scratch* on him,” Nile warned Yassen. Nile already had white skin, he didn’t want to have white hair now too. “I mean it, we can’t go to the hospital or anything-.”

“Alex Rider will be fine.” Yassen said.

Alex was excited, and not prepared in the slightest for fighting an actual assassin. He wasn't trained in it. He had a few martial arts belts and experience wrestling, but that was nothing when facing an older amused man who had already blinded you from smashing your cheekbone into your eye.

"That reminds me," Alex said, "Why did you shoot Sayle?"

Yassen stilled at the question, pausing with his loose battle ready stance. He looked down, then up, then at the trees, then back to Alex's ear. Alex remembered Nile saying that Yassen was a very anxious person- even this whole experience was twisting Alex's nerves and making him feel very flighty. There was a sense of comfort that came with the knowledge that if anything bad happened, he could reset it. A security blanket, that had been torn free from him but had also left *Yassen*. They were both exposed, cursed with the knowledge that they wouldn't forget what they said or did even when everyone else did.

"He..." Yassen trailed off, voice shifting in tone. His face twitched slightly, fingers clenched into a fist. Yassen inhaled, then forced his body to relax again- Alex knew the signs, he would have already reset as well.

"He was...not...what I wished to see." Yassen said, voice unsteady, "In the world. His actions had...consequences I did not find appropriate."

Alex fiddled with his sleeve, frowning down at the grass. "So you let your employers do what they were going to, and then if it's bad you fix it?"

"That would be an adequate description." Yassen agreed.

So Alex went for it. "Did you kill me? With Sayle?"

Yassen stilled, and then side stepped and jerked his head. His hands flexed, his nostrils flared. There was no running away, not anymore when they would remember forever what they had never said. Yassen looked at Alex, paling slightly and flinching back before he kept his eyes affixed to the trees.

"...I..." He trailed off, licking his lips nervously. "I...accidentally. Yes."

"Accidentally." Alex echoed. Alex's hands were trembling slightly, so he curled them into fists and tucked them into his pockets.

"I...I was instructed to shoot you, but I...I aimed for non-vital." Yassen said quickly, rushing the words in a quiet exhale. "Sayle was ...not in agreeance. He shot you, and I killed him. The wounds were severe, and you..."

"I died?" Alex asked, because the concept of death and something concrete finished did not feel possible. It felt beyond his reach, something he could never have now.

"No. Sayle had...modified health records and documentation, more than believed. I had... *thought*, that you were compatible in blood but you..you were not...you had systemic shock

and..." Yassen trailed off, his voice nearly cracking at the end. Yassen looked haunted, eyes flickering about as he shifted agitatedly.

Alex never spent much time in class, but he did pay attention sometimes. The unit on Punnet Squares, the pop quizzes that he and Tom took. They had a unit on blood typing, how different people were compatible or different or which types were dominant and recessive. You could accept the same blood type or a few others, and Alex learned that he could accept only a select few. Someone asked what would happen, and the explanation soared over his and Tom's head except key phrases like '*body-wide red blood cells exploding*' and '*apoptosis*' and '*in severe cases- death.*'

He didn't pay too much attention because blood still bothered him and he tried to hide it. Tom asked him if he was alright, because he never knew that Alex was *afraid of blood*. It was suspicious, how he bolted out of class when instructed to prick their fingers because blood spilled over hands and pale skin and *the smell was so strong...*

Alex still remembered the nights when he woke up screaming, a sobbing mess because inside his eyes and inside his body he still felt Yassen's head thump to his shoulder and the grotesque splatter of Cray on a plane. He still smelled the burnt rubber and the destruction and chaos and the way Yassen's sticky hot blood soaked into his pores. He still had nightmares, flashes where a red tomato on the kitchen counter and powerpoint slides in biology left him flinching.

He had never *ever* considered that Yassen had his own demon.

"I tried to save your life," Yassen said quietly, "and my efforts condemned you to die in my arms. No matter how hard I tried to save you."

"Why?" Alex asked, voice barely more than a whisper.

Yassen's shoulders hunkered inwards. "Hunter died...alone. So I swore that I would never let his child share the same fate."

Alex didn't know he was crying until he sniffled and brushed his face, staring down at the ground because they couldn't dare meet each others eyes.

"You..." Alex said. "You died too. When Cray...you told me to come over and..."

Yassen made a small noise of comprehension. He looked embarrassed, uncomfortable as he nodded slowly. "Yes. The...the reset occurs moments before...it is instinctual. Uncontrollable."

"Why did you have me come over?" Alex said, clenching his jaw, "why would you *tell me that!*"

Yassen stared at him, and looked away. "I didn't know if I *would* die." Yassen said. "I didn't...want to die alone."

Alex could feel his body shaking. The broken hitching of his breathing, the way he trembled like a leaf and even Yassen looked pale and sickly with guilt. Alex almost vomited on the ground, he almost turned and ran because he wanted to run so far.

“How.” Alex demanded, knowing that his voice was wet and blubbery, “how did this happen. How the *bloody hell* did this shit *happen!*”

Yassen shrunk in on himself again, staring at the ground. “I...I don’t-.”

“You *owe me an explanation!*”

“...I died.” Yassen said quietly. “Or I...I *tried...*”

Alex felt his mind scream at him to stop, but he didn’t. He took one step, then two, then another until he was shakily running and slamming into the taller man and sobbing into his shirt. They were both such horrible beautiful messes.

“How did this happen to us?” Alex asked, demanded and crying through it. “It hurts so much, how did this *happen?*”

Yassen curled downwards, his chin on Alex’s hair and wrapping around him in something too disfigured to ever be an embrace. “I was...lost, without Hunter. I...I was foolish, and much like you. I went and challenged fate, or *luck*, or some incarnation beyond us. I like to imagine that a bit of Rider Luck remained, and my own hatred and anger turned it into a curse.”

“A bit of *luck?*”

“Yes,” Yassen said quietly. His chest heaved, although his voice was steady. Alex wondered if he had ever told someone else these words, but they were both lost and drifting and needed each other to confirm that they were *real*. “I...I imagine Hunter would be quite mad with me. Perhaps his last action was to sway my hand. Are you familiar with Russian Roulette?”

“You died?”

“No, little Alex.” Yassen laughed sadly, “Rider Luck, after all. It seems it’s never quite...lost its charm.”

They cried, because they both needed it and it was so easy to find yourself lost and adrift and drowning in time. Her waters were cold and lonely, and only so much laughter and kindness could drag you from solipsism.

The first time that Alex settled himself, inhaling and letting out gently, he met Yassen’s eyes and verbally said for the first time, “*Reset.*”

Yassen was arched over him, chin pressed into his hair. Alex’s sobbing faltered and faded off almost instantly. Yassen’s face hurt and his body slowed from its previous trembling.

“You sneaky child.” Yassen murmured. “All that, to get here.”

Alex wriggled his head, peering up with wet eyes and a dazzling bright smile. “It worked, didn’t it. Weren’t you the one that said something like... *Maybe next time?*”

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

This one took FOREVER.

