

A Man of Two Truths
by Xanthe



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Story Notes:

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Pic by **Sean Spencer**

This story was inspired by a conversation held on a rainy Saturday afternoon in Soho in the company of M Butterfly, Emma, Sergeeva, Wombat and Gaby. You've probably forgotten the conversation, but many thanks all the same, ladies!

Spoilers: *Two Fathers, One Son*, *SR819*, *Requiem*. Some knowledge of canon is required to make total sense of this story but you can cheerfully read it and enjoy it without.

Many thanks to Phoebe for beta reading help.



Spooky 2001 award winner for Outstanding Krycek Characterisation.

Runner up: Outstanding Krycek Slash Story

Third Place: Outstanding Original Character (Max)

Third Place: Outstanding Skinner Characterisation

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"He led a double life. Did that make him a liar? He did not feel a liar. He was a man of two truths." From 'The Sacred and Profane Love Machine,' by Iris Murdoch.

Max is dying. Oh, not quickly; I don't think he'd ever do anything so strategically suspect as to die without due thought and consideration, but, nonetheless, he is dying. His doctors, characteristically ignoring patient confidentiality and, I suspect, his own dire threats, have told me that he has lung cancer. That's ironic, really, I suppose.

I haven't seen him for three years, and I'm shocked by the change in him. His skin is paper thin, and his rugged, much-loved face is deeply lined, and pale, and yet he's still Max. Still fighting, still as stubborn as ever. He looks up as I enter the room, and I wave my hand to prevent him getting up. It's all I can do to hide my dismay at his appearance, but he sees through me anyway. He always did. He always **could**. Not many can.

"Max." I stride over to his side, and kiss both his cheeks, and he smiles at me, that watchful, loving smile that I'll miss so much that it makes me ache just thinking about it. "You're looking well," I tell him, sitting in the armchair by the fire, opposite his own. He shakes his head, chiding me.

"Dominik, you always were an excellent liar," he scolds, pursing his lips as he used to when I was 10 years old, and had just got into some mischief or other.

"I learned from the best." I incline my head in his direction and he laughs at me. "How's Maddie?" I ask, because that's always what I want to know first. He shrugs, and makes a little face.

"She's well, Nicky. She's fine. There's no change, but she's happy. That's all we can ask for."

We're silent for a moment, and he gazes at me. Those sharp, dark eyes miss nothing. They roam over every single inch of me, and I know that he's missed me as much as I have missed him. His expression is as clear and inscrutable as ever, but I am as skilled at reading the nuances as he is. There are no secrets we could ever keep from each other, not after all this time. He knows me too well, and I love him too much.

"Nicky, I'm sorry," he says after he has given me a thorough inspection. He reaches forward, and places a thin, wrinkled hand on my arm. "Maybe I was wrong," he murmurs.

"That bad, huh?" I smile, ruefully, and he gives a grunt of laughter, but it quickly fades.

"Yes," he says, and then we both fall silent.

"How long?" I ask as the clock's endless ticking finally grinds me down, as if it is ticking away the last moments of his all too precious life, which, in a way, it is.

"Several months yet, I suspect." He gives me a reassuring smile, and reaches for a cigarette. His hands are not so sure as they once were, and he fumbles for his lighter. I find it for him, and flick it open, then light the cigarette.

"Still smoking?" I raise an eyebrow, and he gives another amused grunt.

"Dominik, I know those bastard quacks have already told you I have lung cancer. Doubtlessly, they've also told you that it's inoperable. To quit now would be the surest case of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted that I've ever heard of, so don't be a silly boy and give me a hard time about it."

"You know me better than that, Max." I shrug. "We all make our own decisions, for good or ill. It swings both ways, though - whatever has happened to me, please don't blame yourself. I'd do it all again."

He takes a puff on his cigarette, and then gives a strained cough, before settling back in his chair with a searching look in my direction, and a raised eyebrow.

"Well, maybe not all of it," I amend softly, staring into the fire.

"No. Not all." He coughs again, almost apologetically. "We have a lot to talk about, Nicky," he says, rearranging the blanket over his knees. "A lot of things to sort out before I snuff it. There are things I need to tell you, so that you can handle it all when I'm gone." I'm not listening to a word he's saying because I'm too busy watching him. I realise that he's grown impossibly thin for such a large man. His wizened flesh sticks to his bones, and makes him look...old. That hurts; it makes it hit home, and I feel physically sick.

"I won't go back, Max. Not when you're dying," I tell him, snapping out of my reverie. "I want to be here with you."

"To do what?" He shrugs. "The Organisation needs you more than I do, Nicky. You're the only one who has seen the full picture, and knows what's going on."

"Maybe not for much longer."

I examine my fingers for a moment, and he waits. He has always waited for me, and he has never been disappointed. Sooner or later I come to him, and tell him everything he wants to know. I'm not blind to the power of his patience, and I've tried to emulate him. It's a hard but useful weapon to acquire, and it didn't come easily or naturally to such an impatient, headstrong soul as myself. There is silence between us for a long time, and then I get up, and wander over to the window. Outside, the frost is thick and white on the ground. The trees are bare, and the winter is like a blanket over the land around us.

"An order went out yesterday." I glance back at him, where he waits. "The circle is closing, Max. I might not have any longer than you."

"What will you do?" He takes a slow, leisurely puff on his cigarette, and blows out the smoke. It's an action that's familiar to me, but for entirely different reasons.

"Watch how it plays out." I shrug. "Play that waiting game you taught me so well."

"And what do you **want** to do?" He asks, those sharp, dark eyes never leaving my face.

"Come back here, and be with you when the end comes." I turn back to the winter white world outside, because I don't want to see the expression on his face right now.

"Nicky..." His voice never wavers. His will has always been so strong; he's an example to us all. "I'd like that too." And he would, but he won't allow it all the same. "But this is too important. **You** are too important to us. You know that. I don't matter. I'll be gone soon, but what I've worked for all my life will remain, and I'm relying on you to bring about the resolution that we've all sacrificed so much to achieve."

"And what about what **I** want? Doesn't that matter, Max?" I turn back to him, and reach his side with three strides. "Damn it, you're the closest thing I have to family in the whole world. You're the only one who really knows me, Max. You're the only one who understands." I crouch down beside his chair, and place my hand on his thin, fragile arm.

"Yes. I do." He touches my hair, gently with his yellowed, nicotine-stained fingers. "Nicky, I love you as if you were my own son. You know that. I won't order you to go back. Just follow your conscience - that's all I've ever asked of you."

"Yes. That's all." I rock back on my haunches, and consider him thoughtfully. "Damn you, Max," I curse softly, and he smiles.

"So, you're going back?"

"Yes." I get up, and return to the window. It's growing dark outside, and snow has started to fall. "I hate him you know." I twitch aside the curtains, and gaze at the whitening world. It's beautiful - so beautiful that it reminds me exactly what we stand to lose if I screw up. Sometimes I hate the weight of this responsibility, weighing so heavily on my shoulders. I've lost my mother, my father, my best friend, my wife, and my own soul to this cause. Haven't I given enough?

"Who?" His voice is rougher than it used to be, and it always had a gravelly quality; deep, and low.

"Alex Krycek." I watch the world outside turn dark and white at one and the same time, and find some resonance in that.

"Ah." He takes another puff on his cigarette.

"Sometimes I hate him so much that I want to kill him." I let those words linger between us, holding my breath. If he were to give me the word then I'd do it. If I just had his permission then I'd kill Alex Krycek once and for all, and wipe him out of this beautiful world like the cancerous growth that he is. I know that Max won't give me that permission though. That's Max. He's strong for me when I'm being weak, and stops me from doing what he knows I'll inevitably regret.

"Something's happened?" Max coaxes.

"Yes. Krycek is a liar, a thief, and a killer, but...what I never knew... it turns out that he's a sadist too." The snow outside performs a long, slow, dizzying dance that bewitches me for a moment, and almost makes me forget. Almost. "There's a man..." I stiffen, and then turn back. "A good man. His name is Walter Skinner."

"I've read the reports," Max says, encouraging me to continue with an inclination of his grizzled old head.

"He **is** a good man," I tell him, urgently, because it's important to me that he understands. "I wasn't sure at first, but I am now. He's only ever tried to do his job. He's given his life for his country once already, and Krycek killed him a second time, and then brought him back to life. He's a sadist: a cat, toying with his prey. He holds a decent man's life in his hand; with one snap of his fingers he can choose to cause Skinner pain, or release him from that pain, or kill him. It's not good for any man to hold that power over another, Max. It sickens me." My whole body tenses, and I spit those words out, the tension knotting every single muscle in my body.

"I know." He nods, a small, frail shell of the man I once knew, and yet still Max behind those sharp, dark eyes, still my all-knowing Max. He's the only person who understands. "Will Krycek kill Skinner?" He asks, never taking his eyes off me.

"I don't think so. I think Walter Skinner is more useful to the Project alive, so I think that's the way he'll stay - for now at least. Poor bastard. He never did anything, you know? He's spent the past 5 years running around, tying himself in knots, trying to do the right thing, and now Krycek has him - like this." I close my gloved hand into a savage fist, like a tightening noose. Max's eyes have never left my face. "It hasn't been pretty. Skinner fights. Sometimes I wish he'd just give in, but he fights. He can't stop fighting - it's who, and what he is. He struggles, like a wild animal caught in a trap, thrashing around, but they have him; he just hasn't figured that out yet - or maybe he has. Maybe that's what makes his death throes so desperate, and so very sad. I hate what Krycek is doing to him."

"Nicky, are you in love with Skinner?" Max asks. Did I mention that he knows me better than any person on this earth?

"Oh yes, Max," I reply, gazing into the fire, "I'm very much afraid that I am."

Skinner was working late, his shoulders hunched. The words in the report leapt and danced in front of his tired eyes. It was almost midnight, and he should probably go home. He **would** go home if there was any point, but nothing waited for him there but a cold bed, and an emptiness he would have gone to the end of the earth to avoid right now - except for the fact there was no point. It accompanied him everywhere he went, like a cold, dead weight, nestled in the pit of his stomach. His eyes hurt, and he could no longer make any sense of the words on the page. Skinner reached up, snagged off his glasses, and then pinched his eyes, wearily.

"You should get some rest."

It was a familiar voice. Skinner didn't even open his eyes; he knew the hard tones of his bitter enemy when he heard them.

"Krycek." He put his glasses back on, feeling naked and vulnerable facing this old foe without them. Krycek was standing in the corner of his office. God knows how long he'd been there - maybe as long as five minutes. Maybe he'd slipped in when Skinner had gone to get his 8th cup of coffee of the evening. The other man walked into the light, with that slinky, prowling grace that Skinner hated so much.

"You're looking old, and tired, Skinner, and you're no use to us like that." Krycek smiled, a cold smile that didn't reach those elusive green eyes.

"And being of use to you is my main objective in life, after all," Skinner snarled, barely keeping a leash on his temper.

"It should be. I do hold your life in my hand, after all." Krycek grinned, and reached into his pocket. Skinner stiffened, as the familiar, dark shape of the palm pilot came into view, clutched between two plastic fingers.

"If it means betraying Mulder again, I won't do it," Skinner snapped. "Last time there were ramifications I didn't understand. I didn't know that giving him that assignment, and making that tape would place him in danger."

"Relax." Krycek sat down, and slowly placed first one, and then the other foot on Skinner's desk, crossing them nonchalantly. He stared at Skinner, a challenge in his eyes, daring the other man to object. Skinner's jaw clenched, but he said nothing. Krycek grinned. "This has nothing to do with Mulder, or Scully. This is something you can do for us, using all the excellent resources at your disposal."

"I won't kill anyone," Skinner said quickly.

"I'm not asking you to," Krycek snapped back, equally quickly. "This is a nothing job, Skinner. And by that I mean nothing to spoil that oh so spotless conscience of yours." He smirked, as the irony of those words clearly hit home. "All we want you to do is find someone."

"You need my help with that?" Skinner raised a surprised eyebrow. "I would have thought that you and your associates were skilled enough in that field yourself."

"We are, but this is different. There's a man we've been looking for who is proving particularly elusive. We need to find him. It's important."

"And when you find him? Will you kill him?" Skinner asked. "I won't help put an innocent man in the grave."

"Who said he was innocent?" Krycek's eyes were dark, and savage. "He isn't. He's a very dangerous man, and he's been playing a very dangerous game. We need to find him,

Skinner. The only trouble is, the last information we have on him is from when he was nine years old. Since then..." He shrugged, expansively, and waved his good arm in the air. "Nothing. So...we thought it was time to call in the resources of the good old FBI. What's the point of having a pet Assistant Director if you can't make him jump through hoops occasionally, after all?"

Skinner fought with every single degree of his self-control to stop himself jumping over the desk and throttling his old enemy where he sat.

"It's a nice, easy job. You find him, and then you tell me where he is. That's all. Nothing else. You don't even have to get your hands dirty. It's just a simple missing persons case. Surely even you haven't been out of the field so long that you've forgotten how to investigate one of those?" Krycek's raised eyebrow was a challenge. Skinner considered the request for a moment. It didn't seem too bad. There was clearly no point in refusing the assignment, not until he knew more. If he found out where this person was then he might be able to warn the man before he gave the information to Krycek.

"All right. Who is he?" He asked.

Krycek smiled, and reached under his jacket for a file.

"His name is Crozier," he said, throwing the file on the desk. Skinner looked into Krycek's expressionless green eyes for a moment, and wondered what was going on behind that jade façade. "Dominik Crozier," Krycek said, unblinking. "One thing though, Skinner. You investigate this yourself. Alone. Don't tell anyone else, not even Mulder."

Skinner shrugged, and nodded, then reached for the file, and opened it, and when he looked up again he was unsurprised to find that the assassin had left as silently as he had arrived.

"Dominik Crozier." Skinner flicked through the file, and began to read.

It's late as I return to the most recent in the series of rundown lodgings that I've called home over the years. I'm cold, and weary, and I'm worried about Max. I wish he had let me stay. I pass a poster for a production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, and my stomach does its usual somersault. It was once my favourite opera, but I haven't seen it a production of it for years. The last time I saw it was on my 9th birthday, the day my life ended, and Dominik Crozier died. He died again 14 years later; Walter Skinner isn't the only man who knows what it is like to have died twice. I wonder if that is one of the reasons why I fell in love with him. Love. I could laugh at myself for using such a word. As if I am entitled to either give or receive love. I'm an idiot, and being an idiot could get me killed. I care less about myself than what my death would do to Max, and Maddie, and the whole damn Organisation. Without me, I don't know what chance they stand. Hell, realistically, I'm not sure what chance we stand anyway. *The Marriage of Figaro*. I can hear the music echoing in my head, and it makes me retch. Once it made me dance, but for years I've felt sick whenever I've heard even the smallest snippet of that opera.

I remember the journey home. Our chauffeur was driving, and I was chattering excitedly. The evening had been a birthday treat for me, and my mother was laughing as I treated her to my rendition of *Voi Che Sapete*. She was very beautiful, but it pains me that I can barely remember her face now. Max was right to burn the photographs, I know that, but it hurts all the same that my own memory is so hazy. I loved her very much, and I know that she had blonde hair, and eyes that were a stunning shade of turquoise. I remember that she was petite, and slim, and that she had a tiny mole beside her mouth, that her teeth were straight, and white, but I don't remember how it all fitted together. I remember the individual parts but not the ensemble whole, and that upsets me. I wish I hadn't seen the poster for the opera, because it's all in my head again, and now I must re-live it, the way I have countless times over the years.

"Damn but the boy has a fine voice, Marguerite," my father said. "You were right to pester me for singing lessons. He must take after his Mama because I can't sing a note."

"We know that, Papa!" I laughed. "We've heard you singing in the bath!"

"Monster!" He tickled me until I sank to the floor of our enormous limousine, breathless with laughter.

"Hush, boys," my mother chided. "Nicky, come and sit up here beside me and settle down. You're distracting Leo." Our driver glanced at me in the mirror, and winked, and I grinned at him. Leo and I were old friends. He once took me out on his motor-bike when mother and father were off at some political function or other. I loved every second of it – the feel of the wind in my hair, and the way the world whizzed by at top speed. I enjoyed the sense of danger, of doing something illicit. I always did love sailing too close to the wind. Leo had me back at the house and in bed before Papa got home. When Mama came up to kiss me goodnight, she took one look at me, and said, with a conspiratorial smile: "I think you should wash your face before your father comes up." When I looked in the mirror, I saw a smudge of grease along my cheekbone, and washed it off quickly. "I think, also, that it might be best if you at least pretend to be asleep when Papa looks in on you," she chuckled. "It is one o'clock after all." And then she pressed her lips to my forehead, and glided from the room. I don't think Leo got into any trouble for that. I hope not.

I sat down beside my mother in the limousine, snuggling up to her. She was wearing a dress of long, cool, ice blue satin, and she smelled of eau de Mama. Maybe everybody has a smell they associate with their mothers, but I always remember her particular scent. I can still smell it if I close my eyes, and think back. Sometimes I think I smell it again, in the perfume of a woman wafting by, and I'm ashamed to admit that occasionally I have followed women, just to smell their scent. Mama had a fur stole around her beautiful white neck. She **was** beautiful; that isn't just the false memory of a 9 year old boy in love with his mother. Mama was an actress before she married my father. She was well known in Vienna, where we lived. Then my father came along and swept her off her feet, and she gave up the stage for him. He was fifteen years older than her, not particularly tall, but an imposing man. His dark hair was streaked grey, the same colour as his eyes, and he was such a serious man. It was only with her, or me, that he smiled. He loved us. We were the centre of his universe, and I was happy in a way you take for granted when you are 9 years old, and your world is one of

love and indulgence. Maybe I was a little spoiled, but I don't think it made me obnoxious; it merely made me confident, and that's no bad thing. We drove back to our house, still laughing and chattering, and just thinking about it makes me ache, because it was many years before I felt that happy again.

"I want to be an opera singer when I grow up," I said enthusiastically. "Or maybe an actor, like Mama."

"You're certainly loud enough to make yourself heard onstage," my father snorted, ruffling my hair.

"I'll be a great actor. You'll be proud of me," I proclaimed, thrilled by the thought of starring in movies.

"Oh darling, we'll be proud of you whatever you do, won't we, Josef?" My father was staring out of the window, lost in thought, but he looked around, and laughed.

"What? Oh, yes. Maybe you'll be a doctor," Papa said. I'd almost forgotten that snippet of conversation. *We'll be proud of you whatever you do...* I don't think so, Mama. Somehow, I don't think so.

Our car drew up at the house. Looking back, I always want it to end differently. I want to scream at us not to go in, and sometimes I do, but they can't hear me. They're still teasing each other, and 9 year old Nicky was still singing. He tumbled out of the car, eager to pirouette, and prance, to show off for his doting parents. I wonder if I was ever that precocious, but I know that I was. We wandered up to the house, and somehow I feel that there should be **something** to warn us; maybe a feeling, or a sign, to tell us to stop, not to go in, but there is nothing. It was a perfectly ordinary summer evening. Papa opened the door, while Leo put the car away in the garage, and I followed behind my father, with Mama bringing up the rear.

"Nicky, run upstairs and get ready for bed. I'll be up to say goodnight in a few minutes," Mama said, and while I longed for the evening to go on forever I was too well brought up to argue with her, so my little pout sufficed to register my protest, and she laughed at me, and kissed my forehead, then pushed me up the stairs. I went into my bedroom, and washed, and changed into my pajamas, then sat in my bed, waiting for them both to come up. They always came to say goodnight, and read me a bedtime story, but not that night. That night I waited...and waited...I began to wonder if they were planning another birthday surprise for me, and then I heard raised voices. It wasn't my parents arguing; they never **did** for a start, and my father was a quietly spoken man. I never even heard him shout before that night, but one of those voices was definitely his.

"I don't know, I tell you!" He cried, desperately, in a tone of voice that scared me. Even at the age of 9 I knew that something was very wrong. "Please, let her go! I don't know. I don't have them. You're wro..." And then a loud snapping sound, followed by a scream of pain. I jumped out of bed, ran out into the corridor, and crouched in the darkness, staring through the banisters. I could see my father, remonstrating with someone in the hallway below,

beneath the huge crystal chandelier, and I could smell tobacco. A thin, wafting plume of smoke was making its way up the stairs to where I was crouched. I remember thinking that Papa was probably angry that someone was smoking in his house. Mama hated smoking so father quit the day they got married, and wouldn't allow anyone to smoke in the house.

"You have something that belongs to us," the intruder was saying, in fluent German with a heavy American accent, and that's when I caught sight of my mother. She was lying on the floor, a livid red bruise on the side of her jaw. She was whimpering. Father's hands had been tied behind his back, and he looked pale, and small, and defeated. A little boy should never see his father looking like that. A boy's father should always seem big, and strong, and capable of taking on the world alone, and winning. That was the way my father always seemed to me until that night.

"Leave her alone. She doesn't know anything," my father said desperately. "It's me you want."

"Then tell us what we want to know," the smoking man requested, in a voice that sounded eminently reasonable. I willed my father to agree. One of the intruders had a gun held to my father's head, and another had his aimed loosely at my mother's back. I didn't understand why my father was hesitating. Didn't my mother's life mean more to him than some political secret?

"I can't." My father sounded broken, and there are tears in his eyes.

"Then we'll have to kill her," the smoking man said, flicking his fingers.

My "NO!" rang out, but was lost in the sound of gunfire, and the noise of a woman screaming. My mother wasn't dead though. My father had wrenched himself free of his captors, flung himself over her body, and taken the bullet for her. A steady stream of blood was flowing from his chest, and his stiff white shirt was glowing bright red under the lights of the chandelier. The smoking man kicked my father and he rolled over, and I knew immediately that he was dead. His eyes were open, and he was staring straight up at me, and, in death, I sensed that he was giving me a message. He was asking me to save my mother. Silently, finding courage that I didn't know I had, I tiptoed back to my bedroom, and opened the window. I climbed out onto the garage roof, and to this day I'm still not sure how, but I somehow managed to open the skylight, and half climbed, half fell into the garage. Only a few minutes had passed since we entered the house, and Leo was still there, putting the car away. He looked at me, startled. He hadn't even heard the gunshots, and screams, because he had the car radio on, and was polishing one of the wing mirrors.

"Leo...help...Papa..." And that's all I managed to say. He guessed the rest by the look on my face, and the look on **his** face surprised me. He didn't look like Leo any more. He looked different.

"In the house?" He asked, and I nodded, the tears streaming down my face. "How many of them?" He didn't seem surprised.

"I don't know. More than two. They shot him...they shot...please, save Mama!" I was shaking all over, and on the verge of collapse.

"All right, Nicky. Listen to me very carefully." He grabbed my shoulders, and sank his fingers into them. "I want you to go inside, into my apartment." He nodded at the door leading from the garage to his sleeping quarters. "Find the phone, and call this number." He wrote a number for me, and I stared at him in disbelief. My father was lying dead next door and he wanted me to make a phone call? "Ask for Max." He spoke quickly, and urgently. "Nicky, just do it. It's important. When it's done, I want you to run. Run as far away from the house as possible, and hide somewhere. Max will find you."

"What about Mama?" I asked him, and he nodded at me.

"It's all right, Nicky. I'll find your Mama. Now go." He pushed me towards the door, and I went, but as I reached the door, I turned back...and that's when I saw him change. Leo, my skinny, wiry little Leo, with his thin, dark hair, and crooked nose, grew in front of my eyes. He became six feet tall, taller maybe, and his hair changed to a light brown, and he was bulging with muscles. He turned, and saw me watching, and nodded impatiently to the door. "Do it, Nicky," he hissed, and his voice was still Leo, but it changed even as he spoke, and became deeper, stronger, and if I was scared before I was petrified out of my wits now. I ran into the apartment as Leo – not Leo - ordered, and found the phone. I tried to dial the number but my hand was shaking so much that it took three attempts before I could manage it. A woman with a smooth, cultured, American accent answered the call immediately, on the second ring.

"Max...I must speak to Max," I said urgently into the phone.

"Who is this?" she asked sharply.

"It's Nicky...I mean...it's Dominik, Dominik Crozier. Please, Leo told me to call. Please..." I was crying again, and she hesitated, and then I heard her talking to someone. A few seconds later, a man's voice came on the line.

"This is Max," he said cautiously.

"They've killed my father," I sobbed incoherently down the phone.

"Where are you?" Max asked urgently, seeming to understand the situation a lot better than I did at that moment in time.

"In Leo's apartment. He told me to run, and hide, and call you. He changed shape..." I was shaking and crying, and I knew that I wasn't making any sense.

"Do as he says. I'll be there, Dominik. Now go. RUN!" he ordered, and I dropped the phone, scared by the intensity of his voice.

I ran back out into the garage, and that's when I heard the second gunshot. All I could think of was my Mama, lying on the floor with that huge red bruise on her face, and I couldn't

help myself. I disobeyed Leo, and Max. Instead of running into the garden, to safety, I jumped onto the roof of the car, clambered out through the skylight again, crawled to my bedroom window, and climbed back inside. There I resumed my previous place, watching through the banisters. There were more gunshots. I could see Leo walking towards the smoking man, and my mother was still alive! She was sitting on the floor, trembling, but she was still alive. Leo shouldn't have been. The smoking man was firing his gun, and the man who was once Leo just kept on walking. A strange green goo was oozing from the places where he had been shot, and my eyes started to burn.

"Let her go." Leo stopped in front of my mother, and stared down at the smoking man. I couldn't see the face of my father's murderer, just his hand, his fingers curled around a cigarette. "She doesn't know anything, Spender," Leo said.

"You shouldn't be here." The smoking man didn't even sound worried.

"I make my own choices. Now leave," Leo said, but at that moment there was a movement in the shadows, and I tried to call out but it was too late. For a moment I couldn't see what had happened, but then Leo was falling forward, onto his knees, and his face was crumpling before my eyes. I didn't hear a gunshot, and I didn't understand what was happening. Leo seemed to be disintegrating, and the green ooze was seeping from his eyes, and mouth. He fell forward, and that's when I saw that he had what looked like a knife sticking in the back of his neck. My mother gasped, and placed a hand over her mouth, and I started to cough, but nobody heard me in the general melee below. There was an acidic smell in the air that burnt my nostrils, and eyes, and mouth. It hurt.

"Kill her," Spender said, and my mother screamed.

"Please...don't...please...I beg you. Let me live..." She implored, holding onto his legs. He looked down on her, and that's when I started moving. I ran down the stairs, screaming at the top of my voice. I'm not sure what I said; and my throat was hoarse, and sore, and I was out of my mind with fright. They hadn't yet seen me; one of the men had moved his gun, and he placed it against my mother's head, and fired. It's that easy to kill. It takes only one second to snuff out a life. There's no sense to it, and no justice. It's just death. I learned that at 9 years old. I screamed at the top of my voice as I watched her lifeless body sink forward, her hair covering the blood that seeped out from underneath it in a steady stream, forming a pool, and staining her beautiful blue satin dress a bright, sickly red. Spender looked up, and saw me for the first time, and that's also when I got my first glimpse of him, face to face. I was crouched in the darkness of the stairwell, but he was standing in the full light of the chandelier. He was a tall man, with hooded hazel eyes, and a supercilious sneer on his lips, which were curled around a cigarette. I'm not sure that he even knew who I was, and at that moment one of his lackeys ran in, distracting him.

