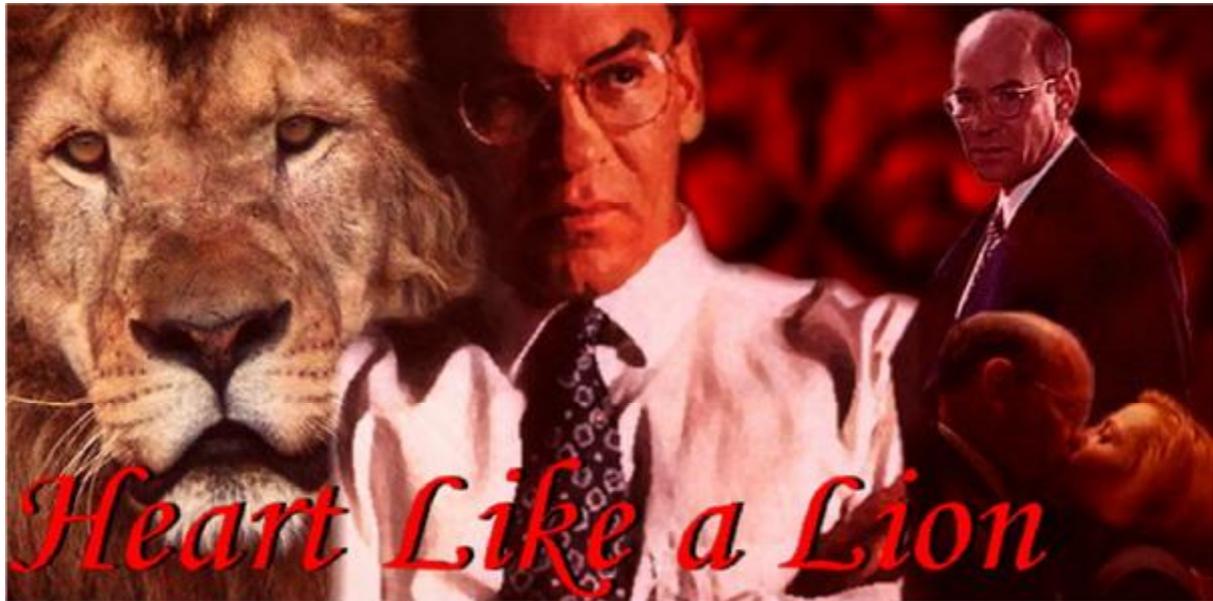


The End... by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/the-end/>

Story Notes:



I picked this gorgeous pic up on my travels but can't remember who made it. If you know, please email me so I can put a credit on it.

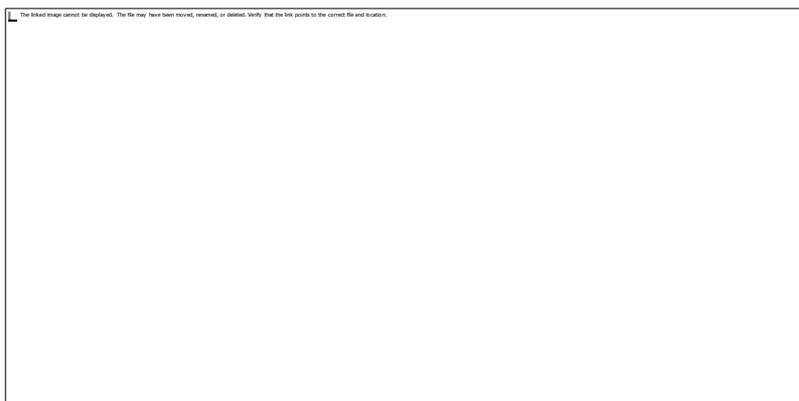
Notes: This story is how I'd like *The X Files* to end!!!! It was written especially for the www.thankyoumitch.com site which is asking for PG rated story subscriptions in honour of the final episode of *The X Files* and Mitch Pileggi's final few performances as Assistant Director Skinner. I wanted to write a story on the theme of goodbye, to tie up some of those X Files loose ends, and to also create an utterly Skinnercentric tale. Really the central theme of this story probably lends itself to a huge, long novel, but I wanted to keep it short so I haven't developed it that way, although hopefully you get the gist of it - and you can fill in the rest with your imaginations! Please visit www.thankyoumitch.com and contribute to the ad thanking Mitch Pileggi for bringing Walter Skinner to life and entertaining us over the past 9 years. You might also like to submit a PG rated story, or a letter to Mitch, or sign the www.thankyoumitch.com guest book - or all those things!

