

Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgot... by Xanthe



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Story Notes:

Posted: 6th Jan, 2000.

Graphic courtesy of **The Theban Band**. They do some absolutely fantastic pics, so go and visit their website.

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It was almost dawn. Crowds of revelers were still jostling in the streets, laughing and singing as Skinner drove home. He clenched his jaw, trying to drive safely through the throng. The new millennium had arrived while he had been working, and he'd barely noticed it, still less welcomed it in. Not that he would have done even if he hadn't been working. What was another damn year? So far it held the prospect of a giant computer meltdown and an orgy of commercialism as everything became branded with the prefix "millennium". Millennium cookies, millennium candles, millennium pens... the list was never ending. A youth staggered past Skinner's car, clearly drunk on his ass. His head was shaven of hair except for a strip of stubble proclaiming "Y2K" in big letters.

A thought occurred to Skinner and he wondered, idly, whether the palm pilot Krycek used to torment him might have its own Y2K problem. Maybe, even now, the nano-technology in his blood was breaking down, and individual nanocytes were running amok, holding their own millennium celebration. Unlikely. Krycek, ever the efficient assassin, would have made sure his instrument of torture and blackmail would be fully Y2K compliant. Skinner rolled his shoulders, hating what was inside him and the bastard who had put it there.

He was so lost in thought, that he almost didn't notice the police cars and ambulances by the side of the road. When they did register, he dismissed the incident as a routine car wreck, no doubt caused by an overdose of millennial high spirits. He was about to drive on, when his headlights picked out a shape lying by the side of the road. He screeched to a halt, his heart thumping. A disembodied arm was lying on the ground. For a moment, he fought back memories of 'Nam, of limbs scattered around the torso of a dead friend, lying bloodied in the center of a minefield, a macabre parody of what had once been a living, breathing human being. Skinner held onto the steering wheel until the shaking stopped, then he took a deep breath, undid his seat belt, and got out of the car.

The police officers and paramedics were ignoring the disembodied arm. They were clustered around a body being placed on a gurney. Skinner frowned, wondering at their negligence. With microsurgery, the limb might still be re-attached...he wandered closer - then froze. The arm wasn't real. Skinner's jaw clenched even tighter, and there was only one thought passing through his mind as he plucked the prosthetic from the road, and examined it. Somewhere, in the distance, he could hear voices singing, drunkenly: "Should old acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind..."

Krycek.

Skinner got out his badge and pushed his way into the ambulance.

"Who is he?" He demanded. "What happened to him?" Two quick strides took him to the side of a man lying, unmoving, on the gurney.

"We fished him out of the Potomac," a startled paramedic replied. "He's in a bad way. Couple of stab wounds, covered in bruises - someone gave him one hell of a beating then left him for dead."

Skinner reached out, and pulled the back of a wet, leather jacket towards him. A dark head lolled, and a pale, bruised face flopped sideways into the light, its features drawn into a grimace of pain.

"Do you know him, sir?" The paramedic asked, closing the ambulance door.

Somewhere in the distance, Skinner could still hear the singing and it sounded eerie, and surreal in the dark, and cold, as he stood there, clutching a disembodied arm, staring at the helpless face of an enemy he at last had at his mercy. He made the decision without even thinking about it, acting on an instinct borne out of too many months of frustrated impotence and a deep, bitter pain and resentment.

"Yes." He turned back to the paramedic. "Yes, I do know him. His name is Alex...and he's my brother."

Skinner stayed at his 'brother's' side for the entire journey, affecting a grim-faced concern that was real enough. He needed Krycek to live. Krycek held all the answers to Skinner's current predicament in his one good hand. Skinner had no idea what he was going to do next, but on one point he was perfectly clear: he was going to be at Krycek's side when his enemy woke up, and he was going to enjoy turning the tables on him. He didn't regret the lie he'd told. The chances of hanging onto the slippery assassin, of being allowed to question Krycek alone, without the Bureau knowing, without anyone knowing, were slight. Under pressure, he had come up with the one sure-fire way to have constant access to the other man.

They reached the hospital, and the gurney was unloaded from the ambulance. Skinner stood watch outside the emergency room, anxiously pacing the corridor as he waited for news, like any good brother. It was sometime after 8 am when the doctor emerged.

"Is he going to make it?" Skinner asked, imbuing the question with the right degree of anxiety but for all the wrong reasons.

The doctor smiled. "By rights he should be dead," he said, "but he's a tough young man. He's been lucky. He must have some bad enemies to have ended up like that, but he'll live."

For now, Skinner thought grimly to himself. "Can I see him?" He asked.

"You can." The doctor gave a placatory smile in response to his obvious concern. "But he's sleeping right now. He won't wake up for several hours."

"That's okay. I can wait," Skinner said tersely. "I want to be there when he opens his eyes."

"That's a good idea - I think he should see a familiar face when he comes to," the doctor said with another understanding smile, patting Skinner's arm. Skinner gave a wry grunt. Oh yeah, it would be one hell of a wake up for Krycek to find an old enemy waiting for him.

"Happy New Year," the doctor told him as he left.

Skinner managed a wry, faded smile in reply. "Happy New Year," he muttered. Oh yeah, it was going to be a happy new year all right. A Happy New Life too, if he had his way - and all because of the little gift that had been dropped into his lap, like a gift from the gods. A "millennium" gift, he thought to himself smugly, pushing open the door.

Krycek's face was as pale as the sheets he was lying on, making the dark bruises decorating his jaw seem even more livid. Skinner winced as he surveyed the damage.

"Looks like you really pissed someone off, boy," he murmured, taking in the deep cut under Krycek's eye, the badly split lip, and the multi-hued contusions along the side of the other man's cheek. Krycek's face was badly swollen, and if Skinner hadn't had the imprint of his enemy's visage indelibly printed in his mind, he might not even have recognized him under the harsh hospital lights.

He glanced down, and saw the bandaged fingers on Krycek's good hand. So, he had tried to fight back before he'd been overpowered. Skinner checked the medical notes. Stab wounds to the shoulder, leg, and hand, a broken finger, concussion, multiple lacerations, scratches and contusions.

"He who lives by the sword..." Skinner whispered, trying, and failing, to find some shred of pity for his enemy's plight. He sat down in the armchair beside the bed, and gazed impassively at the sleeping man. Lying like this, helpless, his dark hair spread over the pillow, Krycek did in fact remind him of his own little brother. Skinner wondered if someone had ever loved the child this man had once been, whether there was anyone out there who would, if given the chance, stand at Alex Krycek's bedside, faces lined with genuine worry at his current condition.

"Does it come to this - that the only person who cares if you live or die is someone who hates you, Krycek?" Skinner asked, rhetorically.

Krycek's pale face didn't move, but his eyelids flickered.

"Sleep, boy, because I intend to be here when you wake up," Skinner growled, placing one hand over Krycek's bandaged hand, in a parody of caring, "and then you'll wish you'd died out there in the river, and that's a promise. You and I are going to have a long talk, and you're going to tell me everything I need to know, whether you want to or not."

Skinner took his gun out of its holster. Krycek was in no condition to put up a fight, but even so, he wasn't taking any chances. He glanced around the room, and found Krycek's clothing folded neatly on a chair. He got up and rifled through it, but found no evidence either of any identification (which didn't surprise him), or the palm pilot, which did. Somehow he had imagined that Krycek carried it everywhere with him, but maybe that was impractical. The nanocyte issue might dominate Skinner's life, but he supposed that to Krycek he was just another job.

Skinner kept his vigil all day, and into the following night. It was sometime around dawn on the 2nd day of the new millennium when Krycek finally stirred. Some kind of alarm went off by his bed, and a few seconds later a nurse ran into the room. Krycek's eyelids flickered open, and red-rimmed, green eyes blinked as they tried to make sense of his surroundings.

"Hello, Alex."

Skinner stepped into the light at the end of the bed, and waited, expectantly. Krycek glanced at him, then glanced away as if Skinner meant nothing to him.

"Where...?" He began, his voice a hoarse, choking whisper. The nurse filled a glass of water, and held it to his lips. Skinner watched, impassively, enjoying his moment. Krycek drank the water down, then tried to lever himself up. He winced and gave in when the nurse told him to lie back down again. "Where am I?" He asked, his voice sounding more normal. He looked at the nurse, and then to Skinner, his expression blank, and hesitant.

"You're in the hospital, Alex. Don't you remember what happened to you?" Skinner asked.

Krycek shook his head. "No. No, I don't." His bandaged fingers clutched painfully at the white sheet, and he looked almost scared. With good reason, Skinner thought. He flexed his hand behind his back, hoping the nurse would leave soon, so that he could get his answers.

"You've been badly hurt," the nurse told her patient. "You've been unconscious for over 24 hours."

"Oh." Krycek stared at her blankly.

"So you missed the party of the century!" She exclaimed.

His green eyes were cloudy and confused. "The party...?" He repeated.

"The new millennium." She placed another pillow beneath his head, and he stared at her, still confused.

"I'm sorry...I just...I don't...I don't remember." He smiled at her feebly, and she hesitated for a moment in her bed-making activity, and looked at him.

"Well, you've been badly hurt. I'll call the doctor in a minute and..."

"Isn't he the doctor?" Alex interrupted, glancing at Skinner. Skinner's eyes narrowed, and he surveyed the other man intently, wondering what trick Krycek was pulling now.

"What? No..." The nurse looked worried. "Don't you recognize him, Alex? He's been here all night, watching over you."

"I don't know him." Krycek's eyes met Skinner's and held his gaze for what seemed like an eternity, fixed in time, unwavering. Realization set in, and Skinner frowned and shook his

head imperceptibly. Clever, Krycek. Very clever. But it won't work.

"Alex..." The nurse's tone was gentle. "His name is Walter, and he's your brother."

"I'm sorry." Krycek dropped his gaze. "I really don't remember."

"Well, that's okay, it's not..." she began.

Krycek grabbed her arm, his face crumpled, and scared. "No, you don't understand. It's not just him. I don't remember anything," he said desperately.

Skinner rocked back on his heels, and folded his arms over his chest. Krycek's green eyes met his again, but there was no clue in that innocent, bemused expression.

"All right. Don't worry," the nurse said, patting Krycek comfortingly on the arm. "I'll be back with the doctor in a few minutes." She gave Skinner an apologetic smile, then left the room.

Skinner strode swiftly to Krycek's bedside, and glared down at him.

"It won't work, Krycek," he hissed. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I can't remember you. I'm glad you were here for me." Krycek's lips parted, and he winced as he tried to smile. Skinner was on the verge of getting hold of his enemy's neck and squeezing hard, when the door opened and the doctor entered the room.

The doctor diagnosed amnesia caused by concussion and trauma. Skinner's diagnosis was a bad case of rat survival instinct. He didn't believe the lying little bastard for a second. There was little he could do though, as an array of doctors, neurologists, and psychologists made their way to his 'little brother's' bedside, and conducted a myriad of tests over the next few days. Suddenly his plan, forged in the heat of the moment, didn't seem so clever. If he had told the truth from the beginning, he could have arranged for a guard to be posted, and Krycek kept under constant surveillance until he was well enough to be arrested. As it was, he was stuck in limbo. He couldn't help but admire Krycek's skill; even at death's door, the other man had somehow managed to outmaneuver him.

