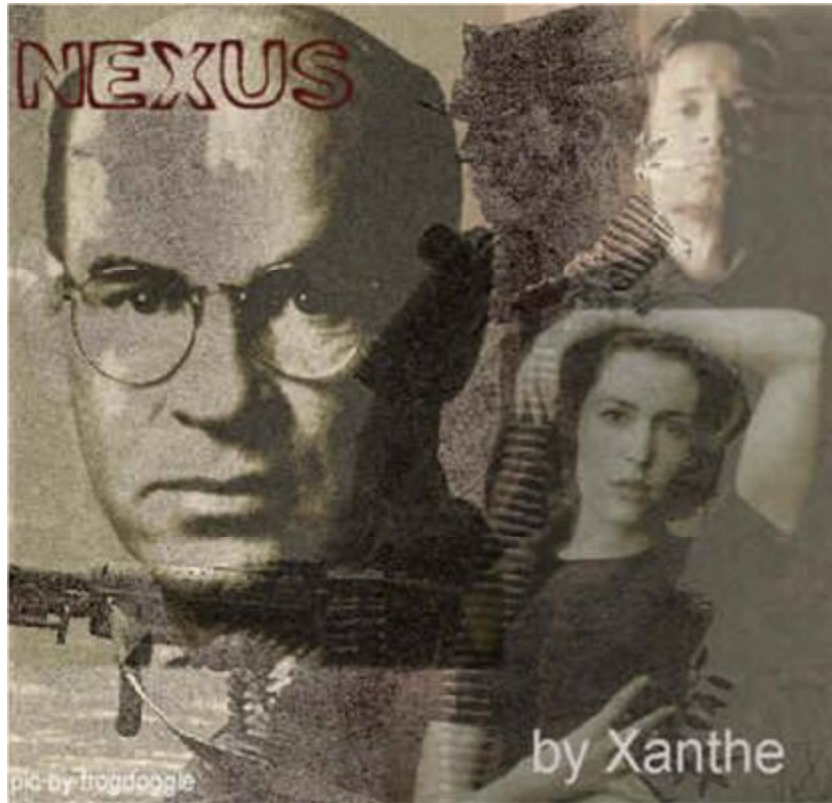


Nexus by Xanthe



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

Story Notes:

"Mulder held out his hand, and Scully looked at it for a moment, then took it. They both closed their eyes. Almost immediately, Scully felt the warmth of the nexus flood in, bringing with it Skinner's pain, which was effectively dominating the link, making her flinch. Mulder's mind was like a cluster of bright, swirling silver clouds enveloping her own pulsing orange hues, and merging with them, creating something beautiful, like a Christmas star, shot through with light. They surged together down the nexus, and found Skinner's mind - a blend of pale blues and grays, tinged with the black of pain."

My huge, definitive threesome vision, still a work in progress. Skinner's past, as a victim of experimentation in Vietnam, has unexpected repercussions in the present day.

This one is unfinished as well - but it's left at a point which is quite satisfying so it's worth reading.

Awards: This story was nominated for the following 1999 Spooky awards:

Outstanding Scully Characterization

Outstanding X-File

Outstanding Mulder/Skinner Romance

Outstanding Work In Progress

Last Updated: 29th November, 1999.

1. **Lost** by Xanthe

2. **Found** by Xanthe

3. **Nemesis** by Xanthe

4. **Synergy** by Xanthe

Lost by Xanthe

Author's Notes:

Posted 8th April, 1999

This story will (eventually) cover a number of years, starting mid-way through season 6 when Mulder and Scully are still working under AD Kersh.

For the purposes of this story, Mulder is 18 when he goes to Oxford.

Spoilers: Avatar, One Breath. Season 6.

Thanks to Daydreamer for her inspiring creation of Commando!Skinner in *Retrieval* (and sequel). Also to Holmes, whose *Folie A.D.* has such a beautiful Young!Walter in it. Both these stories can be found on the **WalterTorture** site

Huge thank you to Frogdoggie for making the wonderful pic.

Massive thanks, as always, to Holmes for the usual thorough beta-reading.

Holmes for the brilliant beta reading.

Vietnam.

March 15, 1971.

The moon was hanging high in the sky, casting long eerie shadows over the jungle. Corporal Skinner was still young enough and naive enough to stop and stare up at it, thinking how beautiful it looked, hanging there in space.

<Fool. It lights us up, makes us easier targets.>

The Lieutenant's thoughts echoed in his mind, and Corporal Skinner grinned at his C.O., finding the man's camouflage streaked face several paces ahead.

<It's beautiful though.>

<So's that whore in Saigon that Casey's been screwing, but she's just as deadly.>

<Casey's whore? You mean the 'Claptrap'?>

<I heard that!> Casey's indignant thought broke through into their private conversation.

The whole platoon, silently, and as a man, broke into broad grins, and cast amused glances in Casey's direction.

Skinner closed his eyes and kept on walking, seeing the world from Lieutenant Logan's eyes, feeling a branch slap against his face, walking a few steps, then brushing into the same branch a few seconds after his C.O. It had taken considerable practice to perfect this, but now he could walk with his eyes closed for hours without stumbling. Skinner sent his mind out along the link between his comrades, testing the flow of energy between them, enjoying the perfect synergy, the sense of harmony and completion. Nothing in his young life had ever captivated him so much, nothing brought him as much joy as this. He reveled in their thoughts, their feelings, and their strength.

<Gonna come, Walt?> Stevens leered, turning to wink at him. <Getting off again?>

Skinner blushed. It was true that he found the energy that linked them so physical a sensation that, when channeled through his wildly hormonal eighteen-year-old brain, it had an almost erotic intensity. The rest of the platoon teased him about that unmercifully. Not that he minded - they were, to all intents and purposes, an extension of himself, and he knew the minds and hearts of each of them.

Skinner allowed his mind to drown in the link, absorbed a direction from Lieutenant Logan that they should head West and relayed an image of water and rest from Casey back to the Lieutenant. He listened idly to J.A.'s constant internal monologue of guilt about the number of times he'd jerked off this week and how many Hail Mary's that would earn him, blocked out Murray's incessant desire to pee, and absently scratched Juke's itchy stubble on his own as yet beardless chin.

The moon disappeared behind a cloud, and the jungle was suddenly plunged into darkness. Skinner felt the tension rise a notch or two, and he fought to stop a dozen men's feelings from overwhelming him.

<Careful.> Logan. <We don't want to run into anything just because we were careless. Left.>

As a man, the whole group turned to their left, silently, stealthily moving through the jungle, completely in tune with each other. They made a deadly fighting force. Their prowess in battle was legendary, their synchronized movements and wordless communication giving them a crucial edge on their enemy.

There was no warning, of that Skinner was sure, just as he had no idea how they could have been seen or heard. The moon had been obscured, and he knew they had made no noise. It didn't make sense. Suddenly the jungle exploded in a flash of gunshot fire, illuminating dark faces and bodies.

<Fuck!> Casey screamed, falling to the ground silently, gracefully, a bullet through his brain.

<Help me! Help me! Shit, shit...hurts...>

<Murray? Murray???? Where are you?> Skinner's mind was alive with the agony of a dozen deaths, with the screams of his dying friends, and the pain in his own body, which faltered beneath him, his legs no longer working, blood pumping out of a wound in his chest, turning the world red. The ground rushed up to meet him, and the next thing he knew he was staring at the sky, his eyes open and unblinking. His mind was full of cries for help, and he could do nothing to aid his stricken comrades. There was only confusion - the link a mass of pulsing, flickering, seething, and fatally disrupted energy.

<Ambush, fucking ambush...fucking VC's...fucking got us at last...> were Murray's last thoughts.

<Hail Mary, mother of god...> The words were repeated over and over again, until they gradually faded out of his mind, becoming a whisper, and then disappeared altogether.

<Failed you...sorry...led you into a goddamn trap. Thought we were so damn good...wish I'd told you all...> Logan died in a bitter agony of self recrimination.

Skinner lay on the ground, seeing their attackers dimly on the periphery of his vision, moving among the bodies, checking pulses, delivering last minute bullets to the brains of any survivors. One by the one, the voices in his mind became silent. Skinner felt a wrenching, dislocating jolt in the link between them, as each voice, each mind, each being,

left his consciousness forever, leaving him at last alone, soundless, for the first time in eight months.

<NO!> The pain of each loss hurt more than the pain in his body. Skinner's mind screamed out in agony, over and over again. <NO.> In a tumult of numbness, he felt himself rise up, his consciousness slipping between the boundaries of life and death, ascending towards a bright light, to a place without pain. He lay there in that restful limbo for a lifetime, seeking respite from his great loss. It took him maybe an eon, or a micro-second, to hear the voice that was speaking to him softly.

<It's not your time, Jace.>

<Jace?>

<Forgive me. Walter.> A laugh. <When I knew you last...never mind. It isn't time yet.>

<Where are we?>

<Everywhere. Nowhere.>

<They're gone. All gone.> For a moment, Skinner wanted to feel something. He remembered the pain of their passing, the agony of his wounds, but here, in this void, there was nothing.

<Yes. They've passed on.>

<I...**miss** them.>

<Yes.> Not unsympathetic, and yet somehow stern, uncompromising. <You must go back.>

<I'm dead!> he protested.

<I know.>

<Then how can I go back?>

<They will help. All their life force returns to source. You are the source, little one. Sweet one.> Something that could have been a gentle kiss on his forehead, a breeze against his brow. <Here.> He felt a sudden rush of something in his mind, a clatter of voices, a clamoring sound that was intensely, blessedly familiar.

<Toss you for it...keep at it like that and it'll drop off, J.A...begging for it... Why'd you call me that?...I said move it, dickhead...Mom baked them...J Arthur Rank - you work it out...on a farm, I was good with horses...Man, yeah! That was a great movie...Picture yourself in a boat on a river, with tangerine trees and marmalade skies...>

The sound welled up to a crescendo and then balled into something small, glowing with an intense white heat. Skinner felt the incandescent globe flood him with its light, and then it was gone.

<Bye, Walt...g'luck...see'ya soon...Walt, baby! So long. Soon...bye, Walter...> The voices faded, and he tried to run after them, to go with them, wherever they might be going, but his way was blocked.

<No, Walter. You can't follow them. You have a different path to follow.>

<I want to go with them!>

<You can't.>

Somewhere in the distance, he could see a dark tunnel.

<NO.> He cried, trying to twist and turn away from the tunnel, yet somehow it moved inexorably closer. <It hurts there...it hurts...>

<Hush. It's okay. I know it hurts, but you have something to do. Something very important.> The voice soothed him.

<What?> His whimpering faded. He was reminded of his mom telling him to watch his brother. "It's important, Walter. I won't be long." He was five years old and his dad was lying outside on the farm, injured. "You watch Joe. I'll get help." She ran towards the truck. Walter stood beside his brother's crib and watched the sleeping baby. Outside his father was moaning, but his mom had told him to stay here, not to move. The baby started to cry. Five year old Walter stood there, uncertainly. She'd said to watch the baby, but should he touch him? He wasn't usually allowed to touch Joe unless Mom or Dad were there. Outside, his father started to sob.

<I can't tell you what it is, but it is something that you must do.>

<How will I know?> Five year old Walter dithered, torn between his father's cries, and those of his baby brother. He felt useless, small.

<You're not useless. You'll know when the time comes. You'll do what you have to, in accordance with what you are. And however it turns out, for good or ill, that is all we can ask of you.>

<Why me?> He knew he sounded petulant, childish, but he didn't want this. A laugh sounded in his mind.

<Because you're the right person. Don't worry. You have time, little one. Time to grow up, to love and laugh and cry some more. Time to learn so many things. Time to live.>

<But I don't want...I want...> He just wanted peace, he wanted to have his comrades back, to feel that link once more.

<One day. Maybe. Come now...>

The dark tunnel came closer and closer, and he cried out as he hurtled through it, then out the other side. Skinner looked down in horror and saw the body of a boy lying on the ground. The boy's eyes were wide open, his uniform torn by bullets, blood pouring from a dozen or more wounds all over his body, soaking the ground beneath. He gazed into the boy's sightless brown eyes, saw the shock in them, and a staring intensity that scared him. Skinner gazed down for a long time, recognizing himself, aware that he was being watched, as he was watching his own death, and then he heard the voice again.

<Little one. I'm here.> He had a sensation of being lifted, and clung like a child to the strong arms that held him, burying his face in a wrinkled neck, and coarse, white hair. <Hush...trust me...> the voice whispered. He felt lips press against his hair, and had a sudden sensation of overwhelming affection. The blinding white light receded, and the world grew darker, noisier, filled with pain and confusion. He looked down, saw those dead eyes again and cried out one last time. He was close, too close. He felt himself settle inside the body, and took a gurgling, agonized gasp of air. Vision flooded into his open eyes, and for one brief second he saw an old woman, smiling at him tenderly, her eyes aglow with love.

<Farewell, Jace. Soon,> she promised, and he screamed silently, wanting her to come back, wanting her to take him back, to let him continue on his journey with his dead comrades. Sensation returned to his stricken body, and a wave of such intense agony ripped through him that he lost consciousness. A single tear escaped through dark lashes as his eyes finally closed.

The man wandered into the clearing, and paused, flicking the hand of a corpse out of his path with a contemptuous flourish of his boot. He wasn't wearing a uniform, yet somehow it was clear from the natural authority inherent in his posture, that he was in charge. He was tall, and his body had a languid, cat-like grace that implied danger. He pulled a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, and lit one, taking a long, slow drag and then blew the smoke out into the jungle. A man, clad in black, his face obscured by a ski-mask, ran up to the smoker, and jumped to attention in front of him.

"Well? Are they dead?" The smoker asked.

"Yes, sir."

"All of them?" The smoker looked at his subordinate keenly.

"Yes, sir. I checked each of them myself. We finished off the ones who survived the initial ambush."

"Good. You've done well, Sheed." The smoker did not even allow himself the luxury of a small smile. Instead, he gazed at Sheed for a long time, with a cool, assessing stare. "You're wondering why," he murmured, taking another lungful of smoke.

"Well...yes." The other man admitted. "I mean they were the best. There's never been a unit like them, and that was all as a result of your work...you know, the drugs, the

experiments...So why are you destroying all your hard work when you've achieved so much?"

"Yes, in many ways, this experiment was my proudest achievement. It's destruction is...unfortunate, of course, but the project requires sacrifices of us all." The smoker pulled a file out from under his combat jacket and gazed at it for a second, as if in regret, or contemplation. "The Nexus Project, subgroup 5c - Delta Company, 1st BN, 12th Marines."

"The best. They had a reputation for being invincible." Sheed said, shaking his head sadly.

"Nobody's invincible." The smoker smiled. "And you should never believe your own reputation." He threw the file onto the ground and lit a match. "Experiment...terminated." He lit the flame to the file, and both men watched in silence as it went up in smoke.

A single gunshot rang out, and the smoker took another long draw on his cigarette, then threw it down next to the smoldering ashes of the fire. "Terminated," he murmured, grinding the cigarette under his heel. He turned and stepped over Sheed's body, and then left the clearing without looking back.

Crystal City, VA.

January 6, 1999.

Skinner awoke, the scream dying on his lips, his heart thudding loudly in his chest. He took a deep, shaky breath, trying to banish the nightmare, feeling the sweat cool on his skin. He was in his own bedroom. The clock on his night stand told him it was 3:05. Everything was fine. Everything was familiar.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he closed his eyes, and the vision returned, as clear as if his eyes were open, and he was actually witnessing the sight. He was standing in a room - a familiar room. He could smell the odor of unwashed socks, and the garlicky remains of a pizza dinner. In front of him, on the floor, was a body. At first, he resisted going to investigate, too scared of what he might find, a great sense of dread enveloping him. He stood there, beside the coffee table, listening to a clock ticking. Finally, after several long minutes had passed, he knew that he couldn't stand still any longer. Slowly, hesitantly, he moved towards the body, dreading what he might find. The man was lying face down in a pool of his own blood that was caked around his head, pouring from his ears. Skinner reached one quivering hand down to the body, turned it...*please, no, please, no, not again...please, no...* his voice rose and fell inside his head, whispering the litany. In front of him, lying on the floor, his eyes wide open and sightless, his hair stained dark red with his own blood, was Fox Mulder.

Skinner's eyes snapped open again.

"No," he whispered, banishing the vision from his mind. He got up and stumbled to his bathroom, picked up a glass with shaking hands, and ran himself some water. He gulped it down, still feeling the sweat as it pricked his skin and cooled on his naked back. He finished

the water and looked up into the bathroom mirror...and dropped the glass into the basin. Behind him, stood a young man, his dark hair tousled and dirty. He was wearing a torn uniform, riddled with bullet-holes.

"Who are...?" Skinner whirled around to confront the apparition, but found only empty shadows.

Skinner clenched his fists, turning back to the mirror, but he was alone. He stood there for a moment, his hands resting on the basin, watching himself with distrustful dark eyes sunk deep in a deathly pale face.

"I won't go back," he murmured fiercely. "If that's what you're asking. I won't go back. I don't want this again." There was no reply, but when Skinner closed his eyes, he saw Mulder's body lying on the floor of his apartment, his hazel eyes staring at nothing, and as he moved closer, Skinner saw another young man, and another body lying sightless on the ground, a lifetime ago. He shuddered, and opened his eyes again, finding no peace in the silence. In front of him, shards of glass lay shattered in the basin, a single red streak of his own blood marking the white ceramic surface. Skinner stared at it for several long minutes, and then suddenly turned and ran back into the bedroom, pulling on sweats and sneakers, not bothering with socks. Within seconds, he was running down to the elevator, disheveled and fighting a rising tide of panic. When the elevator didn't respond instantly to his summons, he pounded his fist against the wall.

"Come on...come on..." he snarled, then gave up and ran down the 17 flights of stairs, and into the garage beneath the building without pausing for breath.

After fifteen minutes of crazy, reckless driving, which would have had him arrested if he'd encountered the local PD on his journey, Skinner drew up outside Mulder's apartment. He eschewed the elevator once more, and ran up the stairs, and then hesitated outside the door. If he was wrong, *please god, let me be wrong*, if he was wrong, then Mulder would think he was deranged, coming here like this, banging on his door in the middle of the night. Skinner shrugged, and knocked on the door anyway, not having a clue what he would tell the other man if he opened it. *Please let him open it*. There was no reply. Skinner felt as though an ice-cold fist had clasped freezing fingers around his heart. He pounded on the door frantically, and when there was still no reply, he heaved his shoulder into it, and broke the lock, falling into the room.

He stood there for a moment, the hair on the back of his neck rising. He was in his dream. There was discarded clothing on the floor, and the remains of a pizza on the coffee table...and, behind the coffee table, he could see one arm, crooked and lifeless. Skinner took a deep breath and edged closer, drawing his gun and glancing around the apartment as he walked. There was no sign of an intruder, no sign of a disturbance...He stopped, closing his eyes and struggling for breath. There, lying on the floor in front of him, in a pool of his own blood, was Mulder.

Skinner knelt down beside the injured man, and moved him gently onto his back. Mulder's eyes were wide and sightless. His heart pounding, Skinner checked for a pulse in Mulder's

neck, and was relieved to find one, although Mulder was clearly, to all intents and purposes, not there, and his flesh was cold and clammy to the touch. Skinner reached into his pocket for his cell phone, and called for an ambulance. Then he grabbed a blanket from the couch, and wrapped Mulder in it, taking the other man in his arms, and cradling his body against his chest to keep him warm, rocking him backwards and forwards.

"Not again," he whispered. "I won't let it happen again."

On the other side of the room, a young man in a torn, blood-stained uniform placed his head on one side, and fixed Skinner with a quizzical look, a faint smile on his lips.

"Go away." Skinner said, without looking up.

George Washington University Medical Center.

January 6, 1999.

"Sir, what happened?" Scully charged into Mulder's hospital room, and stared down into Mulder's open, sightless eyes in horror. "What happened to him?" she demanded.

"We don't know." Skinner shrugged. Scully stared at him in surprise. She had never seen him like this - not just the disheveled state of his clothing, and his unshaven jaw, but the haunted look in his eyes, and the pallor of his face.

"What's his prognosis?" Scully reached for the chart at the bottom of the bed.

"They don't know. They don't have any idea what's wrong with him. He was just bleeding from his ears, and in this...coma."

Scully took Mulder's hand in her own, and stood beside the bed.

"We're going to find out what's wrong with you, Mulder," she said firmly. "We're going to make you better. I promise." She squeezed his hand tightly. "Hearing is often the last sense to go." She looked up at Skinner. "He might be able to hear us."

"Yes. Maybe." Skinner didn't sound convinced.

"There were no clues about how his injuries were caused?" Scully asked him, her eyes still fixed on Mulder.

"No. He was just found...like this." Skinner gestured brokenly to Mulder.

"Found?" Scully's head jerked up. "By whom?"

"Me." Skinner rubbed a weary hand over his eyes.

"He called you? Or are you in the habit of dropping by his place in the early hours of the morning?" Worry had made Scully more brusque than she normally was. Skinner stared at her for a moment, as if he wasn't seeing her clearly.

"No. I had a dream. I dreamed he was hurt. I went over there. I found him." Skinner turned back to Mulder, placed a hand on the other man's shoulder and tried to find something in those sightless eyes. It was a while before he noticed the silence, then he turned back to Scully and saw the expression on her face. "What's wrong with that?" he demanded in a low growl. "People have pre-cognitive dreams. In your line of work you should know that, Agent Scully."

"Yes." Scully bit her lip.

"What's the matter? You're thinking, 'yes, but not **you**', aren't you? Not Skinner. He wouldn't have dreams like this. He's too...what? Sensible, rational?" Skinner sneered. Scully took a step back at his tone, disturbed by the change in her usually controlled superior.

"I'm sorry." He raised his hands in apology, his eyes streaked with guilt at having alarmed her. "It's just that I do have strange dreams, Agent Scully. I always have, for a long time now." He stared glumly at her, and her heart went out to him. He looked so...lost. "There have been times when I've dreaded going to bed...going to sleep. The months before Sharon died were the worst. Dreams every night...disturbing images..."

"That was when you went to the sleep disorder clinic?" Scully asked him. He nodded, burying his face wearily in his hands.

"It didn't work. I didn't expect it to." He looked up. "They go in phases. After Sharon's death, they dropped off altogether for a long time. Until recently." He glanced down at Mulder, and gently freed a strand of the younger man's hair that was stuck to his forehead with blood. Scully witnessed the gesture with barely concealed surprise. He seemed so worried...so involved...so tender. This wasn't the man she was used to seeing, and to working with. Normally he hid behind a front that he presented to the world, a façade that she and Mulder had only had sporadic luck in penetrating. There had been moments - such as when they had been waiting in hospital corridors for news of Mulder on various occasions. Skinner had been solicitous, kind, bringing her cups of coffee. There had been another unguarded moment when he had visited her, as she recovered from cancer, the faintest, shy smile on his lips as he entered the room. He had left too quickly, embarrassed by her closeness to her family, by the small talk. In fact, she remembered that he had hardly spoken, but he had never taken his eyes off her, the entire time he stood in the room, and she had been unable to read the expression in them. Back at work though, he had been punctiliously correct, the consummate professional, hardly ever allowing her behind the screen.

"What was Mulder working on?" Skinner asked, clearly relieved to change the subject.

"Well, I don't remember any particular case, but then again, there's nothing memorable about our cases now. Lately, Kersh has been sending us out on manure patrol, but..." she paused, and looked up at her former boss, wondering if she could trust him.

"But, Mulder being Mulder, he had some other project he was involved in didn't he?" Skinner guessed accurately.

"Yes." Scully nodded.

"An X file project?" Skinner questioned.

"Yes. At least I think so. He wouldn't tell me about it, and I have no idea where he got the file. I just know there was something he was looking into."

"We have to find out what," Skinner said, suddenly energized by the thought of being useful.

"Yes, but...AD Kersh..." Scully began.

"Don't worry about Kersh. I'll take care of him," Skinner said. "Don't talk to anyone about this, except me. As soon as you've finished here, go to Mulder's apartment to find out if there's any clue there, then be at my apartment at..." Skinner glanced at his watch. "9 am."

"All right." Scully nodded. "I want to have a word with Mulder's doctors before I leave him though, and someone should call his mom."

"I already have." Skinner shrugged. "I've done it so often that I know the number by heart."

"Is she coming to...?" Scully began, but her eyes met Skinner's, and read the look of bemused anger accurately enough.

"Does she ever?" Skinner replied brusquely.

No. Scully thought sadly. *Never.*

The people who paced anxiously outside Mulder's hospital room were always the same - she and Skinner. Every time. They were, to all intents and purposes, his next of kin. It suddenly struck Scully how she had never noticed Skinner's consistent presence before, or if she had, she had never found it strange or touching. She had just taken it for granted - his concern over one of his agents - but now it seemed like more than that. She suddenly knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she and Mulder were the only agents he spent long hours waiting in hospital corridors to hear news about. She did not doubt that he visited other agents wounded in the line of duty - he would view that as part of his job - but this devotion, the long hours, the restless, pacing worry, he reserved only for Mulder and Scully. Seeing him with new eyes, she caught the distracted look on his face, as he focused on something just beyond her right shoulder. She turned to look, but couldn't see whatever it was that had his rapt attention.

"Sir? What will you do?" She asked, as he brushed past her, moving purposefully towards the door.

"I...need to see someone," Skinner replied, and then he was gone. Scully stared after him, then glanced down at Mulder. His sightless eyes gave her the heebie jeebies. She smoothed his hair, and squeezed his hand again, trying to ignore them.

"Mulder, wherever you are, you need to get back here soon," she whispered. "Skinner's gone nuts."

"Fox...this is Senator Matheson..."

"Fox... Help me!"

"Samantha?"

"Fox, your mother and I have something to tell you."

"Is it about Sam?"

"We're getting a divorce."

"Senator Matheson?"

"Sam! Samantha?"

Mulder quivered, placing his arms over his ears so that he wouldn't have to hear. He curled his body into a fetal position, and began to moan softly as the voices faded into a background whisper. He didn't know how long he laid there, but he was grateful for the darkness that enveloped him like a blanket, soothing him. After an eon, he cautiously raised his head and looked around. He was in a cell. There were shadows on the far wall, and bars on the one tiny window, far above his head. Three tiny fingers of light shone in, dust particles shimmering in their beam. Mulder ran his hands along the wall behind him. It was made of pure stone - yet curiously it didn't feel cold beneath his touch, and was perfectly smooth, despite its appearance. Mulder got to his feet, unsteadily, still hearing the whispers in the corridor outside. He walked furtively around the cell until he came to a door. He knew without trying it that it was locked.

"Fox..." the voice was right beside him. Mulder jumped.

"Dad?" He whirled around, but there was no sign of his father.

"Fox?" The voice was right outside his cell door. "I'm leaving."

"Dad. Wait for me. Please..." Mulder struggled with the cell door, trying desperately to open it.

"Fox. I'm going now."

"No! Wait. Please wait." Mulder tugged and tugged on the door, but it remained resolutely locked.

"There's another way out. Come this way."

Mulder jumped. The voice had spoken from right behind him. He turned and saw his father, standing with his hand held out. Bill Mulder was dressed in jeans and an old sweater. He looked so young - not much older than Mulder himself.

"Dad!" he cried in relief, running towards the other man, then stopping short. Bill Mulder smiled at him, his customary distant, distracted smile, but didn't offer up the hug that Mulder had never stopped craving all his life.

"Come with me, son. I can get you out of here," his father said. He gestured with his hand again, impatiently.

"I don't know." Mulder licked his lips, glancing around the walls of the cell. It was dark in here, but it was...safe.

"Come on, Fox." Bill Mulder said tersely. "For god's sake don't dawdle. Make your mind up!" Mulder hesitated, and then reached out and took his father's hand.

"Fox...this is Senator Matheson." Mulder blinked. He was in the living room of his old house in Chilmark. In front of him stood an impossibly imposing man - in his late thirties, tanned, with thick blond hair. His eyes were a piercing blue. Mulder stared at him sulkily. "I told the Senator you'd help him with his re-election campaign," his father was stating in his usual implacable way. "You have a few months to kill before you go to Oxford."

"Ah yes - Oxford. You're quite the rising young star. I've heard all about you." The senator grinned, his white teeth absurdly straight in his wide, amused mouth. Mulder resisted an urge to knock them out with his fist. He blushed and stared at his feet.

"I don't think you want me on your campaign, sir..." he muttered.

"Of course he does." His father slammed his hand into the small of Mulder's back. "It'll be a great experience for you, son."

"I don't want to!" Mulder snapped mutinously.

"Excuse us, Senator." Bill Mulder took hold of Mulder's arm, and hauled him into the cloakroom, away from the other guests milling around. Mulder leaned back, inhaling the musty scent of damp coats.

"What the hell is all this about?" His father demanded.

"I told you I don't want to help him in his dumb campaign. I don't even agree with what he stands for!" Mulder yelled, unable to meet his father's eye.

"Oh you don't 'agree'." Bill Mulder mocked. "You're too young to have an opinion, Fox. And I don't want you moping around the house for the next three months. You'll help him with his campaign. I had to pull a lot of strings to engineer this opportunity for you, you ungrateful little shit."

"I won't." Mulder stared obstinately at the ground.

"Yes. You will." Bill Mulder moved forward and grasped his son's shoulders. "Now, get back in there and apologize to him."

"No." Mulder held his ground, but he could feel the tears forming in his eyes. "You always do this to me, Dad, always make my decisions for me. Well I've had enough! I'm old enough to make my own decisions!"

"While you live under my roof..." his father began.

"You'll do as I say...yeah, I know. Change the record, old man." Mulder didn't bother to duck the expected cuff. He bit his lip as the blow landed on the side of his face, and tried to hold back the tears. His father was standing so close that Mulder could smell his aftershave and the scent of whisky.

"Don't you dare sass me!" Bill Mulder hissed. "I've had enough of your constant sulks, your tantrums. You've worn your mother out with the way you run off without telling anyone, your behavior at school..."

"I get the grades don't I?" Mulder muttered sulkily.

"That's not in question. Your attitude is. I will not have you hanging around the house brooding for the next few months, especially knowing your propensity for getting into trouble. Your mother and I have enough to deal with..." His father stopped. Mulder looked up for the first time, and saw the troubled expression in his father's eyes.

I love you, Mulder thought suddenly, silently. Why didn't I notice this before? How come I never saw how hard it was for you and mom when you were breaking up? What an arrogant little shit I must have been to live with. He stepped outside time, and watched as his father hauled his 18-year-old self back into the living room, and over to the senator.

"Ah, our hot headed young friend." The senator smiled, and Mulder found himself settling back inside the body of his younger self. He felt as if he had been slugged in the gut, as he was forced to make the humiliating apology that his father demanded of him.

"I'm sorry, sir," he mumbled. "I'd be..." he glanced at his father, "honored to help you in your campaign."

"Good." The senator held out his hand, and pumped Mulder's vigorously. "I'm glad to have you onboard, son. The young ones always have the best ideas, don't they, Bill?"

Bill Mulder glanced at his son coolly.

"Yes, Richard. I believe they do," he murmured, without conviction.

George Washington University Medical Center.

January 6, 1999.

Skinner ran along the hospital corridor, his eyes fixed on the figure just a little way in front. It was the boy dressed in the bullet-ridden, bloodstained uniform. The boy who had been in his bedroom earlier, in Mulder's apartment. The boy who had shown up a moment ago in Mulder's hospital room, his dark eyes mocking. The boy who held the answers to this. The boy knew what had happened to Mulder, and Skinner had get those answers from him.

"Stop..." Skinner caught up, put a hand on the boy's shoulder, swung him around...and found himself looking into the puzzled blue eyes of a medical student, wearing a white coat.

"Sir?" The young man asked. "Are you all right, sir?" His eyes flickered over Skinner's unshaven jaw and disheveled clothing.

"I'm fine..." Skinner muttered, releasing the man, and walking off, his expression dazed.

