

Future Perfect by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.orr/future-perfect/>
Story Notes:

Unfinished and likely to remain so!

For Lisby

Many thanks to Phoebe and Sergeeva for taking a look at this and reassuring me that I'm not completely insane, and to CDavis for not being quite so sure. I have no idea what anyone else will make of it. It isn't going to be a long series though, so you can all breathe a sigh of relief about *that*.

Spoilers: Requiem. This idea has been floating around in my head ever since Mulder was whisked away so I thought I might as well see what I could do with it.

1. Part One by Xanthe

2. Part Two by Xanthe

Part One by Xanthe

Skinner paused, fighting for breath, his chest rising and falling in heaving gasps. He glanced up, searching the dark sky for his silent enemy. He heard a noise, saw the faintest glimmer of a light above, and somehow found the strength to change direction and run again, ignoring the sharp stabbing pain in his side. He charged through the undergrowth in blind terror, fighting nausea, fighting the limitations of his own weak, all too human flesh, and then he found himself falling, tripping over an outstretched hand on the mossy forest floor. He fell to the ground with a thud, winded, only to find himself staring into a pair of dead blue eyes shining out from the white face of a corpse, the dead woman's forehead framed by copper red curls...

"NO!" Skinner woke up, screaming.

"Shut the fuck up, man," someone grumbled, and Skinner stared disorientated at the opposite bed, trying to make sense of his surroundings. Reality flooded back in, slowly. He was in a large, airy, white dormitory containing three other occupants, in the Qundi compound. He was fine. He was safe – whatever safe meant these days. Skinner reached out a shaking hand for the tumbler of water on the nightstand, and watched, as if from a great distance, as his hand shook, uncontrollably, making it impossible for him to pick up the drink. He recognized the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder all too well. He'd been here, done this, many years ago, another lifetime ago, and he knew how it went. Time had taught him only one way of soothing himself after this kind of nightmare. He sat up in bed, wrapped his arms around his knees, then rocked, back and forth, lulling himself back into a state of calm. His breathing began to slow, but he could feel the cool slick of sweat trickling down the side of his hot face.

"She isn't dead," he told himself firmly, rocking in an endlessly repeating motion. "She isn't dead. It was just a nightmare. She isn't dead." Time would heal. Time had healed him before, but he had been younger then, and the future...well, the future had never looked less certain.

He closed his eyes, and carried on rocking. It was a technique that worked as well now as it had when he had been a battle scarred 18 year old, fighting a different war. Finally, after an hour or so, he felt able to slide down beneath the sheets, and sink back into an uneasy sleep. The dream returned with full force, almost immediately. He was running again, crashing through the undergrowth, making too much noise in his desperate attempt to escape from the Qundi ship. He could smell them in the air, could feel the breeze on the back of his neck as the tiny ship hovered close; any minute now they'd fire, and he'd be caught, and dragged back to god knows what...he turned, changed direction, but his legs wouldn't move.

Not that way, the trees seemed to whisper.

That way lay her dead body, outstretched on the grass, crumpled, like an old rag doll. His feet changed course again, of their own volition, and he was running, seeking sanctuary, and the escape that was so close he could almost touch it. Just a few seconds more... He gave a

jagged, inarticulate cry as the forest above was suddenly filled with bright light, then the ship was upon him, and he felt his legs give way as he was caught in a Qundi paralyzing beam. He thudded to the forest floor again, the ship lowering down, down, down until it was almost upon him. Shapeless alien forms descended, smothering him, their flesh stinking that acrid Qundi scent. Skinner tried to scream, but was denied even that, his whole body paralyzed. He lay, in numb, wordless horror as the Qundi surrounded him, and he wished he could close his eyes so that he wouldn't have to look at their ugly, slimy flesh. One of them was standing over him, and he felt hands on his shoulders. Puzzled, he looked up into the alien's face, backlit by the light from the hovering ship, and almost jumped out of his skin with surprise. He was gazing into a pair of familiar, unfamiliar hazel eyes. His cry was wordless, and it echoed and reverberated in his mind, shattering the silence of the forest.

Mulder.

Nobody could say that the Qundi neglected their captives.

Skinner stretched, and ran his hand over his distended stomach. He was stuffed to the gills after yet another filling, if bland meal. After three years of eating on the hoof, and frequently consuming the kind of food that he'd have retched over in happier times, he had forgotten how content a square meal could make a man; and content sure as hell wasn't how he wanted to feel. Skinner cracked his knuckles, a habit he had somehow managed to acquire over the past few years, and fought the ever-present anxiety that gnawed in his belly. Apart from the nightmares that tore into his every night, he was more rested than he had been in a long time, and, glancing down at the navy blue overalls he was wearing, he could see that he was even gaining weight. When he'd first woken up in the Qundi compound, nearly two months ago, these overalls had hung on his lean, battle-worn frame. Now he was beginning to fill them out. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. He had grown used to his old, hard body, and now he felt that he was growing softer, and more mellow, with every passing day.

Skinner strolled over to the gate. It had taken him some time to stop running everywhere. Running, and ducking the paralyzing beams of light that usually came from above, from the bellies of the small, darting Qundi ships. His body had adjusted slowly, almost painfully, to its new life of leisure, luxury, and indulgence.

Skinner reached the gate, and glanced at his watch, waiting. The gate would open at precisely 2pm, and allow them into the gardens, as it did every day after lunch. The Qundi were nothing if not punctual. Skinner gave a wry grunt as he considered that. Yes, the Qundi were punctual; he wouldn't be surprised if even their invasion of Earth had been carefully timed to the nearest solar second.

At 2 pm precisely, the gates swung open, and a small crowd of men and women, each and every one of them clad in navy blue overalls, swarmed into the gardens like so many dark, foraging insects. The Qundi had an obsession with cleanliness and hierarchy; it pleased their sense of order to clothe their prisoners alike. For they were prisoners: no matter how

luxurious the prison, or how kind their captors, each and every person in the compound was fitted with a tracking device, inserted under the skin in the neck, that effectively prevented escape.

Each day, the former rebels took exercise in the gardens. Each day they soaked up the sun, and sat under the tranquil blue sky. Each day they ate the fine meals provided, and amused themselves in the library, or games room, or on the tennis courts, or in the swimming pool. It was 5 star kind of prison, and that, Skinner assumed, was the point. He watched the resolve of his fellow rebels weaken as each pleasant day passed, until he was no longer sure that even the most ardent of them was as committed to their cause as they had once been. He remembered a quotation, something about any population being only three meals away from revolution - Skinner supposed that the opposite was true as well. Feed people well, and they lost their will to fight. It was, after all, hard to maintain any kind of anger with a full belly.

He didn't know what the Qundi wanted from them, but the sense of waiting was frustrating him. The soothing confines of his luxurious prison, far from placating him, irritated him instead, like an open wound. He was worried about Scully, and their son, and his anxiety gnawed away inside him, keeping him hungry for the one thing the Qundi didn't provide in their luxurious prison: news. Any contact with the outside world was forbidden, and there was, in any case, no way of bypassing the Qundi security. He knew because he had tried. Several times. Each escape attempt had ended up with him waking up, flat on his back, in the Compound sick bay, caught within the same paralyzing beams the Qundi used to disable all their captives. The first time it had happened, he had feared some kind of retribution, but it hadn't been forthcoming. He had merely been reunited with his fellow prisoners, until the next escape attempt - and the next. Last time it had happened, he had woken up in the Sick Bay with a shout of total frustration in his throat at finding himself back at square one yet again. He was reminded of a Science Fiction show he had watched, years ago, where a man was imprisoned in a remote village, unable to escape. That was what he felt like. He grew to resent the Qundi precisely because they **didn't** ever punish him. It was almost as if he wasn't important enough. That he was a life-form so inferior to their own that he wasn't even worth making an example of. And, of course, the truth was that he was little threat to them. His continued inability to escape was proof of that.

Skinner knew from experience that once one of their number was captured, they never escaped and returned to the rebel base. Nobody knew what happened to them once they disappeared behind the faceless facades of the Qundi compounds. They might as well have been wiped from the face of the earth. Rumors abounded about mass slaughter, and death camps, as rumors inevitably did in wartime. Skinner remembered stories about the Vietcong eating babies during the last war he'd fought. It was common enough propaganda, but the truth was that nobody knew what befell the rebels inside the Qundi compounds because nobody ever escaped to tell the tale. Now, having experienced the aliens' hospitality first hand, Skinner knew that this was the last thing any of the rebels expected. He almost wanted to find Scully just to tell her about these hotel-prisons, knowing it would make her throw back her head, and laugh - that deep belly laugh that still had the power to surprise him, coming as it did from within her slight frame. There were many things about Dana Scully that had proved unexpected. Skinner stopped walking, and bent over, placing his

hands on his knees, suddenly winded by the memory of her. Damn, but he missed her so much! They had barely spent a night apart for the past three years. They had lived side by side, often in the most appalling conditions, and fought shoulder to shoulder against the invading Qundi forces. He missed her pale, pointed face, and the way her eyes shone so darkly, determinedly blue. He missed the unexpected timbre of her rare laugh, and the way her cropped red hair glowed in the sun. He missed holding her slender body at night, and reminding her that they were both human, capable of the most sublime pleasure even in the midst of this apocalyptic nightmare. He missed the feel of her soft lips pressed against his, and the way she curled up against his large body, like a wild animal seeking shelter and heat in the bitterly cold nights. He missed her child, as well; the boy he had taken care of like his own, nursed when he was sick, or teething, changed his diaper, and held when the little one cried.

"All right, mate?" He looked up, into Regan's gray eyes. The other man, a Brit, had been with them since early in the campaign, and he had been captured on the same day Skinner had been taken.

"Fine...just..." Skinner managed a faded smile that said everything.

"Another nightmare?" Regan's eyes were sympathetic. "It's all right, mate. We all have them."

"I dreamed about Dana. She was dead," Skinner said bluntly, staring into space.

"Just a dream." Regan shrugged. "Nobody's going to kill that woman, Walt. Nobody would dare – not even the Qundi." They exchanged wry smiles. Dana had a formidable reputation amongst the rebels. "She'd kick our asses from here to the fucking Qundi home- world for the way we're lying down and letting these guys walk all over us." Regan spat whenever he said the word *Qundi*. It was a habit they had all picked up in the rebel camps.

"I wonder what she's doing now?" Skinner sat down on a bench, and steepled his fingers. Was she planning another attack? Was she moving, running, and fighting, changing base constantly to avoid capture as they had both been doing for the past few years? Or had she been taken too? Was she even now imprisoned in another sunny compound, just like this one? He wasn't stupid. They had been fighting non-stop for three years, and they had lost ground on each and every day. He knew the fight was nearly over, and the Qundi were preparing their final invasion force. He knew it, and he hated it, and he would have fought to the last drop of blood in his body to prevent it.

"I dunno, mate. No point thinking about it." Regan shrugged. "If she's out there, she'll still be fighting the Qundi motherfuckers, that's for sure. I never saw a woman fight like her. You're a lucky bastard, Walt."

"What do they want with us, Regan?" Skinner looked up helplessly into the other man's eyes.

"I dunno." Regan shrugged again. "But I feel uncomfortably like a turkey in December." He gave a wry grin. Skinner raised a questioning eyebrow. "Being fattened up for something."

Fuck knows what." He glanced down at what had once been a scrawny frame. Like Skinner, he had filled out, and the sores on his face had disappeared as a result of all the enforced rest, and good nutrition.

"That's not a good thought." Skinner gazed impassively at his hands, fighting his gnawing frustration. "I dreamed about someone else last night," he murmured.

"Oh yeah. Was she pretty too?" Regan grinned.

"It was a man. Someone I used to work with," Skinner said, still staring at his hands. Regan watched, and waited, expectant. "His name was Mulder." Skinner said the name as if in a dream, then said it again. "Mulder." He let the name linger on his tongue, as if he could taste the unfamiliar arrangement of vowels and consonants. "Christ, it's been so long since I even thought about him. He was taken right back at the beginning, before the colonization began. We never saw him again. I suppose...it's possible that he could be in a compound like this somewhere," Skinner glanced up at Regan, his expression hopeful.

"Possible, but not exactly likely, Walt," Regan said bluntly. "We don't know what happened to any of the abductees."

"I miss him," Skinner said, in a low, hard tone. "When the Qundi came, I wished he'd been here. I don't think he'd have got a kick out of being proved right after all the years of taunting and derision. That wasn't the kind of man he was, just that I think he would have known what to do. Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe that's wishful thinking on my part, but he had a clearer understanding of all this than any of the rest of us. I feel like I've spent the past three years just muddling through, losing battle after battle, always one step behind. Mulder had a kind of effortless talent for being able to figure it all out. I wish I knew what had happened to him." Skinner got up, and began pacing restlessly, full of frustration. "Christ I can't stand much more of this waiting. Why are they keeping us, Regan? Why are we here?"

"You always did ask too many questions, Walt." Regan grinned. "It was the first thing I noticed about you. Asking goddamn questions like you fully expected someone to answer them. That's when you weren't yelling orders." He got up and slapped Skinner's shoulder in a gesture of reassurance, and then their attention was distracted by some kind of commotion from the main Qundi office by the gates.

Skinner was startled out of his reverie by the sight of several Qundi exiting the compound where they lived. This was unprecedented in itself, but now they were gliding across the gardens, their skin flushing a shade of pale green, which Skinner had come to associate with agitation. They were always slightly clammy, and glowed whenever they came out into the warm sunshine. Skinner wasn't sure if this was a normal reaction to Earth's climate, or whether they found conditions on his world uncomfortable. It was hard having a conversation with the Qundi, mainly because they had no concept of speech. The very act of communicating with them was such an intensely horrific experience that just the memory of the few times it had happened brought him out in a cold sweat.

The Qundi delegation was clearly on a mission, as they swept across the grass in formation. There were six of them, in a neat, orderly pyramid, the most senior Qundi at its apex, their tendrils waving in the breeze. They were peculiar looking – not the large-faced, huge-eyed, small-bodied creatures of recent cultural myth, but something altogether more alien, and less humanoid. Their bodies were insubstantial, shifting shades of bluey green. Mulder had been wrong, Skinner thought, with a wry grunt – the aliens **were** little green men after all. Although the term *men* was undoubtedly incorrect: Skinner had no idea whether the Qundi had any gender differentiation. There was no outward sign of it, and his mind shied away from even thinking about how they reproduced.

The Qundi pyramid came to a halt in front of the main crowd of prisoners, their tendrils curling and unfurling in a gesture that Skinner approximated to the human gesture of clenching and unclenching fists in anxiety, although for all he knew this could be their attempt smiling. The leader of the little group emitted a sound like a sonic boom, and the prisoners clapped their hands over their ears, wincing in discomfort. The Qundi toned it down, and flushed an apologetic yellow – or at least that was how Skinner had come to interpret that particular shade on the Qundi skin coloration spectrum.

The other five Qundi stepped out from behind their leader, and each laid a tendril on the arms of the nearest prisoner. Skinner shuddered. It didn't matter how many times he witnessed this process, it still made him want to throw up. The prisoners submitted, resigned, as the Qundi trilled at them, their tendrils fluttering wildly. Experience had taught the rebels that there was little point attempting to outrun a Qundi when he wanted to talk. It was better just to give in, and hope the whole thing would be over as soon as possible. Skinner swallowed back his bile as the captive's skins began to take on the same unearthly shade as their captors. They were soon glowing a sickly pale green, and looked decidedly ill. Usually, when the Qundi approached and laid tendrils on a whole group like this, they wanted to communicate with all the humans within a nearby radius, and this seemed to be the only way they knew how, intensely unsettling though it was for all concerned.

Skinner closed his eyes, and tried not to fight the process. Sure enough, a few seconds later, he heard a whisper forming in the back of his mind, like the soft hush-hush of trees blowing in the wind. He wasn't sure how the telepathy worked, or how, by touching one human, the aliens were able to communicate with many, but that seemed to be the way it worked. By choosing five humans, they were boosting the power of the telepathic signal in order to reach all the humans in the compound, and Skinner had to admit that it did work. After a fashion. He gritted his teeth as the whispering grew louder, booming inside his mind. Whatever it was the aliens wished to communicate seemed to be both urgent and complicated. They didn't speak in words, but in a series of constantly shifting images, some of them clear, and easy to understand, but some so bizarre that they ranged from profoundly disturbing, like the special effects in a horror movie, to almost humorous.

Thus, a picture of a piglet squealing in a hut, morphed into an ominous, dark green shape sliding across the floor of what looked like a spaceship. Skinner winced, wondering what the hell they were trying to say.

Search. The word finally became clear in his mind. *Us, searching...one of you.* A big blue tower crumpled into dust in his mind, and the debris lay on the floor of a forest. One of the Qundi flushed a deep pea green, and Skinner wondered what the hell that was all about. *Searching for this,* the baying voices hissed, and he was treated to a sudden mental image of a huge, resplendent superhero. Someone chuckled, and Skinner even managed a smile himself. It was a very amusing image. The man they were looking for was at least 20 feet tall – he was actually towering over buildings, and he was massively muscled, like a competitor in a Mr. Universe competition. His broad chest and wide shoulders positively rippled with energy and power. He had a slim, six-pack stomach, and very long legs. Impossibly long, Skinner thought. Ridiculously and stupidly long, like the legs on a cartoon character after being flattened by a steamroller. The man was almost bald, with a square jaw the consistency of granite, complete with a little Kirk Douglas cleft, and full, strangely sensuous lips, which barely hid a set of straight white teeth. A small nose was set under the deepest, darkest, most intense eyes Skinner had ever witnessed, hidden behind a set of glasses. The man was dressed in a white shirt that was so starched it positively cracked when he moved, which he did with a lethal grace, prowling back and forth like some kind of dangerous, caged animal. Skinner grinned, wondering how the hell they were going to find this guy, when he noticed that some of his fellow prisoners were staring at me.