Dedication: Many thanks to Phoebe, Sue and dot - you've been wonderful as usual!

Grammar Note: I used UK spelling in this one .

Chapter 1 by Xanthe

Author's Notes:



Walter Skinner picked up the photograph, gazed at it for a moment, and then, with a tight, haunted smile, placed it in the box on his desk along with all the other oddments and assorted office bric-a-brac he had accumulated during his tenure as Assistant Director. The photograph of Sharon was the last thing he packed. Skinner gazed around the empty office – it looked strange without all the paraphernalia of his occupation. Twelve years...had it really been that long? Twelve long years in this office – he was saying goodbye to a whole chunk of his life. He sat down with a sigh, fighting a sudden and unexpected wave of nostalgia. He wasn't a sentimental man, so it took him by surprise. He didn't have long to indulge in it however, as a few seconds later the door opened – and a familiar voice broke through his reverie.

"Hey."

"Mulder – I see you're still barging in without knocking," Skinner growled, but he smiled, and gestured Mulder into the room.

"I thought you'd appreciate a reminder of the good old days on this auspicious occasion." Mulder grinned. "D'you mind if I bring the stroller in?"

"You've got the little fellow with you?" Skinner was delighted. "Sure - bring him in!" Skinner grinned and got up, then watched, amused, as Mulder manhandled the recalcitrant stroller and its sleeping occupant into the room. William Scully was fast asleep, his dark eyelashes looking impossibly long as they rested on the pale skin of his face. Skinner went to crouch in

front of the sleeping three year old. He reached out a finger and gently stroked William's silky cheek with a touch too light to wake the child.

"Is he okay?" Skinner asked Mulder.

"He's fine." Mulder shrugged. "Yesterday he moved around the entire contents of his bedroom without moving from his bed and then had a tantrum when I asked him to move it all back again! It's freaky, but kind of satisfying." Mulder grinned goofily.

"So, no regrets then?" Skinner stood up, and gazed at Mulder keenly. "About leaving the FBI - about giving up your career to look after William?"

Mulder shrugged, just the slightest shadow falling over his face. "No. I guess not. It's interesting and it's fulfilling - watching him develop, helping him learn how to handle his strange powers, protecting him."

"Well if anyone can do all that it's you," Skinner commented. "With your degree in psychology, and your years of experience on the X Files."

"Yeah. How are the X Files these days?" Mulder's tone was wistful.

"They're fine," Skinner told him firmly. "Agent Reyes has just been put in charge down there and I have no doubt that she'll do an excellent job – in the tradition of all the agents who've worked on the X Files...although somehow I doubt that anyone will ever be quite as talented, committed, or..." Skinner grinned, "downright spooky as the first agent who investigated them," he finished. Mulder's face stretched into a broad grin – a grin that faded as he gazed around the empty office.

"So, this is it," he murmured.

"This is it," Skinner agreed.

"The end of an era," Mulder commented as he glanced around. "All the history in this room."

"Yes." Skinner sighed.

"All the raised voices and slammed doors!" Mulder punctured the mood, flashing a teasing smile at Skinner. Skinner gave a bass, rumbling laugh, and shook his head.

"Those I won't miss!"

Mulder wandered around the office, gazing at the empty book-shelves, and the packed boxes.

"You forgot something." He picked up the nameplate lying on the desk and tucked it neatly into one of the boxes, alongside the photograph of Sharon. "Assistant Director Walter S Skinner," Mulder read, his fingers tracing the outline of the words on the nameplate. He glanced up. "Ready to go?"

"I guess so. I didn't realise I'd feel so strange about it though," Skinner said. "Is that why you came here today?"

"William's the psychic one, not me." Mulder grinned. "I came here because I wouldn't miss this day for the world. Who's taking your place in here?"

"John Doggett."

"Good choice." Mulder nodded approvingly. "Assistant Director Doggett – he's a good agent. He'll do a fine job."

"Scully didn't want the job," Skinner told him.

"I know. We talked about it but...she likes being at Quantico – she likes the regular hours."

They were silent for awhile. Skinner gazed at William for a long time, lost in thought. The child slept on, warm and at peace in this world that had been made safe for him, after so many long years of struggle.

"How about you?" Mulder asked. His hazel eyes searched Skinner's face, raking and brutal in their honesty. "Do you have any regrets, Walter?"

