

Human by Xanthe



www.xanthe.org/human/

Story Notes:

Posted: 19th June, 2002

Warning: This is an extremely dark and challenging fic.

Pic by **The Theban Band**



*Winner of the Spooky Award for Outstanding
Long Story*

HUMAN BY: XANTHE

(First Place)



Winner of the Spooky Award for Outstanding Kryceck Characterization

HUMAN BY: XANTHE



(Second Place)



Winner of the Spooky Award for Outstanding Apocalypse/Post-Colonization Story

HUMAN BY: XANTHE



(Third Place)



2002 Spooky Awards

Third Place: Outstanding Use of Mythic

2002 Spooky Awards Winner

2nd Place Outstanding Krycek Slash

FHSA

Human

fullhouseslash.slashcity.net

by Xanthe



2002 SPOOKYS
AWARD WINNER:
THE MAP ROOM AWARD

Human
by Xanthe

2002 Spooky Awards Winner

Outstanding Skinner Slash Romance

Honorable

Mention



from ThankYouMitch.com

This is a very dark fic, with, I hope, an ultimately redeeming theme, but I'll leave the interpretation of what eventually happens up to the individual reader. It's written entirely in the second person - this is intentional.

Many thanks to dot for the encouragement to keep going and to Phoebe for the beta, very insightful thoughts and the quote.

Human by Xanthe

"No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." - Donne

They say you never forget your first time.

Well, the first time you died was sure as hell the most shocking – but it was the second that hurt the most.

After that, all the pain just merged into one, and you weren't entirely sure how many times they killed you thereafter. After the fourth or fifth time you lost count anyway.

The cell is quite big. Outside its one small porthole, the stars shine brightly in the black sky. Sitting above the Earth in the belly of their mothership you're almost filled with awe at the sight of your home planet far below, hanging in the sky like a beautiful, ripe, blue-green fruit, waiting to be plucked.

Waiting...waiting...waiting for you to say the few words that would result in it being gobbled up and swallowed whole. Only you won't. No matter how many times they kill you.

Yesterday they killed you slowly, the day before it was fast. At least you assume it was the day before. It's hard to tell when outside it's always perpetual night.

Today...today they drag you from your cell and take you to the torture room as usual. Their jaws are slick and hungry, secreting slime so thick it trails over the floor, making you retch from the stink of it. They rub their long, sharp, shining mandibles together with a mocking, rasping sound, as if in anticipation of your pain. You long ago gave up any pretence at bravado. You scream all the way down the hallway and all the way through the interrogation, performed, as usual, on a cold, stone, bloodstained table. The first time you saw that table you struggled so hard they broke your arm as they strapped you down. Now

the blood on it is mostly yours, and you only struggle out of habit because you know there's no escape.

They don't speak English, or any other Earth tongue – they don't have the vocal chords for it. So they use a bounty hunter as their go between. You've grown to loathe him and his shape-shifting form. He stands over you, seemingly human, smiling pleasantly, asking their questions for them, and then he shifts, becomes grotesque before your eyes, morphing into one of them in order to relay your reply. You've lost count of how many times you've had this particular dialogue. They tried drugging you first, in order to get you to talk, but your genetic inheritance protected you and your information. Nothing they had was effective against your cast iron genes combined with the very effective antidotes the Consortium pumped into your body since you were born, along with god knows what else. That, you think bitterly to yourself, was probably the Consortium's most evil legacy. If you had been drugged you'd at least have had no choice. As it is...as it is the truth rises to your tongue at least a thousand times a day, but on each occasion that's where it dies.

A world.

A whole world.

If you spoke...if you surrendered what you know, then a whole world would die. That's too much for one man's soul to bear. So, no matter how many times they beat you, how many times they flay your skin from your body, drain the blood from your veins, and dismember you while you're still breathing...no matter how many times they kill you and then bring you back to life as good as new to suffer all over again...no matter how often they do it, you won't talk.

You wish you could.

You wish with all your heart and soul that this one burden hadn't been placed on your shoulders. You curse the day you were born and every single one of your long line of ancestors stretching all the way back to the primeval swamp from which they emerged...but all the same, you won't talk.

Today they cut off your thumbs and fingers, one by one. You wonder whether to them it's the same as a human pulling the wings off a fly. You never did that – but you remember watching, fascinated, as your childhood friend did, years ago. Crouching in the dirt in your back yard, you watched his freckled face frowning as he concentrated on his ghoulish task. Is that any different to these aliens, as they rasp and slide and stink in the torture room, watching, unmoved, as you scream yourself hoarse with pain?

"This little piggy went to market," you yell, as your index finger goes, sliced from your hand with meticulous precision by one of their shining surgical implements. It's pointless defiance, but it does at least mean that the bounty hunter has to shift back into alien form in order to relay the meaningless utterances of an old nursery rhyme. You watch the aliens making clicking sounds with their mandibles, and one of them throws back what passes for his head, his jaw opening to reveal several long, sharp teeth. You shudder.

"This little piggy stayed at home!" you scream, your voice newly born, no longer hoarse as it was yesterday because every time you die they resurrect you, good as new, in order to make you live through another session of torment. Your middle finger is sawed from your hand, but this is nothing. You've endured this before, or something similar, and not even at alien hands.

"This little piggy had roast beef!" You screech, as your ring finger goes. You won't miss it; you were never the marrying kind anyway. Not that it matters. Tomorrow, or the day after, it'll be grown back, miraculously, and you'll be in perfect health again.

"This little piggy had none." Your little finger goes and you slump, the sweat sliding down the side of your face. They hold up your hand for you to view their work, and you survey the bloodied mess.

"Been there, done that," you hiss, "and much worse than this. Try having your whole arm sawn off with a rusty knife."

They glance questioningly at the bounty hunter who obligingly shifts form and interprets your words. Undaunted, they move onto your other hand. You throw back your head, your body held tautly in place on their stone operating bench.

"And this little piggy cried, 'wee, wee, wee' all the way home," you cry, your voice sliding up and down an octave as they remove a finger on the stroke of each "wee." Then you pass out.

You wake back in the cell, on your side. Your thumbs and fingers are still missing, the pain throbbing through your veins, making it impossible to do anything but just lie on your side with your stumpy hands clutched to your chest, gazing sightlessly out of the porthole at that glowing green-blue ball hanging in the sky for which you have just suffered one more day of a torment more extreme than any man could be asked to bear. Is it worth it? All this just to save one small world, and the billions of people on it? Stupid question. Of course it is. Maybe one day the endless suffering and dying will turn you insane and you won't be able to reply to their questions, even if you wanted to. Insanity would be such a blessed relief. You lie still, humming softly to yourself. It's a shame really, you think to yourself, because the first time you died should have been the last. It should have been permanent. That had certainly been its intent – you're pretty sure of that.

You have no fingers with which to touch, so you can't trace the place on your forehead where the bullet that took your first life entered. You remember the feel of it though. Red hot, burning, lancing deep into your brain. There was a split second when you wondered what the hell had happened and then realisation flooded in just as your legs gave way from under you. The last emotion you remember feeling was relief. Strange that. Relief that it was all over, maybe? Maybe. Relief that you no longer had to bear this huge burden of responsibility for a world you didn't like and which sure as hell didn't much like you? Maybe. If so, it was short lived.

You woke on their ship. Trust Mulder and Skinner not to even wait around and see you decently buried. If they'd taken charge of your body, committed it to the flames, or even put it in the ground where it belonged, then those alien bastards wouldn't have been able to find you. As it was, lying there in that parking garage, exposed, unable to protect yourself, you were an easy target. They found you, spirited you away, and brought you onboard their ship, all the time doubtlessly rasping away with their mandibles in glee at having one of the key figures of the Resistance handed to them on a fucking platter like this. Fuck. You should have killed Mulder when you had him there at the end of your gun. Would have fucking killed him if it hadn't been for one last vestige of stupid affection you had for him.

He could have been you.

You could have been him.

You were both working for the same ends only he didn't know it and you did...and he was too much the boy scout to deal with what you know. All the same, the genetic inheritance you both share makes you blood brothers, if nothing else. Was it some stupid notion of family that stopped you killing him that day? Probably. Why else had you fought so hard, so dirty, for so long, if not because you cared? Deep down at least, you have some affection for the hapless, clueless citizens of this benighted planet. You must, or you wouldn't be keeping your mouth so firmly shut throughout these long days of suffering.

They cauterised the wounds on your hands before they threw you back in here. The blackened stubs remind you of another time and place where a similar unauthorised amputation took place. Must be your destiny - history repeating itself. Out in the woods in Tunguska you offered up your arm for sacrifice. Now, you've lost your fingers, but like your arm they'll grow back in the Resurrection Tank. You have no idea what it's really called – that's just a name you made up for it. They throw your corpse into a pile of green gunk and you slide out some time later with everything grown back into place, all shiny, and perfect, and new. The first time it happened you couldn't believe you'd gotten your arm back. For a split second you were even elated. That was before you realized where you were.

There's still some blood, despite the cauterisation. It streaks your hands and has stained your naked chest. You gaze at it blankly. It's a splash of colour in the unredeemed gloom of your empty cell. No blanket. No bed. Comfort isn't a priority after all. There are no human rights up here, no Geneva Convention to dictate the treatment of prisoners of war. These aliens have no understanding of human culture – they take what they want like a giant swarm of sentient locusts, gobbling up planets and people. Maybe it isn't even really possible to resist them. Maybe you should just give them the information they want. There's not much at stake after all. Only a world. Just one little world. You raise your head to look at it, hanging like a shiny Christmas ornament through the porthole, almost near enough to touch. Such a tiny thing - hardly worth giving up a hundred lifetimes for.

You lay your head back down again, a bitter, twisted smile on your face. If only they would just let you die and stay dead.

A noise at the door startles you. They've come to take you back for more torture. You open your mouth to scream your protest, your memories providing you with a dozen or more nightmare scenarios of what they might do to you next...when what you see brings you up short.

It's a man. Last time you saw him he was aiming a gun at your head. This time he looks bemused, befuddled, and scared. You don't blame him. You haven't forgotten your own reaction to first being in the same room as one of the aliens. You lost the contents of your breakfast in pure fear. Skinner is white as a sheet. They throw him into the cell and shut the door, and you gaze uncertainly at the man who killed you first.

You feel sure there must be a point to all this, a reason why they've brought him here and why they imprisoned him with you, but if there is it's beyond you. It feels surreal. What the fuck do you have to say to him, lying on your side, naked, bruised, beaten, with bloody blackened stumps where your fingers once were? What the hell does one say in these circumstances?

"Welcome to paradise, Skinner." Ironic, drawled – nice to know you can still summon the old bravado from somewhere, even in the most desperate of circumstances – and, let's face it, they don't come any more desperate than this.

"Krycek." He stares, aghast, unable to take it in. Then he's crawling over to your side to check out your injuries. Not a boy scout this one, not like Mulder. He's far more pragmatic – that's why he killed you and Mulder never could. He's a man after your own heart, although not cut from the same cloth. Maybe, if he knew what you did, he'd be what you are, because he has the kind of soul that would make this kind of sacrifice of his own ideals, nobility and integrity in order to fight against pure evil. "Christ." He rocks back on his heels as he surveys the blackened stumps where your fingers once were, but most distressing of all is the way he looks at your forehead, searching for that bullet he knows went in.

"Yeah. It's me. Always turning up, like the proverbial bad penny." You grin, ghoulishly, and he gazes back blankly. Your feeble attempt at humour has been utterly rebuffed but then you never were all that funny. Too much angst. That's what comes from carrying around the kind of knowledge you've had in your head for far too long. It eats and claws and gnaws away at your insides. "I'm not a clone if that's what you're thinking," you snap at him. He frowns.

"Then what the hell are you?" He asks. He traces a finger over your forehead and you lie, unmoving. It feels strange to be touched by a human hand again after so many days – or has it been weeks? – with only these monsters for company. "You were dead," he says. "Shit, why the hell should this surprise me? I'm on a spaceship, god knows how many miles above the surface of the Earth, imprisoned by a horde of giant locusts, and I'm worried about something as simple as your conjuring trick with the grave?"

He rocks back on his haunches and actually laughs. It's a peculiarly compelling sight. You didn't know he had it in him. He's dressed in what remains of his work clothes. The tie is missing, the shirt is torn and stained with blood and there's a dark streak of grime down the

side of his face that's barely distinguishable from the black bruise on his cheek and chin. However they got him, he didn't come easily.

"So, what happened? Did you piss them off too? Is there anyone who likes you on any world in the known universe, Krycek?" He asks.

"My mom was fond of me," you drawl, deadpan. He looks at you for a long moment, and there's a slight softening of those dark brown eyes.