He didn't remember the journey home, but he got there somehow, took a shower, shaved, got dressed, and made himself a cup of coffee.

"Feeling better now?" He jumped. In the corner of the room, watching him with those dark, amused eyes, was the boy.

"What the hell is going on? What's happening to me?" Skinner demanded, slamming the coffee cup down.

"You're losing them. That's what's happening." The boy smirked, and reached up an absent finger to one of the bullet holes in his arm, fingering the torn fabric of his uniform. "Just like you lost Sharon, and all the others. What is it with you, Walter?"

"Fuck you!" Skinner snarled, advancing on the boy.

"Don't be an idiot. You can't hurt me." The boy laughed, and Skinner stopped dead in his tracks. "What did you think you were going to do? Kill me again?"

"Shut. Up."

"I've been dead once already, and I'll die again before this is through."

"Why are you here?" Skinner whispered, gazing into the youth's mocking eyes.

"To help you." The boy said, his face becoming solemn. "Shit." He shook his dark head, and gazed around the apartment. "I never knew it'd come to this. I never knew **you'd** come to this."

"And if you had?" Skinner asked.

"I think I'd have stayed dead." The boy replied.

"So how's it going, Fox?" The Senator slapped Mulder on the shoulder, and the teenager looked up, unable to keep the adoration from his eyes. It hadn't taken him long to fall under Matheson's spell. Hell, everyone fell under Matheson's spell. There wasn't anybody in his campaign team who wouldn't bend over backwards to help the Senator. People stayed late, sometimes all night as well as all day, and the team had fallen into an easy repartee and camaraderie, influenced by the laid back style of the man they were working for.

"Fine. I got that information you were asking for. You know..." Mulder glanced around the room furtively. "The stuff on Mitchell's bank account."

Mitchell was Matheson's chief rival, and they had all been looking for ways to tarnish the other man's reputation. Mulder thought he had come up with just that.

"Great." Matheson's smile didn't falter, but his tone dropped to a whisper. "Bring it up to my room later this evening, Fox. Don't tell anyone. I have a feeling that this could be it!" His hand massaged the back of Mulder's neck for a second, and Mulder felt the electric sparks run up and down his spine. He would have walked into a tidal wave for this man.

Matheson disappeared into a crowd of mini-skirted girls, all giggling and simpering, holding onto his every word. The senator played to the crowd, making jokes, patting a few pert behinds, but his hands never strayed any further. Mulder watched him, awe-struck.

"I wish all that pussy would pant after me like that, " Wayne Hunter remarked, glancing over at Matheson.

"Yeah. Me too," Mulder grinned, his eyes going back to the little cluster of women, seeking out Matheson, unable to take his eyes off the senator.

"At least Matheson can keep his dick away from all those cunts," Hunter remarked. "That's what lost Azares the last election. All his goddamn women on the side."

"Yeah. No scandals around our guy." Mulder said as he watched as the senator made his way towards the door. "Squeaky clean."

Mulder was surprised when Hunter laughed out loud.

"Is that what you think?" he roared.

"Yeah. What do you mean?" Mulder turned back to stare at his friend, frowning.

"I mean, that what to you and I is pussy heaven, isn't much temptation to the senator!" Hunter whispered, with a knowing wink.

"I don't get." Mulder gazed back blankly.

"It's easy to resist something you don't want." Hunter winked again. "Let's just say that the senator has...other interests."

Mulder just sat there, still frowning. "Oh. I see," he said, but he didn't.

George Washington University Medical Center.

January 6, 1999.

Scully came away from the doctor with very few facts. Mulder's eardrums had been ruptured, possibly by a loud noise. Thankfully, the damage wasn't serious, wouldn't affect his hearing if he regained consciousness, and had nothing to do with his present state of catatonia - as far as anybody could tell. Scully left his bedside reluctantly, having told the doctor that she was to be informed, immediately, if there was any change in his condition. Then she left.

She went straight to Mulder's apartment, and let herself in. It wasn't hard - the door hadn't just been pushed open - it was hanging off its hinges. She was just surprised that Skinner hadn't done himself an injury crashing through it like this. She pushed that thought to the back of her mind. Now was not the time to start worrying about her ex-boss's strange behavior. She had Mulder to think about. She screwed up her nose as she scouted around her partner's apartment.

"Mulder, why must you always leave everything in such a mess!" she scolded absently, picking up one malodorous sock and holding it at arm's length. "That is so disgusting!" she berated. She sat down at Mulder's desk, and switched on his computer, then turned to the pile of papers on the floor, sorting through them to see what her partner had been working on.

An hour or so later, Scully found what she had been looking for. She glanced at her watch. 7.19. Good. That meant she had enough time to go home and get washed and changed before her meeting with Skinner. As she got up to leave, Scully paused, and dropped some flakes of food into the fish tank.

"He might be gone for a little while," she told them sadly.

"Sir?" Mulder pushed the door open when there was no reply to his knock. He could hear the sound of a shower running and stood, nervously, in Matheson's hotel room, wondering whether he should go away, and come back later. Then the shower stopped, and a few seconds later Matheson walked into the room in his dressing gown. He was still wet, his blond hair combed back off his face, and sticking to his head in a way that Mulder found curiously transfixing.

"I'm sorry, sir...you said to come up here with..." Mulder hesitated, pointing at the sensitive file and looking anxiously towards the door.

"That's all right, Fox. Come in. Shut the door behind you." Matheson smiled that easy smile. Mulder had never known such overwhelming charm. The senator rarely ever lost his cool, even under the utmost pressure, and god knows there had been enough of that in the past few weeks. For Mulder, used to his father's silences, moods, and occasional alcoholic rages, it was a revelation, and he looked at Matheson with nothing less than hero worship. The other man fulfilled the role of father figure, big brother, role model and friend without difficulty, aware of Mulder's crush on him, but never teasing him about it. Mulder handed the senator the file, and a droplet of water from the other man's wet hair fell on Mulder's arm, like a tear. Mulder watched as it trickled down his fingers, without moving to wipe it away.

"Take a seat." Matheson waved his hand at a chair, and Mulder sat, nervously, swallowing as he watched Matheson pace around the room. He found himself crossing his fingers, hoping against hope that he had done well, that Matheson would smile, that he could bask in the sunshine of this man's praise for one small moment of time.

At long last, Matheson stopped pacing and looked up. The frown that had been creasing his forehead disappeared.

"You know, Fox..." he murmured. "I think that we just won an election!"

Mulder sat there for a moment, trying to understand what the senator meant, and then the realization sank in.

"You think it's enough?"

"Enough? It's a brilliant piece of investigative work! Nobody could have done better!" Matheson touched Mulder's shoulder, and squeezed softly. Mulder looked up and felt himself drowning in that steady blue gaze. "You really do have a brilliant future ahead of you, Fox." Matheson said, just before his lips touched those of his young protégé.

Mulder sat on the chair, his mouth open, dumbfounded.

"Did you like that?" Matheson laughed at him, as he finished the kiss.

"I...don't...yes..." Mulder whispered.

"Fox, have you ever had a girlfriend?" Matheson asked, his fingers tracing hot patterns on Mulder's cotton shirt.

"No." Mulder stared at his bitten fingernails, flushing at this shameful admission.

"It's all right." Matheson put a finger under Mulder's chin and raised it up so that Mulder was looking at him. "You've wanted one though, yes?"

"Yes, of course. I never know what to say."

"Hey - with eyes like those, and lips like these..." Matheson went back for another soft, tender kiss, "...you shouldn't have to say anything!"

"I..."

"It's okay." Matheson pulled Mulder to his feet, and held him for a moment, in his strong arms. Mulder felt the tension flow out of his body. This felt so right. "You won't say anything to anyone about this will you, Fox?" the senator asked, his fingers caressing Mulder's hair.

"No. I wouldn't betray you. Never!" Mulder insisted.

"Good boy. Come here then."

Matheson led Mulder over to the bed, pushed him down.

"It's okay, Fox." He held Mulder's face between his hands, and kissed him deeply. Mulder opened up his mouth to that searching tongue, wanting it, needing it. He was aware of Matheson's hands on his shirt, undoing it, pushing it from his shoulders. "You know...you really are so very beautiful..." Matheson's fingers were on his nipples, caressing his bare flesh, and Mulder lay back with a groan. He watched, through long, dark eyelashes, as Matheson opened his robe, to reveal his pulsing erection. He felt that he should be disturbed, repulsed by it, but he wasn't. He just wanted the Senator to touch him, and he wanted to touch the Senator. Matheson covered Mulder's body with his own, pressing his hard cock into Mulder's thigh, kissing Mulder's chest, his neck, his face.

"You've never done this before, have you?" Matheson chuckled. Mulder opened his mouth to speak but Matheson closed it with a kiss. "It's all right. I'll be gentle." He pulled Mulder close, undoing his jeans, reaching inside to find Mulder's hard cock. Mulder spurted out almost immediately upon the other man's touch, and Matheson laughed. Mulder flushed and pulled away.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I can never hold on."

"You're young. It's normal." Matheson licked a kiss along Mulder's neck. "It doesn't matter. Here." He tugged Mulder's jeans off, and then his stained underwear, and threw them on the floor along with the youth's socks and sneakers. Then he got rid of his own robe, and pulled Mulder's naked body against his own. His fingers massaged their way down to Mulder's buttocks and caressed him there, then slipped inside him. Mulder tensed.

"Ssh...hush baby..." Matheson stroked softly. "I'll make you nice and ready...we can go slow. We have all the time in the world...you don't need to worry...everyone has to have a first time..."

Mulder lay still on his side, lost in the most pleasurable sensations he'd ever had in his young life. Matheson wanted him! He never in a million years could have dreamed that his idol would want him like this. He allowed his legs to relax, thrusting back onto Matheson's fingers, whimpering with unexpected desire, feeling a stirring in his own cock again. Something cool and slick being pushed inside him made him jump.

"It's all right...only some lube..." Matheson whispered.

"Lube?" He repeated dumbly.

"Lubricant. You'll need it, or it'll hurt. It might hurt a little bit anyway, but I hope not. I'll be careful."

Mulder disappeared into that strange dream-like state once more, as Matheson played with his buttocks, stroked his balls, gently pushed two, then three fingers inside him, stretching and relaxing him. Then Matheson shifted, pushing Mulder's leg forwards, pressing his body closer to Mulder's, and from some distance Mulder felt aware that something was about to happen. He started to whimper before he even felt the tip of Matheson's cock as it nudged the rim of his anus, and then his buttocks were stretched apart, and he felt the hard length slip inside him, making him gasp.

"Okay, baby? Okay?" Matheson pulled Mulder's hips close towards him, his hand lightly caressing Mulder's cock until Mulder was hard again. "Kids! Matheson laughed out loud at the speed with which Mulder had achieved his erection. "You're amazing." He nuzzled his face against Mulder's cheek, and Mulder squirmed, wishing more than anything else that Matheson would withdraw, sure that his ass would be ripped apart, but instead Matheson began a slow, steady thrusting, his hand on Mulder's cock moving in time to the rhythmic motions of his hips. "Okay, baby?" Matheson crooned again, and Mulder nodded, biting down on his lip. "Hey, relax..." Matheson paused for a moment, running his fingers over Mulder's thighs, stroking him as if he were a fine pedigree stallion, gentling and calming him, and Mulder found himself relaxing. Matheson's thrusting picked up pace and for a moment Mulder thought he would cry out in pain - and then a blinding flash of something exquisite flooded his senses, and he gasped.

"What the hell...?"

"Ah, looks like we've found your g-spot." Matheson laughed in his ear, thrusting against the spot again, and making Mulder moan in ecstasy.

"G...G spot?" Mulder stammered when the flashing white light cleared from behind his eyes.

"Yeah - it's not only women that have those, sweetheart. Guys have them too. You just need to know where to look." Matheson thrust again, with a long, slow stroke and Mulder thought he would pass out. Instead he came, making Matheson laugh. "Hell, you're going to

have come five times before I've even come once at this rate," he teased. "I can stay hard for quite a while. You okay with that, baby? Might hurt some in the morning, but it means I can keep doing this..." he thrust again and Mulder whimpered, this time with pleasure. The thrusting became urgent, and now Mulder felt more soreness than pleasure, but he didn't begrudge this man anything. When Matheson finally climaxed, Mulder could feel his come flooding inside him, warm, and somehow comforting. Matheson withdrew carefully, and enveloped Mulder in his arms, kissing the back of his neck.

"You were great, baby," he nuzzled. "Fantastic."

"So were you," Mulder murmured, turning around and kissing his new lover fiercely on the lips. Matheson smiled, and held Mulder's naked body close against his own. Mulder drifted off into a dream world, happily sated by sex and rejoicing in the loss of his virginity to this wonderful, charismatic man. "I love you..." he whispered before he fell asleep in his lover's arms.

Matheson looked down on Mulder's innocent, sleeping face, and gave a little chuckle, softly caressing Mulder's dark hair.

"Sleeping beauty," he whispered. "You are a stunner, Fox Mulder." He kissed Mulder's forehead softly. "But let's not talk about love, kid," he murmured. "This is the real world. You'll grow up."

After a while, he nudged Mulder over to the other side of the bed, and got up, taking another shower, and returning to the report Mulder had brought him. Sex was fun...but politics...that was something else. That was in his blood, and nothing, and nobody - Matheson cast a glance over at his sleeping young lover - was more important than his ambitions. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and grinned. "Seducing young innocents," he murmured at himself, making a face. "Oh well, everybody needs a hobby, and that cherry was so sweet." He smacked his lips together. "Let's just hope there isn't a picture of you in some attic somewhere, Dorian!" he mocked, admiring his thick head of hair and handsome features.

Mulder watched sadly, as if from a great distance. He felt strange, dislocated, at once inside his own body, and yet outside it too, both watching and participating.

"Mulder!" somebody called, but he didn't have the strength to turn around.

George Washington University Medical Center.

January 6, 1999.

"Mulder!" Skinner stood helplessly, watching for a sign of life on Mulder's expressionless face, but saw nothing. He had returned to the hospital before his meeting with Scully, hoping against hope that Mulder would somehow have made a dramatic recovery in the few hours since he had left, but there was no change.

"Mulder, if you can hear me...Scully said hearing is the last sense to go...I just wanted to say..." Skinner paused, and gazed helplessly at the other man. "Nothing," he growled at last. As he left the hospital room, he was aware of a mocking laugh following him, and a silent footstep walking at his side.

Crystal City. VA.
January 6, 1999.

"Come in, Agent Scully."

Scully paused in the doorway to Skinner's apartment. Her boss - ex boss - looked like a different man from the one she had seen at the hospital earlier. With his work clothing, he had also donned that familiar guarded persona, not letting anyone get close, or see what lay underneath. Scully had her suspicions about what was there though - on the occasions she had asked for his help, he had provided it, despite his initial protestations, and usually at some personal cost to himself. Sensing her gaze upon him, he looked at her, questioningly, gesturing her to a seat.

"Did you find anything?" he asked, his eyes burning with an eager kind of hope as he sat down on the couch.

"I think so." She pulled out the folder. "Have you ever seen the film 'Awakenings' sir? It had Robert De Niro and Robin Williams in it."

"I don't think so." Skinner shook his head, his expression clearly showing that he wondered where this was leading.

"It portrayed people suffering from a rare form of sleeping sickness. A kind of narcolepsy..."

"And you think that's what Mulder has?" Skinner cut in, before she could continue.

"No. I don't. But I think that's what he was investigating."

"Mulder was investigating a disease?" Skinner frowned, trying to understand. "Why?"

"Because the case he was investigating was suspicious, and I don't think that Mulder thought it was a disease. I suspect that he thought it was a weapon."

"Explain." Skinner leaned forward, and took the pictures that Scully was handing to him.

"A few days ago, five people in Thurmont, MD, were struck down by the same illness. They all suffered bleeding from the ears, and they all subsequently went into a profound catatonic state...from which none of them have yet emerged."

Skinner's head jerked up, the faint light of hope fading from his eyes.

"Mulder thought it was suspicious that so many people went down with this illness in one small town?" he asked Scully. She nodded.

"He went down there, and asked a few questions. I don't think he got the answers he wanted. A couple of nights ago he was caught trying to break into an armaments factory..."

"Why would he want to break in there?" Skinner frowned, silently berating Mulder for his methods.

"Because all the people affected by the illness worked in the factory," Scully told him.

"I suppose we must presume that good old fashioned knocking on the door, and asking for their co-operation didn't work? He must have felt they were covering something up."

"I suppose so." Scully shrugged. "He didn't tell me about any of this, sir. I dug it out of his notes, and made a few 'phone calls. He was working on this alone."

"Why? Why didn't he tell you?" Skinner's dark eyes bored into Scully's soul making her heart ache. How could she explain it to him? How could she explain the distance that had sprung up between her and Mulder, the way he perceived her to have betrayed him?

"I...don't know," she lied with a shrug. For a moment she felt as if he could take the answers from her soul just by looking at her with those intense dark eyes. She had a sensation of being sucked into a vortex, walking down a path towards a distant light. A faint whisper touched against her mind, and she blinked, drawing back.

"I'm sorry," Skinner said, apropos of nothing. "So - did he find anything at this factory?"

"Not that I can tell." Scully shook her head. "I think he was apprehended before he got very far." *As usual*, she thought to herself. He chuckled in agreement. It was only later that it occurred to her that she hadn't voiced the thought.

"Well I don't think we have any choice." Skinner got to his feet, and pulled on his jacket.

"We're going to Thurmont?"

"Yes." Skinner nodded grimly. "I'll meet you in the parking garage downstairs in an hour, Agent Scully. I think we need to check out both the other victims, and that factory, for ourselves."

"Sir? Why the delay? We could leave now." Scully suggested.

"An hour," he repeated brusquely. "I need to get some...supplies."

This was very probably heaven, Mulder thought to himself, as he lay in his lover's arms on the hillside. It was dark, and the lights of the city twinkled beneath them.

"Happy?" Matheson whispered.

"Yes...very." Mulder leaned his head back on the senator's shoulder. They had a rare evening off from campaigning, and Matheson had brought him out here to lie under the stars. The car door was open behind them, and a tape was playing on the stereo. Something soothing, and melancholy, and beautiful - something classical.

"Do you know what this piece is?" Matheson asked.

"Bach?" Mulder hazarded, his knowledge of classical music being exceedingly limited.

"No!" Matheson laughed, hugging him tight. "This is Mozart - more specifically "The Marriage of Figaro." Do you know what the significance of this piece is?"

"Well, recalling music appreciation with Professor Gantz, Mozart..." Mulder began. It was their private in-joke. Whenever Matheson introduced him to one of his favorite composers, he would ask Mulder the same questions, and Mulder always gave him the same answers. It was a kind of lover's ritual.

"Don't quote the good professor at me!" Matheson interrupted with a wry chuckle. "You must learn to listen with your heart, Fox, not with your head." They lay still for a moment, listening to the music. "This is Voi Che Sapete, and Cherubino is singing about the most beautiful kind of love in the world - first love. Listen, Fox." Mulder lay back, and allowed the music to wash over him. It was beautiful, but maybe it was only beautiful because he was lying out here, beneath the stars, in the arms of the man he loved. He glanced up at his lover, and was surprised to see one, solitary tear wind its way down Matheson's cheek.

"Hey..." he brushed it away with his finger.

"It's all right. This song always does this to me." Matheson smiled.

"You know..." Mulder looked up at the sky. "Whenever I lie under the stars like this, I always think of Sam."

"Your little sister? Why?" Matheson asked.

"I just think that maybe somewhere, she's lying under the same sky, thinking of me. It's sort of comforting."

"Yes. I can see that it would be." Matheson's lips brushed his young lover's hair. "Do you know what I see?"

"Tell me."

"I see a million suns, maybe more, all of which might be circled by planets, just like Earth, and some of those might be capable of supporting life."

"You think so?" Mulder twisted in Matheson's arms, a look of amazement in his eyes.

"Yes. One day I hope to find such life - out there, in the galaxy. The greatest day of my life was when I was only a few years older than you are now, Fox, and I watched man first landing on the moon. As Neil Armstrong stepped out onto that rocky surface, and said those immortal lines, I knew that I too, wanted that kind of immortality." Mulder caught the fierce glow in his lover's eyes. "Oh, I'm no astronaut," Matheson shook his head, "but I want to find what's out there. The first person who discovers an alien civilization will have his name go down in history." Matheson smiled down on his lover. "I want to play a part in making it happen - an important part. It's my dream, Fox. I hope to make it come true one day."

"I hope you will too." Mulder reached up, and kissed his lover's lips.

Thurmont Inn, MD.

January 6, 1999.

They stopped at a motel in the center of Thurmont, and Scully followed Skinner into the lobby, dimly noting that he carried an overnight bag, which he kept in his car, just as she and Mulder did. Somehow that idea seemed strange. Surely he rarely had occasion to be out in the field? Then she remembered the number of occasions to her knowledge when he had worked all through the night, and she conceded that it wasn't so strange after all. It brought home to her how little she really knew this strange, brooding man, with his intense dark eyes, and deeply private soul.

"We'll leave our things here, and then head out to the hospital," he told her, and she nodded, wishing for a moment that it was Mulder who was here, with his comforting, familiar ways, annoying though he could often be. Skinner seemed to catch the thought, and gave her a sad, strained smile that twisted her heart. Why did he care so much whether Mulder lived or died? she wondered as she went to her room, and then she berated herself for having such a mean thought. Skinner had shown that he cared on numerous occasions previously. Only this time...this time it was more than that. She had never seen him like this - as if he was fighting some inner battle, haunted by some demons she could not guess at. No, wait - she had seen him like this before - during that incident with the call girl. He had seemed lost then as well. Were the dreams the common link? Scully dismissed this thought to the back of her mind as she joined him back in the car. Now wasn't the time to psychoanalyze her boss, however strangely he appeared to be behaving. She had to think about Mulder, about getting Mulder back. *Damn you for running off, and doing this alone, Mulder!* she cursed. *Damn you for not trusting me any more!* Her anger soon dissipated though, as she remembered his pale face, lying on that hospital bed, his eyes wide open and staring into space. *Miss you, Mulder...Miss you...* she chanted in her head, over and over again. Beside her, Skinner's jaw was clenched so tight you could have bounced rocks off it. Scully turned her face away from the grim faced man beside her and stared, glumly, out of the car window. *Miss you...*

"Who is she?" Mulder asked, his breathing come in shallow gasps. He felt as if he had been physically hit.

"Her name is Vanessa." Matheson said softly, his blue eyes never leaving his young lover's face.

"Vanessa?" Mulder flailed wildly, trying to remember a Vanessa on the campaign team.

"You don't know her." Matheson took a sip of wine, and reached out a hand to gently caress his lover's hair. Mulder knocked it away, getting to his feet, pacing wildly.

"You said you loved me!" he protested. "I don't understand this! Is it me? Did I do something wrong?"

"No. Of course not," Matheson said gently. "You're a wonderful young man, Fox. I love you very much. But this..." He waved his hand around the room, gesturing towards the rumpled bed where they had recently made love. "Well it couldn't last forever. You knew that. You're going to Oxford in a few days..."

"I wasn't going to go!" Mulder wailed. "I was going to stay here, with you."

"Don't be a fool. You have a life to get on with, a glittering career ahead of you. You have new people to meet, and to fall in love with." Matheson smiled. "Trust me. I believe in you, Fox."

"I don't want you to believe in me!" Mulder cried. "I want you to love me. That's all I've ever wanted."

"I do. I always will, but it's a grown up kind of love, Fox. You'll understand. One day."

"So now you love her more? Is that it?" Mulder could feel the tears rising in his eyes, and couldn't stop them spilling out, flowing down his cheeks unchecked.

"No, of course not. I don't love her at all. She knows that. This is a marriage of convenience."

"Convenience...?" Mulder echoed, unbelieving. "What about love?"

"I'm a politician." Matheson shrugged. "Some things are more important than love."

"NO!" Mulder felt as if he would be physically ill.

"Vanessa won't expect me to perform any...conjugal duties." Matheson reached out, and pulled Mulder into his arms, kissed his head softly. "She's made other arrangements in that department, I believe. Discreet ones. People were beginning to talk, Fox. It was time for me to settle down. My married status, or lack of it, was making me a target for rumor and hearsay."

"I could still stay. If you and Vanessa aren't..." Mulder looked up, hopefully, allowing Matheson to stroke his body, responding to his touch as he always did.

"No, sweetheart," Matheson murmured. "You must go - get on with your life. I'll always be here for you, I promise. If you ever need any help in your career..."

"My career? What career?" Mulder broke the embrace, his heart breaking. "The truth is that you just don't want me around any more do you? You want to move onto the next young, eager little cock-sucker that you can find, don't you, Senator? And why is it that you never allowed me to use your first name? Huh? What kind of a power trip have you been on, Richard?"

"You're being hysterical now, Fox." Matheson said coolly, pouring himself another glass of wine. "I told you - it wasn't wise for you to get used to using my first name. Sooner or later, the bedroom would spill over out there..." he pointed at the door. "And then people would start to guess."

"But I love you." Mulder stared brokenly at his feet. "I really love you."

"You'll get over it," Matheson said, not unkindly. He pulled Mulder close to him again, kissed his wide, full lips. "And in the meantime, we still have a few days before you have to go..." His hand snaked lower, dipped into Mulder's boxer shorts.

"No." Mulder pulled back. "You don't need me any more. Best to end it now, so that you can find the next boy. I wouldn't want to cramp your style." He ran out of the room, slamming the door behind him, running and running without knowing where he was or how to stop. When he finally came to a halt, he crouched on the ground, the tears flooding out of him as if they would go on forever, and he was unable to stop them, barely tasting the salt water as it flowed down his cheeks.

Carroll Co. General Hospital, MD.

January 6, 1999.

Skinner gazed at another comatose face, another set of blank, staring eyes and sighed.

"Any answers?" He glanced at Scully, as she flicked through some medical notes.

"Not yet. I'll take these back to the motel, and read them more closely this evening, but basically these people seem to be in exactly the same condition as Mulder."

"Which case was reported first?" Skinner asked, staring at the row of silent victims in front of him.

"Mark Tyler." Scully pointed to a young man in his early twenties. "He was found by his mother a few days ago, bleeding from his ears..."

"What time of day?"

"Morning. She wondered why he hadn't come downstairs for his breakfast." Scully read through the notes.

"I want to talk to her." Skinner started to move towards the door.

"Wait." Scully called him back. "Here's something interesting. The next four victims were all affected at the same time, while they were actually at work."

"In the factory?"

"Yes." Scully nodded.

"Let's go there." Skinner said in a low, grim tone.

LP Manufacturing, Inc.

January 6, 1999.

The factory manager didn't seem surprised to be visited by FBI agents.

"All my paperwork, licenses, everything is in order." He handed Skinner a bulging file. "As I told the other guy you sent here a few days ago."

"Mulder?" Scully asked. The man nodded.

"Yeah. Mulder. That's his name. Security picked him up breaking in here without a warrant later that night."

"Why do you suppose he tried to do that, Mr. Pelman?" Skinner asked, flicking through the file without any expectation of finding anything.

"I dunno. Why don't you ask him?" Pelman said, defensively.

"Because he's in a coma." Skinner snapped back tersely. Pelman's eyes widened in surprise.

"Like some of our guys?" he asked.

"Yes." Skinner moved suddenly, swiftly, into the other man's personal space. "So if you know anything, anything at all, I suggest that you tell us." Scully stared at Skinner, startled by the barely controlled anger in his stance, and the desperation in his body language.

"I don't know anything," Pelman stammered, paling and moving away from Skinner's large, threatening body. "Look, you can go through all the files, take a look around the whole place. I don't have anything to hide."

"Do you believe him?" Scully got into the car beside Skinner an hour later, after they had completed their inspection of the factory, and watched as he rested his forehead wearily on the steering wheel.

"I don't know," Skinner sighed. "He seemed genuinely surprised by the news that Mulder's in the same coma as his workers."

"I agree."

"And he seems genuinely concerned about their welfare."

"Yes. And yet...why was he so defensive? If he had nothing to hide?"

"I can't answer that," Skinner shrugged, "but he did allow us to look all around his factory. Did you see anything suspicious?"

"I don't think so." Scully mused. "How about you?"

"I'm not sure." Skinner thought about it for a moment. "Let's re-cap here. We have six people who have come down with this sickness, or whatever it is. Four of them seem to have been infected at exactly the same time.

"Yes - one minute they're working, next they're out cold, just like Mulder, and nobody sees anything, or hears anything." Scully repeated back the information they had already gleaned while Skinner started the car and drove them back towards the motel. They gathered up all the casework between them, and dumped it on Scully's bed, and then started to read through it.

"I'll order some dinner for both of us." Scully reached for the phone. Skinner glanced up, absently.

"Hmm?"

"Dinner?" she repeated.

"Oh. Yes." He resumed his study of the files.

Scully watched him as she made the call. He was absorbed, engrossed in his reading, but not in the way Mulder was when he became involved in a case. Mulder was all nervous energy - he would throw the files around, talking his theories through, making wild connections. Skinner was quiet. He read quickly, although that didn't surprise her when she considered the large number of reports that he had to deal with on a daily basis, and as he read, his finger rubbed against his jaw, over and over again, in an endlessly repeating motion. Scully turned away, abruptly. Why was it, when to all intents and purposes it was her partner,

Mulder, who was missing, that she found herself feeling more and more, that it was Skinner who was actually lost?

Mulder spent the next few days just wandering around from place to place, crying, until he was exhausted. When he had finally returned home, his mother had stared at him listlessly, seeming not to care where he had been, or what had happened to him. Usually he could at least have relied on his father to yell at him about it, but not this time. This time, he had just shaken his head, poured himself another glass of whisky, and allowed Mulder to disappear up to his room without the usual lecture.

He looked up as his father entered his room, without knocking, his mother following close behind.

"Fox? Are you packed?" His father asked.

"I suppose." Mulder shrugged, knowing his attitude irritated his father, but unable to stop himself. His rucksack lay against his bed, waiting for him to take it to a new life, somewhere a long way away.

"I, uh, that is...your mother and I have something to say to you."

"Oh?" Mulder barely glanced up as he stuffed another pair of socks down the side of his rucksack. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of his mother, her face pale and drawn.

"We...we're getting a divorce."

Mulder stared at the rucksack, at his own hands, at the socks, feeling as if time had stopped still in its tracks.

"Did you hear me? I said we're getting a divorce." His father repeated.

"I heard you." Mulder continued pushing the socks down the side of his rucksack until they were at the bottom.

"Well? Don't you have anything to say?" his father asked.

"Not really." Mulder shrugged, turning his back on his father and going towards the open door of his closet.

"You must." His father reached out, and grabbed his arm.

"Let me go." Mulder turned, his body stiff with misery. "Just go, Dad. Walk out of here. Walk the hell out of my life; disappear into the air like Sam. Go on. Everyone does!"

"I'm not disappearing." His father's eyes were sad. "Please, Fox. I'll still be here..."

"No!" Mulder yelled. "Go to hell, Dad, because you've never been here. Neither of you have. Not since Sam went." He glared at his mother, and she stifled a sudden sob and ran from the room. "Just go, Dad," he shouted, "because do you know what? I won't even notice any difference." He spat the words, ugly words, and saw them wound, the way he had intended. He wanted to take them back, wanted that hug, the one he had always wanted, but it was too late. His father drew back.

"Well if that's the way you feel..."

"It is."

"I'm not leaving just yet. I'll still be here tomorrow. I'll take you to the airport," his father whispered. Mulder shrugged, turned his back, and continued with his packing. "We waited until...we thought it wouldn't matter so much once you'd left home."

"That must be why you couldn't wait to get rid of me." Mulder felt the tears pricking at the back of his eyes, eyes that he had thought were all cried out. He wanted his father to go, to leave him, before he saw the tears.

"It's not like that. Your mother and I haven't been getting along for a long while. You know that..."

"Just go." Mulder whispered, holding onto the closet, his fists white with tension. "Please. Go."