"We have to go! They're on their way!" He yelled, and the intruders started racing towards the door, leaving only Spender, who looked straight at me. I shrank back into the shadows as he raised his gun.

"I don't like leaving witnesses," he murmured. "It's untidy." He pulled the trigger, and I started moving at the same time, and he was moving too, running for the door. I felt something slice into my head, and the world turned red as I fell down the stairs, blood running down the side of my face. I came to rest on the bottom step, and my head hurt so much that I passed out.

I don't know how long I lay there, drifting in and out of consciousness, but the next thing I remember is waking to find a big man, wearing a balaclava, bending over me. I came to with a start, and began screaming. The big man placed a hand over my mouth. He smelled of smoke, and that made me think of Spender - he was tall, like this dark clad stranger; maybe he'd come back for me. I was screaming and struggling as the man picked me up, effortlessly, and carried me outside.

"Hush, Dominik. It's Max. I'm not going to hurt you. You came to me for help, remember?" he said urgently, as he bundled me into the back of a car.

"Max?" I barely remembered that phone call. It could have taken place a lifetime ago.

"Yes. Hush." He pulled off his balaclava as the car took off at top speed and I saw immediately that he wasn't the man who had murdered my parents. He was about 40, with a lined, craggy face, and deep-set, brown eyes. There was something about him that I recognised, even then; Max was one of the good guys. It was obvious in the warmth of his smile, the humour in his eyes, and the sheer charisma that oozed from every pore in his body. Yes, Max is an inveterate womaniser; he drinks too much, and he smokes like a chimney, but I'd trust him with my life, and he's never once let me down in all the years since he carried a small, frightened, helpless, injured boy from the wreckage of his life, and helped him build a new one. "Dominik, you're hurt. Hold still while I see how bad it is." His large fingers probed my forehead, and came away blood red. I opened my mouth, wanting to scream, but caught the expression in his eyes.

"It's all right, Dominik," Max said softly. "You're going to be all right. It's just a flesh wound."

"He shot me." I put my fingers up to my forehead, and touched the wound.

"The shot must have ricocheted. If it had entered your head cleanly it would have killed you," Max said. Then, as now, he always told me the truth. He never treated me like a child; maybe he recognised that when you've just seen your parents slaughtered in front of your eyes, there is no truth that's too hard to bear, or maybe that's just Max. He doesn't like to hide the hard facts, but he's always there to help you bear them.

"My mother...father..." I whispered, brokenly.

"Dominik, I'm very sorry." And he was. His dark eyes were sad and sincere. "Your father was a good man, Dominik, never forget that."

"Leo told me to hide...but I couldn't. I heard her scream. I couldn't leave my mother. I thought I could stop them. I ran down the stairs, but she was already...they had already...I was too slow. If I had said something sooner...I could have distracted them...I could have..."

“Dominik.” He stopped the torrent of guilty words with his finger, placing it gently over my lips. “You couldn’t have done anything. You’re just a boy. They were men, with guns. You did your best to protect your mother. You couldn’t have done anything more.”

“Mama.” I opened my mouth, and said the word in an almost voiceless whisper.

“You’ve been very brave, Dominik,” Max was saying but I was hardly listening. I was just remembering the way my father had stared at me with those dead eyes, telling me to save her, and how I’d failed him. “Dominik.” Max tapped my cheek lightly, to bring me back. “Listen to me,” he said in a firm, low voice, “You couldn’t have done anything more. You’re the bravest kid I’ve ever met. You could have run – you **should** have run, the way Leo and I ordered you to, but you didn’t. You went back to save your mother. That says a lot about you, and the kind of boy you are. Many a grown man would have thought twice about running back into the house under such circumstances.” I stared at him, unblinking, and he smiled at me. With those few words, he stopped what could have become a lifetime of self-blame before it even began. Oh, on some level I’ll always hate myself for being too small, too young, and too weak to save my parents, but Max took away at least some of the guilt, even if he could never take away the pain.

“Where are we going? What will happen to me?” I asked him in a small voice. I was suddenly aware that I was dressed in blood-stained pyjamas, speeding away from the only home I’d ever known, and that all the people who had ever loved me were dead, wiped out in less than ten minutes of chaos and carnage.

“I’m taking you somewhere safe,” Max said gently. “We’ll look after you, Dominik. I know we can’t replace your parents, but we will take good care of you. You’ll have everything you need. We look after our own.”

I wasn't sure what he meant by that, and I gazed at him, distrustfully.

“The man...that man who shot me...he was asking my father questions. He was looking for something. My father wouldn’t tell him. Why wouldn’t he tell him?” I gazed at Max, the tears filling in my eyes. “Even when they threatened my mother...why? Didn’t he love her?” Max took a deep breath, and swallowed hard, and I think he was close to tears as well.

“Of course he loved her, Dominik,” he said softly, “but there was so much more at stake. Your father was a brave man – and your mother was brave too. She knew all about the secrets your father was hiding. She knew the risks, but she never once asked him to be less than he was, or to give it all up.”

“I don’t understand,” I told him, shivering badly from shock.

“I know, and I will explain it all one day, but for now, you’re too tired, too sad, and too young. Come here, Dominik.”

He opened his arms, and I stared at him. I didn’t know this man. I’d never met him before, and yet I trusted him. A bond had been forged between us that would never be broken,

from that day to this. I was cold, and tired, and I hurt. I crawled across the car seat towards him, trembling violently, and disappeared into the comforting oblivion of his arms.

“Nicky,” I whispered, resting my weary, aching head against his shoulder.

“What?” He frowned down at me, his big arms holding me tight, swallowing me up in their warmth.

“Papa only calls me Dominik when he’s cross with me. Otherwise I’m always Nicky.” I closed my eyes, and felt his arms tighten around me.

“Nicky then,” he said softly, gently stroking my hair. “Nicky.”

Skinner got out of the taxi, and paid the driver. He had taken a few days leave to travel to Vienna on the track of Krycek’s mysterious Dominik Crozier. The house was beautiful; large, and elegant, set in lovely gardens. Skinner opened the file he had brought with him, and checked the address. He didn’t know why he should be surprised: Josef Crozier, Dominik’s father, had, after all, been a wealthy politician with fingers in many pies. Skinner opened the large, wrought iron gate, and walked up the gravel drive, his footsteps crunching as he went. He had justified this trip by telling himself that his life was on the line, and he had to find this Crozier if he was to save himself at best another spell in the hospital, his arteries choked by carbon, and at worst an early grave. This wasn’t the entire truth though, and he knew that, although he wasn’t sure why this case had captured his interest in this way. Maybe it was the fact that this Dominik Crozier, whoever he was, was so badly wanted by Krycek’s bosses that they were prepared to bring in the FBI to find him, and maybe it was because the bare facts in the file were so fascinating. There was very little information to go on at all, save for the fact that at the age of 9, little Dominik Crozier had witnessed his parents’ death, and suffered what the Consortium operative writing the report had deemed to be “probably a fatal bullet wound to the head.” But if they really thought Crozier was dead, then why were they looking for him? Then again, maybe that wasn’t it either. Maybe, instead, it was the blurred, black and white photograph of a small boy, laughing as he was swung between two disembodied arms, which Skinner presumed belonged to the child’s parents, as they walked through the streets of Vienna that had caught his imagination. The child couldn’t have been more than four years old in the picture. Was this really all they knew about Dominik Crozier? It wasn’t much to go on. Skinner took the picture from the file, and gazed that the blurred, grainy image of the boy for a long time. He looked so happy. He had no inkling that in a few years time, his world would be destroyed, and his life shattered.

Skinner returned the photograph to the file, and tucked both into his duffel bag. He swung it onto his shoulder, and knocked on the imposing door. There was no reply. He knocked again, and then took a step back, and gazed at the upstairs windows, as if looking for some kind of clue.

"Nobody lives here now," a voice behind him said, in German. Skinner jumped, startled, and turned to find himself face to face with a gardener.

"Nobody's lived here for years. You'd think they'd sell the place if they didn't want to live here. Must be worth something." The gardener stared at the house.

"It's well kept," Skinner observed, in faltering German, gazing at the façade.

"Yes. They pay an army of people to keep it, but nobody lives here. Nobody even visits. I've never been inside, but I've heard..." The man's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "I've heard that it's like being in a time warp. Everything just as it was that night when Josef Crozier, and his wife and little boy, were gunned down, right down to the bloodstain on the floor."

"Do you believe that?" Skinner asked, frowning.

"Well, maybe not the part about the blood stain." The gardener grinned, ghoulishly. "Makes a good story to frighten the children with though!"

"You speak of Crozier's son. I wasn't aware...did he die here?" Skinner asked, his inefficient German barely adequate for the question.

"Yes. Gunned down with his parents. They cremated him in his mother's coffin," the gardener replied, clearly enjoying being the source of so much information. "Strange tale. Nothing stolen, and nobody knows who owns the house now."

"So nobody ever comes here?" Skinner pressed.

"I've never seen anyone." The gardener shrugged. "I've heard the house is haunted by the ghost of Marguerite Crozier though. The housekeeper comes here once or twice a week, and she says that sometimes she finds things have been moved, and she can smell the dead woman's perfume lingering in the air. Gives me quite a chill, I can tell you." He shivered dramatically, and Skinner grunted. Ghosts. This was turning out to be more Mulder's department than his, and yet Krycek had been quite specific that he should investigate this himself. So, the local people thought that Dominik Crozier was dead; what information did the Consortium have to the contrary? And why were they looking for this man now, decades after he had supposedly 'died'?

I come to with a start, and realise that I'm stiff, and wet, and damned cold. I'm not dressed for this kind of weather. I'm still staring at the poster for *The Marriage of Figaro*, and the lightly falling rain has soaked me to the skin. On the street beside me there's a small, steaming pool of vomit that I don't remember depositing there. I wipe the stench from my lips with the back of my sleeve, and then turn and trudge swiftly home, still lost in thought. Max's illness, and the knowledge that Spender's people have stepped up their search for me, has made me question my choices. I used to be so sure, but maybe now is the time to get out, before it's too late. Maybe it's already too late. Walter Skinner is a clever man. He

might find me where they failed. If so, then my days are already numbered. It's almost 2 am by the time I get back to my apartment block. The familiar stench of urine assaults me as I open the door, and start running up the concrete steps. I come across a gang of youths in the stairwell further up. They're off their heads on some substance or other, and they look at me as I jog up the stairs, hostility evident in their posture, and their dull lifeless eyes.

"Excuse me," I say politely, waiting for them to move so I can get past.

"Fuck off." It's mindless, without meaning. He's just another lost, dispossessed soul, but I have no pity for him. He hasn't seen what I've seen, and I'd defy him to know the kind of tragedy that I've known in my life. My hand fastens easily around his throat, and I defy his other, drugged up friends to come to his assistance. They gaze at me, uneasily, sensing danger. I could kill them all before they even know what's hit them, but I didn't get this far by drawing attention to myself. I pull the youth out of the way, and push him down the stairs. He falls, awkwardly, and gazes after me blankly.

"Thank you," I murmur ironically as I continue on my way.

"Motherfucker." He fingers his throat gingerly, but he's too scared to retaliate. There was a time when that particular epithet might have made me see red, and throw my fists around, but not any more. I've learned to control my emotions to a degree that makes me wonder if I even know what they are these days. I climb the next few steps to my apartment, and let myself in. It's small, and grubby, consisting of one room, and a small kitchen area. The paint is peeling, and the entire apartment block smells damp and musty. I go to the basin, and splash water on my face, and then fill myself a mug of the same cool liquid, and squat down on my mattress. The water rinses the taste of vomit from my mouth, and makes me feel human again – although sometimes I've doubted even that. The truth is that I'm scared, not for myself, but for what will become of me without Max. When he dies, there will be nobody left in the whole world who knows my story, and also...who loves me. I'm an orphan, and I've walked with loneliness all my life. The two people in the world who had showed me unconditional love without question are long since dead, but Max did his best to fill their shoes, and for that I'll be eternally grateful to him.

It wasn't always easy for either of us in those first, terrible days after my parents' death, but Max was amazing. I have no idea how he put up with me, but he did, and he pulled me through. I'm not sure I can bear to lose him. Looking back on my life, he's always been the one constant, from the moment he found me. I suppose that I took that for granted, but now, facing his death, all I can think about is how much he means to me. Maybe I need to go over these memories again now. I, of all people, know how important memories are. Sometimes they're all we have...

I woke up in a small bed in an underground room, and, for just a split second, I didn't remember what had happened, and then it all kicked back in, and I curled up in bed in a fetal position, and didn't move for the next 48 hours. I was kept pretty much sedated as they healed the graze on my head, but the scars inside would take much longer to heal – if they ever could. On the fifth day, Max strode in, pulled the covers off my bed, and told me to get up. There are very few people who would dare defy Max when he's in one of his

determined moods, and, trust me, I'm not one of them. I got up. Sulkily. Slowly. I submitted to being pushed under the shower, and washed, and I put on the clothes he threw onto the bed for me. I followed him through the strange, underground place I had been brought to, and sat beside him at a trestle table in the dining room. It was then that my natural curiosity kicked in.

"Where are we?" I asked him.

"This is our base – one of them at least."

"Base?" I frowned. This was like something out of a television show. I didn't really understand what it meant.

"Somewhere secret, where nobody will find us. Where the men who killed your father won't find us," he added gently, seeing my puzzled expression.

"Oh." I nodded, but suddenly I couldn't eat my breakfast. He didn't make me. Not that morning at least, but the next day when I sat morosely playing with my food, he told me I wasn't leaving the table until I'd finished it. I think I was shocked by his tone, but his dark eyes were deadly serious. Didn't he realise? Didn't he understand what I'd lost, and what I'd been through? Gazing at him with deadly hatred, and finding his resolve unwavering, I realised that he did. He understood all of it.

"I'm not hungry," I hissed, defying him, and all that had happened to me, choosing instead another path. I pushed my plate away, and crossed my arms over my chest.

"I know." He pushed my plate back. "Dominik, if I could turn back the clock I'd give my life to make sure that the abomination that happened to you never took place, but I can't do that. The one thing I can do is to make sure that your parents' sacrifice wasn't in vain and that their only child gets a chance to grow up with people who care about him, and to one day bring credit to the name of Crozier. Now eat it."

And I did.

It isn't many people who have watched their own funeral procession. I have. Max said it would be for the best if we pretended that I'd died in the house. I was 9 years old, and hardly in any position to argue. Besides, looking back, he was probably right. Spender knew I'd seen his face, and even though it was unlikely he'd ever be brought to justice he's the kind of man who prefers to, as he said, keep things tidy. Some of Max's associates didn't want me to even attend my parents' funeral, deeming it too dangerous, and, of course, it was, but I was adamant, and Max was, surprisingly perhaps, on my side.

"They're his parents. He needs to say goodbye," he told the assembled people in his usual blunt, no-nonsense way. I didn't have a clue who half of them were. They were just some of the faceless folk who climbed out of the woodwork in the immediate aftermath of my parents' death, and then faded away again afterwards. Max was the person I clung to, my new reality, and he didn't let me down.

“Take him then,” said a woman, who seemed to be in charge. “But we’ll hold you accountable if anything happens to him. He’s your responsibility, Max.”

“I know that, Janna. He always will be from now on,” Max replied, and a fiery look passed between the two of them. I sensed some history between them, but I was too young to understand that back then. Of course Janna was one of Max’s many conquests. He lived life on the edge, risking that life almost daily, and he took his pleasures in equal proportions to his risks.

So, on the day of my parents’ funeral, Max took me to a hotel overlooking the crematorium, and we watched from the room he’d booked. It was a bright, sunny day, not a cloud in sight, which made no sense to me, as my world held no beauty any more. I watched, numbly, as the coffins were carried into the crematorium.

“Why can’t I go inside?” I asked Max, who was standing by the window next to me, wearing a stiff, formal suit and looking supremely uncomfortable in it. Max was a man more used to casual clothing. After that day it was to be 10 years before I saw him in a suit again.

“Because you’re dead,” Max reminded me bluntly. I stared, silently, as aunts, uncles and grandparents filed into the crematorium. They were my family. I knew them, and yet they thought they were going into that church to pay their last respects to me. I caught a glimpse of my mother’s sister, Maria, and felt an almost overwhelming sense of homesickness. She had my mother’s curled blonde hair, and the same petite figure. For a moment I thought she **was** my mother, and that the events of the past week had been a dream. I gasped out a startled “Mama” and ran towards the door, only to find my way blocked by Max’s large body.

“It isn’t her, Nicky,” he said.

“No, it is, you’re wrong...she isn’t dead,” I cried, trying to get past him, pummeling him with my small fists.

“Nicky...” He let me fight it out of my system. He let me pound against his chest until I was too tired, and hurt too much inside to carry on, and that was when I broke down and cried for the first time. Then he picked me up, carried me over to the bed, sat me down, and held me tight while I sobbed inconsolably into his white shirt. They were all filing out of the crematorium by the time I’d finished. Max wiped my tears away with a huge, ink-stained handkerchief, and then he picked me up and carried me back over to the window, and held me there so I could watch. I’m glad he did that. I wasn’t capable of walking by that point. I stared, sullen, and swollen faced, as my family filed out of the Crematorium, and the big black cars rolled away. Then I placed my hand on the window-pane, knowing it was all over.

“Goodbye,” I whispered. I stared out at the sunlit world for a long time, trying to remember the way my mother laughed, and the sound of my father’s voice, and then all the energy left me, and I became as limp as a rag doll. I rested my forehead against Max’s craggy face, and he held me close, and kissed my hair, and then, after several long, silent minutes, he walked me out of that room and into my future.

Skinner sat in his hotel room, and watched the snow fall outside. Winter in Vienna was beautiful. It had been a long time since he had sat and watched the world go by, and it was curiously restful. He rolled his shoulders, trying to release the tension in them. He was always tense these days. Maybe it had been years. Years of living one lie after another had taken its toll on him. He took a gulp of brandy, and glanced at the equipment laid out on his bed. It had been a long time since he had gone on a mission like this, and his gut rebelled against breaking into that beautiful house, and defiling that dead family on the orders of Alex Krycek of all people, but he had no choice. He was here to find Dominik Crozier, and he'd reached a dead end. He needed more information.

It was 6pm. He had hours to kill before he could do his enemy's dirty work, and he couldn't spend it sitting here in this hotel room, all alone, with only brandy for company. He'd be in no fit state to break in anywhere if he did that. Skinner picked up the phone, rang the concierge, and asked what there was for a man to do in Vienna in the evening. He could almost hear her laughing as she reeled out a long list of concerts, plays, operas and ballets. Opera. He was a regular visitor to the opera in Washington. He had first met Sharon at the opera, more years ago than he cared to remember. Music was one of his loves in life. He was a solitary man, and music spoke to him, in a way that little else did in these days of numb emotions. Skinner skimmed through the list of available options he had noted down, and dismissed the great tragic operas immediately. He was in no mood to deal with all that death and despair. He chose Mozart instead. *The Marriage of Figaro*. It wasn't his favourite opera – he disliked all the ridiculous farce about mistaken identity – but he loved the music. The music soothed his soul; he could bury himself in the music.

Skinner took a shower, and dressed in stone-colored chinos, and a navy polo neck sweater. He pulled on a smart jacket, and surveyed himself in the mirror. Krycek was right. He was looking old, and tired. Leading a double life could do that to a man. By day an Assistant Director of the most famous law enforcement agency in the world, by night a common burglar, breaking and entering into a place where he had no right to be, courtesy of Alex Krycek. Skinner gazed at himself with loathing. How had it come to this? He had sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his own life – has it really been worth it? Was he really doing this to help Mulder and Scully? To keep in the game so he could be of use to them, or was it just self interest at the end of the day? The desire of a survivor not to relinquish his grip on life, to selfishly cling on, no matter what. Twice he had died, and twice he had been returned to life and for what? To eke out this miserable existence in thrall to a man he loathed beyond any other? Skinner picked up his wallet, and exited his hotel room without a backward glance. He had made his choice, and now, god help him, he was having to live with it.

The opera house was full, teeming with well-dressed Viennese hausfraus and businessmen. Skinner took his seat, and closed his eyes as the first aria rose up and filled his soul. He felt as if he was soaring with it, lost in the music, far away from the bitter complexities of his own life. If only he could stay here, and never return. Here there was no Krycek, no dead wife, staring at him with reproachful, lifeless eyes, no Mulder, no Cancerman. Here he felt none of the aching loneliness that had been part of his existence since puberty, and the

choice he had made all those years ago, to effectively lead a double life. Here there was only the music.

“Excuse me, sir.”

Skinner looked up, surprised, as the voice cut through his reverie.

“The opera is over,” the woman said, and he realised, with some surprise, that she was right. The auditorium was empty; the last few patrons were just walking through the door. “Are you all right?” She asked, her dark eyes full of concern.

“What?” He frowned. “I’m fine.” He brushed off the inquiry brusquely, and she smiled uncertainly, nodded, and walked away. His glasses were smeared, and he reached up to clean them, and that was when his fingers found the slick wetness of tears on his cheeks.

Skinner returned to his hotel, and slowly removed his clothing, and then, equally slowly, dressed himself in plain black pants, black sweater, black shoes, and black jacket. He placed the tools he would need in a thin cloth bag, and tucked them into the inner pocket of his jacket, along with a fine bladed knife that he knew he could use to kill a man in less than five seconds. It was a trick he’d learned in Vietnam, and, once learned, it was never forgotten. Was this what he had come to? What difference was there, he wondered, as he slipped out of the hotel, between himself, and Alex Krycek? They both skulked around in the night, both of them knew how to kill swiftly, and silently. How many times had Krycek left on a mission such as this, with similar tools of trade tucked into his pocket?

The house was in darkness when he arrived. It was protected by a sophisticated security system, but Skinner had done his homework well, and he knew how to bypass the trigger areas, found the main control box, and disabled it. His black gloved hands worked quickly, surely. It should have surprised him how well he could perform this task, but it didn’t. He knew what he was capable of. He’d known it since he was 18 years old. It was living with that knowledge that was hard.

The lights in the house were set on a random timer, to give the illusion of occupancy. There was no problem therefore in turning them on – nobody would be surprised. Skinner walked silently down a long, grand hallway, past a huge, imposing flight of stairs, and flicked a switch. He held his breath as the house was suddenly bathed in the light of an enormous chandelier. This place was beautiful – and the gardener was right about one thing: it had been maintained just as it had been on that fateful night when the Croziers died, but he was wrong about something else; there was no bloodstain marring the polished wooden floor. Skinner had read the Consortium report on their mission that night. He knew they had gained entry to the house while the Croziers were at the opera – a birthday treat for their nine year old son. They had been lying in wait in the kitchen, and when the Croziers had returned the boy had been sent straight up to bed. His parents had been cornered in the hallway. Skinner wondered what information Josef Crozier had that was so important his entire family had been butchered for it. He paused under the giant chandelier. This, according to the characteristically thorough Consortium report on that slaughter, had been where they had been standing. Josef Crozier had his back to the staircase, and the

Consortium operative leading the mission had been facing him. There had been 6 of them in all. Six fully armed men to take on one frightened man, his petite wife, and their small son. Skinner's jaw did a sideways clench. He crouched down, and glanced at the floor. Even after all this time, there were sometimes still small clues. Finding nothing, he stood up, and glanced at the staircase. The boy must have heard the commotion from his bedroom. Skinner began to silently climb the stairs.

The first doorway at the top of the stairs, on the left, was open, inviting him in. He pushed open the door, and turned on the light, and almost gasped out loud in surprise. This was unmistakably the child's room – and it was exactly as it must have been all those years ago, on the night that the Croziers were wiped out. The bed was made, and the room was clean, and tidy, but it was frozen in time. The blue walls were covered in posters of the Beatles, and some sporting stars he could not identify. There was a pair of roller skates propped up by the bed, next to some ice skates. The closet was covered in a myriad of word and letter magnets. They had been arranged to spell out: *This boy's room is a pig sty*, and beneath it, the reply: *but he likes living like a pig! Oink!* Skinner ran his hand over the magnets, and smiled, imagining the child and his mother leaving silly little messages for each other on this closet door. The room certainly wasn't a pig sty now; it was as tidy as the rest of the house.

Skinner opened the closet door. The child's clothes still hung there, covered in plastic, and shrouded in mothballs. Skinner frowned, and pulled out a small, boy's sized sweater. Who had ordered that this house be kept like this? It had been systematically wrapped and preserved, like a precious possession, nothing changed, or altered, nothing allowed to decay. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He had been right; this **was** Mulder's territory.

Skinner put the sweater back in the closet, and closed the door silently. He didn't like being here. It felt as if he was intruding on someone's memories, on something too painful, and too precious to be trampled on by a stranger. He was about to leave the room when something caught his attention. By the child's bed, there was a photo frame – an empty photo frame. Skinner picked it up in his gloved hand, looked at it thoughtfully, and then he returned it to its place on the nightstand, and silently exited the room. The other rooms were equally eerie. All of them were exactly as they must have been that night, when the Croziers met their end, and although there were countless elegant silver photo frames all over the place, none of them contained any pictures. It was puzzling. The master bedroom was elegantly furnished, and the lady of the house had her own en suite dressing room. There was a dressing table, covered in neatly arranged potions and lotions, perfume bottles, and hairbrushes – as well as the requisite empty silver picture frame. Skinner sat down at the dressing table, and gazed at it. It was kept perfectly dusted, as frozen in time as the rest of the house. Some of the perfume bottles were half empty, and one of them was out of place, as if it had been recently used...Skinner placed one black-gloved finger on the bottle thoughtfully. A ghost who wore perfume? Or was there a much more earthly explanation for the mysterious scent? He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and he looked out of place. He was big, and clumsy, and, clad all in black, he didn't look as if he belonged in this light, airy, feminine, pink room. He was an intruder, and he didn't like that feeling.

Skinner got up, turned off the lights, and slipped silently back out onto the upstairs landing. The boy, on hearing raised voices downstairs, must have tiptoed out of his bedroom, and stood up here, looking down on the terrifying scene below. Skinner couldn't begin to understand what that poor child had felt, seeing his parents surrounded by men with guns. He looked over the banisters – there was a clear view below. The child would have seen everything. At some point he had come down the stairs, trying to stop the men below from killing his mother, and he had stopped...around here...Skinner decided, glancing at the Consortium report. The stairwell was relatively dark, cast in the shadow, and the Consortium operative would have had trouble seeing his target, especially if he was moving. The report said that the chauffeur had disturbed the mission, and he had been killed...but if that was the case, why had they aborted the mission without first making sure the boy, the only witness to these atrocities, was dead? Skinner thought about it for a moment. It didn't make sense. "Probably a fatal bullet to the head" the report said. Why probably? Since when had the Consortium ever been so sloppy? Unless...they had been interrupted. Not by the chauffeur, who was already dead, but by someone else – or by someone they expected to arrive. But who? And what had they found when they got here? Krycek wouldn't have given him this case if he didn't believe that little Dominik Crozier was still alive, and if the boy had survived that fateful night, wouldn't it be likely that he had become some kind of nemesis for the people who had killed his parents? His hatred of the Consortium must run very deep.