Skinner watched events unfolding with a growing sense of his own helplessness. Just as he was a victim of the nanocytes, now he was a victim all over again, and it made him seethe in silent frustration. He wasn't used to being a victim - it wasn't a role he played well. He still clung to the hope that if he just stayed glued to Krycek's side for long enough, the other man would crack. Luckily, Krycek was still too ill to walk, so escape was impossible - for now. Skinner didn't fool himself that state of affairs would last for long. He needed to get Krycek somewhere on his own in order to get the truth out of him, one way or the other, and Skinner didn't doubt that he had the capacity to beat it out of his former agent. The nanocytes had been the last in a long line of insults his enemy had offered to him, and his anger with the younger man was close to the surface. Skinner knew himself to be near to breaking point. If he had a helpless Krycek at his mercy, he knew he'd get the truth. Whatever it cost both of them.

In this twisted game of cat and mouse, Skinner decided he'd been the mouse for long enough. It was time to become the predator. Krycek was out of immediate danger. He'd live - and that was all Skinner needed. Whether the other man stayed that way would depend upon how helpful he was.

"I'm not happy with the care my brother is getting here," he informed the doctor, in his most authoritative AD tone. "I'm going to take him home with me, and arrange for experts to see him. Maybe being in a familiar environment will help jog his memory." He wasn't watching the doctor - he was too busy watching Krycek to see what reaction there was to him raising the stakes in this dangerous game. The other man's eyes didn't register any emotion. They simply stared at him, so blank, and innocent. He didn't seem anxious on hearing this news, and he didn't protest.

"Well...he needs around the clock nursing," the doctor informed him, clearly reluctant to relinquish his interestingly amnesiac patient.

"He'll get it." Skinner shrugged. "I'm a wealthy man. I can afford it."

"He'll have to sign a release form," the doctor continued.

"He'll sign it."

Krycek's eyes didn't waver, as they held Skinner's gaze. He didn't raise any objection to his 'brother' making these decisions for him.

"Well, if that's okay with him then..."

"It's fine with him. Isn't it, Alex?" Skinner asked. Krycek looked at him for a long moment, and then nodded.

"I guess my brother knows best," he said, with a slight shrug. "Hell, at this moment in time he knows more about me than I do, so I have to trust him to do what's best for me!" He gave an uncertain laugh. Skinner frowned, wondering what was going on in the other man's head. Krycek was playing along as if he really did have amnesia. Skinner had expected that his enemy would argue the issue with him. He could hardly want to be handed over into Skinner's care, weak and helpless as he was, but Krycek was giving him a look of total trust, those green eyes guileless. For the first time, Skinner had the faintest nagging doubt at the back of his mind. Supposing Krycek was telling the truth? What then?

Skinner wasted no time in making arrangements. He called the office and told Kim tersely that he was going on vacation. As of now. She sounded confused, and asked him when he'd be back.

"I have no idea," Skinner told her bluntly, severing the connection. Compared to getting his life back, his job seemed relatively unimportant. He'd deal with the consequences of his absence when he got back. Right now, the only thing he could focus on was getting Krycek

on his own and beating the shit out of him in order that he could regain some semblance of a life - something that the other man had taken from him. Skinner called for a courier, who he sent to his apartment to pick up clothing, and a key. He couldn't risk going himself. He wasn't letting Krycek out of his sight - not for a second. He knew from experience that Krycek was an opportunist. If Skinner made one wrong move the other man would exploit the mistake to his advantage. It was what Krycek did best. If his enemy knew what Skinner was planning, his tranquil, impassive features gave no sign of it. He responded to Skinner's cold, terse demeanor with a stumbling uncertainty and willingness to please that would have been endearing in someone else.

Skinner remained calm and focused as he pushed his enemy down the corridor in a wheelchair. In a few moments he'd be free, and then the fun would really start. He was almost there, when he was jostled. He saw a gun out of the corner of his eye, aimed, not at him, but at Krycek. Damnit, he wasn't about to lose this prize now - not when he was so close to claiming victory. Skinner gave a hoarse shout, and threw himself bodily at Krycek's assailant, knocking the gun flying. The man went down, and Skinner paused only to shove his booted foot into the man's face, hard, and decisively and then he began to run, pushing the wheelchair in front of him. He was in no mood to hang around and answer any questions. Krycek gripped the arms of the wheelchair, and glanced up, his face pale and pinched. He looked genuinely scared, which surprised Skinner.

Skinner got Krycek to his car, and threw him unceremoniously into the front seat. He leaned in, and produced a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, then chained the other man to the seat. Krycek looked up at him, his eyes wide and startled.

"I wouldn't want you running out on me, little brother," Skinner told him tersely. Krycek's eyes remained baffled, and Skinner shrugged off that nagging uncertainty again, got into the car, and began to drive.

He drove out of town fast, breaking every speed limit there was. He kept a constant eye on the mirror and didn't relax until they were 3 hours drive away from Washington. It was only then that the pale, injured man beside him dared to speak.

"Who was that man?" He asked, his voice a shaken whisper. "Why did he want to kill me?" "He's only one of many. Trust me," Skinner replied with a snarl. "Just how long are you going to keep up this amnesia bullshit, Krycek?"

The other man frowned and shook his head. "I don't understand," he said, in a low, bemused tone. Skinner leaned over and slapped his enemy hard across the face. Krycek's mending lip oozed blood, and his dark hair fell across his bruised cheek. He sat there, breathing heavily, peeping out at Skinner from beneath long, dark eyelashes.

"You aren't really my brother, are you?" He asked.

Skinner grinned. "No, Alex, I'm not. And you haven't really forgotten who you are, have you, you lying piece of shit?"

"I'm not lying, and if you're not my brother - who are you?" Krycek asked, his green eyes wide and frankly petrified.

"I'm just another of your enemies, Krycek. Probably not even the one who hates you most, judging by your current condition, but I expect my grudge against you is more personal than theirs. That's why you shouldn't relax." Skinner gave a chilling smile, and put his foot down hard, sending the car speeding towards the mountains. Krycek lurched back in his seat from the force of the acceleration.

"Please, I don't know what I've done to you, but let me go," he asked, tugging fruitlessly at the handcuff.

"Not a fucking chance," Skinner swore. "I'm taking you someplace where nobody will ever find you, boy, and then I'm going to get some answers from you."

"Are you going to kill me?" Krycek's bruised face looked impossibly young, his wide, green eyes, almost translucent with terror. Skinner glanced at him for a moment, unmoved.

"You know, I haven't decided yet," he replied, with a grim, mirthless chuckle. "Maybe I'll see how co-operative you are and then decide."

"Please. I don't know what I've done to you, but I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Krycek whispered pathetically.

"Shut up." Skinner slapped him again, and then drove on in silence. Beside him, Krycek pulled the collar of his leather jacket tight around his neck as if to shroud himself in its safety. His exhausted, injured body went into shock, and he began to tremble.

Skinner's unwilling passenger was asleep when they finally pulled up at his cabin in the middle of the night. It had started to snow, and was bitterly cold. Skinner got out and stretched, breathing in the freezing night air. It was good to be out here, in the middle of nowhere, even if the company wasn't exactly to his taste. He glanced back at the car. Krycek looked even paler than he had in the hospital. He had dark shadows under his eyes, and his healing bruises painted lurid yellow and purple stains on his white face.

"How does it feel to be the helpless one, boy?" Skinner whispered to the sleeping man. "To have the tables turned? It feels damn good from where I'm standing." He opened the passenger door, took a handful of his enemy's thick, dark hair, and shook him into wakefulness. Krycek flinched, unable to protect himself, his eyes wary, and scared. Skinner dropped him like a stone. He didn't like the look in the other man's eyes. It wasn't a look he was used to inspiring in anyone, and a part of him was sickened by it. He had a sudden flashback to Vietnam. His unit had stumbled upon a traumatized old man, sitting beside the burned remains of his hut. Startled, Skinner had drawn his gun, and the old man had looked up at him in fear and bewilderment. Krycek had the same expression on his face right now. Skinner reached into the car, and gruffly undid the cuff, then he hauled his enemy out, and dragged him over to the cabin. He paused for a minute outside, and re-fastened the loose cuff to his own left hand.

"What the hell do you think I'm going to do to you?" Krycek asked twisting in Skinner's none too tender grasp. "I can hardly stand. What kind of a coward are you that you could treat an injured man like this?"

"A coward with a death sentence hanging over his head, and a deep and abiding loathing for you in his gut," Skinner replied. "Besides, I've had dealings with you before, Krycek. I've learned the hard way that it's wise not to underestimate you."

"Krycek?" The other man suddenly went limp in Skinner's grasp. "You've called me that before. That's my real name? Alex Krycek?"

"As far as I know." Skinner shrugged. "Or maybe it's an alias. I don't know and I don't fucking care. All I know is that I've finally got you where I want you."

He took a key out of his pocket, and unlocked the cabin door, then he kicked it open with his foot, and pushed Krycek in ahead of him. The cabin was in darkness. Skinner turned on the light, and started a fire in the grate, then hauled his almost fainting captive back with him to the car. Krycek could barely walk, so Skinner dragged him.

"Please...hurts..." the other man protested weakly. Skinner ignored him, and unpacked the contents of his car - enough provisions to see them through a few weeks at least, and some clothing. He made two journeys with it, dragging his captive behind him through the snow. By the time he had finished unpacking the car, Krycek's lips were almost blue. There was a light smattering of snow on his dark hair, and encrusted in his eyelashes. He looked like a kid, who'd been out playing in the snow, not the highly skilled and proficient assassin that he was. Skinner undid the handcuff, and fastened it to a light fitting on the wall. Krycek sagged, unable to stand properly.

"Please... let me sit down," he begged.

Skinner backhanded him again across the jaw. "When I've unpacked, and got the place straight, then I'll think about untying you but not before. I don't trust you not to run, or to try and attack me when I'm not looking."

"Where would I run to?" Krycek asked. "This place is in the middle of nowhere."

"I told you before - I'm not stupid enough to underestimate you, boy." Skinner turned his back on his enemy, and went around the cabin, opening doors and turning on lights. It wasn't a big place: there were two bedrooms, a bathroom, living room and kitchen and that was it. Skinner deposited his bag in the bedroom, and returned to the kitchen. He heated up some soup, grabbed a loaf of bread, and placed it on the dining table, then he went back to his captive. Krycek looked as if he might have passed out, but Skinner wasn't about to be fooled by his enemy's act. He knew he had to keep on his toes if he was going to survive. Krycek might look innocent, but he knew his enemy to be deadly. Skinner undid the handcuff, and Krycek slumped into his arms. He deposited the other man in a chair by the table, and slapped him into wakefulness, then put a spoon in his hand and pointed at the

dish.

"Eat," he instructed. Krycek took a cautious mouthful, his hand shaking as even that small movement wearied him. He managed a couple of spoonfuls and then sank his head down on the table with a moan of exhaustion. Skinner grabbed hold of his hair and held his head back, then took a spoonful of soup, and thrust it into Krycek's mouth.

"I said, eat, boy, and I meant it," he hissed. "I don't want you dying on me."

"Then don't fucking treat me like this!" Krycek replied, his tone desperate. "Please, please, whatever I've done to you, surely I deserve better than this. I don't remember it. It wasn't me." He hung in Skinner's grasp, like a lead weight. Skinner looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"How long are you going to keep this up, Krycek?" He asked, taking another spoonful of the soup and feeding his captive. Krycek swallowed it down, but not without effort. Skinner tugged on his hair, demanding an answer, and Krycek made a whimpering sound in the back of his throat.