"Yes," he murmurs. Perhaps he never imagined you had something so mundane and earthly as a mom. If that's what he's thinking he'd be right. You were created in a test-tube, and implanted in some poor woman's womb. Consortium born and bred - that's you. Born for your purpose, for your destiny, poor little hybrid boy. No wonder you could never kill Mulder. He had it easy. He was one of the early batch – they never reclaimed him and taught him what you know. He never had to live under this shadow from the youngest age. He had the luxury of freedom and innocence: you didn't. And yet every time you saw him you could never begrudge him that. However much you might have envied him you couldn't bring yourself to ever really resent him for his peace of mind. Isn't this what you've fought for all your life? Isn't it what you've died for, several times? So that they can keep their peace of mind. All of them. Friends and enemies, black and white, men and women.

"Why did they do this to you?" he asks, and he gestures to the blackened stumps where your fingers once were, not because he likes you – he doesn't, and who can blame him? - or because he cares about your distress, but because he's human and out here that alone makes you the closest thing to a friend that he has.

"Why? Because they want information." You smile. "And this?" You hold up the aching, stubby lumps of flesh that are now your hands, wincing as the movement hurts almost more than you can bear. "This is nothing, Skinner. You wait until they kill you for the first time and then you'll know what I mean."

"Kill...?" He looks confused. Poor bastard.

"Well how did you think I rose from the dead? They brought me back to life and they've been torturing, killing and resurrecting me ever since. It would be naïve to imagine they won't do the same to you."

"They have the power to bring you back to life?" All his certainties rocked in one go – but he's seen this before, or something similar. Mulder died on him and came back after all.

"Yes. Over and over again." You smile, grimly, and he looks appalled.

"But I don't know anything," he whispers.

"No. That's your tragedy – and your saving grace," you tell him. "Because if you did you'd have to make a choice – sell out your whole planet to save yourself, or keep on dying over and over again. As it is...well you don't know anything anyway. So you can at least have the

luxury of being sure you won't crack and sell out a whole world – that whole world." You turn your face away and stare out of the porthole at that beautiful, green-blue globe hanging far below; that loved, hated orb for which you've died so many times.

"And you?" He asks.

You don't reply, just stare into space, the full horror of your own predicament reflected back at you from the echoing chasm of his humanity. Because until now it was just you, and you had to just get on and deal with it, but now he's here, full of shock and despair, and that's harder to bear than your own emotions which you've been successfully ignoring until now.

"Krycek?" His hand shakes your shoulder, roughly, urgently. "Alex?" He rolls you back to face him. "And you?" He asks. "What do you know?"

"Everything." You sit up, and gaze at him. Is he ready for this? Probably not. Who could be? Even the act of telling him is pointless, but it's something to do to take your mind off the pain and distract you from the total despair of our situation. You somehow manage to lever yourself up into a sitting position, and lean back against the padded wall of the cell. "I'm one of the last leaders of the Resistance, one of the few left who know what they are, what they've come for, and how to fight them. You might judge me, Skinner, and you have in the past, but I was always playing for higher stakes than you, or Mulder, or anyone else realised. This isn't just a local war, it's a fight against beings you can't begin to understand."

"Try me." Good, honest Skinner. Always wanting to figure it all out, never standing a fucking chance of understanding it all, because it's too horrific to fully understand and he doesn't have the imagination to visualise just how bad it really is. In his heart he doesn't want to know. None of them do, not even Mulder, for all his endless questing. And you've tried to give them that, honest to god you have. Tried to keep them safe from what you know – why share that kind of agony around? There would be nothing they could do. This isn't a conventional war against a conventional enemy. This is something else entirely. Although...that altruism isn't entirely the truth of it. You didn't tell them, just as the Consortium didn't tell them, because you didn't want anyone to interfere with your plans or question your decisions. You didn't want to waste time and energy on debating strategy or defending your actions. Easier, and far more expedient to just not tell them. Isn't that the truth of it? There can be no lies here - not now, after so many deaths, and so many of them your own. You can tell him though. He won't interfere now. It's too late for that. He's still looking at you with those earnest dark eyes, so you lean your head back against the wall, and shatter his peace of mind forever.

"This was once their world – and they want it back. If I've done anything over these past 10 years – and god knows there's a lot I've done, and most of it enough to damn me to hell a thousand times over – I've done it for one reason only. To save us. All of us. To save our world and our way of life. To save our whole fucking species, and so many others too because the aliens aren't interested in the birds and the fish and all the cute fucking furry animals down there. All they're interested in is providing food for their hatchlings. They want to swarm and lay their eggs – and I'm not talking about a few eggs, but enough to fill this planet to the brim, and when they hatch the young eat voraciously – they devour

everything in their path, and when they're done that planet down there, our planet, would be as devoid as life as surely as if the worst kind of nuclear winter had taken place. Imagine a field destroyed by locusts and then think of that only a billion times bigger. That's what this species **do**. It's who they are. Then they move onto the next planet, and the next one. Thousands of years ago they stripped us bare and moved on – and over long millennia we recovered and became plentiful again. Well, now they're back."

"Shit." Whispered, but succinct, and to the point. Typical of the man. His face is drained of blood and he's deathly pale, his dark eyes filled with a savage kind of pain, but of course what you told him was only the tip of the iceberg. He doesn't know the full horror and you won't tell him because then they'd begin to guess the extent of what you know, and that wouldn't be smart. And if there's one thing you are it's smart - it was bred into you.

"Yeah. Shit. So, if I've killed, and lied, and cheated to save us from being eaten alive by the spawn of those alien monsters - and I've done all those things - I don't give a damn. If that's wrong, so be it. But it was a choice I made freely, knowing things that would make you weep, Skinner." You wish, almost idly, that you could still weep but knowledge has made you hard and distant – or maybe that was another genetic gift from your makers. Maybe that has nothing to do with knowledge at all. Maybe that's just **you**.

"What kind of things?" He asks. "What else do you know?"

"I can't tell you that without telling them, can I? I'm not stupid. If they thought they'd bring you here and I'd spill my guts to you and they could just listen in..." You incline your head towards the walls, because of course they're listening. They need the information locked up inside your head and they'll stop at nothing to get it, short of slicing off the top of your skull and scooping out the contents, and fuck knows they might have already tried that during one of the torture sessions you've deliberately blanked out. "If they thought I'd be so fucking stupid then they must need their fucking brains examined." You shout this last out loud to the walls.

"Surely they can't think you'd be that sloppy," he says, perplexed. "That can't be why I'm here."

"Then why **are** you here?" You ask, weary beyond belief, a total abject weariness of the soul rather than of the body. He frowns and shakes his head.

"I have no idea," he whispers. "None at all. Do you know?"

"No." And you don't. You really don't. Why bring him here? For what reason? They must know he was the one who killed you – what purpose does it serve to bring him here? You wish you knew. You think they're playing games with you...and you wish you could figure it out, but you're too tired and too weary to do that and what's more, and this worries you most of all, you're beginning not to care.

"Why don't they just come?" He asks, sitting now, in this empty, padded cell, next to this empty, soul-sick man. "If they have all this?" He waves his arm expansively around the cell,

the gesture encompassing their ship and all their technology. "They could just walk in and take over our world. What's stopping them?"

"Well, firstly they're not ready to swarm yet. They have to make the planet ready first, prepare huge underground nurseries to accept the eggs. It's a mammoth task and will take them some years. And secondly..." You smile at him wearily. "Secondly, we have a secret weapon, and that's why I'm here, dying over and over again until I tell them where it is, what it can do, and how it can be destroyed."

"Only you won't." He gazes at you steadily. He's an old soldier. Maybe he was even captured by the Vietcong once, so he understands what this is all about.

"Only I won't," you confirm with a shake of your head, closing your eyes as you do so. "No matter how many times they kill me."

"Is it true? Do they really keep bringing you back to life just to kill you again? Is the information you have so important?"

His hand comes to rest on your shoulder again and for a second you're surprised by how comforting it is to be with another human being right now, to smell human sweat and fear and hear a human voice – to accept human fucking comfort god damn it. Yes, even you, Alex Krycek, a man who has gone into the dark more times than any man can reasonably expect to and still stay sane – if, with your hybrid blood, you can even claim to be truly human. Yes, it's true, Alex Krycek, quasi-leader of the resistance, and saviour of the entire ungrateful fucking planet - he needs comfort just like any other man.

"Yes, Skinner. It's true." You open your eyes lazily, just in time to see the look on his face and it takes you by surprise. It isn't just revulsion you see in his eyes – there's genuine pity. And more than that. There's something else, something you haven't seen in anyone's eyes since you started on this hard path: respect. Walter Skinner is looking at you with respect. He doesn't know the half of what you've given up for that orb in the sky out there. He doesn't know about the sacrifices, and the hardship, and just how dirty you got your hands for the sake of your mission. He doesn't understand what it's been like to be hated and despised by people who don't know you've been trying your hardest to keep them and their families and their entire world alive. Respect. Nothing else but that could bring tears to your eyes right now. Maybe that's why they sent him here - to make you soft. After all these years, Alex Krycek's going soft because someone placed a hand on his shoulder and treated him with respect. In the circumstances you have no choice - you move your face and bite down on his hand. Hard.

"Christ!" He pulls back, the blood streaming down his wrist, much to your relief. "Krycek, what the hell was that for?" He demands angrily.

"I thought you might be the bounty hunter, wearing Skinner's face, sent to trap me, but they don't bleed right when you break the surface of the skin," you murmur. "The blood doesn't run you see. It just needs to give the appearance of warmth and pinkness to the skin – so it's stagnant. When you bite them it doesn't flow like that. It's kind of...congealed. Trust me, I

tried it a few times when that bastard was interrogating me. He soon learned to keep out of my way. So, it would seem that you're real, Skinner."

"Yes, boy. I'm the real thing," he growls, getting his handkerchief out of his pocket and wrapping it tightly around his hand to stem the flow of blood. "So, what do we do now?" He glances around the cell helplessly. He's a big man, and one used to action. He's finding it hard to face up to the fact that he's stranded hundreds of miles above the surface of his planet, locked away in an empty padded cell with a man he killed just a few short weeks ago.

"Do? What the hell is there to do?" You raise an eyebrow, and throw back at him the words you've wanted to say to him for a very long time. "We just think warm thoughts."

Impasse. He moves away, as far away from you as possible in this large white cell, and sits, slumped against the wall opposite you, while you drift in and out of consciousness, half watching him, half lost in your own thoughts. The bruise on his jaw subtly changes colour, from dark red to purple. Time is fairly meaningless in a place where there is no day and night but some considerable time must pass in this way. Finally, he moves.

"Do they bring us food or water?" He asks, moistening his cracked lips with his tongue. You wake from your hazy slumber and smile.

"Sometimes. If they remember. Mostly they don't bother. They don't much care if we die of starvation or thirst anyway as they can always just sling us in the tank and bring us back to life." You shrug, then grimace as the movement sends shockwaves through your hands.

"What about..." He glances around the cell. "Isn't there anyplace to piss?" He asks.

You laugh out loud, but the dour and ironic sound you were aiming for just comes over as deranged and manic. You wonder how you must look, lying here naked, sans fingers, unshaven, un-dead, unbroken, and utterly without hope. His dark eyes reflect his concern but he hasn't seen anything yet. He doesn't **know** how bad it can be. He doesn't have a clue about any of this. Poor bastard.

"No, Walter," you say softly, relenting, taking pity on him. "There's nowhere. You can use a corner of the cell. It has some kind of renewable lining. When it starts to stink too much

they just replace it. Don't ask me how – I haven't seen it. They usually work on it while I'm in the tank."

He nods, brusquely, and, sitting forward, wraps his arms around his knees. He's a big man and the action is strange – ungainly. You can't imagine him ever normally sitting on the floor like this. He's usually so in control, so private, so immaculately dressed, but that's just a veneer. It's the civilised veneer that our human society affords him but it isn't the real man. You suddenly realise that you don't know the real man underneath at all and that, for some reason, makes you wonder what Vietnam was like. A man such as this has been used to the privations and discomforts of war. Nothing, though, could possibly have prepared him for this.

"What happens next?" he asks, still watching you as if he could find the answers he seeks in your face, or ruined hands.

"I have no idea," you shrug.

More silence. You know that time has passed because the bruise on his face has turned a shade of dull blue now. There's a small pool of urine in the far corner of the cell so you guess that at some point he got up and relieved himself there, but you don't remember him moving. He's still sitting with his back against the wall in that same place, marking it out as his territory as humans tend to. You've noticed that - the way people always sit in the same chair in meetings, even though it's irrelevant where they sit. You wonder if your captors are even aware of these small nuances of homo-sapiens' behaviour. These things that make us human. These little things...

"Christ!" His exclamation rouses you some time later. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He asks, seemingly outraged by something. Glancing down you see the small river of yellow fluid seeping out between your legs.

"What the fuck does it matter to you?" You growl, and turn your face back to the wall.

"Lying in your own filth – doesn't that bother you?" He asks and you laugh.

