

## Little Earth by Xanthe

<http://www.xanthe.org/little-earth/>

Story Notes:

Posted: 17th October 1999

**Warning:** This is a very sad story. There is quasi-rape, some disturbing images, and all sorts of death and despair so you might not want to read it if you're feeling down right now.

Thanks to Lisby for the great pic. Lisby has made a wonderful cover page for **Little Earth** on her **In Our Humble Opinion** site.

### AWARDS

Wirerims award winner for best Skinner/Other X Files character romance.



I was delighted when this story was nominated for several **Spooky 2000** awards in the Outstanding Other Series Character Romance, Outstanding Skinner Characterisation, and Outstanding Post Apocalypse/Colonisation categories. It won third place in the Outstanding Other Character Romance category.

### Little Earth by Xanthe

I was convinced that I would hate my father's new wife before I even set eyes on her. My father was returning to us, after years away, and then, on the eve of his arrival, I received the news that I would have to share him with this unknown woman. I guess you could say I was angry.

I'd heard that she was beautiful too - another black mark against her in my book. I've always been too tall, my hands are too big, my nose a little too long, and I'm clumsy. The other colony brats constantly teased me for that as a child. I was never very popular amongst my peers: too clumsy, too strange, too interested in the indigenous life forms of this world, and not interested enough in the interlopers - us. I'll admit that I find people hard to get on with, which was maybe why I created a fantasy father who would make everything all right. I spoke to him rarely over the years - it was hard to hook up with Big Earth, but occasionally

he was able to send me little transmissions. I lived for them - I had them all on tape and knew them all by heart. Just as I knew every line on his much loved, careworn face.

He was always so kind and loving in those messages he sent to me, and I embellished what little I had to flesh out the details I couldn't know about him. There was one central fact that I clung to: my father loved me more than life itself. It was the only reason I could think of to explain why he sent me away. I don't remember how he looked in the flesh - I just have a vague recollection of his long, lean body, and the way he smiled and flicked my braids when he said goodbye, all those years ago. And now he was coming home - for good.

I almost burst with pride when I heard that he was to be the Governor. He would live in the official mansion, and rule over Little Earth, such as it is, which, to be honest, isn't much. I'll admit to a surge of evil delight when I found out though - I'm only human after all. I'm 37 now - far too old to still require fantasy figures to lean on, but all the same, having him come back as the conquering hero lent me immediate kudos amongst my fellow colonists and I couldn't help feeling pleased about that. In a colony of our size, being unpopular is very isolating, and I suppose I was a lonely little girl, sitting on the fence watching the marsh crests fly across the djebbe, and wishing I could fly with them.

Now, I was sitting watching the ship land, and waiting for the culmination of all my foolish little childhood fantasies about my beloved father. If only he hadn't brought the damn wife!

My heart did a little somersault when I saw him. He was as tall as I remembered, and I felt a surge of pride to see how handsome he was, even though time, and a hard life, had marked his face with deep lines. He still had that long, loping walk that I remembered, and the same wide smile. When he saw me, his face lit up, and he enveloped me in a hug that took my breath away. The governor of the whole colony was my father, and he loved me! I wanted the entire world to know it. Then I saw **her**.

She was a tiny, frail little thing and I immediately felt big and clumsy beside her. My vague dislike solidified immediately into hatred. She was exquisite: long, shining, red hair, and the bluest eyes I've ever seen. Her face was so pale that she reminded me of a china doll - and she looked as if she could be just as easily broken. I had the sudden, angry realization that she was about the same age as me.

"My daughter, Samantha." My father beamed with pride as he introduced us. "Sam - this is my wife, Dana."

"Please to meet you," I murmured, without sincerity. She looked at me intently for what seemed like hours, and I felt my hackles rising. What was she looking at? Was she wondering how someone as handsome as my father could have produced such a big, clumsy daughter?

"Samantha. I've heard so much about you," she said in the softest voice - so soft you had to strain to hear it. Then she did an unexpected thing; she put her arms around me, and held me tight as she hugged me. She might have been tiny and frail, but she really squeezed me

hard, as if I were her own long lost daughter, and not my father's. She hung on for longer than was necessary, and I sensed a strange need in her, that I couldn't begin to understand.

"You look so much like him," she whispered, and I felt myself glow. To be compared with my father was the greatest joy, although I think she was just being kind. He had such presence - he almost radiated his power and strength, and I was just the little tomboy who wished she'd grown up to look like this beautiful, elegant woman, and not the slouchy creature I am. I began to thank her, before I realized that she wasn't looking at my father, and I had the strangest sensation that she was talking about someone else.

We were whisked off to the Governor's Mansion in a grand sweep of official cars and pomp and ceremony of the kind this little colony had never seen before. There are 3,800 residents of Little Earth. There used to be far fewer, just us children and a few adults, but after the aliens returned to Big Earth the people who helped them regain their homeland were rewarded by being given this little world for our own. My father and his colleagues were foremost among those who helped our alien brethren return to their rightful home, so it was only right that he had been given the honor of ruling over us here.

Sitting in the car, next to him, I was overwhelmed by his presence. I'm shy, but somehow I found myself kissing his cheek, and he smiled, and stroked my hair.

"Dear Samantha," he whispered, his eyes filling with tears. He enveloped me in a hug, and as I returned it, I saw **her** glaring at me over his shoulder. There was something about her cold, blue eyes that made me shiver, and I wondered what on earth possessed my father to take a new wife. I know he was married before - not to my mother, who died of a stroke a few years ago, but to some other woman. Someone he didn't love as much as he loved my mother although circumstances prevented my parents from ever being together. I missed Mom, although I didn't remember her very well. I was only eight when I last saw her after all, so that was nearly 30 years ago. Still, the little girl inside me, always mourned for her loss. I think most daughters would feel the same.

"You can be at peace here, Daddy," I told him. My father was the last of us to come to Little Earth. He had stayed on Big Earth, to help quell all the rebels who resisted the alien repopulation of the planet, and he'd earned the peace of his old age. After working so long, and so tirelessly for the good of all of us, it's the least he deserved.

"I hope so, Sam," he said. To be honest, I prefer to be called Samantha, but the shortening was endearing. He, of all people, had the right to call me by the nickname. "Seeing my beautiful daughter, waiting here for me, has made this day perfect," he told me, and I really thought I could float out into the red sky on the haze of those words. I shot the wife a malicious stare, but she barely seemed to notice. Instead her eyes were unfocused, and she smiled, and nodded at me. "You'll take good care of Dana, won't you?" my father asked. "She'll need some help adjusting to her new position. I'm relying on you to be her friend, Sam."

I was torn: I wanted to do anything my beloved father told me to, but all the same, I didn't want to help the little red-haired witch.

"Of course," I murmured. Not that I'd be much use to her. Father didn't know it but I hadn't spent a night in a house for almost twenty years. The Compound where we live has always felt claustrophobic. I was only 13 when I found a way to sneak past the security grid, and explore the red and black reaches beyond. I think I'm just about the only person in the colony who's remotely interested in the life forms on this planet. There aren't many, it's true, but those creatures that do live here have a wild beauty that I love. It was hard giving up my solitary wanderings out on the marshes leading down to the djebbe, but the lure of my father was the only thing that brought me back. If being with him meant I had to give up sleeping under the stars, then I'd do that. To put it plainly, there had never been anybody living in the Compound who I cared about before, or, who cared about me. Now there was. For the first time since I was 8 years old, I felt like I belonged somewhere.

Father reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small packet. Then he selected a slim white stick, placed it in his mouth, and set fire to it. I had no idea what it was, but a musty plume of smoke rose into the air, and settled around the car, and I gazed at it, transfixed. I felt it seeping into my skin and hair, and it smelled just as I remembered he always smelled. It reminded me of home, of love, of being loved. I sighed, and settled back in the car, noticing, out of the corner of my eye, that **she** had stuck her toffee nose out of the window, and was taking great gulps of air.

The Governor's Mansion is squat, and made of yellow clyroform, as all the buildings in the Compound are. Still, it's the largest and most imposing of the buildings in the colony, and it has a lovely view of the deep stretches of the djebbe. The cars landed on the strip of parched red earth in the courtyard, and we all got out. Dana stumbled as she took her first step onto our raw land, and my father put out a hand to catch her.

"Careful, my little precious!" he smiled at her tenderly, and I felt an absurd wave of jealousy. "I wouldn't want any harm to come to you in your new home, especially not on our wedding night." He gently wiped a tendril of hair away from her forehead, and she smiled back at him, her painted red lips looking grotesque in the dusky sunlight of Little Earth.

"No, of course not," she murmured, her slim body pressed against his tall one, like a shameless little arraba on heat.

"We were wed the day we left Earth," Father told me, stroking her hair fondly. "As we've been in stasis for 3 months since then, this is our first real day as man and wife. Of course I'm really looking forward to our first night," he chuckled, and I flushed. **She** didn't seem remotely embarrassed though, she just made a warbling little noise in the back of her throat, as she draped herself all over him, and looked up at him with a smile that never reached those cold, blue eyes.