"I'm not lying," he said. "I don't know how to convince you of that, but I'm not. Tell me what you want from me. I'd do anything. I don't have anything to lose, do I, as you said you'd kill me if I didn't co-operate."

"I will." Skinner took his gun out of his shirt, and placed it against his enemy's head. "Tell me, Krycek, how many men have you killed like this, in cold blood?"

"I don't remember. I don't believe I could kill anyone," Krycek replied, too tired even to appear scared. "No, wait, that's not true..." A startled look flitted into his eyes. "I do remember something. I remember being a kid. There was a sack of kittens someone had thrown into the canal. I couldn't stand by - I couldn't let them die..." He frowned, as if trying to hold onto the memory, then shook his head. "It's gone," he whispered.

"So, the assassin is kind to poor, defenseless kittens. You must think I'm stupid, Krycek," Skinner barked.

"No, but I don't know the person you think I am. I don't remember killing anyone, and I don't feel that I could," Krycek murmured. "It doesn't matter anyway. You're just going to believe what you want to believe. Isn't that why you brought me out here? Not for justice - but for revenge?" Krycek slumped back onto the table as Skinner released his grasp on that thick, dark hair. "It doesn't matter what I say, does it?" Krycek whispered. "You just want to hurt me, don't you? Go ahead. I can't stop you. Right now, I feel so lousy I'd be happy to die. Pull your trigger, Walter Skinner. Kill me. Maybe he deserved it. I don't know, because I don't remember him, I just know me."

Skinner gazed at him for a long time, trying to find some hint of the lie in those innocent green eyes, but he couldn't see it. Finally he returned the gun to his shirt, with a grunt.

"I can't kill you, Alex," he said, with a sigh, returning to his meal.

"I knew it." Krycek gave a guile-less smile. "I felt safe with you, the moment I woke up - that's why I thought you were a doctor, I think. You're not a bad man, Walter Skinner, are you? You wouldn't kill someone in cold blood. I know you wouldn't."

"You're wrong." Skinner finished his soup, and took a swig of his coffee. "Let me clarify my earlier statement. I can't kill you - yet. I can't kill you yet because you have information that I need."

"And I don't remember anything, so I can't help you. Maybe you should kill me anyway," Krycek suggested.

"No. I have time. I'll get the truth out of you if I have to take you apart with my fists," Skinner warned.

"Do it then. If it'll prove to you that I'm telling the truth. Do it. I couldn't hurt any more than I do already," Krycek said with a shrug. He started to shiver, violently, his teeth chattering audibly. Skinner looked at him steadily for a moment, then picked up the spoon again and resumed feeding his enemy.

"Eat," he ordered.

Krycek managed to swallow down the food Skinner spooned into him, then Skinner gave him the meds that the doctors had prescribed and watched him swallow them. The other man was trembling continuously now, and his face was as white as the snow outside. Skinner knew he wasn't faking that much - it was cold in the cabin, and Krycek had been at death's door just a few days before. He picked up a blanket from the couch and draped it around his enemy's shoulders.

"I need..." Krycek's teeth were chattering so much that he could barely talk. "...t...t...he ba...bathroom," he managed to stammer at last. Skinner pointed his head in the direction of the bathroom, but Krycek didn't move. Skinner raised a questioning eyebrow. "C...can't..." Krycek looked down at his one bandaged hand, and the other missing one. Skinner fought down a wave of anger at having to play nursemaid to a man he hated more than anyone else in the universe. With a growl of rage, he picked Krycek up and hauled him to the bathroom, then undid the other man's fly, and stood behind him, propping him up. At least Krycek could manage to hold his own cock, for which Skinner was grateful. He closed his eyes, willing this moment over. When Krycek had finished, he slumped back against his captor, swaying.

"Time for bed, I think," Skinner murmured. He draped one of Krycek's arms over his shoulders and dragged him into the smaller of the two bedrooms, dumping him on the bed. Krycek resumed his shivering - it was colder in the bedroom and there wasn't a fire. The cabin was so small that usually Skinner just relied on the fire in the living room to warm the place up, but they hadn't been here for long enough for that to happen. He strode over to the window, and checked that the shutters were still closed. They were. There was no way

that Krycek would be climbing out of there in the middle of the night. Skinner turned back to the bed, to find his enemy still lying there, his teeth chattering, and sweat running down his face. It was clear, even to Skinner, that the other man was in a bad way. He went over to the bed, and placed a hand on Krycek's forehead, only to find that he was burning up.

"Krycek - wake up." Skinner slapped Krycek's face lightly, but he remained un-moving. "Alex!" Skinner said loudly, but there was no response - Krycek was out cold. With a sigh, Skinner began to undress him. He removed the other man's shoes, and shirt - then stopped. The knife wound to Krycek's shoulder had started to bleed, and was saturating his bandage. Skinner bit back a wave of contempt - not for Krycek, but for himself. He had been so busy manhandling him, enjoying his power over his fallen enemy, that maybe he had forgotten that Krycek was flesh and blood, and in a fairly fragile condition too. He was surprised that Krycek hadn't complained about the pain, or at least told him that the wound had re-opened. Maybe he hadn't seen the point. There had been nothing about Skinner's behavior, after all, that would lead him to expect any kindness. Skinner removed Krycek's vest with more gentleness than he had hitherto shown, and unwound the bandage. He brought some boiled water, and washed the wound gently, pressing on it to stem the tide of blood. Then he bandaged it again with clean dressings. He went over to the closet to get one of his old tee shirts, then paused on his way back. Krycek's body was a mass of bruises, welts, and bandages. There was an ugly, jagged scar on the stump where his arm had been. With his dark hair mirroring his pale, battered face, there was a kind of pathos in his plight. Skinner looked at him for a long moment, hating himself for the compassion as much as he had hated himself for the lack of it just a moment before. He couldn't afford to be weak with this enemy of all people. He returned to the bed, and sat down beside Krycek.

"This dark force you work for, was it really worth all this?" he asked the unconscious man, running a gentle finger over swollen, purpled bruises. "Was it worth killing and dying for? Worth losing your arm?" He smoothed Krycek's black hair away from his face, and looked into the face of his helpless enemy for a long moment, seeing no trace of the man he had hated for so long. Had Krycek really been re-born as this innocent, this boy who rescued kittens and didn't believe himself capable of killing? Was that really possible? Supposing it was? Could Skinner hold this creature responsible for the sins of his former self if he didn't even remember them? It was one moral dilemma too far. Skinner pushed it uneasily to the back of his mind, and dressed his old enemy in the tee shirt. Then he stripped the other man of his trousers, and pushed him under the bedclothes.

"Sweet dreams," he growled, the sound of his own voice catching in his throat. What was he going to do next? What the hell could he do, except wait this out, and hope to stay one step ahead of his adversary all the way? Maybe, at the end of the day, one of them would end up dead in the snow outside the cabin, red blood staining the white ground. Skinner shook his head grimly. He was going to make damn sure it wasn't him.

Skinner closed the door, and locked it, then pocketed the key. He returned to the warmth of the fire, and stayed staring at it for a long time. This was all turning out much more complicated than he had anticipated. A simple lie, told in the heat of the moment, had spiraled into a dark and complex tapestry of choices and decisions. He didn't want to be out here, locked up with a man who might or might not be bluffing in order to stay alive. He

could hardly beat the truth out of Krycek with him in his current condition. He'd lose consciousness before he'd even started, so he had no choice but to nurse him back to health, and then see what he could get out of his old enemy. Skinner couldn't help but be aware of the cynicism of his intentions. To help someone get better, merely to make them strong enough to endure another beating was repugnant to him, and yet...he wasn't sure what other option he had right now. Other than giving Krycek up, and with him all hope of a reprieve from the deadly intent of the nanocytes in his bloodstream, and Skinner had no intention of doing that. If he did, then Krycek would have won.

Skinner fell asleep, still weighing his options. He was woken a few hours later by the sound of screaming. Disoriented, he looked around, thinking he was being attacked, and it took him some minutes to realize that the screams came from Krycek's bedroom. He fished the key out of his pocket, and opened the door, cautiously, gun drawn, expecting a trap, but Krycek was on the bed where he'd left him, sweat literally pouring down his face. Skinner turned the light on and went to sit on the bed. It was cold in here, and Krycek's flesh was clammy, the sweat cooling on his face, making his hair shine darkly.

"Please don't...don't...don't hurt me!" Krycek yelled, sitting up, his eyes wide open but his expression blank. Skinner put his hands on the other man's shoulders to push him back down again, and felt the sticky blood on his skin. The wound was bleeding again - and badly. With a sigh, he started to clean Krycek up. The other man shivered and clung to him, holding on.

"Don't let them kill me," he begged Skinner. Skinner pushed him back down, tersely, unwrapping the bandage. "Please, don't let them!" Krycek screamed, grabbing hold of Skinner's shoulders. Skinner sat there for a moment, arms outstretched, not touching the man clinging to him. He waited to be released, but Krycek hung on for dear life. He buried his face in Skinner's neck, and his body relaxed, noticeably. "I'm sorry I made you angry," he whispered, nuzzling at Skinner's chest. "Don't hurt me again. I can be good too. The way you like, huh?" His face was angelic, his eyes innocent, but deranged, as he inched his face down Skinner's chest, to his groin. Skinner brushed him away, his mind working overtime as he tried to figure out what the hell might be going on in Krycek's fevered brain. "Doesn't uncle want that?" Krycek asked, his arms going around Skinner again. "I can do that for uncle, if he promises not to beat me again. I can be good..." He relaxed once more, gazing dreamily at the ceiling, his good arm clinging onto Skinner. Despite his injuries, he had a strong grasp. Skinner sat there for a moment, then tried to dislodge him, unwilling to offer the delirious man either the comfort or reassurance that he clearly craved. "No! I'm sorry!" Krycek tried desperately to resist, as Skinner unhooked the other man's fingers from his tee shirt.

"Krycek - wake up. Stop this," he said, in a low, firm tone, but Krycek wasn't asleep - he was delirious, and Skinner's words didn't make any impression on him. He still clung on, like a limpet.

"Don't stay angry with me. Please, uncle," he whispered, burying his face in Skinner's chest again.

"Damn it, I said stop!" Skinner roared. Krycek looked up, his green eyes full of fear. His

expression was so clearly petrified that Skinner was momentarily taken by surprise. He moved his hand, and Krycek flinched, visibly.

"Don't hit me again. Please," he whispered. "Take me to America, Uncle. I'll be good there. I promise. You won't have to beat me again."

"Nobody is going to damn well beat you," Skinner said tersely, not entirely sure that was the truth. "Now sit back. I need to clean up that wound again."

"Don't let me go. Don't send me back," Krycek begged.

"No, I won't," Skinner agreed, soothingly, prepared to say anything to calm the injured man. Krycek nodded, then buried his head in Skinner's shoulder again. He began singing, a strange tune in a foreign tongue that Skinner guessed was probably Russian. He sounded like a child, singing himself to sleep. Skinner rocked him back and forth for a moment, hoping the delirium would subside so that he could get him back to bed but Krycek held on, and finally Skinner gave in, and put his arms around the injured man. Krycek sighed, and laid his dark head on Skinner's shoulder. Skinner carried on rocking him, and after several minutes Krycek released his hold, chanting dreamily to himself, and then Skinner was able to push him back onto the bed, unresisting. He went to change the bandage, then stopped short. Krycek was lying with his head on one side, gazing, unseeing, at the shuttered window - and there were tears flowing silently down his cheeks.