"What the...? It sure as hell isn't **me**," he growled. The superhero chose that exact moment to say something in a terse, angry tone, and Skinner almost jumped. The voice was his. "Christ, it **is** me," he muttered, startled.

Skinner swallowed hard, wondering whether he should step forward. He had never yet managed to ascertain quite what the Qundi could **see**, but it was clear that they had trouble telling humans apart – the same way that humans had trouble telling the Qundi apart. He suspected that to them humans all resembled so many wobbling, jellified, warm-bloodied, unclean blancmanges, just as to humans the slickly smooth-skinned, glowing, faintly acidic-smelling Qundi had no distinguishing features whatsoever.

The Qundi were becoming more agitated, and the humans they were holding began to buckle at the knees. Skinner decided he had no choice, and stepped forward.

"I think you're looking for me," he said. "Possibly. Although maybe I'm not tall enough?" He offered hopefully. The Qundi released their captives with an immediacy that made the unfortunate men and women sink down, unsupported. One of them passed out before he thudded to the ground, and another heaved the contents of her stomach onto the green grass. Skinner could sympathize. There was no such thing as a nice, easy chat with the Qundi. The process of communication was uncomfortable for all concerned. Even the Qundi were glowing an unhealthy shade of sludge green, their tendrils whirling anxiously, a thin sheen of slime trickling down their smooth skins, and their scent was more acrid than usual, making Skinner cough and gag.

The Qundi in charge examined him closely for a long time, and Skinner had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being measured against the superhero in the image. He wasn't sure what the Qundi used to look with – they did have a set of glistening orbs that could **possibly** be eyes, but Skinner was by no means sure. Finally, after what seemed like an

eternity, the lead Qundi whirled his tendrils and turned. His fellows turned with him, en masse, as if they were one entity, all of them waving their tendrils at Skinner in what appeared to be a clear directive that he should accompany them. Skinner fell into step, his stomach churning. He had no idea whether the Qundi tortured their prisoners, or whether they had other, more sophisticated methods of obtaining information. Certainly he had information – valuable information – concerning the rebel bases and their plans for future attacks. Maybe the Qundi knew that. Maybe that was why they had been searching for him.

"Good luck, mate," Regan called as he went, and Skinner waved a hand in his friend's direction, wondering if he'd ever see him, or anyone else, again. He had never known the Qundi come looking for anyone before, and he had no idea why they had picked **him**.

He followed his captors into a cool, empty room containing one chair. He had never seen the Qundi sit, so he guessed it was for him, and sat in it obligingly. The head Qundi wafted its tendrils and they turned a gentle shade of green, so Skinner guessed he had probably done the right thing. Certainly the Qundi delegation seemed much calmer now. They glided towards him, and he fought back a wave of nausea as they surrounded him, and began to emit a high-pitched sonic hum.

"Oh shit. You want to talk," he muttered, before their tendrils descended on him.

He felt as if he was drowning, and fought it, choking for air. He could smell that acrid scent more clearly than before, and he knew they were sweating, hating the process of conversing with him as much as he hated it. He hadn't realized before just how unpleasant a process it was for them, but then he'd never been in a one to one conversation with them before – or one to six, as this was.

"It's not fair. I'm outnumbered," he growled, in ironic complaint, just before he lost consciousness.

He was standing in a room that he dimly recognized as his old office, back at the Hoover building. He was talking to Scully...and Mulder was there. Skinner's heart leapt. It had been three years since his agent had disappeared in the woods, a captive of the early Qundi scouting ships, and there had been many times when he had longed to talk to Mulder again. Nobody had ever understood the possibility of invasion and colonization the way Mulder had. He was sure the other man would have been an invaluable weapon in their fight against the Qundi. More than that though, last night's dream had awakened all his old, confused emotions towards his subordinate. He had an almost overwhelming urge to grab hold of Mulder, and envelop him in a bear hug, but he was aware that he was trapped inside an unalterable memory, condemned instead to watch as it played out in front of him. It felt strange. He was in two places at once – in the Hoover building, moving around of his own volition, holding a conversation he couldn't even remember having, and at the same time in the white room, being held down by half a dozen Qundi, several years in the future. Mulder was saying something – arguing, with his boss in a way Skinner remembered with a hazy sense of nostalgia, although at the time he seemed to recall that Mulder's frequent verbal battles used to give him a headache. Skinner wanted to shout that it didn't matter, that within a year Mulder would be abducted, never to be seen again, and soon after that

Skinner and Scully would be fighting for their home planet against alien invaders. Instead he found himself drinking in the sight of his subordinate, loving the sound of Mulder's voice. It was a sound he had missed. Mulder was more slender than he remembered, his slim body more animated than he recalled, and the voice more laconic, almost lazy. Skinner wished they could stop living in the memory for just a second, and talk, really talk again. He would have loved to tell Mulder that he had been right all along. That there had been a colonization planned, that a date had been set, just as Mulder had warned, but he couldn't.

The image faded, to be replaced by one of a huge silver starship, landing on the White House lawn. That wasn't a memory. As far as Skinner knew, it hadn't happened – at least not yet. The scene changed, almost immediately, to him running through a forest that was familiar to him both from his nightmares and his capture several weeks previously. This was a true memory, and so real he found himself reliving that terrible moment all over again, an unwilling spectator inside his own mind. Scully was beside him, running fast. He heard a muffled scream, and turned, to see her falling, her mouth open, startled, as she thudded to the forest floor. The Qundi were almost upon them, and he had a split second to make his decision, but it didn't take that long. He couldn't let her fall into their hands. He turned back, ignoring her terse command that he should leave her, and save himself, hauled her to her feet, and half carried, half ran with her towards the safety of the underground caves, which, for some reason, the Qundi feared, and would not approach.

A Qundi ship materialized overhead, and a squad of six Qundi landed just behind them. Skinner threw Scully in front of him, and turned, aiming his gun as he went, in a swift, well-practiced movement. He fired into the belly of one of the Qundi, and the alien emitted a high pitched shriek, and then slid to the floor of the forest, its green body shot through with shades of dark purple, acidic green "blood" oozing from its corpse. Skinner felt his throat burn, and his eyes started to water as he inhaled the chemicals secreted in the blood of the fallen Qundi. The other Qundi were shaken, momentarily, by the loss of their leader, and it took them a moment to regroup, which won Scully enough time to reach the caves. Skinner wasn't so fortunate. He was nearly there, when he felt his legs stop moving, and, looking down, he realized he had been caught in the beam of whatever strange weaponry the Qundi used. He went down, heavily, unable to even put out a hand to stop his fall, completely paralyzed by the beam, and landed with a thud, gazing, unblinkingly, at the patches of blue sky he could see through the gaps in the trees. He had a flashback to another forest, in a different, hotter land, thirty years before, when he had been fighting a more human enemy. In that split second before the Qundi seized him, and transported him to their ship, he was aware of the irony that humans had ever wasted time doing battle with each other, when there was this kind of foe to fight, and then he lost consciousness.

Skinner came back to the present with a start, his arms and legs thrashing wildly as the Qundi held him down. He felt ill, and opened his mouth to scream, only to vomit over the nearest Qundi. The alien turned an appalled purple, and then wilted, visibly, its tendrils waving in feeble agitation. All the other Qundi turned a paler shade of purple, perhaps in sympathy. Then they all, as one, turned towards the door, expectantly. Skinner tried to remember how to breathe, as the acidic stench in the air stifled him, making his mouth dry, and his nostrils burn. The door opened, and a new delegation of Qundi stood in the opening. With his tormenters' attention focused elsewhere, Skinner took advantage of the situation,

and struck out, one booted foot landing on the sleek, slippery skin of the nearest Qundi. He fought back nausea as his fist connected with a sickening crunch on the tendril-framed surface of another Qundi, and then he was free, and running towards the door. He elbowed the Qundi in the doorway aside, easily knocking their slight frames down, like a ball in a bowling alley, and staggered down the corridor. He had never been inside the Qundi area of the compound before, and the endless white walls, and white doorways confused him. He had no idea which doorway, if any, might lead to freedom. Hearing a sound in front of him, he tried one of the doors, only to find it unyielding beneath his fingertips. There was no handle. Frustrated, he glanced over his shoulder, to see the purple-hued Qundi floating towards him, their tendrils glowing an angry red. Nobody had ever outrun a Qundi, but that didn't mean Skinner wasn't going to try. He was more than prepared to go down fighting. Stubbornly, he changed course, and, with surprise on his side, barged through the contingent of Qundi, ran back the way he had come...and then stopped in his tracks as his feet were caught in the familiar light of a paralyzing beam. He just had time to murmur "oh shit" before he fell to the floor, unable to do so much as blink.

He lay there, waiting, as the Qundi returned to his side. The original Qundi were joined by the second delegation from the doorway, and Skinner was aware, when they came into sight, that it was this new group of three who were leaning over him, peering at him. A tendril came into his field of vision beside his face, and the next thing he knew he was back in the white room, with the new Qundi delegation. He lay, paralyzed and helpless in the chair, as they advanced on him, smelling that familiar, gagging stench as they pushed their way into his mind. This time there were no visions from his past. He assumed that these Qundi were more skilled in communication with humans, because after the usual preamble of jumbled images, none of them from his own memories, a hesitant speech kicked in.

"You...The Skinned One. You will be the..." They spoke a word that sounded like radio static, and Skinner winced. "You will work with him," they added.

"Who?" He formed the question clumsily, inside his mind, and wasn't even sure if they had understood. There was silence for a moment, and then a fuzzy, confused reply.

"You will be the..." Again, that word; a fuzzy, sonic mess of sound. "You will slide into the hierarchy, as the serving one to the..." More static.

"I don't understand," Skinner hissed, trying to twist away from the sickening stench that was emanating from them, but finding himself held fast by their tendrils.

"You will take your place!" The head Qundi pronounced. "You will serve the new leader, the..." Skinner winced before the Qundi even formed the word, and the alien paused, and one of his orbs blinked - visibly. Skinner felt something push inside his mind, searching through his vocabulary. "Caesar!" the Qundi said finally, in a tone of great triumph. "You will serve the Caesar."

"What the fuck is a Caesar?" Skinner growled. "Outside of ancient fucking Rome that is." He saw no reason why he should make their task easier.

"Overlordprelatesuzerainpresidentking..." The Qundi intoned the list in one long string of words that made Skinner's head ache.

"All right, I don't need a fucking thesaurus, and I'm not serving any goddamn Qundi overlord either," Skinner snarled.

"You will serve him. You will be..." There was a clicking sound and he had the image of himself, bowing. Behind him, was the mass of humanity, in front of him, were a dozens of Qundi ships. "Crossover...linkage..." The Qundi attempted to explain.

"You mean some kind of liaison, between us and you?" Skinner suggested. The Qundi emitted a loud sonic boom that made Skinner wince, but which was clearly a triumphant, affirmative.

"Liaison. Yes. Communicator. You, speaking for your people with our chosen one. Linkage. You will belong to the Overlord."

"Not the most tempting offer I've ever had," Skinner muttered, his whole body shaking with the effort of conversation, convulsing against their slimy bodies. They were sweating profusely now, and his throat hurt from inhaling their scent. He felt their tendrils unfurl from his body, and then, thankfully, they withdrew from his mind. His head crashed back onto the chair with a resounding thud, and he stared at the ceiling. Who, or what, was this Overlord? he wondered, and what would belonging to, and serving him, entail?

Skinner spent the next week in solitary confinement in the Qundi area of the compound. He was fed, and kept comfortable, but his nightmares grew worse as each day passed. Every time he closed his eyes he saw images that scared him. Sometimes he could make sense of them, but more often it was the sense of impending darkness that filled him with fear. It was like being stuck in a suspense movie, unable to get to the end and release the tension, and it took its toll on him. He lost weight again. What was left of his hair was long since gone. The Qundi had no mirrors, but Skinner knew by looking down on his body that the past few years had changed him physically. He was still strong, his muscles built up from years of fighting, but his body was more scarred than ever before, and even Qundi medicine hadn't managed to cure his persistent cough.

He tried not to think about what might lie ahead of him, but in the silence of that small room, he came to a decision. He wasn't going to serve any goddamn Qundi overlord. The first chance he had, he'd strike. Even if it meant his own death, if he took this important Qundi bastard with him it would be worth it, and, somehow, he knew that Dana would approve. That thought made him smile, and he gave himself over to the fantasy of making slow, tender love to her. He imagined taking her slender body in his arms, and kissing her white, round breasts, lingering over the soft, pink nipples, sucking them tenderly, making her moan...only to find his mind shifting out of focus. The body in his arms grew longer, harder, flatter, and he found himself kissing a man's solid chest. Looking up in surprise, he encountered a pair of laughing, hazel eyes, looking back at him. Skinner didn't know what the hell to make of that fantasy. It wasn't the first time he'd had erotic thoughts about his former subordinate. There had been a time when it disturbed him to be fantasizing about

another man, but now so much had changed that he was almost pleased to welcome back the familiar daydream.

One day, about a week later, he woke to find a set of clothes lying on the chair beside his bed. They weren't the navy blue overalls he had been wearing since he arrived in the compound either. Skinner got up and examined the clothing with a puzzled expression. It was a formal dress suit, of the kind he had once worn to work every day: white shirt, wool pants, a slim black leather belt, shiny black shoes, and a tasteful navy and white tie. Skinner stared at the clothing dumbly for a moment. He hadn't worn clothes like this in years. He wasn't even sure he wanted to. This kind of clothing belonged to an old Skinner, a Skinner who had died when the first Qundi ships touched down on Earth three years ago. He assumed he was supposed to wear the clothing, so he took a shower, and then dressed himself, his fingers fumbling with the unfamiliar formality of the clothing. For three years he had dressed for comfort, and battle in combat fatigues, or sweats and jeans. This felt so strange. Like donning a memory.

When he was done, he sat on the bed, and waited, his gut churning in anxiety. He had no idea what would be required of him next, although he presumed it had something to do with this new overlord he was supposed to serve. His resolve had settled into his stomach with a characteristic hardness. He had made up his mind to kill this overlord, or die trying. He would never serve the Qundi.

They came to collect him a couple of hours later, took him out of the compound, and prodded him onto one of their small ships, locking him in yet another of their trademark small white rooms. The journey took almost twenty minutes, but during that time they must have covered at least 200 miles, because when they arrived at their destination, Skinner stared, slack jawed, as he stood on the ramp of the landing bay. He was gazing, dumb-struck, at a place he wasn't even sure still existed: the White House. Not only was it still there, but it was untouched by the turbulence of the past few years, gleaming a perfect white in the bright sunshine.

The Qundi hustled him out onto the lawn, and it was only then that he realized they were in the middle of some kind of huge gathering. There were Qundi everywhere, all neatly arranged in formations of three, six, or nine, and even a few humans, less well ordered, standing, staring at the sky, just waiting. The Qundi who had brought him here emitted several loud, sonic bursts, causing Skinner to put his hands over his ears, and then they assumed their place at the front of the waiting parade, Skinner nestled between them, like a precious possession. Half an hour passed, and he grew hot under the bright, afternoon sun. He loosened the collar of his stiff shirt, feeling uncomfortable. Christ, when had he last worn a suit and tie? He knew they had once been his everyday uniform, but that seemed a lifetime ago; a different time, a different Skinner. Now, the collar felt restrictive, too tight around his throat as if it were strangling him. The trousers felt stiff, and heavy. The suit, with its memories of long meetings in air conditioned offices, and an endless round of bureaucracy and political maneuverings, was no longer part of him, the way it had once been. He had worn it once with the authority of one who belonged to that world, but it was a world that had long since gone, and the suit didn't fit him like the second skin it had once been. It chafed, and itched.

Skinner sensed a mounting excitement in the Qundi surrounding him, and then, as one, they suddenly turned their heads, and gazed into the sky. Skinner couldn't see anything, but he heard the unmistakable sound of a Qundi starship. It came into view a few seconds later, silver, and curiously graceful despite its size. It was huge, the biggest ship he'd ever seen, and he'd seen a few since that fateful day when he'd seen his first as it carried Mulder off into the unknown. The ship slowed, and descended in an elegant, spiraling arc, coming to hover a long way above the immaculate White House lawn. It was so big it covered half of Washington, and was far too big to land. An expectant sonic hum went up from the gathered Qundi and Skinner pressed his hands over his ears, as the noise became increasingly high pitched and uncomfortable. He was so intent on filtering out the sound that he barely noticed the starship's doors opening, and a solid beam of light shining from the belly of the great ship onto the grass a long way below. Then the sonic hum cut out, abruptly, and he looked up in surprise. Something was moving in the depths of the starship, and the waiting Qundi each took two steps forward as if on cue, and stretched their fluid body into what looked like an imitation of a bow. Skinner gazed, helplessly at the prostrating Qundi, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do. He wondered how the fanatically hierarchical Qundi elected their overlords, and whether the new Qundi supervisor would be taller, or differently shaped from his fellows, like the Queen bee in a hive. He was interrupted in this train of thought by tendrils nudging against his jacket, and he found himself being pushed to the front, and then pressed down so that he, also, was in a bowing position. He growled in frustration, fighting the tendrils that held him fast, but he knew from experience that it was a lost cause. The Qundi had muscles that could bear three times their own weight, and he didn't stand a chance against them. He submitted in poor grace, bending his head under the onslaught, and waited for the Qundi overlord to put in an appearance, gliding down from the Mothership on a beam of light like some kind of archangel descending from heaven. An expectant hush enveloped the crowd, and the tension was almost palpable. Skinner held his breath, trying not to breathe in the stench of excited Qundi. He had never been surrounded by so many of them before, and the bitter smell hung over the gathering like a pall of smoke. Finally, there was movement inside the ship, and the waiting Qundi shifted, as one, letting out what sounded like a collective sonic sigh. Skinner swallowed hard. He had no intention of striking the new overlord down when he was so outnumbered. He'd wait, and bide his time, and hope that whatever was required of him in the meantime would not be too onerous.