Skinner paused, his black gloved hand finding a small nick in the polished banister as he walked down the stairs. He crouched down, and examined it at eye level. A small piece of wood was missing. Skinner glanced behind, and measured what trajectory a deflected bullet might take. Supposing the bullet had hit the banister, and ricocheted, catching the boy only a glancing blow to the head, and then continuing its path...such a bullet might end up round about...here. Skinner ran his hands over the wall. It was smooth. There was nothing...and yet. He stepped back. A whole panel of wallpaper had been replaced. It was a neat job, and over the years it had become almost unnoticeable, but for an almost imperceptible difference in colour. So, little Dominik Crozier had lived. Skinner felt an almost absurd sense of triumph on hearing that. The boy had lived, and someone had taken him to safety – but why spread the lie that the child was dead? To protect him in case the Consortium came back to finish the job? That was plausible. But how had the child managed to hide so convincingly, and for so long? And what had Crozier become that the Consortium feared him so much?

Skinner reactivated the security system, and, with one last glance around the house, left it as silently as he had entered. He returned to his hotel, and called the number Krycek had given him.

"What do you have for me?" Krycek demanded, in his usual cold, belligerent tones.

"Nothing. Not yet. I was wondering what you had for me," Skinner replied, glancing out of the hotel window. Outside the temperature had risen fractionally, and the evening's earlier light flurry snow had turned to rain.

"What the hell do you mean? Don't play games with me, Skinner," Krycek snarled.

“I’m not. I’ve been doing some investigating, but I’m working in the dark here. We need to meet.”

Krycek hadn’t sounded too pleased by this request, but he had acceded to it. With a weary heart, Skinner folded away his black mission clothes, packed his suitcase, and prepared to return to Washington DC.

For the first few months after my parents’ death I lived in a daze. I clung to Max as my only reality amid the wreckage of my life. He was good to me. For such a large, worldly, blunt-talking man, he could be surprisingly sensitive. We stayed in the underground base in Vienna, and he slept in the bunk below mine, sticking close to me, like a bodyguard, or a parent, both of which I suppose he had become. The night after the funeral, my mother came to me in a dream. She was calling to me, but I was paralysed, and couldn’t reach her. She was surrounded by faceless men who tied her to a pyre, and lit a fire beneath her. She was burning to death, and I just watched, unable to stop them, or to help her. I saw Leo in the crowd of people around her, and sobbed at him to rescue her, and, beneath my horrified gaze, he changed shape, and became Max, and I watched as those faceless men plunged a knife into the back of his neck, and his whole body crumpled in front of me.

“Nicky...hush! It’s all right. It’s okay.” I woke to find myself screaming into Max’s face. He smelled of cigarettes, and whisky, and it was the most reassuring smell in the world, because it was the scent of life. I’ll always be ashamed, to this day, of what I said to him next.

“You let them burn my mother! She was still alive and you let her burn!” I railed at him helplessly, and hit him as I’d done so often in our short acquaintance, but he’s a big man, and my small fists made little impact. He held me tight, captured my fists in one large hand, and pushed my sweaty hair out of my eyes with the other.

“She’s dead, Nicky. She was dead. You saw them kill her, Nicky. Hush. Hush.” I crumpled, my eyes swimming with tears, and he slipped into my bunk beside me, held me in his arms, and rocked me back and forth until I had cried my eyes out on his shoulder. Then we just lay there, gazing at the ceiling. I don’t know what in life had equipped Max to be the saviour of one small, lost boy, but it was a job he did brilliantly. It’s ironic, because he’s a long way from being anyone’s ideal father figure. My mother would have turned in her metaphorical grave if she had known who was looking after me, but, despite appearances, Max was a good man. He still is – and I trusted him, which was the most important thing. As we lay there, both exhausted by the nightmare, I finally spoke about something that had been at the back of my mind for several days.

“Max, Leo changed shape.”

“Is that so?” He didn’t seem surprised.

“Can you change shape, Max?” I asked, and he roared with laughter.

“No, Nicky, I can’t.”

“Oh.” I was disappointed. “You could in my dream.”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t.” He smiled down at me.

“How could Leo do it?” I asked him, holding my breath.

“Well, Leo was special,” Max said softly. “That’s why we sent him to look after your father.”

“Why did my father need looking after, Max?” I asked, remembering Spender’s questions, and my father’s refusal to answer. Max’s large arms closed around me, and he squeezed comfortingly.

“Your father was helping us, Nicky. He had found out something – something very big. Something that certain people wanted to cover up. We asked him to see if there was anything else he could discover, and he promised to help us. We sent Leo along to protect him.”

“It didn’t work,” I whispered into Max’s chest. “Leo died too, didn’t he Max? That green stuff that came out of his body...” I trailed off, convulsed by another sob as I remembered the burning sensation in my eyes and mouth that Leo’s ‘blood’ had caused.

“Yes, Nicky. Leo’s dead too,” Max confirmed, although I had already known that.

“He was kind to me. He took me out on his motorcycle. Papa didn’t know. We never told him.” Max made no reply, save to drop a kiss on my hair. “Max...” I ventured, after a long silence. “Why did they kill my parents? Who are they? What was Leo?”

“Nicky, you’re nine years old.” He looked down at me, his dark eyes glowing in the lamp-lit room. “I will answer all your questions but you’re not old enough yet.”

“Adults always say that,” I accused, crossly. “I am old enough, Max. I want to know.”

“And I promise I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“Adults always say **that** as well, but they never do,” I snapped angrily.

“Well, I don’t lie. If I say I’ll tell you then I will. Why don’t we set a date?” He suggested. I looked at him, curious. Max was different to any other adult I’d ever met. “How about your 16th birthday?” He said. “How about I tell you then?”

“That’s years away. How about my 10th birthday?” I haggled. His eyes widened with amusement.

“Let’s settle in the middle – your 13th birthday. Shake on it?” He disengaged himself, and held out his hand to me. I sat up, one hand on his chest, and regarded him thoughtfully.

“It’s a promise?” I pressed.

“Yes, Nicky. It’s a promise, and you’ll find I always keep my promises.”

“All right. It’s a deal.” And we shook on it.

Max saw me through many more sleepless nights, and when the nightmares came, as they always did, he saw me through every single one of those as well.

We stayed in Vienna for only a couple of months while Max resolved the complication that was my inheritance. Of course, as I was officially ‘dead’ I didn’t stand to inherit a thing, but having already lost my parents, Max wasn’t about to let my fortune slip away from me as well. Instead, an illegitimate son was invented – and my father’s will was duly altered to leave everything to one Nicolas Remarque. I didn’t ask questions as to how this was achieved. Max knew a way – and, as is the case when children view the adult world, I had no idea that what Max was doing was actually difficult and complicated. It’s a testament to his skills that I am now an exceedingly wealthy man. I have no idea what my aunts and grandparents made of the news that my father had an illegitimate son. I never gave them a second thought. I was, after all, dead. My old life had been burned in that crematorium along with my parents. Max intended to give me a new life – but I still didn’t know who or what he was.

He took me to Geneva in the Autumn of my ninth year, to an absolutely enormous mansion, bigger than any place I’ve ever been, before or since. It was set away, in the countryside, and guarded by an impenetrable security system. This was to be my home for the next four years. It was beautiful. There were large grounds, where a boy could roam for days on end, and a huge lake, visible from the west wing of the house. That was the wing where I lived. Max lived there too, in his own apartment, along the corridor from the room I occupied. It was here, as the leaves fell around my head, and the cold winds began to blow, that I met Neil.

Neil was fourteen, and English. He had a broken leg, legacy of an unauthorised midnight swim in the lake during the summer holidays, which was why he was still at The House, which was what the mansion was incongruously called by the many people who lived and worked there. Neil was a tall boy, with thick sandy hair and freckles, and a smiley face, and I liked him immediately. Although I was only nine, I was fast witted and old for my years, whereas Neil was more of an athlete than an intellectual. His leg only slowed him a small amount – and levelled the age gap between us. We spent three months running wild, with very little adult supervision, save for Max’s sometimes gruff, sometimes indulgent attention. I amused Neil by making up voices, and mimicking the people who lived in The House, including my beloved Max, and Neil amused me by standing on his hands, and walking the entire length of the lawn, all the way to the lake. Superficially, we had little in common, but there was one thing that bound us together more than anything else: Neil had been orphaned by the same people who had killed my parents.

“This place is huge. Don’t go in the East wing – that’s got so much security they can hear a mouse breathe and you’ll get into big trouble,” Neil instructed, as he showed me to the

room we were to share. "The West wing is where we all live." Neil showed me into various rooms, and pointed to a door along the corridor. "That's where Max lives. He gets a whole apartment to himself because he's so important."

"He is? Why?" I asked, running along to see if I could peek into Max's apartment, only to find the door locked.

"He's one of our best agents," Neil said with a shrug. "He's broken into the Kremlin – **and** the Pentagon," he added, with a certain degree of pride.

"Why would he want to do that?" I frowned, wrinkling up my forehead.

"I don't know, but it was important," Neil said, as if the reason was irrelevant to the daring of the deed itself, which, to him, it probably was. Neil always did have an uncomplicated way of looking at the world. I was more curious, and less inclined to take anything at face value.

He showed me to my room, and life soon settled into an easy pace. I still suffered nightmares, and often crept along the corridor to Max's apartment, and let myself in, bypassing the lock without too much trouble, much to his amusement. Often I'd find him in bed with some lady friend or other, and she'd wake up with a groan to find me standing in the doorway, the sweat sticking to my forehead, and sigh, and move onto the sofa in the other room so that I could slide in beside Max. Max never once turned me away, although I must have put a serious crimp in his vigorous love-life. My nightmares became less and less frequent though, and I was even, in the way of nine-year-old boys, happy.

The House was home to a few children during the school holidays, but I was a fish out of water. Older children went to boarding school during term time, and there was a nursery for the little ones. Many of us had been orphaned either directly, or indirectly, as a result of our parents' involvement with Max's Organisation, whose purpose I wasn't to fully understand for several years. The very small children only stayed at The House for a short while, before being re-homed with members of the Organisation who took good care of them, and treated them like their own. I was different because I refused to be adopted – Max was the only person I'd have allowed to adopt me and he didn't lead a normal life - and I was too young to be sent away to boarding school. Although there were always plenty of other adults around to take care of me, Max was special. He knew me better than anyone else – and he could see through me too. I wasn't any more badly behaved than any other young lad I don't suppose, but the tragedy that had changed my life did affect my behaviour to a certain degree. I had periods of morose sulking, and other times when I'd just disappear into the grounds for days on end, camping out under the stars. My mother would have been horrified, but Max was a firm believer in boys being boys, and he pretty much allowed me to do what I liked – as long as I told him what I was doing, and where I was going.

My whole world began and ended with Max and Neil, and the first crisis of my new life came when Neil's return to boarding school coincided with Max preparing to leave on the first mission he'd been on since we'd come to Geneva. I couldn't believe that having lost my parents just a few months before, I was now going to lose two more people.

“Why don’t you ask them if you can stay here?” I pestered Neil, who looked at me in surprise.

“I don’t want to stay here? I want to go back to school. School’s fantastic,” he informed me. He had told me all about his beloved Stowe school, in England, and I hated hearing how much he loved it, as if it was a direct competitor with me for his affections. Neil was far too straightforward to understand my dark and complex emotions, so I went to appeal to the ultimate authority in my life: Max. I found him sitting on the terrace of the West Wing, overlooking the lake, his legs resting on the balustrade, a familiar puff of cigarette smoke clouding around his shoulders. It was cold, but he was sitting out in the open air, his long black coat tucked around his large body, lost in thought.

“Max, Neil is going back to school tomorrow,” I said, stomping out onto the terrace to stand beside him.

“Hmm?” He said in a distracted tone. Then he looked up. “Oh. Yes. Nicky, come here. I need to talk to you.” He held out his arm, and pulled me close. “Nicky, I have to go away next week,” he said. I stared at him aghast, unable to take in what he was saying. First Neil, and now Max. My young world suddenly seemed very fragile, and I was taken back in time to the moment when my parents had been forcibly removed from my life, and a dark, ugly cloud descended on me.

“Going where?” I asked blankly.

“I’ve been out of action too long, Nicky,” he said. “I wanted to make sure you had me around for awhile, but there are jobs I have to do. People who need me.”

“What people?” With the arrogance of youth I couldn’t understand who could need him more than I did.

“Just people.” He shrugged, and took another puff on his cigarette.

“What jobs then?” I asked desperately. He paused for a moment, a distracted look in his eye as he gazed out over the lake.

“I won’t lie to you, Nicky – they’re dangerous jobs. But you’re safe here, you’ll be taken good care of.”

“Are you saying you might not come back?” I stared at him, aghast, and he shrugged.

“There’s always that possibility, Nicky,” he said gruffly.

“Then don’t go. Don’t leave me,” I implored, and he shook his head, and tried to hug me, but I was stiff, and unresponsive.

“Nicky, I have to go. You’re not the only person who needs me,” he chided. I stared at him, feeling an intense sensation of betrayal. He tried to talk to me, but I pushed him away, and stalked angrily back to my room, shaking. I’m not sure if I was more angry, or more scared,

maybe a combination of both – but it was a potent combination. I'd never been without Max since my parents' died. He was my security, and, despite all his shortcomings, I adored him.

I refused to say goodbye to Neil when he left, and spent the next day wondering how I could hurt Max as much as he had hurt me. Don't ask me what was going through my mind, because I'm not sure it was anything coherent, but I took it into my head to hide. Maybe, if he couldn't find me, he'd understand what it was like to lose someone you cared about. The only trouble was that he knew The House and grounds and all my favourite hiding places as well as I did. That was when I decided to break into the East Wing.

Neil was right; the East Wing had a state of the art security system that was seriously impressive – but I'd been watching people come and go in and out of the wing for months, and, as I've said before, I'm a naturally curious person, as well as being somewhat inventive. I had no idea what I was getting into, but I did know enough to let myself into the rooms of one of the personnel, and steal their ID.

I chose to break in during the early hours of the morning. If I succeeded then I'd be missed at breakfast, and if I failed then I hoped that the resulting chaos would at least mean that Max didn't get to spend an entire night with his latest amour, a tall, willowy brunette called Suzette who I loathed with a vengeance.

The hallway leading to the East Wing was in darkness when I tiptoed to the main internal security door. I had already shorted out the camera that surveyed every movement made in the outside corridor, and it was a simple matter to slip the ID card into the slot provided, and wait for the door mechanism to open. That wait seemed to take forever, but after a series of clicks, and squeaks, the door swung open, and in my euphoria I thought I was through. I was a child, and had no idea that of course it couldn't be that easy.

I wandered down a corridor and looked in a few rooms, but didn't find anything interesting. Further down the hallway was a flight of stairs. I dithered, but finally decided to go down, rather than up, and found myself in a dimly lit corridor blocked at regular intervals by a series of intriguing plastic doors. I had, in my ignorance, stumbled into the most secure zone of the wing, and a few seconds later I tripped an invisible laser beam, and within seconds a loud alarm was sounding throughout the building, and the plastic doors in front of me had all slammed shut. I tried to run back the way I'd come, but the siren was so deafening it scared me, and I ran instead into a small side room. There was shouting in the corridor outside, and I hid, trembling, under a table in the dark room, seriously scared out of my wits. A few seconds later, a security team descended on the room I was in, tracking me with a heat seeking device, and, no longer thinking straight, if I ever had been, I decided to make a run for it. A bullet rang out, missing me by a hair's breadth as I darted across the room towards the window, and then a light went on outside, flooding the entire building. I saw the leader of the security team raise his gun to take aim again, and hesitated, unsure what to do next, caught in the spotlight, and then I heard a voice yelling, "Don't shoot for god's sake – it's Nicky!" and Max was standing in the doorway, dressed only in a pair of boxer shorts, a gun in his hand. "Christ, Nicky, what the hell are you doing in here, and how the fuck did you get in here?" He growled, crossing the room towards me, and grabbing me

literally by the scruff of my neck. He shook me a few times while I stared, dumbfounded and shocked into his dark, angry eyes.

“Let me go!” I screamed, surprising myself, and I kicked his bare shins soundly with my sneakers.

“Not fucking likely. You could have been killed, Nicky. Christ, you could have been killed.” He alternated shaking me with hugging me, and I struggled uselessly in his grasp as he hauled me back up the corridor and into the West Wing, trailing a horde of security guards in our wake. “It’s all right. I’ll take care of this,” Max told them shortly, and they nodded, as a man and a woman who I knew to be important operatives came towards us, tying their robes, angry looks on their faces. I’m not sure what happened next. There was a bit of shouting, and some terse exchanges, and that was when I realised I’d wet myself. Max noticed it too, because he gave a muffled exclamation, then ended his conversation with the others, promised to deal with me and report back to them in the morning, and hauled me off to his apartment. He stripped off my clothes, shoved me under a hot shower, pulled me out again, roughly towelled me dry – all without saying a single word to me, and then he threw me one of his tee shirts, which came down to my ankles. Finally, washed and warmed up, he sat down on the couch, pulled me to stand in front of him, looked me straight in the eye and said: “Dominik Crozier don’t you **ever, ever** pull a stunt like that again. What the hell did you think you were doing?”

I shrugged, and looked at my bare feet, sticking out from under his tee shirt, but he wasn’t going to allow me to get away with that.

“I want an answer, Dominik!” He rapped out, crossing his arms over his chest. I shrugged again, and he sighed, and tried reasoning with me instead. “Dominik, you almost died. What you did was dangerous,” he said in a softer tone of voice.

“I know,” I muttered.

“So why do it?” He asked in despair.

“You tell me!” I yelled at him. “You’re about to go and do something dangerous, and **you** might die and not come back, but you’re still going to go!”

He gazed at me steadily with those dark eyes. “So, that’s what all this is about,” he said eventually. He reached out, and put his hands on my shoulders. “Dominik, there’s a difference between putting your life at risk for good reason, and behaving like a spoilt child.”

“I am a child,” I muttered resentfully, glaring at him.

“Yes, and I can treat you like one if you want. That means giving you a bedtime, and making you stick to it. It means confining you to the house, and not allowing you into the grounds on your own. Is that what you want, Mister?” He demanded roughly. I shook my head, my eyes full of tears. “Well, that’s what you’ve bought yourself, for the next two months at least.”

“Two months?” I glowered at full force, but my sulkiness made little impression on him.

“Two months. Did you think I wouldn’t punish you, Dominik?” He asked. “Did you think that because of what has happened to you that you’d get special treatment? Is that what you thought?”

I opened my mouth to protest but closed it again. Max knew me too well, then as now. He knew that I was genuinely devastated by my parents’ murder, but also that I was bright, and had a certain animal cunning, and that I would play on people’s sympathy if it would get me anywhere. It never got me anywhere with **him** but it had worked on a couple of his girlfriends.

“I hate you,” I seethed at him under my breath, but he just smiled, mildly, and shook his head.

“I don’t hate you, Dominik. I love you. That’s why I’m not going to let you risk your life just because your emotions got the better of you.”

“Go to hell!” I snapped, and he threw back his head and laughed out loud, taking all the wind out of my sails.

“Oh, Nicky, that’s inevitable,” he said, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes a few seconds later. “Come here.” He held his arms open, and I grudgingly edged forward, unsure whether he was about to spank me or hug me. He did neither. Instead he sat me on the sofa next to him, put his arm around me, and said something that has stayed with me all my life. “Nicky, you have a choice.” He looked down into my eyes, and his expression was intensely serious. “You can allow what happened to your mother and father to ruin your whole life. That would be easy – it would even be understandable. Nobody can know what it’s like to walk in your shoes, and live with that kind of memory. I’m asking you to be bigger than that. I’m asking you to be stronger, and to take the harder path. We both know that you’re brave – I’m also asking you to have courage. That’s something else.” He paused for a moment, and I melted into his arm, needing the reassurance of the scent of whisky, and cigarettes that made him **my** Max, and not this serious stranger he had become. “You can give in to the sadness, Nicky, and let it rule you. You can spend every single day of your life wallowing in self-pity and never make anything of yourself or this precious gift of life that your mother and father gave you, but I don’t think they’d want that. They want you to grow up strong, and confident, and to live your life to the full. Yes, there will be times when you ache with sadness for your loss, but they’d want you to hold your head up high, and keep on going throughout the tough times, to make them proud of you. So, Nicky...” He gently brushed a strand of hair out of my eyes. “Like I said, you have a choice. It’s your life, and it can be a full, and happy one, or it can be a damaged, self-pitying one. It’s up to you. Nobody can make up for what you’ve lost, but it’s your choice whether you get over it or not.”

And that was Max. Saying it like it is. Not pulling any punches. I was only 9 years old, but even at that age, I knew, instinctively, that he was right.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, putting both arms around his neck, and crawling into the comfort of his lap. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm scared that you're going away. Nobody stays. Everyone goes," I whispered into his neck.

"Hush. It's all right." He held me tight, and kissed me gently. "I can't promise I'll come back, Nicky, but I'll do my damndest. I'm not ready to die just yet." He smiled. "And now I have even more reason to live," he said. "Nicky, I don't have any children, but now I have you, and as far as I'm concerned you're my son. That's a powerful incentive to me to come home safely, believe me, but if I don't, I want you to remember what I said to you tonight. Everything's a choice in life, Nicky. Everything – even down to whether you choose to be happy or not." I nodded into his neck, clinging on for dear life, and a few minutes later, he snorted into my hair. "Nicky, just between you and me, and don't tell anyone I said this, but I'm seriously impressed by tonight's escapade. How the hell did you manage to break into the East Wing? I helped design that security system myself so I know how damn hard that must have been. You're a clever boy, Nicky." I stared at him incredulously, and then we both started to laugh.

Looking back, Max's words resonate with me. I don't blame Max for what I've come to now, sitting in this rundown apartment, staring at these peeling walls, and listening to the sounds of the couple next door arguing and beating up on each other. I made this choice. It's down to me.

Skinner waited in the bar, nursing his third whisky of the night. He should stop. He knew that he should stop, but he had long since developed considerable tolerance for hard liquor – during the long years of his marriage it had sometimes been all that numbed him to what he was doing, both to himself, and to Sharon. She shouldn't have had to lead the lie he had built up between them, but he had been too lost in it himself to see how unfair he was being to her. He would do things differently now, he decided, staring at the bottom of the glass. Now, facing himself caught in yet another great lie, he could see what he hadn't before.

"Thinking warm thoughts?" A sly voice said in his ear, and he stiffened, and turned. Krycek had slipped into the seat beside him.

"No. I was thinking what a fucking sorry excuse for a human being I've become, thanks to you." Skinner raised his glass ironically, and downed the rest of it in one gulp.

"Oh, you give me too much credit," Krycek hissed. "Lying, cheating, killing...it's all so easy, Skinner. It all starts with one tiny lie. You managed that all by yourself."

Skinner grunted. Krycek was right. One expedient lie to Mulder, denying any knowledge of the man who had placed the nanocytes in his bloodstream, had sealed his fate and brought him to this. One small lie to Sharon on their wedding night had turned into a huge gulf between them over the 17 years of their marriage.

"What is it Mulder says? All lies lead to the truth?" Skinner slammed his glass back down on the table. "If so, I'm not sure I'm ready for the truth."

"I didn't come here to discuss semantics. You wanted information," Krycek said, bringing the conversation abruptly back to the point.

"Yes. I went to Vienna, but I'm sure you already know that." Skinner watched Krycek's eyes but they gave nothing away. Krycek inclined his head, acknowledging that he did indeed know of Skinner's little European jaunt.

"Find anything interesting?" He asked.

"Maybe. I need to know one thing – that file you gave me says that Dominik Crozier probably died with his parents – why do you think he didn't?"

"That's irrelevant."

"Not really. So far, all my investigations, and all the paperwork I've sifted through have led me to conclude that the boy is dead. Any other line of investigation leads to a dead end. So, why are you looking for him? If I know, then it might help me figure out where to start looking."

Krycek shifted uneasily in his seat, his green eyes hooded, and distrustful. "We have information that leads us to believe that Crozier didn't die. We think he's still alive. You do too, I think. What did you find in Vienna?"

"I went to his house - the one he lived in as a child," Skinner said.

Krycek nodded. "We've looked there. There's nothing there."

"Maybe you were looking for the wrong thing," Skinner said softly. Krycek looked up sharply. "You were looking for a man. Maybe you should have been looking for a ghost."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Krycek snapped.

"I'm not sure - yet. There was something about the house, though, something I haven't figured out yet," Skinner mused.

"You went inside?" Krycek pressed, leaning forward, his green eyes glowing.

"Yes." Skinner shrugged.

"How did you get inside?"

"I broke in - what's the matter, Krycek, did you think you were the only one who knows how to break and enter?"

Krycek sat back in his chair, a look of triumph curling around his lips. "How easily your lofty values are corrupted when your own life hangs in the balance, Skinner," he stated with utter contempt.

"Thank you for showing me the darkness of my own soul," Skinner said ironically, tipping his glass in Krycek's direction. "I'm in your debt."

"And what did all this law breaking gain you, Skinner?" Krycek asked, snapping out of the uneasy banter and returning, once more, to the point.

"Nothing. I've told you. The boy didn't die in that house, but you knew that already or you wouldn't have sent me looking for him."

Krycek's expression remained unchanged, but he gave the slightest shrug of his shoulders.

"Why track him down after all this time?" Skinner asked, fighting down a sense of impotent fury. "You surely can't possibly still believe that he'd be able to testify about his parents' murder? That can't be what all this is about."

"What it's about is irrelevant," Krycek said brusquely. "We gave you an order, and we expect it to be obeyed. That's it, Skinner." His hand went to his pocket, and he removed the palm pilot. "Or do I have to give you another taste of this to make you obey?" He asked, moistening his lips with his tongue.

"You son of a bitch. Listen to me; if that kid is still alive, why the hell can't you leave him alone? Haven't your people done enough to him? Gunning his parents down in cold blood, and nearly damn well killing him too? God knows what kind of injury he suffered from that bullet. Doesn't he deserve some goddamn happiness after what you butchers did to his folks?" Skinner demanded angrily. Krycek's eyes narrowed, and he flicked open the palm pilot, and played, idly, with the controls. Skinner stiffened.

"You're in no position to issue threats, Skinner," Krycek said in a low, sibilant tone. Skinner took a deep breath, and held it, then slowly released it, never taking his eyes off the palm pilot.

"Tell me why you want him, or I won't look for him," Skinner said. "As far as I'm concerned he's earned his anonymity the hard way. I'm not making any trouble for him now."

"You seem to think that he's still a nine year old child, Skinner," Krycek snapped. "He isn't. He grew up - and he grew up to become a very dangerous man. He isn't an innocent little boy any more. He's a killer. An amoral, utterly ruthless murderer."

"I suppose it takes one to know one," Skinner growled, his fingers tightening around the glass he was holding. It would be so easy to just smash the glass into the hated face of his enemy, and grind it into the other man's flesh until blood poured out of those evil green eyes. Skinner didn't know that he had ever hated anyone more in his entire life than he hated this man sitting next to him.

“Find him,” Krycek hissed. “And fast – before he does any more damage.” Looking into those vengeful green eyes, Skinner had a sudden flash – and something that had been bothering him slotted into place.

“Christ, you’re not just asking me to find out **where** he is, are you? You don’t know **who** he is – and that’s why he’s so dangerous,” he murmured, realisation sinking in. He could see he was right by the way Krycek’s eyes narrowed, and a wave of tense fury possessed the other man’s body. Was that it? Dominik Crozier had become some kind of threat to the Consortium and they had no idea who the man was? No wonder Krycek was riding him so hard to find Crozier.