Here is an actual plotline, where things go downhill.

and where Alex gets a little bit insane, and now you see why Yassen is so terrifying on missions through the slow decay of Alex.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alex Rider returned to MI6 in a blaze of glory, primarily due to his stolen boat fumigating the shoreline with chemical incineration along the Thames. He waved his arms, shouting to the banks as if somehow the pedestrians didn't notice his noise or the toxic air pollution.

Unnecessarily, Alex skittered across the deck and console and alarmingly found access to the horn on deck.

The London Coast Guard apprehended him, voiding the handcuffs after some sort of story. The pollution into the Thames would likely result in some sort of lawsuit (slipped under the table, of course, he didn't damage the extinct wildlife near any capacity to the oil barrels dumped last week). Alex was escorted to the nearest police station, where he was then apprehended with unlocked handcuffs to await transportation. MI6 arrived, frogmarched Alex to the closest car (where he elected to sit in the passenger seat) and moved into MI6 custody.

Alex Rider had a haircut (that looked a bit short for his usual messy look), a tan across his nose, more freckles, and a strange look in his eyes. Not unhinged or manic, but sly and cunning with a charming level of awareness that she knew he hadn't acquired from before. The gaze of young boy moments away from stealing your family heirlooms, or preparing a heist for something far more valuable.

Mrs. Jones had seen many people over the years and had listened to their fears and worries. More names than she could remember, more sobbing families as she personally gave her condolences.

She had also interrogated hostages, captives that were obtained through their secret services and strapped down to a metal table. She'd heard more swear words or creative insults than most, heard more accents and dialects than countries in Africa.

She knew when she was looking at something wrong- when there were smarmy agents trying to lie to her face. She could read it through the small twitches in Rider's expression, the tiny arc each bone in his finger made as it tapped against the table calmly.

“Ma’am?” her aide asked quietly. The one-way glass was a durable barrier, but only one wall between her and the twitchy impossibly *wrong* agent. One wall was too few for her tastes.

The agent asked quietly, “how would you like to proceed?”

She pursed her lips, scanning his easy posture once more. He was too confident, too aware and bright for any normal tricks. She didn’t like it. This was a complete shift from the identity Rider had fallen into before his mission failure. A lack of characterization every psychologist had given him. Alex was, in their books now, an unknown.

They sent him to the Middle East to expose him, to shock him out of the numbing state he had unknowingly stumbled into. Had it worked? *Certainly*. Was she happy with what she was looking at?

“I don’t trust him,” Mrs. Jones said, fingers tapping against her arm warily. It wasn’t so much a give on her part, but a sign for the nervous agent standing at her side.

She asked: “Where’s Psych?”

“Already on the cameras, Ma’am,” her agent stated, “They’re evaluating and have been since we had visual.”

Alex Rider was an enigma, one that snowballed out of control into a lethal avalanche. He was a walking natural disaster- namely a wildfire or more recently an aquatic biohazard.

She wasn’t willing to take any chances. Cooly, stated: “I want the tranquillizers at the ready. Medical is prepped?”

“Yes ma’am,” her aide said, snapping to attention as Mrs. Jones forced relaxation into her posture. She couldn’t let Rider know that anything was wrong.

Treat him like someone else, she thought. She had dealt with Yassen Gregorovich before, and as much as she hated it, she could treat Rider like that man. Rider had already been unknowingly demonstrating characteristics, now behind his easy smiles and small tells, he fit the persona of Gregorovich scarily well.

“I want those tranquillizers ready the moment I give the signal,” she said.

Not caring to listen to the finer details of their rudimentary understanding of Rider, Mrs. Jones opened the door and stepped inside.

She was resolute, determined to keep everything a well-contained secret. She would not budge- that was the only way to reason with Yassen Gregorovich. Never play every card at each encounter- use them sparsely and so far apart he would always be caught off guard. Never barter within a ten-minute period. Discussions had to always last well into the night.

She stepped into the room, the door closing quietly behind her. The moment the door secured, Alex Rider shifted in his seat. He threw a glance at the table, scowling at it briefly before his face became void of any emotion. Within a fraction of a moment, all active reactions faded to blank befuddlement out of proportion to the time.

It was unlike anything she had seen before. All curiosity or apprehension simply...washed away. He looked at her with strange eyes that seemed a bit too bright, a bit too *knowing*...

'Gregorovich,' she thought to herself, *'has the same expression.'*

"Hello, Alex," she said. Settling into the chair across from him, she crossed her arms on her lap and her legs at the ankle. "It's nice to have you back."

Alex stared at her, tilting his head ever so slightly. He didn't look calculating or inquisitive. He looked *bored*, aware and bored of interaction on a personal level.

Thought was below him as the conversation was one he had heard a thousand times and grew bored hours ago.

Rider said, "I know why you sent me to the Middle East. I keep telling you, I'm *fine*."

She knew then, that she would carry the true reason he had been sent there to her grave. He could never know, which meant she could never tell another person.

Treat him like Gregorovich, she thought distantly. "We're worried."

"Then don't be," he said.

She hated it. How had the sweet tired child turned into something like this? A blank numb mannequin, capable of shifting and saying all the right words. He didn't blink, he just looked at her and then through her- she wasn't an important or intimidating component to their little exchange. Psych would be having a field day.

Please, Alex. "We care about you."

He didn't react, no life in his eyes. He looked worse than ever before.

"Can you tell us what happened?" she tested carefully. "What happened?"

"You sent me there, shouldn't you know?"

This isn't working, she thought calmly. "It didn't go according to plan."

"Your missions never do," he said, "But you don't care to listen to that, do you?"

"Alex-."

Alex rolled his eyes with a bored exasperated puff. "Can we get on with it? This is really boring already. Look, I went to the Middle East, met up with someone called Nile, spent the last few months playing cat and mouse with that bastard before I could *finally* get away and hitch a ride back across Europe-."

He's already rehearsed this, she thought. Horrified, she maintained a fake face. *Treat him like Gregorovich. Don't act, unless it's swift. Don't play all your cards at once.*

Spread out the conversation.

He'll say exactly what you want to hear.

"I'm so happy you're safe," she said carefully. Emotional reactions would never work on trained agents, and somehow, Rider *was* trained now.

Had he been interrogated? Had Nile even been there?

"Right," Alex said bluntly. "I'm fine."

Mrs. Jones nodded slowly. "What about the rest of the team?"

Alex's eyes sparked, a light of *something* passing through them. The boy stumbled, hands visibly jolting before he quickly looked away. "Oh, them, uh..."

She didn't press further than a quiet, "do you know what happened?"

Alex drummed his fingers along his arm. "It was a while ago..."

It wasn't. Rider hadn't gone in *with* a team.

How? She thought frantically. Did Grief have another one? An imposter? Rider wouldn't forget something like that so soon. Is he having information fed to him?

Alex's eyes flickered anxiously. His smooth rehearsal had somehow gone surprisingly off course. "They uh, didn't make it."

