

Driftwood by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/driftwood/>

Story Notes:

Posted: 21st January, 2001



Driftwood by Xanthe

Skinner had seen the sun rise in all corners of the globe, from the steamy, jungle daybreaks of Vietnam, to the pollution-filtered, hazy dawns of Washington DC. Each possessed their own special kind of beauty, but African sunrises had a depth and intensity that were unique. Skinner didn't think he'd ever grow tired of the way the first golden rays of the sun lit the sea, sparkling like glowing apricot-pink gems on the churning white surface of the waves, and lighting the horizon with streaks of gentle, morning fire.

Skinner sat on the porch of his small beach house, a blanket wrapped around his body, a cup of tepid tea in his hand. He hadn't planned on waking at this unearthly hour simply to view the sunrise, but, like so much else in his life in the five years since Mulder's abduction, it had just happened. Five years...He glanced at the date on his watch and realised, without surprise, that today was the anniversary of Mulder's disappearance. Days and months had passed without him even noticing the date in this lazy, beautiful place, but of course some inner sensor would not let **this** day of all days pass by un-noticed.

Skinner warmed his cold hands around his cup of tea, and gazed out into the black depths of the night. It was five years to the day since Mulder had disappeared, and four since he had performed a vanishing act of his own...

Deputy Director Kersh's ears were moving in time with his jaw as his mouth opened and closed in furious speech. Skinner gazed at the sight, transfixed. He had stopped listening some time ago – Kersh was always perpetually angry anyway. At least this time Skinner wasn't the object of his ire – that misfortune belonged to Agent John Doggett, who was taking the unjustified chewing out much better than Skinner would have done in his position. Skinner had the strangest sense of *deja vu*. Today was the first anniversary of Mulder's abduction, and he had no idea why he was spending it here, in this job he had grown to loathe, taking orders from a man he despised. He seemed to have been sitting in this chair, watching Kersh lose his temper at some hapless agent or another, for years. It had an otherworldly quality to it, and he felt as if he had stepped outside his own body, and could suddenly see the whole universe, and his place in it, very clearly.

"You know," he murmured, finding himself rising to his feet, full of resolve, "I think I've had enough of this. I think it's time to leave."

"What the hell are you playing at?" Kersh demanded after a moment's shocked silence. "You can't just walk out of this meeting, AD Skinner."

"Oh, I think I can." He smiled, politely, never feeling more sure of anything in his life. "I resign, Al. I quit. Oh, you can probably make me work out the terms of my contract, but I strongly recommend that you don't."

Doggett got to his feet, an expression of total surprise on his face. "Sir, you don't have to..." he began.

"It's all right, John, this doesn't have anything to do with you," Skinner interrupted him. Doggett nodded, glanced briefly at Kersh's thunderous face, and then slipped quietly out of the room, leaving the other two men to it.

"That's strange - I never took you for a quitter, Walter." Kersh rocked back on his heels, an ugly sneer on his face.

"I'm not quitting, Al. I just...I just need to go home," Skinner said softly, not even sure what he meant by the words. Kersh reacted angrily, more, Skinner suspected, because he knew that he had lost any power he had ever had over his subordinate than for any other reason.

"If you walk out of this office then you're throwing away your career, Walter," Kersh warned.

"What career, Al?" Skinner smiled mildly. "We both know that my career effectively came to a halt the day I re-opened the X Files, years ago, against orders from above, and thereby showed that I wasn't prepared to be anyone's lackey."

He said the words calmly, without malice, but his inference clearly wasn't lost on Kersh whose dark skin turned an apoplectic ruddy colour in hue, his eyes blazing.

"You know, the difference between you and me, Walter, is that I'm prepared to do what the hell it takes to get to the top," Kersh snapped at him.

Skinner thought about it for a moment, and then nodded. "You're right, Al. That is the difference between us," he said softly, before opening the door, and walking out into his new life. He never looked back.