“Just do your job, errand boy,” Krycek sneered, standing up. “After all, you don’t really have a choice, do you? It’s either Dominik Crozier, a man who you’ve never met, and know nothing about, or yourself. Don’t tell me that you’re really having any trouble with the math involved in that equation. I know you too well for that.”

Skinner’s hand snapped out, and grabbed Krycek’s real arm, and he squeezed, hard. Krycek’s face registered just the barest degree of pain.

“Not all of us would sell our souls to save our own life,” he hissed. “Not all of us are like you, Krycek.”

“Find him, and report back to me. I’ll take care of the rest,” Krycek said, shaking Skinner’s hand away.

“Not if you’re going to kill him,” Skinner stated flatly. “I won’t have that on my conscience.”

“Your conscience, as you call it, is long since dead,” Krycek replied, a smile playing on his vicious, beautiful lips. “Just follow orders, Skinner, there’s a good boy. You know the alternative if you fail.” Krycek slipped the palm pilot slowly and pointedly into his pocket, and then, with another twist of his lips into a grim parody of a smile, he was gone.

Skinner stared glumly at his empty glass of whisky for a long time. It stuck in his craw to be taking orders from Alex Krycek, but what choice, realistically, did he have? And yet...he had meant it when he told Krycek that he wouldn’t sell an innocent man to save his own life. It wasn’t enough for him to find Crozier, even if that proved possible (and if the Consortium didn’t know who the man was then he doubted that it **was** possible); no, he had to know why they wanted Crozier. If the man truly was the killer Krycek said he was, then Skinner would hand him over to his old enemy, but if he wasn’t...if he wasn’t then he would have to think again. Skinner looked up, caught the eye of the waitress, and pointed to his glass.

“I’ll have another whisky,” he growled.

Max came back. In fact, he kept on coming back after every mission, although that didn’t mean that I ever slept easily while he was gone. On my 13th birthday, right on cue, and

three months before I was due to leave for school in England, Max called me into his apartment.

“I believe we have something to discuss,” he said. “I think you know that I always keep my word, Nicky.”

“Yes, Max. Always.” I made a face, because that was a double edged sword – Max kept his word about the length of time I should be grounded when I got into one of my frequent bouts of mischief, as well as about more pleasant things. He was almost impossible to reason with over such matters, and I’d tried, believe me. None of the wiles that had worked on my father worked on Max though. He could always see through me.

“Sit down, Nicky.” I sat on the sofa, and watched as he poured himself a large glass of whisky, and then swallowed it in one gulp. He sat down in the armchair opposite me, and lit a cigarette, gazing at me the whole time. He looked tired, and haggard, his jowls hanging lower than ever on his rugged face. His thick dark hair rose from his head in stubbles, re-growing after his last mission when he’d shaved off all his hair for some operational reason that he hadn’t chosen to share with me.

“All right, Nicky. I’m going to explain a few things. When I get to the end, you can ask me any questions you like. We can keep going all night if you want. Whisky?” He held up the bottle, and pushed another glass my way. I could just hear my mother’s squawk of protest, but Max was a man’s man, and he had never treated me with kid gloves. He expected me to make my own decisions, but I’d taken a mouthful of whisky once, and hated it so I shook my head.

“Don’t know what you’re missing, boy,” he grunted, and then he shot me a calculating glance. “You know a bit about what we do here, Nicky. You’re not a child any more, and besides, you always did have too much curiosity for your own good. Some of us haven’t forgotten the East Wing episode.”

“That was years ago!” I protested, and he grinned, and took a large inhalation of his cigarette.

“I’m not having a go, Nicky. I told you at the time that I was impressed by that, and I’ve always thought you had the makings of an agent, to tell the truth.”

“An agent?” I held my breath. “You mean, work here, in the Organisation?”

“Why not? Plenty of the kids we bring up do that. The Organisation is often the only family they know.” He shrugged. “Oh, I know, you want to be an actor, or a singer, or an astronaut, or whatever job of the week it is this week, but I just thought I’d mention it.” He often teased me about my wild ambitions. I always wanted to do something extraordinary – my jobs of the week were noticeable for never being “dentist” or “plumber”. “Okay, just think about that. We won’t talk about it any more until you finish at school. You’re a bright boy, so you might have other ideas. I just wanted you to know that it’s on the table, that’s all.”

“All right,” I said uneasily, unsure how I felt about this.

“Okay, let’s get back to the point. I want you to know that everything I tell you this evening will be the truth. Whether you choose to accept it or not is your own affair. I think you know me well enough by now to know I wouldn’t lie to you. I’ve never done that, Nicky and I’m not about to start now. However, what I have to say is unbelievable – and some choose not to believe as a way of coping with that. That’s fine.” He shrugged, and I noted just a hint of contempt for anybody who chose that path. “Nicky, we’re in the middle of a war. It’s an old war, and it’s been going on for a long time, but it isn’t between humans, it’s between two alien races.” He paused for a moment, and looked at me, to see my reaction. I just stared at him. Whatever I expected to hear, it wasn’t this. “Earth is strategically important in this war. There’s a group of aliens – we’ll call them the grays – who have been landing here for years. They’ve been using Earth as a re-fuelling, and regrouping point, and its their intention to return here, and turn this planet into one huge base from which to carry on their war. When they do that, they’ll use us humans as a slave race to serve them, and they’ll kill the rest of us. The only thing standing in the way of their plan is their enemies – who we’ll call the shape-shifters. They’re the good guys in all this, although there are some who work for the grays, so it isn’t always easy telling them apart. Equally, there are some grays who work for the shape-shifters – just like in any human war it’s messy, and its complicated. Understand so far?”

Max leaned back, and took a deep drag on his cigarette. I stared at him in disbelief. I had wanted information about why my family had been killed; I had never expected, in a million years, to hear **this**.

“I think so,” I muttered weakly.

“Good. I’ll carry on then. The grays anticipated resistance from us, so they contacted a small group of men years ago, and told them that in return from their co-operation, they would be spared when the invasion took place. It was their job to prepare the rest of us for the coming colonisation. They wanted an acquiescent slave race, and they had developed some kind of virus that would make us do whatever they wanted. They gave that to this group of men, who have been conducting experiments on it ever since, as well as on a gray foetus they were given. I’ve tried many times to get my hands on that foetus, and failed.” Max gave a heartfelt sigh, and lit another cigarette. “They were given the foetus to supposedly create an alien/human hybrid that would be canon fodder in the war against the shape-shifters – the grays want to create a slave race that will do as they’re told, without question, and they thought we humans looked like good material for this. The shape-shifters are horrified. By and large, they’re a much more peaceful race and this kind of behaviour appalls them, which is why they contacted us.”

“Us?” I question, frowning, barely able to follow all this.

“Well, our Organisation. They more or less set us up, years ago. Our enemies run what we call the Project – collaborating with the gray aliens to enslave us, and we’re trying to stop them. If they succeed in creating an alien/human hybrid, then the colonisation will begin. There won’t be anything to stop the grays then. They’ll move in, use us as genetic raw material to create a stronger, but utterly expendable slave race, and deploy our genetically modified children in their war against the shape-shifters.”

“That’s obscene,” I breathed. “Surely, no human being would collaborate in something like that.”

“The man who killed your parents was such a human being, I’m afraid. His name is Spender, and he’s one of their leaders. Your father...” He took a deep breath, and then continued, “had found something in the government department where he worked. He was a well-known, and high-ranking politician, and had access to all kinds of secret material. What he found was detailed notes of medical experiments conducted in top secret in Austria when the Nazis were in power – containing information that bastard Spender was desperate to lay his grubby little hands on.” He almost spat the words, and I understood in that moment the depth of his hatred for Spender and the obscene Project he worked for. “These Nazi experiments were vital to the Project, but the notes had been lost in the confusion that was the end of World War II. When Spender realised your father had found them, he wanted them. We knew your father was at risk, which was why we sent the man you know as Leo to guard him, but we had no idea then just how important those notes were. By the time we did, your father and mother were already dead.” He stubbed out his cigarette, and gazed at me over his glass of whisky. “I’m sorry, Nicky. We failed your father. We had no idea that what he had found was so important, or we’d have sent more people to guard him. We were grateful for his help – we still are. Nicky, it comes down to this – they want to sell humanity down the river, and we want to fight to stop them. There is no damn way I’m becoming part of any slave race, or allowing any abomination of a hybrid to be made out of my flesh and blood to serve a bunch of gray aliens intent on galactic domination. The shape-shifters help us where they can – they’ve given us information, and they’ll stand beside us in the battle for this planet, if and when that happens. This Organisation is the front line against colonisation.”

“Shit,” was all I managed, succinctly, to say – a word that I had, incidentally, learned from him.

“Yeah. Shit.” He nodded. “Sure you don’t want that whisky now?”

“That’s why my father wouldn’t give them what they wanted? Even though they threatened my mother’s life?” I mused softly. This had been preying on my mind for four long years.

“That’s why.” He nodded. “Think about it, Nicky. You know how much she meant to him, but if he handed over that information he was bringing all of us, the whole of mankind, one step closer to slavery. He wasn’t about to condemn us to that, even if he had to sacrifice himself, your mother, and even you to his enemies. Some things are beyond price – do you understand that? Some things are **worth** giving up your life for, Nicky, however hard it is to do. Your father was a brave man – and he knew that he couldn’t have lived with himself if he sold everyone on this planet in order to save himself. That’s what makes him different to Spender and his Project. That’s what makes everyone in this Organisation different.” He leaned forward, his eyes glowing intently. “I’ve done some things I’m not proud of Nicky, I won’t lie to you. I’ve done things that would make you scream in your sleep the way you still sometimes do.”

I jerked my head up. It had been a long time since I'd crawled into his bed after a nightmare, but I did still have them; I just didn't know that he knew that.

"I'm not sure I'm what you'd call a good person, Nicky. I've killed innocent people, but not in cold blood, not the way Spender killed your parents. I've done bad things in the name of a good cause. I hope that's enough to win me a reprieve on judgement day, but if it isn't..." He shrugged. "Well, then I'll be damned to hell just like Spender, and Strughold, and Mulder, and all those other bastards. I'm not an intellectual like you, Nicky. I don't spend my nights wondering whether the ends can ever justify the means. I just do what I think is right."

I gazed at him, seeing him for the first time for what he was; he was a simple man. Bloody minded, strong in body, and in heart. I knew him to be a good person. Whatever he had done, I didn't want to know about it. I just hoped, for his sake, that it could be justified.

"And I know you're wondering, deep inside, whether I ever made any child an orphan, just like you," he tells me, softly, "and the answer is probably, but not knowingly, and I'd never have shot at a nine year old boy to stop him being a witness. There is a difference between them and us, Nicky, but it's a bitter and bloody war, and if they could wipe us all out they would. That's why we're so vigilant. They can't touch us here – this is our main base and it's too well guarded, but we can't touch them in their main base either. It's a war of attrition. Sometimes they try to infiltrate us, but they haven't been successful so far. Then again, sometimes we try to infiltrate them, but we haven't succeeded yet either. We've lost a lot of good men that way. They usually end up on one of our doorsteps somewhere, with a bullet through the back of the head. Sometimes I just wish I knew what they were doing; in this game, information is the most valuable commodity. That's why your father was killed after all."

I sat back on the sofa, still trying to make sense of what I'd heard. It sounded crazy, preposterous, but I knew Max well enough to know that he was hardly a man with a vivid of imagination. He believed what he was saying, and if he believed it, that was enough for me.

"When..." I cleared my throat. "When will it happen, Max?"

"Colonisation? We don't know. We don't have a clue - that's down to the grays and to Spender's bunch. They know; a date has been set, but they aren't telling us of course."

"So it might be next month, or next year, or next century?" I asked him.

"Yes." He shrugged.

"It's possible I might live out my life without it ever happening at all?"

"It's possible, yes. We don't know, Nicky."

"That's what I want," I said slowly. "I don't want to become an agent, Max. I don't want think that's what my parents would want for me. They died because they wanted a future for me."

"Nicky, just because the Organisation has brought you up doesn't mean we've bought you," he explained, running a tired hand over his eyes. "You're entitled to any life you choose. We're not imposing anything on you. Go away and become a doctor, or a lawyer, and forget all about us, and what I've told you. You're right. I think that is what your parents would have wanted."

"You don't mind?" I asked him, suddenly feeling like a total coward.

"Nicky, you're my son. I just want you to be happy," he shrugged. "Here." He handed me a box, and I took it, surprised. It wasn't wrapped - that wasn't Max's style, and he'd never given me a birthday present before; that wasn't his style either. I'm not entirely sure he even knows what shops are. Inside the tiny box was a solid gold ring, with a tiny St Christopher engraved upon it. "I'm not a religious man, Nicky," he shrugged. "But Louise says that St Christopher is the patron saint of travellers, and you're leaving for England soon." Louise was his woman of the moment. I liked her; I was trying to stop being jealous of every single one of his girlfriends. He was being disingenuous about not knowing the saints though; he knew, he'd just decided that religion played no part in his life. Maybe, after all he'd seen, and done, it was hard to believe in any kind of god. I placed the ring on my middle finger, my eyes misty with tears. "Don't go all girly on me," he growled, in that typical Max way. "When are you off?"

"To England? In September," I whispered. I was going to Stowe, to be with Neil, who was still my closest friend. He would be in his final year there, while I would be just starting out. I was offered the choice of any school in the whole world; the Organisation had people everywhere, and I could even have gone to Eton if I'd wanted, despite not being on their waiting list - the Organisation could always pull strings - but I had chosen Stowe, because Neil was there, and had told me so much about it.

"Be good," Max told me, before I left Geneva a few months later. "And if you can't be good, which, knowing you, is likely to be the case, then take a leaf out of my book, and be careful," he winked.

I took my seat beside Neil, my stomach full of butterflies. God knows, this wasn't the first time I'd had to say goodbye to someone I loved, but I knew that it was a big change for both of us. I was ready for it though; I spoke fluent English, German and French, and I longed to be stretched intellectually, and to socialise with boys my own age, and, of course, I wanted to spend more time with Neil. Max didn't stay to wave the train goodbye; he just tapped on the window, and gave me a half salute, but I saw him blink the tears out of his eyes as he turned and left the station. His job was almost done. He'd more or less raised me from the age of 9 to 13, and had gone a long way to healing the wounds in my damaged young psyche, but the time had come for me to grow, and move on, and he had his own life to lead as well. I watched him leave the station, my tall, broad shouldered Max, limping slightly from an old bullet wound to the leg, shambling along in his worn old jeans, and faded checked shirt. You wouldn't spare him a second glance if you passed him in the street, but that was partly why he was such a successful agent. I didn't regret my choice though. There was no way I was going to give up my life the way he had done, to serve the faceless, shadowy Organisation that had, indirectly, led to my parents' death. I was saying goodbye to

Dominik Crozier – at Stowe, I would be using the name Nicholas Danon. I had asked why I couldn't take up the identity of the made-up illegitimate heir to the Crozier fortune, Nicolas Remarque, but Max said it was still too dangerous, and I bowed to his wisdom. As I sat on that train, fingering the ring Max had given me, I resolved that Nicholas Danon was going to live his life for himself, and himself alone - and that life was just about to start.

A big internal crisis at the FBI kept Skinner from doing any more investigating into the whereabouts of Dominik Crozier for the next few weeks. He got home late every night, and had to be up early the next morning. He was so engrossed in his job that there were times when he was even able to forget that there was a metaphorical gun being held to his head, and that was a good feeling. Work had always been his respite and he threw himself into it with a vengeance - until the Consortium sent him a reminder of who he really worked for these days.

He woke one morning feeling like shit. His head ached, and his whole body was stiff. He groaned, turned over, and glanced at the clock on the nightstand. 9.15. He was late. Christ, maybe he was getting old, and couldn't take the pace any more. He staggered into the bathroom, wondering why his legs felt so heavy, and why he couldn't breathe properly, took one look in the mirror, and gazed, horrified at his reflection; his face was covered in dark, pulsing veins. The veins on his neck were so black, and congested by carbon build up, that they looked as if they were going to burst. He felt sick, and his knees buckled beneath him. If he hadn't been holding onto the basin he would have collapsed. Slowly, he half walked, half crawled back into his bedroom, and managed to pull himself onto the bed, where he lay, breathing heavily. His head brushed something as he smashed down onto the pillow, and it took him several seconds before his eyes came into focus enough to see that it was a note. He moved his fingers in slow motion, and wrapped them around the piece of paper. Even that small movement hurt, and he had to lie there, panting, in order to get his breath back enough to read the note. It was handwritten, in a precise scrawl he remembered from a long time ago, and it was sharp, and to the point.

“Don't forget who owns you, Skinner. I'm waiting. AK.”

Skinner crumpled up the paper in his hand, and gazed at the ceiling in despair. Nobody owned him. Nobody. Even as he thought that, he knew it wasn't true. Alex Krycek held the power of life and death over him – and if that wasn't the same as owning him he didn't know what was. He turned over onto his side, feeling the pain in his ribs lessen, and watched, in disbelief, as the veins in his hands and forearms pulsed back a fraction closer to normality. This was just to scare him, not to kill him, but that made it even worse somehow. It was a cruel, and unusual punishment for his tardiness in dealing with their assignment. The nanocyte activity lessened gradually, torturously, over the next three days, rendering him too weak to go to work. He didn't mind that. He didn't even mind the pain, or the hideous disfigurement that the nanocytes caused while they were active, because in some way he felt he deserved that. The one thing he did mind, the one thing that really pissed him off, was the fact that Alex Krycek had hand-delivered that note. Krycek had been in his apartment, in his room. His old enemy had disabled his sophisticated security system, crept

silently up the stairs, and stood beside his bed, looking at him, and he had slept through it all. Krycek had delivered his note, and then silently slipped away again, the ultimate thief in the night. Skinner felt dirty, defiled. He spent the first day dozing uneasily, his dreams full of Krycek. He saw the other man in his mind's eye, standing over him, holding that damned note, watching him, like a hunter stalking prey, and it was too much for him. He made it to the bathroom just in time, and heaved his guts up into the toilet, and then lay on the cool tiles of the bathroom floor, curled up into a ball like a foetus. Now, he thought, would be a good time to die. If he could only die now, then he'd be able to form the welcoming committee for Alex Krycek when he turned up in hell.

He was too tired, and too weak to move, so he spent the rest of the afternoon just lying there. They were breaking him, piece by piece, and he was so tired of it all. Tired of all the running and fighting, tired of all the lies, and half truths. So many of them that he had trouble keeping track of them all. He had always thought himself a straightforward man before this happened. An honourable man. He didn't lie, cheat, steal or kill...who was he kidding? He'd killed countless men before his 19th birthday. He tried to tell himself that in battle that didn't matter, but he couldn't sure any more. Once he had started to question one part of himself, then the rest of his life came under his all too critical scrutiny. Skinner had never been a man who went easy on himself.

His belly felt as if it was on fire, as his body tried to adjust to the massive trauma it was undergoing, and he wrapped his arms around his torso, and screamed, silently, into the flooring. He deserved this. He welcomed the pain. He saw Sharon's white body as she lay in the morgue. He had loved her, it just wasn't the kind of love that she wanted, that she deserved, and because of the affection between them, it had been hard for both of them to just let go. He wished it had been he who had died, and not her. She was on his conscience, and always would be. Krycek was right; his conscience was dead. It had died along with his wife, and his principles, which he had sold in exchange for his life.

"Damn you to hell, Krycek," he hissed, before passing out.

I loved England. My time at Stowe was one of the happiest of my life. I've always been easy going, and able to fit into any kind of crowd, and I've always found it easy to be effortlessly popular. That doesn't mean that I've ever felt I truly belonged. Even at Stowe I was living a lie. I enjoyed my status, but I always felt I was living outside it, watching myself talk, and laugh, without ever really engaging with my own studied charm. It was a curious sensation.

Stowe suited me. I loved the studying, I loved the sports, which I excelled at, and the plays that we regularly performed, and, more confusingly, I found that I loved Neil. Or, more specifically, that I was in love with Neil. He was rugby captain, and had grown into a huge, six foot four inch young man, but he was still the same daredevil, slightly obtuse boy who I had spent every summer holiday with for three years. It was only when we got to Stowe, and I saw him around the school all the time, that I realised that my feelings were more complicated. Homosexual experimentation was rife in the dormitories, and I was much sought after, both for my looks, and the fact that I was so popular, and I took advantage of

that, believe me. I went through a heady, hedonistic stage and embarked on a slow voyage of sexual discovery, but that didn't stop me wanting the one person I couldn't have, and that was Neil, and I couldn't have him because Neil was 100% heterosexual. I think I knew that even then, although I fantasised about him pulling me into the showers, or some dark corner of the school, and pressing his lips against mine, holding my body tight against his massive, rugby playing bulk, and wanting me the way I wanted him. It didn't happen, and I grew more and more miserable as the end of my first summer term approached. Neil wouldn't be returning after the vacation. This was his final year at the school. I was too young to be part of his immediate circle of friends, although, to his credit, he never ignored me. One day, we found ourselves sitting next to each other, watching an aimless game of cricket. Neil was padded up, ready to go on next, but the two batsmen at the crease looked as if they were firmly bedded in and would be there for the rest of the afternoon.

"I'll be sorry to leave all this," Neil said with a sigh. "I'll miss playing cricket." We were alone - the rest of the team, and the spectators, were dotted all around the field, and the nearest were several feet away. We couldn't be overheard.

"You could come back here, and live. You're English. You have an English passport – even if you didn't, I'm sure the Organisation would find one for you," I shrugged. What was the problem?

"I won't be coming back here, Nicky." He looked at me in surprise.

"You're going to live in Geneva, back at The House?" Now it was my turn to be surprised.

"Of course. I owe them everything, and besides...I've always wanted to...you know." He gazed at his hands, and then cast a sideways glance in my direction. "I'm joining them. Max says I can train to be an agent," he whispered.

"Why would you want to do that?" I stared at him, dumbfounded. Was he an idiot? He could do anything, and go anywhere. He had his whole life ahead of him and he was going to give it all up for what he perceived as a glamorous lifestyle as some kind of spy?

"Because it's all I've ever wanted to do," he said.

"Christ, widen your ambitions, Neil," I snapped.

"I don't understand you, Nicky. Those bastards killed your parents too. Don't you want revenge?"

"Who was it who once said that living well is the best revenge?" I replied. I was a precocious little shit and I loved throwing this kind of pretentious crap at him, and watching him flounder. I really was a nasty piece of work. I still am.

"I don't know, and I don't care." He shrugged, looking miserable. "I just thought, after all Max had done for you..."

"Max doesn't want me to be an agent. He told me so." I felt guilty saying that, although I'm sure Neil never guessed because I was adept at hiding my feelings, especially towards him, but I was, after all, twisting the truth somewhat.

"Well, I want to join them. They're my family. I believe in what they're doing."

"Crap. You just want to run around shooting a gun, wearing a balaclava, and showing off," I told him coolly.

"You're wrong, Nicky. We're not all as selfish as you. I'm doing this because I want to give something back, after all they've done for me."

I think, perhaps, that we were both right. Neil **was** attracted to what he saw as some kind of James Bond lifestyle, but he did genuinely want to do the right thing by our "family" as well. I, on the other hand, was a selfish little shit. I gazed at him from under my eyelids, drinking in his lightly tanned, freckled skin, and those deep blue eyes that I would have drowned in if he'd let me.

We returned to The House for the summer, and spent an idyllic couple of months. Neil had been given orders to report for training in Bermuda in the fall, and he spent several weeks with me, saying goodbye to his boyhood, as we roamed the grounds of The House, and revisited all our old haunts. I slept in the bed next to his every night, listening to his breathing, and longed to be sleeping beside him. I was melting in the fever of unspoken, unrequited love. Some days I wanted him so much that I thought I'd burn up altogether. I was good at hiding it, but Max noticed all the same. For a bluff, unsentimental man he could see what nobody else did. One day, he invited me into his apartment to talk, sat me down on the couch, and looked me in the eye as usual.

"Nicky, you're far too old for me to be giving you the birds and bees talk. Hell, you've been to boarding school so I'm sure your friends have taught you everything you need to know." He grinned. "But if you ever want to fill in the gaps, or get an expert opinion on the ladies, then I'm here." He sat back expectantly, and I just shook my head, mute. "Oh, hell, Nicky, I know I haven't exactly got a good track record!" He laughed. "I've never understood women, and my bedroom door should be a revolving one, but I sure as hell like the ladies, and I've known a few. What I'm saying, in my own screw up kind of a way, is that I'm here if you want to talk."

"Thanks, Max, but I don't think you'll be much help with this one." My shoulders were hunched, and defensive.

"Try me," he offered.

"I'm in love with Neil," I told him, with a nonchalant shrug. "There, see, like I said, I don't think you'll be much help with this one."

"Neil? Christ, Nicky." He ran a hand through his hair, looking fairly grossed out by this news. "No offence, Nicky, but Neil's a guy."

"I had noticed." I shrugged again.

"You're saying what? That you're a pansy? A queer?" He asked.

"Probably. Does it matter?"

He looked at me, bemused, as if the question made no sense to him, and then gave a bellowing half laugh of surprise. "Hell, no. Truthfully, Nicky – I may not understand but I don't give a damn. I mean, what's not to like about girls? They feel good, they taste good, they're soft, welcoming..." He shrugged. "But it's your choice. Christ, I'm fighting the end of the world here. I'm not going to be stressed out because you like cocks instead of pussy." It still makes me wince when I remember the way he expressed that particular truth. Nobody could ever accuse Max of being politically correct. "Have you told Neil yet?" He asked. I shook my head, numbly. "My advice? Don't." He gave me a serious look, and shook his head. "Neil won't thank you for it, and it might ruin your friendship. Grow up, find yourself some ballet dancer or hairdresser, and forget all about Neil. He's not for you."

"But I want him." I said stubbornly, barely listening.

"We all want things we can't have," Max said, in his usual blunt way. "It's the best advice I can give you," he shrugged.

And, as usual, he was right. If only I'd listened to him.

Skinner went through the information he had gathered, over and over again, sure that he had missed something. He had contacted the housekeeper of Crozier's childhood home in Vienna, and asked her a number of searching questions. All he had been able to elicit from her was that she was paid by an agency. She didn't know who owned the house, or who her employer was. The agency took care of everything. Skinner contacted the agency, who were equally unforthcoming; Mr. Remarque was a very private man. They had no address for him. He paid them from a private Swiss bank account, and all correspondence was conducted via his lawyer in Geneva.

Finally, Skinner dug out Josef Crozier's will, and pored over it for the umpteenth time. He was missing something. Something obvious. There had to be a clue here somewhere. So, Josef Crozier had an illegitimate son called Nicolas Remarque? Skinner wasn't stupid, and his experienced lawyer's eye had picked up slight inconsistencies that most other people would have missed. This will was clearly, to his eyes at least, a forgery. Nicolas Remarque had to be the missing Dominik Crozier, but that made no difference because Nicolas was as invisible and elusive as Dominik. There was a birth certificate for him, which had to be a forgery, but no death certificate.