Mrs. Jones spread her hand wide, each finger outstretched below the table. Beyond Rider's line of sight, she displayed her cue. He would have no way to recognize her signal, let alone be prepared for it.

Yet, the moment she spread her hand, the boy violently jolted. Either in alarm or anger, his face twisted into a snarl. A millisecond after a dart hit true, Rider slammed his hand against his throat. He wavered the smallest of moments, slumping to the floor from his chair with a boneless clambering flail.

For a moment, Mrs. Jones wondered if Alex Rider was having a seizure. His body twitched, jerking forward and back through a spontaneous momentum she couldn't place. Being pulled in one direction before frantically in another- his eyes fluttered, shuddering one way then another. Mouth choking on words that changed so quickly from one to the next, he couldn't quite finish a sentence.

"Wha-," he started before jerking one way, "Shi- no- godda- come *on-*."

It was a quick-acting tranquilizer, one that would take down an adult man in half the time Alex was struggling through.

He moved oddly, pushed and pulled through inertia with no cause as he slurred broken fragments. "- *shit no...* why is-.... *come on alr-...*"

Finally, he slowly twitchingly succumbed and dropped lifeless to the floor. His skull slammed onto the surface with a wet *crack!* His limp legs slid from his chair to the ground with the sound of a dropped towel, laying in line with the rest of his body.

Mrs. Jones closed her eyes and breathed. She needed a few moments to recover, she couldn't think of Alex as her agent anymore.

“Status?” she asked calmly.

The intercom clicked on. “*The dosage should have put him out immediately, I don't know why-!*”

She lifted one hand and they drew silent. She breathed and let her mind calm. “How long will he be out?”

The intercom shifted on, the agent sounding sufficiently ashamed. “*He should be unconscious for anywhere between eight and ten hours, ma'am, but with how he reacted to it-.*”

“I understand,” she said, “please have him prepped for moving as soon as possible. I don't know *what* happened to him, but I want him to be secured and moving.”

“*Understood, ma'am.*”

Alex woke up feeling like he had been smashed by Yassen's heavily armoured boot. His head felt heavy- too heavy. Trying to move only made his skull flop around unsupported. He moaned a soft breathy whine that made him far too aware of how horrible his mouth tasted.

He felt like absolute *shit*. What had *happened*?

“Rider?” Someone asked, tapping on his face and knocking his skull a different way. He tried to bat them away- likely Nile. Jesus, what had Yassen *hit* him with?

“I don't understand, it's only been a few hours, he shouldn't be awake-.”

“I don't know either-.”

Fuck this, Alex thought with another moan, his head was *killing him*.

‘Reset’-

Alex slumped boneless, his head smashing with a rattling *crack-*

‘Reset’

Alex slumped-

'Reset'

Alex slu-

Alex woke up feeling like he had been smashed by Yassen's heavily armoured boot. His head felt horrible- his nose wet. He moaned, a wet hoarse noise as his nostril began to leak blood.

"Rider?" someone asked him. "I don't understand, it's only been a few hours- oh *shit*. He's bleeding-."

"Grab a doctor, maybe the concussion is worse than we thought-."

Alex wanted to cry, his head was splitting. A high rattling noise somewhere behind his eyes and the pulsing pain of something fractured in his skull. He felt completely helpless, weak as a baby and equally gelatinous.

"We're giving him something else, just enough so we can-."

Alex felt it smash into him like Nile body tackled him. Everything felt so heavy and wrong and *wrong*...

When Alex woke up, it was to a series of restraints around his wrists and ankles, and a thick padded belt across his abdomen. A plastic pipe blew air into his nostrils, smelling and tasting sterile and disgusting. A monitor near his side kept an even beat. A little clamp stuck firmly to one of his fingers.

Alex slumped against the bed, feeling miserable around the splitting agony of a headache. He moaned, gurgling pitifully from the back of his throat. Maybe Yassen would have some goddamn mercy and just reset whatever the hell he had done.

"Careful there," someone shushed him gently, a hand brushing against his brow. "You were in a rough state. There was enough adrenaline in your body to break vessels in your nose and skull- we fixed the problem, but you must be careful."

That's not Yassen, Alex realized tiredly. Forcing his eyes open and lolling his head to the side took enough effort he wheezed. He felt horrible.

"Jones?" Alex slurred, unsure if it was audible. The woman sat in a nondescript chair at his side, a clipboard on her lap with an empty sheet. Alex felt his stomach curdle.

"You're with me now?" she asked gently. "You were having fits earlier. The doctors had never seen a case like yours. There were uncontrollable adrenaline surges, with reactions

from your nervous system leading to muscle contractions and seizure-like symptoms. They cleared the pressure around your brain and repaired the burst vessels. You weren't hurt long enough to seriously damage your brain, but it's worrying that such a rapid onset occurred with a sedative."

God, had resetting somehow messed with his *brain*?

They didn't know how the resetting worked, maybe it *did* carry over. An adrenaline rush every time he reset back into his body? Was that how he fought off the sedative (what the *hell*?) for so long?

'Great, it's like rollover phone minutes,' Alex thought exhaustedly, *'except its adrenaline and I feel like shit.'*

He felt horrible and was pretty sure he said as much considering Jones' thin smile.

"Precaution," she apologized, reaching to fiddle with a small dial. "Now that you're awake, I have some questions for you."

He felt the haze recede slowly, like fog in the morning sun. Slowly, he began to feel more and more, like water brushing along his legs and toes. His fingers still felt galaxies away.

"Mmm?"

"Yes," Mrs. Jones said politely. "I know you were lying, Alex. You weren't in the Middle East, our satellite images showed you willingly stepping into a helicopter with SCORPIA agents Cossack and Nile. At this time, you are labelled a terrorist and will be treated as such."

Alex froze. What warmth he had regained from the lack of sedative turned ice cold. Adrenaline, ironically, rushed and cleared his head and illuminated his horrible headache.

"What?" He croaked, much more aware of the soft restraints. Tight enough across his chest to prevent him from getting enough momentum to dislocate a shoulder or slip-free. "*What?*"

"Please cooperate and we will treat you much better," Mrs. Jones said politely. "You will gain a lighter sentence or better accommodations."

Alex thrashed, wincing as his vision twisted at the movement. "*Better accommodations?* I'm bloody tied to a *bed!*"

Mrs. Jones blinked quickly like she hadn't noticed that little fact. She stared at him, calculating and confused for the rarest moment. "You are, it was a safety precaution."

"My ass!" Alex snapped, thrashing to his best ability once again. "How long have I been here? How long?"

She didn't blink. "You've been sedated for over nine hours, however, we required further dosage for surgery to remove the pressure of your skull. I believe it has been around twenty-seven hours since our last meeting."

Alex stared at her. "Twenty-seven hours."

“Correct.”

His breathing turned significantly shakier. *Fuck*. He couldn’t reset that far- and if he *did* reset back, what if he landed in the middle of surgery? *His surgery*?