As I turned away I noticed that her fists were clenched. Maybe she didn't want to come here. I'd heard that Big Earth is very beautiful, and I remember the sheer over-abundance of color there: blue skies, green grass, and a garish yellow sun but I'd come to love the subtle shades and scenery of Little Earth more. Here, there are a thousand hues of red, and I've given each its own name. There's the neon red of the marsh lights as they flicker down by the djebbe, the orange red of the stars, filtered through haze of the night sky, the dark wine

red of arraba fur, and the blood red of the earth itself. I'd hate this interloper, this tiny, fragile Dana even more if she hated the world I love. It's ironic, for her hair was the same color as the marsh-reeds. She looked as if she belonged to this world more than I did. It was just one more thing to resent her for.

I showed them around the Governor's Mansion, and up to the huge bedroom that they'd share. He couldn't resist stroking her bottom as they stood there, looking around, and she nestled into his body as if she'd been born to stand there in the comfort of his arm.

"I'm just next door," I told them, and a strange expression passed over her face. I couldn't identify it but it looked almost like...relief?

I left them to wash and change after their journey, and joined them for dinner a couple of hours later. All the bigwigs of the colony were there - the gray faced old men who I've hated for so many years. Now that my father had returned, to such high office, they had to be nice to me, whereas before they'd barely even acknowledged my existence. Suddenly I was the center of the attention but, nice though that was, I wasn't blinded by it. Those colonists my own age, the ones who'd taunted me, and pulled my braids when we were children, were suddenly climbing all over each other to be my friend. Well, it's too late. Samantha Spender bears a grudge, and she has a very long memory.

The dinner was grand, hundreds of us crammed into the room, and me on the top table, sitting next to Dana. I noticed that she just picked at her food, pushing it around the plate, until my father covered her hand with his own, and squeezed. She looked up, her eyes startled, and full of pain, and he nodded at her plate. She bit down hard on her lip, then returned his nod, and thereafter she ate with more enthusiasm - even though she didn't manage to clear her plate. After we'd eaten, Father stood up and gave the most stirring speech.

"Dear friends, we're gathered here to celebrate the culmination of a decision made a long time ago, to help our alien Overlords regain their rightful home. It's been a long journey - literally." He glanced skyward, and chuckled. "I would never have imagined that I would one day be standing on alien soil, and calling it home." He paused, and for a moment, I think he was overcome. "We have reaped the rewards for our patience, and our toil. Instead of wiping out our race, our Overlords have granted us this place, where we can thrive and prosper, where the soil is fertile, and there is an abundance of food and water."

Abundance might be overstating it. There's enough to get by - so long as we don't proliferate too much. Maybe Father didn't know that.

"This is a brave new world," Father continued, "and I am honored to be its first proper Governor. Thank you to those of you that came ahead - our children and their guardians, for preparing this world for us. I'm sure that you've done very well but now, of course, a new era has begun. We will learn from you, as I'm sure you will learn from us."

A silence greeted those words. Those who had lived here for the past thirty years weren't entirely sure whether this was a good or a bad thing. I was! Roll on the changes!

"I, personally, will work night and day for this world. I will give my all to you, and we will work together to make Little Earth a happy, prosperous place to live," Father proclaimed, and nobody had any doubts about **that** statement. They all rose to their feet, clapping like crazy and I glowed with pride. To be part of this day made the past 30 years of loneliness worthwhile.

I'm ashamed to say that after that we all became the worse for drink, even **Madam**, who knocked it back like there was no tomorrow. Somewhere towards the end of the evening, Father had a bright idea, and stood up, holding out his hands for silence.

"Friends, I have brought you a gift," he announced, solemnly. "We should not forget how this fight was won - with the blood of our friends. There were those on the Old World, who refused to accept the wisdom and justice of our decisions. They endangered the entire human race with their folly and fanaticism. So that we don't forget, I have brought one here, to remind us of our struggle. He's a sad creature, completely insane, and he should serve as a lesson to us all." Father clicked his fingers and we all leaned forward eagerly, to see what the entertainment would be. I'll admit that I was as curious as anyone else. We had heard much about the rebels, and there had been moments, during our darkest hours, when we feared that they would win. Their tenacity and fanaticism was legendary. Some space was cleared, and a large box was brought into the center of the room. My father pressed a button, and the sides of the box fell away, to reveal the sorriest creature I've ever seen.

He was huddled in the center of the box, with two handlers on either side, both carrying electric prods to prevent him from harming anyone. Father was right - he was completely insane. His clothing hung from his thin frame, his hair was long and tangled, and he had a shaggy beard, but the thing I noticed immediately was his eyes. They were rotating in their sockets like humming buzzflies, and he was muttering to himself the whole time. When he saw my father, he let out a choking cry and launched himself forward - only to be stopped by some impulse inside his poor, crazed brain, for he suddenly pulled up short, and held onto his head, crying out.

"Behold, our greatest enemy, the leader of the resistance," my father announced. There was silence in the room as we all stared at this bedraggled specimen of humankind, a silence only broken by the sound of Dana's glass slipping from between her stupid, inebriated fingers. I turned my head towards her in annoyance, in time to see her slipping noiselessly to the floor. My father picked her up as if she weighed nothing, and slapped her face lightly, until she came around.

"Dana - it's okay. He won't harm you, my darling," he told her. She seemed very pale, but her blue eyes flickered, and she nodded, and allowed him to place her gently in her seat. "I have an idea, just to show you how harmless he is, let's watch him dance!" My father said with a laugh. His infectious laughter rippled around the room, and people stamped their feet, and clapped their hands as a tune was struck up.

My father nodded to the rebel's handlers, and they poked his feet with the prods. I could see the sparks of blue electricity as they tapped his feet, and each time he hopped, and kicked, and howled, as he lumbered around in an aimless circle, his crazy eyes whirling, and

his arms rotating. It was almost an amusing sight, but somehow it made me uncomfortable. I was reminded of Tony Strughold capturing an arraba cub when we were 11 years old. He threw stones at the little creature, and pursued her around the Compound until I came to her rescue and returned her to her mother. This poor man looked just like that cub, and awoke much the same instincts inside me. I was surprised to feel a hand slip into my own, and hold on tight. I looked down into Dana's eyes, and saw an agony there that froze my heart.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whispered to me. "You shouldn't see this. I'm sorry."

My father turned towards us, his eyes angry. "Samantha knows this man is our enemy, Dana," he told his wife firmly.

"He's her brother," Dana replied, with an anguished look at me.

"Half brother," my father said firmly, and Dana's face was suddenly wiped clean of any expression, her eyes dulled first by pain, and then a kind of soporific emptiness that disturbed me. My mind was too busy at that moment to understand what I had witnessed. All I could do was look at the raggedy dancing man, with his filthy unkempt clothes, and strange eyes, and try and see in him some trace of the boy I had once known.

"Fox...?" The name was unfamiliar on my tongue. It had been so many years since I last spoke it.

"That's right. Fox **Mulder**." My father emphasized the last name, to make it clear to me that I should find no kinship with this man. "Don't feel any pity for him, Sam - he defied us to the end."

"He's...he's crazy." I looked at my father. "How could he defy anything?"

"His crimes sent him insane." My father opened his small packet, took out another of the slim, white sticks, and lit it.

Dana nodded, looking up at her husband. "That's right, Samantha. His crimes sent him insane," she parroted, a wide, artificial smile on her lips but her eyes were filled with a kind of grief and despair that I don't think I've ever seen before.

"Trust me, directly or indirectly, he was responsible for the deaths of so many of us - including his own father," my father said.

I remembered Bill Mulder only vaguely - he's a more shadowy figure than my mother. He was a brooding presence in our household, a man of cold and uncertain temper, unlike my own dearly beloved father who has always been kind and loving.

"Including his own father," Dana repeated, nodding her head vigorously, while her hand squeezed all the life out of my own, her face paler than ice. I sat down, wordlessly, unable to release my hand from that desperate grasp if I had tried.

The mood in the hall turned ugly - people began to pelt my half brother with any objects they could lay their hands on. He stood, confused, not even bothering to protect his face, and a cup caught him a glancing blow on the forehead, splitting his skin, and making him bleed. He didn't seem to notice. His gaze was fixed on me. A silence fell over the room, as his buzzing eyes suddenly focused, filled with a strange wonder, and he ignored his handlers, and stepped forward, haltingly, towards me. My father held up his hands, and allowed him to approach, and when he reached the table, he held out one dirty finger, and touched my hair, his eyes filling with tears.

"Samantha." He said it as if he had been searching for me all his life, and in that moment I felt a connection with this man I barely remembered. I covered his hand with my own, and smiled at him.

"Fox."

Hearing his name seemed to send him back into insanity, for he did a little flip, and roared out something incomprehensible, then, without warning, he jumped over the table and made a beeline for my father's throat. He was so fast that I believe he might have succeeded, and I yelled out a warning, but as Fox descended on him, a bright light flashed around my father, and Fox seemed to bounce off him, dazed.

"Are you alright?" I was by my father's side in seconds.