Damnit, how the hell was he supposed to track down Crozier where the Consortium had failed? Everything led to a dead end. Whoever had hidden Crozier had taken great pains to ensure that he wouldn't be found. Skinner rubbed his eyes wearily. It was late, and he was tired. He dreaded that Krycek would lose patience, and give him another dose of nanocyte

induced pain, but he was honestly doing his best. The phone went, and he picked it up, absently.

“Do you have anything for me yet?” Krycek’s cold voice asked.

“No. Maybe you’ll have to kill me after all, Krycek. I don’t seem to be doing a very good job.”

“You don’t get off the hook that easily. Keep looking.” The line went dead, and Skinner slung the phone down. He was damned if he was going to dance to Krycek’s tune, and obey his every order. It was late, and he was tired - he wouldn’t find out anything else tonight.

Skinner got up, and grabbed his coat. He didn’t even know where he was going until he got there. He’d been in this place before, just to look, but tonight he wanted to do more than look. He wanted to touch, and taste, and feel. He wanted to lose himself in sex, the way he could lose himself in music, or in his work – as a way to forget that he was Walter Sergei Skinner, with all the problems associated with that identity.

“Can I buy you a drink?” A slender, blond man asked. Skinner gazed at him for a long time, and then nodded. “I’m Steve.” The man held out his hand, and Skinner took it.

“I’m...John,” he replied, after a pause. Steve smiled, and ordered Skinner another whisky. Skinner downed it in one gulp, and then looked down, to see that Steve had covered his hand with his own, and was fingering his palm, gently.

“Want to dance?” Steve gestured with his head in the direction of the dance floor. It was late, and it was a Tuesday – there weren’t many people dancing.

“I’m not dressed...” Skinner looked down at his work suit. What the hell was he doing here? Christ, what the hell was all this about? Hadn’t he tried this once before, and woken up next to a corpse? Casual sex had never exactly been something he excelled at.

“You look pretty good to me.” Steve smiled, and gently coaxed him out onto the dance floor. Skinner went, reluctantly, feeling stupid, but wanting to lose himself in this, wanting to be John for just a short while, and to enjoy just not being Walter. He allowed Steve to hustle him out of his coat, and jacket, and slung them onto a chair, and then Steve was loosening his tie, and unbuttoning his collar, and Skinner felt hot, and horny, and drunk. Steve’s hands were everywhere, cupping his ass, stroking his back, and his mouth felt good against Skinner’s cheek, stealing kisses. They couldn’t talk – it was too noisy - and that was a relief to be honest. Skinner ran his hands along Steve’s back, and lost himself in his growing arousal, and the music, and the moment.

In a dark corner of the bar, Dominik Crozier took a sip of his water, and watched.

I know Max thinks I should kill Skinner, and he’s probably right, but he also knows why I can’t, and he won’t ask me to. I’ve lost too many people I’ve loved – I won’t be the one who sends another to his grave. I followed Skinner tonight. He’s not having much luck searching

for me, but then again Max hid me very well, so that doesn't surprise me. Maybe Skinner won't find me, but if he doesn't then I'm worried about what will happen to him. If he does find me...well then I suppose I should be worried about what will happen to **me**. I won't write Skinner off though. He's a formidable opponent, and that's another reason why I fell in love with him. He's bright, and he's sharp, and he's so damn attractive. I love watching him dance. He's like some big, stupid horse, lumbering around, but even drunk, and reeling under the pressure Krycek's putting on him, he's still got a strange sort of grace. I fight down a wave of jealousy as I sip my water. I want to go up to that stupid, simpering queen who has his arms around **my** man, and take him out. A garrotte would be a good choice of weapon. I don't want to hear him scream; I just want him to disappear. Then I'll take Skinner into a corner of this bar and fuck his brains out. He wouldn't even look at another man after he's tasted me. Of course it's just a fantasy. I don't even move as I watch them. I just sip my water, and keep silent in the shadows. I was following Skinner because I was concerned that he might do something stupid. There might come a point when he decides he'd rather kill himself than keep answering to Alex Fucking Krycek of all people. I'd understand that. I know he thinks about it – but he's a survivor. He can't help himself. He wants death but he's cheated it too many times to feel comfortable about suicide. It just isn't his style. Poor bastard. So, instead of killing himself, he's clearly decided to let go in a different way. Good for him. Sex can be a good way of forgetting your troubles, and giving you an illusion of power, even if only for a short time. I, of all people, know **that**. Skinner isn't comfortable with sex though...no, that's not quite true. Skinner isn't comfortable with his **sexuality**, so this might not be the release for him that it would be for me.

It's hard watching the man you love fall apart and not being able to do a damn thing about it. A lesser man than Skinner would have crumpled under the strain by now, but then he always was good at taking pressure. I try to imagine what a man like Mulder, would do in these circumstances. He's more volatile, much less restrained. He'd have blown up the world before he accepted the kind of straitjacket Skinner is living in right now. Skinner's shirt is soaked with sweat, and it's clinging to his back. I can't help looking at the shape of that body underneath. The powerful lines of his muscles, and the way he moves in that tightly controlled way. I want to make him lose that control. I want him to scream for me, to scream my name out loud with pleasure when I cover his body with my own, and push my tongue, and my cock inside him. I'm an idiot. I've only been in love with two men in my life, and I couldn't have the first, and I sure as hell can't have the second.

Neil was staring at me, blinking almost convulsively. It would be funny if it weren't so damn sad. I was seventeen years old and had nursed this secret for so long it had eaten me away inside. I chose this night, the night of my 17th birthday, to finally share with Neil what I had kept hidden for so long.

"You're what?" He asked.

"In love. With you. Hell, Neil, you went to Stowe. Don't tell me you never got off in the showers with some boy or other." He flushed, right to the tip of his adorable pink ears, and I knew I'd hit close to the mark.

“That was different. I’m older now,” he hissed. “I’ve had women, Nicky. I’m not a fucking queer.” He was angry, and I couldn’t understand that anger. At 21 he was more handsome than ever. He’d filled out, and after being in training with the Organisation for two years, followed by a third in the field, he held himself so dangerously, full of power and passion. He had been on a couple of missions, and, from what Max had said, he was shaping up to be a good agent. Neil saw the expression in my eyes and his own features softened. “Nicky, I’m sorry. I’m very flattered, but that was just a phase. It is for you too. Haven’t you ever wondered what it would be like, with a girl? I’ll bet Max could fix you up with...”

“No.” I cut him off brusquely. The truth was that I’d had sex with a girl, and liked it. She was one of the girls who had stayed briefly in the House last year. I was young, and wanted to experience everything, and she had been willing, and we’d both been enthusiastic, but it wasn’t love. Love was what I felt for Neil, and it was him I wanted. I was sure he was wrong though. This wasn’t a phase.

I stared at him, and saw something in his eyes that made me angry. It was rejection. He didn’t want me, and that hurt. It hurt so much that I did the only thing I could in the circumstances; I hit him.

He went down, his eyes glazed, and surprised, and I threw myself on him, and pummelled him over and over again, and before long I’d made him angry enough to fight back. He threw me off, and straddled me, held my hands above my head, and looked down on me. There was blood streaming out of his nose and it dripped onto my face.

“Nicky, listen to me,” he said banging my wrists back onto the floor.

“Let me go,” I snapped sullenly.

“No, listen to me. I’m going undercover,” he said urgently. “They’re sending me to infiltrate the Project.”

“What?” All the fight went out of me, and I went limp underneath him. I knew things weren’t going well. That was obvious from the strained, pale looks on the faces of the operatives in The House as they scurried to and fro between the East and West Wings, but I was lost in the dramas of my own life like most young people, and barely took any notice. “No, you’re too young. They can’t send you.” I stared at him hopelessly. Nobody they’d ever sent undercover ever lasted long. The Project was too good, or maybe our agents weren’t good enough. Either way, there was only one way our agents came back from those missions – with a hole in their heads. Some lasted longer than others. Our most successful had stayed 2 years and almost wormed his way into a position of trust before they uncovered him. That had been a long time ago though. I once asked Max why they never sent him to the Project as an undercover agent, and he laughed and said that he was too well known. Every Project operative has a picture of Max engraved in his memory – and they’re under orders to shoot him on sight. The missions Max went on were of the breaking into and stealing things variety, but he did a good deal of behind the scenes strategy work as well. Max always did have a head for details.

“Neil, you can’t go. You mustn’t,” I told him wretchedly. “You’ll die.” It wasn’t, perhaps, the most sensitive thing to say to him on the eve of such an important mission. Max’s blunt manner might have rubbed off on me.

“Someone has to go. We’re getting desperate. They have something going down, but we don’t know what. We’ve had no good information for 3 years.”

“So what?” I cried desperately, looking up into his familiar, beloved face, and knowing this was the only time I’d ever get to be held by him, even if I was being held down, rather than being held close. “It’s not your battle, Neil. Walk away from it. Come with me. Run away with me.” It was an insane suggestion, but it just came into my mind. It was the answer for both of us, the solution to everything. The look in his eyes quashed my hopes before they’d even begun to soar, and sent them crash landing to earth with a bump.

“Nicky, listen to me, for once in your life. Listen!” He growled, his expression angry. “I want to go. I don’t want to stay here. This is my chance to get revenge on the people who killed my parents. You can go your own way. You can carry on living the same old selfish life you’ve always lived, but that isn’t my way. I don’t love you, Nicky. Not as anything other than a friend, anyway.”

“Fuck you.” It was as if he’d punched me in the gut. I pushed him off, and got to my feet. “Damn you, Neil, because if you go then the only way you’ll be coming back is in a body bag.” And I walked out on him. I didn’t see him again. No – I **refused** to see him again. Max told me I’d regret it. He told me to swallow my pride and at least say goodbye, but I was young, and stubborn, and, more than anything else, I was scared. Max saw through the fear. He knew I wouldn’t say goodbye because I’d already said goodbye too many times in my young life, and I wouldn’t, couldn’t, do it again, but all the same, even though he understood, he still knew I’d regret it, and I did.

Neil lasted 11 months, and then he turned up on the doorstep of our Vienna base, with half his face shot away. When Max told me, I felt as if my heart had frozen over, and would never be warm again. I sometimes wonder whether our argument preyed on his mind, whether he was thinking about me, when he should have been concentrating on maintaining the identity he had assumed, and convincing the Project that he was one of them. I hope not. It was a few weeks after his death, just before my 18th birthday, that Max brought home a small, blonde, 16 year old girl, with a sad, pale, pinched face, and introduced her to me.

“Nicky, this is Maddie,” he said, looking at me over her head, his dark eyes full of meaning. “And she’s just lost her parents.”

Skinner felt an urgency thrumming through his veins, as he swayed, listlessly, in time to the music. It felt good being here. He wanted to stay here forever...no, he wanted something else. He wanted...he wanted to possess this man he was holding. He wanted to undress him, to overpower, and devour him. He pressed his tongue, urgently, into Steve’s mouth, and

kissed him hard. His hands slipped down the back of the other man's jeans and he caressed his buttocks urgently, sliding his fingers into his crease.

"Whoa...I think someone's going too fast," Steve murmured, pushing him back, an amused look in his eyes.

"Want you," Skinner said, incoherently. He knew he was drunk, but he needed this.

"You can have me, stud," Steve winked. "Your place or mine?"

"Don't care," Skinner muttered. "Jus' make me...make me forget."

"Oh, I can do that. Who was he?" Steve asked, throwing one arm around Skinner, and grabbing the big man's coat and jacket as they staggered towards the door.

"Wha'?" Skinner looked down on the little man, bemused. "Oh. Yes. He...his name is Alex Kry...Alex Kryzak, and he killed me," he said, zigzagging drunkenly towards a taxi.

"Heartbreaker huh?" Steve said, valiantly trying to hold Skinner up.

"Yeah...no...bastard," Skinner amended.

They got back to Skinner's apartment, and Steve fished in Skinner's pant pockets for the keys.

"Wha' you lookin' for?" Skinner belched, grinning, and placing his hand over Steve's guiding it towards his crotch.

"Later, stud. Let's get you inside first," Steve grinned back, opening the door. They were only just inside when Skinner pounced. He tore Steve's shirt off, and crushed the other man against the wall, kissing him hard.

"Okay, okay. Hold on," Steve remonstrated, trying to undo Skinner's jeans.

"Christ...want you," Skinner growled, swatting Steve's hands aside, and making another assault on the smaller man's body, his lips and fingers never still.

"And I want you, but there are some practicalities to take care of first," Steve said, pushing Skinner back again, and divesting himself of his own clothes, pausing only to grab some condoms and lube from his pocket. "C'mon then, lover," he said, as Skinner grabbed him again, and they both landed on the floor, legs wide open, and tangled up. Skinner's cock was half hard, and he reached, urgently, to fasten his hand around Steve's cock. Steve grinned, and pressed himself against Skinner's body, and Skinner began to thrust his own groin into the smaller man's thigh, in a wild, frenzied passion. He could smell the unfamiliar scent of the carpet, and could feel it rubbing on his bare legs. He remembered another time when he'd lost himself in sex, and woken up to find a woman dead in the bed beside him. Christ, what the fuck was he doing? He looked down at the man beneath him, a man he didn't know. A man who was groaning, and panting and sweating in his arms, and he felt a wave of

revulsion as reality kicked back in and he found himself sobering up - fast. His erection disappeared, and he pulled back.

"Hey, what's the matter, stud?" Steve whispered, reaching up to caress him.

"I'm sorry. Look, I think...you'd better go."

"It's okay. I know you'd had a bit to drink. I was surprised you managed to get it up as much as you did to be honest," Steve said kindly. "I thought I'd just put you to bed, and leave. I wasn't expecting the he man routine!"

It was more than he deserved, Skinner thought, getting up, and dressing in silence. The other man's kindness humbled him, and made him feel even more guilty than he already did.

"Sorry," he muttered again, seeing no reason to disabuse Steve of the notion that it was alcohol that was the problem, and not his own frozen emotions. He, also, could be kind.

"Another time, huh?" Steve finished dressing, and pressed a kiss to Skinner's cheek. "Here's my card."

"What? Yeah." Skinner took the card between nerveless fingers, and opened the door. Steve slipped out, and Skinner closed the door again without a backward glance. He screwed up the card and threw it in the trash. What the hell had that been about? He walked into the bathroom, and got in the shower, fully clothed, and turned it on at full blast. He was going crazy. Slowly, but surely, he was going insane. The cold water sobered him up even more, and cleared his head. He wasn't going to get any more sleep tonight, so there was only one thing left to do.

Skinner stepped out of the shower, and stripped off his sodden clothes, leaving them in a heap on the floor. He pulled on his bathrobe, and walked wearily to the kitchen, and made himself a cup of coffee, and then he went into his den, and turned on his computer, pulling up the files he had been working on earlier.

Dominik Crozier - where the fuck are you? he mused, as he drank the black coffee, welcoming his return to some kind of rational thought. He thought of that wild tangle of limbs on the carpet with a shudder. Could he have been that desperate? Christ, Sharon would be turning in her grave. He had never made love to her with such need, because he had never admitted to either her, or himself, that he wasn't interested in her sexually, and never had been. Never **could** be. That call girl...she had been his one, last ditch attempt to pretend that he was straight, that what had gone wrong between him and Sharon hadn't been **his** fault, and as events had turned out, it had proved nothing. The pain of being asked to sign those divorce papers still made him ache. Damn, why had he ever got married in the first place? Marriage...An idea struck Skinner, and he dialled into the FBI database, and pulled up a file. It took him a little while to get the information he was requesting. Nicolas Remarque was not, after all, an American citizen, but when it came, it was worth the wait. He had almost missed it, and was surprised he hadn't thought to look before, but it was

there, in black and white; a marriage certificate, for one Nicolas Remarque, and a Madeline Owen. It was his first real breakthrough.

Maddie was my sanity in the aftermath of Neil's death. She was fey, and frail, but full of the most amazing zest for life, and she clung to me because I knew what she was going through, and I clung to her, because she reminded me both of myself, and my dead mother. She was petite, as Mama had been, and she had the same blue eyes, and rosebud lips, and she smelled good, and felt soft, and, most of all, she understood me. We each knew, instinctively, when the other was down, and needed to just walk for hours on end, without speaking. I would walk beside her, as she strode out, lost in her own misery, and just be with her, neither of us saying a word, and she would do the same for me, during the first agony of my self recrimination over Neil. It was love, but a deeper, stronger love than I'd ever known for anyone before, except Mama. I left school, and won a scholarship to Yale, and I looked forward to going home every vacation because Maddie would be there. It was the most natural thing in the world that we would make love, and we did when she was 17 years old, and it felt just...right, as if it had always been my destiny. Maddie was the second of the three great loves of my life.

After university, I did a post-graduate degree at the Sorbonne to round off a truly comprehensive, and cosmopolitan education, and then returned to The House, having made up my mind about my future.

"Max, I want to go home," I told him.

"Home?" He raised an eyebrow. I can still remember him sitting there, in his dressing gown, his chin covered in stubble.

"Vienna," I said softly, and he nodded, and poured himself a glass of brandy, even though it was only half past nine in the morning.

"Nicky, you're all grown up. You must do what you feel is right," he said, downing the glass in one gulp. I don't think I ever realised how hard it must have been for him to see me finally leaving the nest, and the security that he had built for me so carefully when I was 9 years old.

"I want to become Nicolas Remarque. I want to claim my inheritance. They won't still be looking for me after all this time, if they ever were," I told him.

"No. I agree. I'll see that you have all the right paperwork, Nicky," he said with a nod.

"Another thing. I'm going to be married," I said, and he put his glass down with a thump, and ran his hand over his stubbled chin.

"Right, so you're telling me that you're fucking straight now are you? Christ, Nicky, how the hell am I supposed to keep up?" He joked. "Who's the lucky lady?"

“Maddie,” I said softly, and he looked surprised.

“I thought you two were just friends. I mean, I know you’re close but...Nicky...” He gave me that serious look that I usually got when I was in trouble, and I wondered what the hell was coming next. “Maddie’s been through a lot. Don’t put her through any more, and don’t mistake having one thing in common for love.”

“I do love her,” I snapped, outraged that he’d question me, or accuse me of not loving her enough.

“I know, but are you **in** love with her?” He asked, and, looking back, I know exactly what he meant, and he was right, as always. I wasn’t in love with Maddie. I loved her, but I wasn’t in love with her. We were just two lost souls who had found someone to cling to; someone who understood.

“Of course I fucking well love her!” I raged at Max and he shrugged, and spread his hands.

“I’m just saying don’t hurt her, Nicky. She’s been hurt enough,” he said softly. “If you don’t think you can stay with her, or be what she needs you to be, then don’t do this. Better to hurt her now than after your wedding.”

“What the fuck do you know about love anyway?” I snarled at Max, as defensive as ever when I knew he was hitting too close to a truth that I would have preferred to deny. “You’ve never been with a woman for more than a few months at a time. You know nothing about love, so don’t damn well lecture me about it.” I regret that outburst so much now, but he responded to in typical Max fashion. He just deflected my anger with a tilt of his head and a wry smile.

“You’re probably right Nicky. Maybe I don’t know anything about love,” he said, and his eyes were sad. He did though. He knew more about love than I did. Hadn’t he, after all, plucked a 9-year-old boy from a scene of carnage, and devoted himself to him for years? I had never done one unselfish thing in my life, but Max had. His love life might be littered with the corpses of affairs that couldn’t survive his hard drinking, womanising eye, but he had a big heart.

I went away full of self-righteous indignation. I think Max seriously doubted that I could be bisexual, and thought that my true nature would win out before long, but he was wrong about that much at least. Maddie and I had a very satisfying sex life. It’s true that I still lusted after other men, but I never did a thing about it during our short lived marriage. I never so much as looked at another woman though. I think Maddie understood that about me. She accepted that she was the only woman who would ever hold a place in my heart, but she also knew that I was still attracted to men. It was a compromise we could both live with. We needed each other too much not to. It was a strange need, and I’m not sure I can explain it to anyone who hasn’t lived through what we’d both been through. Maddie didn’t have any other family. She was the daughter of two field agents who had been killed in action, and what we fell in love with, in each other, was the reflection of ourselves, and the need for comfort. We accepted each other, unquestioningly. She took on my moods, my

passions, my jealousies, and my savage brooding sadness about the past, and I took on her tears, and her confusion, and her 'lost' moments, when she would disappear into her own thoughts, oblivious to the outside world. We were soul mates, Maddie and I.

We were married in Vienna the following year. As it turned out, I couldn't face going back to live in my parents' house. We went there to visit, me grasping onto Maddie's hand so tight that she had bruises the next day, but I could never have lived there. There were too many memories. We took an apartment in town instead, and, much to my horror, that was when Maddie told me she was going to work in the Vienna base of the Organisation.

"Why?" I demanded, thinking of Neil. I took it as a personal affront to my decision not to have anything to do with the Organisation. I was angry, but only because I felt guilty because there was undoubtedly a small part of me, deeply buried, that felt that I, also, should join them.

"Don't be angry, Nicky," she pleaded, putting her arms around my waist, and looking up at me, with those beautiful blue eyes. "I just need to do it. I want to give something back to them. They took such good care of me."

"If it hadn't been for them your parents wouldn't have been killed in the first place," I snapped at her, watching her face crumple as I had known it would, but she was stronger than I had ever given her credit for. Underneath the fragile exterior was a will of pure iron.

"You know that isn't true, Nicky," she said reproachfully.

"I don't understand. I can't believe you'd risk what we've got. We have a chance to make a life here!" I yelled at her. True, I could never quite decide what job to do, and I'd already worked in a bank, a lawyer's office, and done a stint in a publishing house. I couldn't make up my mind. In my heart I yearned to be an actor, but I wasn't sure I had the talent for that. Nicolas Remarque had enough money that was no real pressure to stay in work either, so I frequently gave up my jobs as soon as they bored me.

"I'm not going to do anything dangerous," she said, looking scared by my outburst. "Just work at the base on the communications systems. I'm not going to become an agent or anything. Why shouldn't I work for them, Nicky? They're my family."

"I'm your family," I corrected her bitterly.

"Please don't try and stop me from doing this, Nicky," she whispered. "You don't understand – you never take any interest in the Organisation, but they're struggling. They're losing, Nicky – don't you realise that? Haven't you see how pale and drawn Max is looking lately? Did you never stop to ask why they sent Neil out so young, and virtually untested? They're desperate, Nicky. They need all the help they can get. Nicky, the Project are winning. Don't you care what will happen to all of us if Colonisation goes ahead? What kind of a life do you think we could have then, if we even survived it?"

"It might never happen," I yelled at her furiously, and she bit on her lip, and left the room.

It started to rain, and I found her a few hours later, standing in the street, in one of her “lost” phases. She was just standing there, staring listlessly into space, completely gone. Her dress was sticking to her skin, plastered over her small breasts, and bony hips, and she was utterly, eerily still, gazing at nothing. A small crowd had started to gather, pointing at her. I went out into the rain, and touched her arm, gently, and she looked at me, startled.

“There you are, Nicky,” she said. “I was looking for you.”

“Yes, I know. Come on, Maddie, it’s okay. Come with me.” I took hold of her hand, and led her quietly back into the house, took off her clothes, and wrapped her in blankets in front of the fire. Then I towel dried her hair, talking to her all the time, until she came back to reality. This kind of episode happened frequently. I understood. She was my wife; I knew how to take care of her.

“Are you still angry with me, Nicky?” She asked.

“No, Maddie. I couldn’t be angry with you for long,” I told her, kissing her cold lips.

So she had her way. She went to work at the Vienna base, while I wasted my life on a succession of meaningless jobs, but I couldn’t settle. I was restless, and didn’t know why. I didn’t find out until a few months after my wedding, when there was an explosion at the base. They said, on the news, that it was a gas explosion, but it wasn’t. It was a bomb, courtesy of the Project, and it was the first time that they’d been successful in attacking any of our bases. I went down there, and in the chaos and confusion they thought at first that she was all right. I prayed for her to be all right. Max arrived a few hours later, and all our people were taken to special, exclusive clinics. They said Maddie had concussion, and maybe minor brain damage, but the truth was that her already fragile psyche was sent over the edge by the injuries she suffered, and she never truly came back to us. She was always lost, as she had been that day out in the rain. Only that time she had come back to me, and this time she didn’t. I sat by her bed day and night, and accompanied her back to The House when she grew stronger, but although she regained some of her strength, physically, she never did mentally. I visit her every time I go back to The House, but to this day, she had no idea who I am. Our marriage had lasted for just five months.

It took me some time to accept that I’d lost her for good, but I couldn’t feel sorry for her. Looking into those hazy, faraway blue eyes, I had the feeling that she was somewhere she preferred to stay. Almost as if it was a conscious choice – she could stay there, where she felt safe, or she could come back to reality. Small wonder she chose not to return.

It was only then, finally, that I made my choice, and embraced the destiny that had been waiting for me since I was nine years old. I went to Max just before my 24th birthday, and told him that I wanted to join the Organisation. More than that, I wanted to be an agent, just like Neil, and Max himself.

“Are you sure, Nicky?” He asked, his eyes dark, and unreadable. “I’m not saying that we don’t need people, but you know how dangerous it is, and what you stand to lose.”

“Max, I’ve lost everyone I ever loved except you,” I told him, bitterly. “And I lost each and every one of them to those bastards. Maybe I’ve finally grown up, but I want my revenge, Max.” I think that was my true birthright. Not the house, or the money my father left me, not the charm, looks, and easy manner that was my mother’s legacy to me, but my revenge. It was all that I had left to live for.

Skinner took a plane to Vienna the following day. Whatever he was looking for, he knew that he wouldn’t find it in DC. He made a phone call to Krycek just before he left.

“I’ve found something,” he said.

“What?” Krycek sounded as bored and cold as usual.

“A marriage certificate. It isn’t much, but it’s the first real lead I’ve had. I’ll call you.” And he’d rung off.

Vienna was cold. It was mid-winter, and there was a light smattering of snow on the streets. Skinner went to the address listed on the marriage certificate and did some digging. He didn’t come up with anything about Nicolas Remarque, but Madeline Owen was a different matter. Whoever she was, she hadn’t been subject to the same amount of protection as Dominik Crozier. He discovered her date of birth, an address for where her family had lived, and finally, in his biggest breakthrough, a medical record authorising her release into the care of a psychiatrist in Geneva.

“Voila,” Skinner murmured, noting the address of the clinic. “Now, we are finally starting to roll.” He couldn’t help but be excited by his discovery. He had always loved working in the field, sifting his way through endless amounts of information, and making connections that other people, without his sharp eye for detail, so often missed. He took the next plane to Geneva, and found that the clinic was part of a much wider foundation of companies and businesses. Once he started looking, he found that the same organisation seemed to own half of Geneva, including the clinic to which Madeline Remarque had been referred. Finally, after a week of dogged research, and cross-referencing, Skinner found the address to which all the other records led back. The question was – what should he do next? He was loath to give this information to Krycek without first finding out more, so he set off to visit the address in question.

He found a pair of huge, ornate gates, and a long driveway leading into some woods, in the countryside just outside Geneva. There was nothing else he could see. The area was completely fenced off, with a massive electronic security system, and armed guards who regularly patrolled the perimeter. Whatever this place was, it was important. Skinner knew, instinctively, that this was where he would find his answer, maybe he would even find the elusive Dominik Crozier himself. He ruled out making any kind of attempt to break into a place this heavily guarded, and, after some consideration, he decided to take his life in his hands, and make the most obvious approach; he rang on the doorbell.