Skinner wasn't sure why he felt so wide awake at this unearthly hour. He and Ben had both gotten mildly drunk the previous night as usual, and he had staggered back to his house, singing away merrily to himself as he swayed across the beach. He had slept for a few hours, but something had woken him in the cold, dark moments before dawn. His bladder had protested the amount of alcohol he had consumed the previous night and he had gotten up to relieve the ache, and as he had padded barefoot back to bed, a flash of white in the sky outside had claimed his attention so he had gone out on the porch to watch. Strange lights in the sky were not unusual in this area - he had seen them before, but none quite like this. This had been just one light, and brighter and more intense than any other he had ever seen. It had hovered in the sky, and a low, vibrant hum had filled the air, and then it had gone.

Feeling too restless to return to bed, Skinner had made himself a pot of tea, pulled a blanket around his body, and settled down to watch the sunrise. The night was always darkest just before dawn, but he loved the inky, velvet depths of that darkness. Soon, very soon, the first, faintest rays of the sun would glimmer on the horizon, heralding a brand new day, and not just any day; an anniversary. Five years since Mulder's disappearance. What would the day bring, he wondered? On the first anniversary of Mulder's abduction he had quit his job. On the second he had gotten involved in a fight in a market in Turkey, and had ended up nursing a sore jaw and two broken ribs. On the third he had spent the day downing whisky after whisky in a pub in England until he was too blind drunk to stand, and on the fourth he had stayed in his room in Tunisia all day, watching the whirring fan cast endless shadows on the ceiling. Maybe this year he would spend this day as he spent most of his days; swimming, reading, fishing, talking to Ben, or any one of his other new friends in the bar in town...or maybe he would spend the day alone, dozing in the sun on the porch, listening to the chorusing cicadas, and remembering the past. He had long since given up fighting memories. Now he let them come, good and bad, and he was sure that on this day, of all days, there would be plenty of memories clamouring for his attention...

Skinner packed his possessions into boxes, feeling curiously light-hearted now that he had made his decision to leave. He glanced around his apartment, but there was nothing to keep him here. Nobody would care if he stayed or went, except possibly Scully. He had only stayed this long because of her. Her pregnancy had given him a reason to carry on in those first, dark days after Mulder's disappearance. He couldn't have just left her to cope alone in a hostile world in her condition, so he had done what he always did - shouldered his duties and responsibilities, and put one foot in front of the other when there was a huge gaping hole where his heart had once been. There had been so many times in the year since Mulder's abduction when he had been tempted to throw it all in and leave, and each time it had been Scully who had pulled him back from the brink.

"Mulder wouldn't want you to give up your career over him," she had said, and she might even have been right, but the time had come to stop thinking about what Mulder would have wanted and start thinking about what Walter Skinner wanted – what Walter Skinner **needed** – and what he needed right now was to get as far away from Washington DC as possible.

Scully would be fine. Her baby son was four months old, and there hadn't been any threat to her or her child – Mulder's child. When Scully had made a decision to have a child through IVF, Mulder had been the first person she had approached for help, and of course he had agreed – after discussing it with Skinner first. It had seemed very right, and very natural: Mulder was not only Scully's partner - he was also her best friend. Both he and Skinner knew how much she wanted a child and they were just happy that they could help. Skinner didn't regret it for an instant. He knew that Scully missed Mulder, but with her new baby and a new partner in her life she was making a fresh start for herself, while he was just drifting, aimlessly. She had moved on, and he...he had not.

Skinner picked up a shirt that was still lying where his lover had left it, a year ago, slung carelessly over the back of the armchair, and held it to his face, taking a deep inhalation of the scent that still lingered there. He hadn't moved any of Mulder's possessions until now. He could see Mulder, in his mind's eye, dressed only in his boxer shorts, lazily reading the newspaper as was his habit on Sunday mornings, one long limb slung carelessly, casually over the arm of the chair, his hair still tousled from where he had slept on it.