"Skinner, I'm dead," you explain patiently. "I've died more times than I have fingers to count on – no wait, that's not saying much now is it?" You hold up your stumps and laugh at him some more. "So no, it doesn't bother me. Why would it bother me? I'm a corpse. It doesn't matter."

He stands and stretches out that large frame as much as he can. The cell has a low ceiling – our captors are long rather than tall, and he can't quite stand to his full height.

"You're still human," he says, in a low tone. "That matters, doesn't it? Doesn't it?" He moves across the cell slowly, and you can see that he's limping so they obviously hurt him more during capture than was originally obvious. He stands over you, an expression of pity warring with disgust in those dark brown eyes as he glowers down at you. He seems to be having some kind of internal discussion with himself, which is finally resolved when, with a sigh, he crouches down in front of you. "You should have said if you needed some help," he offers, softly.

"Help? From you? Forgive me but I seem to remember that you were the first person to kill me, if not the last," you murmur.

There's a vein that pulses in the side of his neck, and his jaw has the most peculiar ability to shift and lock into place, betraying his emotions.

"I have just one word to say in answer to that charge," he hisses in a low tone. "Nanobots."

Ah. **That** word. You smile, almost lazily, aware that it will enrage him - and it does. That jaw shifts sideways again, and clenches hard. Then he does a surprising thing. He reaches down, puts his hands under your arms, and lifts you. You complain about being moved, about the pain in your hands, but he doesn't listen. He drags you out of the pool of urine you were sitting in, and dumps you further away, your back to the cell wall once more. But he still isn't finished with you. He tears a strip off his already torn shirt, then crouches down and cleans you up as best he can. It feels strange to be touched so gently after all the many days of torture and you flinch away from him. The shock and pity register in his eyes but he says nothing, just continues his self-appointed task, and then sits down on the padded white floor, closer to you now, close enough that you have no choice but to look at him.

"Why, Alex?" He asks softly.

"Why what?" Your head lolls back and you long for the hazy indifference of sleep once more.

"Why poison me with the nanobots? If you are what you say you are, why didn't you just come to me and explain?"

His tone is gentle, soft and reasonable, but that's a deception that hides pure cold, angry steel. He hates you – and he has every good reason to do so. You cannot hate him for that,

or for the consequences of that. You fucked with his mind and you paid what should have been the ultimate price. If only it **had** been the ultimate price.

"Would you have believed me?" You ask, head flung back, tone so weary it surprises even you. You once would have welcomed the trust of a man such as this, but your years with the Consortium, before you understood the full breadth of the truth, mean that he can see you as nothing but an enemy, and you don't begrudge him that.

"I don't know...but to poison me, to coerce me, to force me, against my will..." His voice is rising in tone. "And what's worse, to have every appearance of enjoying it," he spits.

"Explain **that**, Alex."

"Enjoying it?" You sit up, a little surprised. "Now that you mention it...maybe I did. Maybe I've come that far," you muse out loud. "I never said I was any kind of fucking saint, Skinner. I had an objective and I used you to get it. I never even thought about enjoying it, but yes, you're right. I did enjoy it. It was a little power, and I revelled in it. So much of this shit has been beyond my control, from the moment I was born. For once I could be the one pulling someone else's strings, instead of having my own pulled. Yes, Skinner – I enjoyed it. I enjoyed watching you writhe as I pressed those buttons. I enjoyed making you smart with hurt pride every time I asked you to do something you didn't want to do. Oh yes. I did enjoy it. Very much."

You gaze at him, expectantly, not entirely sure what you're hoping for. His anger maybe? His fists? The sound of a good old-fashioned punch, human flesh landing violently on human

flesh - anything that isn't that dark room with its stone torture bench and the rasp, rasp, rasp of alien mandibles rubbing together.

He inclines his head and this causes the overhead lights to flicker in his dark eyes and for a moment you see yourself reflected in his irises. You look like a piece of meat, an animal – this is how he must be seeing you, and this is all that you are. Maybe it's all you've ever been to him. A worthless animal that took pleasure from his pain because of some sadistic human instinct that enjoys having power over others. Disgusting maybe, but the right to be a sadistic human bastard is one you're fighting for, along with a pantheon of other, more edifying human attributes, such as the right to love, and nurture, and protect.

"That, at least, is honest," he growls and it's only then you realise that he hasn't raised his hand to hit you. Instead he seems to accept what you've said calmly, as if this admission is one he can live with. Is it one you can live with though? You never saw yourself through another's eyes as clearly as in this moment in time. From birth you've been trained to transcend your human limitations; to lie, cheat, steal and kill for your mission, to treat the people you're trying to save as less than yourself, lesser beings to be pitied, protected, patronised and sacrificed as need be – and of course, genetically speaking you aren't even fully human anyway. Does his humanity shame you? Lying here, now, watching him, so shiny and pink and warm, he seems to be everything you never were and could never aspire to be. Ironic, isn't it? You've fought all your life to save humanity from destruction but you don't even know what it is to be human.

Wearily, you turn your face away from the reflection of yourself in his eyes. You don't recognise that person. You don't even have any idea what species he belongs to. Humans

prefer their heroes clean and pure; they don't want murky excuses for a hero, such as you've become, and yet you're all they've got, and right now you're all that's standing between that tiny orb out there and certain annihilation. Ironic, isn't it?

When they come for you again, a little while later, you scream like the animal you are as they drag you away. He tries to intervene for some reason you don't understand. What can your fate matter to him? He's killed you once, after all, but you suppose that the battle against an outside enemy makes friends of us all, whatever our colour or creed. He doesn't succeed, of course. He never stood a chance. Razor sharp mandibles slice through his skin, flaying great gouging lines of red across his chest and ripping long horizontal slits through his shirt until, defeated, he falls back and watches as they drag you away, feet first, your fingerless hands trailing on the floor over your head, and the last thing you notice before the door closes is the look of defeat and guilt in his eyes...and it takes you quite a while to figure out that he's actually upset that he couldn't save you.

Then you're too busy screaming as they strap you down and start in where they left off and before very long you're dead again.

New born. Shiny. The first breath hurts – the gunk is still in your lungs and you feel smothered. Then you're deposited face first on the floor and that knocks the stuff out of your body. You get up on all fours and retch the last of it up, reminded of a silo, a long time ago, and sleek black oil leaving your body from every orifice – and that's **every** orifice, like

having a bad dose of the runs as well as a streaming cold and being violently sick at the same time. This isn't as bad as that and only lasts for a few moments. Then the stuff, whatever it is, is drying on your body in little dark green rivulets, and you're gazing down at your newly formed hands. They look just like the last ones, just like the first ones – only minus the battle scars of everyday life. That burn on your left palm, legacy of a childhood accident is still missing and you find, bizarrely, that you long to see it again. The nails are all even and regular and clean, the skin beneath them pinkly perfect and so soft. Your hands, the real ones, were never like this. They were harder, slightly calloused in places. These aren't your hands, this isn't your body – this isn't even your life. It's a life you have no right to, a life you don't even want. The death Skinner dealt you, a week or a month or however long ago it was, is one you welcomed. With it came the knowledge that all the burdens were on somebody else's shoulders now. You'd done your bit, played your part, and departed this life, shot through the head like a rabid dog put out of its misery by a bullet from a kindly gun. What is it the military call it when they shoot down one of their own? Friendly fire? Yes, friendly fire. Skinner might not have intended it that way but that's what it was. Friendly. A way out. And then these bastards brought you back to life. You're not even aware that you're crying until they wrap their tentacles around your arms and drag you off back to the cell.

Skinner. You'd forgotten about him. How many hours have passed? The bruise on his face is a myriad of yellow hued tones now, so you guess it's been awhile. He looks like shit. There's blood all over his shirt, which is torn to shreds, and he has the makings of a promising beard.

He stares at you for a moment, the shock registering in his eyes as his gaze lingers on your newborn fingers, and your soft, pink, unblemished, beardless skin. Yes, you'd told him this would happen, but seeing it is different.

"How long was I gone?" You ask, enjoying the fact that you're no longer the weak, crippled one in this room. Now your head is clear and your body is humming with life. Now you can meet him on equal terms – or better than equal, because he's still dirty, bruised and hungry.

"I don't know. I have no way of measuring time." He shrugs, and points to the cracked watch on his wrist. "Quite a while. Why?"

"I just wondered...I wondered how long the resurrection takes – how long I'm dead for." You shrug.

"Does it hurt?" He gets up, slowly, his entire body almost creaking and now you can see how cracked his lips are. It isn't the hunger that's debilitating him – it's the thirst. You know that thirst all too well, and feel a wave of unexpected empathy for him. The resurrection tank at least takes that craving for water away. You're reborn in perfect condition and it'll be several hours before the thirst kicks in.

"Being reborn? No. Not really. You're not even aware of it until they dump you on the floor with all this gunk coming out of your ears. You gesture at a tiny piece of dried green on your chest but most of the rest has disappeared miraculously into your skin, leaving you looking absurdly clean. He's fascinated, and repulsed at the same time – you can see it in his eyes. You're surprised when he reaches for your hand and examines the new fingers minutely.

"Looking for a seam?" You joke, uncomfortable with his touch, not because you don't like it but because you like it too much. Back on Earth you never allowed anyone to get close enough to touch you. Even sex was violently done, an explosive coupling for the sake of relieving a need rather than for comfort, company, or even love. You can still remember the way Marita tasted, the faint tang of her blood on your tongue from where you'd bitten her lip, how the sex with her was hard and almost vicious. There was never anyone who just touched you, nobody who ever held you, or stroked your hair. Not even when you were a child – the Consortium bred experiments, not little boys. You never had a mother to love you and you never missed human contact – until now.

"Something like that." He shrugs, and, finding nothing, he releases your hand and you fight down an absurd wave of disappointment. "So, what happens next?" He asks, and as if on cue the door opens again and you start screaming and cursing even before those sharp tentacles wrap themselves around your body.

"Christ, can't you at least give me an hour? One fucking, lousy hour to enjoy being whole again!" You yell, twisting and turning in pointless, fruitless struggle. As they drag you out of the room, you're not entirely surprised to see that they have him too, wrapped up tight in their stinking, slimy talons, and he's fighting as hard as you are only with less noise – good old Skinner; he always was the strong, silent type.

So it's back down into the bowels of the ship, on this journey you know only too well. It takes on a nightmarish aspect - only you know this is one nightmare you can never wake up from. The lighting in the ship is low, the ship's walls a dark reddish brown, made of some kind of organic substance that beats and throbs like a living entity. Then you're in the

interrogation room again, and they sling you down on the stone slab and start strapping you in place, ready for a new day of torture. Out of the corner of your eye you can see Skinner – they thrust him against the wall and tie him there with some kind of manacles that wrap around his chest and hold him fast. He looks at you because you've been here before and understand it all better, and you just stare back because you have no words of reassurance to give him, and anyway, you have no idea what they're intending to do.

The bounty hunter enters the room, stops for a moment to look at Skinner, and then gives that nasty, ghoulish grin that you've come to hate so much. He says nothing though – he's always been a man of few words and most of those are direct interpretations for his masters. He comes over to you and smiles, and then you hear the sound of a motor, or a drill...and, looking down, you see the revolving blade buzzing towards your chest.

"No...Christ, no..." You pant, twisting as much as you can to avoid it as it begins its slow journey towards your beautiful, delicate, pink new skin.

"So...the questions remain the same. Tell them what they wish to know," the bounty hunter says, glancing at Skinner and then back at you. "Or, if you will not, maybe this one will?"

"He doesn't fucking know anything!" you scream and the bounty hunter shifts form and relays this information to the aliens who are inhabiting the shadows down the entire side of the room, like huge preying mantises, mandibles rubbing together, jaws slick with foul smelling saliva. You can see Skinner watching it all, paling visibly when the bounty hunter changes form, his jaws clamped together so hard that they look as if they could crack from the pressure. The bounty hunter changes back into human form, and you realise that they

don't believe you and they're going to torture you just to find out whether it's the truth or not. The next thing you know your chest is being cut open and the blood is spraying out onto your face and neck, turning the whole world red.

At some point there's a pause in the proceedings, and, half-conscious, you turn your head and gaze blearily at Skinner. He's deathly pale, but it's those dark brown eyes of his that haunt you. They're so strong, so full of purpose, so encouraging. It's almost as if he's physically reaching out to you from across the room, reminding you that he's here, sharing your agony, and trying to give you the strength to deal with it. From somewhere, the realisation kicks in that he's staying strong so that you don't have to deal with him falling apart on top of all that you're suffering and for some reason that just makes everything worse. You lay your head back with on the table with a thud and try to ignore the dull, throbbing pain in your chest.