He heard a sound, and clenched his fists, unable to look up because of the pressure of the Qundi tendril on the back of his neck, but he knew the Overlord was close by the way the Qundi were all flushing a deep crimson colour. He swallowed hard, fighting down the bile that was rising in his throat as the Qundi Overlord crossed the lawn to stand in front of him. Would the Qundi want to talk to him? Would he wrap him up in those foul smelling tendrils and force his way into his mind, confusing and terrifying him with those jumbled images that made him want to vomit? Skinner tensed as he felt something land on his shoulder, and then something else, on his other shoulder, and then the pressure on the back of his neck eased.

"Oh god, I should have known they'd force you to do this bowing shit," a voice said, and Skinner would have fallen over if it hadn't been for the hands on his shoulders holding him upright. He looked up, startled, to find a pair of hazel eyes laughing at him. He couldn't

speak for a moment, and when he did, no sound came out. It took him three attempts to form the words from between his shocked lips.

"Mulder?"

Skinner stood there, gaping like a goldfish, as he tried, and failed, to make sense of this situation. He gazed at his old subordinate, trying to understand. Mulder looked...different. He hadn't grown any tendrils, but all the same, there was something indefinably different about the man. His hazel eyes were deeper, and more vivid than Skinner remembered them, and they were shining now as Mulder smiled at him, his straight white teeth gleaming.

"Mulder?" Skinner said again, louder, taking hold of the other man's arms, his expression still one of total and abject shock. "Oh god, Mulder, what the hell happened to you? Are you really this overlord they told me about? Can you talk to them without throwing up? Shit, I can't believe it's you. Shit. Oh shit."

Mulder laughed out loud and Skinner shook his head, still bemused.

"Mulder." Skinner held the other man at arm's length and looked at him for what felt like an eternity, grinning inanely. Mulder was dressed in a flowing robe, that partially obscured his body, but he seemed well. He looked taller, fitter, and, strangely, **younger** than Skinner remembered him. He was still handsome, still knew how to smile that lazy smile, full of affection, with just a hint of flirtation. "It is you, isn't it?" Skinner asked anxiously. "You're not one of the others in disguise? One of the shape-shifters?"

"It's me, old friend. Don't worry." Mulder circled Skinner's shoulders with his arm, and pulled him in close, then, without embarrassment, placed a gentle kiss on Skinner's bemused lips. Skinner had a sudden memory of falling leaves, and sunflower seeds, like a whisper inside his mind, and then it was gone. "And you are still you. I knew they'd find you," Mulder said, caressing Skinner's cheek with infinite affection, suddenly full of wonder at the reunion.

"You gave them that description of me?" Skinner asked, flushing as he remembered the Superhero.

"Of course." Mulder nodded.

"Then we really have to talk about the way you view the world," Skinner commented dryly, still unable to believe that he was touching someone he thought he had lost forever. Mulder snorted in amusement, and Skinner suddenly lost his grip on reality. "I can't...Christ, I thought we'd lost you - I thought **I'd** lost you. I blamed myself...I can't believe...How did this...? I don't..." He felt a lump rise in his throat, and stared helplessly at the other man, his eyes filling with tears. He shook his head angrily, annoyed with himself, and turned his face away to hide from that compelling hazel gaze.

"It's okay, Walter. I'll explain everything. We'll have time to talk later," Mulder said softly, still not relinquishing his hold around Skinner's broad shoulders, his strong arm warm, and

reassuring. "We have a lot of catching up to do, old friend, but yes, I am Overlord of the Planet Earth. Grand title, huh? And this for the guy who used to be known as spooky!" He gave an ironic chuckle, and Skinner couldn't help smiling along with him. The anxiety that had been his constant companion, settled in the bottom of his gut for the past three years, had gone, to be replaced by an emotion he never thought he'd feel again: *hope*.

End of Part One

Part Two by Xanthe

Author's Notes:

Beautiful pic courtesy of **cdavis**

Posted 17th September, 2000.

Note: Like Chris Carter, I'm using whichever pieces of canon I feel like using, and ignoring the rest J

Huge thanks to Phoebe for fantastic beta reading help. Any mistakes are all mine.

For Lisby

Skinner wasn't sure how he stayed upright for the next hour. His life for the past few years had been one of such chaos; always on the run, always fighting, and hiding, followed by the trauma of his capture, and the unreal gilded cage of his imprisonment. To find himself suddenly shoe-horned into this suit, and brought here to await the Qundi overlord he was to serve, and then to find himself looking into the face of his old subordinate, a man he had such confusing and conflicting feelings towards, was too much for his overworked senses to take in. He was faint from being too anxious to eat for the past few days, and, although he was in better shape than he had been before the Qundi captured him, he was still weak. Somehow he'd just never gained the weight he should have done in the camps, and he'd been tired all the time just doing nothing - this sudden injection of excitement was more than his lean, exhausted frame could withstand.

It was also hot, and he'd been on his feet for too long. The stench of excited Qundi was raw in his throat, and burnt his eyes. He struggled against the urge to cough up his lungs, and could hear his breathing coming in wheezing rasps. His legs were barely holding him up. There was too much noise, too many prostrating Qundi, bowing at Mulder's feet, parting in front of the younger man as if he were Moses walking through the Red Sea. Skinner couldn't take it all in, but Mulder seemed unfazed by it. He smiled, and bowed to the Qundi in return, a graceful movement that looked as if it was borne of long practice. Skinner couldn't begin to guess what Mulder's relationship with their oppressors was. This situation was all too new to him, too unexpected.

The Qundi were welcoming their new Overlord by turning a dizzying kaleidoscope of skin tones, and their skin dripped with moisture in the sun; a reflex that mimicked sweat, and which made Skinner's own sweat glands work overtime as he reacted to the odor. He fought back a tide of nausea, and tried to concentrate on just walking as Mulder swept through the crowd of gathered Qundi and humans, until he reached the center of the gathering, and then he came to a halt in front of a delegation of twelve Qundi, and bowed formally to the alien at its apex. This was obviously someone important, judging by Mulder's display of deference. The alien emitted a sonic hum in greeting, and Skinner let out a hoarse shout of warning as it stepped forward, and laid its tendrils firmly on Mulder's arms.

"It's all right, Walter," Mulder murmured in a placating tone, placing his own hands on the Qundi's flesh, on either side of the row of orbs that Skinner had assumed were eyes. Skinner swallowed hard, fighting down his impulse to retch. He had never seen a human voluntarily touch one of the Qundi before, and he found the sight disturbing. Mulder didn't seem to be suffering any discomfort though. His eyes became glazed, and his skin took on a greenish hue, but apart from that he didn't look as if he were in any distress. Skinner glanced around: there were Qundi everywhere - he couldn't even risk striking out in order to protect the other man, and, if he was honest, Mulder didn't look in need of protection right now. In fact, Mulder's face was quite animated; he nodded, and smiled, and had every appearance of being in conversation - except for the fact that his lips weren't moving. Skinner felt his grip on reality grow more tenuous with every passing second, and the burning in his throat becoming even more unbearable, until, finally, the 'conversation' was over, and the Qundi and Mulder both released their grasp on each other. Mulder didn't crumple to the ground, as Skinner had half expected - and as was usual following a conversation with the Qundi. Instead he merely stepped back, and smiled at Skinner, still glowing faintly green around his eyes and hairline. Skinner steeled himself to stay upright, but he felt like crumpling in Mulder's stead. His knees were trembling, and his head was pounding. His chest felt as if it was being squeezed by tight iron bands. These symptoms weren't new, but they were more acute than he'd ever felt them before, and he could feel himself swaying.

"You're tired, Walter. I'm sorry," Mulder said softly, placing a hand on Skinner's shoulder. Skinner couldn't stop himself from flinching. He knew where that hand had just been, and he could still smell the Qundi stench on Mulder's flesh. A flash of pain passed through Mulder's eyes, and he withdrew his hand. Skinner swallowed hard, and his throat constricted, sending him into a bout of the racking cough that had been plaguing him for several months. He was good at hiding it - he'd been hiding it from Scully for a long time - but he was at the end of his physical endurance, and he didn't know how long he could keep his tenuous grip on consciousness. Mulder's eyes were worried, and he was frowning. He turned, and said something to the assembled crowd, causing them to disperse, the Qundi drifting gracefully away across the grass with the few humans following on behind. Mulder turned back to Skinner, placed an arm around the big man's heaving shoulders, and escorted him up the lawn towards the White House.

"Shit, we're not..." Skinner looked at the mansion, and then at Mulder, who shrugged.

"The Qundi are a symbolic race. They insisted," he murmured, looking faintly embarrassed. "Come on, Walter. You're in no condition to be standing here. I had no idea you were this ill. Nobody told me."

"What else didn't they tell you, Mulder?" Skinner asked, but there was no time for a reply, as his dry, burned throat spasmed, and he was silenced by wave after wave of vicious coughing that exhausted him, and finally drove him to his knees, where he stayed, struggled for air.

"You need medicine. There's an infirmary in the Qundi compound on the other side of the White House. I'll take you there," Mulder said urgently. Skinner nodded, still gasping for air, holding out his hands for Mulder to help him to his feet, but instead, much to his profound horror, he found himself being swung up into a strong pair of arms, and then his feet were lifted from the ground, and he was being carried. He looked, surprised, into Mulder's laughing hazel eyes.

"It's all right, Walter. I won't drop you – you're quite safe." Mulder grinned.

"How did you...You're not...?" Skinner glanced down at the ground, disorientated by the position he was in – a position which he could quite safely say he hadn't been in since he was a small child, nestled in another man's arms, being **carried** for god's sake. How the hell had Mulder gotten this strong? Even in his current less than perfect physical condition, Skinner was sure he was still at least fifteen pounds heavier than the other man, and he was too tall, and ungainly, to easily fit into Mulder's arms, and yet Mulder was carrying him effortlessly, as if he were no weight at all.

"Chalk it up to gravity, Walter – and clean living," Mulder added with a wink.

"I can fucking walk. Put me down," Skinner growled.

"You can't walk. You can't even stand," Mulder told him calmly. "Now stop being such a macho bastard and let me carry you."

"I am not being macho, I just object to being carried when I'm perfectly capable of doing it myself. I'm not a fucking invalid, I'm just..." Skinner's torrent of protests came to a gasping halt, his chest heaving with the effort of talking.

"Just in the middle of severe breathing difficulties. Exactly," Mulder said with a grin, striding easily into a hallway, and along a corridor. Skinner didn't even have a chance to look around their grand surroundings because Mulder was walking so fast, and he had to swallow his pride and put his arms around the other man's neck to prevent himself from falling.

"That's better," Mulder commented, a trifle smugly, Skinner thought.

"Oh shit. Kill me now," Skinner muttered, holding on for dear life, and closing his eyes to shut out the appalling humiliation of being carried through the White House in Fox Mulder's arms as if he were a child. He felt so tired, and he had to admit that it felt good to be taken care of finally, after so many years of taking care of everyone else. He had never had the

opportunity to be weak while they had been fighting the Qundi. People had needed him too much. Even towards the end, when this cough had kept him awake most nights, and he had been hiding the bloody rags he used as handkerchiefs so that Scully wouldn't find out - even then he hadn't given in to his illness. Now, finally, he felt as if he was relinquishing a great weight, handing over the baton to Mulder, and it was such a relief. He let his head loll against Mulder's neck, and smelled the reassuring human scent of Mulder's skin, felt the softness of Mulder's hair against his cheek. He was too tired to even be surprised when he felt Mulder's lips press against the side of his face - and then he lost consciousness.

Skinner was dimly aware of waking briefly in one of the trademark Qundi white rooms. He was coughing badly, and as he retched into his hand, he saw a bright red stain of blood staining his fingers. Panicking, he tried to breathe, and heard a dull, rasping wheeze rattle inside his chest. The room was spinning, and someone was holding him down, talking to him, trying to calm him. A Qundi loomed over him, and he kicked out, panicking badly now. Something pressed against his arm, and then everything went black.

He woke up in bed. Not just any bed, but an enormous four-poster bed in a huge room, with wide, airy windows, and exquisite décor and furnishings.

"Tell me I'm not where I think I am," he muttered blearily.

"You're not where you think you are," a voice said obligingly, from a position very close to his right cheek. He turned his face, and saw Mulder sitting on the bed beside him, his long legs stretched out in front of him, and his fingers endlessly changing the channels on the television remote control with restless quicksilver flicks.

"Really?" Skinner raised himself up on his elbows, and glanced around. If this wasn't the Master Bedroom in the White House then it sure as hell should have been. It was big enough, and grand enough.

"No, I lied. Is it my imagination or has television really gone downhill since I left?" Mulder said, frowning absently.

"There isn't any TV. Or at least, there's only the kind of TV the Qundi want us to watch - which is endless repeats of *The Brady Bunch* and old sports games," Skinner growled.

"Ah, well, that makes sense." Mulder nodded sagely. He smiled at Skinner's look of total incomprehension. "They'd approve of *The Brady Bunch* - several humans living an ordered existence in a small, confined space and working for the good of the family unit. Added to that the Qundian symmetry of the fact that there are three sets of three individuals in the unit, and they're happy."

Skinner's expression had gone from bemused to incredulous. "And the sports?" He raised an eyebrow.

"The Qundi don't really understand competitive games," Mulder explained sheepishly. "They might not have gotten the point of them. I suspect it's all team games:

football, baseball, that kind of stuff? No individual sports, like tennis, swimming, or track and field?"

Skinner nodded dumbly, still not entirely sure that he was having this conversation. Of all the things he might have imagined talking about with his old subordinate as soon as they were alone, sports wasn't one of them.

"Makes sense." Mulder smiled. "As for them being repeats - they probably haven't figured out that it's a lot less interesting when you already know the result, unless it's a classic game. How are you feeling?"

"Confused?" Skinner offered, struggling to sit up. His chest no longer felt as if iron bands were constricting it, and his head had stopped pounding. His throat still felt a little tender, but it was better than it had been.

"Besides that." Mulder flicked the TV off, and turned to face him. His eyes were a particularly vivid shade of deep hazel Skinner noticed. His skin was almost sparkingly clear, and his hair thicker than Skinner remembered it.

"I feel fine. Whatever drug they gave me seems to have worked."

"For now. You have pneumonia, but that's just a side effect of the advanced stages of disseminated, non-reactive tuberculosis," Mulder told him. Skinner sank back down on the bed, winded by this news. "It's curable," Mulder added.

"Since when?" Skinner growled, still trying to come to terms with his death sentence, only to have it whisked away from him.

"The Qundi." Mulder shrugged. "They've started treating you already. They would have begun sooner but they didn't realize how important you are."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Very. I need you, Walter," Mulder said softly.

"Need me for what? To cozy up to those Qundi bastards the way you do? To...what was it they told me I had to do? 'Slide into the hierarchy' as your fucking servant, oh great Overlord of Earth?" Skinner tore at his collar savagely, ripping away the loosened tie, and opening the top few buttons of his shirt. "Christ I hate these damn clothes."

"Oh." Mulder looked non-plussed. "I'm sorry. I asked them to give you those. I thought it would help you... I thought you'd hate wearing those prison overalls, and looking the same as everyone else. Maybe I also thought it would help me. I wanted something to recognize when I came home. Something familiar. I'm sorry," he said again. "Look, I can understand why you're angry, and I promise that I'll explain everything. I know you'll understand. Please, just trust me, old friend." He reached out a hand to touch Skinner's shoulder, and left it there, massaging gently. Skinner glanced down at the slender fingers, feeling profoundly uncomfortable.

“Mulder, is it really you? I don’t remember you being this...” Skinner hesitated, searching for the right words. “Frankly this good looking - or this touchy feely. I sure as hell don’t ever remember you kissing me before, or being strong enough to do that whole Scarlett O Hara thing you did in the corridor. And my memory might be fading, along with my body, but I don’t remember you ever, **ever** addressing me as ‘old friend’ – *old friend*,” he added ironically.

Mulder nodded, drawing back his hand quietly, a look of such profound sadness in his eyes that Skinner wished he hadn’t said anything. “I’m sorry, Walter. I forget I’ve come a long way mentally, and you just haven’t had the chance to make the same journey yet. As for touching you...I...” He paused, got off the bed abruptly, and went to stand at the window, looking out, his back to Skinner, stiff, and defensive. He suddenly looked very slender, almost frail – and very alone. “I’ve been without human company for a long time, Walter,” Mulder explained. “There were times, surrounded by Qundi, when I would have sold my soul for the touch of another human being.”