"Alex?" he said softly, turning the other man's face towards him. Krycek turned his face away again, without speaking. Skinner sat back and looked at the stricken, pathetic creature in front of him. Krycek was still singing softly to himself, gazing into the distance over Skinner's shoulder. The tears continued to flow silently down his cheeks and he didn't so much as flinch as Skinner re-dressed the wound, and helped him back into his tee shirt. When it was done, Krycek turned back to face his captor, a faraway smile on his face.

"Mama, I'm hungry, and it's cold outside," he began, then his expression changed to one of anxiety. "Ssh, the walls are thin - people will hear you," he murmured, looking around frantically.

"Krycek we're in the middle of a nowhere so there's nobody to hear, and I'm most definitely not your mama," Skinner retorted. Krycek frowned.

"I waited for you to come home," he mumbled. "I waited, Mama."

"Good kid," Skinner said, because Krycek seemed to require some kind of response and it didn't hurt him to play along if it'd earn him some peace. "Will you go to sleep now?"

"Sleep. Yes. Tired." Krycek closed his eyes. "Sing to me, Mama."

"Not on your fucking life," Skinner snapped. Krycek didn't seem to hear. He started humming in time to some invisible song in his head, hesitantly, as if he only half remembered the words, slurring over them. Skinner watched him for a while. He was

worried about the other man's condition. Despite what he'd said, he knew, deep down, that he hadn't brought Krycek here to kill him. Not that he couldn't, or wouldn't, if the other man attacked him, just that it wasn't something he could do in cold blood, merely for revenge. Krycek finished his incoherent singing, and closed his eyes. Skinner got up to leave, only to find his tee shirt gripped tight between bandaged fingers.

"Don't go, Uncle. I'll be quiet," Krycek said softly. He sounded almost normal, but his eyes were hazy with delirium.

"First I'm your Mama, now I'm your Uncle," Skinner groused, sitting back down on the bed. It was cold in here - and Krycek's flesh was clammy. Supposing the other man died in the night? Skinner felt a pang of guilt. He'd taken Krycek from the hospital, slapped him around, and dragged him out here, to the middle of nowhere. It was hardly surprising that Krycek's condition had worsened. Skinner still wasn't sure whether the other man was lying about being amnesiac, but one thing he was sure of - Krycek wasn't faking his current condition. Nobody could fake the amounts of sweat soaking into Krycek's tee shirt, and running down his face, or this level of delirium, not even the best actor in the world.

Skinner got up, and filled a bowl with water, then returned to the bed, and bathed his enemy's sweat-stained, tear-stained face. Krycek started humming again, his eyes wild.

"I like it when you're kind to me, Uncle," he murmured.

"Yeah. Right. Make the most of it," Skinner muttered in reply.

Krycek smiled. "When you take me to America, I'll make it up to you. I'll be the best boy you've ever had. I promise," he whispered, grabbing hold of Skinner's hand, his green eyes glowing demonically. Skinner shook his head, wondering what the hell all this was telling him about Krycek's life. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

The night passed, and Skinner stayed, seated on the bed, nursing his enemy through his delirium. He couldn't lose him now. If he allowed Krycek to die then he more or less signed his own death warrant. That's what he told himself, anyway. It's what he wanted to believe. He washed the sweat from the other man's face, comforted him through his wild ramblings, held him down when he thrashed around on the bed, and calmed him when he cried out for his mother. It wasn't possible to nurse someone through this level of pain, and not feel some shred of pity for him. A day passed, and Skinner was weary from lack of sleep. His enemy's sweaty, anguished face had become familiar to him, the situation lending an intimacy to their relationship that he didn't want. This body he nursed now, he might one day have to hurt, or possibly even, should it come to it, kill. Krycek moaned, and screamed, fighting unseen terrors. Skinner placed a big hand on his dark hair, and stroked, softly.

"All right, son," he murmured, meaningless platitudes, designed to soothe. "It's okay. You're going to be okay." Krycek whimpered, and shivered, his nightmares clearly receding, momentarily at least. It was cold in the room, and Krycek's shivering got worse. Finally, Skinner lay down beside him, and covered them both in blankets, trying to warm the other man's clammy flesh. Krycek's fevered limb-churning stopped, and he went still.

"See, Uncle, I knew you wouldn't leave me behind," he whispered, his limbs relaxing. He clung to Skinner.

"No. I won't," Skinner replied, wearily. "I won't."

Skinner woke with a start and immediately sat up, a growl in his throat, expecting his enemy to have taken advantage of his stupidity. He was sure that he'd find himself looking down the barrel of his own gun, but a quick glance revealed that Krycek was still lying on the bed, the sheets and blankets piled up around his huddled form. Skinner grunted. Was he over-estimating Krycek's skills and resilience, he wondered? He could have kicked himself for falling asleep. Anything could have happened - but it hadn't. Maybe Krycek was telling the truth, after all. Skinner got up, and stretched his stiff body. He leaned down to check on his captive, to make sure he was still breathing, and was relieved to see the faint cloud of steam rising from Krycek's lips into the cold air. Skinner wandered back into the living room, locking the bedroom door behind him. Outside, it was just starting to get light. He glanced out of the window to see that the snow had fallen almost constantly, completely blocking the door. The car had disappeared beneath a bank of snow almost as high as the house.

"Well, one thing's for sure, nobody's going to be going anywhere for the next couple of days," Skinner murmured, throwing a few logs on the fading embers of the fire. "Not that they were anyway," he remarked grimly. He made some oatmeal, and took a bowl through to Krycek. The other man still slept, his face having an almost waxy appearance, as pale as a corpse.

Skinner put the bowl down and nudged Krycek with his hand. The injured man woke, and looked around, blearily. Skinner wasn't sure whether the delirium had passed, but then Krycek saw him, and he blinked nervously, unable to hide the flash of fear that passed across his face. Skinner handed him the oatmeal, and Krycek took it, and balanced it on his knees, holding the spoon in his injured hand.

"I dreamed I was home," he whispered.

"You remember home, then?" Skinner leaned forward intently.

Krycek looked up. "Yes. I remember being a child. I remember..." Krycek frowned. "I remember some things," he finished at last, "but it's all jumbled, like a puzzle." He took a few spoonfuls of the oatmeal, then looked up at his captor. "I was wrong about one thing though...about the kind of person I am," he said, his face pinched and drawn.

"What do you mean?" Skinner got out his gun, and examined it, idly. Krycek swallowed nervously.

"I mean that I remember being a thief," Krycek admitted, shame-faced. "A pick-pocket. I remember stealing a man's wallet. I was just a kid, but if I could do that..." he shrugged. "I don't remember being a killer, but maybe I was. How can I tell?"

"Are you saying you've got some of your memory back, but not all? How convenient." Skinner continued examining his gun, not even glancing at his enemy.

"What do you want me to say? I'm sorry." Krycek shrugged. "There's one other thing I do remember though..." he began hesitantly. Skinner looked up, surprised by his faltering tone. "I remember that you took care of me when I was ill," Krycek whispered. "Whatever I did to you...I'm sorry. I wish it was undone."

"It could be," Skinner said.

"How?" Krycek looked up, his eyes startled.

"You could do it - if you remember who you are." Skinner put his gun away and stood up. "You could repair at least some of the damage you've done, but you won't. Not unless I make you - and I will make you, boy," he hissed, in a low, angry tone. Krycek swallowed hard. Skinner loomed over him, and tapped his fingers against Krycek's head. "All those secrets locked up in there, Krycek. I only want one of them. That's all I'm asking."

"It must be important then," Krycek remarked.

"You could say that." Skinner gave a barking laugh. "You could say it's a matter of life or death. Listen to me, Krycek. You aren't going anywhere - there's snow banked up 10 feet thick outside. Neither of us are going anywhere - not until you give me the answers I need."

"What are they? If I could, I would. I promise," Krycek's green eyes were so desperate that for a moment Skinner almost believed him.

"You poisoned me. Remember how to cure me, and I might let you go," he hissed, then he picked up the empty bowl, and left the room, locking it behind him.

Skinner slept in front of the fire for a few hours, then got up, and took a shower. It felt good to get dressed in fresh clothes, to wash the sweat and blood off his hands and be clean again. When he next looked in on Krycek, he found the other man lying on the bed, his eyes open. Krycek sat up, nervously, clearly expecting the worst.

"It's all right. I haven't come to kill you. You're too valuable to me for that," Skinner growled. "You need a wash. There's a shower in the bathroom. I'll help you." He pulled back the bedclothes, and helped Krycek to stand, but the other man was too weak, and staggered against him. Skinner sighed, swung his enemy up into his arms, and carried him into the bathroom.

"I'm not sure...but I think I'm the kind of person who'd find this pretty humiliating," Krycek said, with a wry smile, his face tinged with an embarrassed red hue.

"You're not wrong about that much, at least," Skinner replied, putting the toilet seat down with his foot, and depositing his burden on it. He went to turn on the shower, and when he turned back, he found Krycek opening the window.

"No!" He was over there in two strides, hauling the other man away from the window by his tee shirt.

"What did I do?" Krycek gasped. "I just wanted to see the snow. I'm sorry!" He yelled as Skinner shook him. "I thought it might help me remember so that I could help you! I'm getting some memories back! I remember the snow. I remember being a kid, playing in the snow. I remember..." He closed his eyes, and went suddenly limp in Skinner's hands. "I remember that they took my father away in the snow. All that was left were his footprints and the next day even they were gone." He opened his eyes again, and they were dull, and weary. Skinner was intrigued, despite himself.

"What had your father done?" He asked, closing the window, and helping Krycek out of his tee shirt.

"I don't know. I was just a kid. Maybe, about 7?" Krycek squinted up at Skinner, as if for confirmation. "Mama said..." He closed his eyes once more, as if the action helped him to recapture the memory. "She said that he was too outspoken, and that the wrong people heard. They took him away, sent him to the gulag. He didn't come back." He opened his eyes again.

"How much more do you remember? Do you only remember your childhood?" Skinner still wasn't sure he believed in Krycek's amnesia, but he didn't know what else to do other than to play along with him. Threats, and violence hadn't worked so far. He was running out of options and it was always possible that Krycek wasn't lying, that he really had forgotten who and what he was. Besides, a part of him just wanted to find out where all this was leading - deception or not, it was fascinating.

"Mostly being a kid, but it's not clear, just snatches. Something sparks them off - like the snow. There's a dark place though - I can't think past that. It makes my head hurt." Krycek shrugged, then winced as Skinner unwrapped the bandage around his shoulder.

"It's okay, it hasn't started bleeding again." Skinner examined the wound carefully, then gestured that Krycek should remove his boxer shorts. The other man complied, shivering in the cold bathroom. Skinner pushed him swiftly under the shower, and gazed moodily out of the window as Krycek washed himself. When he glanced back, he winced. Krycek's body was a map of scars, old and new. He had seen some of them last night, but there were others on his butt, and down the backs of his legs.

"Tell me about this uncle of yours," he said, surprising himself with the question.

"Uncle?" Krycek froze. "What do you know about Uncle?" He asked and for the first time since he'd brought the younger man here, Skinner detected the Krycek he knew in the defensive, cautious tone of voice.

"Nothing. You spoke about him last night, that's all, when you were delirious." Skinner folded his arms and leaned back against the wall, surveying his enemy through lidded eyes.

"Tell me about him."

"I don't..." Krycek shrugged, and busied himself with soaping his body as well as he could with his bandaged hand.

"You don't what? You don't remember him?" Skinner demanded roughly.