Skinner closed his eyes, still holding the shirt. There were memories all around, and they just made him even more acutely aware of what he had lost. Mulder had been his lover for such a short time, and if it hadn't been for Scully, then Skinner seriously doubted that he and Mulder would ever have overcome their reserve and finally consummated what had been, on his side at least, a constant, unswerving devotion that he had never quite been able to hide. The fact that Mulder might reciprocate those emotions had taken him totally by surprise. It had been Scully who had engineered the candlelight dinner for two that had finally brought them together. Each of them had thought that she was to be their date...only she had never shown up. She had called the next day though. Skinner could still remember the feel of Mulder's warm head on his chest as they lay in bed that first morning. He could still remember the way the sun had shone through drapes they hadn't had either the time or inclination to close during the passionate haste of the previous evening. The sunlight had revealed coppery undertones in Mulder's hair, which Skinner had always assumed, wrongly, to just be a plain dark brown; that had been the first of many small, unimportant and yet thrilling discoveries that he had made about his new lover. He had reached for the phone, taking care not to disturb Mulder's slumbering form draped over his chest, and had spoken to Scully for a few minutes - until she had asked to speak to Mulder.

"Uh, how do you know he's here?" he had stammered down the phone, and she had laughed out loud.

"He sure as hell better be there after all the trouble I went to in order to finally get you two guys together!"

And somehow, after that day, Mulder had never left. At least not until...

Skinner threw Mulder's shirt into a black sack with the rest of his belongings. He wouldn't throw them out – not just yet. He'd put them all in storage and decide what to do with them when he came back...if he came back.

He sold his apartment, wrapped up his affairs in the US, and spent the next three years trying to outrun his own misery, only to find that it went with him wherever he travelled. As he drifted from town to town, and country to country, searching for what he knew not what, a quotation rose unbidden to his mind taunting him with the folly of ever hoping to find rest, or escape, or whatever it was he sought in his endless travels: "Different skies, same soul..." He couldn't remember who had said those words, but they held a profound truth for him. It didn't matter where he went, because he took his sadness with him, packed up in his heart.

For a man who had always been used to the tyranny of the clock, the phone, and the incessant, meticulously-timed appointments that formed his working day, the novelty of

having all the time in the world to do whatever he pleased, and the liberty to go wherever he wanted, was, at first, bewildering. In a frenzied attempt to cast off any trace of his former life he gave up his neatly pressed clothing, state of the art suitcase, cell phone, and carefully prearranged travel itinerary, and abandoned himself solely to the forces of chance - and fate. For three years he roamed wherever his footsteps took him, making his decisions about where to go next on the roll of a dice, or by the end of his pencil thrust at random into a place on a map. From owning an apartment, a car, and a closet full of expensive clothes, he went to wearing only the clothes he stood up in, and a few other meagre belongings, which he kept stuffed into a canvas bag that could easily be slung over his shoulder. Travelling light, he called it. Dangerously unprepared, was Scully's reproving verdict, but he hoped he managed to allay her fears with the postcards he sent regularly – and the gifts he found in countless remote towns and villages, and despatched back home in order to delight little Thomas Scully. He loved that boy as if he was his own son, but the child's wide hazel eyes, and full lips were painful reminders of what he had lost - and it was memories of Mulder that had driven him away from Washington DC in the first place...

Skinner got up, and stretched. He threw the dregs of his tea out onto the beach, and leaned against the wall of his house. He wondered what Scully was doing, and little Thomas Scully, who would now be four years old. He had pictures of the child pinned up all around the house; the little boy grew more like his father with each passing year. Skinner hoped that he'd see the child again one day, but not yet. He couldn't face going back home just yet.

