Prickly Pear

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Summary

Fic-Exchange 2019; Alex couldn't believe his eyes. What were they doing?

In a strange ironic twist of fate, Nile and Alex meet in an awkward role reversal. Namely, with Nile being the unfortunate spy trying to sneak away and keep his target alive, while Alex is determined to stop this nefarious plot.

The twist?
Nile's target is a cactus. And he kicked the door and broke it. And now he's stuck in a goddamn greenhouse with Alex Rider.

Yassen is going to kill him.

Notes

BEHOLD.
TOO MANY PRICK PUNS

Alex couldn’t believe his eyes. What were they doing? Looking, obviously, but it would have been much easier to dismiss it as a visual hallucination.
“Fancy seeing you here,” Alex said. It was actually quite not-fancy seeing him here. Alex was here, in the middle of absolutely nowhere, trapped inside a room of flimsy plastic sheeting, secured by cheap tin. Alex could buy better metal in a craft store.

That... didn’t completely summarize his situation: it was more like the craft store was actually the main supplier of felt for Girl Scouts and they had recently had a herd of porcupine run through and the air conditioner was broken so that the entire building was an allergy-riddled death trap.

Like that, except not at all relevant to his situation.

“Alright,” Alex started, his voice slightly higher than its normal pitch. “Well, I feel like this is incredibly stereotypical, but what are you doing here?”

Considering the mission, Alex felt he had a right to know at least that much.

“Well,” his opponent said, looking at his knife with a fairly unsure expression, “I’m on a job.”

“Well that’s coincidental, because I’m on a job.” Alex defended with a slightly shrill tone of voice, “and I’m supposed to protect this.”

“Oh,” Nile said solemnly, “a bit of a role reversal.”

“I feel bad for you.” Alex said, clicking his tongue, “your first secret spy mission and, pardon my language, it sucks.”

“No,” Nile said, holding his knives threateningly, “you stop that.”

“Or what, you’ll kill me?”

“Yes.”

“You can’t kill me it’ll damage your precious succulents.” Alex pointed out with a small devious grin. “And that’s what you’re here to steal.”

Nile made the smallest noise in the back of his throat, looking terribly cross for someone locked in a greenhouse rather than stranded outside. The outside temperature (due to the said greenhouse being in the middle of bumfuck nowhere) was dangerously low. Without the proper protocols used to seal the doorway, the outdoor temperature would shock the poor, innocent, rare succulents and kill the majority of them. Since Alex had been hired as security (it felt really odd), he was unable to just betray the little green lives and let them all die via natural selection. In a very very strange twist of fate, SCORPIA had apparently hired their own agent to steal the succulents and cacti for their own nefarious purpose.

Alex couldn’t imagine why, SCORPIA had enough pricks as it was.

“I’m sorry, I know I should be giving you some sort of witty comment but I’m really too exasperated with the situation at hand.”

Even Nile looked sympathetic. “It’s not everyday you get trapped in a greenhouse filled with cacti.”

“Actually, MI6 had a page in the training manual about this exact situation.”

Nile looked skeptical, but he too seemed exasperated at their shared situation. They were, after all, stuck here. The doorway was bent and completely disfigured on the outside, a natural warping of the frame that was due to - shocker - the temperature. And Nile’s foot. Alex had tried the door only a
few minutes ago, before he realized he had company in the vast greenhouse and labs. In the morning
the staff would come by and fix the issue from the outside, until then Alex was trapped in a room full
of pains in his ass- and Nile of course.

Alex watched in fascination as Nile’s face contorted through all the stages of grief, pausing a bit
longer on ‘denial’ before moving on to ‘anger’. Alex had never seen mourning move so quickly, it
was almost impressive.

“Are there olives in here?” Alex asked, “can I give you a branch.”

“If you take a leaf off any cacti in here I will kill you in an instant.”

“So strange,” Alex said, “to be on the receiving end of odd threats. Normally I’m the one saying
them.”

Nile had the politeness to look equally unsettled, “I know, I don’t like this.”

They stared at each other over the table of greenery, and without saying anything else, agreed to try
and ignore the other’s presence until they found a solution.

They couldn’t break out of the greenhouse, given the thermal shock issue. Not if they wanted any of
the plants to survive, which both their missions depended upon. They couldn’t exactly...phone for
help, because being in the township of Nowhere in the city of Bumfuck; population 2 came with
phone service on par with Verizon. It sucked.