Skinner closed his eyes. When he opened them again, those hazel eyes were still boring into him, not letting him off the hook. He knew there was unfinished business between him and Fox Mulder – and now seemed as good a time as any to resolve it.

"Too many to count," he acknowledged wearily. "But only one that's really important right now."

Mulder's eyes flashed in acknowledgement. There was real hurt in those hazel depths. The past flashed between them and Skinner felt a wave of affection for the man standing in front of him. They had been through so much together – more so in this past year once the invasion had started, than in all the confused years preceding it. During the actual fighting, Mulder had been at his side throughout - loyal and brave, fighting with every last ounce of his strength and courage, until finally they had defeated the aliens. Only now, several weeks after the end of the final battle against colonisation, were they getting back to some semblance of normality. Skinner hadn't even seen Mulder for the past few weeks – they had both been busy sorting out their lives, and neither of them had had time for the conversation he knew they had to have. It couldn't wait any longer. Mulder knew most of it,

and had guessed the rest, but Skinner knew he owed the other man an explanation and an apology – and that Mulder needed to hear it from his own lips.

"Mulder, I'm sorry," Skinner said softly.

Mulder nodded, the hurt fading, to be replaced by something warmer, full of understanding.

"That's all I needed to hear," he said.

"I did what I had to do...but all the same - I'm sorry that I couldn't tell you," Skinner said wearily.

Mulder chewed on his lip thoughtfully for a few moments, and then spoke again. "You know...sometimes I wish I could go back in time and be involved with the Resistance from the beginning and not just at the end once the fighting started - when it became clear exactly what we were fighting against – and what we were fighting for. I wish I'd been of some use during my time at the FBI, instead of making things so complicated for you with all my questions and demands. I wish I'd known what you knew from the start...and I do resent you for that, Walter. I resent you for lying to me for all those years."

"I'm sorry." Skinner nodded, his shoulders stiff and tense. He deserved the rebuke.

"But then I figure...if you hadn't lied to me, then I probably wouldn't be where I am today, with Scully, and with this little guy in my life." He gestured towards William. "So I guess I should probably thank you. But...Christ, Walter...when I think of all the times..."

"I know." Skinner shook his head. "When you look back you'll see I helped you more than I should. More than was safe. I admired you, Mulder. I admired your courage, and your dedication. I still do. If things had been different, I would have recruited you...but they weren't, and it's easy to forget just how dangerous and desperate the situation was. Even now, you have no idea how close we came to failing. You had too many links to the Consortium through your parents for it to be safe for me to recruit you but I want you to know that I did try - I asked the Resistance but they refused to allow it. They didn't know you like I did. They didn't trust you the way I did. I helped you when I could – I protected you when I could...we were on the same side after all, you and I, Mulder. Only you were open about what you were fighting...and I...I didn't have that luxury." Skinner's voice was hoarse, his words coming straight from the heart. Mulder seemed to accept the apology. He glanced around the room, shaking his head ruefully.

"Christ, when I think of the years I spent looking for **answers**, and they were here all along, in this office. It seems ironic now. You knew the answers but you watched me flail and falter while I went out looking for them. Wasn't that hard, Walter?" Mulder's hazel eyes were insistent. Skinner shook his head, the memories flashing between them almost tangibly, like a beacon.

"Oh, Mulder, you have no idea," he murmured.

March 1971, Vietnam

One moment he had been walking along behind Lieutenant Marshall, and the next everything was chaos, and there was blood flowing down his face and into his eyes, painting everything red. He tried to fight back, only to feel the bullets rip through his body. He was dancing grotesquely on the forest floor, his body shattering into what felt like a thousand pieces and then he was falling...falling...falling...

"Corporal Skinner. You can open your eyes now." He did – only to find that the world had gone from red to white in what felt like a fraction of a second.

"Where am I?" His voice? It sounded strange, different.

"You're safe."

"Where?" He blinked, and a face floated before him, fuzzy and unfocused.

"You were in an ambush. You died."

He blinked again. "I'm dead?"

"No. You died – but we brought you back to life."

"Am I in the hospital?"

"No. You're somewhere else." The disembodied face grew a neck, and then a body, and slowly came into focus as his vision returned to normal. The face was that of a woman in her late sixties. She had thick white hair, and piercing blue eyes. She was wearing a white coat. "My name is Yvette."

"You saved me?" Skinner asked, glancing down at his body, obscured beneath a white sheet.