Next they attach some kind of hook into your cheeks, pulling the flesh so tight that you feel sure it's about to be ripped from your skull and you wish that whatever is going to happen will happen quickly, so that you can have the blessed if only momentary relief of death, or unconsciousness. The pressure on your cheeks forces your mouth open and then you're in the middle of some kind of surreal orthodontic nightmare as the sound of a drill starts up and a shiny silver implement is inserted into your mouth and begins shaving away at your teeth. You can't even scream properly now, can't do anything but whimper and shudder as the torture continues.

More questions, but you barely hear them. You hear Skinner talking, urgently, insisting that he knows nothing, begging them to stop this torture, telling them that it's for nothing, that

he barely knows you, and you sure as hell aren't his friend...for some reason that makes you feel cold inside and after that you block out all sounds and disappear into some hazy world of your own, where you can feel, see, and hear nothing at all.

You wake up warmer than usual. Normally when you wake up back in the cell you're cold where your body has gone into shock after the torture sessions, but on this occasion you're warm, and you realise, after several minutes, that you're being held. You blink, your sweaty hair sticking on your eyelids and squint up through the fringe into a pair of dark brown eyes.

"Hey," he says softly, and you're surprised when he gently brushes your hair away from your forehead so you can see properly. You glance down at your chest which is still ripped open although clearly the cut wasn't deep enough to actually kill you. It hurts though. It throbs with a dull intensity that almost blocks out the other sensations in your weary body. You remember the hooks and raise a hand to your cheeks. There are three holes down either side of your face and they hurt too, as does the hole in your mouth where one of your teeth once was. "I'm sorry," he says in that same soft tone.

"I don't want your fucking pity," you snarl, spitting out a mouthful of blood, and that's not quite a lie. You don't want his pity, but his comfort is another matter entirely. His arms feel so warm, circling your body protectively. He might not have been able to stop them torturing you, but he wants to do something, anything to make it up to you – to help in some way. Maybe that's a natural human impulse, to want to give comfort and succour to another, injured, human. Maybe. You don't know. It's not one you've ever felt if that's the case. Nobody ever showed you this sort of kindness before and it's unsettling and it's good –

yes, despite everything, despite all the pain, it's good to be held so gently, so carefully, as if he really cares about you which of course he doesn't. Fate just threw you together. It isn't you he feels affection for – he's just empathising with your pain. Not that that matters. You'll take what's on offer because it feels so good.

"Is this what they've been doing to you all this time?" He asks, still stroking your hair even though it's no longer strictly necessary. "All these weeks since I shot you? Christ, Alex, I'm so sorry."

"You should be. If only you'd buried me properly – if you'd only burned me..." You trail off, because although you've been lamenting his inefficiency in body disposal for weeks, now it no longer seems important. It goes nowhere, and you're tired of even thinking about it.

"There was something else going on at the time," he says apologetically.

"Ah, yes, that stupid fucking baby," you snarl. "Did it spawn?"

"Yes."

"Well, much good it'll do anyone," you mutter. "You should have fucking killed it when I told you to, Skinner."

"Are you really that lost that you think I'd ever seriously have done that?" He asks, in that same soft tone. "Honestly, Alex. Did you really ever think I'd kill a baby rather than allow you to torture and maybe even kill me with those nanobots?"

"Oh whatever," you growl. "The baby was Consortium created but they'd been sold a crock of shit by a renegade bounty hunter and...oh what the fuck. I don't need to explain any of this to you. You wouldn't understand anyway." It isn't that though. What's disturbed you is seeing yourself through his eyes. To him, killing a baby, any baby, is evil, an act that he wouldn't perform under any kind of duress as you know all too well. It shames you somehow, to see him gazing at you with those dark eyes, trying to understand what to him is indefensible, willing there to be some kind of goodness and nobility to your soul because he's seen you being brave, holding out against intolerable torture, and he wants to believe you're a hero after all. And, right now, lying here in his arms, you want to believe that too, but you know it isn't true.

"What did they do to you, Alex?" He asks and you know he isn't talking about the aliens now, and for some reason you feel tears pricking at the back of your eyes.

"They bred me, Skinner," you reply, still hiding behind the bravado. "The Consortium bred me from a test tube and alien DNA. They didn't raise me like a child, they monitored me like an experiment. I'm a hybrid – I'm not all human, not like you."

"I don't believe that," he says steadily.

"Don't be fucking stupid. I'm not fucking lying to you..." Those tears are still perilously close to the surface and you'd do anything to stop them from being shed.

"I don't mean that. Maybe your DNA is different to mine but I don't believe that makes you less human," he says softly, stubbornly, and that's when you lose the fight and the tears start to fall.

You turn your face away from him because although he knows that you're sobbing like a child, there's no reason for you to have to bear that sympathetic gaze. His arms tighten around your body and he holds you, rocking you gently as you cry yourself hoarse. The plain truth, and it's not one you can deny any more, is that dying this many times has stripped away everything you've ever carefully constructed about who or what Alex Krycek might be, and left you with just the basics of what's underneath - and that's a pathetic, fragile thing, despite everything you've ever done to hide that. You can see it clearly now, lying here with your chest ripped open and your mouth full of blood, his arms around your body, offering you comfort, holding you up, helping you keep your grip on your sanity right at the point when you're most in danger of losing it. What Alex Krycek is, beneath the shell, is something ugly, and useless and small. Something that's never been loved and never knew what it was missing. You feel as if you've been thrown into the resurrection tank and pulled out again without all the protective layers so carefully constructed during the 38 years of your earthly existence.

At some point the tears must have stopped because you find yourself lying in a different position with your head on his lap now. He's staring out of the window, gazing into space, the expression in those dark eyes unreadable. His fingers are still gently soothing through your hair, more as a reflex action than anything else. You gaze at him upside down for a moment, wondering what it would be like to genuinely be loved by this man. As a friend, as a father or brother, even as a lover; loved in any capacity at all because you've never known that and you wonder what it might have felt like. You always envied Mulder the certainties of his love. That blinding love for a sister that led him to search for her for so many years, the love of his mother and father, shielding and protecting him from the truth about both

his own genetics and their involvement with the consortium; his love for Scully, hell, even his love of Skinner in some bizarre way. Having a boss who'd look out for you and protect you is a concept you can't quite get your head around.

"Fuck you," you snap, breaking into his reverie and distracting you from your own. "Christ, I don't need this." And you pull away, ignoring the pain in your chest as the sudden movement makes the ugly wound split open even further. "Fuck you, Skinner. You don't fucking know anything," you snarl at him, and it doesn't help – instead all you see in his eyes is that you're like some wounded wild animal who would rather bite the hand trying to help him than accept that help because he's too frightened and in too much pain to do anything else.

You manage to drag yourself away from those warm, comforting hands and back over to your own side of the cell, where you lie, panting, trying to enjoy the cool, familiar sensation of being alone once more.

"Why don't you tell me then," he says in an utterly reasonable tone of voice. "We've got nothing else to do after all."

"Tell you what? You know most of it now," you snap.

"You were bred by the Consortium – I'm not sure why," he muses. "But at some point you turned away from them, joined the Resistance you spoke of earlier?"

"And you want to know why?" You sneer, gazing over at him, where he's seated on the

other side of the cell. Christ but he looks bad. He needs food and water soon or they'll be throwing **him** into the resurrection tank. He shrugs and starts to say something but his mouth is too dry and you can't hear what he's croaking. "I'm sure you want it to be something noble, something heroic. Some realisation that the Consortium's policy of appeasement was evil," you snap, and he shrugs and spreads his hands, gesturing to you to continue. "Well that wasn't it. I didn't join the resistance out of some noble ideal and commitment to saving humanity - I joined out of spite." And you laugh because it seems so clear now. Nothing can be hidden here - there are no lies left for you to hide behind when you've died this many times. "I turned against the Consortium like a fucking rebellious, surly teenager, turned against them because they bred me, gave birth to me, and never once fucking..."

What? Loved you? Is that it? Is that all? And can that really be why? You stare at him for a moment, feeling angry but not really with him.

"I hate them," you finish lamely, and that's true too. "When I was growing up I didn't know what they stood for. They had me educated, sent me to college, and made me do their dirty work and back then I didn't know the truth. I even believed I was doing something good – it was like I worked for the fucking CIA or something. I truly believed that ultimately I was working for the good of everyone, no matter what they asked me to do. They led me to believe that and even if I hadn't..." you shrug. "Well, one of the first things they taught us was obedience: unquestioning and unflinching obedience and devotion to the cause. It was only later..." You shrug again. "Well, they bred us smart for a purpose, but when you're smart you can't help asking questions and that leads to independent thought and **that** as we know, can be dangerous."

"It must have been tough," he comments, his voice hoarse and strained from lack of water.

"Leaving the people who were to all intents and purposes your family."

"Tough? No. It was fucking easy. They tried to kill me," you snarl. "They planted a bomb in my car. How would you feel if your own father tried to kill you, Skinner?"

He gazes at you, and nothing you can do or say seems to shake the unwavering compassion in those dark brown eyes and it's bugging the hell out of you.

"Was he your father? Spender? That cigarette smoking son of a bitch?"

"Yeah. Probably. He fathered most of the batches for that time period – the ones that produced Mulder and Jeff and me. So probably – but if not him then it was one of the others. They were all in on it and they all voted to have me killed. All except the Englishman – but he was a double agent for the Resistance all along. It was he who recruited me away from the Consortium, he who brought me back into the fold with them, to work as a double agent alongside him – and he paid for that, in the end." You shrug, and wish you could feel something for the only one of them who ever showed you any kind of kindness but you can't. He was using you the way all those old men used everyone. They didn't know any other way – and they didn't teach you any other way either.

He's lying half in shadow now – and you long to crawl back into the comfort of his arms and pretend that none of this is really happening but you won't because you don't want him to catch a glimpse of the small, imperfect creature that lies at the core of Alex Krycek. You

don't want him to know that tiny, fragile, insubstantial being. For your own sake, and the sake of your sanity.

Soon after that they come and take you both back to the interrogation room and this time they complete the job on your chest and before you know it you're waking up again beside the resurrection tank, spitting out gunk from your healed mouth. When they throw you back into the cell he's lying on his side, in a fetal position, and he doesn't answer when you talk to him. You sit and glare at him for a long time, and then, unable to bear it any more, you walk across the cell to examine him. He's been drugged – that much is clear when you get close up. His eyes roll back in his head when you pull back his eyelids. They must have tried getting information from him the way they tried with you to begin with, only he doesn't know anything and he doesn't have a Consortium genetic inheritance to protect him from the drugs. He's completely out of it and will be for some time judging by the look of him.

You gaze down at him for a few minutes and then a thought occurs to you. While he's out of it, you can take that comfort from him without him knowing, without him seeing how pathetic Alex Krycek really is.

So you lie down beside him, rest your head on his shoulder, pick up his arm and wrap it around your own body. Now it feels as if he's holding you, caring for you, and it's almost enough. You stay still, quietly watching him as he sleeps. His dark beard is peppered with touches of grey and white, as if someone has brushed paint over it. His skin is haggard, his face inexpressibly weary, and yet, beneath all that, there shines some essence of the man.

His jaw is square and very strong – hinting at an obstinacy that you can understand and empathise with all too well. His eyelids are red in hue, where he's been taken to the limits of his endurance and yet there are reserves still untapped, hinted at in the broad lines of his face and the surprisingly sensual fullness of his lips. His neck and shoulders are broad, capable of bearing a multitude of self-imposed weights. He's so very solid, so real, so...human. Maybe that's why you need to nestle in so close, and lose yourself in him. He's something you could never be – he's human, and perhaps, by association, some of that humanity will rub off on you. Or perhaps it's just that you're a long way from home, trapped in a living nightmare without end, with the fate of too many souls resting on your shoulders and you want to forget about it just for awhile and take what comfort you can from the warm circle of his arms. If you close your eyes you can imagine you're both somewhere else. Forget the absurdity of Alex Krycek snuggling up to Walter Skinner on a warm summer's day in a park in the middle of Washington DC. Forget that it could never have happened that way back down on Earth and instead imagine it to be true. Above you, the sun is shining and the sky is blue, beneath you is warm green grass, smelling so good, and you're lying pressed up against the warm flesh of someone you love. You aren't Alex Krycek any more; you're someone good, someone kind, a hero the world would like and a hero you wish you could be...and it feels so good.

At some point you fall asleep, lost in his smell and his warmth and the all too human emotion of being with someone, close, touched...and, in your own mind at least, loved. The fantasy is blown apart some time later when you wake with a start. Your leg is cramped, and your neck is stiff from lying in this position, but you don't give a fuck about that because you

blink away the sleep and find two dark, curious eyes, inches away from your face, watching you.

He knows. He knows you crawled into his arms and not even under cover of injury because you were newly born, straight from the resurrection tank. No, he knows that you needed his warmth and humanity, and you hate him for it but hate yourself more.

"They drugged me," he murmurs, seemingly ignoring the fact you're nestled together like lovers.