Mulder heard the footsteps as his father left the room, and went down stairs, then the familiar sounds of arguing.

"If you'd been a little more sensitive..."

"Sensitive'? What crazy books have you been reading, woman?"

"He's upset..."

"He'll cope. We all have to. Maybe it'll help him grow up."

"Maybe he's had to grow up too fast."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know what. We haven't given him a childhood since he was twelve years old..."

"Oh for god's sake. You always pander to the boy. You always have..."

"Don't start that again. I just don't care any more."

"I haven't had the feeling that you've **cared** for a long time, Teena."

"Maybe I haven't. I don't care now. I just want you gone. I want to be on my own, without you, without him...without any of you. I've had enough!"

Upstairs, sitting on his bed, staring listlessly at his rucksack, Mulder flinched at her words.

From somewhere far away, he sat and watched himself, and felt a silent numbness inside. Pity, not just for himself, but for them as well, a family torn apart, unable to do more than to keep on hurting each other. Yet, it was easy to see now, from this perspective, how much they both had loved him. He hadn't seen it then, sunk in his own misery, still reeling from the pain of his first love affair. He had been too close to see that his father's drinking was a symptom of his anguish, that his mother's distance had been her way of protecting herself from loving anyone too much after the disappearance of her daughter. His own self destructive behavior - running off, his school reports, his general attitude - all those had been his reactions to the crisis within the family. They had all been trapped in a bitter cycle of self-destruction, and none of them had been able to break it, or even to offer comfort to those they loved best. In the end, anger and recrimination were the only recourse against the pain. More than anything else, Mulder wished he could have a second chance, and go back and tell them that he loved them.

Instead, he found himself finishing his packing, then hunkering down in his bed for a few hours sleep. He woke early, left a short note on the kitchen table, and then set off for the airport, without saying goodbye.

Thurmont Inn, MD.

January 6, 1999.

"So. Fact..." Skinner wrote the number '1' in the margin of his pad. "All the people affected by this illness work at the factory."

"Fact." Scully nodded, making a similar list on her laptop. "Except Mulder."

"Of course, Mulder," Skinner noted down, "but he did break in there."

"Yes, but he didn't come down with the illness until he was back in DC. Hmm, maybe there's an incubation period," Scully mused.

"Right." Skinner nodded in agreement. "Or he was infected here, and then taken back to his apartment. Is that possible, Doctor?" Skinner glanced at Scully where she sat opposite him, on the side of the bed.

"Long shot." She typed it in anyway. "Tyler was the first to be infected - Mulder the last."

"That we know of," Skinner pointed out. She nodded.

"In between, four other workers at the factory were affected at exactly the same time..."

Soon the pad and laptop were both respectively filled with notes. Scully was amazed at how quickly they worked together. She would never have expected to have this sort of rapport with the Assistant Director, but they both used the same working methods, and she was stunned by how easy their partnership was. They just seemed to be on the same wavelength.

"So, it's very likely either some sort of virus in the factory itself..." Skinner mused.

"Or something to do with the weaponry currently being tested there," Scully finished, wishing it was this easy with Mulder. He'd have theorized a demon that lived off brain energy, or something equally outlandish by now.

"Precisely." Skinner crossed something off on his pad. "Those are the only logical explanations."

"Yes. Logical." Scully nodded, finishing the list on her laptop. They nodded to themselves, and then looked up at the same time, bursting out laughing.

"We're going about this the wrong way, aren't we?" Skinner sighed.

"Yes." Scully shook her head. "If we want to find out what happened to Mulder down here, then we need to come to the same conclusions as Mulder, and that means..."

"Thinking like Mulder." Skinner said glumly, staring at his pad, and then putting a big, thick, black line through everything he'd written.

"So. Which of us is going to be Mulder?" She got out a coin, and flipped it. "Toss you for it?"

"No. I'll be Mulder," he said with a weary sigh. "You're used to bouncing ideas off him."

"I also know him better than you do. I might find it easier to think like him," Scully pointed out.

Skinner stared into space for a moment. "No," he murmured at last. "I, uh, might find it easier to get into his head than you think."

Scully was intrigued, but she didn't have time to respond to this strange comment, because Skinner had gotten up, and was grabbing his coat.

"What are you doing?" she asked, astonished.

"I'm behaving like Mulder," he told her with a wolfish grin. "I'm ditching you."

"Are you Mulder?" The girl stopped on the stairs as he tried to push past her, his gaze fixed firmly on his shoes.

"Yeah," he growled morosely, moving on up the stairs.

"There's a letter for you. It arrived a few days ago - before you got here - and it's been waiting on the hall table. What does the F stand for?"

Mulder looked up into the greenest eyes he'd ever seen, set in flawless alabaster skin which covered two perfectly sculpted cheekbones to dazzling perfection.

"Uh...Fox..." he whispered.

"Fox? No! Really?" she laughed at him. "You must have Jason's old room."

"He's the Motorhead fan?" Mulder has spent his first day in his new digs taking down all the posters.

"Yeah. What're you into?"

"I dunno." Mulder shrugged, finding it difficult to breathe with those exotic, almond shaped eyes fixed on him. The girl suddenly, and abruptly disappeared down the stairs and he cursed himself over and over again for his stupidity. "I dunno," he mocked himself, stomping up the stairs to his room, and throwing himself down on the bed. He was surprised to hear the knock on the door a few seconds later.

"Fox?" The girl stuck her head around the door. She giggled suddenly. "Fox," she said again. "Wow! What a weird name."

"Hmm." He wasn't sure if she was laughing at him, or not. She bit on her lip in an exaggerated little-girl apology.

"Sorry. It's kind of cool too. Here." She handed him an envelope, but instead of leaving him she sat herself down on the bed, and bounced up and down. "You'll be comfy here," she said throatily. He gazed at her, his Adam's Apple bobbing up and down convulsively. "Well - aren't you going to open it?" she laughed.

"What? Oh. Yeah." Mulder looked down at the envelope and froze. He recognized the neat handwriting, and the elaborately looped 'F's and 'M's.

"Who's it from? An old girlfriend?" The girl gave him a sly, knowing glance.

"Kind'a." Mulder shrugged, running his index finger under the envelope flap to open his letter.

"My dear Fox, I do hope you have settled in at Oxford, and are already conquering the local populace with your beauty and brilliance. I'm sorry for the way our last meeting ended - I never intended to cause you pain. I hope that if you ever need my help in your chosen

career, you do not hesitate to contact me. I have, and will always have, the fondest of memories of our time together and will do everything in my power to aid you. I know you well enough, I think, to rely on your discretion in respect to our fleeting, but fantastic few months together. All my love, RM."

Mulder read and re-read the letter, barely aware of the girl's curious green eyes fixed upon him. He wasn't stupid - the Senator was clearly buying him off. That last meeting hadn't gone the way he'd intended. He had expected that he would have been able to control Mulder just by taking him to bed. When that had failed, he had become worried that Mulder might do something to jeopardize his career, and he was heading him off before it came to that. *I'm not your fucking whore to be paid off with offers of help with my goddamn career, Senator!* Mulder wanted to wad up the letter, and throw it away, but something stopped him. "All my love...all my love..." Instead, he folded the letter up carefully, and placed it under his pillow.

"She dumped you?" The girl asked, seeing his expression, and laying a sympathetic hand on his arm.

"Something like that." He shrugged.

"Good." The girl gave a tinkling laugh, and he looked up, outraged by her comment. Those green eyes held a promise that stilled his protest. "I suppose this means you're available then?" The girl laid her long, lean body next to him on the bed, and ran her fingers lightly along his arm. "My name's Phoebe," she whispered.

Thurmont Inn, MD.

January 6, 1999.

"Skinner." The voice hissed tersely down the 'phone.

"Sir?" Scully barely recognized his voice. It had been three hours since he had disappeared mysteriously into the night, and she had hesitated before calling him on his cell phone, but this was important. "Why are you whispering? Where are you?"

"Never mind. What is it, Scully?"

"I have some news. It's about one of the victims - Mark Tyler."

"The first person to fall into the coma?"

"Yes." Scully paused. This wasn't the sort of news she wanted to give over the telephone, not while Skinner was behaving so strangely.

"Well?"

"I'm afraid he just died, sir."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line.

"Sir?" Scully pulled her coat on. "I'm going over to the hospital now, sir."

"Yes. Of course. Scully?"

"Yes?" She picked up her purse and keys, and opened the door.

"How long...uh...?" Skinner cleared his throat.

"He was in a catatonic condition for four days, sir."

"I see. I'll meet you at the hospital in half an hour."

"I don't want to go on." Mulder hovered on the ceiling, watching as Phoebe started undressing him. He saw himself, his eager fingers clumsily undoing her blouse, desperately fumbling with her bra, until he had access to her beautiful, golden breasts. He paused, hardly daring to touch the silky skin. Finally, she took his hand in her own and brought it up to one darkly pink nipple, arching her back as she pressed his fingers against it. With a choking moan, he leaned forward, and took it gently into his mouth, reveling in the feel of her breasts cupped in his hands, the taste of her salty skin. She was so...different, so exciting. Matheson had at least taught him how to control his ejaculation, and he managed to hang on, long enough at least not to give the impression that he was a gauche schoolboy. He loved the feel of her soft flesh beneath his fingertips. With her dark hair, and her curvaceous flesh, she was a world away from Richard's blond good looks and hard muscles, and he couldn't wait to investigate further, to totally explore her body, and press his eager flesh into her.

"I want it to stop," Mulder said. "It's just...I remember how it ends," he murmured sadly, closing his eyes. When he opened them again, he was lying in the cell where he had first woken up. It was dark, and outside he could hear those whispering sounds, like the rising and falling of a tide, whispers being washed up the seashore. There was something malevolent about them. They wanted him. They wanted to consume him. He opened his mouth, and screamed.

Carroll Co. General Hospital, MD.

January 6, 1999.

"He was twenty three." Skinner watched as they pulled a sheet over Mark Tyler's dead, staring eyes. He had a sudden vision of it being Mulder's body beneath that sheet, Mulder going to be autopsied.

"Sir?" Scully led him away from the bed. "Sir, we don't have much time."

"Three days." Skinner told her.

"Yes. If we can extrapolate from this that all the victims will die after the same period of time. That might not be the case."

"No, but we have to proceed as if it is."

"Yes. I'll get onto the autopsy right away..." she began, but Skinner grabbed her arm.

"No. That can wait. I don't think you're going to find out anything that we don't know already. They ran every test under the sun on that boy."

"What then?" Scully glanced down at her arm. Skinner's fingers were digging in, hurting her. "Sir?" she whispered gently, putting her hand over his. He realized with a start that she was in pain, and his eyes were full of apology.

"God, I'm sorry." He drew back, turned away and gazed broodingly at the rows of silent, staring, victims.

"Sir?" Scully stood beside him, speaking softly. "Do you know something? Something about them?"

"No." Skinner shrugged.

"But you've seen something like this before, haven't you?" She pressed. He hesitated, glanced at her, his eyes betraying his anguish.

"Yes, Agent Scully."

"I thought...Mulder looked as if he was...missing. His body was there, but he wasn't in it," Scully said gently. "Is that what you think too?"

"I don't know." Skinner shrugged, and strode out of the hospital, his long coat flapping around his ankles as he walked. Scully had to struggle to keep up.

"Sir, what you said, about having seen something like this before? When was that?" she asked, holding her breath, knowing this was something he did not want to talk about, hoping that he would anyway. "Please, sir." She caught up with him by the car. "It could be important. Anything you can remember..."

"It wasn't like this," he said brusquely. "Or at least, not precisely. The person I saw looked like Mulder looked, and those other poor bastards in there," he nodded his head in the direction of the hospital. "He had the same...intensity of expression, as if he was seeing something - something else, somewhere else."

"What happened to him?" Scully asked, wondering why he would not look her in the eye.

"He died." Skinner said brusquely, opening the car door for her.

"Died?" Scully grabbed his arm before he could move away. He shifted uncomfortably under her searching, blue-eyed gaze. "Like Mark Tyler? Who was he?"

He stared at her for a long, long time, and she felt caught up in the maelstrom of emotions that reflected in those kaleidoscopic dark eyes.

"He...was me." Skinner said at last. Then he removed his arm from her stunned, nerveless grasp, and wordlessly got into the car.

"Fox? Hey, Fox?"

He kept his hands over his ears, barely heard her voice.

"Go away!"

"Fox, please. You're scaring me. Don't scare me."

"Samantha?" Her voice, so barely remembered, finally penetrated his consciousness. He looked up. "Samantha!" It was her, dressed in jeans, and a pink tee shirt with a bright yellow flower on it. Her long dark braids hung down the side of her face. "Is it you? Is it really you?" He knelt down beside her. She was so tiny!

"It's me!" she grinned, allowing him to lift her up into his arms, to hug her. "Don't swing me, Fox! Put me down!" She thumped his back.

"You like me swinging you." He grinned, tucking her under one arm, turning her upside down until her braids touched the floor.

"I don't!" she shrieked, but she was giggling as well. Mulder blinked. It was bright sunshine. The sky was blue. They were in a park. He glanced down at his clothing - jeans, tee shirt, sneakers. He was small, smaller than he could ever remember being.

"Fox! Put her down!" He looked up, and saw his mother, smiling at them both. He couldn't believe how young she looked - or how happy. "Come and eat the picnic!" she called.

"Race you." He dumped his sister down on her backside on the grass, and then set off.

"That is not fair! Fox, you come back!" she whined after him, as he made the most of his head start to get there first.

"Cheat!" She pouted at him as she threw herself onto the blanket and grabbed a sandwich.

"Slowcoach." He grinned back.

"Is this better?" she asked. "We can go further back if you like, Fox. Much further." He saw a darkness, opening up like a rift in the blue sky, and an image of himself, being held in someone's arms, looking down into a crib which housed a tiny, beautiful, newborn sister.

"No. I'm fine here." Mulder lay back and looked up at the blue sky. "We can stay here forever, can't we?"

"If you like." Samantha shrugged.

Thurmont, MD.

January 6, 1999.

"Where are we going?" Scully asked as Skinner pulled away from the hospital. Something told her that she should definitely not ask him any more questions about the startling news he had just given her.

"Back to the motel," Skinner said. "I need to prepare for...Agent Scully, I'm going to commit a felony tonight. I have no right to ask you..."

"Count me in," she told him firmly. "It's the factory isn't it? We're going to break in."

"Yes." Skinner told her, giving her the faintest shadow of a smile. "I think the answers are there, and I don't think we're going to get them by playing by the rules, and asking questions. We don't have time to wait for a judge to give us a warrant. We need those answers now, so, I went back there earlier to check it out, and figure out a way to break in."

"Mulder would be proud of you," she grinned at him.

"Mulder would have just broken in, without bothering to check it out first," Skinner said grimly. "Which is almost certainly why he got caught. You and I are not going to make the same mistake." He paused, smiled again. "There may be moments when you can take acting like Mulder too far," he told her wryly. "I'll do the Mulder method in the Skinner way."

"You know," Scully murmured, "that sounds much safer."

Skinner took a huge black sports bag from the trunk of the car when they pulled up at the motel. Scully watched in amazement as he unpacked the contents of it on the floor of her room.

"I requisitioned some supplies before we set out." Skinner told her, catching the look on her face.

"I can see that." Scully picked up a long, sleek knife in a black leather sheath. "This looks like something out of a movie. Could you...I mean would you, uh, actually use it?"

Skinner looked up, his eyes dark. "Yes, Agent Scully. I could and I would," he told her, pulling a black sweater out of the bag. He threw it to her.

"This is for me?" she asked, aghast, as she caught it.

"Yes. Planning." He shrugged. She was even more amazed by the black combat pants and black sneakers.

"These will fit me?" she questioned.

"Yes." He replied firmly, and she knew without a shadow of doubt that they would, although she had no idea how he knew what size to bring. He went next door to change, and to allow her the privacy to do the same. When he returned to her room, clad from head to foot in black, Scully couldn't stop herself staring at him. He looked so...different. The sweater defined the contours of his broad chest and shoulders, which were normally hidden beneath those crisp white shirts. His waist was flat and his hips lean and slender, his legs impossibly long. He had the appearance of a pirate, or a smuggler. She had to fight back a fit of giggles, imagining him decorating the front of some bodice-ripping novel with tales of derring-do. Skinner gave a startled gasp, and did a double take at her so she supposed that her expression must have betrayed what she was thinking.

He knelt on the floor, and picked up a couple of shoulder holsters. He handed one to her, and she buckled it on while he did the same. Then he passed her a thigh holster. This one was complicated - designed to carry both a knife and a gun. Scully fumbled with the straps, trying to figure out how it fastened. Skinner saw her confusion and knelt down in front of her, adjusting the straps with blunt, capable fingers. Scully held her breath as he touched the inside of her thigh. If this had been Mulder, he'd have made some stupid sexual comment to lighten the tension, but it wasn't Mulder, it was Skinner. He seemed unaware of the intimacy of the moment as his fingers traveled the full length of the strap, making minute alterations, until he was sure that it was correct. Then she noticed that the tips of his ears were burning a bright red and she guessed that maybe he wasn't as unaware as she thought. He stood up, and began checking the shoulder holster as well. She felt like screaming at him that she had worn one of these on dozens of occasions, but before she could mention it, he glanced at her and murmured:

"You can wear this more comfortably - and more efficiently - if you adjust it like this." He pulled the strap tighter, smoothing the harness backwards and altering the fit.

She had to admit that it felt better this way. She was however, uncomfortably aware of those firm, gentle fingers on her arm, by her breast. Her nipples hardened involuntarily, and she tried desperately to think about something else - such as the several guns and knives that her seemingly pen-pushing, bureaucratic superior was so confident he could handle. She had a sudden image of him as Rambo, storming through the jungle, his face streaked with camouflage paint, knives, and machine guns clutched in his hands. He stopped what he was doing for a second, and glanced up at her, a quizzical look on his face, before resuming his task. She could have sworn that as he turned away to pick up another holster, he murmured "Sylvester Stallone?" under his breath, in a tone of disbelief.

Finally, after several agonizing minutes, she passed his inspection, but not before he had pushed up her pant leg, pulled down her sock, and strapped another holster around her ankle. Into this he pushed a tiny gun and a small knife.

"Do you think all this will be necessary?" she asked him, as his fingers tickled against her ankle.

"I have no idea, but in my experience, it's best to be prepared," he replied grimly. "I think Mulder would still be with us if he hadn't been caught breaking into the factory."

"How...ow...unh..." Scully dissolved into a fit of giggles and rested her hands on his back to stop herself toppling over.

"Agent Scully?" He looked up in surprise, his fingers neatly folding her sock over the new weaponry he had deposited in it.

"Uh, that whole area around my feet is really ticklish," Scully admitted, shamefaced, as he finished with her sock and stood up.

"Sorry. I'll remember that," he murmured, as if it was at all likely that the circumstance of him touching her feet would ever happen again. Scully couldn't help it - the image just rose unbidden to her mind. Her, sitting in his office, her naked feet on his desk, while he leaned forward, took her big toe in his mouth, and sucked on it. Skinner paused in the middle of checking one of his guns, and glanced at her in surprise, his face flaming bright red as if in embarrassment.

"Um, ...time to be moving," he muttered, heading for the door, and still blushing furiously. "Put your best foot forward, Agent Scully." They paused for a moment, their eyes meeting, and Scully bit on her lip, trying to hold back the choking laughter at his unfortunate choice of words. As she followed, she could have sworn that she saw his shoulders shake as he struggled to do the same.

"So - who are you supposed to be, young man?"

Mulder glared up at his father's friend through a cloud of smoke. He was wearing a blue sweatshirt with a starfleet insignia sewn on over the left breast, and had a pair of pointed false ears stuck over his own. Wasn't it obvious?

"Mr. Spock." He rolled his eyes and made a face.

"Who?" The man glanced down at him languidly, an amused frown on his face.

"From Star Trek!" Mulder stomped over to the corner of the room and got out some Play-Doh.

"Bright kid." The smoker turned back to Bill Mulder and accepted a proffered drink. "How old is he now? Eight?"

"Nine." Bill Mulder grunted.

"And the little girl?" The smoker swilled the drink around in the glass, his eyes fixed upon his friend.

"Five."

"Lovely children," the smoker commented. Bill Mulder shuddered slightly, and poured himself another glass of whisky. "You should cut back on that," the smoker told him.

"So should you." Bill Mulder glanced pointedly at his friend's cigarette. "But you're not here to discuss our mutual bad habits. Tell me about your most recent experiment. Did it work?"

"No." The smoker leaned back in his chair. "By and large, the results were...disappointing."

"Damn. I thought that project stood a chance. I liked the idea of it. Mankind, working together, minds linked, to fight the enemy."

"You always did have a streak of sentimentality," the smoker commented. "I thought of its more practical applications - such as having units of disposable, highly skilled, linked colonies of soldiers doing our dirty work for us. Like worker ants," he smiled. "We can learn a lot from the insect kingdom," he murmured, pleased by the analogy.

"So what went wrong?" Bill Mulder swilled back his drink.

"The links were unstable. They didn't work in quite the way we had anticipated. Instead of the link flowing freely between the soldiers, it became a muddle - a confusion." The smoker stubbed out a cigarette, and pulled another one from the packet lying on the table. "It required one of the members of the link to channel it, direct the link, and focus the energy. Unfortunately, none of our subjects proved very skilled at this, and in all but one case, the links broke down amid considerable confusion. It was possible that we could have salvaged something from the mess, but we were running out of time. Our studies show that it's doubtful that humankind contains many individuals powerful enough to control and focus the link. We certainly don't have either the time or resources to find and recruit such exceedingly rare individuals."

"But there was one?" Bill Mulder asked. "Wasn't that enough to build on?"

"No. We must breed some more...specially adapted children. Children with very...particular skills." The smoker glanced at Fox as the boy lay on the carpet, rolling some Play-Doh to form false eyebrows, and placing them on his forehead in straight lines, at 45 degree angles from his own eyebrows, making his sister giggle. "And that takes time."

"I see." Bill Mulder frowned. "What happened to this project?"

"It was terminated," the smoker replied. "Last week."

"What about the one individual you found...?"

"Like I said. Terminated." The smoker tipped some ash from his cigarette onto the carpet. "You know how I hate loose ends."

"All the same, that could prove to be a costly mistake. If such people are rare..." Bill Mulder's eyes flickered with a malicious glee, pleased to be able to point out some flaw in his colleague's methods.

"We don't like to leave evidence," the smoker snapped. "It wouldn't be wise. You know who we're dealing with. Besides, he wasn't easily controlled. He was stubborn, and he lacked the ruthlessness to terminate some of the individuals in the link on our orders. He could have done it, but he refused. Imagine having the power of life and death in your mind, not to even have to make a move...no need for guns, weaponry of any sort...one flick of a mental switch and you can kill." The smoker's face was flushed, as if he had just experienced a moment of orgasmic pleasure. The moment passed, and his expression darkened. "He refused. He was of no use to us if he wouldn't follow orders, and he was too powerful to keep alive. Children will be more...malleable"

Seated on the floor, cross legged, frowning in concentration, Mulder made his sister her own set of Mr. Spock eyebrows, and stuck them fast to her forehead with his thumb, before dragging her into the kitchen to make his mother admire his handiwork. At that moment the 'phone rang, and he ran back into the other room to answer it.

"I'll get it, I'll get it, I'll get it!" he shouted, picking up the receiver before the two adults could stop him. "Oh." He turned back to the smoking man, and held it out to him. "It's for you," he said.

LP Manufacturing Inc, MD.

January 7, 1999.

"Agent Scully - there are a few things I'd like to get straight before we go in there." Skinner pulled the car up outside the factory, and turned to face her. "First of all, I need you to obey me implicitly. I mean that. Do what I say immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Scully told him, feeling a shiver of anticipation pass through her at his grim tone.

"Good. Here - take this." He handed her a black ski mask, and she put it on, feeling faintly ridiculous - and nervous.

"If we get caught..." Skinner stopped, shrugged. "Well, you can say you were just following orders."

"That wouldn't be true." Scully stared at him in the darkness, watching as he pulled on his own mask.

"Who cares? The truth, as Mulder would say, is out there." He nodded his head towards the factory. "At least, the only truth we need concern ourselves with for the next couple of hours is. Just worry about finding the information we require, and staying alive. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." She nodded, and followed him out of the car.

"Stay here." He held up his hands, and then melted into the shadows. She lost sight of him within seconds. His dark clothing obscured him from sight, and he moved far too silently for such a big man for her to track him by listening to his footsteps. She looking around anxiously - where the hell had he disappeared to?

"Scully." He appeared behind her, making her jump. "We need to go through there." He pointed at a large steel door.

"How are we going to get in?" It looked pretty solid.

"With the key." Skinner held it up, and she stared at it in astonishment. Peering over his shoulder, she could just make out a body lying beside the steel door. He must have knocked the security guard out and stolen the key - soundlessly - during the two minutes he had been missing. Scully was seriously impressed.

Skinner opened the door, and they tiptoed along a corridor she recognized from their earlier visit. In the distance, Scully heard the sound of a dog barking, and the footsteps of one of the security guards. She followed Skinner as he walked soundlessly along the corridor, wondering how on earth he managed it. Her own footsteps sounded loud to her ears, even with the rubber- soled sneakers. They found the Manager's office, but Skinner passed it by.

"Sir?" she whispered. "The information we require...?"

"Won't be in there," he replied in a low tone that made less noise than her whisper. "Follow me. I have a hunch."

They passed another set of offices, and then he paused outside what looked like a broom closet. Scully raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

"We passed this earlier today," Skinner told her. "Why does a cleaner's closet require two deadlocks?" He pointed to them, and she saw what he meant.

"How will we...?" she began.

He put a finger over his lips and pulled out a small device, inserting it into one of the locks. Thirty seconds later it snapped open. He turned his attention to the other one, as Scully watched him in awed disbelief. Really, the man was turning out to be full of surprises - Walter Skinner, desk-bound, bureaucratic pen pusher, and, uh, professional burglar?

"I'm not even going to ask you where you picked up that little trick, sir," she whispered as the door swung open beneath his expert fingers.

"Wise move, Scully," he grinned, his teeth a startling white in the darkness of his ski-mask. "You're better off not knowing about my mis-spent youth." She gave him an astonished look. There was no way on this earth, that Walter Skinner had ever been a juvenile delinquent. "Don't you believe it," he grinned again, ushering her carefully and silently into the closet and pulling the door shut behind them. Then he drew out his flashlight and turned on the beam to reveal...a closet full of brushes and buckets.

"Oh." Scully murmured. "Well, maybe they're very valuable brushes," she said. If she'd made that comment to Mulder, it would have sounded sarcastic, but somehow with Skinner it came out more as if she were trying to soothe his bruised ego.

"Over here." He ignored her, gesturing to the far wall. She carefully picked her way over the buckets, and saw what he was pointing at. "This wall is about four feet too far in," he told her, tapping it to reveal a hollow sound. He shone the flashlight around and finally found the edge of a door, which was painted the same color as the wall. He pushed it open, and stepped inside. They were in a tiny office, without windows, containing 2 filing cabinets. Skinner raised an eyebrow at Scully, and she nodded, going over to one of the filing cabinets while he concentrated on the other.

It didn't take them long to find out what they were looking for.

"I've found something," Scully whispered, five minutes later.

"So have I." He held up a file. "There was an accident here three days ago which wasn't mentioned in that health and safety report that Pelman showed us. "

"What happened?"

"Some of the equipment being manufactured malfunctioned..." Skinner read from the file. "And guess who happened to be on the factory floor at the time?"

"The people in the coma?"

"Yes." Skinner nodded. "What have you found?"

"This file describes the development of what appears to be a biological weapon for the military base nearby. Sir!" She looked up, her eyes startled. "This base...Mulder's talked about it before. He suspected them of using alien technology to help build new military aircraft."

"What?" Skinner stared at her. "Do you believe that, Agent Scully?"

"I didn't know what to believe." Scully shrugged, flicking through the file. "I'm not an expert in this field, sir, but..." she stopped, studied the file intently.

"What? What have you found?"

"I'm not quite sure. A mapping of some sort of...Sir! It's branched DNA." She closed her eyes briefly, remembering the branched DNA sequences in her own blood that had appeared after her abduction.

"What does that mean?" Skinner asked.

"I don't know." She shook her head.

"Damn. I wish I could run these specs by the FBI lab, but I can't tell them where I got this from." Skinner gestured at the file, then ran a despairing hand over his masked head.

"The Lone Gunmen might be able to help." Scully said suddenly.

"Those guys Mulder hangs out with?" Skinner looked skeptical.

"It's worth a try." She shrugged.

"Yes, of course." He nodded. "What do you want to bet that the accident involving those workers occurred when they were working on this top secret project?" Scully's eyes met his.

"I'd stake my life on this weapon being what induced the catatonic state of those workers, except for one thing."

"Which is?" Skinner asked, cocking his head.

"What about Mark Tyler, and Mulder? They weren't here when that accident happened."

"No. I don't know about Tyler, but Mulder was caught breaking in here. Someone might very well have wanted to shut him up."

"Do you realize what you're saying, sir?" Scully's eyes widened. "We are talking about a military contractor manufacturing a weapon that can somehow induce a comatose state in its victims without leaving a mark upon them, and then they're, what, **experimenting** on people?" The military? Experiments? Scully had a sense of déjà vu. This was just like being on a case with Mulder, and yet it was Skinner standing here!

"I can't see any other explanation for it." Skinner told her tersely.

"Do you know who are we dealing with here, sir, and how far up the chain of command that this would have to go?"

"I have no idea, but I intend to find out, and leave with enough evidence to." Skinner said grimly. He fished a tiny camera out of his pocket, and began taking photographs of the relevant files.

Great, Scully thought to herself. First we have Commando Skinner, then Burglar Skinner. Now we have Spy Skinner, and all of them incredibly proficient in their various skills. What else am I gonna find out about this man?

Skinner cleared his throat, giving Scully a small, apologetic smile. "Time to go." He put the camera away, then returned the files neatly to their cabinets.

"Mom said you had to be in bed by 8." Mulder told his little sister.

"Who's gonna make me?" She grinned, sticking her tongue out at him.

"I am." He folded his arms, and gave her a stern look. "She left me in charge."

Samantha ran shrieking into the other room. "Catch me!" she giggled, speeding up the stairs.

"Sam!" he ran after her, feeling a desperate worry gnaw inside him. "Sam, stop this. Sam, come back here. Sam!" He stood in the middle of the lounge, the world closing in around him. Something bad was going to happen soon. Something very bad. Something he couldn't endure. "Samantha, please. I don't like it. I'm scared. I want it to stop." He saw himself, standing there, alone on the rug in the lounge. Time was moving inexorably moving forwards, taking him to a place he didn't want to go to. He watched as a twelve year old Fox and an eight year old Samantha sat down. They were playing a game. The television was on. Time speeded up. There was a noise outside, and a bright light in the doorway. He saw himself run to find his father's gun, saw his sister lifted up into the air...heard himself scream...

"NO!" Mulder cried over and over again. It was dark. He lifted his head, finding himself back in his cell. The whispering outside was louder than ever. "Please...no!" He wept, covering his face with his hands, curled, once more, into a tight, fetal ball.

Thurmont Manufacturing Inc, MD.

January 7, 1999.

They were half way down the corridor when the alarm sounded. Scully nearly jumped out of her skin. Skinner took hold of her arm and started to run.

<Looks like our little break in has been discovered> His voice echoed in her mind, and she did a double take as she struggled to keep up with his long strides. Two security guards suddenly swung around the corner in front of them.

<This way.> Scully found herself turning to the left at his unspoken command, along another corridor, down some stairs, her breath catching in her throat.

<There are 10 security guards on duty here in all.> His voice echoed inside her skull, but their situation was too desperate for her to question how or why. <I took care of one of them outside. They might have found him, or he might have woken up, although I did hit him pretty hard. Left again.>

Scully moved instantly at his unspoken command. Behind her, she heard the sounds of clattering boots, and a shout. A bullet bounced off the wall to the side of her, making her jump.