"Yes we did – but there's a price." The woman gave a regretful smile. "I'm sorry, Walter. I don't like to do this but it has to be done. We've had our eye on you for some time; you're an excellent soldier - brave, committed, and loyal. You also have an unusual kind of intelligence – and it's that which made you stand out from the crowd. That's why we've been watching you."

"What have you done to me?" Skinner tried moving his hands, only to find that he couldn't even feel them. "I can't feel my hands...or my legs...what's happened to me?" He fought back the rising tide of panic.

"Hush...it's okay." Yvette placed a soothing hand against his cheek. "This will be a lot for you to take in, Walter. I want you to listen very carefully. Do you understand?"

He blinked again. Above him was a bright white light.

"Yes." He whispered. "I understand."

"Good. This conflict in Vietnam is nothing – it's a waste of lives and resources. Men fight men when there is an enemy far greater on its way, Walter. Within 50 years, we will be under attack from the skies – and we must find a way to fight against an alien race with an advanced technology than we can only begin to understand. Are you still with me, Walter?"

*He gazed at her, confused. "Yes," he said at last, wondering if he was hallucinating. Maybe he was still on the forest floor, with blood pouring from his wounds. Maybe he was dead. Maybe this **was** death.*

"For a long time now, a select few of us have been fighting that future. A few years ago, a group splintered off – they favour appeasement of the aliens; they intend to enslave the rest of humankind and live as kings amongst us. We cast those traitors out, but they are still a threat to us. We continue to recruit men and women to our cause so that one day, when the aliens come, they will not find a pliant work force and source of food – instead they will find us as ready as we can be – ready, willing and able to fight them. We want to recruit you to our cause, Walter Skinner. If you agree, then from this day forward you will be bound to secrecy – you will be loyal to us, over and above any other loyalty in your life. Your first duty will always be to us. It won't be an easy life, Walter, but if you choose to accept our offer, then you will have a chance not only to fight for your country, but also for your race - and for your world."

"And if I refuse?" Skinner asked, his mind reeling, still uncertain whether this was even real.

"You were dead, Walter. We have brought your mind back to life using alien technology, but we have not, as yet, mended your body. We have merely placed it in stasis. If you do not wish to join us, then we will allow you to die, as you should have died, out on that battlefield. We will return your body home to your mother for her to bury. You cannot be allowed to live, knowing what you now know. If you agree to join us, then you will be sworn to secrecy for the rest of your life. Think about it carefully, Walter. The rest of your life might be a very long time indeed.

"How long do I have to think about it?" he asked.

She smiled. "Not long. There's a limit to the length of time we can keep you in stasis before your body starts to degenerate. You have about 2 minutes." She gently caressed his cheeks with her fingers. Her skin felt warm, and soothing. She reminded him of his grandmother. "Walter, I am speaking the truth. We want you with us, but we will respect your wishes if you choose death."

Choose death? Who would choose death? Skinner closed his eyes and tried to think. If he joined them, then he would live a lie for the rest of his life. He would never be able to tell his mother what had happened to him here, or his wife, if he ever met a woman he wanted to

marry. He was a fundamentally honest man and the thought of so much deception distressed him...and yet...if what she said was true, then he should be proud to give up his own life to this cause, to sacrifice himself to save his people and his planet...

He opened his eyes, filled with sudden certainty.

"Yes," he said.

"Just like that?" Mulder asked. "You were given a choice between life and death – what kind of a choice was that?"

"Apparently some people turned them down." Skinner shrugged.

"And did the Resistance allow them to die?"

Skinner felt suddenly very old and tired. "Yes. Of course," he murmured. "They – we -were as ruthless as we had to be – in other words, very." He sat down heavily. "Apart from that – the choice was a test as much as anything else. Those who refused wouldn't have been right for the long, hard battle ahead. "

Mulder nodded thoughtfully, and Skinner could see him almost visibly wondering what his own reaction to such a choice would have been.

"Mulder, only a person with the right sort of mind, the kind open to extreme possibilities would say yes, would be able to do more than dismiss the whole thing as a dying hallucination. And only the person with the right sort of heart would be willing to take the chance, the risk, promised along with the return to life, " Skinner said softly. "There's no question that you would have passed that test, Mulder. You would have made an excellent Resistance agent."

Mulder nodded, the fleeting uncertainty vanishing from his hazel eyes.

"What happened to Yvette?" He asked.