"It's okay, Sam, I'm wearing a security net." My father smiled at me, kissing my forehead. "It's just a precaution. You can never tell what might happen." It didn't escape my notice that he glanced at Dana as he said this. I turned my attention back to my half brother. The security net had sent a severe electric shock through his nervous system, and he was semi-conscious. I knelt beside him, and smoothed his dark hair away from his poor cut head, and that was when I saw it: embedded into his skull was a small, metallic device, that winked on and off. I stared at it, curious, but didn't have time to investigate further as his two handlers came and dragged him away. He started to come around, his eyes going in and out of focus, still staring at me, and then at Dana, and my father. I had heard nothing good about him, this brother of mine, but even so, I couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

"Scully!" he shouted. "Skinner! Fuck, don't let them...fuck...oh, Scully..." and he started to cry. I don't know who he was calling to, but Dana made a little whimpering sound in the back of her throat, and my father stood up, and helped her to her feet.

"My poor darling. I'm sure this has been very distressing for you," he whispered, holding her tenderly in her arms. She swayed against him, smiling up at him.

"I'll be all right, my love," she whispered. "When you're holding me, I'm fine." The words dropped like honey from her beautiful, painted lips, but it could have been a robot speaking, for all the emotion in them. My father cupped a hand lewdly around one of her breasts, and fondled her proprietarily.

"Well, it's late, my friends, and I have a new young wife," he winked at the hall and everyone laughed. "So, I think it's time for bed, if not for sleep." He winked again, and the

hall dissolved once more into ribald laughter. I didn't join in. I was too busy watching Fox. He sat, in the center of his box, his arms over his head, gibbering like a monkey from Big Earth, as he stared at Dana and my father. My father smiled, and pulled Dana even closer, and I had the sudden realization that this little display wasn't for the benefit of anyone else in the hall but the poor, crazed man, sitting there in his cage like a little boy lost.

"Dana - are you looking forward to our wedding night?" My father asked.

Dana smiled a lascivious smile and licked her lips, placed her hands over my father's where they caressed her breasts, and leaned back into him, nuzzling at his neck.

"I can't wait, my love," she whispered.

"Who am I to deny my little wife?" my father laughed. He waved at the room, and took his leave.

Fox gave a screech of pure pain as they stepped away, my father leading my new stepmother by the hand. She paused to brush her lips against my cheek.

"Goodnight, dear Samantha," she said, taking hold of my hand, and placing it against her cheek. As she did so, she slid it along to her hairline, and pressed my fingers against her skull. I started in surprise as my fingers made contact with metal, and I saw the same box embedded in her flesh as I had seen on my brother.

"Goodnight, Dana," I whispered, wondering what she was trying to show me, and what sense I should make of it.

It felt strange to go to bed inside after so many years of roaming the veldt. I took off my stiff, formal dress, and looked at myself standing naked in the full-length mirror. I'm not beautiful, and I don't like formal clothing. My hair is coarse and thick, and my eyes are muddy - not clear like Dana's. I touched my breasts; they're small, I don't have a curvy figure like her. I'm rangy, lean - in fact, having seen him, my resemblance to my half brother was clear to me. They're looks that work better on a man than on a woman. Disheveled as he was, there were traces of the good-looking man he had once been. I've never been confident about my looks. None of the Compound boys ever chased me, although that's hardly surprising, considering how much I disdained them. I knew about sex; I'd watched the little marsh crests in their endless couplings, and even witnessed the more discreet amours of the arrabas, but I'd never felt kindly enough towards my own people to want to have one touch me in **that** way. Also, my choice of available mates was severely limited by circumstances. So, I was a 37 year old virgin - maybe that explains my curiosity upon hearing what sounded like the cries of a wounded bird emerging from my father's bedroom.

I pulled on my robe and slipped silently down the corridor, then paused to listen outside the door for a while, hearing my father grunt, and Dana making those little squeaking noises. Finally, and I recount this without any great sense of pride, I pushed open the door, and peered inside. Dana was lying under my father, her head thrown back, as he nipped at her throat, kissing her roughly. She looked as if she's been pinned in place, her legs splayed out, white against the dark satin sheets. It should have shamed me, seeing my father in this way,

in his naked coupling with this woman, but I'm too much the voyeur to feel the guilt I probably should. I've spent my whole life watching, observing, always on the outside, and this was no different.

Dana was as beautiful naked as she was clothed. I could see one breast quite clearly - milky white, topped by a perfect rosy nipple, and the silhouette of my father's head as he suckled at its twin. She was making these little sounds, in the back of her throat, like a trilling, or a cooing. His whole body bucked against her, bucked **into** her, back and forth, and her slim, shapely legs moved in a strangely dislocated way, like a swamp-beetle lying on its back, trying to right itself. His passion built to some kind of climax, his movements becoming even more frenzied, and she moaned, her exposed throat shiny with sweat, her red hair vibrant against the pallor of her skin. Her hands plucked uselessly at his back, neither embracing, nor pushing away, just patting out an ineffectual rhythm on his shoulders. He gave one final thrust, and the event reached its conclusion, then he flopped down heavily on top of her, trapping her beneath him.

It was in that moment of climax, that she saw me. I stiffened, but she made no sound, as he grunted and groaned on top of her, accepting his seed into her body, her blue eyes fixed intently on my own. Her head was thrown back, her limbs akimbo, and if it were not for the rise and fall of that one perfect, milky breast, I would have thought her dead because her eyes were those of a corpse. It's hard to describe the sensation of looking into such lifeless eyes, but a chill passed through me, and I took a step back, and then another. I heard my father stir, and he gathered her up in his arms, and nuzzled at her red hair.

"Ah, my Dana, you have no idea how long I've wanted to do that," he told her, as I disappeared back into the shadows. "From the moment I first saw you, I wanted you, my love," he crooned. "I always knew that you would be my prize, my reward, the price of my success. When they took you once before, they allowed me to visit you, as you lay naked on their examining table. I touched you then, stroked these lovely breasts." He stroked them again, "tangled my fingers here," he touched her pubic hair. "I even pushed them a little way inside you," he moved his hand, and I heard her gasp, "but I couldn't do what I wanted. I couldn't make us one the way I wanted to. Now, at last, you are mine." He smiled down on her, and kissed her hair again, and she lay back in his arms, her lovely, white flesh so firm and supple against his old, leathery skin.

"At last, I am yours, my love," she whispered, and the chill that first went through me a few moments previously, settled deep within my bones. For some womanly instinct told me, without a shadow of a doubt, that if she could, she would kill him where he lay. "Make love to me again, my darling," she crooned, her hand reaching out jerkily to fondle him. "I want to feel you inside me again."

He laughed, and kissed her throat. "I'm not as young as I was, Dana," he scolded. "Do you want to wear me out?"

"I just can't get enough of you, dearest," she murmured, her words as warm as the summer sun burning down on the veldt, her voice as cold as ice.

He folded her in his arms once more, and began to kiss her, and before long I heard those whimpering little cries again. I was reminded of the bird with the broken wing that I had nursed back to health two years previously. This woman, this Dana, who had stolen my father's heart without giving of her own, seemed like that bird to me. Her pale skin, and milky breast, were like the pure white feathers of that broken wing, her tender flesh broken by my father's weight, power, and strength.

I didn't think, having looked into her dead eyes, that she would ever fly again.

I couldn't sleep in that house. The walls were too close, and the air stifled me. There was a sickness, a kind of poison that affected everyone and everything. I grabbed my blanket, ran up the stairs to the roof, and lay out under the stars, thinking longingly of my old haunts down on the veldt by the djebbe, amid the marsh crests and arraba. I was wrong to think I could ever fit in again. It was too late for me, just as it was too late for her.

As the days passed, I began to wonder if we were all ghosts. Dana walked through the Mansion like the living dead, growing paler with each passing day. She ate as little as my father would allow, and was listless, lacking energy. I understood that feeling all too well; I felt the same. It was as if the life had been sucked from all of us, leaving us merely husks of our former selves. Only Father was unaffected by the mood and atmosphere. He set about his new job with some gusto, issuing decrees, instituting new laws and practices, which, if I'm honest, weren't very popular with us old-timers. I longed to leave the Compound, and return to my old life, but something kept me there. The radiant reflected glory of his power, maybe; the sheer joy of having my father home. Or maybe it was the tiny glow of flickering candlelight that was Dana, far eclipsed by my father's shining rays, and yet, somehow more enticing. Like a moth to her flame, I stayed.

I cannot tell you the moment when my dislike for her turned into affection. Maybe it happened on that first night, when I saw her lying under my father's body, or maybe it happened more gradually in the days that followed, as I drowned in the sadness of her dead blue eyes. I just know that it happened. I don't think, to be honest, that I'm very good at hatred. I can bear a grudge longer than anyone I know, but true hatred is a skill I've never learned.

Fox was being kept in a secure room in the basement. Dana laughed when I told her this - the first time I'd ever heard any genuine amusement in her voice.

"He'll be at home there," she said, and then a mood of melancholy descended upon her which I couldn't break - and I so wanted to. I didn't understand the spell this stranger had cast on me, but, as if she were a newborn child, I lived to please her. I longed to see her smile, and my whole life became geared to that one goal. Maybe I saw in her a reflection of myself - oh not her beauty - but her isolation, and the tragedy that enveloped her like a shroud.

A few weeks after her arrival, I packed us a lunch, and took her down to the djebbe. She stared into the dark waters, and frowned.