<How do you know which way?> She asked, before realizing that she hadn't even opened her mouth. She didn't have the breath for running and talking.

<I pulled up the specs for the layout of this place when I came out here earlier,> he replied.

She had a sudden, vivid image of him sitting in the car with a laptop and a cell phone, accessing the FBI database to get the information he required, while visually checking out the numbers of the security guards, their dogs, and their usual pattern of activity. She knew, without question, that he was sharing the image with her - it was not something she was just dreaming up in her imagination.

<If we keep going down here, we'll get to the basement. There are four exits from there. Listen to me carefully, Dana. I'm going to show you where they are.>

<Okay.>

A sudden image of a set of plans appeared in her mind. She stumbled, confused by looking both at where she was placing her feet, and trying to make sense of the map at the same time. His big hand reached out and caught her.

<Sorry. This takes practice. You don't have time for that. Close your eyes. Stop thinking about running. I'll do that for you.>

She had no idea what he was talking about. How the hell could she run if she had her eyes closed?

<DO IT!> he commanded.

He used such a forceful tone, that she immediately closed her eyes, expecting to fall over at any second. The image appeared again, instantly, and his arm remained on her elbow. She felt a curious sensation - like a flow of energy slamming into her head, and then she lost contact with her body altogether. She knew, instinctively, that she was still running and breathing, but all she could see was the map that he was showing her.

<All right. There are two behind us, and we can expect more downstairs. It'll make it harder for them if we separate.> He caught her wave of panic, the sudden flash of worry at being abandoned in this rabbit warren of a building, being chased by men with guns and dogs. <I'll be with you. Keep your mind open. I want you take this exit.> One of the exits on the map

suddenly flashed up in front of her. <I'll take this one. I'll meet you outside. Go right at the next staircase. I'll draw the guards away from you.>

<All right> She felt herself nodding mentally, and then the map disappeared, and she found herself back in her body, still running. The energy rose from inside her and left abruptly, and she felt a sudden sense of desperate loss.

<NOW!> She found her feet turning right, and then she was flying down some stairs, heading towards the exit he had pointed out to her. Above her, she heard gunshots, and felt a sudden sharp pain in her shoulder. She knew, without understanding how, that it wasn't her shoulder that had been hit.

<Are you okay?> she asked frantically, stopping, turning on her heel, and starting to run back to where she had left him.

<I'm fine. TURN BACK!> his voice shouted inside her head, and she stopped, hesitating. <I'm fine. I've lost them. It's only a nick. Go to the exit I showed you. I'll meet you outside,> he said insistently.

A wave of worry swept through her. <I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose **this**.> Her mind radiated the emotion before she could stop herself, and she knew that he had heard her. She felt an answering wave of such affection that she could hardly breathe, followed by something else, a fear of loss so tangible and raw that it made her gasp. No, not a fear, she corrected herself, a **memory**.

<Go.> He told her, and she began to run back the way he had directed her to go.

She was half way down a set of stairs, when she saw the man below. She stopped, and started to turn, when she realized another security guard was pursuing her from above. She decided to keep going, reaching the bottom of the stairs before the man below, running at top speed along the corridor, around a corner, and into a huge storage area. She crouched down, and hid behind a crate, waiting.

One of the guards followed her into the storage area, panting heavily. He slowed down to a walk, his gun poised, his head cocked on one side as he tried to pick up any sound of her. She tried to breathe silently, ignoring the stitch in her side, trying to gulp soundlessly for air. The guard walked past her crate, down to the end of the storage facility, turned, and walked back up again. He kicked aside a few crates, expectantly, then, apparently satisfied that she wasn't there; he turned to go.

Scully breathed a sigh of relief, and then let out a cry of shocked surprise as a hand came down over the top of the crate, and grasped her by the neck.

"Game's up," a voice rasped in her ear, one hand tightening around her throat, while the other ripped off her mask. The guard stared at her in surprise, clearly not expecting to find a woman, and then an ugly grin spread across his face, and he slapped her hard. "Who are you? Why are you here?" he demanded, his eyes glinting with a surge of evil enjoyment at

hurting her. She opened her mouth, but his hand was pressing on her larynx and she couldn't answer him. He slapped her again, hard, across the jaw, and she started to choke.

Her mind was suddenly taken over by a sense of such total, outraged anger that Scully's consciousness reeled from the force of it, and she blacked out momentarily. When she came to, she heard a roaring sound, so loud and absolute that it filled her senses, although the world around her was silent. She could still see the guard - he was shaking her, slapping her again, and asking her a question. She struggled to kick him, to free herself, but she could barely breathe with the pressure he was exerting on her windpipe.

The angry roar reverberating in her mind coalesced into physical reality as a huge, dark shadow in a ski mask appeared from nowhere, slammed into the guard, and picked him up as if he weighed nothing, shaking him violently. Scully fell to the floor, clutching her throat, struggling for breath. Her mind was filled with a fury - a raw, primal, raging sense of protectiveness. She watched in stunned surprise as Skinner backhanded the guard over and over again, until the man lost consciousness - and didn't stop even then.

<It's all right. I'm all right...stop...stop...> she pleaded silently. Skinner's angry punching slowed to a halt, and she felt the rage dissipate. He stood for a moment, looking confused, and then he dropped the guard's limp body to the floor and was at her side. She thought at first that he was going to grab her, and she flinched, scared of him. He stopped as if he had been hit, and took a deep breath, his hands balling into fists at his side.

<What...the...hell...was...that?!> she demanded fiercely, still reeling from the emotions that had flooded into her. He looked at her, and she saw herself suddenly, gazed down upon herself from a greater height than she was used to, seeing with his eyes. She looked small and vulnerable, a large red bruise spreading across her neck.

<Hurt.>

This time, she didn't so much hear his thoughts as felt what he was feeling. <His. Hurt. She was his, dammit! She was part of him. And she had been hurt. He hadn't been able to stop it. **Should** have been able to stop it. Shouldn't have brought her here. Couldn't live with the pain that someone had dared to hurt her, dared to harm someone who was his, someone he loved.>

Scully felt a jolt of surprise at that sensation. A sudden vision of Mulder lying comatose on that hospital bed rose in her mind. <Couldn't stop him being hurt either, or the others.> The raw tide of jumbled thoughts and feelings continued to overwhelm her. <Mine, all of them mine, and lost. Lost...> Scully felt a wave of total despair, and she flinched as an image of corpses flooded her mind. Young men, lying amid foliage, bullets riddling their broken bodies, blood everywhere. A sense of total loss and desolation wrenched her, and she found herself scrambling to her feet, enveloping her erstwhile boss in her arms, clinging to him, trying desperately to soothe and comfort him.

<It's all right. It's over. I'm okay. I'm okay...> Her hands ran over his masked face, drew him close, held onto his broad, shaking shoulders, whispering to him over and over again,

silently. <Mulder will be okay too. We'll get him back. We'll both be fine. Please...please...I'm fine...I'm all right...Just a bruise...>

The shaking in his body gradually ceased, the taut muscles trembling as he fought for control. He drew back, his dark eyes meeting her blue ones, his fingers gently brushing over her bruised neck. Her own fingers found the torn fabric of his sweater, the blood that oozed from the bullet wound. For a moment, she experienced the dull pain that he was feeling in his shoulder, and she sensed him share the pain of her bruised larynx. The sharing seemed to lessen the physical discomfort for both of them, and at last she felt his sanity return, like a layer of calm washing through them both.

<Quickly! The other guards will find us soon.> He took hold of her hand and they ran towards the door.

<We won't separate again?> she asked him fearfully.

<NO!> His hand squeezed hers tightly. <Come on. This way. I've taken care of five of them now, so with any luck we won't run into any more between here and the exit.>

<Commando Skinner is back,> she thought to herself, comforted by the idea. He turned and grinned at her, and a moment later he sent an image to her, of him, rampaging through the undergrowth, his face streaked with camouflage paint, a knife between his teeth, and a machine gun in his hands, his muscles bulging absurdly. She giggled.

<Rambo?!> he teased.

<That was private!> she protested.

<Then you shouldn't broadcast it.>

<How was I to know you were...what...?> she struggled with the concept. <Listening?>

<Sorry. I don't normally eavesdrop, but you just kept throwing those images at me.> She felt his overwhelming sense of guilt at having intruded into her private headspace, and knew that his apology was genuine.

<Oh god!> She suddenly remembered the toe-sucking image, and the way he had gone bright red.

<Yes, Cinderella. I caught that one, too.> His mind laughed inside her own. It was a nice sound. She wasn't sure she'd ever heard him laugh out loud. <So you're a closet foot fetishist?>

<NO!> She exclaimed. <It was just what you said. I couldn't help myself.>

<So, do all women have such lascivious thoughts in response to the most innocent of comments, or is it just you, Dana Scully?>

She didn't have a chance to respond, because at that moment they turned a corner and found the fire exit, exactly where it had been marked on the map. Skinner pushed the bar open, and Scully ducked past him. They were silent, aware that there might be danger outside, but the journey back to the car was swift and uneventful.

They drove back to the motel wordlessly, each wrapped up in their own thoughts. Now that they were out of danger, Scully found that she had a 101 things she wanted to ask him, but as soon as she formulated a question in her mind, she found that the ability to talk to him telepathically had gone. Vanished. She no longer felt the touch of his mind, or that extraordinary rush of energy, the flow of it between them that she had enjoyed so much. It felt like a loss, and she opened up her mind, searching for him, wanting some answers, hoping even to feel his emotions, the way she had done back in the storage area, but it was as if he had shut down the link, turning it off altogether.

<Why won't you let me in?> she asked. <Please!> She felt as if she were a character from an old movie, a woman in a long flowing dress, standing on a doorstep, pounding her fists against a strong, dark door. <I know you can hear me,> she insisted, but there was no reply. The door remained resolutely closed. She turned to him, as he sat beside her in the car.

"What....?" She began. It felt strange to talk out loud. Dislocated, distant. Less familiar.

"Agent Scully, it's late," he interrupted her. "I think we both need to get some sleep. Tomorrow morning I'll interview Mark Tyler's next of kin while you conduct the autopsy. Maybe we'll come up with some answers. I'll also get those friends of Mulder's to run over the specs of that weapon that was being manufactured back there. We don't have much time."

"I'm aware of that, sir," she answered, a flash of anger in her tone. "But I want to know what the hell went on back in that factory."

"We got the information we required..." he began.

"What happened between us?" she asked him desperately. "The telepathic link between us - where the hell did that come from?"

"Agent Scully it was a long, tiring mission. It's possible that you, uh, misinterpreted... Let's just get back, get some rest."

"What?" she gasped. "Are you trying to deny that there was anything unusual about what went on back there?"

He turned his dark eyes on her, and she found them expressionless.

"We were both under stress," was all he said.

Scully glowered at him in the darkness. <I said I didn't want to lose you. To lose it,> she sent reproachfully. The thought seemed to bounce off steel walls, and back into her mind.

"Fox."

He felt a hand on his head, softly stroking his hair. The stroking went on for a long time, soothing him, until at last his sobs became gulps, and then stopped altogether. He raised his head and looked up at his comforter. She was an old woman, with long white hair and a kind face. "All right, little one." She smiled at him, crooning, still stroking him.

"Who are you?" He lay still, feeling safer than he had in a long, long time. Outside, he could hear the whispers recede until they were just a low hum, unthreatening.

"A friend of a friend," she told him, still smiling.

"Who?" he asked.

"Jace." Her voice was warm and tender. He felt as if he could snuggle into it. Instead, he found himself snuggling his head onto her ample lap instead. The cell seemed to glow a warm red, calming him, like being enveloped in a womb.

"I don't know anybody called Jace," he murmured drowsily. She laughed out loud.

"Well, you did once, and you will again," she said, hugging him to her. "Poor baby. Poor sweet child."

"Is Jace a man or a woman?" he asked, feeling distant, heavy and confused...and yet, so safe, savoring the sensation of her warmth against his face.

"Both. In various times." She stroked his tear stained hair away from his eyes. "Jace wants me to watch over you," she whispered. Mulder felt himself drifting off to sleep, but she nudged him awake. "You can't sleep now, Fox," she told him.

"Why not? You'll keep me safe, won't you?" He surrendered himself up to the warmth and haziness again.

"I can comfort you, sweetheart, but I can't keep you safe. That isn't in my power," she told him sadly. "While I watch over you, I cannot watch over Jace, and he needs me too. His situation is as perilous as yours, and he is my first concern. You must go back out there again."

"No." Mulder screwed up his face, seeing the bright lights, his sister's body, the confusion of sounds, and images and old, painful memories. "I won't go."

"You can't stay here. If you stay here you'll die. You have to find a way back."

"I can't." Mulder felt the tears flowing down his face once more. "It hurts too much."

"Yes. I know." The old woman sighed. "That's what Jace said. He had even less choice than you do."

"I can't face the memories. Not alone." Mulder told her.

"Then ask Jace to help you," she whispered.

"How? I don't know this Jace person." Mulder muttered sulkily.

"Yes, you do. You and he are close, closer than you yet know."

Mulder tried to think. Close?

"A man? Richard?" He was unable to think of any other man who had meant as much to him as the Senator had.

"No. Jace has a true heart. He would never hurt you the way Richard did." She hugged him tightly. "Contact him, Fox. Ask Jace for help."

"How...?"

"Just think about the man you trust most...the one you know will listen to you, and help you."

"I'll try..." Mulder closed his eyes again.

Thurmont Inn, MD.

January 7, 1999.

They drove to the motel in silence, got out of the car in silence. Scully felt battered, more from the loss of what they had shared than from the physical mauling she had received. She stopped him from going into his own room, placing a hand on his arm.

"Wait a minute. I want to examine your shoulder," she told him. She opened the door to her room, turned on the light, and found her medical bag.

"It's fine..." he began. She turned and fixed him with a frosty glare.

"Who's the doctor here?" she demanded, surprised by the uncompromising strength of her tone. Something had changed between them this evening. She no longer viewed him as just her superior; she had seen into his heart and soul, shared something with him, known him in a way she had never known anybody else. She felt that **definitely** gave her some rights.

"You are," he sighed.

"Well then. I'll be the one to say whether it's fine, or not," she snapped. "Come here."

"Yes, Ma'am." He grinned, trying to lighten the atmosphere, but Scully was too wound up to respond. She pointed to the bed, and he sat down, removing his mask.

"Take your sweater off," she ordered. She went to the bathroom and filled a bowl with water. By the time she returned, he had complied meekly with her instructions.

Scully bit down hard on her immediate mental response when confronted with his naked torso. This was because her immediate mental response went something like "Shit, you're gorgeous," and involved drooling. She most certainly didn't want him to sense what she was thinking - the foot thing had been bad enough. Instead, she closed her mind completely to anything but the medical task ahead of her. He was right - the bullet had only nicked the flesh, but all the same, it was a nasty little wound. She cleaned it up, maintaining a cool, professional demeanor throughout, and then placed a dressing on it.

"It's causing you pain," she told him matter of factly. "I'll give you something for that." She fished in her bag for some painkillers.

"It doesn't hurt," he replied quickly, pulling his sweater back on.

"We both know that it does." She confronted him, remembering the way they had shared their pain back in that storage area. It did hurt. It throbbed. If she was quiet for a moment she could still feel it. He flushed, clearly remembering the same thing.

"I'll live with it." He shrugged.

"Take the painkillers." She held them out, but he shook his head.

"I...hate medication...drugs...of any sort," he murmured.

<Why?> her mind asked, sensing something here that she would have missed before they had shared that mental link. A fleeting image brushed against her consciousness, and she struggled to understand it. She caught glimpses of a young man, tied to a hospital bed, then white coats, bright lights, an injection - a scream. Strange shapes tumbled into her mind, invading her consciousness...The image snapped off suddenly, and she blinked, staring at him.

"Will **you** be all right?" He stepped forward, gesturing at the bruise on her neck, his fingers lightly brushing against it. "Maybe you should get someone to look at that."

"I'll be fine." She clutched at his hand, startled by the warmth of his touch, and the jolt of energy that it sent through her. <I want you back,> she sent again, wearily. <I want to understand. What was done to you? Let me in. I want to help.> She remembered the feel of him shaking in her arms, re-living a nightmare that she could not understand, and that terrible sense of desolation and loss. <Please.> She wanted to be there for him again. There

was a vulnerability in him that she would never have guessed, and a terrible secret that he held close to his heart. He gave no sign that he had heard her, gently disengaging his fingers from hers.

"It's nearly 2 a.m. We need to get some sleep." He gave her an apologetic smile.

"Yes." She pulled away abruptly, turned her back on him, and heard him leave the room, pulling the door shut softly behind him. "Sleep?" She gave a hollow laugh once she was alone. "After what happened tonight how the hell am I going to manage that?"

Skinner sat down on his bed, then ran a hand wearily over his face.

"I thought you'd be here." He glanced over to the corner of the room, where the boy sat in his armchair.

"Well of course." The boy grinned.

"Don't say it." Skinner held his hand up.

"I have to. That's what I'm here for." The boy smirked. "So, you finally gave in."

"It was necessary." Skinner shrugged.

"And you think you can turn it off again now that you've turned it on?"

"Yes." Skinner said firmly. "I can. It flows from me. I can stop it if I want to."

"Hmm." The boy grinned infuriatingly. "She doesn't seem all that happy about you 'stopping' it."

"It's better for her this way," Skinner sighed tiredly. "It's not fair to her. I didn't give her a choice."

"You didn't have a choice either, as I recall," the boy commented.

"That's different. I won't perpetuate the wrong." Skinner pulled off his sweater, and undid his pants.

"You love her don't you?" The boy's tone wasn't mocking. Skinner slid his pants off, padded into the bathroom, and cleaned his teeth. "Well?" The boy asked him from the mirror.

"Yes."

"And Mulder?"

"Yes." Skinner finished brushing his teeth, walked back into the other room and slid under the sheets.

"You started making the link with them a long time ago, didn't you?" The boy sat down on the bed. Skinner stared up at the ceiling, fighting the guilt.

"Yes. I know I shouldn't have. After Sharon...They were the only ones I was close to. It just...happened. They kept needing my help. In order to find them, sometimes I'd...I worried about them." He closed his eyes. "I just wanted to make sure they were all right - when they were out in the field. Is there anything wrong with that?" he asked defensively. The boy didn't reply. "I didn't mean it to happen," Skinner confessed. "I just sent out little thoughts at first - to find out where they were, what they were doing, to see that they were safe. They didn't know. It didn't hurt them."

"But it was the first link in the chain." The boy said.

"Yes, and with every subsequent crisis, it grew stronger. I was scared they'd know - that they'd find out, and resent me." Skinner rolled over onto his side, turning his back on the boy. "I tried to shut it down, I really did try, but it never went away completely. Then today..."

"Today you opened a channel with Dana."

"Yes."

"It felt good, didn't it?"

"Yes." Skinner's gut churned with remorse. It had felt so good to feel the energy flowing again, to be close to another person in such a unique way, not to have to hide, or cut himself off and keep himself separate for fear of them knowing too much, or sensing that he was different. "I didn't finish making the link though, I pushed it back, shut it off. It won't happen again," he said firmly.

"You said you didn't want to go back," the boy whispered softly.

"I know." Skinner remembered the bodies of his comrades, the wrenching loss as each of their minds left him. "I don't want to go through that again. I won't go back," he said firmly, closing his eyes, and longing for the peace of sleep.

"Did you ever think that it might already be too late?" The boy asked. Skinner's eyes snapped back open.

"Yes," he whispered.

Scully got ready for bed and lay down, closing her eyes, but she couldn't switch off her mind. She was desperately worried about Mulder - and confused about these new feelings that she had for Skinner. She knew that she loved Mulder, had for a long time now, although she was never sure whether it was a love that she should allow herself to feel in a physical sense. She was also never sure that was what Mulder wanted either, although she didn't doubt that he loved her. He was so driven, so consumed by his quest, that he made no room for anything else. Scully knew that she didn't want to play second fiddle to that all her life.

She wanted someone calmer, someone who didn't need to be taken care of the whole time...someone like Skinner. She bit back that thought. *Skinner...Mulder...Me...We complement each other.* Scully flinched from the memory of tangled limbs, and two fair heads smiling at her, kissing her...She punched her pillow fiercely, suppressing the memory, but unable to suppress her anxiety. What would happen if Mulder died, or if she was unable to "find" Skinner again? What was the weapon that had done this to Mulder? Why was Skinner so haunted, so vulnerable, and scared? Why, why, why...?

"You have to help me. Help me." The voice echoed. "Please...I'm afraid. I'm lost..."

"Mulder? Where are you?" Skinner whirled around, trying to see through the mist.

"Help me. Please." Mulder repeated. "They want to take me away. They're waiting for me...eating me alive..."

"Who does? Who are they?" Skinner turned in a circle, but there was no sign of Mulder.

"The whisperers. Please help me." The voice was fading, and it took all Skinner's concentration to hear it.

"I will. How? Tell me how." Skinner stood still, watching as the mist swirled around and around. He felt lost, lonely, confused but knew they were Mulder's feelings he was experiencing, not his own.

"I can't...I..." Mulder's voice broke off, and was replaced by an image instead. Skinner found himself standing in Mulder's apartment, staring at Mulder's bookcase.

"What is it that you want me to find?" Skinner scanned the room, turned back to the bookcase. One of the books fell out onto the floor beside his feet. He picked it up.

"Mulder? MULDER?" He roared, but there was no reply, and seconds later the mist claimed him again.

Thurmont Inn, MD.

January 7, 1999.

"Sir? SIR! Wake up!" Skinner's eyes snapped open. He was sitting up in bed, covered in sweat. Scully was sitting beside him, holding his shoulders, shaking him.

"You were having a bad dream. You kept yelling," she explained, bringing him a glass of water. He downed it in one gulp.

"Mulder..." he whispered, remembering.

"He's all right?" Scully felt a cold fist grab at her heart. "You didn't dream that he was dead?"

"No, but he's very scared. He's lost. He wants me to help him."

"How?" Scully asked. "I mean we're trying to help him, aren't we?"

"Not in the right way, obviously." Skinner closed his eyes, trying to remember more, then suddenly leapt into action, throwing off the sheets, and grabbing his pants and sweater.

"Where are you going? Sir?" Scully stared at him in alarm.

"To Mulder's apartment. He couldn't tell me what he wanted me to do, but he showed me a book. The answer must be in there." Skinner tied up his sneakers, grabbed his jacket and car keys, and ran for the door.

"Sir, it's the middle of the night. You've been wounded...how can you be sure this was really a message from Mulder, and not just a perfectly normal dream?" Scully followed him out to the car.

Skinner turned to her. "I'm sure." He said firmly.

She felt a chill run down her spine at his tone.

"Get some more sleep, Scully. I'll call you later. Autopsy Mark Tyler tomorrow - we need some answers. While I'm in DC I'll run those specs for that weapon past the Lone Gunmen, and get any information I can on it."

Scully watched as he slammed the car door shut, then shivered as she realized that she was standing outside barefoot, clad only in her pajamas. She hopped back into her room, and closed her eyes, wishing that he was still here. Somehow, his presence in the next room had been comforting. She suddenly felt very alone. Mulder was missing, and Skinner had disappeared into the night. She wanted them both back beside her.

"Did you find him?" The old woman asked. Mulder thought how very beautiful she was. She had a beauty that came from the soul. He didn't doubt though, that she could also be stern and scary. He could sense a streak of tempered steel running through her core.

"Jace? Yes. He was very worried." Mulder tried to think about the entity he had known was 'Jace'. Jace's voice, his soul, had been familiar - Mulder was sure that he knew him.

"Did you ask him to help you?" The old woman asked, still holding Mulder on her lap. He nodded.

"Yes. I didn't have time...I couldn't..." Mulder broke off. "I tried my best to explain it. I can't get back alone. I can't go out there again." He nodded his head towards the cell window, with its three fingers of light shining in steadily.

"If you stay here, you'll die," the old woman told him. "Nobody can stay here. You go back, or you move on. You have to do one or the other eventually, Fox."

"I will. Jace will find me. He'll help me find the way back home." Mulder said confidently.

Hegel Place, Alexandria.

January 7, 1999.

Skinner stood in Mulder's apartment, trying to forget the circumstances under which he had last been here. Had that really been less than 30 hours ago? That visit had also followed one of these gut-wrenching dreams. It was nearly 6 a.m., and daylight was just starting to filter under the blinds in Mulder's apartment. He turned on the light, and went to the bookcase, scanning it. He half expected one of the books to fall out at his feet as it had in his dream, but that didn't happen. He tried to remember what the book had looked like, closing his eyes, and pinching the bridge of his nose wearily. How long had it been since he slept, really slept - two nights, three? He forced back the tiredness, and tried to think. An image of a book, hand-covered with a brown dust jacket, flashed into his mind. Skinner opened his eyes again, and ran his fingers along the bookshelf, finally locating a book covered in brown paper. He knew as soon as his fingers closed around the spine that he had found the right one, and pulled it out, eagerly.

"'A Golden Treasury of Fairy Stories'?" He gazed at it incredulously. "Mulder - if this is some sort of joke," he growled, flicking the book open. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting but it sure as hell wasn't this. "A nice tome entitled 'Rescuing People From Catatonia' would have been better, Mulder," he berated, under his breath.

On the inside of the book was a hand-written message. 'To my dear Fox. Happy Birthday. All our love, Mom and Dad. October 1966.'

"Okay." Skinner took a deep breath, and tucked the book into his pocket. "If that's the way you want it, Mulder. I'll read the damn thing, although how the hell this is supposed to help you, I do not know. "

George Washington University Medical Center.

January 7, 1999.

Skinner walked along the white corridors and into Mulder's hospital room. He had placed one guard outside the room, in case Mulder's catatonia had been deliberately induced, but

the man reported that there had been no attempts on Mulder's life while Skinner had been away. The Assistant Director's heart lurched as he looked into Mulder's staring eyes, and saw his pale face.

"Has his condition changed?" he asked the doctor, knowing what the reply would be.

"No. Exactly the same." The doctor told him sympathetically, leaving him alone with the patient.

Skinner sighed and took his coat off, draping it over the back of the chair. He dragged the chair close to the bed, and sat down.

He took Mulder's lifeless hand in his own. "It's uh..." he cleared his throat, embarrassed, "easier if I'm in physical contact..." He warmed Mulder's hand gently between his fingers. "You're cold, Mulder," he murmured.

Skinner closed his eyes, tried to relax, and then sent his mind out along the link that he had forged, piece by guilty piece, over the past few years. <Mulder?> He knew the pattern of Mulder's mind - that tumult of color, vibrancy, and energy, edged always by dark, swirling clouds of sadness, as unique as any fingerprint. <Mulder?> Nothing. He felt none of the usual rush of sensations, the bright shining brilliance that was Mulder's mind. <Mulder?> He surged forwards, trying to find something, anything, along the link. He had a sudden image of a dark cell, a man lying on the floor, being cradled by someone familiar, someone he knew.

<Mulder?>

Then it was gone. Skinner opened his eyes, and felt Mulder's fingers warming up between his own.

"All right," he sighed, getting out the book and opening it, sitting back in his chair, one hand still holding Mulder's, loosely. "Have it your own way, but this had better not just be some ploy to get me in touch with my inner child," he growled at his silent companion, then he turned his attention back to the book, and began to read.

"Once upon a time..."

"Fox?" The old woman nudged him. Mulder stirred. "Jace is with us," she whispered.

"Yes." Mulder smiled. "I know."

She took his hand, and gently massaged his long, slender fingers between her own gnarled ones.

George Washington University Medical Center.

January 7, 1999.

"Scully? It's Skinner. I've been trying to contact you for hours."

"Sorry. I forgot to take my cell phone into the morgue with me." Scully replied, opening the door to the motel room. She sank down on the bed with a sigh. It had been a long day.

"I was worried."

"Well, you do have other ways of contacting me. If you were really worried, I'm sure that you could have found a way to reach me," Scully said meaningfully, making a face at the 'phone. "Unless there's some sort of range limitation to it. Is there?" she asked. He ignored her.

"Have you discovered anything?" he asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I have. The autopsy didn't show up anything. Tyler just...stopped being alive. There doesn't seem to be a reason, but I went to visit his mother."

"And?" Skinner glanced over at Mulder's lifeless body.

"I think I can explain why Tyler went into a coma over 24 hours before the accident at the factory." Scully removed her shoes and wiggled her toes around, grateful to release her feet from their prison. "I think Tyler was stealing from the factory. It's possible..." Scully paused, thinking, "that he was some sort of industrial spy, stealing prototypes to sell to competitors. If he stole a prototype of that weapon we saw the specs for..."

"He could have attempted to use it - to discover how it worked." Skinner finished for her.

"Yes, and that's why he was affected; however that's just supposition. I didn't find the weapon at Mrs. Tyler's, and she was acting pretty strangely. It's possible that whoever the weapon belonged to, realized what had happened when Tyler first fell unconscious, and went to claim back their property."

"That sounds likely," Skinner nodded.

"How's Mulder?" Scully asked, unable to keep the worry out of her voice.

"The same." Skinner shrugged. "I took those specs over to the Lone Gunmen." Skinner shook his head, remembering what a farce **that** had been. It had taken him fifteen minutes just to persuade them to open the door, and a further half an hour of talking before he was able to convince them to help him. Even then, he was sure that they had decided to do so more because they had run their own checks, and discovered that Mulder was in a comatose state in the hospital as he had said, rather than because of any of his forcefully presented arguments. "They can't make head nor tail of the weapon specs either. What they do know is that the weapon is constructed to emit some sort of noise on a very high frequency. My

own theory - and I ran this past them, and they all agreed that it was possible - is that this weapon somehow, uh..." Skinner ran his hand over his head nervously, knowing that she wasn't going to like this. "Somehow separates a person's consciousness from their body."

There was a long silence at the other end of the 'phone.

"Sir, when I said you should start thinking like Mulder I didn't mean you to take it this far," Scully remarked. "You're postulating that all these people are having some sort of out of body experience?"

"Yes," he said firmly.

"Sir, there is no proof that OBE's are true phenomena. The sensation could be caused by lack of oxygen, leading to..."

"I know the medical explanation Scully," he snapped. "I've read all about it." Hundreds of times, he added silently, remembering his recuperation after the ambush in Vietnam, and how he had read everything about Out of Body Experiences that he could lay his hands on.

"But you choose to ignore it?" she asked. Even from hundreds of miles away he just knew she was raising a disbelieving eyebrow at him. "Despite the lack of empirical evidence..."

"I have evidence, Scully," he interrupted her.

"What sort of evidence?" He could sense that she was gearing up for an intellectual battle.

"Personal evidence. It happened to me," he told her. There was another silence.

"Right." He could hear the uncertainty in her voice.

"I found the book," he said, relieved to be changing the subject.

"What is it?" she asked, equally relieved.

"'A Golden Treasury of Fairy Stories'." He held the 'phone away from his head, and listened while she burst into a fit of loud and hysterical giggles.

"Sorry. That is so typically Mulder!" she exclaimed at last. "Have you read it?"

"I'm in the middle of it. He doesn't seem to be reacting to any of it."

"You're reading it out loud? In the hospital?" Scully savored the image of big, stern, macho Assistant Director Skinner, sitting next to Mulder's hospital bed, reading him fairy tales.

"It seemed the logical thing to do," Skinner replied stiffly. "He's the one who told me to read the damn thing. He must know what the hell it is he expects me to find in it."

"Sir, he's unconscious," Scully reminded him gently.

"Yes - but you said hearing was the last sense to go," Skinner reminded her back.

"That's true..." Scully mused.

"Anyway, I'm going to carry on reading until I finish the damn book, and then, if there's no response, I'm coming straight back."

"Back here?" Scully asked. "Sir, it's getting late. Have you had any sleep today?"

"No." Skinner suppressed a yawn.

"Then you shouldn't drive."