Home. Only he didn't think of Washington DC as 'home' any more. He wasn't even sure that he thought of the US as home. When he and Mulder had been together he would have called anyplace where Mulder was 'home.' It had been that simple. Love had made it that simple. When Mulder had been abducted he had never expected to find anywhere else to call 'home'. For three long years he had been a drifter, someone who wandered through, like a ghost. He had made fleeting friendships, shared a cup of tea here, a game of chess in a rundownbar, or a conversation on a bus there, but mostly he kept himself to himself, and made no real connection with anyone... until one day he had walked into a tiny African town by the sea and everything had changed. He wasn't sure why his footsteps had brought him here but they had, unerringly, with each roll of his dice, and each stab of his pencil into the map...

It was just a small town – barely more than a tiny smudge on his map. There were some houses, a tiny market, and a small, ramshackle bar, which was his first port of call. He downed a few beers - and drowned in a sea of friendly, welcoming faces. He didn't know why they should welcome him so enthusiastically; they didn't know him, and yet they greeted him as if he were one of their own, returning to the fold after a long time away in a hostile world. Skinner, used to the urban jungle of Washington DC, where making eye contact on the Metro with a stranger could cost you your life, felt that he should have been surprised by the warmth of their welcome...and yet he wasn't. Finding this town, on this remote stretch of the Ivory Coast, felt somehow right...like coming home.

"Heya!" A tall, slender man, with ebony skin and shining white teeth wrapped an arm around his shoulder by way of greeting. "Adeben." He said, pointing at his own chest. "You took a long time to find your way back. Yes?"

"Back?" Skinner frowned. The stranger was talking in pidgin English, but even so, Skinner wasn't sure he had misunderstood the man's meaning.

"Yes. You take a long time." The man beamed. He found Skinner's hand, and pumped it hard. "Adeben," he said again. "Ben to you!"

Skinner looked at the man for a while and then gave a slow nod. "Yes. Ben." He shook the stranger's hand vigorously. "Walter." He said, pointing at his own chest. Ben grinned and shrugged, as if an introduction hadn't been necessary, and beckoned over the crowd of smiling faces that were beaming at them.

Skinner stayed at first in a tiny room above the bar, or just slept on the beach. The days slipped away without him even noticing, and one day he realized that he had been here for three months, which was longer than he had ever stayed anywhere since his journeying had begun. Each day he wondered whether he would wake up and feel that familiar restless tingling in his gut, telling him that it was time to move on, but it didn't happen, and as the days passed he became more confident that it wouldn't happen. He sent Scully a letter telling her where he was, and that he was okay, and was surprised, a month or so later, to receive one back from her, startled, and slightly incoherent in tone, informing him that his newfound 'home' was the very place she had visited several years previously, when an alien spacecraft had been found hidden in the surf. He asked Ben about the spaceship, and his friend nodded, as if he had been expecting the question, and took Skinner to a remote section of the beach that he hadn't visited before.

"Your ship." Ben paused on the cliff, and pointed, and Skinner took a sharp intake of breath. Despite having read Scully's report at the time, he wasn't sure that he had ever really believed the alien ship existed before, but sure enough – there it was. The outline of the spacecraft was just visible from above, almost hidden by the sea. He scrambled down the cliff and along the beach, and then realized that the craft was protected by a strange optical illusion – the closer you got to it, the less visible it became.

"Wait until low tide...then you can see it better," Ben advised him over his shoulder. Skinner ignored him, and threw himself into the water, eager to swim out to the craft to get a clearer view but Ben held him back.

"Don't touch," his friend warned.

"Why?" He turned, confused.

"Nobody touches. If you do, you bring the swarms of locusts, or the bees." Ben shrugged. "Sometimes even worse."

"Worse? How?" Skinner frowned.

"The sea boils red – like blood, and you burn alive." Ben nodded violently, and Skinner shook his head.

"That's just superstition, Ben."

"No," Ben said firmly, pulling him back towards the shore. "No touch, Walter." And there was something about the vehement way he spoke, and the serious look in those dark eyes that made Skinner think twice about trying to reach the spacecraft. These people had lived in close proximity to this strange alien ship for countless centuries – they had an understanding of it that he did not.