He didn’t know the effects of resetting, what if it had more effect on his brain. Jumping back at the wrong moment could *kill him*.

“Shit,” He breathed, going limp in his restraints. “I’m actually *stuck*.”

“You are,” Jones said, blissfully unaware of the conundrum at hand. “We want to help, Alex. Where did they take you?”

He stared blankly, not like before because now he had lost hope. He looked like a child, her heart went out to him.

“Twenty-seven hours,” he repeated numbly. “That’s...too long.”

“You’re medically fine,” Jones unhelpfully informed him. “Cleared, nearly.”

He couldn’t jump twenty-seven hours. He hadn’t ever tried to push it beyond multiple short jumps. Would a larger jump require more energy? Have a worse impact?

‘I need to try,’ he thought, already knowing that he couldn’t jump back now. He had to jump back, end up now, and somehow alert the only person in the entire world that could help him out.

“Shit,” Alex breathed pinched. “Shit. God *dammit*.”

“Take your time,” Jones said politely. Alex nodded calmly, breathed deep, and let himself scream.

He thrashed back and forth, jerking at the restraints with only a small amount of room. He rolled his head back and forth, gnashing at the air and lolling lame as he shrieked like something furious. The doctors rushed in, pausing and vanishing sheepishly as Jones waved them off.

Alex went limp, flushed and panting and furious. He felt better admittedly and would love to reset just to erase that embarrassing moment.

‘I need to store it up,’ he realized tiredly. ‘ I can’t reset at all, but I need to somehow send a signal.’

Which meant he would have to do something horrible to get out of here.

If he *didn’t* pull this off, then his life would be over and Yassen’s would also be ruined with the lack of his stabilizing force. But, if he agreed to Jones’ claims and still failed, then all the information he had would be used- he would have betrayed Yassen.

But if it *worked...* then he would be rescued without saying a single word, and Jones would never be the wiser.

Please work with me, Yassen.

“Okay,” Alex said flatly, knowing he looked as tired as he felt. “What do you want to know?”

Jones lifted one eyebrow. “Just like that?”

“Yeah,” Alex said with a dry mouth. “But I want out of here. I want to be set free or I’m not telling you shit.”

Jones stared at him, scouring his face and the nervous sweat on his skin. She said hesitantly, “you aren’t trained.”

“No shit,” he grunted, wriggling with the restraints. “You never bloody trained me.”

‘*Yassen did*,’ he wanted to say, just to see her face. It had been so long since other people had been active participants in his life- he didn’t know how to interact with them.

She leaned back in her chair, crossing her ankles and looking at her blank paper in thought.

“Okay...” she said slowly. “You answer my questions, and I’ll let you go.”

Not forever, even he knew that. He just needed to get out, cause a big enough scene to actively draw Yassen’s eye, deal with the consequences and then- *somewhat*, reset back here. Before he gave out all the information.

He needed to work *fast*

“Alright,” Alex said, trying to resist the urge to fidget. “Can you let me out of these cuffs?”

Jones looked at him flatly, he wiggled a little extra for emphasis. “Oh come on, I’m sure you’ve got guns or tasers or- I don’t know. A blow-gun with frog poison. I’m not going anywhere.”

Jones didn’t react, even as Alex groaned and flopped back on his bed. The lack of painkillers was starting to sink in, buzzing in his head and making his senses a little bit brighter. This wasn’t a conventional interrogation, but it wasn’t a conventional hospital visit either.

“Please?” he asked quietly, closing his eyes with a shaky sigh. “Please let me out?”

Jones sighed slightly through her nose and leaned forward just a bit. “Where were you, Alex Rider?”

“What time is it?” Alex asked. He needed to know the time, how much time he had to effectively jump.

Jones’s face was cool and calm. “Eight in the morning.”

“Where am I?” Alex asked. “Where am I, Mrs. Jones?”

“Secured,” she said dryly. “That’s all I’m willing to tell you.”

“That could mean anything,” he argued with a slight whine. “Where *am* I?”

She crossed her ankles and recited a series of numbers Alex recognized as coordinates. Nile liked to tease him with coordinates- which would have never been useful except for *now*.

He hysterically thanked every rational thing he could think of and forced himself to remember the coordinates. Absolutely useless information if she was lying, but MI6 was stuck up enough to actively tell the truth and use just useless information instead.

“Thanks,” he croaked dryly before flopping back against the pillow. “That really cleared things up.”

“Where were you, Alex Rider?”

It was eight in the morning, so if he managed a six-hour jump which was possible, he’d need to manage everything done by one in the afternoon. A nine-hour jump was pushing his abilities but would mean he’d have to finish everything by five in the afternoon.

He would have to do everything in *nine hours*. No resets, no jumping. No mistakes allowed at all. He was so used to taking as much time as he needed, nine hours felt like impossibly little.

“Okay,” he breathed, resigning himself to this *hell* he was about to experience. He could do this. He had to do this. “I was in Russia.”

Mrs. Jones’ head snapped up, stilling on him with an intent degree of focus. “Russia?”

“Yeah,” Alex said with a dry mouth. “Some small farming town. Yassen Gregorovich and Nile...whatever his last name is, took me there.”

She looked at him, an unreadable expression crossing her face. “How did he take you there?”

“Helicopter,” Alex said, screwing his eyes shut. “He landed at some person’s farm and bought their car. We drove into the city, he went into a home agency and removed a listing. We stayed there until he had to leave, and dropped me off near the Thames.”

Jones’s eyes widened slightly, her breathing a tad quicker. She lifted her pen, paused for the slightest of moments, and then began to write what he said on her paper. She believed him.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “How long were you there then?”

I don’t remember. “The entire time.”

Jones nodded, accepting that answer. “Can you confirm that you were truly with Yassen Gregorovich?”

Alex blinked quickly, feeling just a tad bit irritated. “Are you serious? Are you bloody serious right now? You were *just saying that*- I- argh. Look, I want out of here, are you going to make this happen or not?”

“You don’t have the footing for demands.”

Alex bared his teeth at the ceiling of his room. “Then I guess you aren’t going to find out about Yassen Gregorovich. Go ahead and interrogate me, but it’s going to look bad when I don’t appear again.”

“You were already missing, this extended hiatus won’t be noticed.”

Yeah right. “I was talking about *someone* noticing my absence. Or rather, *two people*.”

Jones paused, then she huffed quietly and nodded. She set aside her papers, reaching across with slow movements to undo the strap across his waist. Once it went slack, Alex could tell he had enough vantage to dislocate a shoulder, maybe get his body weight behind some thrashing.

But he wasn’t that desperate. Jones reached down, undoing the restraints around his upper thighs, then his ankles, finally she undid his right arm, leaving him to unfasten his left.

“We’re at an impasse, Alex,” she said calmly. “You have information I am very interested in hearing.”

“And I’m fine for telling you,” Alex said bitterly “But I want out of here in an hour. I am dying for some chips and there is no power in the world that will stop me from getting some bloody food.”