"She died a few years ago – she was too old to be restored to life the way they restored me. The process doesn't rejuvenate - it only repairs. But she still haunted my dreams – usually when I felt I was slipping in my purpose. She'd show up and scold me, and that usually got me back on track again. I wish she could have lived to see us defeat the Consortium and the aliens."

"I had no idea they recruited you back from the grave." Mulder shook his head, his hazel eyes deeply troubled. "You've never mentioned that in all the interviews you've given, Walter."

"No. Some things are too personal to share with anyone but..." Skinner paused, "close friends," he finished. Mulder smiled.

"Ah, I have a claim to fame!" He laughed. "I'm a close friend of one of the most famous men on the planet - Walter Skinner, one of the leaders of the Resistance, the great hero of the battle against colonisation."

"You were there too. You helped," Skinner commented.

"Right at the end – in the final battle." Mulder shook his head. "You mobilised the Resistance forces, you devised the strategy that won the day, you inspired us, even right at the end, when we were sure that we were going to lose. You never gave up. Hell, you were fighting for years before that, behind the scenes, and I never even knew it. I wish I had known. I'd have made your life a lot easier."

"You kept me on my toes – with you around I always had to be one step ahead," Skinner replied.

"Was it all worth it?" Mulder asked. "The years of deceit, the strain of leading a double life? Working for the Resistance, spying for them, outplaying the Consortium, preparing so many of your people for the final invasion?"

"Yes," Skinner replied, without hesitation. He glanced at William, asleep in his stroller. "Whenever I look at him, I know it was worth it, however hard it was keeping that secret for all those years. Mulder – it isn't just you. I lied to my own wife, and in the end that secret drove a wedge between us. It was as if she always knew I was holding something back. I think you did too, with that famous intuition of yours. You and Scully – both of you had trouble really trusting me. I wouldn't give you the unequivocal answers that you wanted because I **couldn't**, Mulder. If the Consortium had suspected I was a high-ranking officer of the Resistance then they'd have killed me – and not before they'd tortured me to get every single piece of valuable information from me. I couldn't risk that. You do understand that, don't you, Mulder?"

"Yes." Mulder nodded, his eyes shining. "Yes, Walter. I do. I didn't come here to give you a hard time. I came to say thank you. From me, from Scully - and most of all from William and all the other kids on the planet whose future you've saved. I'm not sure I could have kept that secret for so long – you did a good thing, Walter."

"I..." Skinner got up and went over to look at William again. He crouched in front of the child and gazed at him fondly. "I couldn't have kids – that was part of what I lost when they brought me back from the dead. I'm glad. I don't think I could have lied to my own children."

There was a knock on the door, and Kim entered.

"Sir, I told you that you didn't have to pack those boxes yourself," she chided Skinner, with an ease that spoke of a long and happy association.

"I wanted to. It's my stuff after all." Skinner stood up, smiling at her.

"Well I hope you'll at least let someone help you carry it! There's a visitor for you who I expect will volunteer for that task, sir." She stepped aside with a grin and a tall, dark haired man strode into the room. Skinner was aware of Mulder stiffening, and he placed a warning hand on the other man's arm.

"Mulder, he works for me. He's always worked for me, for all of us. He's one of the good guys."

"I know." Mulder grimaced. "I do know that. It's just...I always have this gut reaction when I lay eyes on him. No offence, Krycek," he added.

"None taken." Alex Krycek gave an easy smile, and inclined his head. Gone were the cheap and nasty suits of his time, many years before, as Mulder's partner, and the leather jackets and faded jeans from his time as a triple agent. Now he wore his white shirt and tie and elegantly tailored suit with the same panache as Skinner. His hair was neatly trimmed and he looked every inch the FBI agent he was. "Hey buddy!" Krycek glanced at William who was just starting to stir, making little moaning sounds in the stroller as he woke. The child looked at Krycek and gave a wide smile.

"Are you waking up?" Mulder unbuckled the child from the stroller and hauled him into his arms. William's cheeks were pink from sleep. He rested his sleepy head against his father's shoulder, gazed solemnly at Skinner and Krycek for a moment, and then closed his eyes again. "No sense of occasion!" Mulder chided.

"He's a great kid. I envy you," Krycek commented softly, his tone wistful.

Mulder gave a startled glance at Skinner. "Were all agents of the Resistance recruited the same way?" he asked, in a faintly appalled tone. "Did they have to die first?"