"I don't understand it. Explain it to me," she said. "We didn't have the djebbe on Earth."

"Well, I'm not sure why it's like this," I faltered, feeling stupid beside this sharply intelligent woman. My own schooling was a patchy affair at best. "There are long channels of dark water, linked by ridges of marshland. I don't know how it formed."

"It's like a row of canals," she frowned again, the lines wrinkling her pale forehead. She dipped her hand into the water, which is dark red, and brackish. "Can you drink it?" She asked, sniffing cautiously.

"Yes but it tastes nasty!" I laughed, and managed to coax the smallest smile from her lips. "This is nicer." I handed her a water bottle taken from our packed lunch and she drained it, the hot sun having made her thirsty. We sat there for a long time, in a hazy silence. She was so tiny she only came up to my shoulder, and she leaned against me, her head resting on my arm. I liked that. It made me feel as though I had a friend, and I'd never had one before.

"You know, back on Earth - I mean, Big Earth," she smiled, in deference to our way of talking, "if you were lost, at sea, stranded on a desert island, you would write a message, and place it in a bottle."

"Why?" I asked, not understanding.

"Well, in the hope of reaching the civilized world. In the hope of being rescued." Her slim shoulders were tense, and I understood what she meant all too well.

"Why don't we do that?" I suggested, finding a pen in my pocket. I handed her one of the napkins, and the pen, and she sat there, thinking.

"There are some things...I cannot say," she whispered, her blue eyes willing me to understand.

I sat there, drowning in them, then brushed my fingers against the metal in her head. "I know," I replied.

"There are some things, I cannot even..." she paused, tensed, as if waiting for a blow, then continued, cautiously, "write." Nothing happened, and she relaxed, visibly. "We once went on a case where a man's innocence or guilt hinged on something called automatic writing. Do you know what that is?"

I shook my head wordlessly.

"It's when you just write - without thinking. You don't consciously say anything. You close your eyes, and let your mind write without you interfering in the process."

"You could try that," I told her encouragingly.

"Yes." She nodded, enthusiastic. "Mulder used to say..." I jumped to my feet as she let out a piercing scream, clutching her head.

"Dana. Dana!" I shook her slender shoulders and she bit down on her lip, her eyes full of pain.

"I'm fine, Samantha. It's okay, hush, hush." Her eyes were hazy and unfocused, and she was rocking back and forth: I sensed that her words were more to comfort herself than me. I sat back down, and put my arm around her.

"Mulder, my brother. You're not allowed to talk about him," I whispered.

She looked up, the pain returning. "No, you don't understand," she said. "It's worse than that. I'm not even allowed to **think** about him,"

I gazed at her in wordless horror as another spasm of pain distorted her pretty features.

"Look how lovely the marsh crests are." I pointed.

She caught on to my feeble efforts to distract her. "Yes, lovely. The black against the...white," she managed to rasp out, between panting sobs.

"I'll show you a nest later. They build them facing North. I once found 3 chicks and raised them myself..." I warbled on and on, trying to engross her in the life cycle of the marsh crest, and that was clearly a subject she was allowed to be interested in, because the pain subsided. Finally, she picked up the pen again, and smoothed out her napkin.

"I want to do this," she told me.

"We'll both do it," I replied. "Two words - just two. Close your eyes." And she did, and held her breath, and sat there for a moment, before writing her message. I didn't peek - I was too busy trying to write my own. It's hard to make your mind go blank, and not to **consciously** write something, but at some point I felt my hand move, and the message was written. We put them in the bottle, and screwed the lid on.

"Now what?" I asked her.

"Now we just throw them into the djebbe, and wait to see what washes up on the shore!" she exclaimed.

I don't think either of us had any idea what would wash up on our shore a few weeks later, or how it would change our lives forever.

Life settled into an uneasy pattern as my friendship with Dana deepened. I don't know what there was between her and my half brother in their old life, because she couldn't say, but I knew there was **something**. Partly for this reason, and partly for myself, I decided to visit Fox in his room. He was chained to the bed, looking dreamily at the ceiling, his limbs almost wasted away from lack of exercise.

"Fox." He turned at the sound of my voice, and looked at me. He stank of urine, and I realized his handlers didn't take very good care of him. "Shame on you," I hissed at them. "We treat our livestock better than this!"

They shrugged. "He's the enemy," one of them said, unconcerned.

"He's **human**," I responded, reminded, once again, of why I dislike my own kind so much. I sat Fox up and talked to him as if he were a small child. "Come on, Fox. I'm going to wash and shave you," I told him.

He smiled, and gently touched the side of my face. "Samantha?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Mom wanted to say goodbye," he told me unexpectedly. I saw a moment's lucidity in his eyes and then it faded, and he began to scream. "Where did you go? Did you see Scully? Where is he? Where is he? Skinner said he'd do it. Damn you, Walter! Hurry!"

"It's okay," I soothed, undressing him. He was in poor shape. Pale, thin, covered in a myriad of tiny burns - presumably from the electric prodders, although some were larger, about the same size as the butts of those 'cigarettes' my father smokes. That thought made me profoundly uncomfortable, so I squashed it back down. I filled a bowl with water, and washed my brother, then I shaved him, and cut his long, straggly hair. Finally, I went and found him some decent clothes, and dressed him again. "There." I stood back, taken by surprise. My brother was handsome. Even insane, he was still handsome, and his eyes had a curious innocence to them that reminded me of a small child. He stood up shakily - his chain was long enough to allow him to walk around - and looked at me, then gave a little bow.

"My lady." He smiled. "Will you dance with me?" He held out his hand, and I was reminded of that dance he had been forced to give on his first evening here. This was different though. He could barely stand, but he drew me into the circle of his arms, and held me as we swayed in time to some imaginary music in his head. He was infinitely gentle, a world away from that crazed creature my father made perform for our entertainment. Giving him back his dignity had restored something of his personality, and he held me tenderly, and his lips brushed against my hair.

"Scully, you smell good," he said, and I wondered who this Scully was who meant so much to him. "Scully, don't leave me." His arms tightened around my waist.

"It's okay, Fox. I'm not going anywhere." I looked into his eyes, and remembered the brother I lost all those long years ago. I remembered how we would squabble and he would tease me, and yank on my braids. I remembered that I loved him. "I'm not going to let them hurt you again," I told him.

"Oh, Scully," he said sadly, his hazel eyes dark, and full of shadows, "you can't stop them."

A few seconds later, his moment of sanity had passed, and he crouched on the floor, screaming and beating his hands up and down.

I went straight to my father, and demanded that Fox be allowed to exercise, and given some decent food, to be washed daily, and generally taken care of.

"Do it, if you want." He waved a hand negligently at me, and then kissed my forehead. I couldn't help myself; I wanted his love too much after the many years it was denied me, to refuse it now. I let him hug me. "He's no danger to us," Father said. "In fact, let him dine with us in the evenings. It'll amuse Dana."

It most certainly didn't amuse Dana. I regretted my request the moment I saw the pain it caused her to see Fox so broken and damaged. It was easier for me. I'd never known the man, only the boy. She knew how far he'd fallen and the sight tore her in two. She was grateful that I'd been taking care of him, but it broke her heart all the same. Dinner became a trial for both of us, as father taunted Fox, and he responded by yelling, and tipping his food over his head. Father took great delight in fondling Dana, never taking his hands off her. I think that upset my brother more than anything else, and turned him into a gibbering wreck.

"Sully Scully, sully Scully..." he chanted, over and over again, until Dana put her hands over her ears, and ran from the room. My father leaned back with a triumphant look in his eyes, and lit another cigarette, inhaling deeply. Later that night, their lovemaking seemed particularly violent and frenzied.

I didn't know what any of it meant, or who Scully was, but I did know that if I stayed in the Mansion for much longer I would sicken, and wilt, and eventually die. I knew it as clearly as I'd ever known anything. I was torn between my need to be with my father, who was as kind to me as he was cruel to Fox, and my need to escape. I also wanted to take care of my brother and Dana. Eventually I took to slipping out of the Compound, and down to the veldt as often as I could, often sleeping out there, and that was how I found him.

It was the night after the Last Delivery. I remember it because there was a problem that my father kept quiet from the other colonists, but which, in my eavesdropping way, I was able to overhear. Our alien overlords had told us we had to be self-sufficient, and we had known for months that this would be our last delivery; the last time they would send us food and supplies. That was fair enough. They couldn't be expected to take care of us forever. They had stuck to their side of the bargain, and found us a new home, and we were certainly able to survive on Little Earth. Even so, I knew that we would miss the monthly deliveries. We had no spaceships of our own of course, and when the last one left we would be well and truly on our own.

Father built Last Delivery up into some kind of celebration of our independence. He even toyed with calling it Independence Day, but one of his advisers reminded him that this phrase held unfortunate associations for many of the residents of Little Earth so he abandoned the idea. Even so, there was some pomp and ceremony on the day the ship landed. I was the only one who knew that the alien commander took my father to one side before he left, to tell him that there had been an 'incident' during the flight. I knew no more than that, and waved and cheered the ship with everyone else as it left us that final time. Deep inside I felt a knot of foreboding though, and I wasn't alone. Those who had come to

Little Earth only after the invasion were sad, and I could see the regret in their eyes. For the first time I came to question who we were and why we were here; and, most importantly, the role my father had played in that. I was used to Little Earth, and I didn't want to go back, but the newcomers did. I could see their pain like something tangible, and it cast a pall over the celebrations of our fledgling colony. "Give it a chance," I urged, hoping they would come to love it here like I had, but I had been 8 years old when I arrived. It's easier for children.