He couldn't just let the matter pass though. It seemed too important, too much of a coincidence that his footsteps had brought him to this place for him to do nothing. So he did the one thing he could do – he asked questions. The townsfolk were all happy enough to talk to him, but they all said the same thing – don't touch the ship. They recounted tales of people disappearing, and visitations by grave, African warriors, warning against going near the ship. "Some truths are not for us," they told him, nodding vigorously, and shrugging expressively. They had grown, over the years, to think of the spacecraft almost as if it were some kind of ancient monument to the dead, and as such it was treated with respect, and not disturbed. Remembering the details from Scully's report, Skinner began to wonder if they might not be right. Mostly there was still enough of the AD left in him to make him disinclined to believe any of it, but all the same, he kept a respectful distance from the spacecraft. It was almost impossible to see most of the time anyway. Only on certain days, at low tide, when the sun was shining directly on it, did the silvery outline of the spacecraft become visible. At first he was mesmerised by it, and spent long hours sitting on the beach just waiting to catch a glimpse of the alien ship, but in time he became so used to it, lying on the sea bed, unchanging and unknowable, that he barely gave it a second thought. Like the rest of the townsfolk, he ignored it.

On the day he first saw that spaceship, Skinner knew that he had reached his journey's end. It wasn't a conscious decision, it was just something he knew in his gut, and he had learned to listen to his instincts over the past few years. This area of the world was beautiful but that wasn't why he decided to stay; he had been in other, equally beautiful places during his travels. No, he decided to stay because something clicked into place the moment he had first set foot in this place, and seeing the ship had just made it clear to him: he wouldn't be going back home because he was already home.

The faintest smudge of pink on the horizon brought a slow, gentle smile to Skinner's face as he leaned against the wooden wall of his porch, gazing across the dark sea. The sun crept, slow inch by slow inch, above the horizon, flooding the sky with the first rays of golden-pink morning light. Skinner couldn't remember when he had last felt this relaxed. The sun illuminated the long yellow sands of the beach, and the dark shape of his boat as it lay, upturned, a few yards away from his house. Everything took shape around him, bright and clean and newborn. The beach was littered with the usual debris of driftwood – the scenery

constantly changing with each dawning day. Skinner watched as the sun's rays broadened and flattened, until it was almost light.

'Different skies, same soul.' Only here, in this remote town by the sea, had he come to understand that. You couldn't outrun the past. It went with you wherever you travelled, but at least here, he could nurse his broken heart among friends. The pain didn't go away, but somehow it was easier to bear in this place, that he now called 'home'.

It took him a little while to adjust to his new life. He was a wealthy man after selling his possessions in the US, and it barely made even the slightest dent in his savings when he built his beach house on a beautiful stretch of land directly facing the bay where the spaceship lay buried. He constructed the house himself, buying only the best materials from local traders, knowing that he was paying far too much but not caring. The townsfolk all helped in their haphazard way, showing up at strange times of the day to do little jobs, or just to bring him food and drink, until it was done. In return, he bought enough alcohol to make his house warming party a very fine event indeed, and one that would be remembered and spoken about for a long time. He invited the whole town, and the whole town showed up - for months afterwards he was greeted wherever he went with the words, "Hey, Walter – when you have another party?"

He couldn't remember when he had last enjoyed an occasion so much. His three years of wandering had been lonely, restless, and empty, but now his newly built house was filled with colour, laughter, and the sounds of music, and people enjoying themselves. As his guests began to drift away, and the sun started to creep above the horizon, Skinner found himself sitting on the porch with Ben, each of them with a drink in his hand, looking out over the sea.

"What this place needs is a woman," Ben told him drunkenly.

Skinner shook his head, sadly. "No, Ben. What this place needs is a Mulder, and he isn't coming back." There was something about his life here that was so special he wouldn't taint it with lies and half-truths. Mulder was the love of his life, and he was proud of that, not ashamed.