“What about the other people who were abducted with you?” Skinner asked softly, unable to take his eyes off the lonely figure standing framed in the wide window.

“We didn’t stay together. Once the Qundi knew they could communicate with me they took me away, and...well, it was a hard few months,” Mulder said, keeping his face averted. It was the first time Mulder had said anything Skinner could really relate to. The big man got up, and walked over to the window. Mulder seemed to be transfixed by the last, hazy, red rays of the sun as night fell. Skinner waited, saying nothing, giving Mulder some space, sensing his melancholy mood. After several minutes Mulder spoke.

“I’d forgotten how beautiful it is. The sun, the sky, the earth.” He hesitated, and then looked around at Skinner. “Even you, *old friend*,” he said, with a grin in his voice. “Although you won’t thank me for saying it. But you have no idea what it means to see a familiar face after all these years. I missed you. It’s strange how being away, being so desperately homesick, makes you aware of exactly what you’re missing, and with me it always came down to four things.”

Skinner nodded, silently prompting the other man to continue. “You,” Mulder shrugged, as if it was pointless denying it. “Scully,” he said her name softly, as if even the memory of her was too precious, or painful, to talk about. “...This world,” Mulder continued, placing his fingertips against the windowpane as he looked out, “This beautiful world that I took for granted for every single one of the 38 years I lived on it.”

“And the fourth thing?” Skinner asked.

“Beer,” Mulder grinned. “Ice cold, straight from the fridge, with popcorn, and a really bad movie. Preferably drunk whilst sitting on the couch - with my arm around someone I love.” His expression changed abruptly, to one of the most intense yearning. “It was three and a half years, Walter. Three and a half years without being able to touch human skin,” he said softly. “Three and a half years surrounded by Qundi, unable to speak to someone who knew my language, to even hold a conversation. I love words; you know how I love to talk, to

communicate...sometimes I used to sing for hours on end just to hear the sound of a human voice, but nothing eased the god awful loneliness of not being able to touch. So, I'm sorry if I'm acting...inappropriately. I just..." There was a catch in his voice, and Skinner found himself moving, without hesitation. He grabbed Mulder by the shoulders, and pulled him into a firm, embracing bear hug. His fingers gently caressed the other man's back, and Mulder clung onto him, like a drowning man seeking solid ground. It was dark outside when they finally pulled apart. "Thank you, Walter. And you wonder why I call you 'old friend'." Mulder grinned. "There's one thing I have to ask. It can't wait. Scully...?"

Skinner wanted to tell Mulder about Dana. Apart from anything else, he longed to talk about the woman they both clearly loved, but...a nagging doubt in the back of his mind stopped him. Mulder was their new Overlord, whatever that meant. He had no idea here the other man's allegiances lay these days, and he wasn't about to betray Dana Scully to anybody. Not in this lifetime.

"I haven't seen her in months, Mulder," he replied honestly. "I know she was alive and well up until my capture, but I have no idea where she is now." That was all true, even if it wasn't as much information as he could have given. Mulder nodded, accepting this small crumb of news as if it were a feast. Maybe, after so many years away, it was. "What the hell happened, Mulder? What's all this about?" Skinner asked. "And how the hell did you end up as this Overlord? What is it they want from us? What..."

"Questions," Mulder interrupted him, his body suddenly suffused by amused energy. "I'd forgotten how many damn questions you always ask, Walter. *Where's your report? You're saying the perp was some kind of mutant worm? What do you mean you were using a lock pick in order to gain entrance without a warrant? Where's your evidence, Agent Mulder? You said WHAT to the OPC hearing?*" He mimicked, grinning broadly. "It's alright, I'll give you your answers, **sir**." He inclined his head. "But first, I'm starving, and I've been dreaming about real food, **Earth** food, for too long. I need to do some serious eating, and god knows you look as if you could do with a square meal." He glanced critically at Skinner's lean frame.

"You should have seen me a couple of months ago. I've gained a few pounds since then," Skinner said with a wry grunt.

"Where are we going, Mulder?" He asked, as Mulder pulled him towards the door. The other man raised an ironic eyebrow. "So I need answers. That's just me," Skinner shrugged. "Please tell me that we're not sitting down to a banquet with a room full of Qundi."

"Hardly." Mulder grinned. "The Qundi would be shocked and insulted by the very suggestion."

"Why?" Skinner followed the lanky man along a corridor, and down a flight of plush, carpeted stairs.

"Because the Qundi find the whole act of putting food into their bodies to be intensely intimate. To them it's...dirty," Mulder said, clearly struggling to translate the concept so that Skinner would understand. "They view eating the same way we view sex. It's not for public

viewing. They always eat alone, in family groupings. It would be a display of gross indecency for a Qundi to eat publicly. Ah, that shocked you into silence.” Mulder grinned. “Any more questions?”

“Thousands,” Skinner replied, as they found what appeared to be a dining room.

“After. Sit.” Mulder pointed at the table, and Skinner sat, obediently, and watched as Mulder picked up a phone, and spoke to someone. A few minutes later, a waiter arrived pushing a trolley containing dozens of covered stainless steel dishes. Skinner raised an eyebrow, and Mulder flushed slightly.

“One of the perks of the job, Walter. The Overlord does have to eat after all. I ordered this feast while you were sleeping. I hope you like it.” He lifted a lid on a plate of mussels, and sniffed, then moved on to a tureen of what looked, and smelled, suspiciously like Clam Chowder.

“Mulder, I’ve spent three years living on whatever we could find, or loot,” Skinner said, “and the Qundi sure as hell fed us well in the Compound, but it was the same damn thing every day. This is like...every Christmas and Thanksgiving meal rolled into one,” he said, chuckling as Mulder lifted one lid to reveal a large ham and pineapple pizza beneath.

“And to drink?” Skinner asked.

“Cold beer. What else?” Mulder grinned, reaching for a huge pitcher. The waiter got there first, and filled Mulder’s glass, his hand shaking. Mulder looked at the waiter in surprise, and the man, sensing the scrutiny, trembled even more, and spilled some of the beer on Mulder’s arm.

“I’m so sorry, sir. Please...I’m sorry,” the waiter babbled, clearly scared out of his wits.

“It’s all right,” Mulder laughed. “Really – I’ll just wipe it off. It’s okay,” he repeated soothingly, as his words didn’t seem to be sinking in. The waiter looked like a rabbit caught in the glare of car headlamps, paralyzed with fear. “It’s okay,” Mulder repeated, standing, and placing his hands on the other man’s shoulders, trying to calm him. “Look, we can serve ourselves. We’d prefer to be alone anyway. Why don’t you go back to the kitchens?” The waiter nodded, his whole body still trembling from head to toe, and he shuffled from the room. Mulder watched him go, and Skinner noticed his adam’s apple bobbing up and down in his throat, and the way his jaw shifted, and clenched.

“That’s not a good feeling – people being scared of you – is it?” Skinner commented.

“No. It isn’t.” Mulder sat down again, looking shaken.

“Or if not of you, then of your power, and what you represent,” Skinner observed.

“Yes.” Mulder nodded. “You know how that feels.”

“Yes.” Skinner shrugged. “You’ll get used to it. In time. You don’t have a choice, **sir**.” Now it was his turn to stress that word, and Mulder shook his head and sighed.

“Walter, please, I don’t want there to be any formality between **us**. I was hoping we’d be able to work together.”

“To do what, Mulder? I don’t understand any of this. You can’t just waltz back here after years away doing god knows what and expect nothing to have changed. You have no idea how we’ve been living. No idea what it’s been like for god’s sake!”

“I know. You have no idea what my life has been like either,” Mulder pointed out softly. “Let’s eat, Walter, and catch up. Okay?”

He lifted the lid on the tureen, and ladled some soup into Skinner’s bowl. Skinner’s mouth watered instantly, and he grabbed some bread, and dipped it into the soup, luxuriating in the sensation of eating such exquisite cuisine. Mulder set about the feast equally greedily, his hands and fingers moving tirelessly, in a ballet of selection and inspection, restlessly taking a handful of this or that, and consuming it as if he was starving.

“Didn’t they feed you?” Skinner asked, with a smile.

“Oh yes, but you know what their food is like – it’s functional, healthy, there’s lots of it, but it’s...”

“Boring,” Skinner offered, “and bland.”

“Exactly.” Mulder smiled. “And, you know, this is the first time in three and a half years that I’ve sat down with another human being and shared a meal. I took so many human customs for granted. I didn’t realize how much they define and comfort us, or how much a part of our species they are, if you like. The Qundi thought I was some kind of whore because I’d eat in front of them,” he grinned.

Skinner shook his head, and took a bite of his pizza. “I can’t imagine what that must have been like. Tell me about it.”

Mulder nodded, and licked each one of his long fingers, stripping them of the buttery residue from his corn in a way that was positively erotic. Skinner could suddenly see why the act of eating could be dangerously sensual.

“All right,” Mulder said, frowning thoughtfully. “You know I was taken, that night in the forest when I was with you.”

“I know you were there one minute, and then you disappeared. Then a ship rose up in the sky, and I knew you were on it,” Skinner said in a broken tone. Mulder nodded.

“I didn’t go willingly, I want you to know that,” he said.

"I did wonder. I know you'd been looking for proof for so long..." Skinner trailed off and shrugged, never taking his eyes off his dining companion.

"I know, and I admit I was curious. I also admit that I didn't fight it – but all the same, I didn't go willingly. They caught me in some kind of mind-wiping beam, and I wasn't really there in my head. I just knew I had to get onboard that ship - it was like a compulsion. Then when they had me in position, they put us all in one of their paralyzing beams so I couldn't have escaped even if I wanted to. They drew us up into the ship on the beam, and then everything went black." Mulder paused, and took a long swig of his beer. "The first few weeks were hard," he said when he'd finished, and his eyes hinted that those few words didn't do justice to what he'd endured. "At first we were kept together, but still drugged, so it was hard to know what was real. I was moving around in a daze – very open to suggestion. Everything the Qundi wanted me to do, I did - without question. At first it was just a long litany of them trying to communicate with us. They were using a kind of medication to change our genetic make up, and make communication easier. Some of the others had been tested many times, and were part of an ongoing experiment, but I wasn't. The fact that they mistook me for one of their test subjects is significant." He looked almost bitter. "I suppose you could say that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. All the Qundi wanted to do was talk to us. They can't write, and they don't have any compatible technology, so they couldn't even say 'hello'. The process of conversation made my fellow abductees ill, but not me." He paused again, and looked straight at Skinner, as if expecting some kind of reaction. Skinner shrugged.

"Was there a reason for that?"

"Yes, of course. The reason was my dear father." Mulder gave an ironic laugh. "Oh, not Bill Mulder, not the man who raised me, but my real father, my biological father – and I use that term on purpose. The project he was part of had been working on creating a human/alien hybrid for years. They were way ahead of conventional genetic science in that, using Nazi medical research," Mulder almost spat that sentence out. "I wasn't the product of a man and a woman loving each other, Walter. I was created in a test tube, using genetic material from that cigarette smoking bastard, and my own mother, and then implanted in her womb. They used the same process to make my sister. Apparently, she had great promise, so they took her and tried to use her to communicate with the Qundi back in the seventies. That attempt failed – and it cost Samantha her life." He sat back in his chair, his face pale. Skinner's heart went out to him. All Mulder had ever wanted was to find out what had happened to his sister. Discovering this must have pained him. He reached out, and rested his hand on Mulder's wrist, trying to reassure the other man through the physical contact. Mulder managed a faint, watery smile.

"She's dead, Walter. She was too young, and there was a misunderstanding between the Project and the Qundi. It was a mess, and it set back relations between the two races by years. I was their next best hope, so the Project kept me alive, but after what had happened with Samantha they didn't dare use me. They didn't like me, and they sure as hell didn't like the questions I was asking about them, but I wasn't expendable. So they let me live, and tried to keep me away from the truth for as long as possible by feeding me half-truths, and misinformation. I still, to this day, do not know what was truth and what was lies."

He moved his arm, turned his hand, and grabbed Skinner's fingers between his own. "The only truth I know now is those who stood by me for all those years, who trusted me through the confusion, and who tried to help - and when it came down to it, there were only two of you. You and Scully are the only reason I came back." He didn't relinquish Skinner's hand, but held on tight, as if he feared letting go.

"It took us long time to know what we could be without you," Skinner said softly. "There was never a day when we didn't miss you. We talked about you often. We never forgot."

"Thank you." Mulder squeezed Skinner's fingers between his own in acknowledgement.

"So...when the Qundi tried to talk to me, they found, much to their surprise, that I was receptive to their means of communication. I'm not saying it came easy," Mulder added ruefully, "but they could talk to me on a level, and at a depth, that they hadn't managed with any other humans. It gave them something to work with, something to..." he took a deep breath, and chose his next word carefully. "...enhance."

"Enhance?" Skinner interrupted with a frown.

"I'm changed, Walter. Not, I believe, in essentials, but they changed me all the same in order to make communication even easier. I'm not Qundi, but neither am I wholly human either, but then again, I never was." Mulder's jaw tensed again, and Skinner tried to get his head around what it must feel like, carrying the weight of that knowledge. "I was segregated from the rest of the abductees," Mulder continued, "and taken to the Qundi homeworld."

"Christ," Skinner breathed, startled. "What's it like?"

"Dark." Mulder shrugged. "I didn't see much of it, Walter. I was shut up in a room for most of it - for my own safety. Their atmosphere is similar to our own, but it was too toxic for me to survive in it for long."

"What did they want?" Skinner helped himself to a large slice of apple pie, and two large spoonfuls of thick, whipped cream. It was the kind of food he'd only dreamed about for the past few years.

"They wanted to talk." Mulder shrugged.

"That's it? That's all? They flew half way across the galaxy for a cozy fireside chat?" Skinner growled incredulously.

"No. Of course that's not it. They needed to communicate with us. It's ironic really; despite all that technology, and their ability to traverse vast areas of space, the one thing they couldn't do was talk. They didn't understand us, and we sure as hell didn't understand them. It took me three years to learn their language, customs and culture - and I'm still a novice. There's still so much more to learn."

"The only thing I want to learn is how to wipe them off the face of our planet," Skinner said in a low, intense tone. Mulder looked up, a startled question in his eyes.

"Walter, they aren't our enemies," he said.

"Then why have they invaded our world?" Skinner demanded.

Mulder took a deep breath. "They haven't invaded – at least not in the sense you mean, Walter. It's hard for them to explain that though because they can't tell us. They don't even understand binary language, or the written word."

"How do they communicate with each other then?" Skinner asked, leaning forward, desperate to understand.

"Their tendrils are sophisticated sensory devices. They communicate by touching each other, and exchanging information. It seems telepathic – to us it **is** telepathic, but there's a definite physiological explanation for how their form of communication works. I don't have any tendrils, but I am more genetically receptive to them than the average human being. The surface of my skin has some of their sensory cells, so the mental exchange can be facilitated. I have to be touching them though."

"So you can talk to them." Skinner shrugged. "Tell them to get the hell off our planet."

"It's not that simple." Mulder sighed.

"The hell it isn't! They don't belong here and we do." Skinner could feel the blood pounding in his head, and he felt woozy. Christ, what a day. He didn't know what medicines the Qundi had pumped into him, but they seemed to be wearing off. He felt suddenly very tired.

"Do we?" Mulder asked softly.

"What are you saying? They got here first?" Skinner demanded in a tone of disbelief.

"No, but neither did we." Mulder shrugged.

"Then who?" Skinner stared, open-mouthed, at the other man.

"The Shapeshifters. They're a different race altogether, Walter. They were here first. They've been here far longer than we have. There just aren't that many of them, and they've chosen to blend in rather than fight us, taking our form at will to avoid detection. They invited the Qundi here. They're worried that mankind will destroy this world, **their** world, and they want the Qundi to stop us."

"Stop us how?" Skinner barely managed to get the words out. His head hurt too much. He could hardly believe what he was being told. It was too much to take in.

"Not by destroying us, Walter, if that's what you're thinking, but by working with us. Helping us if you like. It's not an invasion. It's...it's as if the Qundi are missionaries sent to a primitive land to tame the native savages - us. They come from a more enlightened race, and they have so much to teach us."

“Teach us? They can’t even fucking talk to us!” Skinner exclaimed.

“That’s where I come in. That’s why they sent me here as Overlord,” Mulder said softly. “Apart from the fact that they like me that is.” He grinned modestly. “I can communicate with them, Walter, and I can communicate with you. That’s why I asked for you as my Liaison officer, old friend.” He smiled, and inclined his head at his use of the term. “I’ve never known anybody more efficient, fair minded, or dedicated to the concept of justice, law, and order than you, Walter. I need your help.”

“To do what? Persuade our people to accept their enslavement? I’ll never do that, Mulder.”