"I know. They did that to me too, when I first arrived." You disengage as quickly and elegantly as you can manage, and unfurl your new body like a cat stretching after a nap. Those dark eyes continue to watch you. You wonder if he understands what you were doing, or why? What's going on behind that steady gaze?

"I told them everything I know," he says, and his face is twisted, as if that really upsets him.

"Well you don't fucking know anything so that's okay," you reply shortly, unwilling to indulge him in some tedious melodrama of self-pity.

He grunts, and manages a faded grin. "Well, I pieced together some of it, but nothing they don't know already," he murmurs.

"That's why we never fucking explained anything to anyone," you explain to him, relieved that there isn't going to be some big emotional scene. "Christ, Mulder was the worst. Always pushing and fretting and worrying away at the truth and never coming anywhere near it."

You stretch out your body, enjoying its feeling of wholeness, as you always do, even knowing that they'll come along and destroy it again all too soon. You glance down at him and then feel a moment's genuine pity for the man. He's in much worse shape than you. They might have given him something to drink when they were drugging him, but he's clearly on his last legs. There are huge dark circles under his eyes, and his skin is almost gray in hue. You can see his ribs sticking out painfully through the remains of his shirt – he's starving to death, slowly but surely, and that at least is a death you've been spared so far. Your deaths might have been painful, but at least they weren't this long and drawn out. It occurs to you for the first time that he might need comfort too, but even as you think it you know you won't be able to provide it. Not you. It isn't in your nature. If you're never loved then you never learn how to love in return. Like a feral cat that never becomes fully tamed if it doesn't have contact with humans during the first few weeks of its life - that's you. You're untrained, undomesticated – you'd rather bite the hand of friendship than let it stroke your head...or at least that's what you thought until you insinuated yourself into his drugged arms today.

That thought brings you up short, but you're swiftly distracted by the opening of the door, and then you're screaming, shouting and hollering as you always do when they come for you because you will never, ever go easily into that interrogation room, no matter how futile the struggle might be. Before long you're being carried bodily out of the cell and he's scrunched up in the grasp of a pair of long tentacles, being hauled along behind you.

The interrogation room is exactly the same – in fact the whole nightmare scenario is unchanged, with that gang of locusts salivating along the far wall as if they've never left the place between questioning sessions. However, this time there is a difference, and you're so busy hollering that you don't even notice it for a few minutes – not until you find yourself pushed against the wall, and something cold, and yet alive, tentacle shaped, wrapped around your chest, holding you in place. Your heart freezes inside you as he's pushed into the centre of the room, towards the interrogation table, and he struggles the way you were struggling a few minutes previously but there's no respite. The bounty hunter is already waiting by the head of the table, that malicious grin fixed on his granite face. Skinner baulks as he's shoved even closer to his inevitable fate, and one of the aliens flashes out a long, almost lazy tentacle, which whips through his flesh like a razor, creating a long streak of blood down his back. He gives an outraged roar and, turning, manages to free his hand enough to sink a punch into the bounty hunter's stomach, making the bastard fall to the ground. The aliens get ugly, and instead of strapping him to the table, they decide to start the interrogation with him standing where he is. Two of the ones who brought us here flash out those tentacles, over and over again, and you know from experience that it's worse than the most vicious steel-tipped whip. He screams like an animal caught in a trap as they gouge into his flesh, tearing great strips of it away from his body...and you know you should feel some reaction, some pity at the sight of him being hurt like this, but the only thing you feel, evil fucking bastard that you are, is relief - and gratitude that it isn't you.

The bounty hunter recovers enough to give his usual short list of questions but Skinner is now so torn to shreds by the aliens that he's practically unconscious before it begins. Realising they'll get nothing from him as he is, they cut the session short and you're taken

back to the cell. They throw you inside, and for the first time after one of these sessions you aren't bruised and bleeding. They throw him in after you and he most definitely is. You sit on your haunches, arms clasped around your knees, glaring at him for a long time because now you're feeling incredibly guilty about your selfish reaction to his plight earlier. He doesn't know any of this though – he just lies there, groaning softly to himself, his eyes wide open and fixed on the Earth as it shines just out of reach through the tiny window.

A little while later, much to your own surprise, the aliens return with food and water – only it isn't for him. It's for you. You have no idea why they're suddenly feeding you – they have fed you before but some time back, when it all first began, and you've long since stopped second guessing why they do **anything** anyway – like bringing Skinner onboard. You chew into a lump of bread, and swallow some of the water, still sitting on your haunches, watching him. It feels amazing to eat again after all this time and the flavours are so overwhelming that you salivate almost painfully. You fight an internal battle with yourself, but in the end some side of yourself you didn't know existed wins out, and you save half of what they've given you, and take it over to where he's lying on the floor. It's probably a waste to give it to him. They'll probably come and take him soon and whip him to death, and then he'll be reborn and you'll have given up your valuable supply of food for nothing. You know that logically it's a total waste of time giving it to him, you **do** know that, but you do it anyway. You go and crouch beside him and he reminds you of a story you read as a kid, about a veterinary surgeon tending to a dying, much loved horse, and how the noble animal lifted its head and gazed at the man with pained brown eyes, not flinching even when the vet placed a gun against his head and pulled the trigger to put the animal out of its misery. You were impressed by that story as a child – you wanted to be a vet back then, back when

you thought you'd even have a choice about what you would be. Skinner looks like that horse now – he has that same tragic, unflinching gaze, and it touches something deep inside you. He's too weak to drink, so you tear off the rest of his shirt, which is just a small strip of fabric anyway, and soak it in the water. Then you place it in his mouth so he can absorb the moisture. He doesn't say anything, doesn't move, just lies there, breathing slowly but heavily, his chest rising and falling painfully, wheezing with the effort of just staying alive. The water works wonders though, and by the time you've managed to get it all down him he's recovered enough to move his head. He'll need to sit in order to eat the bread and you gaze at the mess of his body, wondering which bit of it you can touch to get him sitting without hurting him. His skin has literally been flayed from his body – some of those tentacle cuts are so deep they've ripped down to bone, and the wounds are already swollen and starting to look infected. You wish you could bathe them, but the water was more useful inside him.

You crouch even closer to him, and gaze at him intently.

"Walter – you need to sit up and eat. I can drag you but it'll hurt, or you can try yourself.

What do you want to do?"

He gazes at you for awhile, and there's just the faintest hint of surprise in his eyes – maybe he didn't expect you to care for him the way he cared for you, and, to be honest, you're a bit surprised by that yourself.

"I'll..." The word is so hoarsely whispered as to be almost inaudible, and you bend your head down to his lips. "Sit...help me..." he whispers, and you nod. He can't do it on his own, so

you have no choice. You put your hands under his arms, look into his eyes, and start counting. "One, two..." On the beat of three you haul him into a sitting position and he cries out involuntarily from the pain of movement, but at least he's up...although he won't stay there without help. He's a foot away from the wall – not close enough to lean against it, so you sit behind him and let him lean against you instead. His head lolls on your shoulder, and you rip the bread into tiny pieces and put a morsel into his mouth. He chews interminably, and it strikes you that he's too weak and his mouth is too dry to be able to swallow it. You think about this for a moment, and then figure out what you have to do. You put a square of the bread in your mouth, suck on it for a moment, and then transfer the soggy morsel into his mouth where he's able to swallow it down without so much trouble. You do this until the food has gone, and then you both just lie there. He's in too much pain to move and you're still winded from all that's happened.

It feels weird, awkward, to be sitting here like this, holding him, but nothing could pry you away right now except for those bastards coming to drag you back for more torture and you're not even sure that you'd let them take you without forcing them to kill you in the struggle. His breathing is laboured and you know he must be in great pain, and suddenly, and this surprises you so much that your own breathing hitches as well, you feel a wave of the most enormous compassion for him. It's like a flood barrier breaking down and it flows in all at once, overwhelming you with its force. You always wanted to care for someone, back when you were a kid, when it wasn't too late, when you still harboured lame-assed hopes of being a vet so that you could look after injured kittens or whatever. When you were a kid you longed for something to take care of, maybe to construct a fantasy of the kind of care you'd have liked to have received yourself, but it goes without saying that no

pets of any kind were allowed for Consortium bred kids. Now you have something – someone - that needs you, for the first time in your life, and it amazes the hell out of you how powerful that feeling is. You hug him close, but infinitely gently, your lips grazing his head, not even caring if he knows and then it strikes you just what a total fucking bastard you are.

"I'm sorry," you whisper, no longer ashamed at the tears that are pricking the back of your eyes again. Dying so many times has stripped the artifice out of everything. You don't care about that shit any more. He raises his head a fraction to look at you, and you bite down hard on your lip. "About what I did to you. The nanocytes. I'm sorry. You know...when I was doing it, I didn't feel a fucking thing. I could have kept on pumping that shit through your veins without a second thought but now..." You shake your head and look away. "I'm so sorry," you whisper again, amazed not only that you're telling him, but also by how completely genuine your remorse is.

He gives the faintest hint of a smile, and shakes his head a little, those dark eyes full of something, but you're not sure what.

"S'okay," he mutters but you know that forgiveness is not so easily given and cannot be so easily received. He's saying it because of the situation you're both in right now – you haven't earned that forgiveness yet. "Must be..." He pauses, running his tongue over his dry cracked lips, and you bend your head to hear him, "...hard to treat anyone else as a human being...when you've never been treated that way yourself," he whispers hoarsely, and you're struck dumb for a moment by his insight into your soul. He's a better man than you

ever were, in any of your lives, no matter what you've suffered to protect that planet down there.

You hold him even more closely, humming softly as you both gaze out of the window at the Earth, far below. His weight is comforting on your body and he's warm and all too human and solid, and at some point during the next few hours he dies, silently, in your arms. You don't even feel him go. One minute those dark eyes are open, and his breath is rasping in his throat, his chest struggling with the effort, and the next he's dead. Last time he died you killed him by flooding his veins with carbon, and boy it felt good to have the power of life or death over someone, the way the Consortium always had the power of life or death over you your entire life. This time...this time it's different. You feel more alone than you've ever felt in your life, and you hold his dead body against your chest and sob like a snot-faced kid, your tears washing streaks down his grimy cheeks, leaving little rivulets of clean flesh in their wake.

You've cried yourself into an exhausted sleep by the time the door opens next. The aliens whir and hiss over his body for a moment, clearly a bit disappointed to be deprived of killing him themselves, and then they drag his body from the room. You lie there, too dispirited to even move. Now you're more alone than you ever were before, because before you didn't know what it was like not to be alone – you've been alone all your life after all - but while he was here you had a glimpse of what it might be to share something with another person, to care for another person and have them take care of you, and that loss is what bites deep. With it comes another thought that feels like an ice-cold hand closing around your heart – supposing they don't resurrect him? You assumed they would because they resurrected you, but supposing they don't? He's little use to them after all – he knows nothing and you

still have no idea why they even brought him here. Supposing this is it? It's just you, facing all those deaths again without him here as company? Just the thought of it makes you go a little insane and you get up and crash around the cell, throwing yourself against the walls so hard that you actually create a few bruises on your new, pink body, despite the padding. You're screaming and yelling and wailing like a crazed mourner at a wake and this goes on for so many hours that by the end you're almost hoarse. Finally, exhausted, you crawl over to what remains of his shirt, grab it in both of your fists, then lie there, just trying to find some faint trace of the scent of the man.

You're still lying there, several hours later, when the door opens. You gaze up, blearily eyed and confused, and your heart leaps and thuds in your chest as you see him standing there. The door shuts behind him and he's staring down at his body with a look of stunned amazement in his eyes. His beard has gone, and so too has the ugly torn flesh on his body. He's naked – they must have stripped his pants off him before they threw him into the tank - and his entire body looks just like yours – pink and perfect and newborn, like a baby's skin; too perfect, too clean, and too soft. Gone are the old scars you noticed earlier on his abdomen – he's newly minted and he can hardly believe how good he feels.

"Christ...this is..." He holds his hands out wide, utterly bewildered and yet with that same sense of joy that you felt when it happened to you the first time.

"Feels good, huh?" You grin, getting up and running over to him. You stop when you get close – he isn't wounded now, and somehow that means you don't have the right to touch him any more, even though you want to.

"Good? It's fucking great, boy," he laughs and you decide that you like it when he calls you 'boy', although you hated it when he called you that a few years back, just prior to sinking his fist in your stomach. Then it was a scathing term, a way of putting you in your place, as if you were a bug hardly worthy of his attention, something young and stupid to be squashed without a second thought, but now...now it just seems affectionate. "Woohoo!" He spreads his arms and begins to run around the room, ducking his head slightly because of the low ceiling. You stare at him, bemused, for a second, and then laugh out loud – his delight is infectious and there's been little enough to enjoy in here after all. You have to make the most of the little things, like getting a new body, and not think about what they're probably going to do to that brand new flesh all too soon. He swoops and roars around you, and you know that the loud guffaw hides a hint of all too human desperation but you don't care. Instead you spread your own arms and join him in airplaning around the room, both of you whooping like school kids. You wonder how ridiculous you must look, two naked men prancing around this white cell, laughing manically, but you don't really give a shit – nobody's watching after all, except maybe the aliens and you hope it's really pissing them off.