The guards at the gate eyed him curiously, and one of them approached him and asked him his name, and his business.

"I'm Walter Skinner," he said, "and I'm looking for a man called Dominik Crozier."

The guard stared at him for a moment, and then made a phone call. A few minutes later, and much to his own surprise, the gate was unlocked, and he was ushered into the grounds. He was shown into a car at gunpoint, and driven up the driveway, through the woods, and, fifteen minutes later, he arrived at a massive mansion. It was so big, and so completely obscured by trees, and hills, that it took his breath away. He could feel the sweat pricking on the palms of his hands. Maybe this was the last journey he'd ever make. Curiously, that thought didn't upset him. If he had to die, he'd prefer to do it out here, with a bullet in his brain, than slowly in DC, with Mulder and Scully watching as the nanocytes turned him into something only marginally less horrific than Frankenstein's monster.

He was taken into the house, and shown into a large drawing room, with a blazing fire burning in the grate. A man was sitting in a wheelchair, smoking a cigarette, and he looked up, and smiled as Skinner entered.

Skinner studied the man for a moment. He had clearly once been a large, vital person, with big, raw bones, but now he looked as if he had shrunk in on himself. His thick hair was white, streaked through with yellow nicotine stains, and a blanket covered his legs. He was clearly ill.

"You're not...Dominik Crozier?" No, the man was far too old. Disorientated, Skinner took another step forward. The old man laughed.

"No, I'm not," he said, in perfect, unaccented English. "My name is Max. Please, take a seat. It's good to see you. I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Skinner."

"You have?" Skinner looked surprised. Someone appeared behind him, and helped him remove his coat, and he walked towards the fire, and warmed his hands on it. He didn't seem to be in any immediate danger at least.

"Yes, I have. Dominik has told me all about you. I believe you're looking for him?" Max asked. Skinner frowned.

"Crozier knows that I'm searching for him?" He asked.

"Of course. Dominik makes it his business to know when he's in danger, and I think he is in danger from you, Mr. Skinner. Yes?" Max asked.

"Not necessarily." Skinner took the offered seat, and a few seconds later a maid entered, carrying a tray containing two cups of dark, bitter Swiss coffee, and a plate of intricate little sugar-coated cookies.

"Explain what you mean by that comment, Mr. Skinner," Max requested.

“I’d rather be taken to Crozier,” Skinner parried.

“He isn’t here, and besides, you’re in no position to make demands.” Max’s voice had a hint of steel, and his eyes were hard, and unwavering. Skinner felt a shiver run down his spine. This man was ruthless. He was suddenly aware that it was very likely that he wouldn’t be walking out of this place alive.

“It’s true that I’m looking for Crozier, but only because I want to find out who he is, and what his involvement is with a group of people that I loathe,” Skinner said, choosing his words carefully. “They’re the ones who sent me.”

“And if you find him you’ll sell the secret of his identity to them, in return for your own life,” Max said, inclining his head. Skinner’s eyes widened in surprise.

“It would seem that you know a great deal more about me than I know about you,” he commented.

“Yes, we do. You have no idea who you’re dealing with here,” Max told him.

“It’s safe to say that’s the truth,” Skinner observed, with an ironic sigh. “I’m out of my depth here, Mr...”

“Max. Just Max,” the other man said.

“Well, Max, I don’t know what the hell is going on. I guess that’s the story of my life. I just know that I was sent to do a job, but the more I’ve found out, the less I feel sure that I’ll be able to do it.”

“I see. Well then, perhaps I can help you make up your mind,” Max’s dark eyes never left Skinner’s face, and Skinner had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being scrutinised, examined, and judged, but for what purpose, he didn’t know. “Dominik Crozier is our best agent, Mr. Skinner. He’s been working undercover with the people you know as the Consortium for several years. He’s fed us information that has been invaluable in our fight against them.”

“You’re fighting those bastards?” Skinner leaned forward in his chair. This was the first good news he’d heard in a long time.

“Oh yes, Mr. Skinner. We’ve been fighting them for a very long time, and for a very long time we were losing – until Dominik joined us. About a year ago, Dominik pulled off a considerable coup for us. He managed to assemble many of the key players of the Consortium in one location, and our people, and those helping us, were able to destroy them. You might remember the occasion – you were there in its immediate aftermath. I believe that you took two of your agents to the scene of the destruction.”

“That was your people?” Skinner asked, stunned. “Your people were behind the burning at the El Rico Airforce base?”

“Yes – we arranged it, working on information given to us by Dominik. It was his greatest victory – and ours. It was also a body blow from which the Consortium, or the Project as we call them, never fully recovered. The only person they really have left is the man called Spender.”

“I know him.” Skinner stiffened.

“Yes, you’ve fought your own battles against him, for which I commend you.” Max inclined his head. “However, Spender is neither a man to forgive, nor forget. He knew they’d been betrayed, and that it had to have been by someone on the inside. He’s been busy rebuilding what is left of his beloved Project, and he’s been searching for the person who betrayed them. For a long time he didn’t have anything to go on, but recently one of our shape-shifters was captured, and revealed, under torture, that the man they were looking for, the man who had betrayed them, is Dominik Crozier. What the shape-shifter could not tell them, because he did not know, is who Crozier is, and he didn’t know because nobody knows except Crozier himself, and me.”

“And you’re not about to just give that information to me, are you?” Skinner smiled a grim smile. If Max didn’t kill him, then it was clear Krycek would, because he sure as hell wasn’t going to be leaving this place alive if he discovered Crozier’s identity, and if he didn’t discover Crozier’s identity then the Consortium would kill him anyway. He was a dead man.

“No. I’m not.” Max inclined his head. “I should kill you, but Dominik has forbidden me to do that, so I thought that I’d take coffee with you instead.” He picked up his cup, and took a sip, smiling at Skinner over the rim.

“Why the hell should Crozier care whether I live or not?” Skinner asked.

“Maybe he wants to kill you himself,” Max suggested.

“I hate the Consortium. I’d rather die at his hands than Krycek’s,” Skinner said softly.

“Well, maybe you’ll get that opportunity,” Max said, with a shrug. “Either way, I think we both know that you’re reaching the end of this particular road, Mr. Skinner.”

“Yes.” Skinner settled back in his chair, and savoured his coffee; it was remarkably good.

“You know Dominik’s history?” Max asked, conversationally.

“I know his parents were shot by Consortium operatives, yes. I know he witnessed the murders and someone, I’m presuming it was you, hid him in case they decided to come back and finish the job.”

“That’s correct.” Max nodded. “I can see you’ve done your homework, Mr. Skinner. Dominik said you were thorough. He thought you might find him, in the end, which is why I advised him to kill you.”

"I think you overstate my importance in the grand scheme of things," Skinner remarked, wryly. Max studied him carefully over his cup.

"No, I don't think so," he murmured, and Skinner had an eerie sensation, as if Max was talking about something else, something entirely different.

"Mr. Skinner, when I found Dominik he was lying at the bottom of a flight of stairs with blood running down his face. He had witnessed his parents being slaughtered, but what you probably don't know is how hard that nine year old boy tried to save them."

Skinner sat silently, and completely still. There was a power and urgency in the old man's voice, as if it were important that Skinner knew this. He didn't know why it should be important though.

"He heard his father being threatened by Spender, and he watched from the top of the stairs as those men shot his beloved Papa. His mother was lying on the floor, but she was still alive. Desperate to save her, he crept out onto the roof, and broke into the garage to alert the bodyguard we had provided for the family. Then, disobeying my orders, and not for the last time either," Max paused, and smiled, "he went back into the house to try and save his mother himself. They shot her before he could reach her, and then Spender turned his gun on that little boy. I hope he rots in hell for that, and his many other crimes."

"You and me both," Skinner said in a heartfelt tone.

"So, Mr. Skinner, do you still feel inclined to sell Dominik to his enemies?"

"I couldn't even if I wanted to." Skinner spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "I don't know who he is."

"No, but you know **what** he is. I regard that boy as my son. I'd kill any man who harmed him," Max said, and despite the other man's age, and illness, Skinner knew he meant it, and that he both could, and would, carry out his threat. "He's a good man, Mr. Skinner. He was a good boy; brave, and bright, and he turned into a good man too. A man that any father would be proud to call son – and that's what I call him." Max's eyes were burning with a fierce devotion.

"I believe you, sir." Skinner inclined his head in deference to the other man's strong emotions.

"Come then." Max beckoned him over, and Skinner got up. "Push me," Max commanded, and Skinner did as he was told, without hesitation. Somehow, Max was a man you instinctively wanted to obey. He pushed the old man out of the door, and into the grand, marble hallway. "You're wondering what happened to Maddie. She's how you found us after all," Max said, guessing his thoughts.

"Yes." Skinner had ceased to be surprised by how much they knew about him, and his investigation.

“Well, she’s still alive. Come. I’ll show you. And in case you’re wondering, although we go to some pains to keep this place secret, the Project have known our whereabouts for a very long time, so there’s no question that you can sell them that information in exchange for your life.”

“I wasn’t even considering it,” Skinner replied, honestly.

“Good. Our security is too tight for them to attack us here, just as theirs is too good for us to launch any serious assault on them in their heartland either. Through those doors.” Max pointed, and Skinner pushed the wheelchair through the doors, and down a ramp. They stopped outside a large, airy room, and Skinner opened the door and pushed Max inside. Two women were sitting in there. One got up and left, with a smile, as they entered.

“She’s Maddie’s nurse. Maddie needs round the clock care,” Max said, gesturing that Skinner should park the wheelchair beside the small, frail, blonde haired woman sitting on the couch, rocking herself to and fro, humming to herself, lost in a world of her own. Skinner crouched down in front of her, and gently touched her hand.

“Maddie?” She didn't even look at him. She just kept staring into space, her eyes hazy, and distant.

“She doesn’t talk. We’re not entirely sure she can understand what we say, although she can certainly hear us,” Max commented. He smiled at the woman, and brushed her hair away from her face.

“What happened to her?” Skinner asked, rocking back on his haunches and surveying the sad figure in front of them.

“She was like Dominik – an orphan, but she wasn’t strong like him. She never really recovered from her parents’ death. She was involved in an attack on one of our bases, and suffered brain damage as a result.” Max put his arm around Maddie’s shoulder and kissed her cheek, and she ignored him, and carried on staring into space, but Skinner noticed that a faint smile was hovering around her lips. “She loves being cuddled. I told Dominik that he shouldn’t marry her. It was more a marriage of need than one of love, and somehow that just didn’t seem right to me, but he was adamant. Dominik always was the most obstinate boy in the world when he made up his mind about something, and at his most defensive and fiery when he knew he was doing the wrong thing. And he did know, deep inside. Maybe it was for the best that she ended up like this. At least she seems happy. I don’t think she’d have been happy with Dominik – not in the long term. He was too restless, and he needed something else, something Maddie could never have given him.”

Skinner looked at Max, expecting an explanation, but none was forthcoming.

“Mr. Skinner, Dominik’s lost everything,” Max said softly. “I won’t kill you because I gave him my word, and because...well, because I understand his reasons why. However, I do ask you not to continue with this investigation. Don’t keep looking for him, because if you do, I’m very much afraid that you might find him.”

"You're letting me go?" Skinner stood up, surprised.

"Yes, I am. Against my better judgement, but I'm the boy's father. What else can I do?" Max shrugged. "What will you do, Mr. Skinner?"

"I'm not sure." Skinner thought about it for a moment. "One thing, Max. If you speak to Dominik, and I'm sure you will, you might like to pass a message onto him, from me."

"Very well."

"Tell him that he should be wary of ghosts. I might not be the only one looking for him, and the ghost of a dead woman could be his downfall."

"Very cryptic," Max commented. "Dominik will enjoy deciphering that I'm sure. He always was too clever for his own good."

"The photographs in the house? I'm presuming you took them, in order to protect his identity?" Skinner asked.

"That's right. I think Dominik resents me for that occasionally. I think he wishes he could remember what they looked like, and it's hard, after all this time."

Skinner nodded, as the final pieces of the mystery slotted into place. Poor Dominik Crozier. He could no more sell this man than he could have sold his own flesh and blood, but that didn't mean he was going to stop looking for him. Maybe he could offer him his services, although he wasn't sure what use he'd be with the threat of Alex fucking Krycek, and his nanocytes hanging over him.

"Goodbye, Max." He shook the old man's hand at the door, and walked out to the car, still expecting to hear a shot ring out behind him. He was too dangerous to be allowed to walk free, and he knew too much. What the hell was Crozier thinking?

Max tells me that he's received a visit from Walter. I'm not surprised. He's also passed on a message from him, which makes me laugh. I love this about Walter. I love that he's full of surprises for a man who seems so straightforward. His complexity is one of his attractions of course. I'd be bored if he was anything less than this. Max would thump from here to kingdom come if he knew what I'm about to do next. It's stupid, and it's foolhardy, and it will probably get me killed, but I can't resist it all the same. Walter has laid down the gauntlet; he wants to meet me, and I'm tired of running. If he doesn't kill me, then at least I can fly back to see Max. I miss the old man. Trust Walter to be the one to find me, after all these years. I love that it's him, in a way. I love that of all the people who looked for me, only he was clever enough to find me, and I love that he seems to understand me well enough to know that only a cryptic clue like this could draw me to him, like a moth to a flame.

I take the first flight out to Vienna, and arrive in the middle of the night, which suits me fine. It's about 3 am when I walk up the driveway to my parents' house. Unlike Walter, I don't need to break in. I have a key after all. I unlock the door, hardly breathing. I have a gun, of course, but I don't think I'll use it. Not on him. I as good as killed Neil; I won't have Walter on my conscience. The house is in darkness, which is wrong. There should always be one light burning, somewhere in the house; I left specific instructions. That makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. He's here. I thought he would be, and he is. I walk up the stairs. I don't need the lights; I remember every single inch of this place. It's engraved on my eyelids, in my bones, and in the very core of my soul. I glance into my parents' room. The door to my mother's dressing room is ajar. It shouldn't be. I closed it the last time I was here. I wander across the landing to my old bedroom, push the door open, and I know that he's in here before I even take a step. I walk into the room, softly, silently, and reach for the light switch, and that's when I feel his gun pressed against the back of my head, and I freeze.

"Dominik Crozier, I presume," he says, in a low, tense voice.

"You knew it would be," I reply, and he flicks on the light, and I take a slow, unthreatening step forward, and turn, the barrel of his gun still in my face.

"Oh Christ no, Krycek," is all he says.

"I think," Krycek said thoughtfully, "that in my own home, I would prefer you to use my real name, Walter. Dominik. Here, I was only ever Dominik Crozier. I won't be that bastard Alex Krycek here. I won't bring him here. My parents' house has already been defiled enough."

Skinner stood, staring at Krycek – Crozier? - for a long time, and the other man stood quite still, gazing back.

"Did you set me up?" Skinner managed to croak at last. "How? Was it all a lie? Max, that place, that woman - Maddie. Was it all a set up? And why? For what?"

"No, none of that was a set up, Walter," Crozier replied, calmly. "Are you going to use that gun, or can I move?"

"Stand still," Skinner said desperately, his gun hand wavering as he faced the other man down. Crozier put his hands back in the air.

"All right. It's okay," he said soothingly.

"No it isn't. None of it is fucking okay!" Skinner growled, tightening his grip on the gun. "How did you get here? How did you know that I'd be here? I didn't tell anyone."

"You gave me a clue, remember," Crozier said softly. "You warned me about a dead woman's ghost. You were right to warn me, Walter. Thank you. It was a stupid slip-up on my part, and could have ended in me being caught a long time ago. I just...this is just one thing I can't help. Sometimes I need to come back."

"Ghosts..." Skinner murmured, glancing around the room, taking in the child's belongings; his skates, his clothing, his shoes, his posters.

"That's right. Ghosts." Crozier nodded.

"But not the ghost of Marguerite Crozier."

"No, the ghost of her son, Dominik." Crozier inclined his head.

"Crozier couldn't keep away." Skinner's voice was barely audible. "He was drawn back to this place, over and over again. Not often - maybe a couple of times a year, but when he came back, he'd go to her dressing room, sit at her dressing table, and spray her perfume into the air, so that he could smell her scent. The housekeeper thought it was ghosts, but of course it wasn't."

"No, it was just a nine-year-old boy, trying to recapture the scent of his mother. If he closed his eyes, and sat very still, he could remember the way she looked, and the way she spoke. Smell is a powerful memory stimulator," Crozier said softly.

"Max burned all the photographs so they wouldn't be able to identify you," Skinner said, looking at the empty silver frame beside the child's bed.

"That's right. I found that the only way I could remember how she looked was to come here, and spray her perfume into the air. It was all I had left of her. I didn't realise that the housekeeper thought the house was haunted. How amusing. Mulder would laugh, I think. What will you do, now that you know, Walter?"

"I don't know," he hissed, still holding the gun pressed against the other man's forehead. "I don't fucking know, Krycek."

Skinner gazed at the other man, still unable to take it in. Crozier looked so very familiar, and yet unfamiliar. He carried himself differently, and he dressed differently. The trademark black leather jacket, blue jeans, and white tee shirt were gone, to be replaced by dark navy chinos, and a plain dark shirt, covered by a tailored jacket. There was a solid gold ring on the middle finger of his right hand. Those green eyes, that he had once thought so cold, and evil, were sharp and intelligent, yes, but now they were also warm, and friendly. Hell, even his voice was different. He still had a flawless American accent, but Skinner could detect a slight change in the vowel sounds - and the faintest trace of English intonation, combined with just the merest hint of German.

"Are you really him?" Skinner asked, his voice breaking, and his world tumbling down. If Krycek was Crozier then he really had reached the end of the road. He couldn't win this game. When he came here, it had been to see for himself what kind of a man Crozier was. Now it all had become too complicated for him to understand, and he couldn't see a way out of this. His options had been abruptly curtailed. "Are you really Crozier, or is this just another trap, Krycek?"

"No, it isn't a trap," Crozier said, his green eyes dark, and insistent. He ignored the gun, and took a step away, and then another, daring Skinner to fire, and he found that he couldn't.

Crozier walked over to the closet, and fingered the magnetic letters arranged to form words on the large, metallic card stuck to the surface. "It was a game between us. She used to tiptoe in here when I was asleep, and I woke up to a different message each morning. I'd reply to it, and she'd read it when she put me to bed. We'd both laugh."

Skinner closed his eyes. He had a mental image of a green-eyed little boy, laughing out loud, his dark hair falling into his eyes, as he played this word game with his beloved mother. Crozier moved away, over to the window, twitched the curtain aside, and glanced out. "It's started to snow again," he observed. "You know, when I was a child, I wanted to be an actor. Ironic really, isn't it, considering the role I ended up playing?"

"You're going to have to explain it to me, Kry...Dominik," Skinner said, spreading his hands, "because I don't understand it. Why send me looking for you?"

"You do understand really, Walter, you just don't want to," Crozier replied. "I've been Alex Krycek for seven years. I know him, and I hate him." The vehemence of those words made Skinner look up, sharply. "You don't believe that's possible? Well, it is," Crozier said. "I've done a good job, though, Walter. I kept my silence, and my cover, through even the most difficult moments. I kept it when they sawed off my arm, and I kept it when I took you to the brink of death and then brought you back to life just to show you that the Project owned you. I kept it for seven long years following the orders of man who had killed my mother and father, and destroyed my life, when all I wanted to do was to place my hands around his scrawny throat and choke him until he died. You ask me why I sent you looking for myself, knowing what you might find, but of course I had to. The man you call Cancerman, Spender, gave me an order, and that was to use you to track Crozier down. What choice did I have? If I didn't follow the order then he would surely have wondered why, so I did what I'm good at; I stayed in character, and bought myself time that way. There was always a chance that you might fail, and if you did find me...well, then I'd deal with that eventuality when it happened. Seeing as you were reporting to me, you were less of a threat than you might otherwise have been."

"But you were such a bastard. Did you have to pursue this mission with quite such zeal?" Skinner asked in despair. "I mean, Christ, what was that little object lesson with the nanocytes a few weeks ago all about?"

"That was about Alex Krycek doing his job properly. You weren't getting any results. You weren't even trying." Crozier shrugged. "You couldn't expect a man like Krycek to let you get away with that, so I made sure that he didn't. Anything less and Cancerman would have been breathing down my neck."

"This doesn't change anything." Skinner raised his gun again. "You're still a bastard, Dominik."

"Yes, I am." Crozier turned back from the window, and stared at the gun impassively. "And please, do feel free to ask me any questions you like. If, when you're through, you want to kill me, then that's fine. I'll allow you to do so."

"You'll allow me?" Skinner grunted. "That's big of you, considering that I'm the one with the gun."

"I didn't come here unarmed, Walter," Crozier chided mildly. "And, like Krycek, I am very skilled at my job."

"I'll bet you are. Tell me one thing, Dominik - did you arrange that car accident that killed my wife?" Skinner asked urgently. He watched the other man's reactions closely, but Crozier didn't miss a beat.

"No, Walter. I had nothing to do with that. I didn't even know about it. That was someone else."

"And Melissa Scully – did you kill her?" Skinner demanded.

"No, I didn't. Luis Cardinal killed her. If I could have stopped him then I would have done so, but it all happened too fast." Crozier shrugged. "I try my best to avoid murdering innocent people where possible, but I'll admit, it hasn't always been possible." A shadow passed across his face, and Skinner saw something he had never once seen in Krycek's eyes: remorse.

"And Bill Mulder? Did you kill Mulder's father?" Skinner demanded. Crozier hesitated for just a fraction of a second, and then inclined his head, in a graceful nod.

"Yes, I did. William Mulder was part of the Project, albeit the only part of it with a conscience, but I was ordered to kill him, so I did. I didn't shed any tears for him. He had a considerable amount of blood on his hands." Crozier shrugged.

"You being Crozier doesn't change anything then," Skinner said softly, taking aim at Crozier's head. "You're still a cold blooded killer."

"Max once said that he wasn't sure whether the ends justified the means, but he hoped so," Crozier said, unblinking in the face of the gun. "During the past seven years I've come to understand what he meant by that. You see, Walter, I knew, when Max first asked me to go undercover as Alex Krycek, and infiltrate the Project, that it wouldn't be enough to pretend to be Krycek. I had to really be him. I had to do everything he would do, and that would include killing, and hurting people. It wasn't an easy decision, and it wasn't one I took lightly. Max and I talked it through for weeks. He was worried that it would destroy me, but he was also worried that if I didn't go, **we** would be destroyed. Oh, not just our Organisation, but all of us, all humanity. There was too much resting on my shoulders for me to have the luxury of a conscience, Walter. I had a choice, and I took it. Please make sure you kill me for the right reasons. Kill me for being the kind of lying bastard that can pretend to be another man for seven years while working to his own agenda. Kill me for being a man who can deceive and dissemble so easily that he can kill in the name of a Project he doesn't believe in, while

secretly working for their bitterest enemies. Kill me because I can betray and double cross those people who think I'm their friend without a second thought. Kill me for what I am, Walter. Don't kill me for being Alex Krycek. Kill me for being Dominik Crozier."

"Where does the one begin, and the other end?" Skinner asked, drowning. He felt broken, and lost.

Crozier crossed the room swiftly, and brushed Skinner's gun aside.

"Let me show you," he said. He picked up Skinner's hand, and pressed it against his head. Skinner stared at him, puzzled. "Here," Crozier said, pushing aside his thick, dark hair, and placing Skinner's fingers on his scalp. Skinner felt an indentation, and frowned, bemused. "This is where it begins, Walter. You were right. Spender's bullet did ricochet. It hit the banisters, then glanced off my head, and was embedded in the wall. Come, let me show you." He led Skinner out onto the landing. "This is where I crouched, Walter, while I watched them murder my parents. My father was standing there - right under the chandelier, and Spender was facing him. Papa died trying to save my mother - did you know that? The mission was bungled from the beginning. Mama was expendable, but my father was not - he was the one they wanted. When he threw himself in front of the bullet meant for her, it was all over. I ran down the stairs when they shot her. I got to about here." Crozier paused, half way down the stairs, "and that's when Spender saw me. I was cast in shadow, so he didn't get a clear shot, and they already knew that Max was on his way, so it wasn't wise to linger. He shot me as he was running for the door, and I fell, down these steps, down to the bottom of the stairs. I could feel the blood in my eyes, and I thought I was dead. I should have been dead. I lay here for maybe ten, fifteen minutes, while my parents lay dead just feet away. Sometimes I opened my eyes and stared into my father's dead face. Spender kicked him you know. He rolled him over with his boot, so that he was facing up. Fifteen minutes - Max says that's all the time that passed before he came in here, and rescued me, but that wasn't how long it was for me. For me it was a lifetime, and I'm still living it," Crozier said, staring up at Skinner from the bottom of the stairs, where he stood, his body suffused with the kind of tense, nervous energy he had never seen in Krycek, and his green eyes were glowing with a different kind of emotion now. If Skinner hadn't known that this man in front of him was also Alex Krycek, he might not even have recognised him. He didn't walk, talk, or sound like Krycek.

"Why..." Skinner said, and his mouth was so dry he could barely speak. "Why did you come here, Dominik? Why didn't you have Max kill me when I found the house in Geneva? Why let me live?"

"Why?" Crozier gave a little laugh, and shrugged, but Skinner noted that the other man couldn't meet his eyes. "Why? Who knows, Walter? Maybe because I couldn't bring myself to kill someone I like and respect in order to protect a bastard like Alex Krycek. I've been successful, Walter. I've used Krycek to bring the Project to its knees. We're nearing the end, and maybe I'm taking more risks than I did in the early days, when we were losing, and so much more rested on me." He shrugged again, and spread his arms out wide. "Well, Walter, will you kill me? It would be a fitting end, to die here, where I should have died 25 years ago, at the bottom of these stairs. If you're going to kill me, now's your chance." Skinner

moistened his lips with his tongue, and lifted his gun again. He began to walk, slowly, down the stairs towards his old enemy.

"You poisoned me. You killed me," he said, as he descended.

"That's right, Walter. I did." Crozier nodded.

"You killed Mulder's father, and god knows how many other people."

"Yes, Walter. I've killed a great many people during my years as Alex Krycek." Crozier nodded again.

"You've committed countless other atrocities." Skinner reached the bottom of the stairs, and raised his gun again. Crozier nodded, his green eyes dark with memories.

"Oh yes, Walter. I've done things that would give me nightmares, if my head wasn't already crammed full with enough material to furnish me with demons for the rest of my life."

"You were in my bedroom. You stood over me, and activated those fucking buttons on that fucking palm pilot, and **watched** me become sick," Skinner said, the sweat standing out on his forehead at the memory. "You watched, and then you just turned, and left. What kind of a monster could do that?"

"That wasn't...easy." Crozier swallowed hard, and for the first time since he had arrived, Skinner saw a vulnerability in the other man.

"I still hate you," Skinner said, holding the gun to Crozier's head once again. Their eyes met, and they stared at each other for a long time, and then Skinner moved. He drew back his arm, and crashed the butt of his gun hard into Crozier's jaw. The other man reeled back and smashed against the wall, blood seeping from the bruise that was already rising on his face. Skinner sat down on the stairs with a thud, placed the gun on the ground, and then sent it flying with his foot in Crozier's direction. "I can't kill you, Dominik," he said, in a hard, bitter voice. "I can't kill that 9 year old boy. God help me, but I can't."