“It isn't enslavement, Walter. You don’t understand. The Qundi are so far ahead of us in terms of physics and science that there’s no comparison. With their help, there will be no more poverty, no more disease, or sickness. They can even abolish old age.” Mulder smiled. “Look what they did to me, Walter. I’m fitter, stronger, and healthier than I’ve ever been in my life. They are offering us the solution to all this world’s problems. I made a wish once, Walter – I wished for peace on earth. My wish didn’t come true at the time, but it can now - with your help. Will you help me Walter?” Mulder held out his hand, and Skinner stared at it, numbly. He thought of Scully, thought of their long battle against the invading Qundi forces. He thought of the years of fighting and running, and that hand of friendship waiting for him on the table seemed so tempting. “I’ve seen the future, Walter,” Mulder whispered, “and it’s perfect. All we have to do is to be brave enough to take it. It means leaving the past behind. It means giving up old ways of thinking.”

“It means giving up our freedom,” Skinner observed, seeing to the crux of the argument, with an old eye for such issues.

“The freedom to get ill, to get old, and die? The freedom to keep on plundering this world of all its resources?” Mulder asked. “The freedom to hunt the other inhabitants of this planet to extinction, Walter? Is that the kind of freedom you’re talking about? Whose world is this? Ours? Our children's? The whales? The tigers? The insects? The shape-shifters? It belongs to all of us, Walter, and we’re the only ones destroying it.”

“So we sell ourselves to buy their freedom?” Skinner asked in a vehement tone. “Mulder, how do I even know if any of this is true? Supposing the Qundi lied to you?”

“They can’t lie, Walter. It isn’t possible for them with the way they communicate. They don’t even understand the concept. I wish...” He looked at Skinner speculatively. “There is a way I could convince you, but...” He trailed off, flushing.

“I’m willing to try anything,” Skinner said. “I want to understand, Mulder, believe me. I really want to.”

“Do you trust me?” Mulder asked.

Skinner swallowed hard. “Yes,” he said, because he did, and he always had. He trusted Mulder with his life. Mulder smiled, and Skinner knew that one word had meant a great deal to the other man.

"Come here then." Mulder got up, and held out his hand again, and Skinner took it this time, and was surprised to be pulled into a warm embrace, so that his body was flush against Mulder's hard chest. Mulder took the big man's bare head between his fingers, and looked into Skinner's eyes. "Don't be startled, just go with it," he whispered. "Close your eyes." Skinner obeyed, and a second later he jerked his head back, as Mulder's lips met his own. "Hush, just let me..." Mulder said, and Skinner surrendered to the moment, to the seductive glow of the lamp lit room, and to the feel of Mulder's lips against his own. It was a kiss like no other he had ever experienced. Mulder's body was hard, and strong beneath Skinner's fingers. Mulder's hands were clamped around Skinner's back, holding him tight in a firm, loving embrace. Mulder was everywhere, his mouth, his scent, and his touch filling Skinner's senses. His lips were soft, and he was parting Skinner's own lips, and his tongue was in Skinner's mouth, and...Mulder didn't taste like Dana. Dana...This should have been a betrayal of her, and what they'd shared, but it didn't feel that way. It felt so right... Skinner struggled, fighting his own sense of morality, tried to move away, to draw back, but Mulder was holding him tight, and Skinner wasn't as strong as Earth's new Overlord. He felt weak, lost, alone, almost frail beside this superbeing who had dropped to Earth from the belly of a Qundi spaceship, just as he had been taken so many years ago.

"Hush," Mulder said again, only his lips were still locked with Skinner's, and the sound was in his mind. Skinner had a sensation of falling, and he held on tight to Mulder's body. "*It's all right. You won't fall, and if you do, I'll catch you,*" Mulder said inside his mind. "*I'm speaking the truth, Walter. Let me show you.*"

Skinner held onto Mulder as a series of images passed through his mind. It was like talking to the Qundi, only much less unpleasant. He saw Mulder being taken; saw him waking up inside the Qundi ship, experienced with Mulder the many trials of learning how to communicate with the aliens. It was incredibly detailed, and yet very brief – several years crammed into a few short seconds, but Skinner knew that it was all, without a shadow of a doubt, completely and utterly true. As the kiss finished, so did the images, and Skinner was left with the wistful memory of falling leaves, and the taste of sunflower seeds on his tongue, and then Mulder drew back, still holding Skinner up.

"Do you believe me?" He asked.

"I want to," Skinner's throat was dry, and his head was throbbing.

"That always used to be my line," Mulder grinned. "I want to believe," he added, by way of explanation.

"I do." Skinner fumbled his way back to his chair, and sank down with a heavy sigh. "But even if I do believe you, I'm not sure I can agree to what you ask, Mulder." He thought about Dana, and wondered what she would say. Was he really planning to make a mockery of all the battles they had fought for the past three years by becoming a collaborator?

"I know it's a lot to understand, a lot to take in. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have expected you to just agree. The truth is...that I don't think I can do this without you, Walter. I need you."

Skinner stared into those hazel eyes for a long time, trying to think, trying to figure out what he should do but he felt so very tired, and next thing he knew, Mulder was crouching at his elbow, and a pair of strong arms were lifting him up.

"You're exhausted," Mulder said.

"I know. It's been one hell of a day. I can still walk though," Skinner muttered sleepily, fighting against being lifted.

"I know. I just like holding you. Indulge me," Mulder murmured in reply, as he carried Skinner out into the corridor. Skinner struggled fruitlessly against the other man's superior strength for a moment, and then gave in, resigned to his fate.

"If I do take this job, I want it written into my contract that my boss doesn't try to carry me all over the place the whole time. It's humiliating," he growled.

Mulder chuckled. "Now you know what it's like being on the receiving end of someone else's strength, big guy," he replied affectionately, his lips brushing Skinner's cheek. Skinner had a sudden, vivid, mental image of himself restraining Mulder in a corridor of the Hoover building, and holding Mulder down over a desk somewhere else, Mulder struggling uselessly beneath his weight and strength before giving in.

Skinner was dimly aware of being carried back to the Master Bedroom and laid on a bed, and then Mulder was stripping him, and he didn't even have the energy to complain. Mulder knelt, and undid Skinner's shoes, then pulled off his socks, and undid his pants, before tugging those off as well, and Skinner lifted his hips, wearily, to help him. Mulder paused for a moment, his eyes traveling over Skinner's naked body, and taking in the many scars, some new as well as old.

"It's been a hard few years," Skinner explained, sure that he should be unnerved by Mulder's scrutiny, but too exhausted to care.

"I know. I'm sorry. I want to hear your story too. Tomorrow. When you're feeling better." Mulder helped Skinner beneath the sheets, and the older man was asleep before his head even hit the pillow. He didn't even wake up when Mulder undressed, slid into the bed beside him, took him in his arms, and held him very tightly, as if he feared the big man would disappear.

Skinner woke to find his chin nestled on soft hair. He smiled, still half asleep, and gathered Dana into his arms, nuzzling her neck...only to find himself looking into a pair of amused hazel eyes.

"Who's acting all touchy feely now?" Mulder asked.

Skinner pushed him away with a snort. "I thought you were someone else. What the hell are you doing in my bed?" Skinner snapped.

“Technically speaking it’s my bed, and you’re here because I wanted to sleep next to a human body, to smell a human being next to me, and to touch human skin. I’m sorry if that gives you the heterosexual heebie jeebies, but frankly, after all this time on my own, I don’t give a damn about the sexual niceties of polite society. Being with the Qundi made me rethink my old ways. I always swore that if I got a second chance I wouldn’t live a lie any more.”

“Meaning what exactly?” Skinner swung his legs over the side of the bed, feeling threatened by his own nakedness, and fearing what response his body might give to what was sounding dangerously like a proposition.

“Meaning I want you as more than my Liaison officer.” Mulder grinned, and rubbed a hand over his stubbled chin.

“And what about what I want? Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot,” Skinner said, his tone dripping sarcasm. “I can see you’re merely exercising your Droit De Seigneur. You’re the Overlord, I’m your servant. Forgive me for not realizing that personal services were part of the job. Is that what the Qundi fucking well meant when they used the word ‘serve’?”

“Actually yes.” Mulder said mildly. “At least it’s what they expect. It’s hardly something I’m going to force on you though, Walter, so don’t act like an uptight virgin.”

“They expect...” Skinner felt as if the veins in the side of his forehead were going to explode.

“It’s their way.” Mulder smiled sweetly, and got out of the bed. He padded across the room, stark naked, and Skinner found that he was transfixed by the sight, unable to take his eyes off the other man’s long, swinging cock. Mulder grabbed a towel that was slung over one of the armchairs, and glanced back to where Skinner sat, still dumbstruck, on the bed. “Droit de seigneur!” Mulder snorted. “Christ, Walter, this is me you’re talking to. Do you seriously think I’m going to tie you to the bed and rape you?” Skinner was uncomfortably aware of his cock hardening at that thought, and Mulder must have seen it too, because his face broke into a wide grin.

“Why do the Qundi expect us to...?” Skinner nodded his head in the direction of the crumpled bed sheets.

“Because that’s how their society is organized,” Mulder explained patiently, disappearing into the en suite bathroom. Skinner heard the sounds of peeing, and realized that he’d have to follow Mulder in if he wanted to hear the rest of the explanation. Mulder finished, shook his cock, and then got into the shower. Skinner wrapped a towel around his waist, and stood, waiting to hear more. “You’ve probably already noticed that Qundi society is somewhat...” Mulder hesitated, searching for the right word, “hierarchical,” he said.

“You could say that,” Skinner grimaced, remembering the aliens’ fanatical insistence on bowing and their obsession with order and punctuality. He watched Mulder reach for the soap, and the room soon filled with steam. Skinner had been so engrossed in their conversation that he had barely noticed the opulence of their surroundings; the bathroom was the size of his old office in the Hoover Building, and tastefully decorated. He caught a

hazy glimpse of himself in the steam-obscured mirror. He wasn't wearing his glasses, and he looked like a shadowy figure, indistinct, and undefined – which was exactly how he felt right now. Mulder was lathering himself, as he continued speaking.

“Qundi society is highly structured. They live and work in groups of three, six, nine, or, in rare cases, twelve. Each group has a leader, and each member of the group has a specific function within that unit. When I asked for you to work with me, the Qundi automatically assumed you would become my family, and someone I had recreational sex with, because that's how their society works. It's inconceivable to them that I'd chose to work so closely with someone who I'm not intimate with. The Qundi work, sleep, and eat with their partners – and they make offspring in the same groups. Don't ask me about Qundi reproduction, Walter. I've been looking forward to breakfast, and I don't want it spoiled.” He grinned, that lazy, inviting, flirtatious and wildly sexual grin. “You can join me in the shower if you want, Walter, so long as you promise not to sue me for sexual harassment.”

“I'll wait 'til you're done,” Skinner grunted, fascinated by Mulder's insights into the other species, despite himself. Mulder shrugged, and continued soaping himself. Skinner wanted to look away, but felt compelled to watch. He liked Mulder's body. He had always liked Mulder's body. He had dreamed about it often enough. Skinner found himself examining the other man to make sure he was still human. Mulder had talked of being changed on a genetic level, not once, but twice. First in a test tube at conception, and again when the Qundi abducted him, but he still looked pretty human, Skinner observed. All too human, he mused, unable to take his eyes off Mulder's smooth, toned body. He wondered what it would feel like to take the other man's cock into his mouth – or even into his ass. He had never slept with a man, but his close male friendships had defined his life, and he had sometimes wondered whether, if society hadn't been so resolutely against homosexual affairs, he might have succumbed to the temptation. He had never felt closer to any man than Mulder. Mulder's sexual ambiguity had always been part of his charm, but that wasn't the only reason for the attraction. This man was different, and Skinner's feelings towards this man were different as well. He knew that he loved Mulder, and had loved him for years, and at the same time he knew that didn't change his feelings for Dana. He had loved her for years as well.

“You don't have to fight it, Walter,” Mulder murmured, gazing at him as if he knew what was going inside Skinner's mind. “We can be whatever we want to be. After all I've seen, and experienced, I've come to the conclusion that a healthy sexual response is the last thing we should be embarrassed by.”

“Back off, Mulder.” Skinner growled. He saw the look of pain that flashed into Mulder's eyes, but he couldn't handle this right now, not on top of everything else. Mulder might have had three years solitary confinement to figure out his feelings, but Skinner had spent the last three years on the run. It usually took up all his energy figuring out how to feed the rebels, finding new bases, and planning battle campaigns. He hadn't given his emotions much thought.

Breakfast was a strained affair. Mulder was acting as if nothing had happened, but Skinner couldn't. He felt pressured, less by Mulder's unambiguous sexual advances than his own

dilemma about the job he had been offered. He knew that his decision was important. With his help, Mulder could round up the last few pockets of resistance, and bring the rebels on board. Together, they could build a new future for humanity...but was that the right thing to do? Could he honestly bring himself to do what was tantamount to betraying his own people? Even for the best of motives? The dilemma went around and around in his head, and the only solution he could come up with right now was to just wait and see. Mulder wasn't putting any pressure on him to come to a decision straight away. At the back of his mind he also knew that if he won Mulder's trust, he might be able to use that to help the rebels if it came to it. By seeming to accept Mulder's job, he would be perfectly placed to aid the rebel cause. Skinner had a bitter taste in his mouth at the thought of betraying his 'old friend' like this, but he was pragmatist enough to know that he'd make that decision if he had to. He sincerely hoped that he wouldn't have to. *Christ, I'm turning into Alex Krycek.*

After breakfast, Mulder ordered him along to the infirmary in the Qundi compound, which had been constructed at the far end of the White House. Skinner allowed the small team of three Qundi medical personnel to inject him with some kind of drug, and he had to admit that he felt better afterwards. Yesterday's hacking cough had become little more than a minor irritant. After he'd been treated, he followed Mulder through the Qundi compound, marveling at the fact that the other man seemed to know exactly where he was going.

"How the hell do you know the way?" He asked, falling into step with Mulder's loping strides. "This is the first time you've been back to Earth isn't it?"

"Yes, but all Qundi compounds are the same." Mulder shrugged. "I know this place like the back of my hand. I lived in one virtually identical for three years so I should."

"How long did it take them to build it?" Skinner asked. "And why bother? What's wrong with using our buildings?"

"They don't like them," Mulder replied with a wave of his hand. "The fact that they don't know their way around them makes them insecure. The Qundi like certainty, and regularity. You know how they are. As for how long the compounds take to build – they're all constructed in space, and shipped here for assembly. It only takes a few days. It's kind of like buying flat-packed furniture from Ikea." He grinned, and led Skinner into a large white room, where a Qundi delegation comprising two sets of 9 aliens were waiting. Skinner leaned against a wall, and watched Mulder converse with them, fighting down his queasiness. He didn't think he'd ever get used to this process, but Mulder was as unfazed by it as he had been the previous day. The conversation lasted for well over an hour, and when Mulder drew back he looked tired, and drained.

"You okay?" Skinner asked, as they left the compound and strolled back towards the White House.

"Fine, it takes a lot of concentration, that's all." Mulder shrugged.

"What did they have to say?"

"The final date for the...integration has been set," Mulder said cautiously.

“Integration? You mean invasion?” Skinner snapped.

“They don’t see it that way. They’ve managed to secure most of the habitable territory on the planet, but there are still a few pockets of rebels causing problems.” Mulder stopped, and looked Skinner square in the eye. “Walter, I haven’t been entirely honest with you,” he said, biting on his lip in a way Skinner remembered very well. “I haven’t lied, but I haven’t told you everything. I know you were helping the rebels, because you were imprisoned in one of the compounds the Qundi constructed especially for those actively opposing integration. I’m not asking you to betray those people, Walter, but I want you to consider asking them to give themselves up. Wait!” Mulder held up his hand. “Please let me finish, Walter. I don’t want you to decide now, or even tomorrow, just give me a chance to show you that I’m acting for the best interests of us all, and then decide. Please.”

Skinner considered this for a moment, and then nodded. They were both playing their own game, he and Mulder, and, what was more, they both knew it. The old affection was there, but for both of them the trust they won was merely a stake in a much bigger game. Mulder wanted to use him to bring the rebels in from the cold. He wanted to use Mulder to find out more about the Qundi and how they might be defeated. Skinner thought longingly of a time when they had both been on the same side, but, even then, he had to acknowledge that the trust between them had been hard won, and had not always been constant.

“Thank you.” Mulder took a deep breath, and continued walking. “There’s one particularly active rebel group that has been causing the Qundi problems, and they’re led by a man called Phoenix. Have you heard of him?”

“Yes.” Skinner shrugged, his heart missing a beat as he jogged a few paces to catch up. Mulder glanced at him, his hazel eyes curious, questing. Skinner maintained an expressionless face. He wasn’t sure what Mulder already knew, and he didn’t want to give anything away. Mulder considered him for a moment, and then, when it became clear that Skinner wasn’t going to say anything more, he continued.

“He’s been quiet for a couple of months but the Qundi think that’s only because he’s planning something big – maybe an attack on the Compounds holding rebel prisoners.”

Skinner still didn’t say anything, and Mulder clearly knew that if he pushed the big man on this Skinner would be forced to make a choice that they might both regret.

“They asked about you,” Mulder said, changing the subject with a smile. “They got very giggly when I said we’d shared dinner last night, and breakfast this morning.”

Skinner had a hard time imagining the Qundi giggling. They didn’t even have mouths. Mulder put a hand on his arm, and Skinner had a sudden image of a gaggle of Qundi, turning a shade of deep emerald green, and convulsing slightly. “That’s giggling?” He asked. Mulder grinned.

“If it’s any consolation they think our mouths positively are gross. They find the idea of orifices in general extremely disturbing, and this one in particular totally obscene. The fact that we go so far as to put food into our most visible orifice makes them blush and quiver.”

