

Laundry by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/laundry/>
Story Notes:

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I found this wonderful pic by **The Theban Band** (thanks gals!) and sent the URL to Sergeeva so she could drool over it too. She wrote two wonderful snippets to go with it. Duly inspired, I came up with one too. It's short and sappy 'cos that's all I have the energy for right now.

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It was dark. He woke with a scream on his lips, and a vision of a face in his mind - a face that haunted him, and tore at his conscience. Dark, familiar eyes that should have been full of love, were instead consumed by hurt and hate, and the full force of that loathing was turned on him. He opened his mouth to scream, only to find that the words had been torn from him. His wordless scream turned into frenzied activity. He fought to be free, to return to where he belonged, his arms and legs scissoring desperately...

"Alex...Alex, wake up!"

"Unnh?" Alex came to with a start, and found himself staring into a pair of dark brown eyes. The room, full of light, hurt his eyes. He glanced around blearily. "Where are we?" he asked, confused and disorientated, his heart beating too fast in his chest. His mind was full of demons, each one grasping for him with greedy hands, trying to devour him, and he had to stay ahead of the game, he had to...

Walter frowned. "In the laundry room of our apartment block, Alex. Where did you think we were?" he teased, then his smile faded as he saw the befuddled look on his lover's face. Alex stared back at himself, reflected in his lover's dark eyes. His face was pale, his eyes shadowed, haunted, full of ghosts - but not ghosts of this world...

"We must have both dozed off," Skinner said gently. "I woke up when you started lashing out as if you were doing ten rounds with Mike Tyson. Alex...what was it? Not another one of those dreams?" Walter reached out an anxious arm and wrapped it around his lover's shoulder, pulling him close. Alex went with the ease of one who knew the comfort of those big arms, and the sheer sensory bliss of being held against that solid, reassuring chest. He rested his head against Walter's cheek, and closed his eyes.

"Yes. It was...not like a dream. More vivid," he murmured.

"Like the others?" Skinner's fingers painted little circles on Krycek's red sweater, teasing his skin through the fabric, bringing him back to reality.

"Yes...it's so hard to explain. I know they **are** dreams. I mean, realistically they have to be. Maybe they're a side effect of the drugs, but..." Alex shrugged, and felt Walter's fingers caress and cajole him into continuing. "They're just so **real**," he finished, shaking his head. "So damn real. I wouldn't mind if they were **nice** dreams but usually they aren't. Usually they..." He stopped, and shuddered.

Walter reached down, lifted his chin, and pressed a gentle, calming kiss to his lips. "They **are** just dreams, Alex," he said firmly.

"Supposing they aren't?" Alex drew away, his overactive mind buzzing with an idea that had preoccupied him ever since the dreams had first started haunting his sleep. "Suppose that...when we sleep we cross over into another reality - and when we sleep there, we live **this** life," he said.

Walter smiled. "That sounds like a fantastic idea. That's why you're the novelist and I'm not," he grinned.

"No, but...truly. I mean it," Alex whispered. "Maybe that's what's happening. It was just so **real**."

"You're just tired. You had a late night. I knew I should have insisted you came to bed."

"I wanted to finish the chapter." Alex shrugged. "You know how I get when the ideas come. I couldn't have slept even if I tried. I had to write it out."

"Hmm." Skinner made his 'stern' face, and Alex gave a rueful chuckle. "Yes, I know what you get like," Skinner sighed, stretching his long legs out in front of him, narrowly avoiding the laundry basket with his big, booted feet. "And I've learned to my cost from hundreds of kicked shins courtesy of your restless legs that imprisoning you in bed and expecting you to sleep is a lost cause. Even so...I wish you'd pace yourself better, Alex. You need your rest." His dark eyes were sad, his comment pointed.

Alex smiled, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief that **this** was his reality, not that other place, where nobody cared whether he lived or died. "I don't deserve you," he murmured.

"Whoa! Where did **that** come from?" Skinner wrapped two big arms around his lover and gave him a very noisy, slurpy kiss on the forehead. "You deserve nothing but the best, Alex!"