"No, I do remember him." Krycek looked up. "I don't want to talk about him, that's all."

"Did he take your father's place?" Skinner asked. "Was he a kind of stepfather?"

Krycek looked surprised. "No. He didn't do that," he said. "My mother didn't marry again."

"Who beat you then?" Skinner asked.

"Nobody." Krycek shrugged.

"That's not what you said last night," Skinner said softly. Krycek's head jerked up, and he looked annoyed.

"What did I say?" He asked, sharply.

"You talked about your mother, and this uncle, and you spoke about going to America with him." Skinner watched Krycek's reaction closely. Somehow, he sensed that in all this he might find a solution to his own predicament - but he wasn't sure how. Krycek looked at him for a long time, his green eyes troubled.

"So I talk gibberish in my sleep, so what?" he said, then he laughed out loud. Skinner watched him, his face impassive. "They aren't good memories," Krycek offered after several minutes of silence, combined with Skinner's unwavering scrutiny. "I wish I'd had some of the others back. There must have been some good ones amongst them. Yes?"

"Maybe." Skinner shrugged. "But if you're lying about remembering that, what else are you lying about remembering, Krycek?" He asked dangerously. "Yes?" He parodied Krycek's question back at him, then left the other man standing there, naked, and dripping.

Skinner returned to the kitchen to fix some more food. He wasn't sure it was wise turning his back on Krycek, even for a second. The other man was like a dangerous snake, just waiting for his chance to strike, but having seen him naked, and vulnerable, Skinner didn't think his captive was up to either trying to escape, or launching an attack on him. He figured that he was safe. For now.

He poured himself a coffee, and grabbed a slice of bread, then stood by the window, gazing out at the wintry world. It was almost midday, but barely light outside. The sky was heavy, thick with snow clouds, and Skinner suspected there would be another blizzard before long.

"Happy New Year," he murmured ironically, to nobody in particular. His nerves were feeling

the strain - this game of cat and mouse, which had seemed to be going so clearly his way, had somehow taken a wrong turn and he wasn't sure how to get it back on track. He rolled his stiff shoulders, trying to relieve the ache in his neck. He was surprised to hear a voice behind him.

"Do you think that it's possible that there could be a point when people change? An exact moment in time - a defining moment?" Krycek asked him. Skinner turned. The other man had managed to walk back to his room and dress himself in the clean sweats and tee shirt that Skinner had laid on the bed.

"Ah, the myth of lost innocence." Skinner raised a mocking eyebrow, then felt his heart thud inside his chest as he was assaulted by a memory. He saw a child, his body strapped with grenades and explosives, walking towards him and his comrades. He remembered raising his gun, and staring into the eyes of the ten-year-old boy, then pulling the trigger, killing the child where he stood. "Yes," Skinner whispered. "I think that can happen." He went and poured Krycek a cup of coffee, then took it back to him. Krycek looked thin, and so different, hunched on the couch, his watchful eyes taking in every movement Skinner made. He didn't look like the cunning, devious double agent, Skinner thought he knew so well. Skinner could almost believe...almost. He handed Krycek the coffee, and a thick, inelegantly cut ham sandwich, then went to stand by the fire, leaning against the wall.

"You'll say it's convenient, but all I can remember is before," Krycek said, between bites of the sandwich. "Before that moment, when I lost my innocence, when I became this man you hate so much, this man I can't remember. I do remember being a child though. I remember what my mother looked like, and the sound of her voice. I remember that after my father left, people were cruel to us. She worked hard, but nobody liked to be seen with us, in case...well, guilt by association, I suppose. I didn't see much of her. Maybe I ran wild - I do know that I was lonely. I used to dream about going to America. My father said that everyone there was free. I was just a child. I didn't understand that freedom sometimes has a price." Krycek shrugged, and took a gulp of his coffee. "I don't remember when I started stealing, but I think I was already fairly proficient at it by the time I stole his wallet."

"Him? This uncle?" Skinner asked.

"Yes." Krycek fought back a shudder, then he pulled a blanket from the back of the couch, and wrapped it around his shoulders. "I was a good pickpocket. He was the first one to catch me. I was about 16, maybe 17, but the penalty for getting caught thieving in Soviet Russia..." Krycek trailed off, then gave Skinner a twisted smile. "It's not like here," he finished.

"No. I expect not." Skinner shrugged. "Go on." He was fascinated, despite himself. Even if Krycek were making all this up, for some dark and devious reason of his own, it was still absorbing, and it wasn't as if either of them had anywhere else to go. Maybe if Krycek kept going for long enough, he'd trip up over his own lie, and then Skinner would have him where he wanted him.

"I don't remember much more. That must be when..." Krycek bit on his lip. "When my moment came?" He looked at Skinner as if for reassurance. "When I changed? I wasn't a bad

kid - I know that. I'm sure of it."

"This man, whose wallet you stole...you say he found you. What did he do to you?" Skinner asked.

"He took me to his hotel to eat. Proper food - the kind they only served to the tourists," Krycek's bandaged hand clenched at the memory.

"A strange way to treat someone who'd just stolen from you," Skinner commented.

"Yes." Krycek shrugged.

"Is that it? Don't you remember anything else?"

Krycek was silent for a long time, staring into the fire.

"I remember that he kept feeding me, and I ate and ate and didn't stop. I can still remember the way the food tasted - it seems like yesterday. I know from looking in the mirror that objectively it must be at least 15 years ago, but to me, it seems like it just happened."

"Tell me more about the man you stole from," Skinner pressed.

Krycek nodded. "I remember that he had an American accent. I asked him about America. I thought...if I could only get to America, I'd be free. It was like this bright, shining land. I can't make you understand..." Krycek's eyes were despairing. "You couldn't understand unless you were there. I was desperate to get away. I would have done anything, I would have sold..."

"Yourself?" Skinner suggested.

Krycek nodded, silently.

They were quiet for the rest of the day. Skinner didn't know what to say. Of all the things he had expected when he first told that lie back at the dawn of the new millennium, this was the last thing he would ever have dreamed possible. He saw a bitter enemy, transformed before his eyes into a scared boy who'd bartered the only thing he owned in order to escape an unbearable existence. It wasn't an image of Krycek he wanted. He clung to the memory of the sharp-faced assassin who applied himself to his deadly, silent trade without pity, pulling strings, hurting Skinner, and those close to him, but the reality in front of him was so different as to be incongruous. The man on his couch was wounded, feverish, pale and scared. He didn't look dangerous. He just looked...in need of a friend.

When darkness fell, Krycek asked if he could go back to bed. Skinner agreed, with a disinterested shrug. He changed Krycek's bandage once more, then watched impassively as the injured man slipped under the sheets.

"Thanks," Krycek said, as Skinner walked towards the door.

"For what? Not killing you?" Skinner asked.

"No. Yes." Krycek gave a wry smile. "And for listening. I feel like I'm going crazy. I don't know what's in my head. It's hard - not knowing who you are."

"I suppose so." Skinner shrugged. It seemed pointless to threaten his enemy on this subject any more. Maybe, at some point, he had started to believe Krycek.

"Tell me - what was I like?" Krycek seemed to be almost holding his breath.

"If you're expecting to hear anything good, then you're asking the wrong person," Skinner commented with a grunt. Krycek gave another wan smile.

"I know that. Tell me anyway. Tell me what you know."

Skinner sighed, then returned to the bed and sat down. "That isn't much," he said. "When you first showed up, I thought you were just another agent. A green kid - Mulder told me you threw up at your first sight of a corpse."

"Mulder?" Krycek repeated the name, as if it meant nothing to him.

"You were assigned to him, as his partner," Skinner explained. "You were already working for..." He hesitated. "Your uncle," he supplied at last, sure that he was right. "At least I assume it was him. You conveniently disappeared from sight as soon as you'd fulfilled your task of spying on Mulder, and keeping him from the truth. It's a pity. You were a good agent - polite, conscientious, smart...I almost liked you." Skinner shrugged. Krycek's green eyes shone in the dark.

"Go on," he urged.

"After that, you came and went, spreading chaos, like some kind of disease. People died, people got hurt. You gave Mulder information that seemed almost helpful, but there was always a downside. Whatever game you were playing and whoever you were working for - it wasn't for us. From what I know, you're a cunning, treacherous, deadly man, Krycek."

"Alex," Krycek said.

"What?" Skinner frowned.

"I don't recognize him. I'm not him. I don't want to be him. Call me Alex." Krycek was insistent.

"A name doesn't change anything," Skinner hissed. He got up, and went back over to the door. "I hope for your sake that you remember something soon. I'm a patient man, Alex, but even my patience will wear thin eventually."

He snapped the light off, and closed the door, then locked it behind him.

It had been a tiring day. Skinner went to the door of the cabin and opened it, looking out on the star filled sky. It was a crisp, cold, clear night. The blizzard that had raged around them in the afternoon had finally blown itself out, leaving the world covered in a new layer of fresh white snow, topped by a thin sheen of ice. There were new clouds banked up in the distance though, and Skinner guessed that the respite from the blizzard would be brief. He breathed in the chill air, and tried to think, but there weren't any answers. He had no choice but to wait this out. He went to his bedroom, and lay down with a deep, heartfelt sigh. He needed to stay rested, to be alert enough to deal with whatever new surprises the morning might bring.

Skinner woke just after dawn. A thin, watery light shone through his bedroom window and outside, snowflakes danced in wild spirals, patterning the world with their cold beauty. Inside though, it was warm, and cozy. He lay still for a moment, then shifted, and beside him a dark head muttered something. Skinner froze, then looked down. Curled up tight against his torso was Krycek.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" He demanded, pushing the sleeping man away. Krycek opened his eyes, and looked around, confused. "Shit! How the hell did you...?" Skinner reached for the gun on his night-stand, but it was still there.

"I picked the lock." Krycek shrugged. "I remember how to do that much."

"You...? Then why...?" Skinner stared at his captive in disbelief.

"Why didn't I steal the gun and kill you? I told you, I'm not a killer," Krycek replied. "I don't think I could kill anyone. I just...I woke up in the middle of the night. I was cold and I needed to use the bathroom. I called out but you must have been fast asleep so I picked the lock. I looked in on you, and I..." He shrugged. "I didn't want to be alone," he finished, a curiously vulnerable expression flitting momentarily across his face. Skinner just sat there, his mind working overtime to process this new development.

"I may have become the man you described to me last night, but he's not who I feel I am," Krycek said, urgently. "Events I can't remember might have turned me into him, but he's not me. Not in here." Krycek gestured towards his heart. Skinner gave out a bark of ironic laughter. This defied belief, but it also seemed to confirm his captive's story. He could think of no other explanation for why Krycek hadn't placed the gun to his head and killed him as he slept. It was bizarre. Crazy. "And you're not the man you pretend to be either," Krycek observed softly.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Skinner demanded

"It means, that I don't think you really want to hurt me. You don't really want to kill me either." Krycek reached out, and put his bandaged hand on Skinner's arm. "Your bark's worse than your bite, my friend. Despite your words, you've been kinder to me than you clearly think I deserve. I'm grateful for that. If I've really done all the things you say, then I'm

lucky that you're a better man than I am." He sank back on the pillows, exhausted. His cheeks looked hollow and he gave in to a fit of racking coughs. Skinner got up, wordlessly brought him a glass of water, and placed it in his hand. Krycek drank, gratefully. "Come back to bed. It's still early, and it's warmer with you here," Krycek invited. Skinner glared at him, but another run-through of his options revealed that he was running out, once more. If Krycek could pick locks then the only way to minimize the danger was to stay close to him. Skinner slid reluctantly back into the bed, and lay there stiffly. Krycek seemed to possess no such inhibitions. He nuzzled close to Skinner's back, and laid his arm on Skinner's thigh. There was silence for a moment, and Skinner began to doze off. A few seconds later, he felt Krycek's hand move, stroking his thigh softly, then moving down into his boxer shorts. He caught the impudent hand in a vice-like grip, and held it tight.