He comes to a halt, out of breath, and throws himself down on the floor in an exhausted heap, and, laughingly, you throw yourself down beside him. You lie there, head touching his shoulder, both of you getting your breath back and then he leans over and touches your arm thoughtfully.

"Did they torture you again?" He asks, and you glance down at the bruise on your skin.

"No," you admit, shame faced. "When you died...I thought you might not be coming back. I didn't know whether they'd resurrect you or not. I went a little crazy – threw myself around the place. I missed you," you admit, painfully, and it makes your chest hurt just thinking about it.

"Alex..." he begins but you interrupt him.

"Nobody ever cared before," you mutter, wanting to tell him this even though it's so difficult, because who knows when they might kill either of you for good and you want him to know before they decide to do just that. "When those Russian peasants cut off my arm in that damn forest – they just left me there. I found a way home by pure chance. I survived that, the way I survived every fucking thing, but there was never anybody who cared what happened to me until you showed up here. Then...when they were torturing you...I just felt relieved, Walter. I felt relieved that they were hurting you and not me." You gaze at him despairingly, and he takes a deep breath, and sighs.

"Alex, they killed you over and over again in that room, god knows how many times. It's an understandable reaction, I guess," he says, although you're not sure he believes that – maybe he's just trying to make you feel better.

"I felt bad about that. I felt bad about you. You took care of me...so I took care of you...and then I started feeling all this shit I've never felt before...and then I missed you. I fucking missed you, Walter."

"You're alone up here – it's hardly surprising." He gives a faint smile. "You're only human," he adds and you stiffen and shrug. *Not quite, Walter. Not quite.* You can't think of anything to say, so you blurt out the most ridiculous comment that comes to mind.

"When I was a kid I wanted to be a vet, Walter," you tell him. He looks surprised by the change of conversation, but you plough on regardless. "They brought us up in a long, white dormitory. I was one of 5 other boys in my 'set'. They called us a 'set'. We never had anything that was our own...everything was communal. I wanted one thing to take care of, Walter. One thing that was mine, and I never had a damn thing."

He nods, slowly, as if pondering this and then reaches out and puts a hand on your shoulder.

"I grew up on a farm. We had a ton of things to take care of. I used to wake up on Saturday and beg my dad not to make me get out bed and help with the livestock. He'd just shrug and tell me that the animals depended on us, just as we depended on them for our livelihood, and the way he put it I never felt I had a choice, so I'd get up and trudge around after him, hating him, and the animals, and the whole damn world."

He chuckles at the memory and it feels so good and downright normal that you're fascinated. You lean in closer, hoping he won't notice how close, or if he does that he won't push you away, and he doesn't. You both lie back and look at the ceiling, your head resting on his shoulder, and you ask him a hundred questions about his childhood, and the farm, that he laughs and tells you to slow down. You like the sound of his laugh, peeling and billowing out from deep inside his chest. You like the sound of it reverberating against your

cheek. Even up here, in the midst of all this, he can still laugh at something as simple as a memory.

Slowly, oh so slowly, you swap life stories. His upbringing wasn't all the bed of roses, the fantasy childhood that you imagine all non-Consortium bred people have experienced. His family were dirt poor and his mother was unstable, always on the verge of a breakdown that left the whole house wary of her emotional state. His father was a dour, hard-working man, who loved his son but didn't have many ways of showing it. You tell him more about the other boys in your set, and the way they made you compete against each other for the respect of the Consortium and he tells you how when he was 5 years old, his mom snapped and threw all the dishes in the kitchen against the wall until there wasn't a plate in the house left un-smashed, and how he watched from behind the dresser, wondering if she'd throw him against the wall and smash him too.

"Shit," you comment after listening to this story. "You know, I always envied Mulder his Mom and Dad and I hated him for them too, but maybe having parents isn't so fucking great a deal after all." You grin at him and he grins back, shaking his head slowly.

"Mulder had a very difficult relationship with his parents," he tells you. "Families are complicated, Alex – they aren't all sunshine and blue skies. Some of my childhood was great and some was shitty – I guess most people feel like that though."

"Maybe," you concede, and you remember how you used to enjoy the company of one of the other boys in your 'set' and how you created a vivid imaginary world between you when

you were seven years old. You wonder what happened to him, and whether he still remembers that too.

And then, just when you're getting so lost in his stories, and in telling your own that you almost forget where you are, and why, the door opens again, almost taking you by surprise.

This time, they manage to strap him down to the interrogation table, and you close your eyes when they torture him so you don't see the worst of it, although you can't block out the terrible sound of his screams. You find yourself screaming with him, over and over again:

"He doesn't know anything! He doesn't fucking know!" you screech and when you open your eyes the bounty hunter is standing over you, grinning away to himself.

"No, we know that," he says. "But you do. Tell us what we want to know and we'll stop torturing him."

And your whole world falls apart once more.

It's easy to decide something for yourself, to decide what you can and can't take, and what you will and won't surrender in order to save yourself – much, much harder to make that decision about someone else. And it's made even worse by the fact that you know what he's going through because you've been there and experienced it yourself. Was that their plan all along? To bring him here and make you care about him? And if so, why did they choose

him? They surely knew he was the one who killed you in the first place. On the other hand – who would they have been able to find who you cared about? There's nobody on Earth that you care about and if you didn't care about him when he arrived, somehow along the way you learned to. So what now? Does it change anything? Does it shit. Except that it makes it much harder to bear what they're doing.

"Don't tell them a fucking thing, Alex!" He screams, and you weren't going to anyway but you feel a little bit better knowing he isn't asking you to.

You close your ears to his screams, hating yourself, hating the aliens, and hating the whole damn world, and when they throw you back into the cell, with his sweaty, bleeding, broken body, you don't hesitate. You take him in your arms and hold him tight, whispering to him, and kissing his head. You nurse him through the next few days of torture sessions. They take him to the brink but don't push him over, and each time, when they're done, you hold him and feed him half your own food and drink, and he hangs on, those dark eyes of his boring into your soul, making you examine your decision a hundred times or more a day only to come to the same conclusion each time.

Something happens during those long, dark sessions listening to him scream. At some point you cross a line – now you no longer feel relief and gratitude that it isn't you. Now you'd rather been suffering the pain than watching and listening to him suffering it, knowing his fate is in your hands, knowing you could stop the torture at any point just by telling them what they want to know. At the back of your mind is always the same thought – supposing the next time they kill him they don't return him to life? Supposing they figure out this isn't working and sling his body out of the airlock? Supposing you end up alone again? And you

know that's just as fucking selfish as your earlier relief, because at least that way he'd be spared all this, but you can't help it all the same.

Then it happens. His body gives out under the torture and he dies. You hear his last gasping breath, listen to it gurgling in his chest, rattling with the effort of trying to live, and then he's gone once more. You don't scream this time, you just weep, silently, manacled to the wall, and then watch as they un-strap him and cart him off before coming back for you and returning you to your cell where you're left alone once more with your dark thoughts. You curse him for making you care about him, when by rights you should be enemies, as you once were. He killed you. You trace your smooth forehead with your fingers. He killed you and now you would do anything to have him back, lying in your arms again. Fate is a fucking ironic bastard.

You're not sure how many hours pass but it seems too long and eventually you know that this time he's gone for good, and you long for the refuge of insanity, so that you don't have to feel anything any more. If not insanity, then a return to your old, numbed state of being, when nothing truly mattered to you because the Consortium bred little automatons, emotionally crippled children who they turned into feral, emotionless adults, expressly designed to do their master's bidding. You're curled up tight in a ball when the door opens and you wonder at first if it's an illusion – this whole nightmare has taken on an aspect of unreality and for a second you just gaze at him stupidly and then you're acting on pure emotion, no conscious thought involved at all, as you run across the cell and hug him tight. He returns that hug, and, when you finally release him, you find your head angling in and then your lips are on his and you're kissing him hard. He stands still for a second but then,

finally, he responds. His hands clasp your buttocks and he returns your kiss, forcefully, powerfully, strong in his new body, his muscles rippling beneath his flesh.

"I'm sorry," you say, when you draw back, and you flinch, trying to guess what his reaction will be to your impulsiveness.

"Alex...don't..." he whispers hoarsely, and his hand comes up and brushes your cheek.

"You're all that's keeping me sane in here."

"It's not just that..." You pause, and consider it. "It's not just that we've been thrown together like this, that we're trapped in this intolerable situation. I've never known anyone else the way I know you – never got to know anyone, never got to care. I don't know how much longer I can keep watching them torture you, Walter."

"Alex. You must," he says firmly, his hand still caressing your cheek. "There's too much at stake. I can take it. Even if one day I tell you I can't – just ignore me. It'll be the pain talking. At some point they have to give up. They can't keep doing this forever, can they?"

You bite on your lip.

"They have the time, Walter. Nothing's going to happen until 2012 – that's how long their preparations will take them. They could keep this up for another ten years."

He stares at you, horror in his eyes, and then he grabs you again and holds you tight against that broad chest. "I don't fucking care how long it takes, Alex. Don't tell them what they

want to know. We'll get through this. Somehow. We already have."

He's such a fucking amazing man, and yet he doesn't know fucking shit. You love him for it as much as you despair, because he isn't the one with the knowledge locked up inside his brain and he isn't the one watching someone he loves being tortured to death over and over again. Love. Shit. That's a big word and one you've never used before. To avoid thinking about it you throw yourself at him again and you're acting on impulse as you nuzzle your way down his neck and chest to his nipples and circle them lazily with your tongue. He moans and places his hands on your head, and you smile and glance up at him.

"Walter, they can hurt you, but I can make you feel good. Will you let me do that?"

Realisation floods into his eyes. He looks at you for a long moment and then nods. You're not even sure if this is about sex as you go down on your knees and take his warm, ripe, newborn cock in your mouth. You think that maybe it isn't and maybe it is. You sure as hell find him attractive but sex isn't exactly a pressing concern up here, in this situation. On the other hand, sex can be revenge on those bastards who are keeping you here. They can have your pain and his, but they can't take your pleasure from you – you can give that to each other and it's the one thing they can't regulate, or deny you, for as long as you share this cell. You think he understands that too, because he gives a throaty little growl and his hand twines in your hair. You smile, and go about your task eagerly. This isn't the first time for you and you wonder if it's the first time for him. It is the first time you've ever done this for someone you loved though, and that makes one hell of a difference – and one you hadn't expected. You enjoy it too much for a start, and you think, as he comes with a gasp in the back of your throat, that maybe he did too.

"Thank you, Alex," he says and you get to your feet and wrap yourself around him again.

"Each time you die I wonder if they'll bring you back," you whisper. "And I wonder what will happen to me if they don't because I don't think I could stand it here without you, Walter."

He nods, the pain showing in his eyes but there's nothing either you or he can do about it, so he just holds you, rocking you gently in his arms. Then he lowers his head to kiss you again and this time it's so gentle and loving that you surrender yourself to it body and soul, loving the many tastes of him, loving the way his hands always find your butt when he's exploring your mouth with his tongue, and it feels so real, so human, that you can almost forget that you never once experienced anything like this when you lived down on that planet you're both trying so hard to save. Not once. You never once kissed someone you loved before. Not a parent, not a child, not a lover – not even a goddamn pet, and you never knew in that previous lifetime, that hazy lifetime that only seems half real to you now, you never knew what you were missing.

When you break apart, he sits on the floor, gasping a little for breath but grinning at you all the same.

"Who the fuck thought that would happen?" You comment, sitting down beside him.

"Yeah." He grins and you rest against him, needing to be close. "You remind me of someone I once knew," he says, putting a big arm around you, circling you protectively.

"Who?" You look up, too eagerly, and he laughs at you.

"Francis Capelli. He was this kid in 'Nam..." He pauses and you settle in against him, longing for another long session of storytelling to lose yourself in, before they come and begin it all again. "He was a good kid," Walter says, his grin fading. "But not popular – you know how there's always one who's a bit different? That was Francis. He could fight well enough but he never fit in with the unit and so the other guys started picking on him. It was just little stuff at first, but as the tensions of the situation out there got to us more and more, it got worse. It was easy I guess – Francis didn't take drugs, he didn't go out whoring...you'd always find him sitting on his own, reading, his glasses perched on the end of his long, thin nose. When I joined the unit, I'm ashamed to admit that I took my cue from the other men – I didn't bully him the way they did, but I wasn't that nice to him either. He was the unit's scapegoat. Everything that went wrong, we blamed on him, whether it had anything to do with him or not, and he just took it. I guess there wasn't much he could do about it and I have no idea how he felt – it must have been terrible for him. At some point I started to feel sorry for him. He had that look my mom had in her eyes sometimes, a look of resignation and despair that troubled me. So, I took the time to get to know him, started talking to him instead of alternately ignoring and jeering at him like the other guys did. And you know, he was the most interesting person in the unit. He had read so much, had an opinion on most things, but didn't shoot his mouth off like the louder guys in the unit. He had thought deeply as well, he knew shit that I didn't even know existed. He was still an oddball, but he had this sly sense of humour that made me laugh – I mean really laugh. I used to belly laugh talking to Francis." His voice fades and you look up to find him staring wistfully into space. "You know, back then I used to think 'Nam was the worst hellhole I'd ever experience in my life, but that was before this. Francis made it bearable – I never laughed before or since the way I laughed with him."