The sense of dejection, of being alone, outcasts, exiles, never able to return home, hung over the Compound like a cloud that evening, and I couldn't sleep in the house, listening to Dana whimper as my father made love to her in an almost angry frenzy. So I fled, not just up to the roof this time, but out of the Compound altogether, and back to my old haunt on the veldt, by the djebbe.

I was wading through the marsh, to get to my favorite resting place, when I saw the capsule. It was half sunk in the wet earth, and a marsh crest was sniffing at it curiously. It was only when I drew close to it, that I saw there was someone inside.

He was unconscious, and the capsule was rapidly slipping into the swamp. I took hold of his shoulders, and pulled, but he was far too big to lift, so I slapped his face to try and wake him. He moved, and groaned, then opened his eyes.

"You have to wake up," I told him urgently. He looked at me for a moment, clearly confused, then nodded, and struggled to get free of the battered life pod. I recognized it as belonging to the alien ship, although I had never seen one in use before. The man was injured; there was a jagged tear across his chest, and a burn down the side of his face. I could tell by the way he moved that his ribs were bruised or broken, and his arm hung uselessly by his side. I half dragged, half carried him out of the sinking capsule, towards my little shelter on dry land. Little Earth is warm, and the nights are sultry, so my shelter didn't contain more than a couple of thin blankets, and some supplies of food and drink. Sometimes I lived out here for weeks on end. The man sat down with a groan, and leaned back on the reed mat I'd woven. I opened a bottle of water and held it to his lips, watching as he swallowed it all in one long gulp, before slipping back into unconsciousness.

I didn't know who he was, but I spent all that long night looking at his face, his hands, his clothing. None of it was familiar. He was a big man, and almost bald, with large, scarred hands. In fact, when I undressed him to examine his wounds, I soon found that he was scarred almost everywhere. Faded, old, white scars, and fresh, new, red ones. Small burns, like the ones from the prod that I found daily on my brother, and ugly, jagged, knotted scars, as if from a knife. Now there was also the bruising caused by the crash. All in all, I was surprised he was still alive. I dressed his wounds as best I could, tearing up my old blanket. He awoke when the marsh crest heralded dawn, his dark eyes blinking, and closing, blinking and closing, before finally focusing on me.

"Mulder? Is that you?" He peered at me through the dawn's red gloom. "Fox?"

"No." I moved forward, so that he could get a better look at me. "I look like him though. I'm his sister, Samantha."

I think I could have told him I was the Moon Goddess Diana judging by the look on his face! Astonished is too mild a word for it.

"Samantha? Here?" He sat up, wincing as his hurt ribs pained him.

"Yes." I was surprised myself. He seemed to know me, but I had no idea who he was.

"I came to believe you an illusion, an apparition, a..."

"Ghost." I touched his hand as he traced it along the side of my face. We're all ghosts here. The ghosts of what we were, and what we should have become. "Do you have a name?" I prompted.

"Walter Skinner." He held out his hand and I took it, noticing how hard, rough, and callused his skin was. "I know your brother, Samantha. I know him very well. Is he here?"

Walter Skinner. Walter Skinner. I don't know why it mattered to me, but the moment he said his name, I knew my life would never be the same again. In that moment, I knew that I would tell him everything he wanted to know, and when he spoke about my brother, I knew that he was my brother's friend and would never harm him. I've always been a creature of instinct, more than thought, and instinct told me that Walter Skinner was one of the good guys - whatever side he was on.

"Yes, he's here," I replied softly. "He calls for you all the time - and for Scully, but I don't know who he is."

"Scully? Is she here too?" Walter asked, hardly breathing.

"No. At least..." It all slotted into place, and I rocked back on my heels, sickened. "Scully is Dana?" I asked. He nodded. "Then yes, she's here. She's my father's wife."

"Your father...?" He reached for something in his shirt, and I edged back, and drew what he was looking for from under the blanket where I had hidden it. It was a long knife with a curved blade.

"Did you come here to kill him?" I asked, wondering what I would do if the answer was 'yes'.

Walter laughed - a curious, mirthless sound. "I can't kill that bastard," he spat, "although god knows I've tried often enough. He's surrounded by an impenetrable security net. I got this one from my last attempt on him." He pointed at a long scar that twisted down his forearm.

"What did you come here for, then?" I asked him.

Walter Skinner never did answer that question, not in words, anyway. In fact, I think that Walter Skinner was more used to doing the asking, than the answering. He was clearly a man of action, his hard, muscular body raring to be out doing something, anything, rather than sitting here talking to me.

"Walter, you're injured. You won't be going anywhere quickly," I told him.

He nodded, and glanced at his wounds, clearly assessing the truth of this statement. "I've had far worse," he said with a grimace.

"Clearly," I remarked, somewhat acerbically, and that made him laugh. When he laughed, I laughed. It was such a dark, rippling sound, the sound of a man who has nothing to lose, or to love, and nothing to find funny but the vagaries of fate.

"It's nearly daylight. I have to go back to the compound," I told him. "When I return, I'll bring you food, and medicine."

His hand reached out, to stop me, clamping over my wrist, too hard, hurting me.

"And will you also bring your father's soldiers?" he asked.

I suppose it was in that moment that I chose sides, although I didn't know it at the time.

"No," I told him. "Do you believe me?"

"I've found out the hard way, that sometimes you have to believe in the kindness of strangers," he replied, lying back, wearily. "And I have to hope that you're more like your brother than your father."

I was late returning to the Compound, so I missed breakfast. I saw to Fox, bathing him, and feeding him, and he was having a rare good day. So good, I almost didn't want to spoil it, but I was curious.

"Who is this Skinner you sometimes talk about?" I asked him, casting a glance at his handlers, although they pretty much ignored me.

"Skinner skins skin," he told me with a wink.

"But who is he?" I pressed.

Fox put his head on one side, and gazed at me curiously. "My friend," he replied, with rare lucidity, then he put his fingers over his eyes, and squawked at me. I didn't mind though - he'd told me all I needed to know.

I was on my way to see Dana, when I heard the commotion. One of the servants ran towards me, shouting.

"Quickly, come quickly!" she yelled, grabbing hold of my arm. I ran up the stairs two at a time, and burst into Dana's bedroom - then stopped. Dana was sitting on the bed, with a small pair of scissors in her hand, methodically slicing lines across her arm. Ruby red blood welled up in each cut, and dripped onto the bedclothes.

"Dana, sweetheart..." I stepped into the room, and she looked up at me, with dazed eyes.

"My bonnie lies over the ocean..." she chanted at me in a sing-song voice. "My bonnie lies over the sea," her eyes were dreamy, as if she didn't see me. "My bonnie lies over the ocean, bring back my bonnie to me." With each word, she cut a line into her flesh, and the blood was pouring from more than fifty cuts in her pale skin. She seemed immune to the pain, but with each savage jab of her hand, she tried to inflict more damage than she was really capable of. It was as if she was fighting something that told her she couldn't hurt herself, when all she wanted to do was slit her wrists, and watch the blood drain from her body.

"Dana..." With a few swift strides, I was at her side, and I whisked the scissors out of her hand, then drew her into me, holding her close, and rocking her back and forth.

"My bonnie..." she told me, in halting tones.

"Yes, I know." I kissed her head softly, and she wept into my shirt.

My father arrived a few minutes later, and surveyed the scene in horror.

"Dana." He plucked her out of my arms. "You mustn't do these things to yourself," he scolded. "I love you, and you love me. We're happy together, aren't we, my love?" I couldn't believe he really meant that, but Dana looked at him, and smiled, and nodded, and nuzzled up against him.

"Safe now," she said. "Daddy's home."

I left them, still puzzling this curious turn of events. That my father's new wife was a deeply unhappy woman, I did not doubt, but I had never seen her like this before - disturbed. She seemed almost like Fox. I took advantage of the commotion in the house to filch some supplies for Walter. Just the thought of his name made me flush with some secret, unnamable hope, and my stomach clenched in anticipation. Walter. My stranger from the sea, or the djebbe, which is the closest thing we have to an ocean on Little Earth.

He was sleeping when I returned to my shelter by the djebbe. I put down my sack of food, clothing, and medicine, and squatted beside him for a moment, just feasting my eyes on him. How can I describe him? He wasn't handsome in the accepted sense of the word - not like Fox. He was perhaps 10 or 12 years older than me, and his face was lined with pain, and worry, and the many scars of battle. Nothing though, could erase the curious beauty that his features held for me. I loved his wide head, and the sensuous mouth, the broad jaw with its small cleft. There was about him something uncompromising, solid, real, and reassuring. Having lived for so many weeks in a place where the truth slipped like water through my fingers, and where there seemed to be no solid ground to rest on, Walter, to me, represented all that I had not found in my father's house. Or, indeed, if I listened to that small voice in my heart, what I had not found in my father.