"I don't think so," he snapped.

"Please. You've been kind to me. I've tried to be good. Let me show you just how good I can be..." Krycek's voice was warm with promise, and went straight to Skinner's groin.

"No," he hissed.

"I don't understand. You want me," Krycek said. "I saw you looking at me in the shower. I can repay you..." His hand moved again, found Skinner's cock, and took hold of it, stroking it firmly with his thumb.

Skinner pushed him away, and turned over. "Is everything about barter with you? What you can sell, what you can trade? Sexual favors as a pay-off to keep you safe? You're wrong, Krycek. With or without your memory, you're the same. Deep down inside, you're exactly the same," he spat in disgust. He got up, slid out of the bed, and strode into the living room, feeling deeply unnerved. He brushed a hand over his forehead, surprised to find that he was shaking. Damn him! Damn him for finding some vulnerable nerve, deep inside, that Skinner thought he'd buried with an old friend, 30 years ago, fighting a war that nobody had believed in. Was he still fighting wars he didn't believe in? Still fighting himself? He buried his face in his arms in despair. A few minutes later, a cautious hand dropped on his shoulder, and massaged, gently.

"I'm sorry. It's what I used to do for him," Krycek said. "He's all I remember. All I know how to please. I'm sorry that I took you for the same kind of man."

Skinner turned, savagely, slapping Krycek's arm away, only to find himself looking into dark pupils, dilated with want, and the need for comfort. He held back the threatened blow, faltering, and in that moment's hesitation, he was lost. He allowed himself, to be led over to the couch, like a helpless child. Krycek sat him down, then hunkered down beside him. "I didn't like him. I didn't like the way he smelled," Krycek said, leaning his head on Skinner's chest. "I lied yesterday. I do remember what happened - I just don't remember...after. I think I blocked that out. Hold me," he whispered. It was more of a command than a request, and somehow Skinner found himself obeying, nerveless arms wrapped around a slender body, hugging his enemy close. "He said he'd take me back to America with him. He said he wouldn't report me for stealing his wallet. He said he'd pay for me to go to college. All I had

to do was obey him, and learn well. He said he could tell that I was smart." Krycek paused, then began again. "He looked at me as if he wanted to eat me alive. I was young, and stupid. I just wanted to get away, and he was offering me so much. It seemed a small price. I wasn't so stupid that I didn't know what he wanted though. I'd been with girls. I didn't think this would be so much different. I was wrong." Krycek lay there for a long time. Skinner didn't speak. Finally, the other man continued with his story. "He told me to undress. He watched me, from the other side of the room. All I could see was his cigarette, burning in the dark, and the whites of his eyes. He didn't touch me, or kiss me. I don't know why I expected that, but I did. He just told me to kneel on the end of the bed. I can still remember the feel of his breath on my back. He placed the cigarette in an ashtray by the bed, and I watched it burn down to nothing, while he..." Krycek's voice faltered into nothing. Skinner didn't know whether to laugh in disbelief and throw Krycek to the floor in disgust, or offer some kind of platitude. He didn't want to believe, but there was something so compelling and vulnerable about his old enemy, that he couldn't stop himself. Could this all be some deeply elaborate lie? And if so, why bother? Krycek took a deep breath, and looked at Skinner intently, as if trying to gauge his reaction. "I cried the first time. He laughed, and told me I'd get used to it...but...he could be kind too, sometimes. That's why...that's why I wasn't sure with you. You hurt me, then you were kind to me. The same as him."

"Damnit, I'm not him," Skinner hissed. He needed some air. Skinner pushed Krycek off his shoulder, and opened the door. Outside it was bitterly cold, and the remains of last night's blizzard had painted the landscape a serene, innocent white, in ugly contrast to the darkness and stench of misery inside the cabin. Skinner pulled on his boots, and stepped outside, taking a deep inhalation of cold air. A few seconds later, he heard Krycek behind him.

"I'm sorry that I don't remember anything else," Krycek began. "Anything from later. Anything that might help you. The memories all stop after that though. I don't know why." Skinner turned, opened his mouth to say something, then saw the red stain on the other man's tee shirt.

"You shouldn't be out here. Damn, you're not well enough," he said. "And that needs to be seen to." He pointed at the other man's shoulder. Krycek looked down, and saw the red blood oozing out from the knife wound. It welled up darkly against his tee shirt, and then a few drops fell silently onto the snow, staining the ground. The blood looking shocking, but curiously beautiful on the thick, white blanket of snow. Krycek looked at it, mesmerized, then took a sharp intake of breath, as if he had been physically hit.

"No," he whispered, sinking to his knees. "Shit...no."

"What?" Skinner went to help him up, but Krycek was consumed by some kind of panic. Skinner watched, bemused, as the other man covered the blood with handfuls of fresh, white snow, obscuring it completely.

"You were right," Krycek muttered, over and over again. "You were right all along." The open wound bled even more furiously now, soaking Krycek's tee shirt, and staining the snow covered ground. Krycek knelt back, wordlessly, a haunted look on his face.

"Come on...I have to get you back inside." Skinner picked the other man up effortlessly, and Krycek went numbly, unresisting. Skinner dumped him on the couch, and went to get a new bandage. When he returned he tugged Krycek's tee shirt away from his body, and cleaned the wound, gently. Krycek wouldn't meet his eyes, and didn't speak. Skinner finished his task, but Krycek continued to lie there, staring blankly at the fire.

"Do you remember something else?" Skinner asked at last. Krycek nodded, but didn't speak. Skinner shrugged, and sat down next to the other man, and stared into the fire, waiting.

"He took me with him - he didn't break his word," Krycek broke the silence a few minutes later, his voice dull, and lifeless. "He said he had a use for me, back in America. He was going to train me, but first I had to show him what I could do. She was an old woman. She was a drunk. Homeless." Krycek looked up, his eyes dark with the memory. "I can't...I don't have the details in my head..." he whispered. "I think...I've blocked them out. I just remember that the snow went red with her blood, and it felt so warm on my cold hands. I think I threw up. After that...nothing." He shrugged. "That's when I changed. Yes, I can kill. You were right. I was wrong. I was 17 years old when I first took a life."

"I was 18." Skinner found that his hands had become entwined in that dark hair, and were stroking his old enemy, softly, gently. Krycek looked up, a question in his eyes. Skinner didn't answer it. Instead he wrapped his arms around Krycek, and pulled him up, then he kissed him, hard. Krycek's mouth was soft, almost like a woman's, but his stubble was rough against Skinner's chin and cheek. He was pliant in Skinner's arms, his body pushing against his enemy, like a cat wanting to be petted. Skinner's need pulsed, deep inside his groin. He pushed Krycek back on the couch, held him down, and straddled him. Krycek went easily. He lay, looking up, with greedy green eyes. Skinner hesitated, but Krycek put out his arm, and fastened his bandaged hand around Skinner's neck, then pulled him down on top of him. Soft lips melted under his caress, and a tongue slipped insistently into his mouth. Skinner's hands found warm flesh, lowered Krycek's boxer shorts, and discovered a hard cock.

Then it was too late.

He found himself rutting against the other man like an animal, consumed by his need. He closed his eyes, and fought back a memory of another young man, in another time and place, thirty years ago. A hot, steaming jungle took the place of the cold, storm-lashed cabin and it felt good. After so long, it felt so damned good. He knew why, even if he had never admitted it to himself - not through all the long, lonely years of his loveless marriage, and not even after, when attitudes were more liberal, and it might have been safe to admit the truth. Skinner opened his eyes and saw dark hair, and gleaming white teeth, smooth skin - young, soft, and willing. Krycek moaned, and their cocks met in an absurd dance of lust, thrusting and sliding against each other. Skinner gasped, reeling from finding the truth like this, snatched in need and hunger from a man whom he knew to be his greatest enemy. It wasn't right, but it damn well felt right. Thirty years of repression burst from deep inside, and he came, warm and slick, all over Krycek's belly. The younger man laughed, and Skinner loved the sound. He took his enemy's cock in his hand, and brought him to climax, then he sank down beside Krycek, and pulled him close, for warmth, for comfort, and maybe, just

maybe, for some other reason too.

Days and nights passed. Skinner was no longer sure which was which, as the storms buffeted the cabin. Day was only fractionally lighter than night, so it was hard to tell. They had supplies, but not enough for more than another week or so. Krycek was getting better. The rest was doing him good, and the color had returned to his pallid features. They slept each night in the same bed, Krycek's dark head nestled under Skinner's chin. Skinner longed to withdraw, to catch his breath, and step back from the brink of this dangerous relationship, but deep inside he knew it was already too late. Krycek had somehow found a way past all his defenses. The cabin had now warmed through, and Krycek wandered it half-naked, while Skinner watched, trying to fight the desire, and failing. Krycek's body, for all its blemishes, flaws and wounds, was still beautiful. His bruises had nearly healed, and his flesh was enticing, stretched taut and white over well toned muscles.

Skinner found an uneasy peace in this new alliance. Krycek's memories were full of such huge gaps that it was enjoyable just sitting with him, talking. He wondered how much of the old Krycek was present in the new. Maybe his new lover, and old enemy, had reverted back to how he had been a long time ago, before that cigarette smoking bastard had got his hands on the kid, and molded him to his will. Sometimes Krycek would remember something, and blurt it out. The most inconsequential memories took on a deep significance to him, and he even woke Skinner in the middle of the night to tell him he remembered eating chocolate cake on the bank of the canal one Summer when he was a child. There was something so endearing about him as he discovered these lost parts of himself, that Skinner couldn't begrudge him their joy.

Krycek wasn't what he had expected, and he realized how little he had known the man. He was smart, sometimes witty, eager to please, and occasionally moody, given to long periods of introspection. His curiosity wasn't only limited to himself though. They sat up through the long hours of seemingly endless snowstorms, as Skinner recounted the stories of his own past. Krycek was his captive in more ways than one, as he sat and listened, his head on Skinner's shoulder, or his lap, gazing into the firelight. Occasionally he stopped Skinner, and asked a question, and sometimes, he caressed the big man, gently coaxing him through some hard part of his life story. Sometimes Skinner would look up, and catch Krycek looking at him, his expression curious, and absorbed, tinged almost with surprise, and often he would find the other man's eyes fixed on his lips, or his eyes, or body, with undisguised lust.

Krycek's need for physical reassurance was insatiable. Wherever Skinner went, the other man was always just one step away. When he sat down, Krycek would sit beside him, leaning his head on Skinner's shoulder. When he heated food, Krycek would stand watching in the doorway - and at night...at night Krycek would curl up close to him, and do things to his body that he had only dreamed about for thirty long, lonely years.

"You don't have to follow me everywhere," Skinner said in exasperation on finding Krycek crouched outside the bathroom waiting for him one morning.

"Yes, I do." Krycek shrugged. "Walt, I don't know who I am, but I know who you are. You're all that's real to me. I need you," Krycek sneaked a hand around Skinner's waist. Skinner

pushed him away, angrily, and strode back to the living room.