She huffed, lip quirking the smallest bit amused. “I can agree to that. Are you...alright?”

‘Playing for sympathy. Where was that when you drugged me?’ “Yeah, I...I’m just really tired.”

“We’ll have you out in no time, it’s alright,” she soothed quietly. “Do you remember anything about where you were staying?”

Alex closed his eyes and choked back the guilt. “Suburban home. I had my own bedroom. There was a fenced backyard and a city not that far away.”

“You’re doing amazing,” she said, scribbling down something. Alex recited the coordinates she had said earlier, determined to remember them. “What about Yassen Gregorovich? Can you verify the information we’ve gathered before?”

“He isn’t exactly a chatty person,” Alex said bitterly. “He sleeps four hours a night. Likes a Glock gun the most. Has a bad sense of humour.”

Jones nodded slowly, her face melting into regret. “Oh, Alex. I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

Alex shrugged his shoulders and ignored her eyesight. 'What a bitch.'

"Can you confirm this?" Mrs. Jones asked politely, voice gentle in his ears, "we've had a suspicion that Gregorovich has some degree of an anxiety disorder, have you seen anything similar?"

"Anxiety?" Alex dumbly repeated, trying to fathom where she got that.

"Specifically, we have estimated the presence of nongeneralized social phobia," Mrs. Jones explained calmly, "have you noticed anything that could corroborate this?"

"Are you asking if Yassen Gregorovich is afraid of *crowds*?"

"Allow me to elaborate," she corrected herself, "typical social situations with interaction are most easily noticed. Did you notice a reluctance to meet new people? Talking in meetings or groups? Starting conversations? Eating, drinking, or working while being observed?"

Alex stared at her dumbly. She elaborated carefully, "individuals with social anxiety disorder fear doing anything in which they view as embarrassing or humiliating whenever possible, and will go to great lengths to avoid appearing as such."

Alex Rider blinked owlishly twice and said quietly and stunned, "huh."

"I take that as a yes?" Mrs. Jones asked. Alex Rider blushed slightly and averted his eyes with a quiet hum.

"Thank you for the information," Mrs. Jones said carefully, "now, I believe we established a quid-pro-quo?"

Alex looked at her sharply, chewing on his lower lip. He said carefully, "I want to be let out. I don't care if you have people following me, but I *demand* chips."

He waited nervously, hopefully, the bluff would take.

Mrs. Jones sighed through her nose and shook her head. She lifted one hand, a cue to someone in the other room. They entered, fluttering around the IV drips and oxygen around his nose.

"Everything is good, ma'am," they said quickly, disconnecting the oxygen tube to stop the flow of stale air into Alex's nostrils. "He can be discharged if he is careful."

"You have an intracranial sensor to monitor the pressure within your brain," Mrs. Jones informed him seriously, "you have a recovered number of arteries that were repaired from an aneurysm. You must be *careful*, Alex. If you were anyone else, I would not release you."

"Too bad," Alex snapped quickly, "you can't just keep me here, and I want decent food."

The medical aid fluttered around, unclipping the oxygen saturation device from his finger and the various electrodes. Slowly, the beeping stopped and Alex came closer to freedom.

“You’re going to be tailed,” Mrs. Jones stated, “to assure Yassen Gregorovich does not appear. This is for your safety.”

‘Shite that is,’ Alex thought and faked his appreciation.

It took long, far too long to escape the front door. His headache pulsed agonizingly. There was a hole in his skull with a weird metal port covered in a clear wrap near his left ear, but he covered it the best he could with his hair.

Freedom felt like sunshine on his skin and the glare of windshields on his eyes. He had no sunglasses or pocket change, but he did have three agents politely shadowing him like personal bodyguards.

“Oi,” Alex snapped at the closest one bitterly, “can you call me a cab? Or are you just going to stare at me all day?”

“Where would you like to go, Mr. Rider?” the agent said monotonously.

“Uh, my friend’s house?” Alex said obviously, “Tom? You know who he is?”

“We know who Tom is,” the agent said cryptically, lifting one hand. On cue, a black car had its engine turn on in the opposite parking lot, flashing its lights pointedly.

Alex had to admit, MI6 was good when they wanted to be.

Tom was a little alarmed when Alex showed up at his front door but handled it well.

“Uh, hey man...” Tom said shakily, still wearing his pyjamas despite the clock slowly moving towards 11 in the morning. “...why is there British secret service in my driveway?”

“Let me in and I’ll tell you,” Alex said quickly, trying to keep his voice low, “I think they called me a terrorist.”

“They did *what*?” Tom yelped, nervously eying the three agents with twitching hands, “mate, what did you *do*?”

“Let me in,” Alex hissed quietly, brushing past Tom to sneak inside.

The moment the door closed, they rushed quietly to Tom’s room, then into Tom’s *closet* with yet another door between them. For a moment, only their hushed breathing was heard before Tom whispered, “mate, what the *fuck*?”

“Okay, so...” Alex said, woozily remembering that he did have a severe head wound, “you know the rewind thing?”

“Yeah?” Tom asked in return, voice trembling, “you weren’t playing with a football this time, were you?”

Alex laughed a tad shakily, leaning against the wall, “no...not really. Look, I need to get on the news.”

“What?” Tom hissed, “are you insane? *Why?*”

“I need to get in contact with someone,” Alex said quickly, “look, if this works, you won’t even *remember* this.”

“Oh my- you found someone *else?*” Tom asked him, bumping their shoulders together, “you found someone else who can bop back?”

Alex wet his lips, vertigo tugging him distinctly to the right. “Yeah I think so- I just...I just need to get his attention, so he can get me *before* this shite happens.”

They sat there quietly, Tom trying to process but failing as evidenced by his occasional hysterical giggles. Alex curled his legs and placed his forehead on his knees, his stomach was cramping and in truth, he had no desire for chips.

“Okay, okay.” Tom said, barely composed, “so you need to go on international tellie, so that you can bop back so that never happens, so you can get a jailbreak hours ago.”

“Exactly,” Alex summarized tiredly, “I tried to reason it out, but I reckon I only have until five this afternoon before I *have* to jump or I can’t go back.”

“Shite, that’s not a lot of time,” Tom hissed out sympathetically, “I don’t know what you *could* do. Like, even if you rob a bloody bank, it takes time to get your face up there.”

‘*Rob a bank*,’ Alex thought as slowly, a horrible idea grew. ‘*Rob a bank*... Tom, you’re a *genius*.’

“I’m really not,” Tom giggled anxiously, “but what did I just inspire?”

“The *bank*, Tom!” he stressed, “not the money kind! MI6 is too well protected, but I have information, they can’t afford to take me out right now! I don’t need to rob MI6, I need to go for their boss!”

“You’re gonna rob the Blunthead?”

“No,” Alex said with a manic grin hidden in the closet, “I’m gonna kidnap the bloody Queen.”

Despite Ian doing a wonderful job hiding his weapons, he never got all of them.