At least Alex had his phone, and a wall charger (which Nile pulled out of his coat, although he
’didn’t have a phone on him.’ How nice, SCORPIA trained their assassins to share phone cords, true
kinship in bad professions).

They lasted as well as could be expected, which meant they lasted horribly. Alex was staring at the
phone rather than using it by now. There were only so many times you could play meaningless
phone games before life lost its purpose. Nile clearly looked to be similarly suffering, which was
probably a lie to further his disguise as an actual person and Alex shouldn’t believe it for a minute,
but at this point he was just exhausted and fed up.

“Look,” Alex said, which was a horrible way to start off terrorist negotiations, “you and me, we’re
not that different-.”

“Are you quoting the Godfather at me?”

“- and today we’re experiencing the opposite side of our jobs and really, this is horrible. I’m willing
to talk with you to pass the time, because it may be a while.”

Nile considered it, then considered how much he was suffering being surrounded by plants that all
looked soft but cut you like fiberglass.

“You know what these little shits remind me of?” Nile asked after a long pause. He reached out with
one hand, hovering just before his fingers could brush the spiky hell-fur. The things had barbs.

“Uh, prickly dry things?”

Nile tilted his head ever so slightly, pulling his hand back sharply as once again, the shrubbery bit
“Do you want to see cute animal pictures?” Alex asked, offering his phone. “It’s not my dog, but I like to pretend that at some point in the future my life and sanity will be stable enough that I can get a dog.”

“A dog could help with your mental instability issues.”

“Yeah but I’m stuck working. I don’t want a dog who has to work also.”

Nile shrugged, accepting the phone. He flipped over the screen curiously, ridiculously human in personality and compassion as he looked through the pictures. Except for the smaller terriers, which he swore vengeance upon.

It probably wasn’t a warning sign. Small dogs were little craps to Alex too.

“I’d get it,” Alex declared, cooing over the pictures of huskies like any other kid would. Dogs were a universal bonding method.

“What’s your opinion on cars?” Alex asked, trying to sustain the conversation and stave off boredom that would eat them both alive.

Nile paused a small fraction of a second. “They’re overrated.”

“Mopeds?”

“Underrated.”

Alex looked at Nile with something close to appreciation. He smiled, or he would have but that would be a bad move in this chess match of personalities. Alex had always been bad at chess - he found that he was too predictable, so he went out of his way from then on to act in the most unpredictable random way he could. His opponents wouldn’t know what Alex was doing, because Alex didn’t know either.

Having adopted that as his policy for life and somehow having survived this long, he patted Nile’s closest shoulder. Alex wasn’t even sure that the man could feel it through the thick reinforced material that was his body armor. SCORPIA had good combat protection, Alex kept getting sent out with only his normal clothes or, you know- metal corroding zit cream but no kevlar.

MI6 was a skank.

“I think we can get along after all,” Alex confessed, “at least for a while, but I’m sure we can. I have a strange ability to not get killed by assassins.”

Nile made a small noise of agreement, “you know, I honestly was going to stab you at the first pun. But the second one was pretty good, and now I get why Cossack didn’t shoot you.”

“Thanks,” Alex said, “I think.”

“All I’m saying, is that Koala’s are absolute little fucks.” Alex snarled viciously, nearly smashing his
hand on the tabletop housing several delicate succulents. He didn’t, thank god, because then Nile would be obligated to gut him.

“Oh they are,” Nile agreed easily, “but you know bigger fucks? Sunfish.”

“Oh my god you’re right.” Alex whispered in shock, “that’s- I- kill me now. Spare me this knowledge.”

Nile looked at him, appraised his value and then considered the amount of energy expenditure he would have to use killing Alex. Thought about the smell of having a body in a warm, humid greenhouse for the next... however long he was stuck there. He looked down, like a monster, and whispered: “No.”

“I have a confession to make,” Nile said after an hour of silence, “I’m not good at...this.”

Alex frowned. “You mean the infiltration thing, or the social interaction?”

“No,” Nile huffed, “the... keeping things alive... thing. Normally I just kill a target and that’s that. Keeping them alive is so hard.”

“Oh, tell me about it,” Alex agreed instantly, “stopping maniacs is so much easier than being a maniac.”