Maybe the age gap between us was important. It's easy, looking back, to see that the lonely little girl I had been was still there, just under the surface. I had waited all my life for my father and when he came, he did not, and to be fair, **could** not, live up to the fantasy image I

had created in my head. This man filled a need in that aching crater in my soul that had been waiting for so long: he was someone to love.

So, I crouched beside my Walter, my stranger, who seemed as familiar to me as the veldt, and djebbe of Little Earth, and I did something I have never done before in my life: I kissed a man on the lips. Like sleeping beauty, he awoke, his dark eyelashes fluttering open, and he seemed startled, and was about to hit out, not knowing where he was, but then memory flooded back, and he smiled at me.

"That's some way to wake a guy up," he grinned.

"I was curious," I grinned back.

"Ah - just like your brother. Always curious!" He laughed that rich, deep laugh, and again, I couldn't help but join in.

I handed him the food, which he ate ravenously, and then I undid his makeshift bandages and dressed his wounds properly, cleaning them, and giving him the painkillers and antibiotics I had stolen from the Compound. I cannot deny that I enjoyed touching him, although I'm almost ashamed to admit it. I never felt any desire for the boys I was brought up with - their personalities always irritated me too much to make the thought of them touching me anything other than profoundly unpleasant. Now, a lifetime of repressed sexual desire flooded through me, as my fingertips brushed his naked chest, and his long legs, and I flushed, astonished by the thoughts that suddenly rushed into my mind. He caught my hand, and smiled at me.

"You're very gentle," he said.

"I'm used to tending to the sick animals I find on the veldt," I mumbled, hardly able to look him in the eye.

"Do you live out here then?" He glanced around. To an outsider, it probably does look inhospitable, but when you grow accustomed to it, there is no more beautiful place in this universe.

"Not all the time. I have to go back to the Compound. Since my father came home..." I bit on my lip, knowing his hatred of my father. There was silence between us for a long time, and then he noticed the blood on my shirt.

"Are you hurt? What happened to you?" he asked, and I could have sung for the anxiety I saw in his eyes. He had no reason to care about me, and yet, by some miracle, he did.

"It's not mine," I reassured him. "It's Dana's..." I noted with a sinking heart that the concern he had shown about my well-being, was far eclipsed by his reaction to this news. He tried to stand, his face crumpled, his eyes wild.

"Dana's hurt? How? Where?" He demanded.

"Walter, sit down, she's fine, my father's with her," I told him.

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" He sat, reluctantly, clearly knowing that his body was too badly damaged to take him anywhere right now.

"He's her husband," I told him, blankly. "She agreed to marry him." I might not have understood the nature of their marriage, but then I was used to not understanding my own kind. I was more at home out here in the wild, than with people, who made so little sense to me.

"Agreed!" Walter shook his head. "Yes, she agreed, if you can call it that, when she's got that implant in her skull that makes her say whatever he wants her to say. To say nothing of the fact that he tortured Mulder in front of her until she would have said anything to save him from the pain."

I stared at him in horror. This man he described was not my father. My father had only ever been kind and loving to me. I might not have liked the way he treated my half brother, but he had been good to **me**, and I was lonely enough, and hungry enough for his affection to live with his cruelty to others.

"How do you know this?" I asked him, in a broken voice.

"I'm sorry, Samantha, I know he's your father, but I was there." I didn't doubt him for one second. His dark brown eyes held such sincerity, that I couldn't have doubted him if I had tried.

"I've seen the metal devices in their heads. What do they do?" I asked, uncertain whether I wanted to know the answer. He gazed into space for a while, and when he spoke, it was in a dull monotone, devoid of emotion, as if that was the only way he could talk about it.

"They're wired directly into the nerve endings in the brain - alien technology. The aliens have implanted them on every remaining person on Earth, not that there are many of us left. That way, we can serve them, without question. They emit a pulse that constantly bombards you with reminders of what you should say, and how you should behave in any situation. As if that weren't enough, they're programmed to hurt you if you say, or even **think** anything that is forbidden. They also inhibit behavior - you can't harm your controllers, you can't even kill yourself," he whispered, as if somehow, that was the ultimate horror. I was reminded of Dana, this morning, sitting on her bed, chanting that rhyme, cutting into her arms and yet unable to cut deep enough to kill herself, no matter how hard she tried, or how much she distracted herself with the chanting.

"Imagine, being trapped like a zombie inside your own head, the only respite when you say what they want you to say, and behave the way they want you to behave. Mulder was driven insane within 2 days of being implanted - it has that effect on some people."

"My father said...that Fox's crimes drove him insane," I murmured, feebly, still trying to cling to some hope of his goodness.

"Your father always did have a way with words - and with the truth," Walter commented sourly. "Mulder's only crime was to lead the resistance against the invasion."

"Well that's crime enough, isn't it?" I rocked back on my heels, and looked at him intently.

"To want to save your world? That's a crime?" Walter asked. "If so, then you're talking to the wrong man, Samantha. Dana and I were Mulder's generals. We all three fought to the bitter end to save our race, and our planet. We failed." He said the word simply, without anger, but the self-reproach was evident in his eyes. "Except for the citizens of Little Earth, I think I'm probably the only man left alive who doesn't have an implant."

"Why come here?" I whispered.

"For them. Why else?" He shrugged.

"You know a way to remove the implants?" I asked, breathlessly. I would have given anything to see my brother sane again, and to witness Dana's smile reach as far as her eyes, just once.

"There isn't any way to remove them without killing the wearer," Walter told me, flatly. "And besides, we have nowhere left to run, Samantha. Earth is lost...we fought, so long, and so hard, but it's gone." He sounded so tired, and dejected, that I couldn't stop myself moving to his side, and taking him in my arms. He didn't resist. Feeling bold, I kissed his bare scalp, and a tingle ran through my veins. We lay there for a long time, looking out on the djobbe, wordlessly.

Some hours later, as he lay, captive in my arms, I told him about myself. I told him about growing up on Little Earth, about not fitting in, and feeling so lonely. I told him about my fantasy father, about what we had been taught about our alien overlords. I told him about my love for my world, about the djobbe, and the arraba, the marsh crests, and all that I've discovered out here while my kind languished within the walls of their Compound. They, who are too afraid to venture out, too scared of their brave new world to actually live on it, relying instead on the alien biosphere, and the livestock they brought from Big Earth. And as I told him, I understood for the first time what it means to love a world so much that you can't bear to lose it. No, Little Earth isn't the glittering jewel that is my Walter's world. If it were, the aliens wouldn't have given it to us. It's a rock; a swampy mass of red and black, but it's my home, and I love it. If someone came here, and demanded it back, I know that I would fight, as he fought, to the last drop of my blood to be able to stay. I told him this, I told him all that was me, and when at last I'd finished, he turned to me, and smiled, and took my face between his hands, and kissed me.

Journeys of discovery can be made without physically taking a single step. I made such a journey that night, as the sun went down over the djobbe. Walter was my guide, as we mapped out the plains and valleys of our bodies, exploring how they fitted together, each stretching to the other's needs as if by magic. I didn't even tremble as he slowly undressed me, paused to kiss a collarbone, or the tip of my elbow, and frequently, to part my lips with his own, and claim a deep, loving kiss.

I don't know what I meant to Walter but I know that I loved him with every single fiber of my being, and would have died for him that night. For him, I suspect that I was a reminder of what he had lost. I bore both my brother's face and Dana's blood, and also, of course, he was being kind. My Walter, my warrior Walter, with his scarred, battle-worn body, was, at his deepest core, a gentle man. He took me in his arms, and made love to me, because it was what I wanted more than anything, and he didn't have the heart to deny me. I don't think that he loved me. Why would he? I was just the raggedy girl who dragged him from the djebbe, and took care of him.

Walter made love to me so slowly, so carefully, making that first time one of magic, and beauty for me. Looking back, I cannot complain. Most people never experience one perfect moment in their whole lives, but I did. For that night, for just one night, I had everything that I loved most in the world. I was lying out, under the stars, hearing the water from the djebbe lap softly in the background, and I had my Walter, stroking me to heights of pleasure I never knew existed. I hope that I, in turn, reminded him that the battleground that was his body, could be a playground too. Later, towards dawn, we made love with the more passionate frenzy of two people who know that time is short, and who cannot tell what the future will bring.

As the sun rose on our naked, entwined bodies the next day, I knew that what we had done, and what my father did to my stepmother every night, were two such completely different acts as to be beyond any comparison, and I started to cry. To know the beauty of this act of love, to experience it at first hand, and to know that every night, Dana was forced into a coupling with her greatest enemy, a man she couldn't refuse, made my heart break. Walter woke, hearing my racking sobs, and held me tight.

"Did I hurt you?" He asked, anxiously, his lips nuzzling my tears from my face.

"No...you never could," I told him honestly, wrapping my legs and arms around him.

"Walter, whatever it is you're planning, I'll help you."

And so, I suppose, the fates of us all were sealed.

Walter never did tell me what his plans were. I suppose, deep in my heart, that I knew. He questioned me thoroughly, and at some length, about the Compound, but I told him he was in no condition to attempt to break in.

"Father will be looking for you anyway," I said. "The alien commander told him there had been an incident. I assume that he was referring to the capsule you launched to escape from the ship."