"No." Skinner shook his head. "But sometimes, a promising person died before we had a chance to recruit them. That's what happened to me – and to Alex. When you died after being abducted, I was going to recruit you then, against the direct orders of the other senior agents of the Resistance, just so that you would have a chance of life...but the process didn't work. It was something to do with the alien virus you were incubating but we didn't know it then."

"Did you recruit Krycek?" Mulder asked. "Or did someone else."

There was silence in the room. Skinner and Krycek gazed at each other wordlessly for a long time, a whole history contained in that one look. Then Skinner made a slight, weary movement with his head.

"It was me," he said.

November 11, 1991

Skinner stood for a moment, staring at the gaping hole in Alex Krycek's head. A thin trickle of blood ran down the young man's forehead, soaking his thick dark hair, staining it a dull red colour. Skinner gazed into the sightless green eyes, and repressed a shudder. Krycek's breathing was harsh and laboured – he clearly didn't have long for the world. The paramedics were on their way but Skinner knew Krycek would be dead before they got here.

"What happened?" Skinner didn't take his eyes off the pale man in front of him. Krycek's green eyes seemed to be pleading with him, asking him to make a decision he didn't want to make.

"He was just unlucky, sir. Just plain unlucky." The SAC shook his head. He was crouched beside Krycek, his hand hovering over the young man's hair, as if unsure whether it was even possible to comfort a man this far gone. "We staked out the place, followed all the correct procedures. Agent Krycek was under strict orders to cover us from behind. We knew how green he was, that he didn't have many field ops under his belt..." The SAC broke off, his face pale, his voice choked. "Christ, he's such a kid. I'm sorry. I thought he was fine, we had them all...but there was one guy hiding out the back and he took pot shots at us. Alex just got caught in the cross-fire. He wasn't doing anything wrong – he'd followed my orders to the letter. He was a damned fine agent."

"I want your report on my desk first thing tomorrow morning," Skinner snapped tersely, still gazing into those sightless green eyes.

"Yes, sir. He isn't going to make it, is he, sir?" The SAC asked. Skinner thought about it, flinching inwardly. Krycek could survive, if he made a call. He could bring this promising young agent back to life – but at what cost?

"I don't know," he said softly. "He might not be as badly wounded as we think..." Even as he said it, he knew that he was setting up Krycek's miraculous recovery and return to duty. The SAC gazed at him, blindly, wanting to accept there was still a chance despite the desperate condition of the man in front of him.

"Go and take care of your other men. Get them back to the Hoover building and debrief them. I'll stay with Krycek until the paramedics get here," Skinner ordered tersely, wishing this was a decision he didn't have to make.

"Yes, sir." The SAC took one last look at Alex Krycek and then went, his eyes bright with unshed tears.

The warehouse where the drugs heist had taken place gradually emptied. Skinner waited until everyone had gone, leaving only a police presence outside, on guard. Then, alone with the mortally wounded man, he crouched down beside him and gently stroked the dark hair

over Alex Krycek's forehead, obscuring that terrible, gaping wound. Krycek's breathing was soft as a whisper now, barely audible.

"Krycek – can you hear me?" Skinner asked, but the young agent was too far gone to respond. Skinner watched as the young man's eyes opened wide, as if in surprise, and then all life faded out of them, and he exhaled his last breath. "What would you want if I could ask you?" Skinner asked softly. "What is it you'd want me to do?" He rocked back on his haunches, and tried to find some clue in the dead green eyes. He had sworn he would never do this, would never do unto another what had been done to him. Not that he regretted the past 20 years, but...to give Alex Krycek the kind of choice he had been given, to take this bright, promising young agent and make him into someone who had to live always in the shadows, never able to trust anyone again, never to be able to be honest with anyone he loved...The hair beneath his fingers was soft, and those green eyes seemed to follow him.

There had been something about Alex Krycek, something that had caught his eye and attracted his attention from the moment he'd first met the young agent, straight out of Quantico, barely six months previously. Could he do this? Would Alex want him to do this? Would he leap at the challenge or balk at the untenable choice he would be given if Skinner went ahead, resenting the older man forever because of it. Alex's eyes held no answers. Skinner got wearily to his feet. Every instinct in his body screamed at him to just turn his back on the corpse and walk out of here, have Alex buried with full honours as befitted an agent killed in the line of duty. He almost did it too...he walked towards the door with a long-legged, determined stride, was half-way there...then stopped, and made the fatal mistake of turning around. Alex's eyes were staring straight at him, pleading for a second chance at life. Skinner swallowed hard. With nerveless fingers he reached into his coat pocket, pulled out his bulky cell-phone, and made the call, never taking his eyes off Alex Krycek, spread-eagled on the floor with a bullet through his brain.