“How the hell do they eat then?” Skinner asked.

“Don’t ask me - I’ve never seen them do it!” Mulder exclaimed. “I’d love to know but they’re too embarrassed to tell me. After all, it’d be like you explaining to them which sexual position you favor. Look, I’m sick of these robes – the Qundi aren’t very good with the concept of clothes, and I feel a total wuss running around in what’s basically a long dress. I know you hate that suit – why don’t we see if we can track down something to wear before we get down to the serious business of running the world.”

“Sounds good to me. Did you have anywhere in mind?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I did.” Mulder grinned.

Twenty minutes later they were driving in a presidential car through Washington. The streets were fairly deserted, and whole sections of the city had been destroyed – Skinner remembered the battle for Washington DC vividly. It had been the first he’d fought, when the government still had forces to deploy. It was a sad and bizarre reflection of the huge difference in firepower between the two races, that most of the damage to the city had been wrought by their own side. The Qundi technology was so infinitely superior that the Earth troops had ended up blowing huge chunks of the city to smithereens in their unsuccessful attempts to score even one hit on the myriad of small Qundi ships that darted and weaved amongst them. The battle had lasted barely a week, and by then the Qundi had won all the main strategic areas, the President and most of the residents had fled, and the rebels had taken to the countryside in order to regroup. They had been fighting a rearguard action ever since, always falling back, never winning so much as one tiny battle, but never giving up despite that. Until now, Skinner thought grimly. Was he planning on giving up now?

Mulder had eschewed an official driver, and was driving them himself, albeit somewhat clumsily, but then after three and a half years away that was hardly surprising. Skinner had assumed that Mulder was taking them to some kind of Qundi-run storage warehouse that stocked clothing, and was so lost in his reverie that he didn’t notice where they were headed until they were almost there.

“Mulder.” He put a hand on the other man’s arm. Mulder looked around in surprise. “I’m sorry. Not here. I should have realized you’d come here.”

“I just want to see the old place again,” Mulder said. “One more look. I used to close my eyes and imagine being back here, lying on the couch, watching TV, a bottle of beer in one hand, remote in the other, pizza on the coffee table. I’d try and think what it looked like, and sometimes...” His voice faltered. “Sometimes I couldn’t remember, Walter. I need to see it again, even if it’s for the last time.”

“Mulder. It isn’t...” Skinner’s voice trailed off as they turned into Hegal Place. “Here,” he finished softly. Mulder drew up the car outside the burnt-out shell of a building that had once been his home, and got out. “I’m sorry.” Skinner followed him, and placed a hand on the other man’s shoulder.

“How...? The Qundi would never...” Mulder began. He looked suddenly smaller, and achingly vulnerable.

“It wasn’t the Qundi. It was us,” Skinner said softly. “We’d have done anything to protect ourselves, Mulder. We’re not talking about the fucking film *Independence Day* here you know. This battle didn’t have any heroes, and we sure as hell didn’t win it. We would have destroyed the city just to save it, but they stopped us before it got that far. They took away our weapons, locked up half the population in one of their big holding compounds, and those of us they didn’t manage to capture fled. I was one of them.”

“All gone.” Mulder’s fingers touched the blackened bricks that had once been his apartment block. “One of the things that kept me going was the thought of coming home.”

“I’m sorry,” Skinner said again, feeling inadequate.

“What about your place? Is that still there?” Mulder asked.

“I think so. It was when I left, although looters have probably taken all my stuff by now,” Skinner shrugged.

“No. The Qundi wouldn’t allow looting. It’ll be there, just as you left it,” Mulder said confidently. Skinner put his hands on his hips, and shrugged again. Privately he didn’t think that likely, but he was prepared to find out. They got back into the car, and Mulder drove them to Crystal City. It only took a few minutes to navigate the deserted streets, and then they pulled up outside the Viva Tower. There were clearly still residents – the elevators were working, and the lights were on, although the doorman was long gone.

“I don’t have a key though, Mulder.” Skinner followed the other man along the corridor of the 17th floor. Mulder turned to him, his eyes gleaming.

“Since when did I need a key?” he grinned.

“You can’t possibly have that lock pick hidden in those robes!” Skinner protested.

“No, but you’re wearing a belt. Give it here.”

Mulder’s resourcefulness was undiminished, Skinner thought wryly, as the other man removed the prong from the belt buckle, and played around with the lock. A few seconds later, the door sprang open, and an alarm went off.

“Quick, what’s the code?” Mulder asked.

“Christ, I can’t remember.” Skinner thought about it for a moment. “1-0-1-3” he recalled finally. Mulder raised an eyebrow, and punched the code into the alarm, and Skinner flushed.

“I’m not saying a word,” Mulder grinned as the alarm deactivated. “So, home sweet home, Walter. How does it feel to be back?”

"Strange." Skinner stared around the apartment. "It could be another lifetime, Mulder. A different Walter Skinner. Let's get the clothes and go. I don't want to stay," he said abruptly. "You can wear my clothes if you want – although I'm sure the Qundi will be able to find something for their Overlord to wear; there must be some stores still open." He went up the stairs two at a time, and paused at the top, outside his bedroom. This felt eerie, like breaking in to somebody else's apartment. He almost couldn't believe he'd ever lived here. It all felt such a long time ago. He took a deep breath and entered the room, pulled out a suitcase from beneath the bed, and then opened his closet and started throwing in all the casual clothes he could find, ignoring the more formal suits and shirts that formed the larger part of his wardrobe. Mulder leaned in the doorway, watching him.

"I wanted to see my old home so much. I thought you'd feel the same, but you find it painful, don't you?" He murmured.

"You just don't seem to figure that not everybody feels the same as you fucking do, or wants the same fucking things!" Skinner growled, slamming the case shut. He left out a pair of sweatpants, tee shirt, sneakers, and a denim shirt, and undid his stiff collared, formal shirt with a savage jerk of his fingers, sending the buttons flying. He threw the shirt onto the dusty bed, pulled on the tee shirt and denim shirt, and then tried to undo his shirtsleeves to push them up, but his fingers were shaking too much. Mulder reached out, and batted them away, and then slowly unbuttoned the cuffs for him. Skinner submitted, fighting back his emotions, then brushed Mulder aside, and in doing so caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror...and sank against the bed as his knees started to give way.

"Christ," he muttered, surveying the pale shell of the man he had once known. "Christ, Mulder. I look like shit. Why didn't you tell me?" He stared hopelessly into the mirror. He knew that he'd lost the rest of his hair, but he looked so...old. His face was lined with worry, and there were deep furrows across his wide forehead. His eyes had dark shadows underneath, and a whole flock of crow's feet at the corners. His skin was pallid, and haggard, and his clothes hung off him as if they belonged on someone else. He wondered how his body had ever filled them. He was so gaunt; his body was hard, and still solidly muscled, but so much leaner. He missed his old, solid bulk, which had given him an illusion of invulnerability, power, and control. "How the hell did they recognize me from that description you gave?" Skinner whispered, going over to the mirror and tracing the lines of his reflection. "I don't look like that person, Mulder. And what the hell were you thinking with that anyway? Since when did I ever have legs 20 feet long, and tower over tall buildings?"

Mulder smiled, and came up behind Skinner, his face visible in the mirror as he stared into it over Skinner's shoulder. "The Qundi don't have very good eyesight, and in any case they have trouble telling one human from another, so I had to exaggerate some of the salient points, Walter," he murmured. "But not by much, I think. That's how I see you in my head, how I've always seen you, and how I will always see you," he said firmly. He crossed his hands over Skinner's chest, and rested his chin on Skinner's shoulder.

Skinner just stood there, stunned by his reflection. "When did I get so old?" He asked.

"You've been very ill, Walter. When your health improves you'll be amazed how much better you look," Mulder said gently. "Qundi medicine will restore you, I promise – look what it did for me."

"You look young enough to be my son," Skinner whispered.

"I'd rather be your lover." Mulder pressed his lips against Skinner's cheek, and a familiar image of falling leaves, and the taste of sunflower seeds flashed into the big man's mind.

"Dana..." Skinner stared at their reflections in the mirror.

"We'll find her, Walter. She'll join us. We'll be together again, the way we were always supposed to be," Mulder insisted, and his confidence was almost catching. "It isn't a betrayal, old friend. It's a new beginning."

His lips were insistent, soft, and so beguiling. It took all Skinner's willpower to wrench himself away.

"If I let this happen then I'll have made my decision, won't I?" He hissed. "Is that what you want? You want to seduce me over to your side?"

"I'm not the devil, Walter," Mulder chided. "I'm just a horny guy who's spent the past 3 and a half years alone in a room jerking off and thinking about you – and Scully. I can't pretend I don't want this – I've spent too many years of my life pretending. I do want this, but only when you're ready. Look, I won't hit on you again. I'll wait for you to come to me."

"And if that doesn't happen?" Skinner growled.

"Then I'll die a very unhappy man." Mulder grinned, and grabbed Skinner's case from the bed. "Come on big guy. Let's go..."

"Home?" Skinner finished for him, glancing around the place he had once called by that name. "No, Mulder. That isn't my home, and I refuse to stay there. My people didn't elect me into the White House, and I'm not just going to camp out there. It means more to me than that. It stands for more than that."

They stared at each other for a long time. Skinner knew that he'd pushed the game to a higher level. He was demanding that Mulder trust him enough to be out of his sight - and out of his immediate control as well.

"You can't stay here. It's too far away," Mulder said. "I need you nearby."

"There are apartments within walking distance of the White House. Let me stay in one of them. I won't live in a Qundi compound," Skinner stated firmly. There was another silence. "Do you trust me enough to allow me my freedom, Mulder?" Skinner asked softly. The question hung between them, and then Mulder broke into a wide smile.

“Of course I trust you, old friend,” he said, as if that had never been in question. “Just promise me one thing.” Skinner stiffened, wondering what the price of his independence would be. “Promise me that you’ll eat your meals with me,” Mulder said. Skinner almost laughed out loud. It was such a small thing...and yet...it revealed both how much Mulder now identified with the Qundi, and their customs, and how alone and estranged Earth’s new Overlord was from his people. He longed to reach out to the other man, to stand by his side as he had so many times before, but their recent pasts intruded on the present, and neither of them was about to join the other side just yet.

“It’s a deal,” Skinner said. “Here.” He threw Mulder a pair of sweat pants and a tee shirt, and Mulder grinned, and quickly stripped off his Qundi manufactured robe, and pulled them on. Skinner’s clothes were as big on Mulder as they had been on the big man, and they took one look at each other and burst out laughing.

“We really have to bulk you up again,” Mulder said.

“And we really need to get you your own clothes,” Skinner replied. “Look, Mulder, the practicalities of everyday life have never exactly been your strong suit, have they? The Qundi seem to have provided you with some servants but you’ll need more than that if you’re going to run things around here. You’ll need a whole staff – not only to run the White House, but also to help you organize and resettle the population, not just of our own country, but also of the whole world. It’s a big job, Mulder, and that’s an understatement.”

“I know. That’s why I asked for your help. You always were an awesome administrator, Walter.”

“Well, I’ll need people, and I need to know what you’re planning on doing. How are you going to implement all these ideas you have about eradicating disease, stamping out poverty, and achieving world peace, Mulder?”

“Do I detect a note of cynicism?” Mulder led Skinner down the stairs, taking them two at a time, as if he couldn’t wait to get started on the task ahead.

“Yes.” Skinner growled in reply. Mulder turned, but he wasn’t laughing. His eyes were deadly serious.

“I will do it, Walter. I’ll do all that and more. Does this mean that you’re accepting my job offer, old friend?”

“What’s the alternative, Mulder?” Skinner asked. “No, really, I’d like to know. What happens if I say ‘no’? Do you send me back to prison?” He stood in the elevator, and waited for Mulder to join him. The other man’s face was as still as if it had been set in stone; only a tiny movement of his jaw showing that he was even alive.

“Would you, Mulder?” Skinner pressed. “Is it ‘my way or the highway’? Is that how it is?”

Mulder took a deep breath, and joined him in the elevator.

“I want you here. I didn’t conceive of any other possibility than that you would stay,” Mulder said finally.

“You never even considered that I might say no?” Skinner asked incredulously. “I’d forgotten your breath-taking Muldercentric view of the world. Let me tell you something, Mulder. You aren’t the only one who has suffered during these past few years. I’ve lived like an animal, and I’ve been hunted like one. I’ve always been on the run, fighting and running for every single day of the past three years. I’ve lived in constant fear of my life, in constant fear of the Qundi, and there were days when my hands shook so badly I couldn’t even hold my gun.” He stopped short, feeling an old, familiar churning in his gut, and a sharp stabbing pain in his side. He held onto the side of the elevator, and tried to remember to breathe. He didn’t want to collapse out here, and have Mulder pick him up and start carrying him around again.

“They didn’t want to fight you. They didn’t want that,” Mulder whispered. “They took good care of you in the prisons.”

“We didn’t know what the hell happened to those of us they captured!” Skinner retorted angrily, getting out of the elevator as soon as it opened, and leaving the building without looking back, his whole body suffused with rage against the aliens who had invaded his world. “They disappeared into Qundi compounds never to be seen again. For all we know they could have been being tortured, or eaten alive by those alien bastards. Mulder – you have no idea what it’s been like here.”

“This whole war, it’s all because of not being able to communicate,” Mulder retorted furiously, throwing Skinner’s suitcase into the car, and kicking the wheel in sheer frustration. “Walter, if you only knew what I know. If you could ever just sit down and talk to them the way I have...Christ, what a nightmare.” He slammed his fist against the car door. They faced off against each other, anger running through their exchange like something visible, almost tangible, their bodies tense. “I’m sorry.” Mulder crumpled against the side of the door. “Walter, I haven’t talked to anyone for over three years – that does tend to focus a man’s soul on his own self somewhat more than usual.” His shoulders hunched into a self-deprecating shrug, and Skinner gave a wry grunt in reply. “I’m sorry that I didn’t know what you were going through back here. I’m sorry that I didn’t think that you might not want to go along with my plans, but there’s one thing you have to believe: I am **not** a traitor to this world. I’m doing what I think is right, what’s best. You know what I’m like when I believe in something. You know how single-minded I can be. You trusted me once, Walter, all I’m asking is that you do it again – at least for long enough for me to show you that I’m right. This is just like the old days isn’t it?” He looked up with a grin.

“What?” Skinner frowned.

“You, demanding proof. Me promising to deliver it – and the jury remaining out until then.”

Skinner couldn’t help smiling at that. “Yes, *old friend*,” he said mockingly. “It’s just like the old days.” And, just like the old days, he was straddling both sides of the fence - and taking a hell of a lot on trust.

The next few weeks went by so quickly that Skinner barely had time to catch his breath. He seemed to have drifted into his job as Mulder's liaison officer by default. By not saying no, Mulder assumed he had said yes. And there was so much to do. There were so many displaced people to find homes for, and new Qundi regulations to implement. Those stuck in Skinner's crew, but he couldn't deny that Mulder had been right about some of what he had been promised; the Qundi ensured that there was enough food for every single human being on the planet, and that everybody received excellent medical care - as Skinner could testify. His tuberculosis was quickly cured by the Qundi, the damage to his lungs repaired, and within a couple of months he was back up to his old weight, and his face had lost that haggard, drawn quality. He was well on his way to becoming a shiny, reborn human, just like Mulder. Third world countries that had suffered from extreme poverty and disease were transformed overnight by the kind if unyielding hand of Qundi dictatorship. It wasn't achieved without considerable hard work though. Skinner lost count of the number of times he stayed up all night, working with Mulder, setting up lines of communication, and finding appropriate members of the local populace to explain and help implement Qundi directives all over the world. Mulder never gave less than his eccentric best; he was a constant stream of ideas, some of them workable, some of them not, and they worked so brilliantly well together that it was like making the sweetest music. Skinner was able to use his own formidable administrative skills and sharp intellect to implement Mulder's plans to best effect. He discarded those that were unworkable, and reigned in the worst of Mulder's excesses. He was a curb to the other man's natural brilliance and exuberance, and he kept Mulder channeled and focused. Skinner was astonished by how quickly he recovered from what had been a life threatening illness.

Working with the Qundi wasn't as easy as working with Mulder. Skinner shuddered his way through the daily meetings Mulder held with them. Mulder might have been Overlord of Earth, but he answered to the Qundi, and was held to account by them. Mulder, never very good with authority at the best of times, sometimes came out of those meetings looking decidedly green around the gills. On those occasions Skinner took him out of the office, made him walk, talk, let off steam, and they always invariably ended up back at Skinner's apartment, eating whatever the big man could find in his fridge. Whatever 'enhancements' the Qundi had done to Mulder, had definitely changed him, Skinner observed, sitting watching the other man devour the remains of the previous night's pizza. He was still Mulder in essence, but he had developed an aversion to eating or drinking in public, or alone, and he made no secret of the fact he liked taking his meals with Skinner. By contrast, he was much more openly tactile than the Mulder of old.

"What were they hassling you about this time?" Skinner asked, taking a bite of pizza, and leaning back on the couch.

"The rebels." Mulder took a swig of beer, and leaned back as well, so that their shoulders were touching. Skinner had grown used to the way Mulder needed to be in such close physical contact - particularly when he was trying to explain a difficult idea or concept. Mulder would often lean over him as he worked, and place both his hands on Skinner's arm, or slide his fingers over Skinner's shoulders, caressing and petting him. At first Skinner had found it profoundly embarrassing, but he had grown accustomed to it, and there was no

doubt that they worked better, and understood each other more easily when he allowed Mulder to act freely, without inhibition.