"I'm coming back," Skinner told her firmly. "I'm not leaving you down there on your own."

"I can take care of myself," Scully replied tartly. "I didn't need anyone to..." She stopped in mid-sentence, remembering the way he had responded when that guard had attacked her last night. Her safety, and Mulder's, was obviously a touchy subject with him right now. "I don't have any say in this do I?" she asked.

"No," he grunted. "I'll be down there in a few hours, then we can talk about what we should do next."

He severed the connection, and stretched, listening to his bones crack. Scully was right. He should sleep. His body ached, and he was so tired, but he didn't have time - Mulder didn't have the time - for him to start taking naps. He sat back down in the armchair, and opened the book again with a sigh.

"At the edge of a big forest there lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and two children; the little boy's name was Hansel, and the girl's was Gretel..."

Thurmont Inn, MD.

January 7, 1999.

Scully ordered a pizza and ate it ravenously, mulling over Skinner and the day's events. Honestly, first it was pre-cognitive dreams, then telepathy, and now out of body experiences. She was no longer surprised that Skinner had signed off on the X Files cases all these years. She was more surprised that he hadn't insisted on tagging along with her and Mulder went they went out investigating.

Mulder would be thrilled if he knew, she thought. All this time, another believer right under your very nose, Mulder, and our Assistant Director is an X File in himself, a walking X File. She felt a warm glow calling him "our" Assistant Director. *Dana, you're losing it, girl*, she grinned. Her smile faded, as an image intruded into her mind. She was in a car, her vision was blurring...she heard the sounds of car horns, then her vision cleared, the road ahead sweeping into focus as the car swerved back into lane. She felt incredibly weary, bone tired, and her eyelids began to droop...

<SIR! Wake up!> she yelled, jerking herself awake. She felt an answering confusion inside her own mind.

<What?>

<You're in the car aren't you? You were falling asleep at the wheel. I warned you about that!> she admonished, getting up and pacing anxiously around the room. <Where are you?>

<About 50 miles from you. I'll be there soon.>

<You'll be dead on arrival if you keep on driving in your present condition. Turn off at the next service area, and take a nap.>

She heard a jumbled protest, but cut him off before he could form a coherent thought.

<DO IT! NOW!> She smothered a grin, and sent him an image of the previous night when he had sent similar commands to her, replacing Rambo!Skinner with Kickass!Rambo!Scully. <My turn to give orders now!> she told him, reveling in the communication, the warm flowing energy of the link.

<Okay, okay...> his mind grumbled at her. <Just a nap though. I won't be long.>

Scully smiled to herself as the communication faded. So that was it, was it? When he was tired, he couldn't stop little thoughts from leaking through. He didn't have the strength and control to keep her out when he was this weary. Well, good! She went into the bathroom, and washed her hands to get rid of the smell of pizza. With the water running, she didn't hear the sound of the door to her room being opened.

Skinner parked the car and turned off the engine, leaning back in his seat and closing his eyes. He was asleep within seconds.

He was walking through a forest, whistling. He had an ax over his shoulder, and was wearing a long flowing white shirt, and...what the hell were these? Britches? He glanced down at himself, and then around, and groaned out loud. *Damn you, Mulder, and your stupid, goddamn fairy stories. I am not a woodcutter!* He walked through the trees, and saw a little cottage with smoke billowing merrily from its chimney. It was very familiar. It featured in a **lot** of fairy stories. With a sigh, Skinner followed the dainty, winding path, past a merrily chirruping brook, towards the cottage. Everything seemed very bright. Absurdly cheerful roses, grass that was impossibly green, ridiculously colored birds wittering away to themselves. *Oh, goddamn it!* Skinner waved the ax threateningly at a passing fawn, but it just blinked at him, fluttering its absurdly long eyelashes and then, kicking its hooves merrily into the air, it scampered away. Skinner suppressed the growl that was rising in his throat. *If we ever get you back, Mulder, I am gonna kick your butt for making me read that stupid book. Those stories have even gotten into my dreams. And another thing...* He glowered at a passing fluffy bunny rabbit, *...what exactly is a tinderbox?*

He came to a sudden halt. The door to the cottage was open. He thought about it for a moment. *Either a silly little girl in a red hood is going to come skipping out, or the cottage is going to turn out to be made of gingerbread, or it'll contain bowls of porridge that I'm not supposed to eat...or...* Skinner suppressed a shudder, hoping that he wasn't going to be really unlucky and bump into seven singing dwarves. He edged forward, and pushed the door open cautiously. He was standing in a room. He frowned. It was familiar. It didn't look like the inside of a cottage. It looked like...a motel.

"Hello!" He called, edging in, ax at the ready. *Wolves dressed as grandmothers...* he reminded himself. *Or trolls. Or 3 little piggies. God, this is worse than being stuck in a horror novel...Not even Stephen King would think up stuff this sick...And people read these stories to their kids.* There was nobody in the room. He could smell the remains of a pizza dinner, and it filled him with a sense of foreboding. He remembered this smell - last time he had smelled it...Mulder! An image of Mulder lying on the floor of his apartment assaulted him but this wasn't Mulder's apartment, and it wasn't a repeat of that dream. All the same, it wasn't an ordinary dream.

Skinner felt a gut wrenching sensation in his stomach. The cottage fell into darkness, as if somebody had blocked out the sun, and outside wolves began howling in the forest. He heard running water, and started to walk towards the bathroom, his mind screaming that he didn't want to, he didn't want to go there. Something terrible was waiting for him there...something that would hurt him. Yet his feet moved, inexorably onwards of their own volition, closer and closer to that sound, which was unnaturally loud, like a waterfall. He couldn't stop himself. Slowly, but surely, he walked, pushing the bathroom door open with a shaking hand. Something small - a bundle of red and white was lying on the floor. He moved closer, fear gripping his heart...reached out a hand, touched a warm, body, rolled it over...Scully! She was lying in a pool of her own blood, her eyes staring at him sightlessly.

The sound of the hoarse shout dying in his throat, woke him. Skinner sat up, instantly awake. He turned the engine on, and started driving, crazily, too fast. *No, please no, please...* he repeated over and over again. He made it to the motel in half the time it should have taken, jumped out of the car, burst through the unlocked door to her motel room, threw himself towards the bathroom...then stopped. She was lying on the floor, as he had known she would be. Water was running into the basin - the faucet had been left on - and she was just lying there, on the floor, looking so small, and bleeding, her eyes staring into space.

"Scully..." he whispered brokenly. "Not you too."

He went to her and swung her up in his arms, gazed at the ceiling, at nothing, as he walked around in a circle, not knowing what he was doing.

"Give her back...please...give them both back!" he cried, his face upturned.

There was no reply. He pushed his mind desperately into hers, tried to find the link, to find some trace of her, but she was gone, and he was alone once more.

He was lying in the jungle, his body writhing, as one by one his friends minds winked out and were gone forever. He was crouching in Mulder's apartment, cradling the other man's body against his own to give him warmth. He was standing here with Dana, without Dana, without any of them. He clutched her empty body to his chest and sat down, broken, in the middle of the room, his hands listlessly stroking her blood-stained hair as he rocked her backwards and forwards in an endlessly repeating motion.

END OF PART ONE.

Found by Xanthe

Author's Notes:

Posted 30th May, 1999.

Massive thanks, as always, to Holmes for the thorough beta reading. Also to Sergeeva for her help, and patience in listening to me talk this story through for the past several months.

This story will (eventually) cover a number of years, starting mid-way through season 6 when Mulder and Scully are still working under AD Kersh. It's gonna be a loooooong series.

Spoilers: *Avatar, One Breath*. Season 6.

Thanks to Daydreamer for her inspiring creation of Commando!Skinner in *Retrieval* (and sequels). Also to Holmes, whose *Folie A.D.* has such a beautiful Young!Walter in it. Both these stories can be found on the **WalterTorture** site

Huge thank you to Frogdoggie for making the wonderful pic.

Scully blinked. She was in a forest, surrounded by trees. It was night. She shivered, and instinctively wrapped her arms around her body for warmth. Later, she realized that despite the darkness, and the wintry appearance of the bare branches of the trees, it was, in actuality, quite warm. Three fingers of light shone through the woods - displaced moonbeams that didn't do more than cast an eerie glow over her predicament. Scully took a deep breath, and started to walk.

She had been walking for a long time, when she paused for a moment, resting her back against a tree trunk, surprised that it didn't feel cold to the touch. It didn't even feel ridged, or uncomfortable, despite its gnarled appearance. Scully looked around, and then frowned. She had been walking for miles, but she was still in the same clearing. Nothing had changed - the trees still enclosed her within their looming, ominous circle, and the same three fingers of light still shone through, casting long, terrifying shadows through the trees. Scully closed her eyes, and then opened them again. She was imprisoned here - lost in a dark wood, where nobody would ever find her. There was no way out.

LP Manufacturing Inc.

January 8, 1999

Linus Pelman opened the door to his office, and fumbled for the light switch.

"Damn," he cursed as the room remained in darkness. "Bulb must have blown." He felt his way carefully across the room until he came to his desk, and opened the bottom drawer, reaching in to find the bottle of whisky he kept there...only to discover that the drawer was empty.

"It's here." A voice in the darkness made him jump, and he saw a figure seated behind his desk. "I considered draining the bottle, but then I realized that you probably have even more need for oblivion than I do, Mr. Pelman. Perhaps you have more on your conscience."

"Who are you?" Pelman whispered.

"I'm the man who stole your light bulb," the intruder said with a grim chuckle. "I'm also the man who's got a gum aimed at your head, so why don't you just sit down, and I'll ask the questions."

"I'll call security..." Pelman blustered.

"I've taken care of your **security** as you call them, although I think 'soldiers on loan from a nearby military base' describes them more accurately. They're here to guard their precious new weapon aren't they?"

"Who **are** you?" Pelman edged his way nervously into a chair.

"That depends." The other man shrugged, pushing the bottle of whisky across the desk. "If you tell me everything I want to know, then I'll disappear into the night and you can just think of me as a figment of your imagination. A ghost."

"And if I don't?" Pelman asked, ignoring the proffered whisky.

"Then I'll have the honor, or misfortune, depending on how you look at it, of being the last person you speak to before you die."

"Scully?"

"Melissa?"

"You killed Melissa."

"Mom? Mom, where are you?"

"Dana, sweetheart."

"Bill, don't tell daddy. Please."

"Daddy?"

Scully curled herself up into a tight ball and placed her hands over her ears. The darkness of the forest soothed her. She was safe here. The moonbeams bathed the trees in a darkly luminous glow, comforting, and warm, like being enclosed in a womb. Scully crouched at the base of the largest tree, trusting it to hide her and keep her safe, as if she were a small woodland creature - a mouse, or a squirrel. If she stayed here, she'd be okay.

"There you are." The voice sounded clear, and too loud, echoing around the clearing. Scully jumped, and looked up.

"Mulder?" It was still dark, but she could just about make out a shadow through the trees.

"Yeah, it's me, Scully. Who were you expecting, huh?" He was leaning against a tree, looking incongruous in this forest, dressed as he was in his smart work suit, with one of his tasteless ties around his neck.

"Mulder...oh, Mulder." She uncurled her tightly scrunched body and got up, ran over, then stopped just in front of him, feeling utterly relieved that she was no longer alone.

"I was..." She paused. His hazel eyes were laughing at her.

"Scared? Surely not. The rational Dr. Scully is scared of a little old forest?"

"Mulder..." she began, disturbed by his tone, but he turned on his heel and started to walk away from her. "Come on, Scully. Get those little legs moving, or we'll be late!" he called over his shoulder.

"Mulder, no. I don't want to...I don't want to leave here." Scully held onto one of the trees for safety, and security.

"Don't be stupid, Scully. Follow me. You know you will. You always do." He gave an infuriating smirk, and strode off into the woods. Scully took a deep breath, staring uncertainly at his disappearing back, and then, with one last glance around the forest, she followed him.

LP Manufacturing Inc.

January 8, 1999.

"What do you want to know?" Pelman licked his lips nervously, staring at the stranger, whose face was obscured by a black ski mask, and whose hand definitely, and unequivocally, held a gun.

"I want to know all about your coma-inducing weapon. I want to know who designed it, and I want to know how its effects can be reversed."

"That information is classified. I can't possibly tell you," Pelman stammered. "If I do, they'll kill me."

"If you don't, I'll kill you." The man stated implacably.

"If you do, you'll never find out." Pelman retorted, eyeing the whisky on the desk, wanting it - **needing** it.

"Ah, an impasse." The man leaned forward, and poured a large measure of whisky into a glass tumbler. He held it out to Pelman. "Take it," he urged. Pelman reached out a shaking hand, only to find his wrist pulled into a rough grasp. He was pulled bodily forwards until he could feel the other man's warm breath on his cheek, and then blunt fingertips were placed against his head. "I have another way of finding out. I can **take** the information I require."

Pelman opened his mouth to scream, but found it silenced, as if the weight of a large blanket had fallen over his mind. He felt a pain, thrusting deep inside his head, and he gasped, whimpering.

"Ethics. They're so conveniently selective, aren't they?" The boy stood behind Pelman, his eyes mocking.

"Fuck off." Skinner growled.

"So - you won't share yourself with Scully, because it's what? An intrusion? But you don't mind forcing yourself into this man's head and taking what you want."

"There are lives at stake." Skinner insisted in a desperate tone.

"Self-righteous justification - and you know it. You don't have any link with this guy. If you push your way into his mind it'll drain you, and you'll end up as weak as a puppy. It'll hurt you, and him, and I don't think you'll ever get over the guilt."

"If Mulder and Scully die I won't get over that either." Skinner snapped.

"Go ahead then." The boy shrugged. "I only tell you what you already know anyway."

Pelman watched as the man who held him in that vice-like grip fought some kind of internal struggle, his eyes fixed on a point somewhere over Pelman's shoulder, holding a conversation with somebody who didn't exist. Finally, the iron grasp of those fingers on his arm slackened, and the man released him.

"Just tell me," the intruder begged, leaning forwards into the half-light, so that Pelman could see the desperate look in his dark eyes.

"There's not much to tell you. I only manufacture one of the components of the weapon, and get the other components from seven other factories and assemble them onsite. I have no idea why and how the components produce the effects that they do when combined." Pelman found himself responding to the unspoken plea in the other man's eyes, as much as to the gun pressed against his heart. "Look, buddy, I'd like to help you, but I don't know any more than you do. I just know that we had an accident on the factory floor a few days ago, and everyone within hearing distance went into a coma. My guess is that the weapon works on an aural level, but I don't know how."

"Do you know how the effects can be reversed?"

Pelman hesitated, knowing that he was about to dampen that faint light of hope in the other man's eyes. He had no way of knowing how his attacker would respond to what he was about to say, or whether he would use the gun he still held pressed into Pelman's flesh.

"I'm sorry," he whispered at last, "but as far as I know there **is** no way of reversing it."

"There must be!" The man's voice was a desperate whisper.

"If there were a way, why would I know it? Did Oppenheimer know how to reverse the effects of the atom bomb?"

There was a grim silence in the aftermath of this spoken truth, and the masked man took a deep breath, and ran a hand over his head, as if thinking out loud, pacing the room as he did so.

"Who is your contact at the Military Base? Who ordered this?"

"I don't know. I don't **have** a contact there. At least I don't have the same one twice."

"Why then? Why Mulder and Scully? Why use the weapon on them? For what purpose?"

"The FBI agents?" Pelman licked his lips nervously. "Look, I had nothing to do with that. Security must have reported back that they were both caught trying to break in here. Someone at the military base must have ordered their..." he trailed off, uncertainly.

"Oh god." His assailant stopped his pacing, and rocked back on his heels. "I've been stupid," he said. "So, so stupid."

"Mulder!" Scully chased after him, but he seemed to have disappeared, as had the forest. She looked around. It was winter. She was dressed in a thick black coat, with black leather gloves on her hands. She was in a church. Everybody was wearing black - and her mother was sobbing. Scully put her arm around the weeping woman, and they left the church

together, and started walking behind the coffin as it was taken outside. She saw her brother, Bill. He looked grim faced, almost angry. Her heart jumped suddenly. There was Mulder!

"Mulder." She ran up to him, caught his arm. He turned, and gazed at her solemnly.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come."

"I'm glad you did."

"Your brother..."

"I'm glad you're here," she told him firmly. Bill gave them both a look of disapproval. Scully sighed - she was used to Bill's disapproval. They walked slowly towards the grave, but Scully's footsteps faltered and slowed as they drew close.

"I don't want to go here," she whispered.

"You have to." Mulder said flatly, his hand holding her arm with a grip like steel.

"No..." she tried to say the words, but they wouldn't come out. Mulder's eyes glinted a dark, malevolent hazel.

"You aren't...Mulder..." she breathed, trying to pull away.

"And **you** can't escape."

He dragged her towards the grave, pushed her in front of him, holding her shoulders tightly so that she couldn't move. She looked down. In front of her were three freshly dug graves, and inside them were three open coffins, each of them containing a body. Scully tried to turn her face away, but Mulder swung her around, and made her look at the first body.

"Daddy," she whispered. He looked gray and old, rigid and cold. She reached out a hand to him, but his eyes remained closed.

"Dead." Mulder said, in a cold flat tone. He shoved her towards the next grave.

"I don't want to..." She struggled in his grip, but he was too strong. Missy lay in the next coffin, her long red hair dull and lifeless, her slender hands crossed over her chest, clutching a single white rose. "Oh, Missy." The tears came unbidden to Scully's eyes.

"Dead." Mulder told her, picking her up, and swinging her bodily towards the next grave.

Don't..." Scully begged. "Please don't..." She closed her eyes. This grave was small, and she knew without looking who she would see there.

"Look at her!" Mulder shook her until she opened her eyes and gazed down on the innocent round face.

"Emily." Scully stood rooted to the spot.

Mulder laughed. "Dead - all of them dead because of you."

"Because of me? No. Daddy..."

"Melissa, Emily - they died because of you. Your father tried to contact you but you wouldn't listen - you wouldn't **hear** him, would you? It was his last message to you, and you couldn't be bothered to find out what it was."

"That's not true!" She cried. "Please, Mulder stop this. It hurts. It all hurts too much."

"We haven't finished yet - don't you want to see the future?" he asked, pushing her again, his fingers digging into her flesh as he propelled her across the ice-encrusted grass towards three more graves, lying side by side a little way off.

"No. I don't. I don't want to!" Scully squirmed in his grasp, trying desperately to free herself, but his strength was superhuman, and soon she found herself staring down at another open coffin. Inside, lying with his eyes open, staring lifelessly into space...was Mulder.

"NO!" She cried, spinning around to look at the visage of the being that held her. His eyes gleamed malevolently from Mulder's face as he grinned at her.

"And the next one." He picked her up again, and threw her towards the second grave. "This one should amuse you."

"No..." she whispered, knowing, dreading what she would find. "Not this. No." His fingers closed on her shoulder blades, and it was like being held by pure ice. He pushed her close, and she peered inside - and found herself staring back, eyes wide and lost. Scully shivered.

"What's the matter - someone walk over your grave?" Mulder whispered chillingly in her ear, his voice breaking off into a cheerless, malicious laugh. "Last one."

She shook off his hands. "I'll walk there myself," she told him defiantly. Skinner lay in the last coffin, dressed in black, only... he wasn't dead. He was talking to her, but she couldn't hear what he was saying. She threw herself forward, trying to catch his words, but she couldn't quite make sense of them.

Her heart froze as the coffin lid was screwed down, and earth was piled on top of the casket. "He isn't dead." She turned to her captor, and pounded against his body with her fists. "He's alive! You can't bury him alive!" The being just laughed again, and turned away, disappearing from sight.

Scully jumped down into the grave, and tried to pull the earth away, to pry open the coffin with her fingers.

"Skinner!" she shouted. "Help me! I can't hear you...please come back, come back and rescue me...Don't disappear, don't go...please don't go..."

She worked for what seemed like a lifetime, the tears spilling down her cheeks and onto the freshly dug ground below, but her efforts made no difference. Soon, the earth was piled high on the coffin, then grass grew over the earth, and trees on top of the grass, and when she looked up again, it was night. The moon shone its three fingers of light through the branches of the trees, and she was lost once more in a dense forest. Scully sat down under one of the trees, and curled herself up in a tight ball, her arms around her knees, staring blankly into the darkness.

George Washington University Medical Center.

January 8, 1999

Skinner sat down on the chair in the hospital, too weary to even think straight. He stared, dazed, at the two bodies, lying side by side, with their wide, sightless eyes. He had brought Scully back to DC with him, traveled beside her the whole way, holding her hand, and trying desperately to push his mind into hers, to find her, but like Mulder, she too was missing, lost. He had tried talking to her, as he had talked to Mulder, but her eyes hadn't even flickered in recognition of his voice. He wasn't going to leave her there though, in that town where she had no friends, abandoned among strangers. If she were going to die, she would do so lying next to Mulder, the two of them together, where they belonged. If she were going to die...Skinner was too tired to fight the sense of loss and anger, and it spilled into him, eating him alive.

He sat there, feeling dislocated from his own body, watching their breathing, gazing blankly at their pale faces, at the empty blue eyes and the vacant hazel ones, both of them fixed at a point somewhere in space, beyond his ability to reach them. He sent his mind wearily along the half-formed nexus between them, looking for something, anything, but found only an echoing silence that made his heart ache. For the first time in three years, he was alone again - more truly and profoundly alone than anybody could comprehend. It was a loneliness that bit deep into his heart and tore open his soul, leaving a great, gaping wound.

He heard a noise in the distance, and after several disoriented seconds, located the source - his cell phone was ringing.

"Skinner."

"Sir? This is the Carroll County Hospital. You asked for news..."

"Yes?" Skinner's heart pounded inside him, and he felt a surge of hope, sitting up straight.

"I'm sorry, sir. The four remaining coma patients all died within minutes of each other about an hour ago."

"I see." Skinner cut the connection, and stared glumly into space for a long time, the 'phone hanging from his nerveless grasp. Finally he found some energy from somewhere. "I'll get revenge," he told the silent agents, as he struggled to his feet, and walked wearily towards

them. "I promise you that. I'll find whoever did this to you, and to those other poor bastards, and I'll break them in two with my bare hands. They won't live for long after you go." He stood between their beds, and took one last look at them. He ran his fingers through Mulder's hair, and down the side of the other man's still face, and then he bent to deposit a kiss on Scully's forehead. "I'm sorry I couldn't keep you safe," he whispered, taking off his glasses, and brushing his fingers over wet eyes. "I'm so, so sorry. Please forgive me." Then he left.

Scully closed her eyes and put her hands over her ears, trying to block out the sounds of the wind as it whistled through the trees, making their branches sway, and rustle, and whisper.

"Shut up," she said through gritted teeth, as the whispers grew louder.

"Dana!" A voice called. She opened her eyes in surprise. In front of her, dressed in a striped red tee shirt, was a small boy. "Were you hiding?" he asked.

"Charlie? Yes...yes I was," Scully told him. It was sunny, and the forest suddenly didn't seem so threatening.

"I've made a den. Want to come and see it?" Charlie asked her.

"Yes." She got to her feet, and looked down at her thin cotton dress. Her bare white legs and sandal-encased feet were smaller than she remembered.

"Come on." Charlie took hold of her hand, and dragged her through the forest, until she was laughing, her long red hair streaming out behind her.

"Bill helped me." Charlie told her proudly, showing her the collection of cardboard boxes covered by raincoats that was the den.

"Mom will kill you if you get those coats dirty." Scully giggled.

"You won't tell though." Charlie grinned at her.

"No way!" Scully crawled inside the den. It was comfortable in here, safe and hidden. Maybe she would stay here forever. A shadow fell across the entrance, and a large hand descended on her ankle, and dragged her out.

"What have we got here?" a voice asked, and she screamed with laughter, wriggling to escape.

"Bill, let me go, let me go!" she gasped helplessly, as both her brothers descended on her.

"Death by tickling!" Charlie exclaimed. "That always works on Dana!"

Soon she was a limp, panting, heap - exhausted by her giggles. She lay on one of the raincoats, and grinned up at her two brothers.

"You are such a tomboy, Dana Kate." Bill poked her in the ribs.

He looked so young - not serious, and grumpy, and middle-aged before his time as he later became. Scully closed her eyes, feeling safe here with her two brothers. Melissa rarely joined them - she was a girly girl, she liked dressing up and playing with her hair. Dana hated those games; they bored her to tears. It was much more fun playing with Charlie and Bill, teasing, being teased, roughhousing, wading through streams, and getting dirty. Charlie always had the ideas, and Dana always pointed out how crazy they were, but went along with them anyway, just so she could tell Charlie "I told you so," afterwards. Bill would watch them with a superior big brother air, and then wade in and rescue them when it all went wrong, just as Dana had predicted. Scully looked up at the blue sky, and hoped nothing would change, and Bill smiled down at her, his eyes glinting, and said three words:

"You killed Melissa."

Scully opened her mouth to protest, and instead heard herself start to cry, a heart-rending, keening wail. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, it was dark, and she was sitting in the forest surrounded on all sides by a dense thicket of trees, tears pouring down her cheeks.

Crystal City, VA
January 9, 1999

Skinner took a long, hot shower, trying to ease the aches out of his shoulders and back, but the ache in his soul remained. He stared at himself in the mirror for a long time, wondering if he really intended to go through with this, and then nodded to himself. He went to his bedroom, and pulled on the black sweater and combat pants that he had worn the other night. He checked his guns, and knives, placing them in their holsters, then stood up, ready to go. His FBI badge caught his attention, and he glanced at it for a moment before, regretfully, picking it up and throwing it in the wastebasket. He had no intention of coming back, and he wouldn't use his title for what he was going to do. This wasn't about Assistant Director Skinner, or the FBI; this was personal.

"So, that's your decision is it?" The boy was leaning in the bedroom doorway, his arms folded.

"Yes." Skinner brushed past him, and ran down the stairs into the lounge.

"What are you going to do? Go on a rampage?" The boy was already in the lounge, his eyes mocking.

"If need be." Skinner poured himself a glass of whisky, and downed it in one gulp.

"You've figured out who's behind this then?" The boy was seated on the couch, his long legs on the coffee table.

"Not exactly, but close enough." Skinner grunted. "The accident at the factory caused injuries of such a bizarre nature that Mulder believed a weapon was being manufactured utilizing alien technology. When he went to investigate, he got caught. The military followed him back to his apartment and used the weapon on him to shut him up."

"Neat. They got themselves a test subject - and they also got rid of someone who was asking too many questions at the same time."

"So it would seem." Skinner poured himself another glass of whisky. "That could have been the end of it all too easily."

"Only you and Scully showed up."

"Yes. I was a fool. A damned fool." Skinner thumped his glass down on the table, shattering it, and spilling the contents onto the carpet. The boy seemed unimpressed by this display of bad temper. "That guard at the factory saw Scully's face when he took her mask off. I should have killed him." Skinner's voice was low, his tone bitter.

"What was it Mom used to say?" The boy turned his mocking face to one side. "Never regret the things you've done - only what you haven't done?"

"Don't quote Mom at me. She had a saying for every occasion," Skinner growled.

"And she wouldn't believe that you are sitting here berating yourself for **not** killing somebody. Since when did killing become your first, best option, Walter?"

Skinner shook his head. "This is different. Scully will die because of me."

"So, you're going to charge down to that military base, storm inside...and do what?" The boy asked. "Are you sure you've thought this through?"

"The answer is in that base. Whoever gave the order that Mulder and Scully were to be killed is in that base. I'm going to find them, and I'm going to make them pay for what they did."

"Vigilante justice? That's not like you. They're not dead yet," the boy murmured. "Maybe your revenge is somewhat...premature?"

Skinner stared glumly at his feet. "Mulder has less than 24 hours," he said. "The doctors don't have a cure for this. Why should they? This is far beyond anything they've ever come across. Imagine the implications of it, a weapon that can wipe out a unit of soldiers with one shot - they don't even have to be in sight."

"Yes," the boy shrugged, "but if you go down to that base, then maybe you'll end up in a hospital bed, staring into nothing, just like Mulder and Scully. You won't be much help to them then."

"I'm not much help to them now," Skinner said despairingly. "I feel so..." He rested his head in his hands. "They've always been there before," he confided. "For the past few years, I just had to close my eyes and they were **there**. It was comforting, to hear their thoughts, to see what they were seeing, even when they were hundreds of miles away. Now they're gone. I can't be alone again." He looked up, his eyes bleak. "I'd rather die."

"Mulder seemed to think that you could help him." The boy pointed out.

"That stupid book." Skinner grunted. "What the hell kind of help was that?"

"It was Mulder telling you what he wanted you to do, the only way he could."

"I don't understand what he was trying to say!" Skinner slammed his hand onto the book, which was lying on the coffee table in front of him. "What is there in here that's of any use to me?"

"In your dream you were a woodcutter..." the boy murmured. "That could be a clue."

"Do you have any idea how many damn woodcutters there are in this book?" Skinner glared at him. "Hundreds. Woodcutters are commonplace in fairy stories. They give advice, marry princesses, befriend changelings, go on quests, abandon their children in forests, kill wolves, save children abandoned in forests, turn out to be long lost kings..."

"Do you remember the Old Woman?" The boy came and knelt down in front of Skinner, his dark eyes serious and intense.

Skinner exhaled deeply. "Of course," he murmured. He could still see her face, her kind eyes, and long white hair. "She saved me. She brought me back to life, and she still watches over me. She warned me about what would happen to Sharon. She was trying to protect me. Why isn't she here now?" he asked ruefully. "Isn't she paying attention? I need her help now, damn it!"

"Maybe she's busy protecting someone else," the boy said. "Someone you care about. Maybe that's why I'm here instead."

"I can't...this is all..." Skinner struggled with it, wordlessly, for a long moment. "Mulder would be three steps ahead on all this, but I can't handle it. I don't understand it!" he stated bitterly. "This," he took a gun from his holster, "is something I **can** understand." He got to his feet.

"If you don't help them then they will die," the boy told him sadly. "Don't turn away from them now, Walter. They need you."

"To do what?" Skinner exclaimed, exasperated.

"What the Old Woman did for you," the boy said quietly.

"Which is what?"

"She brought you back to life. You couldn't have returned to your body without her, could you?"

"No." Skinner whispered.

"You know where Mulder and Scully are. You've known all along. You've been there," the boy said insistently. "You've been there, and you found a way back."

"Hansel and Gretel." Skinner said suddenly.

The boy raised an eyebrow at this leap of thought.

"The obligatory wicked stepmother abandoned them in the woods. They couldn't find their way home. They used white stones at first, to mark the route, and then bread, but the birds ate the bread, and they couldn't find a way back. The Old Woman told me I couldn't stay there - I had to move on or go back. It's the same for Mulder and Scully." He got to his feet, and paced the room anxiously, running a hand over his head. "I cannot believe that I just theorized the cure for a coma based on a fairy story," he muttered wryly. "It's absurd. Lack of sleep. I'm going nuts. If they were here now they'd die laughing at me."

"You could find them. Bring them home." The boy stood up.

"You think that's what Mulder meant? That he was lost? He can't find the way back?"

"Don't you?" The boy shrugged.

"But how?" Skinner asked in despair. "I tried to use the link to follow them, but I told you, I didn't complete the nexus, I just made the beginnings of it. I couldn't find them - the link wasn't strong enough, or they were too far away."

"There are other ways to travel." The boy grinned.

"Hi." Scully glanced up. A youth stood there - about 17 years old, blond hair, blue eyes...and then there was two of him.

"Hi." The second one said.

"Hi." Scully looked back down at her book, feigning disinterest.

"Tom."

"Todd."

Two voices piped in unison. She glanced up again.