"Then we don't have long, and my injuries don't really matter. They'll be irrelevant before long anyway," he murmured, with a sad smile. After talking at some length, we decided that Fox was the easier of the two to get to, and Walter gave me my orders. Yes, orders - Walter's very good at giving them. He didn't ask me if I knew I was risking my life, and he didn't warn me about what could happen, what almost certainly **would** happen, because we both knew the risks. Walter gave me the courtesy of knowing my own mind, and choosing

my own fate, and I knew that for the first time in my life, I could be of real use to somebody I loved.

I returned to the Compound in the morning, and went straight to Dana. Her arms were bandaged, and she was lying in bed. My father fussed over her, kissing her hand, clearly reluctant to leave her lying there, so pale and ill. The strange truth is that I think he genuinely loved her. Yes, on one level he knew that the words that came from her lips originated in the implant in her head - an implant he controlled. Yet still, he seemed to be able to ignore that reality, and believe in the illusion. We are all more complex beings than plain black and white and my father is no different in that. He worked so long in the dark that I believe he had no frame of reference for living in the light. He had achieved his aim, and saved his family, and, to his mind, the human race, from destruction, and now he was left with the aftermath. Happily ever after can be a hard place to live.

Dana shooed him away, with murmured trills of nothing, promising that she would be all right, and insisting that he had work to do, and he went, with the reluctance of a new husband worried about his bride. She sat up, and patted the bed, and I joined her there.

"Samantha...you look different," she commented, smoothing my dark hair away from my face. I stiffened - was it obvious? Did being in love, experiencing the act of love, make you shine and glow? I felt as though I were a beacon, and anybody looking at me would know, as if I had his name written on my forehead.

"No, Dana." I hated lying to her, but she didn't have the luxury of her own silence, and if I told her, I knew my father would find out.

"How's Fox?" she asked, her eyes glazing over slightly, and flinching. She always asked after him, but never tried to see him. I think it hurt too much.

"He's fine. That's why I'm here. I'm taking him outside for his exercise in a minute. Would you like me to bring him here on the way?"

She looked at me in a kind of horror, and betrayal. She relied upon me to somehow anticipate her feelings as she was unable to vocalize them, and the idea of seeing her old friend (had he been more that?) clearly upset her.

"No, I don't think..." she murmured.

I grasped her hand firmly, leaned forward, and whispered into her ear. "To say goodbye?" I suggested. She placed her hand to her throat, and was still for a long moment. I hoped that I hadn't said too much, but Walter had been adamant that I give her the choice. She looked at me, then nodded, and kissed me soundlessly.

Fox was in one of his smiling, endearing moods when I went to see him. He was crouched beside his bed, playing with his toes.

"Sammy." He pointed at his feet, and made them do a little dance.

"Yes, Fox, very clever," I laughed. One way or another, I came to associate my brother with dancing, from his strange flitting eyes, to his restless, fidgeting feet.

I unchained him from the bed, and led him up the stairs. His handlers let us go, bored. They usually allowed me to take him outside, unaccompanied, for his exercise each morning, and today was no different. Fox was confused, when, instead of taking him outside, I led him up towards Dana's room. He stopped on the threshold, twitching, his face anxious and worried. Then he saw Dana, and it was as if something inside his mind snapped. She held out her arms, and as he walked over to the bed I saw him as he must once have been, with a wry smile on his lips, and a mischievous light in his eyes.

"My Scully." He knelt beside the bed. "One, one, one, one..."

"Mulder." She ignored the chatter, and took his face between her hands. "Goodbye, Mulder. I love you." She kissed his lips, softly, and when she drew back he continued:

"One, one, one..." She smiled at me sadly, and he reached up, fascinated, and wiped away the tears running down her cheeks. "Boom," he said. "Five billion, Scully! Boom, boom. One, two, three..."

"Fox, come on," I pulled him away, and he turned and looked at her as we reached the door.

"Bye." He waved his hand, and she smiled through her tears, as I led him away.

He followed me so obediently, like a child, as I took him out of the Compound, and across the veldt to the djebbe, and to Walter.

He was waiting, the sun burning down on his unprotected scalp, as he sat there, his feet dangling in the brackish water. When Fox saw him, he gave a startled shout, and ran across the veldt as if he had the wind in his shoes. He threw his arms around Walter and held on tight, as if he feared my lover would disappear.

"Mulder, Mulder..." Walter said his name over and over again, then pushed him away, and sat him down.

"One, two, two, two..." Fox began, but Walter silenced him.

"Mulder - hush." Fox shut up, but not without a little pout. "Come here." Walter grinned, dragging Fox over so that he was lying between his legs. Fox went happily enough, and lay there with an expression of such trust on his face, that it brought tears to my eyes. He had never looked at me like that. Walter picked up his knife, and handed it to my brother, and I took a sharp intake of breath, but Fox just played with it for a moment, then looked up, a question in his eyes.

"I made you a promise a long time ago, and I want to keep it," Walter said softly. "Is that okay with you, Mulder?" Fox smiled, and I let out a shout of warning, as he placed the tip of the knife against Walter's throat. Walter just sat, very still. "Mulder?" he asked gently.

"Finders keepers," Fox whispered, tracing the blade down Walter's neck. "Losers weepers."

"Yes, I know." Walter's hand fastened over my brother's and he gently retrieved his knife.

Fox leaned back, and smiled, his whole body relaxed, as if waiting for something. "Okay," he said brightly.

Walter looked at me, and then took a deep breath, and placed the tip of the knife against the metal implant in my brother's head. I gave a choking cry, remembering what he had told me, but it was too late. With a quick flick of his wrist, he sliced through the nerves connecting the implant, and then hacked the box out of my brother's head. The strange thing was that Fox didn't scream at all. He didn't even move as Walter finally dug that thing out of his flesh, and threw it into the djebbe. Blood flowed liberally from my brother's head, and Walter tried, uselessly, to stem the tide. Fox opened his eyes, and stared at me, and for the first time, I saw sanity in those hazel depths.

"Samantha. I'm glad I found you." He held out a hand, and I took it, and knelt beside him, crying my heart out.

"Walter - thank you," His other hand found Walter's, and he held it tight. "Tell Scully that I love her too."

"I will." Walter smiled gently, and kissed my brother's blood-soaked hair.

"The little green men got me after all, huh?" Fox asked.

Walter grinned. "Hell, Mulder, that was always on the cards!"

We stayed with him for the next hour, each of us holding on, until Fox finally slipped away. Even then, we didn't move. We just sat there, beside his cooling body, still holding him tight. Later that night, we wrapped him in a blanket, and Walter carried him out to the djebbe, and we slipped his body into the water together. We didn't say anything. I'm not sure what there was to say. I just wrapped my arms around Walter, and we both stood there, watching as the heavy swamp waters finally swallowed my brother into its depths.

"You spoke of a promise. What did you promise him?" I asked him, when Fox's body had finally disappeared from sight.

"His death. We all made a vow a couple of years ago, that if they ever caught any of us, and put those implants into us, anyone who was able to would... It's my last duty, to give them their death, as they asked, as I promised, as..." He paused, and I saw the tears in his eyes. Walter was a big man, with such strength, that it's almost shocking to see him cry. He sobbed his heart out, and I stood holding him, stroking his back until he was done. Despite his tears, he never once lost that innate dignity that made him so special. When he'd finished, he stood up straight, and wiped his face with his sleeve, then he started to walk as if nothing had happened.

"I didn't even really know him," I whispered, as we neared home.

"He loved you, and he never stopped looking for you," Walter told me, and I stopped dead in my tracks. For so many years I'd lived without love, without knowing it, or expecting it, that it hurt deep inside to know that this man, my brother, had cared enough to try to find me, even if he couldn't know how hopeless that task was. "It was his quest," Walter said gently, seeing the pain in my eyes. "He never got over losing you."

"I wish I'd known." The world was a blur, and I buried my face in Walter's chest, blindly seeking comfort there.

When we made love that night, it was with my brother's blood on our hands, and his thanks in our hearts. We clung together, seeking in this affirmation of life, a respite from our grim, inescapable, duty of death.

The following morning, Walter insisted that I took him into the Compound. We both knew that my father's men would be out looking for Fox, and it wasn't safe to stay in the shelter any longer. It would clearly be impossible to lead Dana out the way I had rescued Fox, so I helped Walter break into the Compound. My own bio-readings were readily accepted as we slipped past the security grid, but Walter's set off all the alarms. He half ran, half limped into the Mansion behind me, and I took him up the stairs towards Dana's room. I could already hear the dogs barking in the courtyard beneath us, and the cries of my father's men. We burst into Dana's bedroom, to find her standing beside her bed, fingering the tiny gold cross around her neck.

Walter stopped, in the doorway, and a look passed between them that made a lump rise in my throat. I never did find out what existed between the three of them, but it was clear that Walter loved my father's wife, and that she loved him. Whether as friends, or something more, I have no idea. I just know that I didn't begrudge her, although my heart ached with jealousy. If he could ever once have looked at me like that, I knew I would die happy. He was across that room and by her side within seconds, and he took her in his arms, and held her tight. She looked so small, and frail beside him, that it was almost comical.