“What about them?” Skinner asked nonchalantly, moving his shoulder away. He knew that Mulder was using touch to communicate, the same way the Qundi used it, but he wasn’t entirely sure how the process worked... or whether any of his own thoughts spilled back to Mulder, and he didn’t want to betray his old friends unintentionally.

“The Qundi think that if I could just talk to this Phoenix, and bring him around to our way of thinking, then he could convince the other rebel groups to give up their weapons too. It’s such a waste, Walter. These people living in those caves like animals when they could be contributing to what we’re trying to achieve.”

“You can’t make people see things your way, Mulder,” Skinner pointed out. Their eyes met, and Mulder’s were half amused, half sad.

“I do know that, Walter,” he replied softly, alluding to their own situation. He moved his hand to Skinner’s shoulder, and squeezed gently, and Skinner closed his eyes, and surrendered to the caress. The truth was that Skinner liked being touched. He liked feeling those long, slender fingers on his body, searing their heat on his flesh through his thin cotton shirt. Mulder was so dangerously compelling an individual that it took all his willpower to resist. Mulder had been true to his word and made no further attempt to seduce the big man, and there were many times when Skinner wanted to make that short walk from his apartment to Mulder’s rooms in the White House...but he didn’t for two reasons. The first was that he knew that if he made that journey he would be committing himself not only to Mulder, but also to Mulder’s cause, and, by default to the Qundi cause, and Skinner wasn’t ready to do that. The other reason was Scully.

“Walter, do you know who Phoenix is?” Mulder asked.

“No.” Skinner said the word too fast, and held his breath.

“But you do know how to find him,” Mulder said softly. Skinner grunted, trying to stay one step ahead. “Walter, will you help me find him?” Mulder’s voice was warm and husky against Skinner’s ear. “Please?” Skinner fought it for a moment, wanting nothing more than to wrap his arms around Mulder and pull him close, to give in, both to the man he loved, and to what he represented. He was so very tired of fighting. Somehow, he found the strength to play an old, familiar game.

“There was a man in the prison camp. If you’d agree to his release, I could talk to him. He isn’t Phoenix, but he might know where we can find him,” Skinner said. Mulder’s fingers brushed over his lips, and his eyes burned holes in Skinner’s soul as he weighed this up. Skinner looked into their vivid hazel depths for what seemed like eternity. Trust had become the tightrope they seemed destined to walk forever.

“The Qundi won’t like it. They don’t like releasing prisoners,” Mulder mused. “You have no idea the battle I had with them over getting you out. They’ll only release the rebels when the Resistance have given up their arms, and agreed to accept Integration.”

Skinner shrugged. "If they want the problem solved..."

Mulder bit on his lip, and then, finally, nodded. "All right. What's his name?"

"Regan." Skinner said in a flat tone, and then the deed was done, and there could be no turning back.

Regan was brought to the White House under Qundi guard the following day. He looked fit enough, but his eyes were suspicious, and he took one look at Skinner and threw himself at him.

"Traitor!" He spat, landing a punch to Skinner's gut before the Qundi overpowered him and dragged him back, retching and vomiting from the physical contact with them, his face turning green.

"For god's sake tell them to let him go, Mulder!" Skinner snapped, leaning against the desk and massaging his stomach gingerly. "Christ, he'll be no use to us like this." He surveyed the stricken man, where he lay curled up on the floor, choking on his own vomit. Mulder moved over to the leader of the Qundi group, and placed his hands on the alien. Some kind of communication passed between them, and after a few minutes of what looked like heated argument, the Qundi withdrew, leaving the humans alone.

"They didn't like that," Skinner grunted.

"They were shocked," Mulder agreed. "You know how hierarchical they are. They thought Regan should have bowed to us as the ruling group in the hierarchy. The idea of him attacking you outraged them, I'm afraid."

"Poor bastard." Skinner crouched in front of Regan, and held a glass of water to the man's lips. Regan drank, his eyes still hostile, but made no further move to attack them.

"Regan – please, we don't want to hurt you. We have a job for you," Skinner said, hating the distrust in the other man's eyes. He tapped Regan's shoulder twice in a signal that they had used to guard the rebel base. It meant 'friend'. Regan's eyes widened. Skinner held his gaze for a moment, and Regan blinked a couple of times, then nodded. "Okay now?" Skinner asked, helping the other man to his feet and propelling him over to a chair. "We need your help, Regan."

Regan sat, and drank down his water in one gulp, glancing at them both suspiciously.

"You're looking good, Walt," he commented brusquely. "Must be all that Qundi medicine."

Skinner shrugged. "I had TB. I guess I didn't realize I was that sick – and you're right; the Qundi cured it, almost overnight."

"They've been taking good care of you. They must like traitors," Regan snapped.

"Regan, Walter isn't a traitor. He's trying to help. You can help too," Mulder said, crouching in front of Regan's chair, and touching the other man's knee. Skinner winced as Regan

moved away pointedly. Mulder just didn't understand how uncomfortable it made people when he invaded their space in this way.

"We know you had links to the rebels," Mulder continued, his hazel eyes beseeching, "and we believe you knew the leader going by the codename Phoenix. We'd like you to set up a meeting with him."

Regan's eyes widened in surprise, and he glanced at Skinner over Mulder's shoulder.

"We just want to talk to him, Regan," Skinner said urgently. "He's a very important man. We need his help in bringing the resistance to an end."

Regan's eyes widened even further. "You're asking me to contact Phoenix?" He asked. "You're asking me to arrange a meeting between you and..." He glanced at Skinner, "...him?"

"That's right." Mulder nodded. "He'll be safe. We just want to talk to him. He has my word that he won't be harmed."

"Your word? What the hell is your word worth?" Regan growled.

"We'll agree to his terms. It can be wherever he wants." Mulder gave his most reassuring smile.

"You must think I'm stupid," Regan said incredulously. "I've got a tracking implant in my neck – and you think I'm going to lead you straight to Phoenix? That I'm going to **betray** him. Tell me why the hell I should?"

"Because Phoenix isn't going to win, and I want to bring this war to a close. I like his ideas, and his energy. I want to bring him here, to work with me. I need people like him," Mulder said urgently. "And I'm not asking you to betray him, Regan."

"Then remove my tracking implant," Regan demanded.

"I can't do that. The Qundi won't let me," Mulder said with a heartfelt sigh. "I have asked them, believe me. Look, I can give you two weeks, Regan. You can leave here first thing tomorrow and I promise that the Qundi won't track you. That's the best I can say. If, after the two weeks are up, you don't secure a meeting with Phoenix, they'll track you down and bring you back. What do you say?"

"I say you must be nuts." Regan glanced at Skinner, and then back to Mulder. "You're asking me to take your word on this? It's a trap."

"No, it isn't," Skinner said softly. "Mulder...can I speak to Regan alone?" He asked. Mulder looked at him, and Skinner nodded, reassuring the other man. Mulder's hazel eyes were troubled, but he withdrew from the room. As soon as he had gone, Skinner removed a knife from his pocket, and advanced on Regan.

"What the hell are you doing?" Regan demanded, putting up his hands to defend himself.

"Sit down. We don't have much time," Skinner said urgently, undoing Regan's overalls at the neck, and locating the small implant pulsing under the skin. "Mulder means what he says. He'll give you the two weeks. You won't be doing as he asks though. You'll be working for me. Now hold still."

"What the hell are you doing? You know the implants don't function if you cut them out!" Regan protested. They had both tried this back at the prison compound. As soon as the tracking devices were removed they sent an urgent signal back to the Qundi who descended almost immediately.

"Shut up, and keep still. I've done some investigating," Skinner said in a low, urgent tone. "The implants have to be within the body to stay activating. It doesn't matter whose body." He cut a line in his wrist with the knife, and Regan gazed at him, wide eyed. "You're going to..."

"Put your implant in my body – yes. They'll only find out when they check your whereabouts in two weeks," Skinner said, slicing through the flesh over Regan's implant, and popping the device out. It was the size of a pea, covered in blood, and slippery. Skinner slipped it under the cut in his own wrist, and pressed the flap of skin back over it. "The implants are partly organic – they can only survive for 20 seconds outside the body. If I was quick enough, we should be all right." They both gazed intently at the implant in his wrist, and a second later it pulsed, indicating that it was still active. Skinner breathed a sigh of relief, and tied his handkerchief over his wrist, then pulled his shirt-sleeve down to cover the bloodied cloth.

"They'll know what you did. What will happen to you?" Regan asked, wide-eyed, as Skinner mopped the small trickle of blood off his neck, and buttoned up his overall to hide the small cut.

"Don't worry about me. I can handle whatever the Qundi throw at me," Skinner said grimly. "Just get to Dana, and give her this." He handed Regan an envelope containing a letter he had written. "You're free, Regan," Skinner told the other man, who was staring at him, as if unable to grasp what had just happened. "I'll call Mulder back in a minute. I'll tell him I persuaded you, and that you agree to his terms. As soon as they release you get as far away from here as possible, and make sure none of those Qundi bastards follow you back to Scully."

"I'd die rather than let them take her," Regan growled. "What about you though, Walt? You can't stay here. Why are you working with that collaborating bastard?"

"We need information. This is the only way to get it," Skinner replied, with a shrug. It was a good deal more complicated than that, but he wasn't about to explain that to Regan. "And, Regan – give my boy a kiss from me, huh?" He asked. Regan smiled, and nodded.

"I could kiss Dana for you too, if you like," he offered, lapsing back easily into old, teasing relationship.

"Do it and die," Skinner growled in reply, grinning broadly. He held out his hand to the other man, and then pulled him into a bear hug. "Good luck, Regan," he murmured, then he drew

back, finished cleaning his knife, and replaced it in his pocket. He checked that there was no sign of what he'd done, then strode over to the door, and opened it. Mulder was standing at the far end of the corridor, his back against the wall, humming to himself. He came loping back, his eyes questioning, when Skinner beckoned him.

"Has he agreed?" He asked. "Will he do it?"

He took some persuading, but when I managed to convince him that you didn't have me brainwashed into helping the Qundi, I was able to talk him around," Skinner replied, hating the lie, and the look of total trust on Mulder's face. He had no idea whether he'd done the right thing, but he needed more time – and he was desperate to get word to Scully without endangering her.

"Good. Thank you, Walter." Mulder smiled an affectionate, delighted smile, and Skinner turned away, the betrayal settling in the pit of his stomach. He knew this feeling. He remembered it from before, when he'd given Krycek a tape he'd made of a meeting with Mulder in his office. It had stuck in his craw then, and it did the same now. They watched Regan leave, and, sensing Skinner's sadness, Mulder placed a hand on the big man's shoulder and squeezed, gently, and supportively.

"Forgive me, old friend," Skinner whispered, watching from the window as Regan disappeared into the night.

"You did the right thing," Mulder said, reassuringly, not understanding.

"I hope so." Skinner gazed out blindly into the dark. "I'm not sure I can tell any more."

Skinner spent the next two weeks in a state of anxious anticipation. He wasn't sure what the Qundi would do to him when they found out, but he dreaded their response far less than the look on Mulder's face when he learned of his betrayal. As the second week passed, and there was still no word from Regan, Mulder became agitated.

"Are you sure he understood what we wanted?" He demanded of Skinner.

"Very sure," Skinner replied stiffly.

"Maybe he can't find Phoenix – but I'd have thought he'd send word." Mulder paced the Oval Office anxiously. "What's he **doing**, Walter? Where the hell is he?"

"We'll find out soon enough. We just have to be patient." Skinner's jaw did a sideways clench. He was determined to play this waiting game through to the end. Two weeks would buy Regan enough time to escape, find Scully, and give the rebels invaluable information about the Qundi. Nobody had ever escaped before, and the rebels had been stumbling around in the dark for three long years. They didn't know what went on inside the Qundi compounds, or what the Qundi wanted from them. Now, at last, they'd have information – and that was worth more than all the weapons in the world.

Skinner's gut was churning when he and Mulder attended their usual daily meeting with the Qundi a few days later in their sterile, white compound. Mulder looked...disappointed. There was no other word for it. He seemed tired, and much less animated than he usually was, and, for the first time, Skinner wondered whether the Qundi exacted a penalty for failure. He hadn't seen any evidence of it before, but Mulder sure as hell didn't look happy to be going in there to report his failure.

"Will they hurt you?" Skinner asked. He hadn't even considered that. He hadn't intended any harm to befall Mulder. He had assumed that if anyone was going to be punished, it would be him - in fact he expected it. He was sure that he'd be sent back to prison at the very least.

"Hurt me? No. That isn't their way." Mulder shrugged. "They just find it hard to understand why the rebels keep fighting them. I have a tough job explaining human psychology to them," he sighed. "So this will be tiring." It was. Skinner watched Mulder visibly wilt during the long conversation, and his heart went out to the other man. When it was finally over, he watched Mulder return to his side, his expression concerned, and confused.

"I don't understand. According to the Qundi in charge of the tracking devices, Regan never even left. They think he's still hiding here somewhere. Why, Walter? What the hell is going on?"

"I'm sorry, Mulder," Skinner said helplessly, undoing his shirt sleeve, and holding out his wrist, showing the other man the pulsing implant under his skin. Mulder stared at it, trying to make sense of what Skinner was saying.

"I don't understand," he murmured.

"Yes you do, Mulder," Skinner said softly. "I set him free. There isn't going to be any meeting with Phoenix. I won't deliver him up to you."

"You still don't trust me?" Mulder looked as if someone had punched him in the gut.

"No, I don't trust **them**." Skinner spat in the direction of the assembled Qundi delegations.

Mulder rocked back on his heels, all the color draining from his face. He reached up, brushed aside the fabric of Skinner's shirt, and located the second implant in his neck.

"Shit, Walter," he whispered. "What have you done?"

Pandemonium broke out among the Qundi, and they were soon in heated discussions with Mulder. Skinner watched, feeling helpless. If there was anything he could have said, or done, to help the other man right now, he would have done it. Mulder was suffused with nervous energy, his whole body animated as he spoke to the aliens. There were three groups of six Qundi, all surrounding Mulder, laying their tentacles upon him, but as Skinner watched the conversation become more heated, the doors opened, and another twelve Qundi glided smoothly into the room. Their bodies were all glowing a vivid turquoise blue, and if there was such a thing as agitation in the Qundi emotional range, they were

displaying it right now. Their tendrils were all flapping, and the stench was sickening, causing him to retch, and his eyes and throat to burn. And there, in the middle of it all, was Mulder, a tall, human figure, in the center of all this alien chaos. The air seemed almost electric, and some of the Qundi were beginning to drip green slimy sweat onto the floor. Finally, as if on cue, the conversation reached a crescendo, and then stopped, abruptly, and the Qundi withdrew to various corners of the room. Mulder was left standing in the middle of the room, his body tense, and his posture defensive.

“Mulder?” Skinner hissed. The other man looked up, straight at him, and Skinner almost couldn’t meet his eyes; there was such pain in them. “What are they going to do? I don’t mind, whatever it is,” Skinner said. “I knew what I was doing. I’ll take full responsibility for it. I’ll accept whatever punishment they decree.”

“It isn’t that simple,” Mulder replied, his face ashen. “You see, Walter, under Qundi law, and custom, I’m responsible for your actions.”

“What the hell do you mean?” Skinner marched into the center of the room, and grabbed Mulder’s neck, searching the other man’s face for some clue to what the hell was going on.

“You know how Qundi society is arranged. You know how hierarchical they are,” Mulder said in a low, urgent hiss. “The leader of each Qundi unit is responsible for the behavior of their group. It isn’t you they’re going to punish, Walter. It’s me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Skinner growled. “I fucked up here, not you.”

“It’s not the way they work.” Mulder gave an almost apologetic shrug.

“Then tell them I’m not part of your group, or unit, or whatever the hell it is they think you’re the leader of,” Skinner said, his hand tightening insistently around the back of Mulder’s neck.

“I can’t. You work with me. You come here with me every day when I talk to them. We eat together. I asked for you when I first came here. They know how I feel about you because they can see inside my mind. As far as the Qundi are concerned we’re...lovers.” Mulder shrugged. “That word doesn’t really sum it up. The Qundi have a better way of describing it, but I can’t translate...we’re family, Walter. We’re bonded.”

“Tell them we aren’t. Tell them that we haven’t...” Skinner waved his hand in despair, hopelessly out of his depth.

“The actual act isn’t important, it’s the emotions and rituals that surround it. They’ve already decided.” Mulder shook his head.

“They can’t censure you. You’re their Overlord for Christ’s sake!” Skinner protested.

“That doesn’t exempt me from punishment.” Mulder lowered his head.

“What kind of punishment? What are they going to do to you? Mulder, for god’s sake, convince them this isn’t fair. I screwed up, I should be punished,” Skinner protested desperately.

“You will, Walter,” Mulder said softly, disengaging himself from the big man, and walking back to the center of the room. “They’ll make you watch. They will be almost as bad, believe me.”

Skinner glanced around to find a group of Qundi gliding towards him. He took a stride towards Mulder, only to find himself surrounded, and his path blocked. Tendrils descended on his arms, and he was held fast. He felt the familiar sensation of Qundi minds entering his own, and he gagged, bringing up bile. “Mulder!” He choked, but the other man was standing quite still, surrounded by Qundi. “MULDER!”