"Hmm," she murmured. "Okay, I'm hazarding a wild guess here. Twins, right?" *Tom? Todd? What got **into** some parents,* she wondered idly to herself. She was used to a constant stream of neighbors coming and going, some with kids, some without. Being a navy brat she was used to making friends quickly, and saying goodbye in haste. She was used to it - but she didn't like it. Her nature wasn't suited to quick friendships. She longed for knowledge, for permanence, for the security of slowly getting to know, and getting known by, friends, forging valuable bonds that would last for a lifetime. As she grew older, she had shunned friendships altogether, contenting herself with her studies, and with her family. She'd also grown closer to Melissa. Once Bill had left for college, she had turned to her older sister for companionship, and they had both found, much to their surprise, that despite, or maybe **because** of having nothing in common, they got along well. Each had qualities the other didn't possess, but admired in her sister. Now Melissa had flown the nest as well, and Scully found herself feeling lonely. She had no intention of getting close to these two blond, all-American kids, with their wide, lantern-jawed smiles, and freckled noses though.

"We've just moved in." Tom, or possibly Todd, informed her.

"Great." She looked back down at her book.

"What are you reading?" Todd, or possibly Tom, asked.

"A book." Didn't they get the message? The 'don't talk to me, I don't want to know,' message?

From afar, an older Scully watched from under the dark branches of a tree, three fingers of moonlight reaching through the forest to dapple her hair. She found that she was smiling, despite herself.

"Why do you always want to be alone, when it's so easy just to reach out..." Tom whispered, looking past the teenage Scully, sitting in her backyard, his eyes meeting those of an older, sadder Scully, trapped all alone in a dark forest. Scully felt those blue eyes beckon her, pull her back into her old life, and she lifted her hand, wanting to feel warm flesh and blood, wanting to live again. She was aware of two worlds colliding, the forest merging with her past life, and she gasped as she found herself back in her 17-year-old body, sitting in the sunshine. Tom was smiling at her, an easy smile that made her breath catch in her throat, and her heart pound inside her chest. "We could go for a walk?" he suggested. "We don't know the best places around here, do we, Todd?"

"No." Todd ducked his head. He was the shy one of the two, Scully decided.

"You could show us." Tom said.

"There are no **best** places," she informed them with a wry smile. "This is Dullsville, USA, but a walk sounds fine."

She took Tom's hand, and he pulled her to her feet.

"Dana," she said, finally smiling at both of them. They smiled back, flashing two identical, cheesy grins. *Oh, brother...*

Crystal City, VA
January 9, 1999

The boy walked across the room, and picked up a photo from the sideboard.

"Do you remember this?" he asked.

"Yes, of course." Skinner frowned.

"Do you remember when we'd all hit Saigon on leave? Do you remember where we went?"

"Yes." Skinner stood behind the boy, looked over his shoulder at the photo. It showed a unit of marines, goofing around for the camera. Skinner closed his eyes, smelling the distinctive odor of rotting vegetation and sweat that he associated with his days in Vietnam. He walked into a bar - he was leaner, supple, but graceless, his long legs still gawky and awkward. He walked with a gangling, loping stride. His friends were with him.

"Hi, boys," the woman behind the bar said in her singsong voice. "You want the back room, yes?"

"Yeah." Murray slapped some money down on the counter.

"It's all ready for you. I'll send my girls in."

They disappeared into the back room. Skinner remembered sitting on some faded red cushions, hearing the whir of a fan overhead. Someone gave him something to smoke, and he opened his mind, allowing the sensation of being high to drift through the link, calming and soothing them all. Casey opened the tin box on the table and took out a syringe.

"Want to try something stronger, Walt?" he asked, looking at his comrade through those innocent sandy eyelashes.

"No. I've told you before, I don't do that stuff." Skinner shook his head.

"Come on. You've seen how good hash is through the link, sharing the high." Casey filled the syringe, and brought it over to where Skinner lay. "Well, this stuff is even better. We can't get that high without you, Walt. You're the only one who can push it through the link. You have to take it."

He undid Skinner's sleeve, rolled it up to his elbow, and pressed around in his flesh to find a vein. Holding the syringe between his teeth, Casey tied a strip of cloth around Skinner's arm, until the vein pulsed. The other men just sat there, watching, their pupils dilated, waiting for their next high.

"All right, Walt?" Casey asked, holding the syringe poised. Skinner felt their expectant minds inside his own, urging him to do this for them. He nodded, and Casey grinned, rewarding him with a surge of excited energy. The syringe was plunged into his arm, and he felt the substance flowing into his veins.

Girls joined them in the room, giggling, nuzzling close with their straight dark hair and exotic, almond-shaped eyes, their musky perfume heady in the hot night air. Skinner felt too hot. He undid his shirt, and the girl he was with simpered, pressing her silky hair against his naked chest. He felt as if he was floating, far, far away. This felt so good...The girl's lips teased at his flesh, licked his nipples. He could feel Casey, pounding into the girl he was with, while she called out in a foreign language, her legs wrapped around his back, her fingertips gouging long red streaks down his back.

At the same time, the Lieutenant was having his cock sucked, while he smoked some hash, one hand listlessly holding the joint, the other lazily tangled into the hair of the prostitute who was blowing him.

Murray was kissing the girl he was with, his hands stroking her thighs in an insistent rhythm...Skinner was in each of them, as the orgy of their bodies became a shared orgy of the mind. The sounds grew loud and indistinct, the faces hazy - a whirl of red and white. Panting, heaving flesh, laughter, sweat running down foreheads, blood running down backs, semen spurting onto flesh, into flesh, hot...too hot...

Skinner was overwhelmed by the kaleidoscope of images and sensations, and started to scream. He was on a carousel, going around and around, but too fast. He was going to fall off. He was going so fast that the world had turned into a heaving, writhing, roaring, blurring monster, devouring him whole...He screamed as he spun off into a dark void, his mind leaving his body, and the link, far, far behind. He turned, and looked back down on himself, lying senseless on those cushions, the prostitute draped over him, licking his body. His eyes were open, and as he stared into them, he found himself returning to his body, his consciousness flooding back inside his flesh with a jolt. Feeling disoriented and ill, he pushed the girl off, leaned over, and vomited onto the floor.

"Bad trip," was all they said, as they pulled him up, and gave him some water. He never talked about what had happened - maybe he had even forgotten it - until now.

"Drugs?" Skinner looked at the boy.

"It's one way of getting out of your head," the boy grinned. "People do it all the time."

"Not me. I never touched hard drugs again after that one time." Skinner shook his head vehemently.

"This is different. This isn't for you. It's for them."

"It was for 'them' last time. A different 'them'." Skinner remembered the press of their minds, their expectation, and the giddy excitement of pleasing them.

"They weren't dying." The boy pointed out.

"I can't..." Skinner felt a wave of fear remembering the sensation of being high, out of control, rising out of his body. He felt sick just thinking about it. "I can't do it," he whispered.

"Then they'll die." The boy shrugged. Skinner stared into those uncompromising dark eyes, fighting the rising tide of distress that was threatening to overwhelm him.

"Go away," he said, in a tone low with rage. "Go away!"

"What's the matter, Walt? Scared to have their deaths on your conscience? Scared that they'll die, and you'll know you could have saved them if only you'd been **brave** enough?" the boy asked, in a sneering tone. Skinner's hands snapped out and fastened themselves around the youth's neck only to find that it was insubstantial, and the boy slipped out of his grasp.

"I told you - you can't kill me!" The youth exclaimed, unaffected by Skinner's attack. "I'm part of you. There's no getting rid of me and besides..." his dark eyes glinted with amusement. "I think you're going to need me."

"I don't need you," Skinner snapped. "I don't need anybody."

"Not even them? Not even Mulder and Scully?" The boy taunted. Skinner closed his eyes, and saw their pale faces, lying on the hospital bed.

"The way I see it is this," the boy stated. "You have a choice to make, Walter. You can either blast your way into the military base like Rambo and get yourself killed, or you can lead Mulder and Scully out of their mental prisons, which is what Mulder asked you to do in the first place.

"I said I wouldn't go back there." Skinner crouched down on the floor, his arms around his knees. He remembered a white light, and a dark tunnel. "I was **scared**. I never wanted to look beyond that experience. I'm not like Mulder. I don't get off on this stuff."

"You'd rather die than leave your body, and face your past?" The boy whispered softly, kneeling in front of the big man, and holding his face between blunt, bloodstained fingers.

"Yes...no..." Skinner trembled. "You don't know what you're asking."

"I do." The boy smiled, sadly, his fingers finding Skinner's and melting into them, fitting him like a glove, or mirror image. The same hands, the same fingers, the same tilt of the jaw, and the same eyes, only younger. "Of course I do, Walter."

Skinner looked into those familiar brown eyes for an eternity. Finally, he took a deep breath, and got to his feet.

"Ready?" The boy asked, holding out his hand.

Skinner nodded, accepting the proffered hand. The boy melted into Skinner's body, settling inside him, his mocking dark eyes glowing for a moment from within Skinner's serious ones.

"I think I know just the place," Skinner murmured.

It was summer. The woods were green and lush, and a stream gurgled over dark mossy rocks and stones. Scully lay on her stomach, and trailed her fingers through the cool water.

"Happy?" Tom asked.

"Yes." She turned and smiled at him. "We can stay here, can't we?" she asked, glancing fearfully around the forest, straining her ears to make sure that the whisperers hadn't returned.

"Of course. If you want." He took hold of her hand and kissed her fingers, gently, one by one. She lay back, feeling mellow, enjoying the sunlight, the company. She could see Todd a little way off, examining something he'd found in the stream, a lock of blond hair falling into his eyes, a frown creasing his forehead. Todd was the clever, unpredictable one: quiet and studious, but given to fits of moody introspection that only Tom could rescue him from. Tom was sensible, stable, easy going. *Everybody loves Tom*, Scully thought to herself, *even me...* She had known the twins for a year, and they had become inseparable in that time.

Scully shivered as Tom's lips traveled up her arm, along her neck, and finally ended up at her mouth. He paused, wanting her permission, and she took hold of him and pulled him down on top of her, shocking herself to the core of her Catholic soul. His mouth felt so good though, and she parted her lips to let him in. He tasted of the cider they had both recently drunk. He was heavy, and she was enjoying the rhythmic movements of his solid body against her own a little bit too much. She felt a hand smoothing her hair, and looked up into Todd's blue eyes, and shy, gentle smile.

"You're so pretty, Dana," he whispered. Scully smiled at him, as Tom drew back. Melissa had always been the pretty one - Dana had been the Plain Jane. She had never thought of herself as pretty before. Tom lay down beside her, his hand stroking her arm. She glanced at him, and he nodded, agreeing with his brother.

"You're our pretty Dana," he said. His fingers moved to the front of her blouse and unbuttoned it, his eyes never leaving her face as he watched her to see if she would allow him to continue with his exploration. She knew that she should ask him to stop, but the truth was that she didn't want to. Todd's fingers continued to stroke her hair, then slipped down, and gently touched her lips. She glanced at Todd, and then at Tom.

"You know, we always share everything." Tom said, with an apologetic little half smile.

"Is that all right, Dana?" Todd's lips brushed against her cheek, and she knew that she should be shocked. She wanted to be shocked, to turn against them, to get up and storm away, outraged, but somehow she couldn't. This felt so...right. They both loved her, and she

loved them. What was wrong with that? She realized then, that she couldn't have chosen between them, even if she'd tried. She wanted them both. They had always treated her like a goddess, their Dana, the center of their universe, and she loved them for it.

"Yes. Yes of course, " she whispered, pulling Todd's head down so that she could taste his lips too. Tom's fingers finished unbuttoning her blouse and pulled it open, his cool fingers slipping gently beneath the fabric of her bra, and finding one swollen, eager nipple. Scully gasped, arching her body into his caress. She had never been touched like this before - she had touched herself, during dark nights of guilty self-exploration, but this was different. This sent waves of something warm, exotic, and exciting coursing through her veins. Todd's fingers rippled in her hair, as his tongue clashed against her own, exploring her mouth, while Tom's fingers just played, gently, with her nipples, and soon her body was afire with both sensations. Tom's hands went lower, pulling at the waistband of her skirt, tugging it down, and she wriggled her hips to help him. It was soon disposed of, and his fingers edged up slowly inside her panties. He glanced at her face, to make sure she wanted this, but Scully was enjoying herself too much to resist.

She moaned out loud as one of Tom's fingers disappeared into the warm, moist, folds between her legs, and clenched hard around him. Todd, meanwhile, had taken Tom's place at her breasts, gently unfastening her bra, and loosening them from their captivity, holding each one in his hands, kissing first one, then the other. Scully had never felt so totally the center of attention. As one of four children she had always had to fight to be noticed, but here, now, she was the focus of so much love and adoration that she wished time would slow to a standstill so that she could savor this moment forever.

As if in a dream, she found herself unbuttoning Todd's shirt, smoothing it away from a hairless golden chest, and hard, youthful muscles. She licked at a nipple, and watched in wonder as he threw back his blond head and his Adam's apple jutted out, bobbing convulsively. On an impulse, she kissed his throat, nipping him slightly with her teeth. His fingers closed around her nipples, teasing them until she was writhing with the sensation, and then he bent his head and sucked. Every nerve-ending in Scully's body exploded, and she was aware for the first time, that Tom had removed her panties, and was caressing her inner thigh, his own pants open, and his erect cock nudging her entrance.

"I've got something, Dana. Protection for you." He pulled a packet from his pocket, and it took her a while to know what he meant. She knew that she should say 'no', knew that if she did, the twins would stop their loving caresses, but she didn't want that. Her eyes met Tom's over his brother's head, and she nodded, imperceptibly. He gave her a smile of pure joy, unwrapped the condom, and rolled it onto his eager cock. Then he gently parted the folds of flesh between her legs, and pushed into her eager, waiting body.

Scully was gripped by a wave of longing, and she found her legs wrapping themselves around his hips, pulling him close, forcing him deeper into her waiting body. Her hands tangled in Todd's hair, as he sucked on her breasts, and she gave a gasp of pain as Tom's hard cock pushed deep inside her, then the pain receded as swiftly as it had come. She rocked in time to his thrusts, her body overloading from the attention it was receiving at

their eager, adoring hands. She flung her head back, and saw the sunlight flooding through the forest, bathing their union with its blessing.

Her first orgasm was a blinding flash of light that consumed her senses and left her reeling. She was aware from a distance that Tom was still thrusting into her willing body, and that Todd still played with her breasts, but she was on a different sensory plane entirely. Then she came back to herself, to find Tom lying beside her, holding her, and stroking her sweat-dampened hair, while Todd directed her willing fingers to his own hard cock. She had never touched a man's penis before, and she felt a momentary curiosity as her fingers made contact with the thick length. She ran her hands along Todd's cock, fondling and caressing, watching his face, loving the way he flung his head back, and his tongue moistened his bottom lip. She could tell by his expression that she was doing something right, and increased the pressure of her caress until he came, with a shuddering sigh, and, like his brother, he flung himself down beside her and wrapped her in his arms.

She felt safe this way, with these two boys, safe within their embrace, sharing the closeness of their bond. This felt right. It felt like belonging, being part of something greater than herself, something beautiful and satisfying. *I don't want this to end*, an older, sadder, Scully wept, a wave of foreboding sweeping through her. *Please...I know what happens. Don't let it continue. Please, please, stop it!* She fled from her warm, sated body, and hovered among the branches of the trees, gazing down on the naked, abandoned bodies below. *Don't make me live this again. I want to stop it. I want...* She placed her hands over her eyes, remembered footsteps, and her brother's look of horror as he found them. His sister - the whore, lying naked with not one, but two lovers. She could remember the disappointment in his eyes. He had been shocked to the core of his conservative Catholic soul, and she couldn't blame him. She remembered running after him, frantically adjusting her clothing, calling him back.

"Bill...please don't tell Daddy. Please..." She remembered the way her brother had looked at her, the way he had looked at her ever since. The disapproval was always there, warring with the love. He hadn't told their parents what he had found that day, and he had never spoken to her about it either, yet somehow it was always there between them. "I was always making things up to Bill," Scully whispered, sinking back down beneath her tree, in the darkness. "I was always trying to show him that he was wrong about me."

The darkness closed in around her, and she clutched her knees to her chest, and placed her hands over her ears. Outside, beyond the small circle of trees that both trapped her, and kept her safe, she could hear the whispers starting again.

Downtown Washington,

January 9, 1999

The woman behind the bar looked up as the man walked in, some sixth sense, honed over many years working in this dive, telling her that he was trouble. He was a bit older than her

usual clients, but his hard, muscular body, and the black combat clothes he wore hinted at danger. Something about him didn't ring true to her. He looked out of place, and she knew that he didn't belong here.

"Can I help you?" She asked him politely.

"Yes." He had a low, deep voice, and his eyes were dark and unreadable behind the wire-rims he wore. "I want to buy something."

"Whatever you like." She spread her hands, gesturing at the bottles behind the bar.

"That's not the kind of substance I want to get high on," he told her.

"We don't have anything else." She shrugged, reaching for a glass. "Now what can I get you?"

His hand shot out and grabbed her wrist.

"I want what you sell in the back rooms. Don't pull any crap with me, I know what this place is, and I know what goes on here."

"Are you a fed?" She asked, her heart pounding. Something about him wasn't right; the way he looked, the way he spoke - even the way he walked.

"No." He gave her what he probably thought was a reassuring smile, but it only succeeded in alarming her further. "I have cash." He moved aside his coat, revealing both his weapon and a quantity of cash sticking out of an inside pocket. "Well?" He asked.

"All right. Go through." She pulled out a key, and unlocked a door behind the bar, and he followed her into a dark corridor that stank of urine and vomit. They walked along to a room, dimly lit, hazy with cigarette smoke, and filled with empty, staring faces. A man stood by the door aimlessly cleaning his gun. "Is this what you want?" The woman asked. Skinner nodded, and she scuttled off back to the bar.

The man with the gun looked Skinner over, then gestured with his head to a recess, partially obscured by a curtain. Skinner strode over, slipped behind the curtain, and found himself in a booth, facing a gap-toothed man with a large box full of tiny plastic envelopes, and several tubes containing hundreds of colored pills.

"Jesus, what a place. These people are the living dead." The youth hovered behind the drug dealer, glancing at the content of the box. "At least back in 'Nam, there seemed to be something exotic about it - some sense of fun, hedonism even. This is so..."

"Soulless." Skinner finished for him.

"What?" The gap-toothed man looked up.

"Nothing. I want to buy." Skinner gestured with his head towards the box.

"What are you interested in?"

"Something that will take me out of my body." Skinner told him seriously.

"You mean something that will blow your mind?" The man grinned.

"If it does that too, I'll just view it as an unfortunate side effect." Skinner shrugged.

"You want crack." The man said confidently.

"No. I want heroin." Skinner replied. "Or acid."

"You don't look like you take heroin." The man peered at him through the hazy, smoky, half-light.

"My money looks like real money." Skinner drew out a wad of dollar bills, and laid them on the table.

"You're not a junkie." The gap-toothed man leaned back in his chair, surveying Skinner, sizing him up.

"I've done heroin." Skinner insisted, counting out some bills, and then reaching across to place them in the other man's hand. The man hesitated.

"We have to be careful. We don't want to be busted."

"If I were a fed, I can assure you that it would already be too late," Skinner snapped tersely. "I'm not going to bust you, I want to buy from you."

"Okay." The other man finally made up his mind. "It's expensive here, but at least you know it's not cut with rat poison like those assholes sold those poor bastards who o.d. two days ago."

"Fine." Skinner nodded.

"And you pay for the protection." The man gestured in the direction of the thug cleaning his gun in the doorway. "Nobody messes with you while you're high."

"How...reassuring." Skinner murmured.

The gap-toothed man nodded, taking his words at face value. "We provide a service here," he said, sounding almost proud.

"It's an all-American kind of place." Skinner commented ironically.

The man laughed. "Yeah. Just like apple pie." He handed Skinner a sealed syringe. "It's all in there. Just inject and fly."

Skinner took it and eased his way out of the booth, glancing around the room until he found an empty table in the corner. When he got there, he found the youth already sitting waiting for him.

"Is this going to work?" Skinner asked, rolling up his sleeve, and tapping his arm to find a vein.

"How the hell should I know?" The youth shrugged.

"Thanks. That's just what I wanted to hear." Skinner snapped.

"Hey, I just say it like it is. That's the deal - you know that by now. Well, are you going to sit there all day staring at it?" The youth nodded his head in the direction of the vein that was now bulging up under the pressure of Skinner's thumb.

"Shut up."

Skinner hesitated for a moment, and then plunged the syringe into his waiting flesh, pushing the contents into his body. He closed his eyes and leaned back, waiting for the rush, remembering the way it had felt all those years ago in Saigon. The sounds in the room grew louder, and everything shifted into slow motion. Skinner heard a voice, and turned his head towards it. He saw the boy, sitting beside him, his mouth opening and closing as he spoke.

"What...? I can't hear you..." Skinner said, and his mouth felt heavy, as he listened to the sound of his voice from a great distance. He closed his eyes again, and when he opened them, he was sitting staring at himself, as if had jumped straight into the youth's insubstantial 18-year-old body. He glanced down at his bullet-ridden uniform, soaked in blood, and then across to where he sat - older, heavier, his face etched with weariness and despair. His eyes were open, blank and unseeing. Skinner waved a hand in front of the face he had previously only seen looking back at him from mirrors, or reflected in water, or other people's glasses. There was no movement; his eyes were staring into space - lost. Skinner shivered as a cold sensation seeped into his soul, and then he found himself ascending to the ceiling, looking down on the smoky room full of lost souls. He rose up further, into a dark void, and beyond, towards a bright light.

"Fox? I have to leave you now." The Old Woman moved his head gently from her lap, and glided silently away from him.

"You can't go." He sat up, panic-stricken.

"I have to. Jace is here." She smiled. "I said that he'd come for you."

"Where is he?" Mulder looked around.

"Near. I must go and greet him." She paused, putting one hand out, and resting it against the cell wall, and Mulder watched in horror as her fingertips disappeared into the very fabric of the wall. He opened his mouth in a wordless cry. Outside, the whispers grew louder.

"I don't have long do I?" He asked, looking around, and shivering violently. The warm red glow of the cell had dissipated almost to blackness.

"No." She shook her head. "When Jace comes you must go with him, Fox. He doesn't have a magic wand that he can wave to make you safe."

"Then how will I ever get out of here?" Mulder whimpered.

"With strength, and courage. You have both of those in abundance, and you can borrow them from Jace as well. He'll stand beside you."

"That's not enough!" Mulder muttered mutinously, but the Old Woman just shook her head.

"It has to be," she said, and then she disappeared, her body melting into the wall as if it didn't exist. Mulder put his arms over his head, and buried his face in his knees.

Skinner stood still, bathed in a bright white light. He heard a voice, and a dim shape walked towards him through the light.

"Jace?" A voice whispered, and it echoed all around him, the word caressing him, like a lover.

"I'm here." He wasn't sure when he had started to respond to the name 'Jace', but he just knew that it felt right.

"It's an old name. You've worn it for a long time," she said, reading his thoughts, her body suddenly coming into focus, gray hair floating around her shoulders in a ghostly cloud.

"I don't remember." He shrugged.

"No." Her voice was full of regret, and she gathered him up in an embrace. He stood, stiffly for a moment, and then felt himself relaxing. He trusted this woman. More than that, on some deep level that he couldn't understand, he **loved** her. He felt her love flowing back into him, and for a moment he couldn't feel his body. He merged with her in a flow of energy, and as he did so, his consciousness touched an infinite number of other souls, and he was suffused with a longing to join them.

"Not yet." The old woman whispered, as he surrendered himself to the experience. "They just wanted to send their love." He felt joined, at one with something larger than himself, in a way that he hadn't felt since he lost his comrades all those years ago. The energy of those countless souls flowed through him, connecting him to them, bathing him. He opened his

heart, mind, and soul, and felt them touch him, leaving him cleansed, refreshed, and strengthened for the task ahead.

"You were chosen," the old woman said, her voice as heavy and sweet as honey. "Out of all of us, you were chosen for this task, Jace. You haven't disappointed us."

"I want to come home," he murmured.

"Not yet," she said again, her voice regretful. "We chose the brightest and the best from among our number. You're a very old soul, Jace."

"As old as you?" He asked.

"Yes." She chuckled.

"And Mulder and Scully?"

"One of them old, the other new, made by us all to meet the threat ahead of us, and shining as bright as a star." She spoke proudly, like a mother talking about a special child. "We gave the best of ourselves, tiny pieces, to form the new-born. You were all chosen, Jace, and you all accepted the task, freely and willingly, knowing how hard it would be."

"What task?" Skinner asked, his body becoming a loose collection of atoms, and each one of them merging with the light until he was indistinguishable from his surroundings.

"You'll find out soon enough if you take the right path, and I hope you do. We can't interfere, but we know you well enough to trust that you will do what is necessary. If you fail, well..." She shrugged. "We hope you don't."

"There's a lot at stake, isn't there?" Skinner whispered.

"Yes. Our union is at stake, the consciousness of every single one of us is at stake, and, less importantly perhaps, the fate of your world is also at stake."

"I don't understand." Skinner felt his body solidifying once more, and he could have wept for the loss of those minds touching his, loving and supporting him. He glanced down at his torn uniform, and the blood that liberally covered his body, oozing from a dozen wounds. "I look like an extra from a horror movie," he commented wryly. "Why?"

"None of us are corporeal here, Jace. You're wearing the body that you associate with this place, the body you were wearing the last time you were here. That's the only way I can describe it. Now, you must do what you came here to do, and find your friends."

"My friends?" Skinner stood there for a moment, puzzled, and then realization swept through him. "Mulder, and Scully. I'm not used to thinking of them as 'friends'."

"You'll soon learn to think of them as something else entirely. I can take you to Mulder. Scully is... elsewhere. Now that you're here I can go and find her. I couldn't leave Mulder before."

"Why? Is he all right?"

"Yes, but the longer he stays the weaker he becomes. Come. Time is different here, but he doesn't have much of it, all the same."

Skinner followed her unquestioningly, disappearing into a haze of bright light, and emerging on the other side into a completely white space. A man lay on the floor, crouched in a fetal position, rocking backwards and forwards.

Skinner looked questioningly at the Old Woman.

"Mulder?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. He's in grave danger. He knows the end is near and he doesn't have the strength to fight it for much longer."

"Why doesn't he leave here?" Skinner asked, looking around. "What's stopping him?"

"This isn't how he sees it," she explained with a shrug.

"Mulder." Skinner knelt down, holding out his hand as if to a wary cat. Mulder gave a whimper and scrunched his body up even tighter. "What's wrong?" Skinner glanced up at the Old Woman.

"He doesn't recognize you. He thinks you're one of **them**."

"One of who?" Skinner frowned.

"The whisperers."

"I'm not making any sense of this." Skinner stated flatly, fighting the fear inside. "These things scare me."

"I know. You're too rational." The Old Woman smiled, and caressed the side of his face with her gnarled hand. "You must learn to trust your instincts more."

"Like Mulder?" Skinner glanced at the other man who still rocked back and forth at his feet, his body tightly clenched.

"Maybe not quite like Fox, no!" She laughed. "He has his own destiny to follow, and he needs your strengths. He doesn't need you to be a carbon copy of him." She saw his troubled expression and took pity on him, her expression softening. "Jace - the child has been wrenched from his body, but his mind and memories are intact. He's lost inside them. That's the closest I can come to explaining it to you. If you want to get him to safety, and

back to his body where he belongs, then you have to enter into his delusion, and bring him out."

"How?" Skinner looked up at her helplessly.

"Using the link you have with him of course." She smiled.

"The link...that isn't properly formed. It isn't a true nexus. I didn't complete it," he gabbled defensively, shame-faced.

"You feel guilty," she remarked, looking at him keenly. "Well, I suppose that's understandable. Nonetheless, if you want to save his life you'll have to complete the nexus between you."

"If I do that, there's no turning back. We're in each other's thoughts, inside each other's minds until we die. I can't do that to him without asking him if he'd want it first." Skinner told her.

"You can't ask him if he can't hear you." She shrugged.

"You don't understand. Mulder's very...independent. I think he'd hate being part of a nexus. I think it would frustrate him, and I think he'd hate me for forcing him into it." Skinner stood up.

"So you're just going to leave him here to die?" The Old Woman asked calmly. "Jace, you've already looked into his mind. You've stolen glimpses of his soul when he wasn't looking. This time you can do it to save his life. "

"Glimpses, yes. You're asking me to do so much more."

"Don't do it then." The Old Woman shrugged. "But he will die. In your world he has less than three hours left."

Skinner stared at her helplessly. "I'm in a no-win situation here," he protested. "I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't."

"I never said that your choices would be easy." The Old Woman sighed. "I don't promise he won't resent you for this either. I just tell you how it is."

Skinner thought about it for a moment, and then exhaled deeply, glancing down at the prone body of his colleague. It hurt him to see Mulder in so much distress.

"All right." He knelt down beside the other man, and placed his fingertips against his head. Mulder jerked away, a hoarse scream rising in his throat, but Skinner held on tight. His mind opened up, traveling along the link he had formed guiltily over the past few years, finding the bright, swirling brilliance of Mulder's mind and following it, merging himself into it. He found the threads he had planted there, little links that he could use in order to find Mulder at any given moment, sending out his thoughts to connect to the links, to see what Mulder

saw, and, most of all, to check that the other man was all right. Mulder had been in so much danger over the years that it had been impossible to resist. Now Skinner fastened his own energy onto those links, made them bigger, weaving a pattern like a spider weaves a web. Finally, when his work was completed, he surged into the new nexus he had created.

The whiteness faded into a dark cell. There was one window, with bars over it, through which three fingers of light shone into the prison, illuminating the huddled figure on the floor.

"Mulder."

Mulder looked up and saw a terrifying apparition staring down at him. A youth, wearing a ripped uniform rendered unidentifiable by bloodstains and bullet holes. He had short, cropped dark hair, and deep, sad eyes. His face was pale, and his cheekbones and jaw were sharp and angular. He was tall, thin and lanky, with hard muscular forearms and a hint of solidity around the shoulders. His mouth was set in a straight line, as if something so terrible had happened to him, he never intended to smile again. Bright red blood oozed from a dozen or more wounds on his body, although he didn't seem to be in any pain.

"Are you dead?" Mulder asked.

"No. Yes. No." The soldier shook his head. "That's a tricky one."

"Am I dead?" Mulder whispered.

"No. Not yet." The youth stood up, glancing around. "We must leave here though, or you soon will be," he said.

"You're Jace." Mulder uncurled his body and got to his feet.

"Yes. Come on, Mulder, hurry."

"No. I'm not going back out there again." Mulder shook his head. "The whisperers are out there. They want me."

"If you stay here you'll die." The youth held out his hand and gave a hint of a shy, gentle smile. "Come on, Mulder. I'll be with you. I won't let them harm you."

"No." Mulder shook his head. "You don't understand. I tried it before. I got lost. There was Richard, and Sam, and Dad...I couldn't find a way out. I don't know you."

"Yes you do. Come on, Mulder. Trust me." The soldier held out his hand again. He sounded a lot older, and his tone was more imperative than seemed right given his youthful appearance. "You have to trust me."

Mulder hesitated. He looked into the boy's solemn brown eyes, and felt that he knew him.

He took one uncertain step forwards, then another, and then reached out, and his fingers touched the youth's outstretched hand. The other man's fingers closed around his own, and his blood-stained face broke into a wide, full smile. Mulder had a sudden, curious sensation of coming home. The hand holding his own felt warm, safe and comforting, and Mulder was filled with a renewed sense of hope and optimism.

"Where do we go?" Mulder looked around. The cell walls were solid, unchanging. "How do we get out?"

"The cell isn't here, Mulder." Jace said. "Your mind created it. Look at it - it's like a picture you've seen in a book. Maybe in *The Count Of Monte Cristo*, or something like that. It's a stereotypical cell - with bars over the windows, bare brick walls, a heavy locked door. The door isn't real, Mulder and neither is the cell. You can walk out anytime you choose to."

"No, I can't. The whisperers..." Mulder shook his head.

"Mulder, listen to me, there is nothing here but the inside of your mind. I'm not leaving you. Come with me and I'll take you to safety. Trust me."