"Are you saying you're the best?" Alex teased mischievously.

"Well, I haven't had any complaints," Skinner grinned. He glanced around the laundry room to make sure they were alone, then he placed his hand on Alex's crotch and massaged the swelling bulge that he found there. Alex opened his mouth and allowed his tongue to wet his lips lasciviously, and Skinner laughed and pulled him close again. "You still haven't told me about the dream," he reminded his lover gently.

Alex sighed. He should have known that Walter wouldn't let him get away with that evasion. His lover was like a dog with a bone once a subject was begun - especially when that subject was in any way related to Alex's health or well-being.

"It was the same as before." He shrugged.

"The one with the aliens?" Skinner pressed.

"Yeah. Don't laugh." Alex prodded him in the ribs.

"I won't. I promise," Skinner's dark eyes were amused.

"All right. You were in this one." Alex bit on his lip, and glanced at his lover.

Skinner squeezed him encouragingly. "Go on. What was I doing? Being abducted by those evil aliens? Enduring horribly intrusive anal **probes**?" He said that last word with a hint of lustful intent, and Alex would have laughed out loud if it hadn't been for...

"No. I was killing you," he said.

Walter looked taken aback. "Oh," he said. "Hmm, that could be worryingly Freudian. What was your murder weapon of choice? Gun? Knife? Candlestick? Lead piping?" He grinned, trying to make a joke of it.

"No. I...I poisoned you," Alex told him. "I infected you with some kind of parasite. It gave me control over you. They were in your bloodstream...all I had to do was press a button and they were activated, making you very ill..." He stopped, the words choking in the back of his throat. Damn but it had felt real.

"Oh, Alex. Alex, Alex, Alex." Skinner reached out and pulled him close and he went, unresisting. "This is just your own fears coming out as nightmares, Alex, but there's no need. I keep testing negative. We practice safe sex. I'm fine. You haven't given me HIV. What you **have** given me is the best two years of my life. Please stop worrying about this."

"It's hard. If anything happened to you...if I caused anything to happen to you..." Alex glanced up at his lover, the worry radiating from every tense muscle in his body. His life had been a lonely one before he met Skinner - he still couldn't believe he had been lucky enough to become involved with this amazing man. He only had to look at his strong, handsome lover to get a hard on, and although he often teased Skinner about his status as a bona fide 'national treasure', he still found it mind-boggling that this man, **the** Walter Skinner, would be remotely interested in **him**, Alex Krycek, struggling author.

"Ssh...the only thing you've caused me is a ton of washing as the result of a far too vigorous sex life," Skinner grinned, glancing ruefully at the baskets around their feet. "And that's **with** all the condoms we get through!"

Alex smiled, and leaned his head on Skinner's shoulder again, watching as the dryer went around, mesmerizing him. It was warm in here. A warm Saturday morning spent doing the laundry with his lover. It felt good. It felt normal. Somehow he had a feeling that 'normal' wasn't something his alter ego, that other Alex, the one driven by fear, living in the dark, running with the rats, ever experienced.

"Maybe there are different realities, different universes," he murmured to his lover as he closed his eyes again. "Maybe we can catch glimpses of them when we sleep. Maybe that's what these dreams are. Maybe in another reality I'm not a novelist and you're not one of the nation's favorite sporting heroes. Maybe...maybe I **am** that assassin - and you **are** something high up in the FBI."

"Yeuch! Me in a suit! I don't think so!" Walter growled. "And I'm far too old to still have that 'sporting hero' tag attached. That was years ago!"

Alex grinned, cozying his face against his lover's denim-clad shoulder again, and then a thought occurred to him. Supposing he was glimpsing an alternate reality? Supposing **that** Alex was also glimpsing **his** reality and wanted it for himself? Supposing he found a way to cross over into this universe, and take from Alex what was his, to snuggle up to his **Walter**, while he was consigned to that other universe, where he would have to lie, and kill, and where Walter was his bitter enemy. Supposing...