“I’m not a maniac,” Nile sulked.

Alex ignored him, “-but like. The job comes with highlights. Sometimes you don’t even need to kill anyone, sometimes weird adult men swoop in upside down doing sick parkour tricks out of helicopters to shoot said megalomaniac then leave with some sort of weirdly vague statement that makes you question the world.”

Nile squinted at him.

Alex shrugged. “The puns, the puns are the main highlight.”

“I fucking knew it.” Nile looked much more relieved, “still can’t believe it. Fucking cactus, I’m a goddamn high tier assassin and I’m rented out like a callboy for some goddamn succs.”

“What a hard job.” Alex cooed, “you’re doing great, I’m proud of you for keeping things alive for once.”

Nile huffed and tried to look impassive. Alex knew he was still annoyed.

“Who was the first person you killed?” Alex asked Nile curiously.

Nile hummed, reclining against a mound of perlite cactus soil. “It’s been a long time, why?”

“Because I’m so desensitized to violence and threats of bodily harm I’m numb inside. Come on, make me feel again. I’ll sing old school music-.”

“Please don’t.”
“Are you sure? I can do a mean Johnny Cash. He was like, from the 40’s right?”

Nile looked scandalized for a small moment, likely for his own age and fading mortality. Not just anyone could do that to an assassin in his early twenties, but Alex had always been talented.

“Fine. I was like, ten and it was an accident, I threw a snowball and hit a car and the dude had a heart attack.”

Alex made a small noise of agreement, “ah, winter. The coldest of bitches. Yeah, I sleighed someone in winter too.”

Under his breath, Nile said something along the lines of ‘those fucking puns’.

“It’s okay, it wasn’t a driving accident.” Alex assured him, “because I jumped off so I wasn’t driving when it blew up his helicopter.”

“Why,” said Nile, “the fuck did Yassen leave you alive.”

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“If we die here,” Nile said in the long hours between are we found yet, and pssst are you awake?
““You can eat my body.”

Alex gave a small hum. “That’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me.”

““Thank you,” Nile said, staring upwards at the slightly clouded surface. “I think that says a lot about your life that that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to you.”

“Yeah,” Alex agreed casually, “my life does kinda suck.”

Nile made a low noise. “Why are we trapped in a greenhouse? For cactus? Why has our life turned into this?”

“My potential is being wasted,” Alex bemoaned quietly, “why can’t I do more sick flips out of banks and escape via a flagpole only to be captured and then escape again?”

A considering pause, then, “nice one, kid.”

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“I spy with my little eye...something that’s a dick.”

“A cactus.”

“Fuck you.”

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“Okay, I can’t handle this.” Nile said when sunrise peaked. Still, they couldn’t escape without the doors buckling completely and destroying the poor poor succulents. “I’m calling in for backup.”

“What stopped you from doing that before?” Alex asked, lying sprawled on his back with arms extended under the numerous planters. “Your paycheck? Your honor-”
“Mostly my dignity,” Nile grunted, fishing out a communication device, “but all my dignity isn’t worth being trapped in a damn greenhouse with you any longer.”

Alex didn’t feel annoyed. He waited, barely listening to the strange list of numbers and names of various inanimate objects that apparently meant calling for urgent help, now.

Alex couldn’t find it in himself to care, until he heard a loud, distant drone that was unmistakable. And getting closer, fast.

“What is that?” Alex asked alarmed, straightening up quickly. “Nile, what is that?”

Nile had the audacity to simply stare in horror, and say nothing. The jets continued overhead, dropping what could only be a missile on the very small village which had employed Alex and who had the only key to the greenhouse.

The ground exploded in a low rumble, debris flying. The maid who had seen him off from the hotel that morning, and the poor workers who would likely come to tend to the succulents eventually - were dead.

“Nile.” Alex said, very quietly and very seriously, “what did you say?”

“I said there was a situation.” Nile said. “And we needed backup quickly. I think they interpreted it as a threat-”

“You had one job!” Alex shouted, “we needed a locksmith not a missile!”

“Well I’m sorry, normally I’m trying to kill things not grow succulents!”

Hours passed, the smell of smoke permeated the air and left Alex and Nile both staring at the distant destruction in partial rage and partial dismay.

“We could have been out of here,” Alex said, “if you worked on your communication.”