"God forgive me, Alex," he whispered. "Because I'm not sure that you ever will."

I always swore I wouldn't recruit anyone the way I was recruited – I'm sorry, Alex." Skinner sighed. "All I seem to be doing, now it's all over, is apologising to people."

"You did what you had to. I don't regret it," Krycek told him with a shrug. "You gave me back my life after all."

"Yes – but I didn't give you back your old life. I gave you something else entirely. You had the hardest job of us all – you didn't just have to lead a double life, you had to infiltrate the Consortium as well."

"I volunteered for that." Krycek shrugged. "You didn't exactly force me."

"And you did a damn good job!" Mulder exclaimed. "I was convinced."

"You were supposed to be." Krycek shrugged.

"Hell, even I was convinced sometimes and I knew the truth!" Skinner said. "We agreed to maintain our cover in all public places – including the FBI building. This place used to be teeming with Consortium spies, and I knew my office was bugged. It wasn't always easy treating Alex like a traitor and enemy when I knew what he was really like and how dedicated to our cause he was." Skinner grimaced.

"It was even harder doing some of the things the Consortium ordered me to do." Krycek shot Skinner a meaningful look.

"We couldn't risk the Consortium finding out about either of us." Skinner explained to Mulder. "It was better to play it safe than take unnecessary risks, however personally unpleasant it might have been for us – although I was always pretty grateful whenever I met Alex privately, at Resistance safe houses, to be reassured that he was still one of us. Sometimes you played your part so well that I used to wonder if they'd turned you."

Krycek shook his head, his green eyes flashing. "No chance of that ever happening, sir. I hated those bastards and what they stood for...and you know I'd have followed you anywhere, just like everyone else in the Resistance." Krycek gave Skinner a smile of pure hero worship. Skinner was aware of Mulder's look of total surprise in response; this Alex Krycek was one Mulder would have to get used to because he was the real man - and he was here to stay.

"So, you died of gunshot wounds to the head twice, Krycek? Once might be considered unfortunate – twice starts to sound like a habit," Mulder joked.

"It was Walter's idea the second time around. He told me to stand very still so he wouldn't miss his aim!" Krycek laughed. "You have no idea how much trust it takes to stand still and allow yourself to be shot at...but the aliens were on our doorstep and Walter needed me out of the Consortium and back underground with the Resistance."

"And you thought I'd make a good witness to his death?" Mulder raised an eyebrow at Skinner. "I wondered why you stayed behind after you shot him. I presume it was to get his body back to the Resistance so that they could revive him?"

"Yes." Skinner nodded. "Although I wasn't sure you'd buy the whole event at the time. Alex was supposed to provoke me into it, but when it came to it we both froze and it didn't go the way we planned. In the end I just shot him to get it over with – I think both of us were at the end of our tether with waiting for it to happen at that point. Luckily you had other things on your mind with William's birth – so you didn't ask your usual horde of awkward questions." He grinned at Mulder who made a face in reply.

"It can't have been easy pulling that trigger," Mulder commented.

"It wasn't," Skinner admitted. "Alex has always been my right hand man in the Resistance, my second in command. When it came to it I..." He shook his head, his voice choked.

"Sir – I came down here to get you. Are you ready?" Krycek asked, changing the subject deftly and distracting Skinner from the memory in the process.

"Is it time?" Mulder juggled the sleepy William against his shoulder.

"It's past time. I want my office!" An amused voice said from the door. Assistant Director Doggett walked into the room, grinning broadly.

"Okay, okay. I'm leaving!" Skinner held up his hands in mock surrender. He grabbed one of his boxes, and Krycek swung another up in both his hands; the left one had been restored to him during the process of his second resurrection, and Skinner had noticed that he liked to use it as much as possible, still delighting in the joy of having it returned to him, like a kid with a new toy. Skinner smiled to himself, glad that something so tangibly good had come of those terrible few moments in the parking garage when he had been forced to kill his closest friend and ally.

Skinner walked to the door, and then glanced back, another wave of sadness assaulting him.

"I'm going to miss this old office," he said softly. Kim stood on tiptoe, and placed a kiss on his cheek, her warm hand squeezing his arm comfortingly.