"Alex. Stop it." Walter's voice broke through his thoughts.

"Stop what?" Alex glanced at his lover.

"All that buzzing inside your head. I can hear it from here."

"We're telepathic now are we?" Alex teased. "Now that would make a good plotline..."

"Stop it!" Walter groaned. "Just switch off whatever's going through your inventive little mind, and get some rest."

"Or?" Alex raised a provocative eyebrow.

"Or else," Walter replied firmly not rising to the bait.

Alex subsided against his lover again wishing it were that easy to switch off his thoughts. Sometimes he envied Walter his calm demeanor, and ability to take whatever the world threw at him without blinking an eye. Walter was probably right. They probably **were** just dreams induced by the drugs he took for his condition - that combined with the fact that he was on a writing high right now, and his imagination was working overtime as a result. He was tired, and he shouldn't have stayed up half the night writing. It was no wonder the dreams had seemed so vivid. He was run down.

"Supposing that other Alex found a way to take my place," he said, without realizing he'd spoken out loud. Walter gave a deep, heartfelt sigh. "No, listen...supposing he was deeply envious of what we have, and found a way to take my place."

"He couldn't. I'd know," Skinner replied.

"How?" Alex pressed.

"Well, does this other Alex, the assassin Alex, have a habit of asking weird and bizarre questions every five seconds?" Skinner raised an eyebrow. Alex opened his mouth to protest, and then closed it again, with a wry smile. "I rest my case," Skinner said, crossing his arms smugly.

Alex conceded the point. He still wished he could get the image of that other Alex out of his mind though. It made him sad in the way the leftover emotions from dreams sometimes do when they're particularly vivid. He felt a need to put something right, to say something that couldn't be said in that other world.

"Walter...?"

"Alex." Walter's voice was both amused and exasperated.

"Um, this is going to sound crazy...and sappy...but...in my dreams...uh, well, I loved you in that universe as well. You hated me and I loved you - but I could never tell you. I had to keep on hurting you and I hated doing it. I wanted you to know that I hated it. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," Skinner replied, his tone full of indulgent smiles. "But it isn't real, Alex." Walter's voice was low, rumbling, and calm. He was a man securely grounded in the real world for which Alex was profoundly grateful. If he ever got too lost in his own imagination Walter would always be there to pull him back. He felt Walter's head nod against his own, and knew that his lover was dozing off once more.

"Walter?" He muttered again.

"Hmm?" His lover replied.

"I'm glad we're just regular folk who talk, and make love, and...and do the laundry!" He glanced up to find that his lover's dark eyes were open, and fixed affectionately on him, bemused and loving at the same time. "There's something wild, exotic, and exhilarating about the other Alex's life," he mused. "As a novelist I'm always living in fantasy worlds...always creating what isn't real, making up for what's boring about my own existence, and I suppose there's a part of me that always wants to live in the worlds I create, to have that kind of fantasy life. But you know... I wouldn't want his life, however exciting it is. I want this one. I want normality, our normality...and you know...I think he probably wants it too. He'd give anything to have what we have here. It seems so mundane, but to just sit and do the laundry together...he wants that. He wants you." Alex shivered, almost scared to go back to sleep. It might not have been real but it had **felt** real.

"Well he can't have me. I'm already taken," Walter said softly, his lips nuzzling the side of Alex's face, warm, and tender. "And very happily taken I might add."

Alex grinned. Walter was surely right. It made sense. His HIV status did prey on his mind, and despite all the precautions they took he was constantly worried that Walter might contract the virus too. It was hardly surprising that he had dreamed up a scenario where he had infected his lover's blood with a deadly poison. It was so classically Freudian that it was almost amusing.

Alex settled down against his lover again, relishing the feel of Walter's shirt against his face, and Walter's strong, hard, muscled body nestling against his own. He wouldn't trade his life and his Walter for anything in this universe - or any other universe. No, Walter was **definitely** right. That other Alex Krycek and that other Walter Skinner were merely figments of his imagination. They didn't really exist...

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