He looks broken, and I wish that I could go to him, and put my arms around his shoulders, and hold him tight, but of course I can't. I think he might really find the strength to kill me if I were to do that. So I just lie here, at the bottom of the stairs, as I did all those years ago, the blood running down my face, just as it did then. My jaw aches - I wonder if he's broken it? I massage it gingerly with my fingers but it's just badly bruised. It hurts, but I've suffered worse; being sat upon by sturdy Russian peasants while they chopped off my arm with a carving knife comes to mind. I sit up, and pick up his gun. I'm not sure that I'm grateful for my reprieve. He should have killed me. He, of all people, has the most right. If only he knew that the night I crept into his bedroom to leave that note, I crouched beside the bed and watched him for over an hour. One of his arms was lying outside the covers, and I bent my head, and kissed it; just a light brush of my lips on his fingers. Not enough to wake him. Then

I stood up, opened my palm pilot, and pumped three days of agony into his veins. He doesn't know that though, and I won't tell him.

He's sitting, with his head in his arms, and now that he's made his decision, I must make mine.

"Walter, we have to think about what to do next. I have a suggestion." He raises his head to look at me, and I can see the disgust in his eyes. Before, I could always take his contempt, because I always had the comfort of knowing that it was aimed at Krycek, and not me, but I don't have that luxury any more, and I flinch from his gaze - visibly. He looks surprised; he has no idea of the effect he has on me, but then he doesn't know what he means to me. "I have something for you." I slip my good hand into my pocket, and bring out the palm pilot. His eyes widen, and he looks from it, to me, and back again.

"What now? You want to use that thing on me again?" He asks, with an expression of total horror in those bleak, dark eyes.

"No, of course not. Please, Walter, you must understand. I'm not Krycek. I have a different agenda. I'm giving this to you. Take it. You have control of your own destiny again, Walter." I hand him the palm pilot but he's too stupefied to take it, and just carries on staring at me. I close his fingers around the palm pilot, and make him take it. "I want you to deposit \$500,000 in this account." I hand him a piece of paper.

"That's a lot of money. It'll wipe me out," he says.

"That doesn't matter. We'll take care of you. Just transfer the money. That way it'll look as if I sold you the palm pilot. I'm getting out, Walter. Alex Krycek is jumping ship. Cancerman will understand if I sell you this, but he'd never understand that I gave it to you, and while he'll allow Krycek to betray him for cash, if he knows that I'm Crozier nothing will stop him from tracking me down and killing me."

"Then what? What happens to you?" He asks, and I think he almost cares. That warms my heart in a way I never thought possible.

"I'm going back to Spender. I have a report to make. I'll tell him that you failed, that you couldn't find Crozier, and then I'll disappear. He'll figure out that I've sold you your freedom, but he expects Alex Krycek to do that kind of thing. He won't think I'm Crozier, and that means I get to keep my options open."

"It's a dangerous game. You've taken away his bargaining chip," Walter says. He's good at this. I love the way his mind works. He still understands so little of what all this is about, but he's smart enough to figure out the important points.

"Yes, I know. He won't be happy. I'll expect a minor retribution." I shrug. "Just do it, Walter. I can take care of myself," I tell him softly. "I've been doing that for a long time."

"Yes," he agrees, and he puts the palm pilot in his pocket. "What then, Dominik? What happens next?"

"Next, Walter, we do something else I've been doing for a very long time; we wait. Everything plays out in its own time. I've discovered that there's little I can do to hurry it along."

"And me? What do you want me to do?"

"Do whatever you like." I shrug. "I told you, Walter, you're a free man. Go, and live."

He gets up, but he's frowning, as if he can't believe that this is it, that this is where it ends. He walks slowly to the door, and then stops, and turns back.

"I can't do this, Dominik," he says. "I can't walk away from this, and what happened here." He glances at the spot where my parents died, and then looks back at me, and I wish I could kiss him for being the kind of man who would say that, or who would care about the murders of two people he has never even met, who died a very long time ago.

"When I met you in that bar, and you told me that you'd been here, I wanted to kill you," I say to him, and he's surprised by how much I am Dominik, and not the man he spoke to in the bar that night. He doesn't know Dominik though - how could he? He knows only Krycek. "I wanted to place my knife in your heart and twist it for breaking into this house," I tell him, and he nods. He can understand that. "Then when you said those words, when you asked me if Dominik didn't deserve some happiness after what the Project butchers did to his parents..." I break off, because that moment affected me deeply. "At the time it was all I could do to be Krycek, and not give myself away," I murmur. "I had to distract both you and myself with the threat of the palm pilot, or you'd have seen what was in my eyes. What you said meant a great deal to me, Walter."

"Was that why you couldn't kill me?" He asks, and I shake my head, ruefully, because I can't answer that question for him. I cannot kill him because I love him, but I don't think he'd thank me for **that** revelation after the night we've both just been through.

"Are you saying that you want to join us?" I ask him, changing the subject. "Is that what you're saying, Walter?"

"Yes." He nods. "Tell me what you want me to do."

"Nothing - for now. Just go back to Washington. I'll be in touch." I move towards the door. "And, Walter..."

"Hmm?"

I stop beside him, and he looks at me, and we're so close that we're almost touching. His eyes are a warm, chocolate brown behind his glasses, and he smells of sweat and that aftershave he's been using ever since I first met him. I think I'd know him by his scent alone, just like Mama. "Leave a light on," I tell him, handing him a key. "I make sure that there's always one light burning in the house at night. Dominik was afraid of the dark."

And I disappear into the snowy dawn, leaving him behind to lock up.

Skinner returned to Washington DC in a daze. His mind restlessly went over every single one of his dealings with Alex Krycek, from the moment the green young so-called agent had turned up in his office, eager, bright-eyed, and ultimately treacherous, to that last meeting with him in a bar in Washington DC. He looked for some clue, any clue, that would link Krycek to Crozier. The man was a consummate actor, but now that he thought about it, there had been one time when the mask had slipped, just a little. He remembered slugging the younger man in the gut, and enjoying it, remembered the look on Krycek's face as he had hauled him out onto his balcony and handcuffed him there. "Just think warm thoughts," he'd hissed in Krycek's ear, and the other man had snarled and yanked on the handcuff in a futile gesture...and yet, when Skinner had returned to the balcony after Mulder had gone, he had glanced out, and, for a second, found himself looking into a pair of green eyes that were neither baleful, nor angry, but which reflected some other emotion instead, an emotion he hadn't been able to identify. He had been about to go back outside, and beat the shit out of the man on his balcony, but the expression in those eyes that had stopped him, and, to this day, he wasn't sure why. Instead of going to sink his fist into Krycek's flesh, he had, instead, pulled the drapes shut across the window, blocking the other man from sight. He hadn't gone back to look at him again. He couldn't think of any other time when Crozier's mask had slipped though; the man played his role like the consummate professional he clearly was. Skinner couldn't begin to imagine what kind of life Crozier had lived. He didn't think he would have been capable of living a lie so completely, and for so long...and then he remembered the sham of his marriage, and his refusal to address the issues of his sexuality. At least Crozier had never deceived himself. He was honest about what he was; Skinner was not.

Skinner took the palm pilot to the doctors that had treated him in the initial aftermath of his first infection with the nanocytes, and stayed with them while they examined the data it contained. He refused to let the small device out of his sight. After all, it contained the power of life and death, and he wasn't about to relinquish that power to anyone, ever again. They managed to ascertain that while they couldn't use the device to remove the nanites from Skinner's blood, they could neutralise their signatures so they became dormant, and no longer able to respond to external commands. It was as close as he was going to get to a cure, and Skinner took it, gratefully. With the cure vanished the last vestige of his doubts about Crozier. The man had kept his word about this, at least. Maybe he would prove trustworthy in a way Alex Krycek was not. He still didn't like the green-eyed bastard, but he no longer hated him either.

Weeks passed, and he heard no word from the other man, and he began to wonder whether Crozier had been wrong, and Cancerman had finally uncovered the traitor in his camp, but then one day, out of the blue, Dominik Crozier strode into his office – and he wasn't alone.

As it turned out, Spender was more than a little pissed off that I'd sold our one method of blackmail over our tame Assistant Director, rendering him tame no more. Spender hates

Skinner – ever since the object of my affection saw him for the man he is, and went eyeball to eyeball with him over that DAT tape I eventually managed to steal, and copy, before passing on. I think that's another reason why I first fell in love with Skinner; he saw through Spender, and he did so damn quickly. He could have just kept his head down, and done as he was ordered, but he didn't, and that's testament to the kind of man he is. Maybe I was attracted to him, also, because he believes so much in justice, and with the amoral life I've led for the past few years, it surprised me that there was anyone like him left in the world. He seemed almost old-fashioned, an anachronism, and that fascinated me.

The price for my betrayal is a spell in a Tunisian prison, courtesy of the man who murdered my parents, so I guess you can say he's pretty angry with me, but the very fact I'm here, and not lying dead on Max's doorstep, is testament to the fact that he still hasn't figured it all out. To be honest, I think Spender's grip on reality is fading. He's ill; he's finally allowed himself to be subject to the same experimentation that he's been inflicting on those around him for so long, and whatever it is he's done, it's killing him. I hope he doesn't die before I get out of this prison - I want to kill him myself. I think, after all these years, that the end is drawing close. He's still too well protected for me to take my revenge just yet, but I have a feeling that the rats are deserting the sinking ship, as he grows physically weaker. You see, that's the thing about Spender – he had this kind of power, an aura of ruthless, physical invincibility that was the first thing I noticed about him, and it scared me shitless then, and I know it scared the rest of his lackeys as well, but that's faded, and now he just looks like an old man. It's ironic, in a way. Both he and Max are bowing out, and I intend to be with both of them when they die, but for very different reasons.

Prison is about the best fun I've had since Tunguska, if you'll excuse the sarcasm. There are no women around, and I'm too pretty, and too foreign to fit in. The first rape attempt happens within 3 hours of my arrival. I think they imagine me to be an easy target, because of my looks, and the fact that I only have one arm, but I soon put them straight on that. The first man to make an attempt on my ass gets his neck broken, courtesy of my remaining hand. It's a technique that I've perfected over the past two years, and it takes about 5 seconds to despatch him into eternity, and kick his dead body back into the crowd. The other men are wary of me after that. A couple of them try – and there's one concerted effort by a gang of three, but I dispose of them all in the same way, and that's the last time anyone tries to touch me. The guards seem to neither notice nor care about the body count. In fact, they almost seem to expect it when they come to open the gates to throw us our food in the morning. Suffice it to say that I don't get a lot of sleep during my imprisonment. I do, however, have plenty of available waking hours to sift through old memories. Seeing myself through Skinner's eyes has had a profound effect on me. It's the first time that I've spoken to anyone other than Max who knows just what I've done during my time as Alex Krycek. Max knows of course. I sent him reports whenever I could, and I know he read them, committed them to memory, and then destroyed them. He knows every last atrocity I've committed, and he understands why. I've never seen any reproach for me in his eyes, although I've seen plenty towards himself, taking the blame for what I've become, what I've had to do, and the numerous beatings and bullets, and the one mutilation I suffered.

Max trained me himself. He pushed me harder than he'd ever done before, and there was a time when the bond between us was sorely tested, as I endured day after day of hard

physical training, and complex briefings. I stormed out on more than one occasion, but I always went back. We constructed Alex Krycek together, he and I – we figured everything out, from where my alter ego was born, to how old he was, even his star sign, and what he liked to eat. I had to know my part inside out to play it. It was Max who came up with the idea of building in a number of character flaws, and, looking back, it was a brainwave that has kept me alive.

“If you go in there, looking like the perfect Project agent, then that’s too obvious. If we make you untrustworthy, sly, capable of biting the hand that feeds you...they’ll be suspicious of you, but for the wrong reasons,” he said, as we sat on the terrace one afternoon, me still dressed in sweats after a vigorous workout, and he clad in his normal shambolic attire of unwashed jeans, and faded flannel shirt, the ever present cigarette dangling from between his fingers. Thus we created Alex Krycek, from his walk, to the clothes he liked to wear, to the way he talked, and laughed, and ate. We built Krycek from scratch, and I lived and breathed him for months before Max would allow me to leave. Often, over dinner, he’d fire questions at me, testing me, and it was only when he was satisfied that I had become the man we had constructed that he allowed me to go to the US, to be recruited into the Project.

I’ll never forget the day I first met that bastard who murdered my parents face to face, as an adult. Here was the monster who had featured in so many of my nightmares since childhood, sitting in an armchair, a cloud of smoke clouding around his head. The resemblance to Max began and ended with the nicotine though. Spender was leaner, taller, and far more smartly dressed for a start – he was also as different a man in temperament and personality as you could imagine. Max had prepared me for this meeting. We had gone over and over it in a bid to stop me doing anything stupid, but, all the same, the sound of his voice, and the smell of him was enough to tip me back 16 years to a stairway in Vienna. Here was the man who had killed everyone I loved, who had tried to kill me, standing, shaking my hand, and I was smiling, and answering his questions, and it was in that moment I knew that I could succeed where Neil and countless others had failed. It was a baptism of fire, but Alex Krycek was my strength, and my weapon, and I would wield him ruthlessly to bring this man and his Project down. Spender oversaw my training himself. I think he saw in me an ideal protégé. I was young, and hungry, and he could mould me to his will, and create me in his own image, but Alex Krycek was too strong a personality for that.

One of my first jobs was to go through Quantico, and become a faux FBI agent, for reasons that they didn’t explain to me at the time, and then I was assigned to work with Mulder. I’ll admit I wasn’t comfortable meeting him; I knew only that his father was one of the Project’s top men, and I was predisposed to hate him for that reason alone. It’s impossible to hate Fox Mulder for long though. He’s not his father’s son, not by a long way. I grew to have a grudging respect for him, and, if our lives had been different, I like to think that we might have been friends. It’s too late for that now, of course. Alex Krycek sold Mulder down the river, like so many others since, and every time he saw me thereafter his anger was obvious, and almost uncontrollable. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve been on the receiving end of Mulder’s fists. The one thing I can say, to my credit, is that I never hit him back. I empathised with him. He was only doing what I wanted to do to the man who had murdered **my** father after all. Occasionally, the information I fed to Mulder came from me,

Dominik Crozier, or from Max, and not from Krycek, or the Project, but he didn't know. Once I obliquely told him about the Organisation, and the rebels, but he never figured me out; I played a very dangerous game. Mulder was a useful tool, and I used him as such. He should hate me. He has every right.

If Mulder was a surprise, then my feelings towards my new boss were a revelation. I never thought I'd care about another man the way I cared for Neil, and, at first, it's true that what I felt for Skinner was merely lust, and nothing more. I'd slept around – after Maddie's accident, I whored myself around the gay district of Vienna for months, making up for lost time. I knew what Skinner was the moment I first shook his hand in his office. Maybe I was sensitive to anyone else living a lie, but I saw the flash of attraction in his eyes, and saw, equally, how quickly it was quashed, like a fire doused with water. That was what first intrigued me about him. I did nothing about it – there was no strategic purpose, and I wasn't about to play fast and loose with my cover for the sake of sex. The attraction didn't go away though; I spent an entire night on his balcony thinking thoughts so warm that they'd have made him blush from head to toe if he'd known just what was going on in my mind.

I played a complicated game – and sometimes I had to retreat back to Geneva just to get my head cleared out, to visit Maddie, and to spend a few days with Max, just hanging out at the House, or walking in the grounds, and swimming in the lake in the Summer. In later years that became too dangerous, and I stayed away. Max learned about the events at Tunguska only via email. I have no idea what it must have been like for him to read that message, where I clinically, and bluntly recounted how I had lost my arm. It took a damned long time to type the thing as well – there were many things I had to re-learn after Tunguska. I wasn't about to give up though; I was too close, and had sold too much of my soul to do that.

El Rico was my finest hour. By playing the most perfectly balanced game, I managed to send almost all the leaders of the Project to their deaths at the hands of our alien friends. I helped set it up, and Max took care of the details. Max always was good with details. It was the culmination of so many years of hard work, but there was a moment, just before it came to fruition, when I thought I wasn't going to pull it off. The men running the Project were scared, they even talked about joining the rebels, about joining **us**. That thought chilled me to the bone. I would not, **could** not work with these bastards. I had a trap nicely set up for them. They had to walk into it! They had to. I talked at them urgently, trying to persuade them to continue, right up until Spender ordered me to be silent, but luckily I'd done enough. In their arrogance, and pride, they thought their moment had come, and they went to El Rico airforce base expecting to become the protected darlings of their alien overlords, and instead, they found the Organisation's allies waiting for them, torches in hand. It was a good moment. It was my finest moment.

I can still remember sitting in their completely deserted New York lair after they'd gone, cherishing the moment, before Jeffrey Spender arrived, as clueless and hopelessly behind the main events as ever. He had no idea that the man he talked to that day was not Alex Krycek, but Dominik Crozier. I didn't even try to pretend. I think I thought it was over, that I was free to be myself again, but I was celebrating too soon. Jeffrey's father survived, and within weeks he was putting the Project back together again, and I had no choice but to take my place by his side once more. Not that he liked Krycek; he didn't. He hated him, and

had nearly succeeded in killing me on more than one occasion, but that was a long time in the past. Spender knew that Krycek would sell his own grandmother if it suited him, but he also knew where he was with me, and, besides, I knew too much, and there were too few people left that he could trust.

The sound of wolf whistling and shouting draws my attention from my morbid recollections of how I came to end up in this Tunisian hellhole, and, fighting my way through the melee, I can see why my cellmates are making such a fuss. Marita is slinking through the prison, swaying her hips, and my sex-starved fellow prisoners are going crazy. She's looking a damn sight better than the last time I saw her, and I'm pleased about that, for her sake. She hates my guts, but then why not? Krycek has used her, as he used so many others, and she, it must be said, was happy enough to use him as well, to get what she wanted.

There can only be one reason why she's here; the old man must have a job for me to do.

Skinner got to his feet, and eyed his guests warily.

"Krycek," he said cautiously, his glance flicking over the attractive woman at the other man's side. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"It's all right, Walter, she knows," Crozier said, closing the door behind them. "I explained it all to her last night, and she's joined us. Walter, we need your help. I have vital information that I have to get to Mulder. I think that if I just turned up in his office and tried to give it to him, that he would very probably kill me. He sure as hell wouldn't listen to me, so I need you."

"Are you going to tell him who you are?" Skinner asked, his eyes searching the other man's face. Once again, he was struck by the difference between Crozier and Krycek. This man was dressed in the dark, elegant, muted clothes that he guessed were more to Crozier's taste than Krycek's more casual attire, and there was something very neat about him, something precise, and uncluttered.

"No, I'm not." Crozier shook his head.

"Why not? Dominik, I'm not comfortable keeping this from Mulder," Skinner said. "I think he should know."

"Why? To make us feel better?" Crozier shrugged. "Let him have the luxury of his ignorance, and his hatred for me, Walter. I won't take that away from him."

"I don't understand." Skinner frowned, glancing at Marita again. She held his gaze, her cool eyes assessing him thoughtfully.

"I killed his father, Walter. Let him hate me for that. It's kinder than revealing that he and I have been working on the same side all along, and asking him to try to like me," Crozier replied with a shrug. Skinner gazed at the other man, with a new respect. He was sure that

Mulder had some inkling of his father's involvement with the Project, but there was a kindness to Crozier's words. He was, after all, a son who knew what it was like to have a murdered father.

"What do you want him to do?" Skinner asked.

"There's a space-ship stranded in Oregon. If he gets there fast enough he might be able to find it. I tried, and failed," Crozier shrugged, "although I didn't exactly try very hard - Mulder might succeed. You have to get him to listen to me."

"I can try...but...he has no reason to trust you, Dominik."

"I know, and he has every reason to hate me. All the same - this is important."

"Will he be in any danger?" Skinner asked. "I won't send him if he'll be in danger."

Crozier thought about it for a moment, and then sighed. "There's always danger, Walter, I won't lie about that, but this is what he's been looking for all his life. I'd like to give him this. I know that it won't make up for what I've done to him, but it's something." Crozier shrugged. "Let him make up his own mind, Walter. All I'm asking is that he be given the choice."

Skinner thought about it for a moment, and then, reluctantly, he nodded. He led Krycek and Marita down to Mulder's office, and, predictably, Mulder went ballistic the minute he set eyes on his old enemy. Skinner stepped between Mulder and Crozier, and had to hold his subordinate back from beating the crap out of the man he thought was Alex Krycek. It took him a lot of fast-talking to persuade Mulder to listen, and, as he watched Crozier speak, Skinner wondered that Mulder couldn't see that this man wasn't Alex Krycek. It seemed so obvious to him now that he knew the truth; everything about Crozier was different. He spoke softly, like Dominik; he even stood differently, and the content of his speech was entirely different to anything Alex Krycek would have said. He acknowledged Mulder's hatred for him, and acceded that the other man had every reason to want him dead, and, watching him, Skinner felt a strange sense of approval. Whatever wrongs Alex Krycek had done to Mulder, and they were many, Dominik Crozier was going some way to make up for them.

"Why me?" Mulder asked. "And why now?"

"I want to damn the soul of that cigarette smoking son of a bitch," Crozier replied, and a shiver went down Skinner's spine. He didn't know what it must have cost Crozier not to have killed Spender the moment he first set eyes on the man. He didn't know how he could have worked for Spender all these years and never once been tempted to finally put a bullet between the other man's eyes. Skinner wasn't sure that he could have been either so patient, or so duplicitous if he had been in Crozier's shoes.

It was agreed that Skinner would accompany Mulder to Oregon to look for the alien ship.

"Aren't you coming too, Dominik?" He asked Crozier, as they stood alone in his office after the others had left.

"No, Walter. I have an older score to settle," Crozier replied, flexing his good hand. Skinner raised an eyebrow. "Cancerman is alone, and friendless," Crozier explained. "I have nothing more to gain by continuing to serve him. All the long years of waiting are over, Walter. Dominik Crozier is finally going to take his revenge on the man who murdered his parents."

Skinner gazed into a pair of determined green eyes, and saw a destiny in them that had been a long time coming.

I'm not sure what I'm feeling as I go to finally perform the deed I've waited so long to do. I'm excited, nervous, and apprehensive, yes – all of those, and sad too. This is the first killing I will do in my own name, the first time that Dominik Crozier will have blood on his hands, and, strangely, for such a seasoned killer, that unsettles me. I know it's what I want though. The world won't miss this old bastard after all. I've done what I can to make up for Krycek's actions. I've given Walter back control over his own life, and I've given Mulder the proof he's always wanted. I've even arranged for Dana Scully to have something returned that she thought she'd lost forever. All I've given Marita is the truth, but she seems content enough with that – she has no love for our erstwhile boss after the way he experimented on her, and she was willing enough to join me. I don't trust her quite enough to take her back to Geneva with me, but I know she wants the old man dead as much as I do. As for myself, well, this is my gift to Dominik Crozier, in reparation for those long years of being Alex Krycek.

It might sound ridiculous, but I have a speech prepared. It's been decades in the making, as I've been writing and re-writing it in my head since the age of 9. I want him to know who I am when I kill him. I want him to look into his eyes, and know who had betrayed him...but when it comes to it, as I face down this sick, wizened old man in his wheelchair, I find that none of it matters.

My whole life has been leading up to this one moment. It's the end, and maybe, if I'm lucky, the beginning too. As I stand here, facing him, the monster of my nightmares fades, to be replaced by the pathetic vision in front of me, and I change my mind about my speech. He would love to be killed by Dominik Crozier. It would make sense to him. He would die with the luxury of knowing who had killed him, and why, and I don't want to give him that. I find, when it comes to it, that I don't care about my speech. It doesn't matter any more. None of it matters now. I've won, and he has lost. It's as simple as that. Oh, the war hasn't been won, not by a long way, but his Project's part in it is finished, destroyed - and so is he.

I don't even speak as I push his wheelchair towards the stairs. I was going to strangle him, because I wanted to hear his last breath gurgling in his throat, but now I find that I can't bear the thought of touching him. This will be a fitting end – a fall down the stairs to end up in the same tangled heap that he made of me on the night of my 9th birthday, all those years ago. He tries to reason with me, but he can't, because he doesn't know who I am. He

doesn't even really understand why I'm doing this, and I think that gives me the most pleasure. He can die not knowing. Knowledge is power, and I won't give him the power of understanding why I'm taking his life. It's easy to tip the wheelchair, and it gives me immense satisfaction to watch him fall. When he's lying at the bottom, dead, I walk down, slowly, Marita following behind, step over him like the filth he is, and leave without looking back.

I think, as I walk towards the door, that I can smell my mother's perfume in the air.

Skinner opened the door to his apartment, and closed it behind him, with a heartfelt sigh. He felt old, and weary, and desperately sad.

"Hello, Walter," a voice on his couch said, and he jumped.

"Christ, Dominik, can't you knock on the door and wait to be let in like everyone else? Or have you been Krycek too long to remember how to do that?" Skinner snapped, turning on the light, and glaring at his uninvited guest.

"I'm sorry." Dominik looked small, almost crumpled, and Skinner knew immediately that there was something wrong. He didn't know Crozier that well, but he had never known the man look less than immaculate. Now his shirt was pulled out of his pants, his collar was undone, and he wasn't wearing any shoes. His face was pale, and drawn.

"It's all right," Skinner muttered gruffly. "You just surprised me, that's all. It's been one hell of a day."

"Yes. I heard about Mulder," Dominik whispered. "Do you blame me?" There was an uncertainty, almost a fear in those green eyes that Skinner had never thought he would see.

"No," he sighed. "Mulder went into that one with his eyes open. I did **try** to blame you all the way back from Oregon, but I failed." He loosened his tie, and flung himself down on the couch beside his old enemy, and new friend.

"It's always easier to blame yourself, isn't it?" Dominik said. "It's what you do all the time, Walter. I've never seen anyone tie themselves up in more knots over their real or perceived failings." Skinner gave a wry grunt, and placed his feet on the coffee table. Every bone in his body ached, and he just wanted to get drunk, and sleep forever. He could still hear his own voice calling Mulder's name, as the alien ship carrying his agent disappeared into the night sky.

"Why did they take him?" Skinner asked. "Will they hurt him, Dominik?"

"I don't know. On either count," Dominik replied. "I'm sorry."

That was when Skinner saw the empty bottle of whisky on the table. “Damn it, Dominik. I was looking forward to drinking that,” he said with a sigh, picking it up, and draining the dregs from the bottle.

“Sorry. I needed it,” Dominik said. “I can’t remember the last time I allowed myself to get drunk. It felt good to let go.”

“You did it then?” Skinner glanced sideways at his companion.

“Yes. I did it. I killed him. It was...easier than I had thought it would be.”

“Well, you’ve killed people before,” Skinner said with a shrug.

“Not like this. Not for me...not **as** me,” Dominik corrected him, his voice slightly slurred. In his drunken state his peculiar mixture of accents was more noticeable. Skinner could see why it wouldn’t have been wise for Alex Krycek to ever get drunk. Dominik Crozier’s accent was pronounced, part English, and part German, under the American, but even drunk he still spoke softly, with that same measured, thoughtful style of speech.

“What will you do now?” Skinner asked.