"He is the one you pine for, even when the sun is shining and life is good? He is why your eyes are always sad?" Ben asked. Skinner smiled and nodded, and Ben nodded back, seeming to understand without needing explanations.

"He come back?"

"No." Skinner shook his head and took a deep sip of his drink. "Mulder would have loved it here. At least he would if we could have tied him down for long enough to make him appreciate the peace of this place." He gave a wry smile. He could see his lover in his mind's eye, dressed in the African uniform of open cotton shirt, and faded shorts, could almost hear Mulder's dry, ironic tones as he wandered around the house, examining it in minute detail. Mulder would put his head on one side, smile, and ask him if he had built the place

himself, and when he replied in the affirmative, Mulder would laugh and make some comment about Skinner being 'good with his hands' before pulling him into an embrace with an injunction to 'prove to me just how good, big guy!'

"He dead?" Ben put a hand on his arm, breaking him out of his reverie. Skinner swallowed down the lump in his throat.

"No, not dead, just gone."

"Then he come back." Ben smiled, and nodded confidently, and Skinner smiled back, uncertainly. If only it were that simple.

He bought a small boat, and kept himself fit by vigorous sailing sessions, combined with long runs along the coast. You could run for miles in either direction without encountering another human being, although the townsfolk thought he was crazy to waste his energy on such a pointless pastime. He enjoyed it though. He loved the feel of the sand beneath his bare feet, and the taste of the salty air on his lips, and sometimes, if he lost himself in the running, he was sure that he could feel Mulder jogging alongside him. They had often run together, back in DC, and there were occasions when he could sense Mulder's presence so strongly that he held entire conversations with the other man, lost in an endorphin haze. The sensation that his lover was with him was so strong that later, when he stopped running and looked back along the beach, he was often surprised to see only one set of footprints.

The memories of that terrible day in Oregon five years ago were easier to bear now - not because, as the old cliché went, time was a healer, but because he had found a place where he could get the memories out, and examine them, and nobody cared whether he turned up in town the next morning with a hangover, or not at all. Sometimes, when the memories hurt too much, he locked himself away for a few days, and the townsfolk respected that, but if it was any longer than a week then Ben, or one of his other friends, would come knocking at the door of the beach house. They would sit him up, pour water down his inebriated throat, and take him out into the sun, or back to their homes for a meal, or out onto the sea in one of their boats, and they didn't expect him to make conversation, or to be sober, or amusing, or interesting. They just accepted him as he was, and he didn't think he'd been more grateful for anything in his life. It was strange how here, among people he had known for such a small amount of time, he had found more kindness and acceptance than he had known back in his old life, in DC.

The sun was now clearly visible, sitting on the horizon, warming the land awake, and the tingling sensation in his stomach had become so acute as to be uncomfortable. Skinner wasn't sure why – but he assumed it had something to do with this being the anniversary of Mulder's abduction. It was the first such anniversary he had spent in his new home, and he wasn't sure how he'd feel as the day progressed. Unable to sit still any longer, Skinner got up, stretched, and stepped out onto the beach. The wet sand squidged between his toes, and the newly risen sun warmed his back and head, making the sea shine a hundred different shades of aquamarine. He stretched again, and wandered down the beach towards

his upturned boat. Shedding his blanket at the water's edge, he slid, naked, into the cold sea. It cleared his head, and he paddled along idly for a while, lost in thought. He swam back to his boat, and rested on it, gazing towards the distant headland, feeling at one with himself, and peaceful, despite the constant ache in his heart. Something caught his attention...not something that was there, but something that wasn't. It was low tide, and usually the sun glinted off the half-buried spaceship across the bay at this time of the morning. Skinner couldn't shake off the feeling that something wasn't right, and he had come to trust his instincts over the past few years. He tugged at his boat, righted it, pushed it out into the water, and grabbed the oars, trying to identify what he was feeling as he rowed. No, it wasn't that something wasn't right...it was that something was different. He rowed steadily, easily, across the bay, tied the boat to the ramshackle wooden jetty, and then climbed out. It was only then that he realised that he was still naked. That didn't bother him particularly - it was early so nobody was around, and he wasn't sure they would have cared anyway. He walked along the beach a little way, still not entirely sure what he was looking for...and then stopped.