"And I remind you of him?" You frown.

"Yes. You're the one nobody ever got to know, who turns out to be more interesting than anyone would ever have guessed – and just as Francis kept me sane in Vietnam, you're keeping me sane up here, Alex."

"What happened to him?" You ask, and he shrugs, and you know this memory is still painful to him even after all this time and all he's suffered since.

"He died. They all did. My entire unit was wiped out in 'Nam," he murmurs softly. "Francis and I had a pact – if either of us didn't make it but the other one did, we promised we'd visit each other's family and take a meal with them, in remembrance. Francis's family were the kindest, gentlest people. They asked me all about his time in 'Nam and I lied. I told them how popular he was, how everyone appreciated his good humour but the truth is that he had a terrible time in 'Nam not just because of the conflict but because of the way he was treated by his own people...and nobody but me ever really got to know him."

"It was a kind lie," you shrug and he nods.

There's silence between you for a long time, and then, out of the blue, you find yourself speaking.

"Walter, I love you," you tell him hazily, and he shifts a bit and gives a pained smile.

"Yes," he says and then there's a long pause. "I know," he adds, and he squeezes your shoulder thoughtfully. Somehow, that's more comforting and reassuring than if he'd replied in kind, and said he loved you too, and you're grateful as hell you got that off your chest. You lie there, wrapped up against him for a long time, just enjoying the moment, and for a little while you're actually happy, and then the door opens and the nightmare begins all over again.

There are times in the next few days when that new-found love of yours is tested to the limits. The torture is as unrelenting as ever, and you're not sure that either of you can take much more of it. You nurse him, kiss him, and tend him as always, and he never once complains, or looks at you in reproach for failing to stop them with the information you have locked up in your mind. Sometimes, when he's feeling really bad, you take his cock gently in your mouth and just hold it there. It isn't even a sex thing, more a comfort thing – as much for you as for him as it calms both of you, connects you on some fundamental level that the aliens can never breach, no matter how much of your dignity they try to strip away from you.

You lose count of the times you watch him screaming in agony as they tear his limbs from his body, or cut into his chest, or any of the number of ways they hurt him. You now have a permanent red bruise across your chest and arms and waist where you've fought against those manacles, struggled mindlessly, crazy with grief as they hurt him beyond anybody's endurance. You've seen the look of total despair in those dark eyes of his, at the same time tempered with that terrible stoicism, the grim look of a man who will bear everything to save a world. His body, his beautiful body, is carved into more times than you can begin to

count, and you wonder whether either of you will be able to stay sane - and then it's over, and he's dead again.

This time, you grab him the moment he's thrown back into the cell, and that's when you and he renew this strange bond that's grown up between you. You run at him, needing to make love, to consume, to be part of him, to escape with him from this nightmare, but he stops you.

"No...let me," he whispers, taking your hand away from where it's hungrily pumping his cock. "Here..." He holds you lightly in his arms and drops a kiss on your lips and you push up hungrily for more. "No...like this..." he whispers, sinking to the floor of the cell, pulling you slowly after him. You wonder what this is about, this unhurried pace, and the way he stops you when you go too fast, too eager. He makes love to you for hours, in every single possible way...and he makes love slowly, and then you begin to understand that he wants the good times to last for hours to counterbalance all the bad times. You've never known such gentle lovemaking – so slow, and languorous, as you both take a lifetime exploring each other's bodies, sucking and fondling and caressing. It's never harsh, or explosive, or violent – that would be too much like what those bastard aliens are doing to you. You learn what it can be like to make love, as opposed to having quick, raw, violent sex. This feels so new, that you are lost in wonderment and you learn every single slow, tender stroke and lick from him, every lazy thrust, every burning caress, following his lead. Whenever you touch him, or he touches you, it's with a careful respect and tenderness that sometimes brings tears to your eyes...and you sense that this is his rebellion, the only riposte he can make to them through all the dying and torture. *This is what it means to be human*, he seems to be saying, as those dark eyes of his glow at you when he leans his head forward to

gently kiss your cheek and lips and neck. *This is what we are - not the suffering, screaming lumps of flesh you turn us into in that torture room, but this...and what we are is beautiful .*

He conveys all this with a touch of his broad thumb on your collarbone, and the lightest whisper of a kiss on your nipples. It's in the way he treats your body as if it's the most precious thing in the world to him, to be cherished and loved and taken care of - and you were never more in love with him than you are now, lost in the scent and feel of him, lost in his kindness, connected, more than anything else, to his shining humanity.

You make love for what feels like an eternity, both of you pleasuring each other over and over again, because this is the only pleasure on offer up here, and you're determined to show those bastards they don't own you, that you're still able to have control over this tiny aspect of your lives, and when you're both spent, he rolls back on top of you and coaxes one more climax out of your sated body, and you're stunned by the look in those dark eyes as he works – this is his revenge on the creatures keeping us here and hurting us like this. It's the only revenge he has, and he's enjoying it for all he's worth.

After that first long session he rolls onto his back, all sweaty from sex, and lets out a loud roar that emanates from deep inside his chest. You stare at him, alarmed, but it isn't aimed at you - it's for their benefit – he's like a silverback gorilla, roaring out his sheer defiance, and it makes you laugh out loud. Just when you think you've got to know him, when he's told you and shown you everything he is, he surprises you like this and you love that about him too. He turns back to you and gathers you to him, and you see yourself reflected in his eyes. Your beard is thick and dark, your body bruised from their manacles, and your eyes are haunted – but you're glowing, coated in sweat and semen and glistening with the joy of

being connected to this man. Your enemy. Your lover. The man who killed you first...and the only person you've ever loved in all your lifetimes.

Surprisingly, considering how many other topics you cover during your time in this stark, white cell, you never once talk about sex. You never ask him and he doesn't tell you, whether he's had any previous male lovers, and you don't tell him about yours. He does tell you about Sharon and you tell him about Marita, but you don't speak of other men. Maybe because you don't want to hear he's had other male lovers or maybe because it isn't relevant, because it's nothing compared to what the two of you have found up here, in this most unlikely of places.

Time grows more and more meaningless, locked up in this unreal little world. His stories, his tenderness, his intelligence and his sheer blinding humanity stop surprising you, but you never stop being surprised by yourself. You wait for it to end – to find him boring, to resent the hold he exerts over what was once the stony ground of your heart that somewhere along the way threw up tender green shoots. At some point you expect the magic enchantment that seems to have enveloped you to wear off, but if anything it just grows stronger. With him you can be yourself, and that's something you've never been before, in all your years as a Consortium double agent, spy, assassin and god knows what else. With him, you truly are newborn. There's no need for pretence because up here there's nobody to judge you and nothing to hide. It's a two way street – and you understand him in way you never could have imagined understanding anyone before. And the terrible price you pay for that intimacy is the agony you experience every time you watch them torturing him, and every time you watch him die.

For the first few times, you're both so defiant; the connection you share during love-making and the sense of rebellion it gives you makes you both strong. He roars his way to his deaths 7, 8, 9, 10 times...but slowly, surely, you notice a change in him. The first time his newborn cock fails to respond to your loving ministrations when he's returned to the cell he dismisses it with a gentle, weary smile, lies down with you and makes love to you with his mouth and hands instead, but you note that he remains un-aroused himself. His erections become fewer and fewer, but they're just a symptom of what you see in his eyes. Slowly, right in front of you, he fades. He's been tortured, died, and resurrected more times than you endured it, and you remember how close you felt to insanity when it was happening to you.

"Walter...please, talk to me," you implore, when you're both returned to the cell after one of their torture sessions. His body is covered in lacerated wounds and he lies on the floor and gazes out of the window, those dark eyes of his distant, and lost. He no longer talks as much as he used to – he sleeps for longer, and even when newborn there seem to be dark shadows under his eyes and even darker ones within them. He doesn't reply to your entreaty, not, you think, because he doesn't want to, but because he hasn't heard you.

"Walter?" You kneel by his side, and gently touch his shoulder. He turns his head, slowly, towards you as if moving from a great distance.

"Hmm? Alex?" He smiles at you and reaches out a hand to softly brush your long hair from your face. Your hair now reaches to your shoulders and your beard is bushy and unkempt. You're not surprised he doesn't find you attractive any more.

"Walter...please..." you whisper. "What's happening?"

"Happening?" He struggles to focus on you, his eyes still distant and faraway. "Alex...I'm so tired. I want to...escape," he murmurs.

"Walter there's no way..." you begin. You talked about escape incessantly during his first few lifetimes, fantasised about it, planned it, even tried it on more than one occasion, suffering the inevitable consequences...you both know it's impossible. The realisation of what he's saying sinks in and you crouch there, disconsolate, beside him.

"Walter...please don't leave me," you whisper. He smiles and struggles to sit.

"Alex...I'm sorry. Sometimes...I can't help it...I just find myself going to a place in my mind where I can hide," he murmurs.

"You used to be able to hide in me," you tell him, stroking his arm gently, trying to remind him.

"I know...but now...sometimes if I find my mind just wanders, I find that I'm not here...and when that happens...I can escape the pain, escape all of it..." His voice breaks just a little.

"I'm sorry...I'm being selfish. Walter, if you need that refuge, then take it," you tell him, because you understand all too well how he feels.

"No...I'll try to stay..." His dark eyes flash and you can visibly see him willing himself to hold on. "Damn it...I'll try." He looks angry – but with himself, not you, and much as he wants to stay in the moment, you don't think he really has much choice in the matter. They've damaged him too much – human beings weren't built for this kind of abuse. "I'm sorry, Alex. I'll try harder. I'll fight it." His face crumples in frustration and you can see how hard this is

for him. He doesn't want to leave you but it's not a decision he's making by his own choice – his body is making it for him and that distresses him. He's always been so in control of his own emotions, even if not his circumstances.

"Walter..." You gather him up as carefully as you can, and hug him tightly. "Let's talk. Tell me about Sharon...about Mulder...tell me about anything." You just want to hear him talk, to be reassured that it's okay, that he hasn't left you, but you know his grasp on the situation is slipping and that at some point he'll drift into madness. You know because it so nearly happened to you before he arrived and because you feel sure it will happen to him if he disappears into the darkness inside his own mind.

"You talk." He smiles, tiredly. "I'll listen."

"Walter, do you remember the first time I told you that I love you?" you ask him, wondering how long ago that declaration was. You've said it many times since.

"Yes...I remember." He smiles again, and manages to stroke your arm where it's holding him.

"Do you remember your reply? You said 'I know'. At the time I found that reassuring...but all the times I've said it since, your reply is always the same. Walter...I need to know...before you leave me...is it just companionship, just the situation...or could you, could we... if we were back down on Earth...could you and I be lovers there too?"

You ask it falteringly, but you need to know. He thinks about it for so long that you wonder if it might be too late, and he might already have left you, but then he looks up and you see he's still there, those dark eyes still hanging on to some semblance of himself.

"Alex...I wouldn't be so cruel as to give you the answer to that question," he says, in a low, deeply anguished tone. You feel your heart plummet, and draw back from him. You could kick yourself for being so fucking stupid as to think that he'd give a shit about you in any other circumstance than this. You're Alex the Consortium freak, Alex the not-quite human, Alex who put nanobots in his bloodstream and enjoyed pressing the button that activated them. You're Alex, his old torturer – how different are you from his current tormentors?

"No..." His hand brushes against your arm again, more urgently, despite his weakened condition, and you look down into his eyes to see yourself reflected back, your pain written all over your face. "No," he says again, and that's when it becomes so blindingly obvious that you feel it like a physical kick to the stomach.

"Oh...oh shit..." You wrap your arms around him again, and rock him against your chest. That sleek head of his is thrown back, and his dark eyes devour you as you hold him to you, like a child, loving him even more now, just like he didn't want you to. No, he never replied to your many declarations of love with one of his own – how could he? Every day you watch him being tortured and killed, and every day you bear the weight of your guilt for not saving him when you know the words that could stop his pain. If he said he loved you, what kind of unbearable burden would that place on you, and what might you do as a result? No, of course he wouldn't be that cruel. "Oh fuck...I'm so sorry..." Sorry you asked, because both answers would hurt and this one does, twisting in your gut like a knife. He's the first person to have told you he loves you – in all your life, the first person to ever have loved you, and

you condemn him to torture and death over and over again. You stare into the distance, out of the porthole, and he stares with you, both of you lost in thought. Now you envy him his increasing distance and detachment. Now you long to follow him into the void of darkness. One day, you know he'll complete that journey he's already started, into the recesses of his own mind, and then you're fairly sure you'll be right behind him if only your Consortium genes will let you...that thought makes you go cold with fear. Imagine not even being able to have the comfort of insanity...imagine facing this, alone, without him...