He struggled pointlessly against his captors, and then it began. The Qundi started to emit a burst of high-pitched sonic humming, and Skinner could feel the pressure building up in his eardrums. He would have fallen if it hadn’t been for the Qundi holding him up. Mulder seemed to have disappeared within the crowd of glowing Qundi, who had surrounded him, laying hands on his body. Skinner had no idea what they were going to do, but the next thing he knew, he was witnessing what he knew were memories, creeping into his mind in slow motion, and yet, at the same time, whirring past at top speed. Unable to process this essential paradox, Skinner slumped in his captors' grasp, and watched the punishment unfold, helpless to resist.

There was silence. Skinner’s mind was full of Mulder. He felt the Qundi pressing in, their disapproval so intense as to be tangible. It gave a new meaning to the term peer pressure, Skinner thought in some conscious recess of his brain. The room seemed to have gone dark, and the Qundi to have disappeared, although he knew that was an illusion, an image they were placing in his mind. Mulder was standing alone in the center of the room, awaiting judgment, and there was a decided chill in the air. Mulder was called to account for his recent error in judgment, as though in court, and he started to 'talk'. He faltered his way through his decision to allow Skinner to be alone with Regan, and then wilted, visibly, as mental censure assaulted him from the assembled Qundi. Then they started going back through Mulder’s memories.

"What the hell are you doing?" Skinner screamed, but they ignored him. They were ruthless, examining every aspect of Mulder’s memories, rifling through them with savage and chilling efficiency to find what they were looking for.

Skinner saw Mulder sitting in his apartment, holding a gun to his own head, and he tried to speak, but no words came out. The images were clear, and sharp, unlike the usual Qundi mish-mash of jumbled visions that Skinner was more familiar with. There were no words, and yet Skinner understood what was being said.

"She was dying. Cancer... She needed you. You would have left her to deal with that alone, taken your own life. Coward!" The pressure was building up inside his head, and Skinner wasn’t even sure if he was still breathing.

"It wasn't his fault," he tried to say, thrashing about helplessly in his captors' grasp. Mulder stood, frozen to the spot, as every single last mistake he had ever made was found, and dragged out for everyone to witness. From gigantic fuck ups to minor errors in judgment – they were all brought to Mulder's attention, placed under a spotlight, and replayed to him. Mulder was pale, and he looked suddenly shaky, standing alone in the center of the room. The Qundi were ruthless. Skinner wasn't sure how anyone could stand seeing a barrage of their mistakes examined so coldly, and clinically, in an atmosphere of such overwhelming criticism. He was shaking too, and he knew that he was crying. Mulder seemed to be shrinking. Initially he had stood up straight, and tried to rebut each accusation, but now he was wilting, and trembling. The Qundi were dissecting an argument he had had with his mother about going to Oxford. She was looking shocked and hurt by his words, and, watching the memory replay, Mulder sank to his knees, and hugged his arms around his body as if he could ward off the invading, questing, probes inside his mind. The process continued, relentless in its accuracy, until Skinner found himself watching a twelve year old boy standing by as his sister was taken. "*She was in your care. She was your responsibility. You failed her...*" the voices whispered.

"Leave him alone! That wasn't his fault!" Skinner yelled, but it was pointless. Mulder was curled up on the floor like a fetus, his arms around his knees, helpless against the onslaught. The Qundi minds were like a ruthless, prosecuting interrogator. They found every single weakness, probed and examined it, and held it up to Mulder as an example of his poor judgment. Their minds were coldly brutal, as they tore him apart, and he drowned under the force of their censure.

Then it was over. Daylight flooded back in, and Skinner blinked, disorientated. The Qundi swept out, en masse, and then there was silence.

"Mulder?" Skinner crawled over to where the other man lay in the centre of the room. "Mulder, are you okay? Christ, what did they do to you? You poor bastard. They're wrong, Mulder. Don't believe them." He picked Mulder up with nerveless, shaking hands, and held him close. Mulder lay, curled up tight in his arms, his whole body rigid. "This wasn't your fault, it was mine. Shit, I had no idea they'd do that. I didn't know. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He cradled Mulder in his arms, and rocked him back and forth, stroking the other man's hair, and willing him back to sanity.

"It's all right, Walter," Mulder croaked. "I'll be fine. That was just... not very nice," he said with ironic understatement, his lips twisted up in a faint shadow of a smile.

"You're cold. Let me get you to your room. Here." Skinner stood, shakily, pulled Mulder up, and slung Mulder's arm around his shoulder. Mulder clung on, shivering violently. Skinner walked him out of the Qundi compound and back to the White House, and along the corridor to his room. Mulder stopped him on the way.

"Not there. I don't sleep there. What you said...about not being democratically elected...it bothered me," Mulder admitted with a wry shrug.

"Where the hell have you been sleeping then?" Skinner demanded.

“Guest room,” Mulder muttered. Skinner frowned. “Lincoln bedroom,” Mulder qualified, and Skinner shook his head, almost smiling. He half carried, and half walked Mulder to the other bedroom, pushed the door open with his foot, dragged Mulder inside, and dumped him on the bed. Mulder lay there, still trembling.

“I thought you said they didn’t fucking hurt people,” Skinner snapped, pouring Mulder a glass of water from the pitcher on the nightstand, and pressing it to the other man’s lips.

“They don’t. They didn’t. They just told me exactly what they thought of me, and it was...depressing,” Mulder said, gulping the water down.

“They tore you apart, turned you inside out like a pack of wild dogs,” Skinner protested. “Why in god’s name are you protecting them, Mulder?”

“You were in an OPC hearing once,” Mulder said softly. “They tore your life apart, and turned you inside out. This was no different – the Qundi are just more efficient that’s all.”

“I can’t believe you’re defending them,” Skinner growled.

“It’s quick, it works, and it’s over now.” Mulder stretched, and tried, visibly, to stop shaking. His face was pale, and his eyes sunken. Skinner couldn’t stand it. He lay down on the bed beside Mulder, and took him in his arms, trying to warm him with his own body heat, pulling the blankets around them.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Me too. I asked too much of you. Wasn’t fair,” Mulder muttered into his chest.

“I didn’t know they’d do that to you. Christ, we all make mistakes, but to have a lifetime’s worth thrown in your face like that...”

“S’okay,” Mulder said sleepily. “Walter, it’s okay. Please, just hold me. I’ll be fine.” He could do that much at least. He slipped down beside Mulder, and gathered him up, held him close, and pressed his lips against the other man’s hair, and face. Mulder angled his head, and Skinner moved his mouth to brush Mulder’s lips. They were soft, and yielding beneath his own. Mulder’s lips opened up, and his tongue sought the sanctuary of Skinner’s warm mouth, and this time, Skinner couldn’t draw back. He returned the kiss, and Mulder seemed to draw strength from it. Skinner saw himself sitting in his old office, caught off guard by something Mulder had said. He was raising his head, and there was a smile hovering around his mouth, and a look in his eyes that was unmistakable.

“My favorite image of you,” Mulder whispered. “I want you, Walter.”

“You’ve got me, Mulder,” Skinner said despairingly. “You always did.” Their mouths met again, this time with more passion, and he felt Mulder opening his shirt, sliding his long fingers over the broad expanse of his chest, and gently rubbing a nipple. Skinner moaned softly, and gave in, unable to fight it any more. He lay back, and allowed Mulder to crawl astride him, and look down into his eyes.

“All of you?” Mulder asked.

“All of me,” Skinner replied, unable to look away from the other man’s intense gaze. Mulder smiled, raised Skinner’s hand to his lips, and kissed each fingertip, then took each one into his mouth, and sucked, sensuously. Skinner felt his cock harden inside his pants. It was such an erotic sight, and he was helpless beneath the weight of Mulder’s body. Mulder finished with his hands, and undid the buttons on his shirt, slowly, one by one, and Skinner lay there, mesmerized, as if he had been caught in a Qundi paralyzing beam.

“I’ve wanted to do this for such a long time,” Mulder murmured. “I spent three years in a Qundi compound on another world, dreaming of this moment, of undressing you, and making love to you. It was one of the few things that kept me sane.” He pushed Skinner’s shirt aside, and lowered his face to lick the other man’s naked chest. Skinner groaned, and moved his hands to caress Mulder’s back. Mulder grabbed his hands to stop him, and held them over Skinner’s head, rendering him helpless. “I need to touch. I need to feel, I want to just feast on you, it’s what I’ve dreamed about...will you let me?” Mulder asked, his hands roving over Skinner’s body. Skinner gazed up, helpless, completely in Mulder’s thrall. “Keep your hands there. Don’t move. I want to explore you.” Mulder dipped his head to gently suck a nipple, his hands moving all the time, undoing Skinner’s belt, and fly, rocking his groin into Skinner’s erection. Skinner wanted to move, wanted to touch, but Mulder seemed to be regaining his strength with every passing second, and he was everywhere, holding Skinner down, and devouring him with a contained, focused energy. Skinner stopped even trying to keep up, and just gave in, surrendering to the sensations that were all Mulder. Skinner was soon stripped of all his clothes, which Mulder flung on the floor. “Watch,” Mulder ordered, and Skinner did as he was told, lying on his back, as Mulder removed his own shirt, and quickly discarded his pants, and briefs. He straddled Skinner again, and the big man shivered with need as their naked flesh met. Mulder felt so warm, and energized, and vital. The other man’s body was smooth, and white, lean and hard. Skinner felt a thrill of arousal as their hard cocks met, and slid against each other. It felt so good – but more than that, it felt as if something in the world had clicked into place; something right, and good, and necessary. Mulder was like a starving man at a banquet. His mouth, and tongue were never still, his hands reaching for some new part of Skinner’s body, desperate to explore. Endless minutes past in this delicious exploration, and Mulder swarmed over Skinner’s body, seemingly everywhere at once.

“Roll over. I want to touch the rest of you,” Mulder said, moving so that Skinner could comply, and soon the big man was lying face down on the bed, once more at the mercy of those questing hands and lips. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve imagined this moment,” Mulder murmured in a throaty voice as he cupped Skinner’s buttocks, holding each round globe of flesh, and kneading it – slowly at first, and then more urgently. His fingers slipped between Skinner’s buttocks, and probed inside, dipping in and out, making Skinner thrust backwards, as he tried to impale his body on them. “Hush...quiet, quiet...” Mulder whispered, withdrawing, and soothing Skinner’s shaking, aroused body with gentle strokes along his flanks, as if he were a prized racehorse. “Hold still for this. I want to do this. Hold still.” Skinner did as he was told, feeling boneless, almost melting through the bed itself. He opened up, helplessly in thrall to the man who was claiming and consuming his body, and

then he felt something warm and delicious lapping at his anus. He gave a hoarse shout, and grabbed a pillow between his hands, holding on tight.

“Feels good?” Mulder paused, and looked up, stroking Skinner’s buttocks again. “It tastes good. I want to taste more.” His tongue explored Skinner’s anus again, thrusting deep into his body, sending shivers running down the big man’s spine. He couldn’t help himself, and began thrusting rhythmically into the bed. “Wait...hold it...” Mulder ordered in that same low, husky voice. “I want to come inside you, Walter. Will you hold it for me to do that?”

“Yes. Whatever...yes,” Skinner croaked, hoarse with need.

“Wait...” Mulder got off the bed, and Skinner almost cried out with the loss, and then the other man was back, straddling Skinner’s legs as before, keeping him pinned to the bed as he stroked his buttocks again. Skinner felt Mulder’s fingers slip into his anus once more, and this time they were cold, and slippery. He didn’t know what Mulder was using, but it felt so good. He abandoned himself to those fingers, opening up under them, and all the time Mulder was talking, and stroking, and playing with him in a way that made his cock spasm with need. “Hush, it’s okay, it’s now, almost ready...hold it...” He felt Mulder’s hands opening his buttocks, and then felt something hard press against the tight ring of muscle in his anus. He gave a moan, and Mulder pressed on, sliding easily into the tight channel. Skinner felt a warm, burning sensation, and then he was being stretched, and filled, and Mulder was fully sheathed inside him. The other man’s hands were still stroking him, and Mulder was almost lying on his back, kissing his body, his hard cock buried to the hilt inside Skinner’s body. “I’ve wanted to be inside you for so long. Here...” Skinner gasped as Mulder thrust inside his willing body, and found something deep inside that made his nerves scream with pleasure. At the same time, that familiar image of falling leaves filled his mind, only this time it was more vivid. The sun was setting, and it was autumn, and the leaves seemed imbued with a beautiful, wistful melancholy as they floated to the floor of a forest. He could taste sunflower seeds, and, if he closed his eyes, he could see Mulder’s face, smiling at him as they made love.

They were moving together, in time, joined, their bodies thrusting against each other, rising and falling towards a crescendo, and the sound was building in his head as the images danced and played in front of his eyes. Suddenly, Skinner understood the full import of what Mulder had meant by being inside him, as he felt the other man’s consciousness join his own, and he was held in a bright, warm light, that bathed him in its healing glow. He was Mulder, and Mulder was him. He felt the other man brush against his memories, sifting, experiencing, tasting what it was to be Walter Skinner, and he fought him, and then gave in, and allowed him to take only those he was prepared to share. There was a moment, that seemed to last for an eternity, when they were one being, and then it was over. He was only dimly aware that he had come, and that Mulder was coming inside him, and then the moment passed, and he lost consciousness.

Skinner awoke several hours later feeling more rested than he could ever remember being in his life before. He felt content, sated, and at peace. He opened his eyes and gazed at the man beside him. Mulder was asleep, his previously pale face now flushed in the aftermath of sex. He looked better than he’d done at any point since returning to earth. Skinner lay

there, watching his new lover for a long time, trying to come to terms with the events of the day. He sank back to reality with a dull thud of realization.

Oh, Christ, what have we done?

Skinner eased himself away from the sleeping man, and wrapped a sheet around his waist. It was dark outside, but the drapes were still open, and the moon was shining into the room. He walked silently across to the window, and sat down beside it, gazing out. What the hell was he playing at? Sleeping with Mulder had just made everything more complicated. Where did his loyalties lie now? With the man he had just given himself to, completely, and irrevocably? Or with the woman he had loved for just as long, and the child they had raised together? Did he belong here, working with the Qundi towards a future he wasn't even sure he believed in; or did he belong back with the rebels, and a life that had almost killed him, a life he didn't want for his son? Skinner didn't know where the truth was any more. He looked up in surprise as a hand landed on his shoulder, caressing him, breaking through his reverie, and a familiar image of falling leaves flashed into his mind. He could taste sunflower seeds on his tongue.

"Why so sad?" Mulder asked, sitting behind him, and wrapping his long legs around Skinner's waist, drawing him close.

"I don't believe, Mulder," Skinner whispered miserably. "I don't believe in this bright future you see, and I don't believe in those bastards who as good as raped you down there today. I know you believe in them, and in what you're doing, but I can't give you that. I want to, but I can't."

"I have enough belief for us both. I'll show you, Walter. All you have to do is trust me."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Skinner murmured.

"You don't have anything to lose," Mulder said softly.

"What about my freedom? The liberty enshrined in the ethos of this place where we did what we just did?" Skinner asked. "I can't just give that up, Mulder, not even because you're the one asking me to. Isn't that what you're asking? That humanity gives up its freedom in exchange for the benign hand of Qundi dictatorship?"

"You know, I once made a speech to the Oxford debating society on the nature of liberty," Mulder murmured. "One quote I found still sticks in my mind. It's Isaiah Berlin, and he said: 'Liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience.' Liberty won't give you all those things - but the Qundi will. Freedom isn't a cause worth dying for, Walter; not this time."

"Maybe not, but it might be a cause worth living for," Skinner replied.

Mulder's long fingers caressed his face, and he leaned forward, and rested his head against Skinner's cheek. "When the Qundi took me you cried," he whispered. "I saw it in your mind. I didn't know that, Walter."

“You knew I loved you.” Skinner shrugged. “You knew that, before I knew, Mulder. And yeah, I cried. I’m not as macho as I pretend to be but you knew that too, didn’t you?”

Mulder’s only reply was to brush his lips against the side of Skinner’s face.

They sat there for a long time, watching the dark world outside, and then, finally, Skinner got up, and slowly got dressed.

“You could stay,” Mulder suggested.

“No, I need...some space,” Skinner replied. Mulder’s eyes flashed with an old, familiar pain. Skinner shook his head, and tousled the other man’s hair. “I’ll be back, old friend.”

He walked slowly to his apartment, lost in the turmoil inside his own mind. His body still ached in an entirely pleasurable way from that slow, tormenting, intimate lovemaking. He replayed the sensation of Mulder inside his mind and inside his body at one and the same time, hating himself for his weakness, and need, and his betrayal of the woman he loved. He trudged wearily up the stairs to his apartment, and pushed the door open...only to be sent flying as the back of someone’s hand slammed into his jaw. His head snapped back, and he staggered and fell over a chair, landing on his ass.

“You stupid, crazy, idiot,” his attacker scolded, in tone full of affection, holding out a hand to help him up.

Skinner accepted, a grin spreading across his features, as he massaged his tender jaw.

“Hello, Dana,” he said.

End of Part 2

Chapter End Notes:

I know this story is a bit different, so I'd be interested to know what you think!

third and final part probably never coming. Sorry! I ran out of inspiration on this one :-)

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