"What? What is it?" Krycek followed him.

"Cabin-fever," Skinner snarled. "Look, I'm going stir-crazy cooped up in here like this, unable to go out, staring at these four walls, trapped in this intolerable situation."

"You still don't trust me." Krycek's shoulders settled into a dejected line. "After all we've shared here."

"How can I trust you? What happens when you get your memory back, Alex?" Skinner's voice was raw with pain.

"Maybe I won't." Krycek grinned, and for a second he looked like the Alex Krycek of old, his sharp, green eyes glittering, tinged with an almost malicious mischief.

"Maybe you will," Skinner retorted. "What then?"

"Then, I'll do whatever I can to find a cure for this poison in your blood, Walt," Krycek said, pulling Skinner close, and caressing his back with his one good hand. "I promise."

"You don't know yourself very well if you think that's likely," Skinner snorted.

"I know the way I feel about you though. I know that won't change." Krycek placed a firm kiss on Skinner's mouth, then he pushed him against the wall, and claimed another one, his tongue hungry, and demanding. "I promise," he said, when they came up for air. "Cross my heart and hope to die, Walt." He sank down on his knees, and opened Skinner's fly, then took the other man's cock whole into his warm, skillful mouth. Skinner moaned, and leaned back against the wall, abandoning reason. He wrapped his hand in Krycek's dark hair, and caressed him. The other man pulled Skinner closer, his fingers slipping between his butt cheeks, as his lips and tongue worked on the big man's cock.

"I know it's someone else's line, but I want to believe," Skinner muttered, in an ironic tone, bucking his hips into that waiting mouth. Krycek's efforts intensified, and Skinner came with a hoarse cry.

"Then you can," Krycek pulled back. "You can believe in me. I promise you, Walt. I promise." He rearranged Skinner's clothes, got up, and ran his hand gently down the side of Skinner's face, looking deep into his eyes. "You can," he repeated.

Skinner was woken a couple of days later by Krycek bouncing up and down on the bed excitedly.

"Wake up, Walt. The storm's over!" Krycek exclaimed, licking Skinner's ear until he opened a reluctant eye and squinted up.

"What?" He asked blearily. Krycek got up, and drew back the drapes. "It's a brave new

world," he said, with a grin, pointing at the still, white world outside. "Come on, hurry!" He pulled on his sweatpants, and a thick sweatshirt then ran for the door. Skinner found the younger man's enthusiasm catching, and he got up and followed suit. Krycek grabbed hold of his arm and dragged him towards the door of the cabin. Skinner took a deep breath and opened the door. Outside it was beautiful. The car was an invisible mound, covered by snow, but it had drifted away from the front of the house and settled at the side in a huge bank. Krycek pushed past Skinner and ran outside, laughing and stamping his feet. Skinner paused, suddenly taken by surprise by the wave of dangerous affection that swept through him. Krycek was wearing one of Skinner's old checked shirts. It hung from the younger man's shoulders, two sizes too big for him, but the muted blue and purple colors suited him. He looked young, vibrantly alive, and so damned good.

"Come on!" Krycek yelled, grabbing a handful of snow, and throwing it at his surprised lover. Skinner didn't take much encouragement. He gave a roar, grabbed a handful of snow, and chased after the other man. Krycek laughed, and slipped, trying to escape. With a triumphant growl, Skinner jumped on top of him, and thrust the handful of snow down his sweater. Krycek doubled up, screeching half in outrage and half in helpless laughter.

"That's not fair!" He panted. "You have two arms!"

"I would have won with one tied behind my back," Skinner teased.

"Do you have it?" Krycek asked unexpectedly.

"What?" Skinner frowned.

"My arm!" Krycek wriggled beneath him, his face screwed up with mirth.

"Somewhere. You might have to wait for a thaw until you can have it back though," he said, glancing at the snowbound car. He didn't remember bringing the arm in, so he assumed it was still locked up in there.

"It can wait." Krycek grinned. Skinner grinned back, holding the other man down by his one good arm, and the world froze at that moment in time. Krycek's dark eyelashes were framed by a layer of snow, his thick black hair in stark contrast to the white blanket he was lying on. His lips were parted, wide, sensuous, and inviting. Skinner felt as if he'd left his body and was looking down on that strange, ghostly, silent world from a great distance, then the moment passed.

"Make love to me," Krycek said, unexpectedly.

"Out here? In the snow?" Skinner asked, in an incredulous tone.

"Why not?"

"Because my balls will freeze off," Skinner laughed. Krycek was still and willing beneath his knees.

"Back inside then," Krycek insisted. Skinner hesitated. So far they hadn't gone this far. It felt almost like...an affirmation, or commitment of some kind.

"Do you want that?" Skinner watched as Krycek's pupils dilated. The other man moistened his lower lip with his tongue, a gesture partly of uncertainty, and partly of sexual promise.

"What do think?" He asked, and his voice was low, husky, and so arousing. "Don't you?" His voice was suddenly anxious. Skinner's cock told him that he did. Very much. He smiled, and picked Krycek up, out of the snow, and they walked back to the cabin.

"I've...got, um, there's stuff in the bathroom," Skinner said, his voice sounding strange in the silent world.

"Good. Hurry." Krycek pushed him towards the bathroom, then ran into the bedroom, undressing as he went. Skinner followed slowly. It wasn't that he didn't want this - but where did it lead? He found the condoms and lube, both old, and barely used, remnants of a happier time, when he and Sharon had come up here on Summer vacations, years ago. Blindly, he put them in his pocket and returned to the bedroom, then stopped, on the threshold. Krycek was lying naked on the bed, his lithe body stretched out, sinuous and inviting, like a cat, his butt positioned over a pillow, raised like a ripe fruit for his attention. It was so enticing he wanted to sink his teeth into it, but instead he just stood, dumb-struck.

"What is it?" Krycek asked, a tone of uncertainty in his voice.

"You," Skinner rasped.

"What?" Krycek twisted around, and Skinner saw that his cock was already half erect, swollen and raring to go.

"It's like in the films - just when you think the hero is safe, the bad guy leaps out from the closet with an ax. Or there's someone in a car, singing away and you just know that around the corner is a ten-ton truck about to mow them down. I feel like that just now," Skinner said. "Seeing you, here, waiting for me like this - it's too good."

"You mean, where's the juggernaut?" Krycek asked.

"Yeah. Where's the juggernaut?" Skinner said, in a numb tone.

Krycek got up, and took hold of his hand, led him back to the bed. "There isn't one. This time, there isn't one. There's just you and me." He started unbuttoning Skinner's shirt, pushed it off the big man, then moved on to his sweatpants. Skinner stood there, unresisting. When Krycek had finished, he pulled Skinner down onto the bed, and kissed him, his one hand caressing Skinner constantly. Skinner felt life returning to him, warmed by sex, by need, by Krycek's obvious lust. "You're so sexy..." Krycek whispered, nuzzling at his nipples. "You know, when I first woke up, and they told me you were my brother, my first thought was 'damn', because I wanted you the minute I set eyes on you. I knew what I felt

sure as hell wasn't brotherly love," he grinned. "It's a crime to hide this body under clothes. Under suits, and shirts, and ties," Krycek murmured, taking Skinner's cock in his hand, and stroking it to full erection. "I saw the real you then, Walt, not the growling enemy, but you. I knew that you'd never really hurt me. I knew that."

Skinner's hands found Krycek's throat, and he circled it, then squeezed lightly. Krycek looked at him, those green eyes radiating pure trust. An image sprang into Skinner's mind of holding a snake by the neck, dangling it in the air while he decided whether to strangle it, or let it go. He increased the pressure around that firm, white throat, but still Krycek's eyes didn't waver in their total faith. Skinner loosened his grasp, and stroked the reddened flesh, smoothing away his fingerprints.

"You talk too much," he grunted.

Krycek grinned, and then laughed out loud as Skinner pressed him back into the bed. "Have you done this before?" He asked. "With a man, I mean."

"Not for a long time," Skinner replied.

"But you have though...?" Krycek's question hung between them.

"Yes," Skinner said softly. Krycek smiled again, and rolled onto his stomach, placing the pillow back under his hips.

"Please. Now," he begged. Skinner knelt and surveyed that beautiful, flawed body for several long seconds, then he gently caressed the other man's butt.

"Good enough to eat," he whispered, inching forward, and taking a soft bite. Krycek moaned, and wriggled under his hands. Skinner opened him, up, worked gentle, lubed fingers inside him, and Krycek started to pant, his green eyes glazed with arousal. On one subject at least he had been telling the truth: he certainly wasn't a virgin. Skinner stretched him easily, then put a condom on his own cock, and slid it into that inviting opening. Krycek gave a gasp, then started to thrust into the pillow. Skinner put his head back, feeling the sweat running down the side of his face. This felt so good. He had wanted this, needed it, for so long, and to finally receive this release, from his enemy of all people... He shut that thought away and concentrated on the task, sliding in and out of Krycek with deep, urgent thrusts that made the other man moan and thrash around on the bed. Skinner thought they both came together, but he wasn't sure, the moment was too good, and too intense for him to remember the details afterwards. He just knew that he had found something he had been looking for all his life, and he wanted to keep it. Later, he held Krycek in his arms, never wanting to let him go. His lover lay naked, and abandoned, his pale limbs entwined with Skinner's tanned ones.

"That was so damned good," Krycek whispered.

"Yes." Skinner hugged him closer.

"Love you, Walt," Krycek murmured sleepily, his body limp and relaxed in Skinner's arms. Skinner smiled, and stroked his lover's chest. Krycek's eyes were closed, his lips parted in a haze of sexual satisfaction - he was fast asleep.

"Me too, Alex. God help me, but I do."

Skinner woke to the plopping sound of snow falling from the roof.

"Alex, wake up - it's starting to thaw," he said, nudging the sleeping man.

"What does that mean?" Krycek asked, stretching sleepily. Skinner turned back, and saw the question in his eyes.

"It means we can dig the car out and go and buy supplies," Skinner said.

"And come back here?" Krycek's question was soft and full of meaning. How long could they keep hiding out here? At some point they had to go back, and face reality, whatever that might be.

"For a while. I'll sort it out. It'll be okay," Skinner said reassuringly. Krycek nodded. "Come on. Let's go and dig the car out."

Krycek grabbed his hand, and pulled him back. "Before we go," Krycek said softly. "One more time..."

"We'll be coming back," Skinner pointed out.

"I know. Indulge me," Krycek winked, his green eyes inviting. Skinner gave in and allowed himself to be pulled back down onto the bed.

It was almost midday by the time they finally emerged. The world was in a process of transformation, still covered by gradually sinking layers of snow. Skinner handed Krycek a shovel, but there wasn't much snow to shift, and they made short work of the task. Skinner cleared a path down to the road - it was slippery, but just about passable. When he came back, Krycek was sitting staring at the car, his expression glum.

"What is it?" Skinner asked.

"Tire's flat," Krycek said with a sigh. "Must have been the weight of all the damn snow."

"Damn." Skinner kicked it. He opened the trunk of the car to check the spare, but that was flat too.

"How much food do we have?" Krycek asked.

"Not much." Skinner shrugged. "The roads are passable though - we'll just have to walk."

Krycek nodded, and went to get his jacket. The journey was hard, and soon Skinner was sweating liberally. He turned to find Krycek struggling behind him.

"Sorry." Krycek made a face. "I suppose I'm just not up to this," he said, sitting down on a bank of snow, and wiping some of the cool, wet substance over his hot face. "My shoulder hurts."