"Oh shit, Walter, what have you done to me?" You ask him, your tears salty on your lips as they fall and become swallowed up in your beard. He shakes his head.

"Sorry," he whispers. "Sorry, sorry, sorry..." And you both rock there, lost in the knowledge of what you have become - because of him.

As the torture sessions continue, you watch him face them more and more silently. Now he doesn't even scream when they hurt him and that somehow bothers you more than when he roared out his all too human pain. Slowly but surely you're losing him and you've never faced this before - never had to face it. All your decisions, all your life, were made out of spite and defiance, out of a need to punish the men who created you – you never had to make a decision out of love before. You still hold him during your time alone in the cell between torture sessions, although you're not sure he even notices any more; even when newborn he looks lost, haunted, and haggard. Sometimes he still talks to you, but more often he hides his face in his arms, or stares blankly into space. You both stare at that world out there, that small blue/green globe that you've both given up so much for, and now, for

the first time, you start considering a possibility you never countenanced before. Can you really sacrifice a whole world for this man? Could you do that? Would it be the right thing to do? When do the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many? When he's the only person you've ever loved? Does that make it okay – because you love him? Or maybe because he's a man who has so bravely faced a torture that no human being could ever be expected to endure, and yet he has, over and over again, without a word of entreaty to you to stop his suffering – does that make it all right? Does that make it okay?

"Alex?" He looks at you, as if he can read your mind. He so rarely talks these days and you smile at him, stroking his head where it's lying in your lap.

"It's all right, Walter," you tell him soothingly.

"I dreamed we were both walking on the moon," he tells you.

"That sounds cool." You grin, and he nods, uncertainly.

"Mulder was there, and Scully, and their baby..." he whispers. "We were in pressure suits, and you took off your glove...and I was screaming at you not to, but you didn't listen..." He sounds agitated.

"I'm sorry, Walter." You stroke his head again.

"You never listen," he whispers. "Never did."

"No," you reply, bending to kiss his lips. He lies there, accepting the kiss, returning it a little with what strength he has left.

What did the world ever do to you except hate you? You were always an outlaw from the moment you were born. An experiment, not a child, not even fully human. Are you even all that important in the grand scheme of things? Maybe it's time to give the real humans control over their own destiny. All these years you've lied to them, deceived them, acted supposedly for their best interests but really out of a desire to preserve your own control over the situation and your own sense of importance, denying them the knowledge that would enable them to make decisions for themselves. You, the Consortium, and the Resistance – all of you high-handedly refused to allow humanity a chance to fight their own battle, and maybe to win it, or to at least die trying. Even if you never surrendered this information that you hold...there's no guarantee you'd save the world. Yes, you know the details of the most powerful weapon the Resistance has developed, but there's still time – and the minds of the most able men and women on the planet might come up with something even better. Maybe, just maybe, humanity can save itself. Maybe humanity doesn't need you to fight its battles.

“Alex,” Walter's voice is rasping, and low. He's trying so hard to stay with you through this.

“It's okay, Walter. I'm just thinking,” you reply, as a little kernel of some greater truth occurs to you and you struggle to grasp it. You were Consortium born and bred and what did they ever do except treat the great mass of humanity like children, denying them the truth and a voice in their own destiny? All your life you've both hated and loved that blue-green world hanging so serenely out there in space, just out of reach. You wanted to belong at the same time as knowing you never could. Your ongoing rebellion against everything has twined, fatally, with your need to make a place for yourself in humanity without ever really being connected to it. Isn't that the real truth of all this?

Did you ever really want to be human? Did you even try? Wasn't it more interesting to be different, to keep yourself apart from humanity, to look down on them and reject them as you felt they'd rejected you? Didn't that make you more special? Knowing what you knew, always able to sneer at them for their weaknesses and their lack of knowledge - a knowledge that you and the Consortium always strove so hard to keep from them. You despised them for not accepting you, hated yourself for not being one of them, and yet, in the end, the greatest obstacle to your acceptance was not them but you all along.

"Oh shit." You sit back with a sigh, and Walter's anguished dark eyes gaze at you, full of a wretched, desperate kind of empathy. "Are all moments of great personal revelation this fucking painful, Walter? Huh?" You ask him, and his eyes flicker as if he understands everything that's been going through your mind.

And, while we're being brutally honest here, didn't you endure all those deaths, all that torture, at least partly out of rebellion, defiance, and spite? Isn't that the core of what Alex Krycek is - or at least once was? It defined you for so long that you couldn't let go of it even up here, under these circumstances. Were you even thinking about humanity, about saving the world? Or was it just you, Alex Krycek, being your old cussed self - not giving up your knowledge so that that world, which rejected you so completely during your one lifetime on it, would be in your debt, and would have something to be grateful to you for. And, worse than that, in your arrogance, vanity, pride, and, perhaps most of all, your need to belong, haven't you clung to the belief that you and you alone are the sole bulwark holding up the invasion? There are others with knowledge at least as great as your own - and can you even say that you know everything? Since when have the Consortium ever revealed the whole truth about anything, even to their most trusted operatives? No, humanity still has its hope

even without Alex Krycek defending his knowledge on the altar of Walter Skinner's broken body, short, pain-filled lifetimes, and increasingly fragile spirit. So, maybe now it's time to give up this self-imposed burden, to surrender it in the cause of a greater need than your own.

"Alex...don't take the glove off," Walter whispers, interrupting your train of thought.

"I might have to, Walter," you reply, tenderly stroking his face.

"Not for me," he mutters incomprehensibly, sliding between his dream and reality, understanding only the importance of the decision.

"Not for you," you reassure him. "For me."

"Why?" He gazes at you blankly.

"Because..." You pause, and look down into those dark eyes. "Because I'm only human, Walter," you tell him gently.

He smiles and pats your hand. "I always told you that," he reminds you and you shake your head wryly.

"Well, telling me wasn't good enough – you had to show me. And you did."

You disengage from him gently, laying his head on the floor, and he goes easily, trusting you.

You stand up and call out to them, and a few minutes later the door opens, and this time when they enter, they leave him where he is, and take you instead.

You tell them. You tell them everything they want to know and you ask for only one thing in return – the one thing you think they'll grant because you know they sure as hell won't send you back to Earth to live out your life knowing all that you know. You thought it would be hard to sell out that world out there, hanging so peacefully in the sky, but when it comes to it, it's easy. The words come tumbling out like a flowing river from your mouth, leaving you only with a sense of relief that it's done, that it's all over. You're Alex Krycek, the Judas of your age, and you find that you can bear that. In fact, it has an air of inevitability about it. Maybe one day the world will find out what you did and your name will be synonymous with the greatest of betrayals, but that doesn't concern you much either. Maybe you were born to carry that burden – maybe that has always been your destiny. You've spent a long time trying to outrun it but it tracked you down and overtook you in the end. Maybe you've finally become the treacherous, traitorous coward that Skinner and Mulder and so many others took you for for so long. Or maybe the truth lies somewhere else, in the twisted skein of your heritage and in this final act, born out of love and maybe, just a little – out of hope?

They send you back to the cell and you wait but only for a little while. Soon they come back to the cell and you hope they intend to keep their side of the bargain. Somehow, and you're not sure why, you think they will. Not because they're noble, or honourable, but because they think with an insect's mind – they're more logical than humans, and you and he have outlived your usefulness. You're pretty sure that if they got what they were looking for, they'll grant the one request you brought to the negotiating table. You hope so anyway, or it'll all have been for nothing. Rasping, and salivating, they drag you both out of your cell. He can barely stand as they push you both along those dark red corridors and you put an arm

under his shoulder and help carry him – only to find that they're taking you in a different direction this time. You're not sure he's even noticed that it's all changed, that this time they won't be hurting him. He has that dark, resigned look in his eyes, steeling himself for inevitable pain and death.

You end up in what looks like a dimly lit, cavernous hold. They push you over to a section of the floor that's made of some invisible substance. At first it feels as if you're standing on top of space itself, but it's solid underfoot, although disorienting to see the stars beneath your toes – as if you're tiptoeing through the universe. He looks at you, a questioning expression in those dark eyes.

"It's all right, Walter," you reassure him gently. "It's okay." You turn to the bounty hunter who has accompanied you, along with a dozen or more of the foul locusts. "I want clothes," you tell him, "for both of us."

He blinks, and then turns back to the aliens, shifts, and relays the demand. There's some rasping of mandibles but one of them goes and a short time later returns with the requested clothing. Walter can barely stand, so you have to dress him yourself. He sways against you, allowing you to pull the plain gray sweatpants and black tee shirt over his lacerated skin. His face is unmarked, so you can almost make-believe that none of this nightmare ever happened – except for the haunted expression in those dark eyes of his. This man has died countless times for you. He never once asked anything of you, except that you wouldn't give in, and that, alas, was one promise you couldn't keep. You wonder, as you smooth the fabric carefully over his solid flesh, where they got this clothing from – probably stolen from the poor bastards they've abducted and tortured up here and then sent back incubating the

virus they put in their bloodstreams. The sweatpants are far too short for him, and the tee shirt too tight but that doesn't matter. You just wanted to give him some dignity – not that he ever lost that. Even naked, suffering, tortured to death over and over again, they could never destroy that innate dignity of his.

"Alex, what's happening?" He asks, bewildered, the focus coming back into his eyes as he struggles to return to reality, to deal with what's going on here.

"Nothing, Walter, it's okay. Hush," you smile. You dress yourself in the jeans and sweater they provided, and then take him in your arms. He leans his head against your shoulder but he hasn't been reassured by your soothing words.

"What did you do, Alex?" He whispers.

"What I had to, Walter," you reply. You hug him close, and then nod to the bounty hunter. He grins that ghoulish smile one last time. The wait seems to last for eternity, but you hold Walter tight, keeping him upright. He finds the strength from within his weary, abused body, to stand up straight, and look into your eyes, and you face his searching gaze with an inner calm.

"Tell me you didn't...not to save me, Alex," he whispers.

"No - to save me." You won't let him go to his final death thinking that, and it's nearly true. Did the aliens plan it this way, you wonder? Do they really have that level of understanding of this human race, to which you have, somewhat belatedly, discovered you belong, or were they just lucky? Did they plant him in your cell intending for you to become too close to him

to be able to continue witnessing his suffering? If so, why did they pick him, of all people? Why him, the man who killed you first? You have no idea what the answer to any of these questions might be, and to be honest, you don't really care. You've been living a life you had no right to for far too long. The world and its inhabitants long ago ceased to be any concern of yours. You were always a dead man, reaching out with your great betrayal from beyond the grave. The Consortium created you a hybrid, something less than human, and that was the way you died, but it wasn't how you were reborn – oh, not by them and their tank, but by him. He birthed this Alex by reaching out to you with his own shining humanity. He made you human and, being human, you had no choice but to betray a whole world for the sake of the man you love. To stand by and continue watching – that would have been inhuman.

"I love you," you tell him, as the moment approaches. He smiles, and you feel his hands stroke your back.

"I know," he replies. He glances at the aliens, now partially obscured behind a barrier of flickering blue light, and then back at you, clearly guessing what's about to happen. "I love you too, Alex."

You stare at him, surprised, not realising until he said it just how much you wanted to hear it, and a moment later the floor beneath you gives way and you're sucked out into the vacuum of space. You press your lips against his as you go, claiming the last air from his lungs, and sharing your own with him in one final embrace. You've died so many times between you that this is just one more death...and a gentler one than any that were ever visited upon you in this ship. This death will be relatively fast. You feel him stiffen against you as he struggles to breathe, and you tighten your grasp on him with your own fading

strength. Your legs and arms are wrapped around his body, and your face locked against his. You want rigor mortis to freeze you together, so that you can float away in space for all eternity, entwined. One day, you wonder if humankind, or whatever species might rise up to take its place maybe millions of years in the future, will find you both frozen in time, wrapped together, still floating through space, together for eternity. If so, you wonder what they might conjecture about you and the nature of your death. Whatever it is, they're likely to be wrong.

They won't know that he is Walter Skinner, a man you loved more than an entire world. You wish you could tell them all about this man, so that they might understand that he is worth sacrificing a world for and that you'd do it all over again.

And they won't know that you are Alex Krycek, Consortium born and bred, former assassin, cheat, liar, thief, erstwhile leader of the Resistance, betrayer of the Earth, and finally, at last, it seems...an all too human being.

The End

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