"It isn't real?" Mulder gazed around the cell. When he looked closely, it **did** appear to be insubstantial.

"No, it isn't real. Except for the light that you can see through the window. That's the way back to your body, Mulder, and I'm going to take you there. I want you to focus on it, and on it alone. Nothing else matters."

Mulder turned to look at the three fingers of light, as they shone through the bars covering the window, then he ignored the bars, and concentrated on the light. The light grew brighter and brighter, until it suddenly exploded into the cell, and the walls of his prison disappeared.

"I can't see you," he yelled, panicking. He couldn't feel his body, or see anything, but the whispers grew louder, filling his mind.

"I'm here." A reassuring voice said inside his head. "The whispers are just your memories. They can't hurt you."

"Fox!"

He whirled around to see his father calling him.

"It's dad. I have to go back," Mulder insisted, trying to pull away, but Jace's grip was like steel. The youth didn't seem to be holding onto his hand any more, he seemed to be inside his head, and there was no escaping from him. "Let me go! I have to go to my father. I have to tell him that I lost Sam again. I have to..."

The light that surrounded them wavered, and dissipated, coalescing into a room, and Mulder found himself sinking back into the memory, watching himself, as he opened a door...

"Dana."

Scully thought about it rationally for a moment, and then opened her eyes.

"I know you're not real," she said, staring at the Old Woman who was standing under one of the trees, watching her. "I know that you're just a figment of my imagination, or maybe someone from my past. You can't really hurt me if I don't give you any power to," she said firmly.

"I don't want to hurt you." The Old Woman sat down beneath the tree opposite Scully.

"Good, because this isn't actually real. None of this is real." Scully nodded vigorously as if she were trying to convince herself. "I don't know what's going on here, but, uh, I think I've probably suffered some sort of head injury. This is clearly a hallucination. I expect there's some sort of medical explanation and..." She swallowed, and gripped her hands even more tightly around her knees.

"I'm sure there is." The Old Woman smiled. "I'm glad I've had this chance to meet you again, Dana."

"Again?" Scully frowned. "I don't know you. We've never met before."

"Yes we have. You've been here before, my dear. When you were trying to choose whether to live or to die."

"Choose? I don't remember making..."

"Nurse Owens." The Old Woman's features shifted and changed, until she had the appearance of a homely, middle aged female, dressed in a white medical uniform.

"No, this is a trick." Scully shook her head. "You're going to try and take me away from here, to lure me away from this place, where I'm safe."

"Well..." The woman looked around. "It's a little bit dark and lonely, but no, I'm not going to try to make you leave, if this is where you feel safe."

"I'm not listening to you." Scully put her hands over her ears. "You're **him**. The one who pretended to be Mulder, the one who accused me of killing Melissa, of killing all of them."

"That was you, dear." The other woman replied, shaking her head sadly. "The guilt, and grief, and sense of loss that you suppress every day of your life. You had to store it

somewhere in order that you could go on being so calm, and rational, and strong. The trouble with suppressed emotions is that they can take on a life of their own."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Scully replied. "I don't feel guilty about Melissa. It wasn't my fault..."

"Hush, sweetheart. You don't have to lie to me." Nurse Owens said soothingly.

"They thought she was me." Scully's face crumpled up. "It should have been me. I should have died..." she wept.

"No, my love. I know this is hard for you to believe, but it all happened exactly as it was supposed to. You were born for a purpose, a very particular purpose, and Melissa gave her life gladly in order that you could fulfil your destiny."

"I miss her." Scully tried to wipe the tears away with her sleeve, to hide the fact that she was weeping.

"You don't have to be strong here, with me, Dana." Nurse Owens told her gently. "Later on you'll have to be brave again, but here, now, you have a little respite from the storm. Cry all you like."

"I'm not crying." Scully sobbed.

"You can accept comfort too, sweetheart. It's a lonely path you've walked so far and there are hard times yet to come - but many good times too."

"It's just there are so many things I don't understand." Scully squeezed her knees tightly with her arms, making herself as small as possible. "I feel as if I've been sucked into his slipstream, as if he's a vortex and I'm lost swirling in his clouds. I don't know who I am any more. I know that sometimes I want him, but I also want more than he can give, and he knows that too, so he doesn't offer anything. He loves me too much to hurt me, but I want something. I **need** something." Scully wept. "That's not selfish is it? Every day I go to work, I help him on his quests, and I lose everything I love, and every day my own beliefs are undermined and he doesn't care about that. He doesn't care..." Her voice trailed off into a series of gulps. "God, I'm whining." She gave a self-deprecating smile. "I found something, someone. Someone else." She looked into the other woman's eyes for the first time. "He was inside my mind, and he was strong, so I didn't have to be any more. I didn't have to carry everything around on my shoulders - I could share it. He was there, he was with me, and it was intimate in a way I'd never known before. Then I lost him too..." Scully fought to control herself again, and failed, the tears running down her cheeks.

"Sweetheart - you don't have to be strong with me." Nurse Owens patted the ground beside her, giving Scully a warm, inviting smile. Scully gazed at her, uncertainly, but the other woman's smile never faltered. Slowly, uncertainly, Scully got to her feet, and started to walk towards her.

"You didn't have me come all this way to give me good news. What is it, Fox?" Skinner recognized the man's grim, unsmiling features. He had only seen Bill Mulder once before, but he knew him immediately. He watched as Mulder turned away, trying to hide the tears in his eyes.

"Samantha's gone, Dad...I lost her." Mulder's shoulders were set in a tense line, and it was clear to Skinner that this conversation was a painful reminder to both men of one that had taken place many years previously.

"What do you mean, you lost her?" Bill Mulder's expression was hard and cold, his tone hectoring.

"There was a man. He was holding my partner hostage in exchange for Samantha." Mulder explained.

"You let his man take your sister - isn't that what you're trying to tell me?" Skinner wished that he could change something about this scenario, he wished that he could somehow intervene and stop this gut-wrenching memory from tearing Mulder apart. Instead, all he could do was watch, as Mulder turned around.

"I can explain it to you but, um, I believed that I was doing the right thing, Dad."

"Was this your decision?"

There was silence for a moment, and Skinner saw a familiar pattern - an apportioning of blame, and a sense of guilt settling around Mulder's shoulders that was so tangible he could feel the weight of it.

"Yes." Mulder answered finally. "I'll tell Mom." The tears welled up in Mulder's eyes.

"Do you realize what losing her again will do to your mother?" Bill Mulder demanded. Mulder's face was grief stricken. He clearly realized all too well the effect that this news would have on his mother. "Do you?" Bill Mulder asked again, in that same cold, hectoring tone, as if his son's distress meant nothing to him.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry. I'm sorry...sorry..." Mulder's voice trailed off. Skinner watched as Bill Mulder made no move to comfort his son, and he felt a deep anger rise up inside him. How could anybody who purported to love Mulder stand by and watch him in such obvious distress, and do nothing? Mulder was hurting, Mulder was his, part of his nexus; how dare anybody, anybody at all, even his own father, cause Mulder such pain, stand by and watch Mulder in pain, and do **nothing**...

"Enough!" He wasn't even aware that he'd spoken until the words reverberated around the room. The effect startled Mulder out of the memory, leaving the room, and Bill Mulder, frozen in time. Skinner's rage rose around them both like a dark cloud, and he saw Mulder flinch in alarm as it filtered through the link between them. Skinner fought hard to suppress it. "Come with me. Leave this behind," he urged, holding out his hand again.

"I disappointed him so many times." Mulder said softly, touching his father's unmoving, unsmiling face. "He must have despised me."

"He's your father. He loved you." Skinner insisted, unsure whether that was the truth. "He matters to you, Mulder, but he's dead. You're still alive. Let me take you back to the light." Mulder stood there for a moment, uncertainly.

"It hurts," he whispered.

"I know. It hurts me too. I feel what you feel." Skinner waited, his hand outstretched, and finally Mulder took it again. Skinner slid his arm around the other man's shoulder, and ushered him away from the scene, back towards the light.

Almost immediately they were assaulted by images. A thousand snapshots from Mulder's life, a swirling mass of memories, all overlapping in a tumultuous confusion until all that could be heard were insidious whispers, claiming Mulder, pawing at them both, trying to suck them back in. It took all Skinner's strength to keep Mulder moving, to drag him past the images as they flashed before them, revealing so many facets of Mulder's life that he had never glimpsed before. He saw a birthday party, a nine year old boy dressed as Mr. Spock. He saw a little girl running in a park, and a man sitting smoking at a table. The images grew stronger, weighing them down, and Skinner started to run, propelling Mulder along with him.

"I can't..." Mulder panted.

"You have to." Skinner insisted. "Don't stop. Don't look at them. If you look at them they'll drag you back, and keep you from returning to your body. You're strong, Mulder, you can resist."

"I can't." Mulder twisted in his grasp. A red-haired woman loomed in front of them, her face pale and drawn.

"Mulder. Help me, Mulder!" She cried.

"Scully..." Mulder reached out a hand, but Skinner pulled him on, away from the memory, and it faded as it passed them. "Scully...!" Mulder called, his arms stretching out behind them, as Skinner forced him on. They turned the corner, and Skinner stopped dead. There, in front of them, was himself.

"Agent Mulder, would you like to explain to this committee why..."

"You're standing by this report, Agent Mulder?"

"I want you to tell me what the hell you thought you were doing!"

<Shit. Ignore it.> Skinner closed his eyes, walking forward purposefully. <Christ, anybody would think that all I ever did was give him a hard time. You have **such** a selective memory, Mulder.>

He opened his eyes again, and an image of himself restraining Mulder in a choke hold sprang up, closely followed by him immobilizing the other man over a desk. He saw himself shouting, and some sort of weird bug creature looming up over his own shoulder. <Did that really happen?>

He stopped for a moment, fascinated, his gaze drawn to the monster's red eyes, then felt himself disappearing inside a body, but not his own. He watched in horror as the memory became real, as he became Mulder re-living the event, trying desperately to warn his unseeing, unbelieving boss that he was in danger. He saw his own large hands fasten around his wrists, and felt aggrieved, out of control, wanting to be believed, wanting this man to believe him, wanting **that** more than anything else. As those big hands held him against the desk, and he felt the weight of a solid body pinning him down, he was suddenly overcome by a sensation of desire.

Skinner jerked back out of the memory with a gasp of surprise.

"Where did you go?" Mulder asked accusingly, grabbing hold of his arm. "You were here and then you disappeared."

"I'm sorry. It's all right. I'm back now, I'm sorry." He pulled the agent closer, scared by the ease with which he had been sucked into the memory, and still reeling from the shock of being Mulder, and seeing himself from Mulder's perspective, to say nothing of that curious wave of desire. "We have to be strong, Mulder. We have to keep going. I won't fail you again. Come on." He hurried the other man along the twisting recesses of his memories, experiencing a whole lifetime in a series of swirling images, stray words and thoughts. A beautiful woman stood naked in a doorway, beckoning.

"Fox...care to join me?" She purred.

"Diana." Mulder whispered, reaching out. Skinner hurried him on.

"You've never done this before have you?" A man with blond hair leaned over them, his hands moving in an intimate caress. "It's all right. I'll be gentle..."

Skinner digested the implications of that image without surprise, still forcing Mulder on. The whispering around them built up to a crescendo and Mulder started to whimper.

"They're everywhere. I want to stop..."

"You can't. Close your eyes. I'll lead you." Skinner told him, glancing at the other man. Mulder's face was pale, and he looked almost ghostly in appearance, his dark eyes showing the struggle he was going through to hold onto his sanity in the face of the constant bombardment. Mulder thought about it for a moment, then nodded, doing as he was told. Skinner felt their minds merge, becoming utterly and irrevocably one, as they fled down the recesses of Mulder's past. The white light glowed in the distance, coming closer, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"We're nearly there, Mulder. Nearly there..." He said encouragingly, picking up the pace again, starting to run.

The image rose without warning, too big to avoid, spilling out in front of them, blocking their escape route. It was a 12-year-old boy, mouth open in shock, watching shadowy figures take his sister away. Beside him, Mulder's footsteps faltered, and came to a stop. He sank down, and buried his face in his arms.

"I can't go any further," he said, the memory settling around them both like a blanket. "I'm too tired."

Skinner stopped, and crouched down in front of the other man, touching his face gently to make him look up.

"I'll carry you," he said. Mulder stared at him, his eyes filled with despair, then Skinner felt the link between them suddenly pulse with a sense of hope.

"Will you?" Mulder asked.

"Yes." Skinner reached out and swung him up, wrenching them both through the scene that was playing out endlessly in front of them. A little girl was screaming out her brother's name, Mulder was trying to tell his parents that she was missing; imparting news that would hurt everybody he knew, enduring hours of endless questioning, trying not to cry, failing. Mulder lay almost comatose in his arms, the whispering so loud that neither of them could hear anything else, as Skinner battled through the assaulting images, his footsteps as slow and labored as if he were walking uphill into a head wind.

"Leave me." Mulder said suddenly. "You can save yourself. Leave me. This is all I am, and all I can ever be. I can't get beyond it. I'm lost here."

"No." Skinner replied.

"You don't understand..."

"No." Skinner said again. "It's not an option." Mulder's hazel eyes stared at him wordlessly, and then he reached out a hand to touch the bloodstains on the other man's neck.

"Who are you? Why are you doing this for me?"

Skinner's only response was to open up his entire soul to the link, pouring every last ounce of reassurance he had into the fledgling nexus that he had constructed between them. Mulder's eyes opened in wonder and shock, and then suddenly his own mind opened up, his thoughts and emotions flooding into the nexus as if a dam had been breached, momentarily overwhelming Skinner until he could adjust to the force of Mulder's presence in the link. Without warning, the whispering stopped, as if somebody had flicked a switch, and they were plunged into complete silence. The images faded, and there was an explosion of white light all around them.

Scully wasn't sure how long she had cried, she just knew that it was a relief to be able to. The other woman's arms circled her, protecting her, and she laid her head against that motherly breast and wept herself into oblivion.

"Damn, did I make a fool of myself?" She asked, as the sobs finally subsided.

"No, dear." Nurse Owens laughed. "You just gave yourself permission to do something you never do back in your world. Did it help?"

"I don't know." Scully lay back, and stared at the light from the moon as it filtered through the trees. "I think so. Maybe. I hate being weak."

"Oh you're not that." The other woman chuckled, hugging her close. "You're very dear to me, Dana, and to Jace. He wants to help you. Will you let him?"

"I don't know." Scully said again. "I don't know anything here. None of my usual rules apply."

The other woman laughed. "Dana, you have an important destiny to fulfill. I think we picked well, when we chose you. I don't think you'll let us down." She leaned forward, and kissed Scully on the forehead.

"What do you mean?" Scully asked, grabbing the woman's hand. For a second she had a sensation of being connected to something so big that she couldn't comprehend its vastness. She saw a swirling mass of colors, repeating an endless, age-old pattern, over and over again, and gasped.

"It's beautiful..." she whispered, transfixed by the jewelled display.

"Yes." Her companion took hold of her other hand and held it tightly. "You are at its heart, Dana. Let me show you."

Scully felt her heart beating inside her chest, until it filled her ears with its sound, and the world turned in time to the rhythm. For one brief second, Scully felt connected to every blade of grass in the world, every tree, every insect, every human being. She breathed with the wind, flew with the birds, swam with the fish. The world, and the souls of everything that had ever lived, were woven into a tapestry, like a giant, gossamer spider's web, spun out of rubies and sapphires.

"I never knew," she whispered, leaning her forehead against the other woman's, overwhelmed by the image.

"The pattern spins and weaves, and has done for countless eons, but one day soon, all that we are, and all that we could be, will be threatened by a darkness as strong as our light. You are our hope, Dana. You, and Jace, and the child, Fox. Don't fail us. Please." Scully felt as if she were falling into a dark river as she stared into those solemn gray eyes.

"I won't. I swear," she promised, and the next thing she knew, she was alone once more.

"What happened?" Mulder looked around, dazed by the silence.

"I'm not sure." Skinner shrugged.

"You got me out. I...thank you." Hazel eyes regarded him with solemn gratitude.

"We haven't finished yet. I can't take you back until I find Scully," Skinner said. He realized that he was still carrying Mulder and put him down, feeling vaguely embarrassed. Mulder gave him a look of puzzlement, and Skinner could feel the nexus glowing at the interchange of emotions between them, unsettling them both. "I'm sorry." Skinner murmured.

"For what?" Mulder asked, looking, and feeling, confused, the emotion flowing palpably through the link.

"You're going to hate this. Hell, I'm not sure I'm going to like it." Skinner mumbled. This was so different from before. Then he had been young, innocent, open. Now he was older, and he had hidden himself for so long, his heart and soul closed to everybody around him, that the newly created nexus between him and Mulder seemed awkward, and frankly embarrassing.

At that moment, the light parted, and the Old Woman returned.

"Fox." She took him in her arms and kissed his forehead. Skinner could feel the agent's sense of unease, combined with a giddy surge of joy at being enveloped in her embrace.

"Dana?" Skinner looked at the Old Woman over Mulder's head. "Have you found her?" The Old Woman smiled, and nodded.

"There's just one small problem," she murmured.

Skinner's heart sank. "She's all right?" He asked anxiously.

"She's fine. She's just very determined to...well, you'll see." The Old Woman sighed.

Scully sat on the forest floor, making a daisy chain. She heard footsteps, and looked up as a shadow fell across the folds of her skirt.

"You're Jace?" She stared into the eyes of a young soldier who looked...half dead. His face was a deathly white, which contrasted with the wet, violently red bloodstains on his clothing and face. She gazed at him for a long while, and then decided not to scream.

"Yes." The man crouched down beside her. "I'm glad you're okay," he murmured.

"Nurse Owens told me you'd come to find me." The bloodstained boy looked confused, Scully thought to herself. "You know who Nurse Owens is don't you?" she asked.

"Yes. Of course." The youth replied, although he was frowning and didn't appear all that **certain**. Scully completed the daisy chain and fastened it around his neck, smiling at him. He flushed a bright red, looking extremely confused now, to say nothing of embarrassed.

"I want you to come with me." The soldier held out his hand. Scully looked at it for a moment and then shook her head. "Why not? I can take you back home." The boy gave what he probably thought was an encouraging smile. Scully shook her head again.

"I'm safe here," she said.

"No, Dana, you're not." He tried to scoop her up, and she gave a blood-curdling roar of rage that stopped him in his tracks.

"I'm staying here!" She fumed, pounding at him with her fists until he let her go. "I've worked it out quite logically. If I stay here, I'll be safe. If I try to leave, I'll just get even more lost. There are no such things as ghosts, or monsters, or demons, so it's quite impossible that there's anything lurking behind the trees waiting to eat me."

"You don't believe in monsters?" The stranger asked, with a wry smile.

"No. I've decided they can't exist, so they don't." Her mouth was set into a straight line, and her jaw was clenched in determination.

"Dana, you're not safe here. I know you think you are, but you're not." The boy's voice was insistent, but she didn't trust him.

"You're lying! I'm not going out there with you. You're not real; you're some perverse part of my mind that wants me to die."

The boy exhaled loudly, turned to somebody that Scully couldn't see, and said:

"She won't come with me. What the hell do I do now?"

It was, Skinner decided, worse than a nightmare. First he had to leave the safety of his own body and journey to this place, which had scared the hell out of him. Worse, once he got here, he had an overwhelming desire to stay, which also scared the hell out of him. Then he'd been forced to run the gamut of Mulder's memories, which had given him a new perspective on the man as well as most **definitely** scaring the hell out of him. Now, he was faced with the task of convincing an extremely skeptical Dana Scully that monsters, mutants, ghosts, ghoulies and things that went bump in the night **did** exist, and she was

better off leaving with him than staying here to be eaten by one, hypothetically speaking at least.

<Since when did I become an apologist for the paranormal anyway?> he wondered resentfully. Then he laughed at himself, some rational part of his brain pointing out that he was right slap bang in the middle of the most paranormal experience anyone could ever have so what the hell, he should just go with it.

"She's still Dana," the old woman informed him. He saw her sitting rocking in a chair, Mulder crouched by her feet. "She still has Dana's thoughts and memories. It's just that she's a little confused. She's been taken from her body, and finds herself lost in this place where there's no clarity or certainty, and her memories are all chopped up. She doesn't know what's real and what isn't. You can imagine how frightening that must be for someone like Dana. Bad enough for Fox here," she kissed the top of Mulder's head, "but worse for Dana."

"Scully's here?" Mulder looked at Skinner with worried hazel eyes. "She's lost too? Like I was? Can I help find her?"

"Hush, sweetheart." The Old Woman murmured. "You're safe here for now, but this is Jace's task. You won't be any help to him; you're growing weaker the longer you stay here. Just rest."

"I could..." Mulder began, but the Old Woman placed one finger over his lips to quieten him. Skinner felt the force of her will flickering through the link. No wonder Mulder had shut up. He wished it was a trick he possessed. It could save him a lot of time and energy in meetings.

"Tell me..." he said to Old Woman, "why is she so attached to this piece of forest? I can understand Mulder creating a cell, but why a forest?"

"You have a link with her - you find out." The Old Woman smiled.

Skinner sighed. "How did I know you were going to say that?"

<Dana...>

The blood stained kid was talking...only he wasn't moving his lips. Scully stared at him for a moment, perplexed, as his words continued to echo inside her mind.

<Dana, I want to understand. Will you allow me?> She felt a sigh, or a whisper, pass through her mind, gently sifting through her memories. It wasn't unpleasant. In fact, Scully enjoyed the sensation. It was like showing somebody your vacation snapshots, or sharing a thought or emotion with them, only without the clumsiness of expressing it in words. If it had been somebody else, she wasn't sure that she would have enjoyed it, but with Jace, it felt right.

<I like you.> She told him impulsively. He laughed.

<I like you too. A lot.> *More than a lot...* That last thought was private, but she caught it as if it had been blown to her on a breeze, trapping it in her mind as it passed, like plucking dandelion fluff from the air. It made her feel warm inside. She felt his mind settle inside her own, and it was familiar, and comforting.

<Will you stay here with me? > She asked.

<No. We have to leave, both of us. > He replied, still searching through her mind.

<But will you stay **here**,> she repeated. <Inside my head?>

<I don't know.>

She sensed a maelstrom of emotions, and glimpsed the edges of a huge internal struggle. She was about to say something else when he found what he was looking for. She felt herself falling back to a place and a time that she could barely remember. She opened her mouth in panicked surprise, but Jace was with her, holding her as they both fell, calming her, and she felt comforted by his presence.

She was six years old. She had been in these woods at the back of the house many times before, and felt safe here. True, her mother had always told her not to come here alone, but she had wanted to be alone. Sometimes, she just needed to get away from Bill and Charlie and Melissa, to come to a place where she could escape, and have silence and solitude. She wasn't sure how she had got lost. She had been so certain that she knew the way. At first she had wandered in circles, then she had become frantic, as she couldn't find her way home. Finally, exhausted, she had sank down beneath a tree and watched as the afternoon became evening, and darkness fell.

A rustling in the trees behind her made her turn, a scream rising to her lips. She was sure that she could see something moving in the undergrowth, something big, something that would hurt her. Another noise startled her, and she turned again, her imagination providing a set of bright red eyes, gleaming from a nearby tree trunk. If she looked very closely she could see a nose under the eyes, and a dark, gaping hole where the mouth was, waiting to gobble her up. Scully began to shiver violently, trying to remember the prayer she had learned in Sunday School last week. Something slithered next to her hand, and she jumped, gasping out loud, seeing a snake, its large fangs poised to plunge into her flesh. A silhouette flickered beside a bush, and she saw a ghost, screaming out its agony, reaching for her. On one level she re-lived the memory, but on another she was aware that she was merely watching it, safely wrapped up inside Jace's mental embrace.

<You were six,> he whispered. <You were lost, and scared, and wanted your mother. What happened?>

She sensed his anxiety, and could feel his own imagination supplying all sorts of scenarios, the worst being a shadowy figure creeping up behind her, placing a hand over her mouth so that she couldn't scream, large, rough hands touching her, unbuttoning her dress. As Jace's imagination supplied a scenario as frightening as the ghosts and demons her own six year

old imagination had dreamed up, many years ago, Scully could feel his anger and sense of protectiveness rising, and forming into a dark cloud that seemed familiar to her.

<Someone hurt you?> He asked, and his distress was real and tangible, resonating inside her mind.

<No. It's all right. **That** didn't happen,> she soothed. The memory continued to play out in front of them, Scully's imagination running riot, until she was convinced that the entire wood was filled with monsters and goblins and trolls - creatures from the fairy stories her mother read to her at night. She was so petrified that her heart froze in her chest, and for a moment she struggled on the edge of total collapse.

Then, some small nugget of clarity opened up inside her mind. She made a conscious decision to reject all the creatures of her imagination, to irrevocably turn her back on fantasies and fairy tales. At that moment, as she made that decision, she saw that the snake had been a tiny worm, slithering through the leaves. The gaping mouth on the tree that she had imagined was going to devour her, was merely a big hole. There was no ghost moaning his despair, only the sound of the wind rustling through the bushes.

<You're safe if you don't believe.> Scully told Jace. <Trusting in hard, cold facts - that's what keeps you safe.>

So that was it. Skinner processed this information, feeling sure that he was the worst person in the world for this task. Scully's defining moment had been when, as a six year old child lost in a wood, she had refused to believe in the creatures from her imagination, and had resolutely turned her back on anything she could not see, quantify and explain. During that one moment it had kept her sane, and she had relied upon that defense mechanism ever since, even in the face of experiences she had undergone on the X Files that would have given many other people, himself included, nightmares. Skinner stared his dilemma in the face. How could he convince her that this survival mechanism, relied upon for so many years, would kill her if she insisted upon sticking to it here?

<Dana, this time the danger isn't imaginary, it's real,> he told her urgently. <I'm not a figment of your imagination. This time, if you don't believe, you'll die. I can't explain it, and I can't prove it scientifically or give you evidence.> Skinner paused, and looked into her skeptical blue eyes. He decided on a different approach. <Agent Scully, you were exposed to a weapon which has trapped you here. Your body is growing weaker, and will die if you don't return to it soon. This forest is just a construct of your imagination, a place where your mind has imprisoned you. If you don't leave it, then it will kill you.>

<You're asking me to have faith.> She stated.

<Yes, and to trust me.>

The memory dissolved around them, and they were back in the forest that her mind had constructed, a place to keep her safe, a place to imprison her. Three fingers of light slid past

the branches of the trees, illuminating the dark red blood that was seeping through the fabric of his uniform. For a moment, he wondered why the hell she **should** trust him, looking like this, looking worse than any of the creatures her six year old imagination had supplied to torment her with all those years ago. He sensed her uncertainty through the link, and underneath that was her fear, which she always kept so tightly contained, almost to the point of denying that it even existed.

<What happened?> he asked, <back then? When you were six? How long were you lost for?>

<A few hours.> She shivered at the memory. <My mother and father, and half the naval base were out looking for me, with flashlights, calling my name.> Skinner caught an image of recollection: a bright light shining through the wood, a woman appearing, crying and laughing at the same time as she picked Scully up and held her tightly, kissing her, murmuring her name over and over again, alternately shaking her and hugging her, berating her, saying how worried everyone had been, and then telling her that she was loved, crooning that she was safe. Then the bliss of being handed over to her father, of snuggling up against his shoulder as he carried her back home, his hand gently making circles on her back the entire journey, and his lips continuously kissing the top of her head as he walked.

<I can take you back home as well,> Skinner told her. <Time is running out. If you don't come soon, Mulder will die. I need to get you both back.>

<Mulder is here?> Scully's concern for her partner radiated through the link.

<Yes. He's lost, just as you are. Come with me, and I can take you both back.> He stretched out a hand to her, keeping the nexus between them open, flooding it with as much reassurance as he could muster. She stood there, brave, beautiful, and uncertain. Her blue eyes radiated her fear, as she struggled with the dilemma.

<I'm scared,> she whispered at last.

Skinner knew how much that admission had cost her. <That's okay.> He placed his hand palm up, waiting for her. <I'll keep you safe. I promise. Both of you.> He had an image of them lying in their hospital beds, faces pale, eyes staring and lifeless. <I failed you,> he thought miserably, and if you don't come back with me, you'll die. I couldn't bear that. I couldn't...> He was lost for a moment in the sensation of total, abject misery. <It was bad enough before...>

He felt himself falling noiselessly to the floor of the jungle, a terrible pain ripping through his body, the sounds of his friends dying assaulting his ears. He felt the wrenching pain as they departed from the nexus, one by one, and then he was alone. The link that had once pulsed with their vibrant energy now lay battered, ruined, and lifeless, occasionally flickering with a spark of blue energy, like the twitching of a corpse, as life finally, irrevocably departed. The remembered pain drove him to his knees. He had suppressed it for so long, keeping it down, keeping people away so that nobody would guess how much it hurt inside. Now it rose up and overwhelmed him. All he could see were the faces of his lost comrades. Murray's gap-

toothed smile, Casey's fair hair and freckled nose. He was falling, falling into darkness, and sadness. He felt a touch, fingers soothing his cropped hair, and then a hand ventured into his own, jolting him out of the memory.

<Please. Don't be sad.> Her strength flowed into the nexus, creating something new and solid, joining his own energy and Mulder's, and completing the link between them. Something snapped into place, and he looked up into her worried blue eyes. <Jace, please...> Her hands patted his face. <You're scaring me. Come back, come back.>

He smiled, his fingers tightening firmly around the hand she had placed in his.

<It's all right. I'm sorry I scared you.>

He turned, and led her back towards the light.

Mulder felt a huge sense of relief as the skinny, badly injured youth emerged once more into the light leading Scully behind him. Mulder got up slowly, his body pale and insubstantial, and went to greet them both. As he looked into Scully's eyes, he had the weirdest sensation of being her, looking back at him.

While Jace had been gone, the Old Woman had talked to him about destiny and various other new age concepts that he wasn't sure he believed in. Mulder was, quite possibly, one of the most open-minded men on the planet, but all the same, he liked to choose what he believed in. He didn't like to be told. In fact it irritated him. The idea of having a destiny alarmed him more than he could say. If that was the case, then he was helpless, at the whim of some fate larger than himself, any decision taking him closer to a pre-ordained outcome that made a mockery of his own free-will. He hated the very thought of it and told her so.

"It isn't pre-ordained," she replied. "We don't know if you'll succeed or not, or even if you'll do what we want, what we **expect** you to do. You might not even survive this current crisis. If Jace doesn't get you back soon, you'll die before you come close to fulfilling the hope we have for you. Let me show you something," she waved her hand, and he felt himself surrounded by an infinite ocean of souls, all pressing close against him, caressing him. It was, he had to concede, nice. More than nice, it was cleansing, and he felt loved and cherished.

"What are they? Some kind of sub-ethereal, ectoplasmic..." he began. The Old Woman shut him up with a laugh.

"Turn your mind off for a moment, Fox," she told him. "They're souls, if you need a term for them. 'Souls' might be somewhat misleading, but it'll do. I don't think you're equipped to handle any other concept of them."

"You're trying to sell me some kind of concept of an afterlife here, aren't you?" He asked. "I have to say that I'm not religious, and I'm not sure that I believe in any quasi-...."

"Fox." She spoke firmly and he shut up. "Good, because here's the part I know you'll appreciate."

Mulder had a sudden image of a pulsing, writhing mass of **something**; he wasn't sure what it was.

"That's our nursery, if you like. Every living thing has a soul. Many of them are tiny. When their lives are over, they rejoin the whole, and as they are reborn, they grow larger and add more to the richness and texture of the whole. Experience makes them so. An individual soul can be reborn many times, over and over again."

"Right. Yeah, I know this concept, it's drawn from...Sorry." He bit on his lip and grinned at her. "It's just I underwent regression hypnotherapy so I know all about this. You're going to tell me I was Julius Caesar or something in a past life aren't you?"