"Shit. It's my fault. You're in no condition to be making this kind of journey," Skinner told him. "Go back to the house - I'll go on alone. I'll be about..." he glanced at the sky, "Four or five hours?"

"Will you be okay?" Krycek asked, anxiously.

"I'll be fine. I have my cellphone." Skinner replied, with a reassuring smile. "Go and rest up."

"Okay." Krycek gave a shrug, then pulled Skinner into an unexpected embrace, kissing him soundly. Krycek's unembarrassed displays of affection always took him by surprise, but a curious warmth settled inside his gut, making his whole body tingle with a delicious glow of happiness. "Don't make me wait too long, lover boy," Krycek grinned, patting Skinner's ass. Skinner growled and mocked a cuff to the side of the other man's head, and Krycek laughed and side-stepped it, then he turned and began walking back. Skinner stood and watched him until he disappeared from sight.

It was hard going but Skinner was in good shape, and he made the journey in a little under two hours. He left a message for a mechanic to drive up to the cabin when the snow had thawed, exchanged a few pleasantries with the store keeper, then packed some necessities into a rucksack and strapped it on his back. He whistled as he walked back to the cabin. The weak, wintry sun warmed his head, and it felt good to be out and about again, stretching his long legs. Not that he hadn't enjoyed all the sexual activity of the past several days, he thought to himself, filled with a sudden longing to taste Krycek's soft lips again, to bury his face in that smooth flesh, to lick and kiss and caress the other man's lithe, lean body. It was getting dark by the time he returned. Skinner frowned - the cabin door was open. He had a sudden flash of worry that Krycek hadn't made it back, or that he had, and then had gone out looking for Skinner. He hadn't been that long - quicker than he had said he would be. Skinner pushed open the door, cautiously, and dumped the pack on the ground.

"Alex?" He called. There was no reply. He raced into the bedroom, but it was silent, and empty. There was no sign of the other man in the bathroom, or the other bedroom either, and the tiny kitchen was deserted. A thought occurred to Skinner and he checked his nightstand, but the gun was still there. It didn't make sense. He went outside, and called, his voice echoing back around him eerily in the melting darkness.

"ALEX!" he yelled, but there was no reply. Skinner returned to the cabin, and sat down at the table. It was only then that he noticed the note, propped up against a jar.

"Walt - thanks for everything. I couldn't have picked a safer bolthole if I'd tried.

So long,

AK."

Skinner read it several times, not understanding, then he got up, and roared out his rage. He ran back outside, and for the first time noticed that the trees around the cabin were naked, bereft of the snow that had been weighing them down for so long, as if some big insect had literally blown it from their branches. It didn't take a Vietnam vet to recognize that a helicopter had been here recently. He ran over to the car, and checked inside, but Krycek's prosthetic arm was missing. He remembered the other man's chance remark about the arm, how he had asked him where it was. It wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility that Krycek had carried a transmitter in the prosthetic. All he had needed was for Skinner to leave him alone for long enough, and to be trusting enough to do so. The two flat tires suddenly seemed so obvious a trick, that Skinner didn't know how he could have missed it. The breath left his body, and he sank down on the snow, and crouched there, hunched, for a long time. He wished for a moment, that the blizzards would return, and cover him with their silent, suffocating blanket, but instead, the world was alive with the sounds of snow melting, and water trickling down the side of the mountain. After a long time, Skinner got up, shakily, and returned to the cabin. There was nothing he could do except sleep until daylight, and then walk back down to civilization, back to his life, to his job, back to being a helpless, blackmailed victim.

He sat down on the couch, and stared into the dead fire. There had been nothing to show for any of it. There was no cure, no Krycek, and, more importantly, no Alex, the man who had come to mean so much to him. He had been outmaneuvered by a man far more ruthless than he could ever be, someone who played him along, maybe even from the outset, staying one step ahead the whole way. Skinner stared the truth in the face, and the truth stared back at him, cold, and unforgiving.

Skinner nursed his 5th whisky of the evening. He didn't usually drink this much, but he had taken to visiting this bar every night after work, for the oblivion he could find in that curious mix of the company of strangers, and hard liquor. It had been three weeks since his return to DC. His unplanned vacation had caused a few raised eyebrows, but no serious repercussions. He had buried himself in his work, feeling distant, and remote, watching the world go by, and the agents come and go, without caring, or feeling he belonged to any of it. The weather in DC had been unpredictable. Last night it had started to snow again, and Skinner had spent most of the day in his office watching it fall onto the street beneath his window.

"I like the snow," a familiar, mocking voice said. "It can be so...obliging." Skinner's hand tightened around his glass but he didn't look up. A shadow fell across the alcove he was sitting in, and a man slipped into the seat opposite. Skinner ignored him, and called for another drink. "Don't you think you've had enough?" A plastic hand was placed across the

top of his glass.

"No, I don't think so." Skinner steeled himself to look up, but even so, he wasn't ready for way his gut lurched as he found himself looking into those familiar, unfamiliar green eyes. "I don't think I'll ever have had enough," Skinner said bitterly. "What do you want, Krycek? Are you here to gloat? Or did you come here to give me new orders?"

"Neither." Krycek smiled, a cool, deadly smile.

Skinner shook his head. "How much of it was a lie?" He asked. "Did it start off as the truth and become a lie? Or was it a lie from the moment you woke up in the hospital and found out who was waiting for you?"

"You don't need to know. You don't want to know," Krycek said, with a slight shrug.

"Was any of it true? The stories you told about your life? About the old woman you killed?" Skinner asked. Krycek shifted, uncomfortably.

"I'm what you said I am. An assassin, a practised liar. However - you shouldn't credit me with too much imagination," he replied. "Those details had to come from somewhere. I was too sick to be all that creative."

"So, some of it was true?" Skinner didn't know why it mattered, but somehow it did.

"Some of it," Krycek murmured.

"You're looking well," Skinner remarked. He was. He seemed to have returned to full health. His dark hair had been cropped close to his head, and he had regained the weight he'd lost while he was ill. He looked good enough to...

"You don't," Krycek observed.

"Yeah. Well." Skinner shrugged.

"I have a lot to thank you for," Krycek said.

"Don't worry - the personal services were free," Skinner said bitterly, then he tipped his glass back and drained it.

"You saved my life - back at the hospital. It all worked out very well for me. You were a faithful watchdog and bodyguard in the hospital, then you took me to a place where the people who were trying to kill me couldn't get at me. You gave me breathing space while I recovered, and you were a...most devoted nurse," Krycek gave one of his trademark mocking smiles, and Skinner felt as if a knife had been stabbed into his chest and given a vicious twist.

"The delirium wasn't a lie. I know that," Skinner snapped. "You couldn't fake that - that's

why you were so worried when I asked you about it. You didn't know what you'd let slip in your ramblings."

"True enough." Krycek nodded.

"But the rest of it, Alex? Was that necessary?" Skinner couldn't keep the pain out of his voice.

"We have a profile on you." Krycek leaned forward. "We have a profile on almost everyone. I knew you back to front, Walt. You didn't stand a chance. We were fairly sure about your sexual...inclinations. My...uncle," he inclined his head ironically, "wanted to use that fact to blackmail you before we came up with the nanocyte idea. I had to point out to him that as your only male love affair happened years ago it could easily be written off as a youthful indiscretion. We all have those, after all." Krycek grinned knowingly.

"So you intended to seduce me all along?" Skinner asked in a broken voice.

"No, but I wasn't sure I'd convinced you, and it was a good option. I needed you to trust me."

"Why bother? Why didn't you just run that night when you had me at your mercy - when you picked the lock on your door?"

"Run where? There was a raging blizzard outside if you remember, and nowhere to go. Killing you wasn't an option. It isn't policy," Krycek shrugged. "I was also ill - I couldn't have held you at bay for long in that condition, and besides, you were taking very good care of me."

"I see." Skinner sat up, and straightened his shoulders, his jaw clenching spasmodically. The cynicism of the other man's words appalled him, but he wasn't surprised by it. "Well, this might be one game I lost, but I don't think I give a damn about that. At least I'm not a soulless bastard, prepared to selling myself to ensure someone's trust and protection."

"It isn't about souls. It's about survival. I'm good at that - I learned it at a young age. I had to," Krycek commented bitterly. "And you're wrong about selling myself. That part of the plan was entirely...enjoyable." Those green eyes were suddenly full of regret.

"Why are you here?" Skinner asked wearily. "If it's to blackmail me again, then you can save yourself the effort. I don't care any more. Just kill me if you want. It doesn't matter."

"I'm not here for that. I came to bring you this." Krycek handed him a black leather case.

Skinner opened it, and wordlessly pulled out the palm pilot. "What's this?" He asked.

"A gift." Krycek shrugged. "There isn't a cure, Walt, you have to understand that. There were three palm pilots in existence that held data on your specific condition. I've destroyed the other two. You'll just have to take my word for that." He shrugged, and a shadow flitted

across his face as if he realized how little his word meant after his recent deception. "This is the last one. You can take it to your doctors - they might be able to do something with it. Your blood is valuable - nano-technology is expensive, so you're walking around with a several million bucks worth of experimental research inside you. Nanocytes can be programmed to clear the blood cells of cancer, and other impurities, such as the build up of cholesterol. Believe it or not, this technology was originally intended to benefit mankind." He gave an ironic nod towards the palm pilot. Skinner fingered it wordlessly.

"Why?" He asked after a long time.

"Why not?" Krycek shrugged, and got to his feet. Skinner's hand flashed out, and grabbed his wrist, holding it in a vice-like grip.

"Not good enough. I asked why," he hissed.

The mask slipped for just a moment. "Because I promised," Krycek replied, "and because it wasn't all lies, Walt," he said softly. "You were a revelation to me. I never expected...Well, let's just say that I have some good memories now." Skinner looked up into eyes that were Alex, his Alex, unguarded, and sincere, not Krycek, his enemy, but Alex, his lover. He swallowed hard, and released the other man's wrist.

"Your... uncle won't be pleased that you've done this," he said, fingering the palm pilot.

"No. I don't suppose he will." Krycek's face was hard, and dispassionate, as if steeling himself for a confrontation yet to come.

"What will he do?" Skinner wished that he didn't care.

"What he usually does. Maybe worse, this time. He doesn't like to be deceived. Or disobeyed." Krycek gave a brittle smile. "I'll live," he murmured. "I always do. He trained me well - it takes time to do that. He's invested too much in me to kill me for this. Cheer up, Walt," he said brightly, surveying Skinner's face. "I've just given you your life back." Skinner lifted his eyes to meet Krycek's, their bleakness conveying his message all too well. "Don't you understand, you stupid bastard," Krycek hissed, flinching from the unspoken reproach. "You've won. You fucking well won. You got what you wanted."

"Did I?" Skinner asked bitterly.

Krycek shook his head. "You got all I can give you, anyway," he said. So long, Walt." He dipped his head, and brushed his lips along the side of Skinner's face. Skinner sat, impassive, watching until the other man had left the bar. Then a flash of white inside the case caught his eye, and he fished out an envelope, and opened it. There was a card inside, plain white, with dark lettering on it.

"Happy New Year, Walt.

All my love, Alex."

Skinner stared at it for a long time, then screwed it up in his fist and threw it onto the floor. He slipped the palm pilot into his pocket, and left the bar. The snow was falling steadily outside, and soon his dark overcoat was covered in a layer of white, forming a cold shroud around his body as he disappeared into the night.

The End.

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