“The first thing I’ll do is bury Alex Krycek,” Dominik replied. “As far as I’m concerned, he’s already dead. I made a vow to myself tonight – I won’t ever be him again. Don’t make me be him again, Walter,” he said wistfully, drunkenly, resting his head on Skinner’s shoulder.

“Hell, it isn’t up to me, is it?” Skinner replied, staring into space for a moment. “You know, there was a time when the news of Krycek’s death would have made me a very happy man, but now...well, now it’s just complicated isn’t it? He might be dead, but you’re still here, still looking like him, still the person who pulled his strings, and did all those deeds in his name.”

“Yes. I do understand that whenever you look at me, you must only see him.”

That wasn’t quite true, Skinner thought to himself. Dominik was surprisingly unlike Krycek for a man who wore the same face. Seeing him drunk, and hearing him talk in this accent brought that home even more; even his mannerisms were different, and this uncertainty, and the strange sense of wistful yearning he was picking up, were decidedly different.

“Has something else happened, Dominik?” He asked, looking down on the man who was resting against him. There was a time when he’d rather had nestled up to a viper than this man, but now Dominik just looked like the small, lost child he had once been.

“It’s Max. I’m booked on the next flight out but it doesn’t leave until tomorrow. I was waiting for you to come back. I was hoping you’d get here before I left. I was hoping...” Dominik trailed off, and then looked up. “That you would come with me?” He ventured uncertainly.

“With you? Back to Geneva?” Skinner frowned. “Max is dying,” he guessed accurately.

“No. I mean...yes, but he’s been dying for months. Now he’s about done, I think.” Dominik gave a wry smile. “He only has a couple more weeks at most, according to his doctors.”

Skinner looked down on the man beside him, and gazed at him for a long time. Dominik stared back. “Will you come?” He whispered. “Please.”

Skinner wanted to say no. He wanted to say no for all the wrongs that this man had done to him. He wanted to say no for the day he had spent retching up his guts on his bathroom floor in this apartment. He wanted to say no for the vicious punches he’d taken in a hospital stairwell a long time ago, and for the smug, evil smile this man had flashed him when he had betrayed Mulder on Krycek’s orders. He wanted to say no for all these reasons, and more. Indeed, he fully intended to say no, but when he opened his mouth, the word that came out instead was “yes.”

Dominik gave a smile of gratitude, and then his entire body relaxed, and he seemed to almost melt into Skinner’s arm, his head lolling against Skinner’s neck. He closed his eyes, and within seconds he was asleep. Skinner gazed down on the sleeping man for a long time, and tried to see inside the tormented soul that was Dominik Crozier, but all he could see was a lonely, orphaned boy who was about to lose the only person left in the world who loved him. With a sigh, he moved his arm, and placed it, awkwardly, around Dominik’s shoulders, and the other man leaned into him as if he belonged there. Skinner rested his chin on Dominik’s dark hair, and then he, too, fell fast asleep.

When they arrived at the House, Dominik went straight to Max’s apartment, and Skinner, unsure what to do, found himself following on behind. He felt a constant sensation of dislocation as he watched Dominik in these unfamiliar surroundings, where he was clearly so much at home. Although, intellectually, he had accepted that Alex Krycek was really Dominik Crozier, seeing the evidence of the man’s other life still jarred with him.

Max was no longer well enough to sit in his wheelchair. He was confined instead, to his bed, much to his obvious irritation.

“I expect you’re giving your doctors a hard time,” Dominik said, as he crossed the room to sit on the bed beside his oldest friend, and mentor. He kissed the other man on each cheek, in an easy, familiar way, and Skinner watched. He didn’t know why he should be surprised by the obvious love between these two, but somehow he was.

“Quacks! I hate the buggers. I mean, I’m dying, Nicky.” Max grabbed Dominik’s arm. “Tell them it’s unreasonable to keep me in bed. So what if I snuff it sooner by getting up – what’s a few days here or there?”

“I agree.” Dominik nodded.

“You do?” Max narrowed his eyes. He had clearly been expecting a battle.

“Yes, Max, I do. I’ll help you get up.” Skinner grinned at the obvious, and almost child-like delight that spread over the older man’s face.

"I knew I could rely on you, Nicky. Always knew it." He was seized by a sudden wave of coughing that left him weak and exhausted. "Maybe later," he mumbled into Dominik's arms as he held him. "Keep the chair out, Nicky. I'll use it later."

"Yes, Max. Later." Dominik smiled at Skinner over the old man's head. They all knew it wouldn't happen.

"Talk to me, Nicky. Tell me what's been happening," Max said, urgently. "Is it all done? All finished?"

"Yes, Max. All done," Dominik replied.

"Thank god for that. I've been holding on you know. Wanted to see it through to the end. We did it then?" His dark eyes were glazed with a tired, pained happiness.

"Yes, Max. We did it. The Project has been destroyed."

"Still a long way to go, but still...we did it." Max smiled up at Skinner who returned the smile. It was impossible not to respond to the fading charisma in that craggy old face. "You did it, Nicky. You succeeded where we failed," Max said in a softer tone. Dominik made no reply. Skinner couldn't see his face, but the younger man's shoulders were hunched. "I know what you gave up, Nicky. I know what it cost you, but remember that it was worth it. It was worth all of it." He reached out, and placed his hand on Dominik's plastic arm.

"Maybe, Max. I can't tell any more. Maybe I'm too close to it."

"You'll come to see, Nicky. It's been hard on you, and I'm sorry for that. I wish it hadn't had to be you, but I think, in the end, that you were the only one of us who could do it. I always said you were too smart for your own good."

"Bullshit, Max. You're the wily coyote of this outfit. I was just following orders."

"Ah, the Nuremberg defence," Max laughed. "I might have known you'd try to weasel your way out of it all with that." He succumbed to another bout of vigorous coughing, and when he looked up his face was serious, and he stared straight at Skinner. "I'm pleased to see you again, Mr. Skinner," he said.

"And you, sir." Skinner nodded. He wasn't sure whether he should stay, or go. He didn't know whether Dominik wanted to be alone with his dying friend or not. "Can I get you anything?" He asked.

"No, but this boy can. Nicky, go and get me a glass of water."

"You already have one, Max." Dominik pointed at the glass on the nightstand.

"Well go and get me another one then," Max growled. "For god's sake, Nicky, don't go getting obtuse in your old age. It's obvious I want to talk to Mr. Skinner alone. Don't come back until I send for you."

Dominik gave a theatrical sigh, and got up to go. He passed Skinner on the way to the door, and they exchanged a glance. Skinner raised a questioning eyebrow, but Dominik just shrugged in reply. He clearly had no idea what the dying man wanted to talk about.

“Come and sit over here, where I can see you,” Max said, pointing at the bed. Skinner did as ordered, feeling uncomfortable, and wondering why Dominik had been ordered out of the room. He sat on the bed, and Max looked at him from rheumy, red-rimmed eyes for what seemed like a very long time. Skinner felt as if he were being examined and weighed up, although for what purpose he had no idea. He didn’t move, but faced out Max’s scrutiny, despite feeling seriously unnerved. Finally Max cleared his throat.

“Nicky tells me that you’re a good man,” he said.

Skinner shifted uncomfortably. “It depends on your definition of good. I didn’t know he thought so highly of me,” he replied.

“Well why else did you think he brought you here? Don’t you have eyes, man? The boy’s in love with you.”

“What?” Skinner choked, aghast at both the unexpected news and the other man’s blunt method of delivering it.

“Look, I don’t have time to be all flowery and sensitive about this and besides, I was never very good at dealing with affairs of the heart, as Nicky can tell you. He’s a good man, Skinner, and he deserves a break. He’s lost everyone he ever loved, one way or another, and that’s the reason he wouldn’t let me kill you.”

“I had no idea. I mean... he has a wife,” Skinner murmured, taken aback.

“So did you.” Max shrugged. “Yes, I know all about you, Skinner. I read the reports Nicky sent me. I know you’re not easy with what you are, not like he is. Ever since the age of 14 when he just told me, out of the blue, but that’s just him. He always was precocious.” He gave a wry shrug. “Now, I’m not saying I understand him, or what he is, but I know what he wants, and I know I’d do anything to give it to him. Just think about it, Skinner.”

“I don’t... I mean...” Skinner struggled to find the words. He thought this might very well be the most bizarre conversation he’d ever had in his life, and he’d had a few with Mulder in his time.

“That’s all I’m saying. I don’t want a discussion about it. I have something else I want to talk to you about anyway. Nicky’s going to be left in charge of this place when I go, and he’ll think that’s what he wants, and he’ll be fine with it – at first, but the boy’s restless, Skinner. Detail bores him. He’ll be climbing the walls before long. He isn’t cut out to do the boring, behind the scenes work, like I am, and he’ll piss off the other members of the Organisation. I love the boy dearly, but he’s got a filthy temper when he’s roused, and it won’t be long before he starts yelling at someone. You, on the other hand, are not only a much calmer, more diplomatic sort of man, but you’re also an excellent administrator I hear?”

“What?” Skinner frowned, still reeling from the first part of the conversation and utterly dumbfounded by where the second part now seemed to be heading.

“There are other people around, but Nicky’s the best and brightest of us, and he understands the issues as well, but he’ll need help, and he’ll need the help of someone he can trust, someone he can leave here to take care of the details while he’s out getting into mischief, and doing the glory stuff. Think you can do that?”

“I have a job...a life...” Skinner felt as if he was doing an impression of a dying fish. His mouth kept opening and closing, and he kept gasping. He must look ridiculous.

“Up to you. I won’t care. I’ll be dead. Just telling you what I think. Don’t decide now. Give it some thought.” Max surrendered to another exhausting bout of coughing, and Skinner pressed the glass of water to the old man’s lips.

“Shall I get Dominik for you?” Skinner asked.

“Not yet. One last thing.” Max’s fingers grabbed his arm like talons, keeping him there. He had a surprising degree of strength for a dying man. “The boy’s feeling strange now it’s all over. It’s not easy leading a double life, Skinner.”

“No. I know,” Skinner said honestly, and Max grunted, clearly understanding the allusion.

“He’s done a lot of things he didn’t think he could do. We talked about it before I sent him out into the world as Alex Krycek. He knew what was at stake, and he did the best job he knew how. Don’t mistake him for Krycek, though. He isn’t him. I know Alex Krycek, I helped to create him, but I know Dominik Crozier as well, and I know which one I’d rather spend time with. They might look the same, but they aren’t. You might have your own quarrel with Krycek, but the man’s dead.”

“Surely you don’t think it’s that simple?” Skinner said in a hard, angry tone.

“It’s as simple or as complicated as you want to make it,” Max snapped back. “All I’m saying is that he’s going to have a hard time dealing with my death and his past, both at the same time. If you’re just going to look at him and see Krycek, and be unable to forgive him for that, then get the fuck out of here, Skinner. Don’t stay. He doesn’t need that. If you can see beyond it, then hang around. You might find that you like Dominik Crozier. He’s hard not to like when you get to know him. Give him a chance.”

“I’ll think about it,” Skinner said cautiously, overwhelmed by what he’d heard, and in no fit state to either understand or analyse his emotions right now.

“Don’t think too long,” Max grunted. “He’ll need someone soon, and not someone who’ll let him down. Decide what to do and do it. Get out, or stay. If you decide to stay, then be here for him for the rest of his life, and I’ve no doubt he’ll reward you for it in his own inimitable way. He’s a loyal bastard at heart. Now, go and get him before he sneaks back in anyway. He always did have a nasty habit of creeping up on you when you least expect it.”

Skinner did as he was bidden, then made his excuses and wandered down the stairs, still reeling. What the hell was he supposed to make of this? And, more importantly, how did he **feel** about it? Skinner found his way to the drawing room he had sat in before, and stared, sightlessly out of the window at the lake. Dominik Crozier had finally stopped hiding; the question was - could Walter Skinner do the same?

Max hung on for another week, yelling at his doctors and flirting with any woman within the radius of his bed. When he finally went, it was with a smile on his face, and a glass of good Scottish whisky in his hand, which I think is what he wanted. I'm not very good at funerals - ever since that first one, where I was a watcher at the window; I feel as if I'm still just watching, never participating. Skinner stuck around. I don't know why. Maybe out of some misplaced sense of loyalty because god knows he doesn't owe me anything. There's a small, private graveyard down beyond the woods, where all our operatives are buried, and Max takes pride of place. He was pretty much a legend among us, and I'm not sure that any of us know how to be without him. I do notice that I'm getting some faintly awe-struck looks though, so obviously Alex Krycek's notoriety has gone before me. They're giving me the credit for single-handedly disposing of the Project, which is crap. I had an incredible amount of back up, not least from Max himself.

I'm not sure how I feel about the idea of being back for good. My whole life these past seven years has been my undercover work. I've forgotten what it's like to just **be**. Skinner stands beside me as we lower Max's coffin into the grave - he volunteered to be one of the pallbearers as well, which touched me for some strange reason. He barely knew Max after all. I haven't cried. I think I just feel that same numbness I felt when I was 9. After the funeral I wander out to the lake, and Skinner comes to, like some kind of shadow.

"Max once told me that happiness is a choice," I say to him. He reminds me of Maddie, accompanying me on those long, silent walks. "I'm going to miss him." I stare at the lake, lost in my grief, and then turn back to face him, with a forced smile. "I hear he left the Organisation to you. That's pretty good going, Walter, considering you only knew him for five minutes." I mean it as a joke, but somehow it comes out almost bitter.

"Don't be an idiot. You're in charge. He just asked me to provide...back up." He shrugs.

"And you're going to stay?" I ask, in an incredulous tone of voice.

"Do you want me to?" He's looking at me, with this strange expression in those dark eyes, as if he's waiting for me to do something, or say something, but I don't know what it is I'm supposed to do, or say.

"It would be...useful," I mutter, finally.

"Then I will." He shrugs.

"What about the FBI? What about your career? What about Dana Scully?" I ask, and he thinks about that for a moment, before replying.

"I told Scully that I'd look for Mulder, and I will. I figure that your people will have more chance of finding him than I ever would. My career is dead in the water anyway, courtesy of Spender and his damn conspiracy. As for Scully - she doesn't need me. She has her family with her. You don't."

"You think I need you?" I ask, with a hint of challenge in my voice.

"I think you need someone or you'll fall apart," he replies, and the fact that he cares enough to stay makes my eyes hazy with unshed tears. I hold on for a long time, teetering on the brink, and then he gently, purposefully, pushes me over the edge, by placing one hand on the back of my neck, and massaging. "You can cry if you want to. You've just lost someone you loved, after all. There's no shame in it," he says, and that's enough to open the floodgates and I sob like a snot nosed kid for what seems like hours, holding on to the lapels of his big woollen overcoat. I can still see Max, taking off his balaclava that first time I met him, holding out his arms to me, and sheltering me from the storm of my own emotions. Walter's arms are just as big, and just as comforting. Then, when I'm done, we walk back to the House in silence. I don't know what I've done to deserve his compassion, and I feel I have to give him something back.

"That night, when I broke into your apartment, and left that note..." I mutter. His forehead is wrinkled up in a giant frown, and I can see that he **really** doesn't want to remember what Alex Krycek did to him right now. "It took me an hour. To press the buttons. I sat and watched you for an hour before I could bring myself to do it. I just want you to know that it wasn't easy, or casual. It was hard, and it hurt."

"Thanks," is all he says, and he gives me a faded, grim smile.

"Look, if you're staying you might as well have Max's apartment. I don't want it. It wouldn't feel right somehow." I shrug.

"I don't think..." He begins to protest, but I silence him.

"It's no big deal. It's just a couple of rooms," but they're the best rooms in the whole damn house and he knows that. He smiles, and nods, clearly not willing to argue with me when my mood is this volatile. I help him clear out the apartment later on that week. I thought it would hurt, but it doesn't - actually it helps. It helps to be sorting through Max's stuff, remembering him, and it really helps to have Skinner there beside me as I do it. He's looking good, more relaxed than I've ever seen him, and much younger. I realise then what a strain these past few years have been on all of us.

"Tell me what it was like," I ask him, tossing some of Max's old pairs of jeans on the bed. I swear he bought them looking this old; either that or he never got a new pair in over 20 years.

"What was what like?" He looks up from where he's crouched by a bookcase, sorting some books into boxes. He's wearing a red flannel shirt, and stone coloured chinos. I want to kiss him.

"Living with the nanocytes in your blood. Living with that death sentence hanging over you."

"Christ, Dominik, let it drop. What good will it do you to know?" he asks.

"I'm not sure. Just that you're the only one who knows what I did to people. You're the only one of Krycek's victims I can talk to about it."

"It won't solve anything," he says stubbornly, his jaw clenching.

"Humour me." I spread my arms wide, and he sighs.

"All right, Dominik. I hated it. I've always been a loner. Independent. I make my own choices, and stand and fall by them as well. I felt like an animal caught in one of those rope traps you see in films, hauled up off the ground, tied, and helpless, and that was the worst feeling in the world."

"And you hated me?" I prompted, because I need to know all of it.

"Yes, I hated you. Is that what you wanted to hear? You know I hated you. I dreamed about killing you, Dominik. I fantasised about it. I imagined what it would be like to snap your spine in two with my bare hands, and to hear you scream. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Yes." I dig my nails into the palms of my hands. "Yes. I wanted your honesty. Thank you."

And we finish the job in silence. It's strange, but while I was living as Krycek, I could somehow justify everything I did, but now that it's over...somehow it's harder.

I dream that I'm nine years old, and standing on that staircase again. It's an old, familiar dream, and I settle into it, knowing how it'll end. Only this time it's different. There's someone threatening my father. I can hear voices, as I stare through the banisters, only I can't see the face of the man below. Every time I try to get a look at him, he shifts away from me. There's a commotion, and I can see my father falling, over and over again, in slow motion, and then my father's murderer turns his gun on my mother, and I'm running down those stairs, but I'm too late this time, as I'm always too late, and my parents' murderer turns to face me, and now I can see him. He's coming into focus, as he raises that gun, points it at my head, and pulls the trigger, and the one thing I know, clearly, as I start to fall down the rest of those stairs, is that the man who killed my parents, and who tried to kill me, is myself. He's wearing my face, and he's smiling a deadly, vicious smile, and I know that this is how Alex Krycek appeared to all his victims, and that's when I start to scream.

I wake up, still screaming, to find someone holding my shoulders, shaking me.

"Dominik! It's okay. You were sleep-walking. It was a nightmare." I gaze around, blearily, to find that I'm in Max's bedroom, now Walter's bedroom. I'm standing in the doorway, screaming my head off, and shaking like a leaf. There's sweat running down my face, and I stink of my own terror.

"Wha...?" I mutter, and he guides me over to the bed, sits me down, and presses a glass of water into my hand. "Sorry." My teeth are chattering from cold. I'm only wearing boxer shorts, and I feel like an idiot. "Always...used...to...come here...kid..." I try to explain when my teeth let me get a word in edgeways.

"It's all right. Christ, you're freezing." He's not even wearing shorts. He's completely naked. I wish I hadn't noticed that. I can see that he can't help looking at my stump. It's natural; people always do. I'm not ashamed of it. It's no less than Alex Krycek deserved, and Dominik Crozier probably deserved it too. It's my penance, I think.

"Get in the bed," he says, and I crawl in, as ordered, beyond arguing. He slips in beside me, and pulls me over to lie on his chest, and I start to feel warm again.

"What was the nightmare?" he asks.

"The usual." I make a face. "With the added twist that this time it was me pulling the trigger on myself."

He gives a sigh, and I look up to find his dark eyes closer than I had expected. He isn't wearing his glasses, and that makes him look different.

"Dominik, you have to forgive yourself," he says.

"The way you have, you mean?" I point out gently. "For marrying a woman you knew you could never really love."

He looks down, sharply, and I rest my head on his chest again. "It's all right. I know. It's easier to recognise that someone else is leading a double life when you're living one yourself. I followed you around Washington after her death. I went into some of the bars you went into. I watched you."

"Shit," he says succinctly.

"You never did anything though. You nearly did, with that blond kid you picked up that night you got drunk - after I'd called you to pile on the pressure."

"You saw that?"

"Yes. I followed you. You were a bit of an obsession with me, to be honest."

"I was never unfaithful to Sharon before we separated," he tells me but I already know that. "Not physically at least. Mentally..." he shrugs. "I was never really there in the marriage. She deserved a lot better than I gave her."

"She didn't have to stay," I point out.

"We were best friends. She didn't want to leave. Not until it went too far. We didn't make love for years. She tried to ask me what was wrong but there was nothing I could say. I was too deeply in denial."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of." I put my arm around his body, and hold on tight. He feels so solid, so good. "You don't have to be alone any more," I whisper into his chest. "Neither of us do." I raise my head to look into his eyes, dreading what I'll find there. Can he ever really forget Alex Krycek? Could he ever make love to me, wearing, as I do, the face of a man he hated so much. He's looking down into my eyes, and he's stroking my hair, and I don't see the contempt I fear so much. Instead I see something very different, and I raise my head to meet his, and our lips touch. It feels good. It feels real, and warm, and it tastes like love. I open my mouth and then his tongue is inside me, and I wriggle up so that I can hold him even tighter, and fully explore him. His hands move down, caressing my body, and he feels so hard, and solid, and just so damned good.

"Would now be a good time to tell you that I'm in love with you, and have been for years?" I murmur, and then stiffen, because that's a lot to lay on someone after just one kiss. He surprises me by laughing out loud.

"Max already told me," he says, by way of explanation.

"Shit, that old bastard," I growl, but Walter just wraps his arms around me and pulls me close.

"Dominik, it's been in my head since I was a boy, but I was too ashamed to...I've never done anything." He looks a little helpless.

"No problem." Quite the reverse as a matter of fact. I've longed to take hold of him and drive him insane with pleasure for a very long time. I rise up under the sheets, and quickly dispose of my boxers. My cock is already half hard. Just being this close to his naked body is such a turn on. I lie on top of him, face to face, our hard cocks almost touching, and hold his head with my hand, running my fingers over his bare scalp. Damn but he feels good. I look into his eyes and then drop another kiss onto his lips, and move down to his neck, and suck long, and noisily there. His hands are cupping my butt cheeks, and I move one of them, gently, to my stump, and make him caress it. He needs to do this. He needs to explore it, and then it isn't important any more, and I move on again, down his chest, to his nipples, and suck on them as well, until he's arching up under my wet caress. I can feel a beat in my head, insistent, like a drum, and I'm drinking in the scent of him, and entering some primeval world of my own, where there is just flesh, and heartbeats, and sensation.

I cover him with my love. As single mindedly as I could be Alex Krycek, I can also be Dominik Crozier. I make love to him with a skill I know he's never experienced in his life before and he responds, hesitantly at first, and then growing bolder; a shy man finding his way at last. Soon he's opened up, and abandons himself to me totally, body and soul, and there's no part of him that I haven't touched, and kissed and trailed with my wet, devouring lips, and skilled, expert fingertips, and he's almost screaming with need by the time I explore his ass with my finger. I reach over, and fumble in the nightstand for the condoms and many

different varieties and flavours of lube that Max kept always to hand, and which made me both laugh, and feel inexplicably melancholy when I discovered them a few days ago.

"Strawberry, orange or chocolate," I tease holding up the various tubes.

"Depends where it's going," he growls, taking a fistful of my hair, and kissing my forehead.

"Inside you. Along with me," I inform him, and he breathes deeply, unsure about this. "Trust me, Walter." I take hold of his face, and look into his eyes. I wonder if he can bring himself to trust me, of all people, but he just nods, and I smile, and kiss him hard, and passionately on the mouth. I once said that I wanted to bury my cock and my tongue in him at the same time, and I want to make that particular fantasy come true. I sink back down the bed, and smooth a generous amount of chocolate flavoured lube onto my fingers, and then insert it into his body. He wants to stiffen up against me, but I'm covering his body with my face, licking, and teasing him, and flicking my tongue at his cock, and he just can't resist, and soon I'm fingering deep inside him, and he's writhing about so much that I think he's almost about to come. I don't want that - not yet, so I stop tormenting the man, and pull back, positioning myself between his long, tanned legs. I unwrap a condom, and slide it onto my cock, and then cover it with more lube, and then I take his buttocks in my hand, and look at him, and he's gone quite still, and I know he's going to let me do this. I enter slowly, surely, gasping out loud as the heat of him engulfs me, and swallows me deep inside his body, which is where I've always wanted to be, and then I'm fully sheathed in that tight, welcoming ass. It feels too good to move, and I lower myself, gently onto his chest, and capture his lips with my own, tasting the essence that is Walter Skinner, my lover. I savour the moment. My cock inside his ass, my tongue inside his mouth, and it seems to turn him on as well, because his hard cock is still between us, hardening even more. I take it in my hand and slide it between my lubed fingers, and then I slide my own cock out of his ass, and straight back in again, in a steady rhythm. He's grabbing the bedclothes, and bellowing something that sound suspiciously like pleasure, and I remember that I always wanted to make him scream my name out loud.

"Say it," I urge, sliding back into him, over and over again, and his cock is ready to explode, but I don't want that yet. I come with a shuddering gasp, and he blinks, as if he was so lost in the moment that he'd forgotten it would have a climax and resolution. I sink down on top of him, and lie there in a pool of our own sweat, still buried deep inside him, and then slowly, I come back to reality. "I haven't finished with you yet," I murmur into his ear, and his cock hardens again, expectantly, against my stomach. I ease myself out of his body, and then smear lube on his fingers, and impale myself on them. He grins up at me, a look of affection on those broad, blunt features, and I unwrap a condom, and slide it onto his thick, eager cock. I position myself over his erect penis, still looking down on him, and he's saying something that sounds like a term of endearment, but I can hardly hear him because my ears are filled with the sound of my own blood sizzling with pleasure, as I slide that large cock deep into the crease between my buttocks. It slides in easily, as if it were made to go there, and I sit on top of him, his cock pressed deep into my body, and look down into those warm, chocolate brown eyes.

"Say my name when you come," I tell him, and his eyes widen and he nods, enjoying the command. I ride him up and down, and I don't think he's ever had such a good time in his

life because he's wild, and uninhibited, and sensual, and everything I knew he could be, and I'm glad that he's finally had the courage to find that out for himself. He's so close that it doesn't take much to make him come, and after a few hard squeezes of my internal muscles he's crying out, and then he climaxes with a shudder, holding tight to my hips, his fingers pressed deep into my flesh.

"Say it," I command, pressing my knees into the side of his chest, and he smiles, and pushes up inside me one last time as his cock spasms.

"Dominik!" He pants, sliding his hands up and down my chest, gazing up at me. I smile, and we stay there for a long moment, connected, and as one. Then I climb off him, and sink down, exhausted, to lie on top of him again.

"Nicky," I murmur into his chest.

"Hmm?" He strokes my hair idly away from my face.

"People generally tend to only call me Dominik when they're angry with me. Otherwise they call me Nicky." I look up, and see him studying me, thoughtfully. We're silent for a long time, and then I ask the question I need answered. "Are you still angry with me, Walter?" He thinks about it for a moment, and then he smiles, and my heart starts beating again after too long frozen in time.

"No, Nicky, I'm not," is all he says, and his arms tighten around me, convincing me that's the truth.

Outside it's starting to get light, and somewhere, far, far away, I can hear the sound of my mother's laugh fading into the distance as a new day dawns.

The End

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