Alex wasn’t fond of guns, and he had absolutely no intention to use them, but returning to his house was a wonderful cover story (namely to get a change of clothes not provided by a hospital). Tom came over with him, filling the rooms and hallways with idle chatter as Alex slipped on a new outfit and a cleaner sweatshirt. Struggling for the briefest of moments, he slipped on a pair of briefs over top of his boxers to serve the job of the world’s most uncomfortable holster to jam one of Ian’s guns.

Tom’s eyes flickered a few too many times to Alex’s crotch, hopefully, the MI6 agents outside would just presume Tom had some repressed homosexual tendencies and not that Alex was armed.

“How are you feeling, buddy?” Tom asked him nervously.

Alex weighed the risks, and said: “pretty cocky honestly.”

Tom groaned, flopping back on Alex’s bed. Jack wasn’t home, which was the only reason they were still going to go through with it.

It was amazing how quickly time flew when Alex had little control over it. Relentlessly, it drove on. It was humbling to remember his own mortality.

That, and his head was fucking killing him.

“Hey so, what happened with that one girl?” Alex asked Tom, lifting his eyebrows pointedly. Tom spluttered, struggling to come up with any sort of defence.

“There- I- You’re leaping to assumptions mate-.”

“Nah, she did those high braids, right? The really hard ones down the middle?”

All the while Tom talked, Alex flitted around his room to gather what small bits and bobs he had accumulated over the years of unethical missions. Metal corrosive zit cream (which really had lasted him forever with how little he needed), stun grenades were hidden in a Pez dispenser, A wallet with bladed credit cards able to slice through doors and pry open a small car.

His final true good was the universal key that worked within MI6, taken more to spite Alan Blunt a long time ago. If the palace (wasn’t that a wild thought) truly did work with MI6, then the card would work everywhere.

“Okay,” Alex said, breathing out nervously as he settled his sweatshirt and eyed Tom carefully. Tom fidgeted warily, expecting something horrible.

Alex checked his watch, past noon now. “Let’s go get some chips, mate.”

The car outside watched them, and casually opened the door to allow them inside. It would save Alex precious minutes to get to downtown London, where he (lied) told them about the best little chip shop right off the main street. The joys of people watching, and how nice it would be to visit the gardens and cloud watch for once.

(If he implied he had been locked up for a while, well, they didn’t need to know the truth).

Tom was rightfully terrified to be there, shaking in his boots at the sight of the MI6 agents and their barely hidden firearms. Alex felt bad, but with any luck, his friend wouldn’t remember this.

Maybe *Alex* wouldn’t remember this, because his head was really smarting him.

Dropped off, Alex jogged lightly inside the nearest chip store. Once inside, he staggered slightly as his head ached hideously and nearly careened him into a wall.

“Whoa there,” Tom said, catching his friend with one arm, “don’t go falling for me already.”

“Hah hah,” Alex said, recovering as quickly as he could. Rightening up, he slid into a booth across Tom as his friend ordered up some battered Haddock. Alex was struggling to think of how to get inside the palace, let alone to the living quarters behind the normal tours.

“You okay?” Tom asked, his jaw twitching a bit. “Mate, they may *shoot you*.”

“Yeah,” Alex agreed quietly. He plucked a chip and ate it absentmindedly.

He tried to figure out the layout of any government building. Chewing a few more salty chips, he said; “I have a key card, I just need to get into the back rooms. Once there, I know how to fake it.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” Tom asked him nervously.

Alex shrugged, “set fire to it and call the news? Give my demands? Hopefully, it’s big and bold enough to go international.”

Tom rubbed his face with both hands, trying not to cry. Alex awkwardly reached out and patted his friend’s shoulder, “it’ll be fine! Want a chip?”

“Alex...” Tom hesitated before he sighed and accepted the chip. “Mate, *please* be careful.”

Alex did attempt to be careful, however, careful was not kind to him.

Escaping MI6 tails was easy when he had been taught by none other than *Yassen Gregorovich* how to do so, who could reset only long periods of times and actually had the skill to evade. Slipping into a crowd of tourists lining up to Buckingham palace, Alex pulled away into the staff parking lot and further into the area of dangerous security cameras.

Breaking into the locked door took three swipes with an enhanced credit card. Busting the metal detector took one hand and the power cord. Once inside, Alex pulled down his hood, steeled himself the best he could and attempted to look like he belonged.

He was stopped twice by frantic staff, looking utterly perplexed by his appearance. Alex raised one hand, boldly walked past and barked out, “important duties!”

One staff member who had more authority than Alex did meekly stepped back and said, “yes sir!”

‘*Huh*,’ Alex thought as he stormed his way up a case of velvet stairs, ‘*this is kinda fun*.’

Alex considered the benefits of breaking his cover quickly. He checked his watch, 2:27.

He had to move quicker, which meant he had to start taking horrible risks.

Alex Rider jammed his hand in his pocket and came up with the security clearance card stolen long ago. Completely black, the card had the subtlest hue of blue along the edge in an opalescent sheen he hoped meant something. Storming up to the nearest guard (who was

eying him angrily), Alex flashed the card and coolly stated, “priority event. Where is Her Majesty located right now.”

The guard looked at him and frowned further. He said, “*you* don’t have clearance, are you even allowed up here?”

Alex squared his shoulders, glared, and channelled his inner Yassen to the highest degree. Alex forced himself to remain British, and said icily, “that information is above your level. Where is your supervisor?”

The guard argued, “you’re fifteen! I’m not taking you to my supervisor-.”

Alex said, “I have a request sent from MI6 that requires urgent attention. If you cannot provide me with your superior, then I will presume you are incapable.”

The guard froze, his eyes looked at Alex’s hand with the card in it, and he swallowed thickly.

Alex lifted the card once more, twisted it enough for the sheen and said, “I’m waiting, *sir*.”

Gritting teeth, the guard nodded jerkily and abandoned his post. Walking down the hallway furiously, Alex gave himself a mental pat on the back for apparently being that convincing.

They made it to the next hallway, where the guard said something to yet another guard, who escorted Alex skeptically to yet *another* door. Once there, they took Alex into what appeared to be some sort of staff quarter with no less than six intelligence agents sitting at computers looking through the many cameras of the entire facility.

“Hey,” the guard said, drawing attention, “this one said he has business with the Royals.”

“Urgent missive,” Alex corrected with a flat tone of voice and a partial side-eye, “MI6 classified.”

One of the computer guards snorted and waved off the hallways guard, who was blushing red in frustration and shame. Once the door closed, the computer director glanced at Alex curiously.

“MI6 business?” he asked carefully, “aren’t you a little young?”

Alex blurted, “never stopped MI6 before.”

“Fair,” the man grunted, sticking out his hand, “I need the missive, or some identification kid.”

Alex passed over the blank card and held his breath. *Here we go.*

The man accepted the card, fed it through a high-tech reader and froze. Alex hoped that MI6 was paranoid enough to not have employee pictures next to names. Alan Blunt was known in MI6, but within the staff of Buckingham Palace Alex hoped he was unknown.