“Me?” Nile scoffed, “what about you! Where is your backup?”

“Don’t be silly, I don’t get backup,” Alex dismissed, tracing nonsensical patterns against the glass. “Isn’t there anyone you can call? A classmate?”

“Can’t, killed them.” Nile responded instantly. He hesitated for a long moment. Outside, their hope of rescue smoldered. “Well, there is one person- but he’ll kill us.”

“Do it.” Alex said. “No more missiles.”

“Can’t promise you that,” Nile apologized in advance, pulling out his phone with a small expression of bleak acceptance. “You know, you’re not that bad of a kid.”

Alex scoffed, then sneezed as he inhaled pollen.

Yassen Gregorovich was a busy man, but apparently not busy enough to avoid caretaker duties. He had expected that the young assassin, Nile, would be intelligent to stay out of trouble. He’d been a
competent second in command to Rothman, and had an impressive reputation of his own. There was every indication that he should have been able to complete this job in his sleep. It wouldn’t be the first time Yassen’s expectations were too high when regarding others.

The message sent to him was simple: relayed in the structure he explicitly required all contact must be given in. He nearly demanded APA formatting just to spite the younger nuisance further, but reconsidered it.

Now, he was regretting his past compassion. Nile had requested his immediate presence on an alpine recovery-and-espionage mission to recover biologically engineered materials to study.

Such a sugar coated report, carefully worded, was clearly because when Yassen piloted the helicopter down on a recently bombed location, he knew Nile had been sprouting bullshit again.

The ashes were still warm and the air smelled like poorly burning plastic. He’d need to get new shoes after he was done ramming them up Nile’s ass for dragging him into this.

Turning off the helicopter, he let it slow progressively so the engine had time to air out. The thinner air put a strain on the motor, if he could, he would have piloted a different model. But the request had been labeled as ‘urgent’.

Double checking his phone, he frowned once again at Nile’s message. Greenhouse; North. Backup (NO MISSILE), then a series of coordinates. Yassen should have known it would be moronic based on the explicit mention of missiles.

The path north of ground zero was quite cute, framed with flagstone and lavender. On the top, near a cliff face overlooking the other slow slopes and rolling fields of heather, Yassen spotted Help US etched into the glass via finger grease and condensation. The ‘e’ was lowercase and backwards - clearly the author forgot how glass worked.

Yassen inhaled slowly, and wondered why on earth Nile had survived as long as he had.

The man used swords in the era of firearms. Swords.

Yassen walked, and distantly considered how believable it would be if Nile casually fell off a cliff on the way back to the helicopter.

The greenhouse was large, but not excessively so, as it was for a few clients. The word typically used for their type of business was ‘exclusive’. Instead of cosmetic touches - unnecessary furnishings outside the building, signs with carefully selected color schemes - the greenhouse was purely functional. Completely translucent, made of small woven fibers to increase strength. A double wrap metal framed door that - under Yassen’s sharp eye, appeared to be warped on its hinges.

The door. Was warped.

Yassen pocketed his gun, securing the holster before setting off in a brisk pace. This would be a simple fix. Given the biological specimens inside the greenhouse and the high altitude and temperature, it suddenly made much more sense why Nile required aid.

It didn’t mean that Yassen wouldn’t beat him across the face for drawing him away to fix a door jam.

He walked up, eyed the warped metal speculatively, and considered his options. The frame was buckling out towards him, which meant any work from the interior truly wasn’t an option. Nile was, for all intensive purposes, stuck.
Yassen’s thick combat boots, steel framed on the toe, collided with a harsh *scrrrrre*!

Once, twice. It wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t up to his usual standards for a job.

The frame aligned, and the door gave a quiet pop as the seal reset in the proper position.

Almost instantly, the door opened. Very slowly, in timid movements.

*Good.* Yassen thought, trying not to dwell too much on spite.

“Oh! It is!” Someone said, someone very much not-Nile. Smaller, younger, a voice Yassen remembered distinctly and dreaded hearing ever again. “Nope, looks like it’s just him.”

Nile slowly appeared, looking very sheepish and very much ashamed. Alex Rider, on the other hand, looked positively gleeful.