"Walter." His name sounded beautiful on her lips.

"Dana." He stroked her hair, and his hands wordlessly found the bandages on her arms, and fingered them, gently.

"Did you come to do what you promised?" She asked, her face creasing up in pain as her implant kicked in.

"Yes. Did you doubt me?" He asked.

"Not you. You surprised me too often," she chided, "but you never once failed us - either of us. Mulder?"

"Free at last." Walter murmured, touching the side of her face tenderly. "He wanted me to tell you something." He bent his head and whispered into her ear, words meant only for her, and she smiled, and rested her face against his shoulder. At that moment, I heard footsteps outside, and I cried out a warning. I didn't even see his hand move - like the consummate

soldier he is, he slid that blade softly home, between her ribs, taking her life so swiftly that she didn't even know. He picked up her lifeless body, and held her in his arms, just as my father burst through the door.

"Skinner." My father came to a halt, taking in the implications of the scene in front of him. "Dana!" He cried, wresting her corpse from my lover's arms, and laying her on the bed, crooning over her in genuine anguish. I couldn't help but feel sorry for him; he had truly loved her, in his own way. He took a few minutes to pull himself together, and then he stood, drew himself up to his full height - towering over even my tall lover, and confronted Walter. I had a sense of déjà vu, although I had never seen my father and Walter in the same room before. I just knew that this confrontation had happened many times before, each one a rehearsal for this one moment, as they stood over the body of my father's wife.

"End game," Walter said softly.

"The game ended a long time ago, Skinner," my father snarled, "and you lost."

"Maybe." Walter shrugged. "And now, so have you."

My father drew his gun, and pointed it at my lover, and before I knew it, I had stepped between them, with a cry.

"Please, Father. I love him."

There was silence for a long time, as we stood, wondering, waiting. I didn't know whether my father would kill both of us, or just Walter, although it wouldn't have made any difference because if he had killed my lover, I would have followed soon after, by my own hand. Instead my father smiled, a grim, cadaverous smile, and put his gun away, gesturing to his soldiers.

"She loves him. Well, then you must have him, Sam. Nothing is too much for my precious little girl, hmm?" He patted my head, and I felt a chill stab deep into my heart. They dragged Walter away, and I threw myself at my father's feet, and begged him not to harm my lover.

"Of course not," my father told me, helping me up. "You'll see him again this evening - at dinner. He can live here, with us. I could do with a good administrator to help me run this place, and Skinner has always been an excellent administrator. In fact, it's all he was ever any good for." He opened his packet of cigarettes, and lit one, only his shaking figures indicating the true level of his distress. He inhaled deeply, standing for a while beside his wife's body, the ash dropping onto her bloodstained nightdress, and then he left, without looking back.

Yes, they brought my Walter back to me. He looked so handsome - bathed, shaved, and all dressed up, in a shirt and tie, and his wounds had been treated properly as well. All in all, he was very presentable - except for the metal box that was clearly visible, embedded in his skull. I knew then that I had done him a grave wrong in begging my father for his life. If I had just let him kill Walter, then he would have been spared this fate. As I looked into my lost love's eyes, and heard him talk, so carefully, so emptily, praising my father, congratulating

him on his successes, I knew that I had condemned my lover to the very living death from which he had been courageous enough to liberate his friends.

It took me three months to find the strength to emulate him. Three months of watching him walk around the Compound like a zombie, doing my father's dirty work for him, saying "yes, sir, no sir," while his body language spoke wretched volumes about his true feelings. Our freedom was greatly curtailed: wraiths once more, we floated around that house, pale shadows of our former selves, and although Walter shared my bed, I could see in his heart the words that were denied him.

"Please," he would beg me, as I held him in my arms, night after night.

"I can't," I replied, the tears running down my cheeks. To have found him, after so long alone, it was more than I could bear to lose him again. I ran through all the options in my mind - those same options that he must have gone through months ago, when he first arrived, or even before he stowed away on that ship from Big Earth.

There was no escape from Little Earth; no ships visited us. We were alone. There was no chance of overthrowing my father on his very own power base. We couldn't even escape to live outside the Compound, in the veldt, because Walter's implant had been fitted with a tracking device, and my father kept him under surveillance 24 hours a day. I think, also, and it pains me more than I can say to remember this, that my father had done something with his implant that kept my lover in constant pain, although Walter never spoke of it. The dark bruising under his eyes, and their weary depths told me that particular cruel truth about my father's soul.

My father. My poor, lost father, my poor lost brother, his lost Dana, and my lost Walter and his poor lost world. Little Earth was populated by ghosts - not all of them dead. I never came to hate my father, although I tried very hard. Maybe a part of me understood him. We shared the same genes after all. I came to learn the hard truth; that you can love someone without liking them.

We all have to face ourselves, sooner or later, and my moment came the day I felt the new life move inside me. I took myself away from the Compound, and back to the shelter by the djebbe where my brother died. As I sat there, my feet dangling in the water, trying to make sense of what had happened, I saw the bottle, bobbing up and down towards me. The swamp waters are heavy, so I was surprised to see that it hadn't sunk, but it nudged insistently against my leg, and I plucked it out. It took a moment before I realized it was the bottle Dana and I had thrown into the water several lifetimes ago. I remembered her red hair, and pale face, and those cold, lifeless, blue eyes. She was the first friend I'd ever had, and maybe the last. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I recalled how hard I'd tried to hate her. I opened the bottle, and pulled out our notes. Two words on each - I recognized my own untidy writing, and her neat loops, but the words stabbed deep into my heart, making me struggle for breath.

"Kill me," her note said, and I wept for a moment, in pity for her life, and thanks for her death.

"Love me," my own note said, and I wept again, for myself this time, the little girl who never managed to fit in, sent away from her home, and family, always yearning for someone to love her. Walter had come along - an answer to both our pleas. He had given us both what we wanted most. Wasn't it time to return the favor? I glanced around the veldt, and placed my hand on my stomach. Walter wouldn't want this child to see him like this - a strange, lifeless, almost strangulated imitation of the man I'd fallen in love with. Walter would have done anything to avoid such a fate, only he couldn't. So I had to act for him, and show him the same compassion he had shown to Dana, and Fox. Somehow I had to find the same depths of love and courage that Walter had found, to put my needs aside, and think of someone else.

I stayed there all day, watched the sun go down over the djebbe, and then returned home. Walter was sitting in our room, rocking himself back and forth in his chair, in a way that seemed to soothe him. He looked up as I came in, and I went quickly to his side and kissed him.

"I'll run a bath," I whispered, and he nodded, his eyes glazed, and blank. I set the water running, arranged what I would need, and then returned to him.

"Walter." I placed his hand on my belly. "I'm pregnant."

There was, I think, a momentary joy in those sad, dark eyes, but it was quickly eclipsed by the expression of intense pain that followed it. "It's all right, my love, I know what I must do now. It's clear to me. Don't worry." I put my finger over his lips, and kissed him, before leading him to the bath and undressing him one last time. I sat down in the warm water, and guided him to sit between my legs, his back against my breast. Then I picked up the knife, and held his wrist in my hand. He looked at me with a wordless expression of gratitude, and nodded.

I made the cut long - lengthwise along the vein, not cutting across it, to speed his passing. He didn't flinch, didn't even move as I worked, just looked at me, with those intense, grateful dark eyes. First one wrist, then the other, then I pulled him back into my arms, and we both lay there and watched the water turn red together.

"Tell me," I whispered, as he faded away from me, "did you ever really love me?"

"Yes," he smiled. "Of course, Samantha."

A final act of kindness, from a kind man. I saw in his eyes that he cared about me, that he was fond of me. I think though, that he had used up all the true love of his heart on his lost world, and on whatever strange, tangled, skein of thread bound him to my dead brother, and my father's wife. Whatever he had left was mine, and for that much, I'm grateful. He slipped away from me without a fight, after a lifetime of battles, finally following his heart's desire.

When I was sure he was gone, I eased myself away from his body, and dried myself, still smelling his blood on my flesh. I got dressed, and left the Compound one last time. I

wouldn't be coming back, and I didn't think they'd look for me for long. None of them had ever explored the world outside the Compound as I had, and they were all convinced that it was impossible to live for long away from the biosphere, and all their technology. They were wrong. I knew that I could live out here quite happily, away from the sickness of my kind, and my father's house of ghosts. I had done it before for months at a stretch. I knew it was a hard path too - delivering my child alone, and caring for the infant by myself, but I was full of hope for the future. When the baby was born, I would call it Fox Skinner or Dana Skinner, depending on its gender, and in a strange way, this child would be the sum of us all, and of our tragedy. My father, Fox, and Walter, three men who fought a bitter battle that consumed their lives, would be united at last by genetics, all of them sharing some part of my child. As for Dana, she lived on in my heart - I would tell my child about her beauty, her intelligence, and most of all, her quiet, desperate courage.

I think, maybe, that you can be born to a certain state. With me, it's loneliness. It's all I've ever really known, and I think, if fate exists, it's what I was fated for. In 6 months time, I'll finally have someone who will love me more than anyone else in the world. I suppose that's all I've ever really wanted. After all the death, it's time, past time, for a new life.

**The End**

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