The spaceship was gone.

In its place was an empty black crater, and the sea was churning up the newly liberated stones and sand that it had been resting on. Skinner frowned, and his footsteps slowed...and then stopped. The ship might have gone but it had left something behind, something that was lying on the beach like a piece of driftwood, glowing a faint unearthly white in the early morning light, dappled in the pink rays of the dawn sun.

Skinner's feet began to run of their own volition, his heart pounding in his chest. He knew it was absurd - knew, logically, that it couldn't be, but some instinct inside kept insisting otherwise. He ran along the beach, and then slowed again as he grew closer. The 'driftwood' was a body. A man's body.

"No. Christ...no." Skinner took a deep breath, and walked slowly forwards. The man was lying on his front, his body smooth and...white; a white man, here, where he knew himself to be the only white face for miles around. Skinner's whole body was shaking as he edged closer, and closer, until he could make out the scars on the man's back, and the bunched, knotted cords of his muscles under the surface of the skin. The man remained unmoving, face down on the sand, his dark hair fluttering in the sea breeze, and Skinner's heart plummeted towards the soles of his bare feet. He knelt down beside the stranger, placed a gentle hand on the man's throat and let out a hoarse cry when he found a pulse. His hands were trembling as he turned the man over, and...found himself looking not at a stranger, but instead at a familiar, beloved face.

Mulder.

Three star-shaped lesions marked each of Mulder's cheeks, and his chest bore a long thin scar that had not been there when he had left, but it was definitely him. His wrists and ankles were similarly scarred with thin, pink, puckered lines. Skinner fingered them wordlessly. Now was not the time to ask how, or why, or to rail angrily at the unknown forces that had stolen his lover and subjected him to god knew what. Now was simply time

to give thanks, and wonder at the miracle that had washed up on the shore like a piece of human driftwood.

"Mulder." Skinner took the other man's head onto his lap, and gently brushed his face with shaking fingers. "Fox," he whispered. The sun edged even higher on the horizon, bathing the beach in pure, white light that seemed to cleanse and heal as it warmed the two men's cold, wet skin.

"Fox," Skinner whispered again. Two eyelids began to flutter, and then he was looking into upside-down hazel eyes, that gazed at him incredulously, as if they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

"Walter." Mulder's voice was raw, and guttural, but so unmistakably him that Skinner could have wept. "I had a dream, Walter," Mulder croaked.

"It's all right. It's okay." Skinner soothed Mulder's hair, and hugged him into his lap. He couldn't believe this was happening. Not now, after all these years. Tears began to roll down his cheeks, and Mulder gave a faint ghost of a smile.

"Don't cry, Walter."

"I'm not," Skinner replied, rocking back and forth, hugging Mulder to him as he did so, his tears spilling onto the other man's face. "I'm not, my love, I'm not."

Mulder smiled, hazily, and then looked around, his eyes bleary. "Where are we, Walter?" He asked, staring at the sea, and the boat bobbing by the jetty as if he had been transported to an alien world.

"Home, Mulder," Skinner said, with a smile, wrapping his arms around his lover and pulling him up the sand, away from the cold sea. The golden-pink rays of the new dawn embraced them both in their warm glow, and Skinner felt whole again for the first time in five years.

Mulder reached up a wondering hand and touched Skinner's wet cheeks.

"We're home, my love," Skinner repeated softly. "I've been waiting for you. You've come home."

The End

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters and settings are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. No money is being made from this work. No copyright infringement is intended.