“*Hi,*” Alex said, nearly singing the word. Generally such a tone only came before an explosion, or something immensely stupid. “Thanks for not dropping another bomb. We were going to call a locksmith, but thought that getting an estimate would be a *killer price.*”

Nile groaned quietly, slowly putting his face in his hands. Yassen prided himself on how his face didn’t twitch.

“As you can see,” Alex continued, uncaring of the situation, “we’ve been in a-”

Nile started mumbling something like- *don’t say it, don’t say it.*

Alex ignored him, “- *sucky situation.*”

Nile, pointedly, groaned again.

“You called me,” Yassen said, condescendingly. “To unlock a greenhouse. That you locked yourself in.”

“Actually, Nile kicked the door and locked us in, not me.” Alex defended. “It’s okay, we bonded like a teenage girl sleepover. Is it true that you can sleep with your eyes open? And once a new recruit shot you in the foot-”

“*Why would you ask that?*” Nile shouted, horrified. “What sort of- survival instincts do you *have?*”

“*None, you chemical disaster!*” Alex shouted.

Yassen looked at Nile with an unspoken question. Nile, as if for some god unknown reason Yassen wanted to know, casually informed him: “It’s because everything I touch dies.”

“Right.” Yassen said. “Why have you not killed the boy?”

Alex made a noise similar to a parrot being punched, and Nile had the gall to look hesitant. “Well, *you* left him alive, so I was afraid you had claimed him.”

Yassen stared. Nile started to look more uncomfortable. “You know… like… *your-boy.*”

“Do I look like someone who would claim a child I’ve barely met before.”

“You look a lot like a cactus,” Alex provided helpfully, “but I *have* been dealing with pricks all day. Oh, and cactuses.”
“Okay that’s it.” Nile said, “Cossack, shoot him. I’m begging you, this is worse than torture. This is—this is a new sort of hell.”

Yassen glared at Alex. Alex waved. Yassen’s hand twitched, and he considered the benefits of waving back.

“For god’s sake, I’m so fucked,” Nile said in disbelief.

“So, how much do I have to bribe you to do a flip in this?” Alex asked, voice crackly and a bit static-distorted over the headset. They evacuated the greenhouse, Nile choosing a few succulents given that their gardener most likely had been disintegrated, and MI6 still hadn’t shown up.

Alex honestly wondered about the state of national security, sometimes.

“Helicopters are not designed for extensive vertical maneuvers.” Yassen said tonelessly, making sure all proper gears were engaged. The engine groaned, fighting with the thin air. He had enough fuel to make a minor detour, dropping off the boy somewhere with phone service and likely adult-day-care services.

“When we were braiding each other’s hair Nile told me he’s afraid of heights.” Alex said, like an absolute shit.

“In that case,” Yassen said, already managing a gentle decline towards safer altitude, “I can accommodate a tactical maneuver.”

They landed in an abandoned parking lot outside what looked like a long since suffering mall. If Alex had a gun, he would have taken the poor thing behind the barn and put it out of his misery. Since he didn’t, he gave a quiet prayer for its swift death as they landed outside the abandoned Bed Bath and Beyond.

“Well kid,” Nile said, looking tired but a bit saddened. “I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but I’ll miss you. You’ve grown on me.”

“Aww,” Alex cooed, “then this ebony assassin began be Niling my sad fancy into smiling.”

Nile stared at him, then looked unsure at Yassen. Yassen didn’t look over his shoulder, although he did offer a monotone, “quoth the raven.”

“I hate you,” Nile said, sounding almost gentle with it, “I absolutely hate you, Alex Rider. Where the hell did you learn a goddamn edgy poem?”

“I’m a glutton for extra credit in school.” Alex shrugged, “Yassen, kick his ass extra hard for me, alright?”

Inside the helicopter Yassen waved. Alex beamed and waved back.

“Fucking ridiculous,” Nile said, shaking his head slowly, “all this for some goddamn cactus.”

“I love you too, you prick!”
“Your principal called! Said you’ve gotta get back to your little lunch hour!”

Alex laughed, “King Louie Some-random-number is looking for where his outdated fencer went! Better scuttle on back to the dark ages!”

Nile flipped off Alex Rider, and finally started to see why Yassen liked him so much.

Impassively, Yassen pressed the helicopter into a fast ascent, much more sharply than the usual steady lift-off. Nile knew that it was likely his fault.

“Yassen, for the love of god, I’m sorry! Please stop spiraling—”

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