“Shite,” the man gaped, nearly throwing the card at Alex in his hast to pass it back, “yes yes-of course sir! Her Royal Majesty is in her personal courtyard, would you prefer an armoured caravan? Or- shall I call some support, sir?”

‘Wow, Blunt you really were an asshole,’ Alex thought, sliding the card into his sweatshirt pocket. The man cursed, bumbling in his haste to print off the necessary papers to get him in and past the other guards.

“Here sir!” he practically shouted, shoving the packet to Alex quickly, “with haste! Godspeed!”

“Later,” Alex said with a wave, swaggering out of the room.

At this rate, it wouldn’t take long until an *actual* MI6 agent came by, or when MI6 realized they lost sight of Alex completely inside the fish shop. There was only so long that Tom could stall for, especially since Alex was already a borderline terrorist.

‘I know the coordinates still,’ Alex thought to himself nervously, *‘I just need a distraction they can’t cover up, my phone, and paparazzi.’*

He could do this. Just like the chemistry lab, all he needed was a broken electrical line and some combustible gas. Or, the eyesore of Velvet inside the building which was giving Alex some ugly flashbacks to Grief’s grotesque decorations.

“Hey, kid-.” One guard shouted out, cocking his decorative musket.

Alex waved his papers and snapped back, “not now!”

Too stunned to move, the guard gaped as Alex ascended the ridiculous number of stairs towards the royal’s personal courtyard, thanks to the hastily printed map. Their printer was running low on magenta ink.

Slamming through the unnecessarily heavy doors, Alex found himself finally in an empty waiting room. He took a moment to sigh in relief before spotting all of the security cameras on the ceiling. He pointedly looked at them, signalled a line under his throat and waited a few seconds. Hopefully, the terrified security team would realize he wanted the cameras off while he destroyed them.

(the number of golden floor lamps was a safety risk at this point, especially since he could slide them into the door handles and effectively barricade them after smashing the cameras).

Then, he bashed apart the smoke alarms and fiddled with the closest power cord.

“Nile showed me how to make a dead man’s cord,” Alex muttered quietly, using his razor credit card to slice off a power cable attached to a lamp. The part that would plug into the wall, thankfully not inserted. “Any extension cord cut in half, plug it in and-.”

Fzzzzzwshhhh! The voltage from the wall immediately sparked all across the velvet drapery and couch. Alex marvelled for a small moment as the fire smouldered and lit, churning out thick black smoke which clung to ancient painting varnish.

“Well,” Alex said unnecessarily, “That’s going to be expensive.”

He waited until the fire exceeded the pity state and now looked worrying, then lit another on the other side. The heat was beginning to really worry him, so he left the closed-off little lounge to blaze as he charged further to the Queen’s last known location.

He slammed into the courtyard, saw the six armoured guards around the perimeter, and pointed back inside shouting, “there’s a fire!”

Alarm broke out as half of the guards sprinted inside. The three remained eyed around warily, the queen herself looked quite perplexed but Alex really had no time to deal with that.

“Who are you?” the leader of the guards growled.

“MI6,” Alex snapped back, flashing the dark card to the grizzled agents, “Your Majesty, we need to move.”

“Move?” She asked from her chair, looking at her three guards baffled.

‘I’ll reset after this,’ Alex thought to himself as sweat dripped down his neck, ‘this won’t matter. I’ll reset and none of this will have happened. It isn’t real.’

He pulled his gun from his trousers, *bang! Bang! Bang!*

Alex hastily shoved the gun back into his pants, burning his leg against the hot muzzle. He barely had time to think before his ears (screaming, because firing a gun was *loud*) and his vertigo caught up and he vomited all over the pristine stone.

The Queen of England (how *absurd* Alex’s life was) screamed. The fire inside finally broke through something because the flames imploded a window and poured skywards from the direction Alex came. Alex walked forward, dizzy and close to being sick as he learned how much blood was in a human being.

“Don’t come closer!” the queen said, and Alex ignored her. He fumbled for his phone, blood smearing on the screen as he hit the speed dial.

“*Mate...*” Tom said on the other side. Another window exploded, a few second delay before he heard its tinny noise on Tom’s side. “...*there were gunshots. What-.*”

“I’m fine, Alex croaked sickly. He had a feeling Tom wasn’t going to ask that.

Alex spotted the old lady trying to hurry away, he shakily drew his gun again and shouted, “don’t move!”

“*Holy shite- is that the Queen? Do you actually have the bloody queen?*”

“Shut up,” Alex croaked, fumbling on his phone to access the nearest streaming service through his phone navigation, “shite, shite I can’t start a broadcast if I’m on the phone.”

“*You’re going to broadcast? Alex- Alex, wait calm down-.*”

Alex hung up and hastily enabled broadcasting. When his phone's meagre camera lit up, he immediately began repeating the coordinates he remembered jerkily. Focusing the camera on the terrified Queen, he repeated them-.

And his application shut down. *Your account has been suspended.*

Alex grit his teeth and went to the next best thing. Calling the nearest news station he knew, he didn't let the receptionist pick up before he began barking demands. "I have the Queen of bloody England as a hostage. I have demands."

"*Holy shite,*" the person on the other end said before forwarding them through.

In ten minutes (ten minutes *wasted*) Alex was on the phone with who he presumed to be an active news anchor.

"*Hello, shooter...I understand you have our Royal Majesty as your hostage.*"

Alex licked his lips and knew there was no going back. "My name is Alex Rider. I'm a kid who lives in Chelsea and has been blackmailed to work for the British Secret Service over the past few years."

....*Alright, Alex, I'm sure you're very good at your job-*."

"I'm serious!" Alex snapped into his phone, trying to handle his breathing, "The Head of Special Operations within MI6 is Tulip Jones. If you don't fucking believe me, why are agents suddenly trying to cut off your stream?"

"*How did-...wait, this kid is how old-...okay, uh Alex, our viewers are wondering how serious you're-.*"

Alex croaked, "I have killed three people and you are going to *listen* to my *demands*."

Alex pointed his gun once more at the Queen and hated himself all the more as she cried out. A news helicopter cycled above them, within seconds he heard the mirroring inhale as the news anchor for *someone* realized Alex was completely serious.

A different voice, female, now answered his phone. "*Hello Alex, I understand this is a very stressful time for you. I heard you have demands, what are they?*"

"I want you to send out these coordinates," Alex said, nearly begging, "these *exact* coordinates, with my name."

"*That's it?*" the news anchor asked, and another window blew out in a loud horrifying crash. Sirens wailed outside the gates of Buckingham, firefighters shouting inside the blaze as presumably secret service were trying to get inside.

"Say them!" Alex snapped as he hurried against the Queen, holding her around her elderly torso with the gun clumsily pressed to her side. The secret service, equipped with sniper rifles, eyed him from the perimeter.

The news anchor dutifully repeated the numbers, looping them and his name. Alex's phone buzzed with the national alert of a terrorist attempt on Her Royal Majesty, five confirmed dead.