"The fifth floor won't seem the same without you, sir," she whispered.

"Or you," he told her, with a fond smile. She nodded, and grabbed her own box. They left Doggett in his new office and walked down the hallway towards the elevator. They passed an office door and Skinner grinned and pointed.

"That's Section Chief Kersh's office," he said.

"Section Chief?" Mulder raised an amused eyebrow.

"Yup – he might not have worked for the Consortium but he wasn't exactly a help to the Resistance either. He was just out for himself and his own career. It gave me great satisfaction to bust his ass down to Section Chief. He answers to Doggett now – and somehow I don't think John will be all that gentle with him." Skinner gave a malicious smile. "It wasn't easy finding a suitable office for him," Skinner mused. "In the end we converted an old broom cupboard...it's a little cramped and airless but I'm sure he'll manage."

"Why, Walter, I do believe you're enjoying this," Mulder grinned.

"Why, Mulder, I do believe you're right!" Skinner replied.

They got into the elevator, rode up to the 6th floor, walked out into the hallway and past a door bearing the legend "Deputy Director Alex Krycek". At the end of the corridor was a wide open door, leading to a huge, plush office suite. Mulder whistled, and put William down on the thick, soft carpet. The three year old began racing around excitedly, investigating the empty office.

"So that's why you didn't bring your old name plate with you." Mulder picked up the sparkling new one, sitting on the desk.

"I'm glad you packed it though. It'll be a souvenir." Skinner smiled. He glanced around the office, and the heavy weight of his new responsibility settled on his shoulders. "I think...if you don't mind...I'd like to be alone for a moment," he murmured to them.

Krycek and Kim exchanged a glance, and nodded. Mulder's hazel eyes were sharp and knowing as they searched Skinner's face. He understood – that famous intuition of his had kicked in as usual. After so many years of sacrifice, of hiding and fighting, it had finally come to this. Skinner felt almost weary from the knowledge that it was over, and they were free, and safe. Even after the final battle he'd been running on adrenaline and there had been so many things to sort out. Now, for the first time, it really sank in, and he needed some time to face up to it.

Kim scuttled out into her office next door while Mulder scooped William in his arms. He and Krycek reached the door at the same time. Mulder hesitated.

"Can we be friends do you think?" He asked, holding out his hand, the other full of William. "For his sake if nothing else." He inclined his head in Skinner's direction. Krycek's green eyes flashed.

"I'd like that," he said, tentatively, accepting Mulder's hand and shaking it firmly. They both glanced at Skinner as they left the room.

"Will he be okay?" Mulder murmured.

"Yes. I think so," Krycek said thoughtfully. "He's the real deal – a real hero, Mulder. He keeps apologising but he's given up more than most of us and he was an inspirational leader. You have no idea how brilliant he was behind the scenes, setting up meets for me, keeping me in the loop and all at the same time as running his section of the Resistance. Without him, I wouldn't have survived in the shark's pool. I always call the Consortium that." Krycek grinned. "That's what it felt like. Do you have time for coffee? My office is just here..." Their voices faded as they walked out into the hallway, shoulder to shoulder, old enemies suddenly become friends.

Skinner gave a wry grunt. A real hero. He was no such thing. He was just a normal, flawed man, with too many memories and a heart full of regrets. No, he wouldn't do anything differently if he had his time over again, but that didn't make it any easier to live with the memories. He sat down in his new chair, at his new desk, and pulled out the photograph of Sharon. He placed it in pride of place on his desk, and lovingly fingered her image.

"Sorry – to you most of all, Sharon," he whispered, wishing she had lived to see this day. And yet...somehow he knew that she would have understood, and, more importantly, that she would have forgiven him.

Skinner gazed at the name-plate, still bemused. It had all happened so quickly. Just a few years ago he had been struggling to maintain his position as Assistant Director against Kersh's machinations, needing to stay where he could find information and pass it on to his colleagues in the Resistance. Now it was all over. He was free; for the first time since he was 18 years old, he wasn't leading a double life. Now he could just concentrate on living, on finding ways to be happy, and on doing his new job as well as he could for the benefit of his country.

Skinner allowed himself one small moment of satisfaction, and then he picked up the phone and called his Deputy Director into the room to discuss how they would run the FBI between them. As he spoke, he picked up the name-plate and fingered it thoughtfully, smiling at the legend it bore:

Walter S. Skinner – Director, FBI.

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