Alex Rider: Secret Weapon

The man with the two missing teeth had thought a great deal about killing Alex Rider. He had imagined it. He had planned it. Today he was going to do it.

His name was Skoda. At least, that was what he had called himself when he had been a drug dealer in west London. He had sold his little packets of death in pubs, at street corners and outside schools, until the day he had made just one mistake. He had chosen Brookland School and that was how he met Alex.

Skoda thought about that as he sat outside the school, ten months later, watching and waiting. It still seemed impossible. He had been living on a canal boat. The fourteen-year-old schoolboy had used a crane to hook the boat out of the water and he had dropped it from a height into the middle of a police conference. Skoda had been arrested immediately.

Worse than that, he had become a laughing stock throughout the criminal world.

Skoda doubted Alex would recognize him now. He still had the missing teeth and pierced ears. But the incident with the canal boat had left terrible scars. They had patched him up in hospital but the stitch marks still showed. They began high on his forehead, ran the length of his nose, continued through his mouth and ended under his chin. The two halves of his face had been sewn back together by a doctor who had obviously never trained in cosmetic surgery. He looked hideous.

But Alex Rider would pay. Skoda had escaped from the prison hospital. He had made enquiries and he had finally discovered whom he had to blame for his misfortunes. He knew he would be arrested again eventually. But that didn’t matter.

Today it would be his turn to laugh.
Alex was coming out of drama when he ran into his new teacher ... literally. He was one of half a dozen boys and they were all breaking one of the Ten Commandments of Brookland School: thou shalt not run in the corridors. Somehow the others managed to get out of her way. Alex crashed into her.

Everyone had been talking about Miss Treat since she had arrived, just a few weeks ago. She was a supply teacher in physics and chemistry and suddenly everyone wanted to do science.

Miss Treat was young; still in her twenties and almost absurdly attractive, with blonde hair falling to her shoulders, amazing blue eyes and movie star lips. She dressed like a teacher with a grey, tailored jacket and serious shoes. But she walked like a model. The boys joked about her. The girls admired her. And Alex had just run into her. It was the first time they met.

"Good morning," she said. "I'm Donna Treat."

"You certainly are," Alex replied.

She looked at him coolly. "You're Alex Rider," she said.

"Yes."

He wondered how she knew.

"I've been looking at your reports for last term. You've got a lot of catching up to do."

"I was away ... sick."

"You seem to get sick a lot," Miss Treat said.

Alex couldn't tell her the truth. He couldn't tell anyone. Even if he had been allowed to, nobody would have believed him.

He had no parents. He had been brought up by an uncle, Ian Rider, who had been a spy, working in an obscure department of MI6 ... a secret within a secret. Then his uncle had died and, somehow, they had manipulated Alex into taking his place. There were times, they had said, when a child could achieve things that an adult could not. And if he missed school? If he came back each time not just injured but with his whole life bent out of shape? It didn't matter. He was doing it for his country. Nobody must know.

Of course, Miss Treat was right.

Despite his efforts to catch up, Alex was slipping behind in class. She had read his reports. His form teacher: "Alex is a bright and pleasant boy but he would be doing much better if he turned up more regularly at school..."
And humanities: "Alex needs to join in more and to be part of the class. He was absent again this term. But he wrote a first-class essay on Russian politics and the collapse of the fleet at Murmansk."

That had amused Alex. What he had learned about Murmansk wasn’t out of a book. If it hadn’t been for him, Murmansk along with half of Russia would no longer exist.

Miss Treat was still watching him with those deep blue eyes. "Are you going on the trip this afternoon?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss."

"Are you interested in weapons?"

Alex thought briefly of all the guns and knives that, at different times, had been aimed at him. "Yes, he said.

"Well enjoy it. But don’t run in the corridor."

And then she was gone, brushing past him and disappearing into the staff room. Alex wondered what she did when she wasn’t working as a supply teacher. A bell rang. Walking fast, he headed for the next class.

The exhibition at the British Museum was called Seven Hundred Years of War and had hundreds of weapons from medieval bows to automatic machine guns displayed in a dozen galleries. Two classes from Brookland School had gone, with Miss Treat and Mr Kydd (who taught history) in charge. It was the last visit of the day. The museum was about to close.

Later, Alex would be unsure quite how he managed to lag behind. He had been looking at a case of replica guns. MI6 never let him have a gun. Maybe that was why he was interested. At the same time, he had become aware of a security guard showing other visitors out of the gallery, before slowly walking over to him. The guard seemed to have been involved in a bad car accident. His face was divided by a line of stitches.

"Enjoying yourself?" the guard asked.

Alex shrugged.

"If you like weapons, you might be interested in this one."

The guard smiled and that was what saved Alex. The two missing front teeth. Instantly, Alex knew he had seen the man before and he was already moving, sliding backwards, as the fake guard suddenly produced a vicious sword, taken from the kung fu gallery next door.
It was a unicorn sword, also called lin jiao dao: fifteenth century; Chinese. It had three razor-sharp blades: one about a metre long and the others shorter, attached to the handle and shaped like lethal crescent moons.

The guard aimed for his head. As Alex leapt back, he actually felt the sword slice the air, less than a centimetre from his face. The guard came at him a second time, stabbing forward now with the three blades. Alex only just managed to avoid them, hampered by his school uniform and backpack. He twisted back, lost his balance and fell. He heard the man laugh out loud as his shoulders crashed into the wooden floor and the breath was knocked out of him.

The guard walked forward, spinning the sword. That was when Alex remembered his name.

"Skoda!" he said.

"You remember me?"

"I never forget a face. But something seems to have happened to yours."

Alex tried to get back up but Skoda pushed him back with the sole of his foot.

"You did this to me!" Skoda snarled, and Alex saw that the two halves of his head no longer worked at the same time. It was as if two people were fighting for control of his face.

"And now you're going to pay!" Skoda giggled. "This is going to be slow. This is going to hurt!"

He raised the sword. There was nothing Alex could do. For once, he was helpless, on his back, with no gadgets, no clever moves. Skoda took a breath. He was like a butcher examining a prime cut of meat. His tongue hung out. It was also stitched in two halves. There was a soft, thudding sound. Skoda pitched forward and lay still. There was a small, feathered dart sticking out of the back of his neck. Alex looked past him and his head swam.

Miss Treat was standing there, holding a tranquillizer gun. "Are you hurt, Alex?" she asked.

Alex got unsteadily to his feet. "You...?" he began. He was staring at the gun.

"All right," Miss Treat said. "We knew Skoda had escaped. We were afraid he might come after you. I was sent in to keep an eye on you."
"You're a spy?"

"I think the words you're looking for are ... thank you!"

It was true. She had just saved his life. Alex looked around him. Seven hundred years of war. He was part of it now and had been ever since his uncle had died. MI6 had made him their secret weapon. They had put him into a glass case of their own and they were the ones with the key.

"Thank you, Miss Treat," he said.

"Don't mention it, Alex," Miss Treat replied.

"Now, you'd better go down and find the others while I deal with our friend." She smiled at him. "And try to remember not to run!"