'Please go international,' Alex begged himself, squeezing his eyes closed as the woman cowered in his arms. Shouts demanding he put the gun down only faintly heard. He had already *killed people*, he had *already*-.

"Alex? Alex are you still there?"

"I'm here," he croaked shakily.

"Alex, can you please let the Queen go?"

"What time is it?" Alex asked abruptly, swallowing thickly. His hand was cramping, his vision horrible as both smoke and recent injury drained him.

"...It's four-thirty in the afternoon," the news anchor said carefully, *"...do you have other demands, Alex?"*

"Repeat the numbers," he said, trying to haul the lady backwards as the secret service pressed closer, "repeat those *fucking numbers*."

"Kid! Step aside now!"

"We're repeating them- just please let our Queen go-."

"Put the gun down *now!*"

Alex squeezed his eyes shut and dearly hoped it was enough.

"Kid! You'll have until the count of five!"

Alex steadied his breath, truly *truly* wished he had enough energy in him for this, and-

Reset

"...seizure-like symptoms. They cleared the pressure around your brain and repaired the burst vessels. You weren't hurt long enough to seriously damage your brain, but it's worrying that such-"

Alex *arched*, flailing upwards against the bed violently. His mouth dropped open with a wordless low noise close to computer static. The various monitors simultaneously began to scream.

Mrs. Jones stepped back quickly as medical staff burst into the room frantically. Lines were drawn, a port protruding from Alex's skull hooked itself as blood dripped lazily from his head.

"I don't understand!" the doctor shouted exhausted, "why? How is this happening?"

"Pressure levels increasing, sir!" one of the nurses said, rushing to find an oversized needle contraption that they would, presumably, shove into Alex's skull.

"I see I am of no help here," Mrs. Jones said simply, standing professionally.

"You!" the doctor shouted, pointing at Mrs. Jones accusatory, "what did you say? How did you trigger this!"

She reached up and redirected his pointing finger to the side. She said, cold and sharp, "Never question my decisions again. Stabilize the boy, do whatever procedures necessary to have him live."

The doctor growled, glaring at Mrs. Jones as the emergency personnel hastily guided Alex out of the room.

'How did this happen?' she wondered, *'how did he seize so unexpectedly?'*

Had Gregorovich done something to him? A remote trigger sleeper soldier? A medically induced epilepsy state? It was adrenaline-caused, had he somehow been addicted to an experimental drug?

She didn't understand, but there were a lot of things she didn't understand anymore when it came to Alex Rider.

Watching from the surgical suite did nothing to relieve her stress. Whatever happened to Alex Rider...she was afraid she'd never know.

Her agent walked inside, shutting the observation room doors behind them. They stood nervously along the side, not coming closer to her observation view.

"What is his state?" she asked.

"We don't know," the man meekly said, "everything they *did* just... *reopened*. There was some sort of...glitch, all of the stitches came free and new devices had to be planted. There's going to be no damage, but unless we can determine a reason for this..."

"What *caused* this?" she mused out loud, tapping her chin. "What purpose does this serve?"

"Er...medical complications aren't necessarily caused with a purpose, ma'am."

She ignored him, focusing on the boy who, according to the clock, had just finished a two-hour surgical procedure. She felt no closer to answers, in fact, she felt even *more* at a loss.

"Leave me," she said to her staff, "I'll escort him to his room."

“Er, our staff will set him up on the post-surgery equipment. Just to monitor his health, ma’am.”

Fair, she had little patience for learning how to apply electrodes or pulse oximeter. She watched nurses wheel the boy out, freshly bandaged with a new stent, and contemplated her options.

She could move him to a new facility further away, but what point was that? Any sort of specialized medical care required her ability to find staff quickly, and this was one of their best-hidden hospitals within the city.

No, Rider would have to stay here until he could be interrogated. She’d assign agents to his room around the clock as soon as she could see him herself. He’d be unconscious, but it gave her more security to see his heartbeat monitor.

“Oh, ma’am,” the nurse said, catching her in the hallway, “he’s sleeping. You won’t be able to get anything...”

“I’m not going to wake him,” she said dryly, “he’s not able to answer questions right now.”

“Oh, well...” the nurse said a tad hostility, “how would I know what you’d do?”

‘Perhaps I should move him,’ Mrs. Jones thought to herself, ‘and fire everyone here.’

“There’s no point to waking a sleeping child,” she said with false sincerity. The nurse clearly did not buy it.

“Well,” the nurse huffed, fluffing upwards, “his brother is here anyway so-.”

Mrs. Jones felt something icy settle in her. There was no reason for it- the facility was unknown and impossible to infiltrate. Yet, Alex Rider did not have a brother. Alex Rider had *no* living family.

Clearing her throat, Mrs. Jones repeated quickly, “his brother?”

“Mm, yes,” the nurse admitted with a sly sense of amusement at her shock, “rather lovely young man. Beautiful eyes.”

Mrs. Jones swallowed thickly, forgetting to dismiss the nurse. The woman simply walked away from her, leaving the head of MI6 frozen in the hallway.

Slowly, she made her way to Alex Rider’s room. The sound of the heartbeat monitor was not soothing to her, but an ominous mantra of something lingering just inside that door.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Fearful to take the seat she had just hours before.

“How the *fuck* did you-,” said someone Tulip Jones knew from classified intelligence tapes. They sighed, and said miserably, “okay, *fine*. You win this bet, *again*.”

Nile, *standing right next to her*, fiddled with a stolen surgical scalpel. He toyed with it, twirling it like a broken butterfly knife across scarred fingertips.

“Hi,” Nile greeted her politely, “I hear you try to kill me a lot, but that’s fine. I’m used to it. *But-*.”

“You tried to kill Alex Rider,” Yassen Gregorovich said, standing in the doorway to the ensuite washroom, light spilling forth to illuminate him in pure shadows, “to where he took grave risks to evade you.”

“Yassen,” she choked out, stilling at the press of a scalpel to her throat.

Yassen Gregorovich looked at her, then turned his head to Alex with open affection. Nile clicked his tongue scoldingly, pressing a tad sharper.

“You know,” Nile told her in a stage whisper, “cheetahs are these insanely fast animals, elegant and fierce. But they’re actually this super anxious shy breed that gets so stressed out sometimes they *die*.”

Tulip Jones felt blood against her throat and saw Yassen smile relieved and happy as he brushed the hair from Alex’s unconscious face.

Nile said, “sometimes, they get emotional support dogs. I know! It sounds absolutely stupid, but....well, I like the kid. And fuck *you* for taking away his puppy.”

Tulip Jones closed her eyes with a shaky breath and said, “do it quickly.”

“Fuck you,” Nile said, “nobody fucks with my friends.”

This time, there was no reset.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this!

I've wanted to apply this concept to a story plot, and here it is.

I'd have loved to make it longer and more in-depth, but I'm happier to have finally finished it since so many people enjoyed the earlier chapters.

Feel free to leave a comment/review! I read every comment and it was all of your wonderful thoughts and encouragement which made this last chapter possible!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!