"No." She laughed. "Your past life regression was accurate, although not in the way you imagine. You're unique, Fox. We created you. We took the best parts of ourselves, and made you. We are facing a threat, and we had to be prepared. You are, if you like, our child." She smoothed his hair gently. "Not an old soul, Fox, but brand new. That's what gives you your hope, your strength, your great optimism, your ability to search so long and so hard for the truth. You've lived no previous lives at all, and yet, in some ways, you've lived more than any other soul, as you have a part of each of us inside you. You are the sum total of our experience so far. Flawed, of course, for we haven't got all the answers yet, but so beautiful. As much as we could have hoped for. More, maybe."

"Right." Mulder nodded. "So you're saying that before 1961 I didn't exist at all, but other people, like, **Kersh**," he spat the name with venom, "have been wandering around for millennia?"

"That's about it, yes." She laughed at him again, and he was beginning to become irritated by that. "You don't understand, sweetheart. It isn't possible for you to fully understand because you're limited. When you die..."

"Oh great. Enlightenment in the afterlife." He interrupted sourly.

"Let me show you something else." She took his hand and he felt himself spinning out into space. He gasped, looking back, and saw the Earth a long way beneath, glowing blue and white. "Our pattern belongs to this planet. Every living planet has its own nexus of souls. When each nexus spins to completion there will be a joining such as you can't imagine." He felt an explosion of joy inside him, and saw an image of an infinity of souls becoming one, merging into the ultimate fulfilment of its purpose, a huge nexus of individual beings, existing as one entity. "Then our work will be done, and we will be able to find other worlds, a whole universe full of nexuses, and eventually we will join with each one in turn, their completion merging with our own, until the entire universe is joined in the ultimate pattern. That is the purpose of everything."

"Sounds great." He muttered, trying, and failing, to keep up his attitude of sullen indifference in the face of the information overload he was experiencing.

"We are facing a threat that might prevent us completing our own nexus, Fox. We have chosen you, and certain other people, to help us defeat that threat."

"Oh, right. So what you're saying is that we have the fate not only of our own world, but possibly the entire universe in our hands. Is that it?" Mulder asked.

"That's about it, yes." She smiled.

"Fabulous. I've always wanted to be Captain Kirk." Mulder commented sourly.

Skinner's relief at having rescued Scully was short-lived when he saw Mulder. The other man was so pale as to be almost insubstantial. His body seemed to lack solidity and he looked bone weary, as if he didn't have the strength to carry on.

"I have to get you back." Skinner said, and Mulder smiled wanly, sinking back down to a crouching position.

The Old Woman enveloped Skinner in an embrace, and kissed him firmly on the forehead. He wasn't sure how she managed this, as she was at least a foot smaller than he was.

"Take them back, Jace. As I did with you."

He nodded, remembering that journey back into darkness and pain, all those years before. "Do I have to go back?" He whispered, suddenly suffused by a longing to stay in this serene place forever.

"We've had this conversation once before," she replied. "Don't worry, when you return this will all seem unreal. You won't remember it clearly, any of you. The mind has an amazing capacity for blocking out what it cannot fully comprehend. Take them home," she whispered. Her mind reached out and lightly caressed them, whispering some private message meant for each of them alone, and then she was gone.

Scully felt Jace's arm around her body, holding her tight, then he scooped up an almost comatose Mulder in his other arm, and she saw the darkness speed towards them. She cried out, and buried her face in his neck, but his arms held her close, his chin resting on her hair. The darkness devoured them, and for a moment she was sure that she'd never breathe again. Without warning they emerged into daylight, hovering high above two prone bodies, with wide sightless eyes. She recognized herself with a start of surprise, and stared down, fascinated. She looked so pale, and ill. So lifeless.

<Mulder!> He looked even worse, his breathing coming in ragged gasps, his eyes sunk, with huge, dark shadows beneath them.

She was aware of Jace loosening his hold, and then she felt something drawing her back. Looking down, it seemed almost as if an invisible string was pulling her towards her own body, and she followed it blindly. She paused, watching as Mulder settled into his body, his eyes jerking shut, his whole body going into spasm for a moment, and then, unable to resist, she too, re-entered her body, sinking deep inside it, returning to safety. In that split second, as consciousness returned, her own wide, staring eyes saw the face of a young man hovering far above her, pale, and covered in blood, with dark, sad eyes. She felt a wave of affection for him, and he smiled, returning it.

<Thanks...> she murmured, and then the raw sensations of her body claimed her, and she closed her eyes, giving up the struggle for consciousness.

Skinner watched for just long enough to see that they had both returned safely, then he felt a tug, pulling him away, drawing him in a different direction, and he floated through the ether for a moment before seeing his own body, far beneath. He swooped down, crashing back inside himself so quickly that he was disorientated. He felt sensation return to stiff, frozen limbs, and yelped almost immediately from the pins and needles he'd developed in his feet. The room span around him, dizzily, and he held onto the table, shaking his head to try and clear it. For a moment he felt hazy, and insubstantial, and then consciousness flooded back with a vengeance, and he vomited all over the table.

"Bad trip," someone murmured, as his guts spilled out over and over again, and he remembered those words from another bad trip a long time ago. He struggled to his feet, and walked unsteadily to the door. A man sat there, cleaning his gun.

"There was a boy." Skinner whispered, holding onto the door frame as he swayed, struggling to stay upright. "He came in here with me. Skinny, wearing a uniform..."

The man gazed at him blankly.

"You came in here alone, buddy," he said, turning his attention back to his gun. Skinner nodded, feeling suddenly bereft. He staggered out of the building, and somehow got back home, although he wasn't sure how.

The 'phone was ringing as he opened the door. He picked it up, trying to remember how to speak. His tongue felt furry, and his head was pounding.

"Mr. Skinner? You asked to be informed if there was any change in the condition of Agents Mulder, and Scully?"

"Yes." He leaned his forehead against the wall, enjoying the coolness against his scalp.

"I'm pleased to report that they regained consciousness about an hour ago."

"Yes, I know." Skinner put the 'phone down and half ran, half lurched to the bathroom, where he threw up, over and over again. His gut hurt so much that he was sure he'd pass

out. He lay on the tiled bathroom floor, his shaking hands clutching the toilet bowl, his vision blurred. He wished that he felt a sense of elation, but there was nothing, only this nausea, and the protests of his abused body. He lay there for several hours, vomiting frequently, occasionally managing to take a sip of water, then vomiting again. Finally he started to shiver, and got up, dragging himself back to the lounge, where he laid on the couch, covering himself with a blanket. In the darkness, by the door, he saw a dim figure.

"I thought you'd gone," he whispered. The boy came to stand next to him.

"I'm always here. Inside you," he replied.

"Can there be such a thing as the ghost of someone who isn't dead?" Skinner asked, his teeth chattering.

"You did die. I'm the ghost of the boy who died that day, in Vietnam, the 18 year old soldier you once were."

"She sent you here, to nag me, to make sure that I made the right decisions..." Skinner wrapped the blanket more tightly around his frozen body and curled his large frame up into a fetal ball.

"Yes. I've finished my task. Nobody could be harder on you than you are on yourself. She knew that." The boy gave a half smile. "You did the right thing."

"Then why do I feel like shit?" Skinner mumbled.

The boy drifted closer, his body fading, and becoming insubstantial.

<Because you faced your demons, Walter,> a voice said. <As Mulder and Scully faced theirs.>

<How...?> Skinner closed his eyes, but all he could see was the Old Woman's face as he drifted in and out of consciousness.

<You all did what you feared most. Mulder faced his past, and found the strength to leave it behind. Scully trusted on faith alone, without proof. And you ventured back into the unknown and willingly embraced an experience you'd always refused to look beyond. > Skinner knew that the voice in his head belonged to the Old Woman.

<You pursued me all the way back to my body to give me that New Age pep talk?> he murmured, convinced that he was hallucinating.

<Any excuse to spend more time with you,> she chuckled. "Now that you know me better, I trust you'll listen to me next time I appear in your dreams.>

<Oh hell, no.> Skinner groaned. <Don't pull that dream shit on me again. It scares the crap out of me.>

He heard her snort, and then she was gone, the echo of her laughter fading behind her.

Skinner lay on the couch in the darkness, and allowed his mind to wander along the brilliant white light of the newly formed nexus that he had created in order to save the two agents. It felt so strange, to experience this again, to feel the warmth and energy of a link. He traced the flow of energy back to source, and contented himself that they were both there, both alive and safe. The flickering lights of their minds told him that all was well. He smiled, briefly, and then, quite purposefully, he snapped the energy flow off inside his mind.

They need never know, he thought to himself. They hadn't been given a real choice, and he knew, even without thinking about it, that Mulder would hate having anyone else in his mind. It would drive the agent crazy. He remembered the days before he had got used to his first nexus. Long days of confusion and terror, not knowing if they were his emotions, or whether they belonged to someone else. He had been forced into that link against his will, but he wouldn't do the same to Mulder and Scully. The nexus between them had been created, and he knew no way to undo it, but that didn't mean the two agents had to be aware of it in any way.

Skinner was at the heart of the nexus, and all its energy flowed through him. If he dammed up the flow between them, they wouldn't even know it existed - not if he was vigilant anyway. He wouldn't be able to stop their thoughts and feelings flowing into him, now that there was a full nexus between them. He could no longer block them out as he had with Scully after their raid on the armaments factory, but he could stop them flowing any further. He could block his own responses flowing back to them or theirs flowing into each other. It would be hard work, and he'd have to remain vigilant, but he was sure that he could do it. Even if stray thoughts and emotions got through, it wouldn't be enough to intrude on their privacy, or to change their lives irrevocably, without their consent, which was the only other alternative.

He nodded to himself, making his decision. In a way, this was almost worse than losing his comrades in the jungles of Vietnam. At least they hadn't still existed, a living reminder of what he had lost. Mulder and Scully were alive, and for that he was grateful, but their presence in his life would make every day a living hell for him. Seeing them, feeling their thoughts, and not being able to respond to them, sensing their emotions and not being able to reach out and touch them. Skinner closed his eyes. He'd cope. He had to.

Some little voice also told him he was cutting off the life-blood of the new-born nexus because he feared the intimacy, and, coupled with that, he also feared the horror of their reactions to being known so completely by him of all people. He would have nothing to shield him from knowing every emotion they felt on the subject, every thought that politeness would keep them from expressing, and he shuddered at the concept. Rejection: plain, good old-fashioned fear of rejection, a voice whispered in his ear. He ignored it, and finally allowed his weary body to get some rest, drifting into a deep, and mercifully dreamless, sleep.

Washington D.C.

January 18, 1999

Mulder held the door to the café open, waiting while Scully slipped past him and went inside. It had been just over a week since their miraculous recovery, and they were due back at work the following day. He hadn't spoken much to Scully about what he had seen during his OBE, and she hadn't shared much of her experience with him either. By unspoken agreement they both seemed to have decided that it had been a too intensely personal experience to share with anybody, although they had discussed a few basics. In truth, it already seemed unreal and even the memory of it was fading rapidly. He was beginning to wonder whether it had in fact been a hallucination. He was sure Scully would have a perfectly rational medical explanation for the whole event, if he were to ask her. He didn't because he decided that he'd like to cling onto at least the possibility that something extraordinary had actually occurred.

<Over there.> Scully said.

Mulder nodded, noticing Skinner sitting at a table by the window, absently stirring his coffee. *That's another thing*, Mulder thought to himself as they ventured across the café. *Why do I feel different? Something's changed, and I'm not sure what it is.* Sometimes he was sure he almost picked up on Scully's thoughts, but he discounted this as being absurd. They'd always had a close, almost telepathic communication, and this most recent experience had just bonded them even closer.

What was more alarming was the sense he had that someone else was watching him. At times he felt like a juicy fly, caught in a spider's web, aware that the spider was just sitting there, watching him, waiting for him to move so that it could scuttle in for the kill. Mulder was trying hard not to move, but he didn't like the sensation one bit.

Skinner looked up as they approached, and for one unguarded moment Mulder saw something curiously akin to pleasure in the other man's eyes. Then it was replaced by a cold, abrupt nod of his head in the direction of the seats opposite. Mulder and Scully sat down.

"I ordered coffee for us," Skinner said.

"I like low fat, de-caff..." Scully began.

"Yes, I know," he interrupted brusquely. Their coffee duly arrived, and Mulder noted, with his ever present profiling 'third eye', that his own order was what he normally drank as well.

"You're both well?" Skinner's eyes raked over them anxiously, as if checking for signs of harm.

"Yes." Scully nodded. "I thought you might visit us in the hospital," she murmured, and Mulder noticed the reproach in her tone.

"I was busy." Skinner took a sip of his coffee. "I thought I should meet with you before you returned to work though, and as we're forbidden to have contact, Starbucks seemed the logical choice of meeting place. I have a file here." Skinner threw it down onto the table, and glared at Mulder. *What the hell did I do? I've been in the hospital for 8 days! He can't possibly be annoyed with me.*

"This is the report on that weapon you were investigating up in Thurmont." Skinner said brusquely. "The one you had no authorization to be investigating."

"Oh. That one." Mulder picked up the file. "Did you catch whoever did this to us, sir?"

"No. I checked out the base and the contractor involved, but, unsurprisingly, there was nothing. After those people died, everything relating to that contract was terminated. I've requested information from the military base but, also unsurprisingly, they've told me to butt out. They are, of course, entitled to create and manufacture any weapons they choose, as long as they're not violating any international treaties."

"Even if those weapons are using alien technology in their construction?" Mulder asked in a bitter tone.

"Agent Mulder..." Skinner sounded as if he were barely holding onto his temper. "Let me remind you that you have no evidence to support that theory."

"That doesn't stop it being true." Mulder took a deep gulp of his coffee, and the burning liquid scalded his throat. Skinner winced, and took a sip of water, then handed the glass to Mulder who took it gratefully, allowing the cool water to soothe his burning throat.

"Sir..." Scully had been watching this exchange keenly, and now she spoke. "Mulder and I would like to submit our own reports on the incident..."

"This wasn't an official investigation. There's very little point." Skinner interrupted her. Her blue eyes flashed, angrily.

"We think there's a point," she told him. "We both underwent a profound experience as the direct result of the injuries caused by that weapon, to say nothing of nearly losing our lives. We'd like that put on record."

"Fine." Skinner snapped. Mulder couldn't remember ever seeing the man look more jumpy, as if he were holding onto some secret that he didn't want them to see.

"Sir, do you have any idea, **why** we survived while those other people died?" Scully asked.

"No. I don't." Skinner played with his spoon restlessly.

"Did you follow up the areas of investigation we were pursuing while Mulder was unconscious?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid I didn't find anything more than what we'd already figured out. It's all in there." Skinner gestured tersely towards the file. "I'm assuming that neither of you saw who shot you?" He asked. "Did you?"

Mulder and Scully exchanged glances.

"He took me by surprise." Scully said with a shrug. "To be honest I didn't even hear whoever it was entering the motel room."

"The guy who shot me was lying in wait for me when I got home." Mulder recalled. "I didn't even get a good look at him. I don't know how he got access to my apartment, but I'm guessing that if you have technology that can give people Out of Body Experiences, then lock-picking's pretty straightforward."

"Or even if you don't." Scully looked Skinner directly in the eye, and Mulder noticed the other man avert his gaze. What the hell is **that** all about, he wondered.

"The case is now closed, not that it was ever officially open," Skinner told them firmly. Mulder opened his mouth to protest, but didn't get that far. "I mean it, Mulder." Skinner's tone was forceful. "You are not chasing back up to Thurmont to see if you can find evidence of alien technology. Do I make myself clear?"

Mulder shrugged, which just served to infuriate the other man.

"I said, do I make myself clear, Agent Mulder?" Skinner ground out. Mulder gazed at him thoughtfully for a moment, and then nodded.

"As crystal, sir," he murmured.

There was silence for a long moment, as three unhappy people sat, not looking at each other. Scully built a little pyramid out of some spilled sugar on the table, while Skinner stirred his coffee for the umpteenth time, gazing out of the window.

Mulder sat back, and watched the other man. His eyes raked across Skinner's face, struggling to understand what was going on. He was good at reading emotions, and understanding patterns of behavior, but he couldn't figure this out at all. He was transfixed for a moment, by Skinner's blunt fingers as they stirred his coffee. Not for the first time, Mulder imagined those fingers caressing the side of his face, touching his lips, and he opened his mouth slightly, wetting his lips with his tongue. He never bothered fighting the desire he frequently felt for Skinner. He didn't even bother hiding it from himself. It was part of him, as much a part of him as his love for Scully. He had no intention of acting on either emotion. It just wasn't an option. He was scared that it would ruin his friendship with Scully if he hit on her, for a start. As for Skinner - the man would break him in two for even thinking about it, he was sure of that. He'd never met a man who screamed 'straight' more than Skinner did. Mulder liked the idea of Skinner being straight - he liked the thought of the macho marine holding him in those strong arms, kissing him. He wanted to reach out and place his hand over Skinner's incessantly stirring fingers, to bring each one to his lips and suck, gently, his eyes never leaving Skinner's face.

Skinner's fingers froze, and Mulder was jolted out of his little fantasy. Skinner was flushing, and he turned back from gazing out of the window and looked straight into Mulder's eyes. Mulder's breath caught at the back of his throat. Skinner knew what he had been thinking! It was as clear as day in those dark, knowing eyes. He felt naked, his harmless little fantasy exposed.

"That's all, agents." Skinner murmured.

"Not quite, sir." Scully seemed to wake up, clearly not ready to be dismissed. "Mulder and I haven't talked much about what happened to us during the time we were unconscious but..."

"What **happened** to you?" Skinner sounded almost sneering. "Nothing happens to people when they're unconscious. That's implicit in the term, isn't it?"

Scully flushed, but continued anyway. "Mulder and I both remember seeing the same figure. Someone called Jace." Mulder watched, intrigued, as Skinner placed a finger under his collar and loosened it slightly. "In fact, I believe that we owe our lives to him," Scully continued, her blue eyes boring holes into Skinner's flesh with their intensity. "I'm sure you'll agree that if we were hallucinating, it's most unusual for two people to **share** the same hallucination." Skinner remained silent, clearly unwilling to agree any such thing. "Jace was a soldier - he'd been badly injured, and Mulder and I both thought he seemed familiar, as if we should know him."

"And do you?" Skinner asked, leaning back, with all the appearance of being casual, but Mulder noticed the deep tension in his shoulders, and the stiffness of his arms as they rested on the table.

"No." Scully glared at Skinner. "We were hoping that you might know who he is."

"Me?" Skinner looked surprised. Mulder didn't blame him. He wondered what Scully was getting at. "Why would I?"

"I don't know," Scully mused. "Are you saying that you don't?" She pushed. Skinner hesitated for a long moment, and Mulder could see a nerve pulsing in the other man's neck.

"No." He said, finally. "I have no idea." Mulder felt a sudden, inexplicable sensation of guilt flood through him.

"That's a shame." Scully mused. "We wanted to thank him, didn't we, Mulder?" Mulder dragged his attention away from Skinner, and nodded.

"Yeah. He saved our lives. We were lost, and he found us. We owe him."

"So, you're sending us back to work under A.D. Kersh as if none of this ever happened?"

Skinner's head jerked up at Scully's words, and Mulder was intrigued by the look in those dark, unfathomable eyes.

"Yes." Skinner growled.

"I see." Scully nodded. "Well, I think that's all there is to say on the subject." She got up. "Coming, Mulder?"

"Yeah." Mulder got up, and took the file Skinner had left lying on the table. "There's nothing to stay here for, after all." He followed on behind Scully and they both left the cafe.

As they crossed to the other side of the road, Mulder glanced back at the window where they had been sitting. Skinner had taken off his glasses, and was rubbing the bridge of his nose - or maybe his eyes. He looked...lost.

The Mulder Residence, Chilmark.

March 25, 1971

"It's for you."

The smoking man gave the child his most benign smile, and took the proffered telephone receiver. He watched the boy scurry off towards the kitchen, dressed in his, what had he called it - Mr. Spock - uniform?

"Sir. I'm afraid I have some bad news for you." The voice on the other end of the 'phone said.

"Yes? What is it?" He took a long drag on his cigarette, and watched the young Mulder boy playing with his sister. They made a charming pair. It was such a pity.

"The Nexus Project, sir, the one you gave orders to be terminated?"

"Yes?"

"Well...a mistake has been made."

"A mistake? How so? I took care of the termination myself."

"Yes, sir. I know." The subordinate at the other end of the line swallowed nervously, clearly not eager to deliver the news. "The thing is, that we've just found out that somebody survived. He's in a hospital in Saigon. He's badly wounded but it looks as if he'll make it."

"I see." The smoking man took a thoughtful drag on his cigarette. "And the man's name?" He knew what it would be without waiting for the answer.

"Corporal Walter S. Skinner, sir." The subordinate said, confirming his suspicions.

The smoking man was silent for a long while, as he gazed at his friend, Bill Mulder, watching as the other man downed a glass of whisky in one gulp. His colleague had made a very interesting point earlier, when he had criticized his handling of the termination. Maybe he had been hasty in disposing of Walter Skinner. Maybe he would come in useful one day. Not now, perhaps. The project had, after all, been terminated, and he had no intention of pouring any more time or resources into it.

"Sir?" The subordinate spoke. "Are you still there, sir? Do you want me to order Skinner's termination?"

"No. That won't be necessary." The smoking man severed the connection. He still had some related files on the Nexus Project in storage, awaiting destruction. The subordinate he had been speaking to had no idea what the project was about - it was just a name to him. He dialed another number, and asked to be put through.

"Ah, good. You're still there." The smoking man smiled. "I want you to dig out the file and all related material on one...Walter Skinner." He checked the name he had written on the note pad by the 'phone. "Yes, from the Nexus Project. Yes, I know it was terminated, but now I'm re-opening it. You still have the monitoring equipment? Good. I want you to keep an eye on it. If Skinner creates a new nexus, at any time, now, or in the future, I want to be informed immediately. Is that understood?"

He put the phone down, barely listening to the assurances he was being given.

"Good news?" Bill Mulder looked up at his friend's smiling face as he rejoined him at the table.

"I'm not sure." The smoking man stubbed out his cigarette with a firm sweep of his fingers. "Let's just say that there's been an interesting development shall we?"

End of Part Two.

Hmm, you were expecting the telepathic threesome sex *already*? I told you this was going to be a long series! View it as extended foreplay <G>

This part was a bit weird. Like it?

Nemesis by Xanthe

Author's Notes:

Skinner receives a visit from an old enemy, which starts an ordeal that tests his strength to the limit. **WARNING:** This chapter contains scenes of mental, physical, and emotional suffering/torture.

Posted 4th July 1999

WARNING: This chapter contains scenes of mental, physical, and emotional suffering/torture.

Massive thanks, as always, to Holmes for invaluable help and assistance. Also to Sergeeva for her help, and for her patience in listening to me talk this story through for the past several months.

Thanks to Twisted Sister for her help, and a special thanks to Phoebe for considerable technical assistance, and "small town" info!

This story will (eventually) cover a number of years, starting mid-way through season 6 when Mulder and Scully are still working under AD Kersh. It's gonna be a loooooong series.

Spoilers: *Avatar, One Breath*. Season 6. *SR819* IS SPECIFICALLY DEALT WITH IN THIS INSTALMENT. If you haven't seen that episode, you might like to check an episode guide to help you understand the events that take place at the beginning of this chapter. This is where I part company with CC on the reasons for *SR819*.

Thanks to Daydreamer for her inspiring creation of Commando!Skinner in *Retrieval* (and sequels). Also to Holmes, whose *Folie A.D.* has such a beautiful Young!Walter in it. Both these stories can be found on the **WalterTorture** site

Huge thank you to **Frogdoggie** for making the wonderful pic.

Crystal City, VA.

January 20, 1999.

Skinner unlocked his front door, and threw his briefcase down wearily. It was past midnight, and he had only just returned from the office. Focusing on his work was the only thing that kept him from brooding on the nexus that was tearing him apart inside. He wasn't sure how long he could continue to block Mulder and Scully's thoughts and emotions without going completely insane. Night time was the worst - those moments just before sleep when his mind went into free-fall, and he would catch glimpses of Scully's dreams, or see the crap that Mulder was watching on TV, hear the ceaseless whisperings of their minds, beckoning to him, urging him to join them. Skinner poured himself a glass of whisky - he found that drinking helped to numb the unique agony of his situation.

He raised the glass to his lips, downed it in one gulp, and then stiffened, smelling cigarette smoke. Skinner whirled around, reaching for his gun. His enemy, an old, old enemy, was seated on his couch.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Skinner growled. "How the hell did you get in?"

"I usually find that I can go wherever I please." The smoking man smiled, and opened his pack of cigarettes.

"Don't fucking smoke in my apartment." Skinner felt his muscles clench in protest at this outrage.

"You're in no position to give orders to me." The other man lit the cigarette, and blew a mouthful of insolent smoke in Skinner's direction. "You've been brought to my attention recently, Skinner."

"I won't play your games any more, you son of a bitch. I thought I'd made that clear," Skinner hissed. "Besides, Mulder and Scully don't work for me now - a situation that I'm sure is at least partly your doing. So, I'm of no interest to you."

"Oh, but you are." The other man smiled. "You've always been interesting to me, Skinner." He tipped some ash onto the carpet, and watched as Skinner's jaw clenched in silent anger. "You were interesting a long time ago, and now you're interesting again."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that we know what you're doing, no - maybe that's the wrong phrasing. We know what you've **done**. You've done something very rash. You've formed another nexus."

Skinner went white, and he staggered for a moment, as if he'd been physically hit, then he poured himself another glass of whisky, and downed it in one gulp.

"What do you know about that?" He asked,

"Everything." The smoking man inclined his head. "We go back a long way, you and I - longer than you think. The Nexus Project was my brainchild, and you were its greatest creation."

"You didn't damn well create me." Skinner disputed, taking another shot of whisky.

"Of course I did." The smoking man leaned back, a faint smile playing around his lips, as he watched his protégé. "You were just a boy, and I made you into something special. I gave you an ability than many people would kill for."

"**You** were behind it? You created that obscene project?" Skinner closed his eyes, a memory of being strapped down assaulting him - the injections, the experiments, the operations. The pain, and confusion, and sheer terror of it all.

"Of course." The smoking man smiled again. "I'm surprised that you never figured that out, Skinner."

"I never wanted to look. I was just grateful that you left me alone...after..."

"Well, it wasn't our intention that you survive, but seeing as you did, I thought I'd use it to my advantage."

"What are you hell are you telling me?" Skinner's face was as crumpled and distressed as that of a lost child. "Are you saying that **you** killed them? That the ambush wasn't the Vietcong?" He remembered the minds of his friends flickering out, one by one, until he was alone, the link between them fatally wounded, pulsing with dying embers of energy until it was gone.

"No, I didn't kill them, **you** did," the other man replied. "You had their fates in your hands. We asked you to kill one of them, and you refused. If you'd done as we asked, killed one of your comrades with your mind, then you could have saved the rest. It was your choice."

"I didn't know," Skinner whispered. "You bastard."

"If you had known, could you have done it? Killed one to save the others?" The smoking man looked at him keenly. Skinner's hands balled into fists, and he wanted to place them around the other man's neck, and squeeze with all his might.

"I don't know what I'd have done then," Skinner replied, "but I sure as hell know what I'm going to do now."

He was halfway across the room, the bloodlust rising inside him, his revenge for his lost friends the only thing on his mind, when the gun appeared in the smoking man's hand.

"Don't be so hasty. We have a lot to discuss. I'd prefer to do so in a civilised fashion, but I'll happily continue our conversation with you nursing a gunshot wound."

"We have nothing to discuss." Skinner ground to a halt, still half tempted to risk the bullet, in his bid for revenge.

"Yes we do. I want to know who you've formed this new nexus with, and why." The smoking man raised a cigarette to his lips with one hand, while his other held the gun rock steady.

"Go to hell."

"You have no idea how many times people have told me to do that. I'm weary of responding with amusing ripostes," the smoking man replied. "An associate of mine, Doctor Lubecker, called me a few days ago. Do you remember him? I see that you do." His watchful eyes caught the tightening of Skinner's jaw, and the distressed jerk of his head at mention of the name. "Lubecker informed me that a new nexus had been created. Did you think that we'd stop monitoring you? We've kept a careful eye on you for some years. You have an implant in the base of your skull - we always knew where you were, and what you were doing."

Skinner reached up and fingered the back of his neck, but he couldn't feel anything.

"I was amused at your rise to a position of power and success, and not a little dismayed at first," the smoking man continued. "I had hoped that you'd just go back to that little town in the middle of nowhere that you came from. What's it called - Lonesome Pine?" His tone was sneering, and he flicked more ash onto the carpet.

"Lone Oak." Skinner snapped, knowing that he was being toyed with, hating it.

"I wonder why you didn't go back there? Or maybe I don't." The other man smiled, knowingly. "We were happy to ignore you while the skills we gave you remained dormant. Now that you've chosen to rediscover them though... Well, we put considerable time and money into the nexus project, I'd be pleased to see it finally yield us a useful harvest."

"I don't have anything that will be of use to you." Skinner growled. "The nexus doesn't work properly. I shut it down."

"No, you **tried** to shut it down, but you couldn't. You know as well as I do that the only way to end it is either for you to die, or all the other links in the nexus to be...terminated." Skinner flinched. "Do you care about them as much as you cared about the links in your last nexus?" The smoking man asked, casually.

"They aren't links. They're people," Skinner said in a low, hard tone, "and yes, I care about them. If you'd ever understood the nature of what you created in me, then you'd know that it's impossible not to care about them. In forming the nexus, they become part of me."

"Sentiment was always your weakness," the smoking man commented, stubbing out his cigarette on a hardback lying on Skinner's coffee table. "No ashtrays?" He chuckled. "I hope that wasn't an expensive book."

"Why are you here?" Skinner asked wearily. "Just go."

"Not until you tell me who you're linked with. Or maybe I should just guess. It wouldn't be very hard. Firstly, the nexus was created a couple of weeks ago. Further investigation shows that at that precise moment in time you were busy helping out our two young friends on a particularly interesting - if not officially authorized - case. It's not often that you have to work in the field with Mulder and Scully is it?" The smoking man raised an eyebrow. "Did your desire to help and protect them finally spill over into something more tangible, to say nothing of irrevocable? How do they feel about being so closely involved with their former boss?" Skinner shifted uncomfortably. "Ah - so they don't know yet. How interesting."

"Just tell me what you want, and leave." Skinner stalked over to the door, and held it open. The smoking man remained seated. "Why, I want **you** of course, and them. I want you to control them, the way you refused to control your brothers in arms last time. A Mulder and Scully under my direct personal control could be very useful. I want you to bring that gift to me."

"And if I don't?"

"Well, you know what happened to your last nexus." The smoking man smiled. "It could happen again."

"I don't think so." Skinner said. "You've had plenty of opportunities to kill Mulder and Scully before but you haven't. I think you need them - and you need me. Fuck your offer - the answer's no."

"I thought you'd say that. So we'll just have to find a way to bring you in line."

The smoking man got up, and walked over to the door. He stopped in front of Skinner, and leaned close, too close, so that Skinner could smell the ash on his lips.

"I have an idea that I think will work. You'll be hearing from me, Skinner," he said in a smoothly sibilant undertone, and then he left. Skinner slammed the door shut behind him, and took another slug of whisky, rolling the cool glass over his forehead, and wishing that he knew a way out of this whole mess.

Hoover Building.

January 24, 1999. 10:18 PM.

Mulder threw a pencil aimlessly at the ceiling. He was so damn bored. He spent his days doing background checks, wasting time when there was so much to be done, so much that prick Spender wasn't doing. Mulder briefly considered going home, then changed his mind. Home had always been here before, not his apartment in Alexandria, which he used as a place to sleep, and jerk off in.

Mulder wondered whether to commit himself to another session in front of the video this evening, and decided against it. His lonely masturbatory sessions with only the incoherent cries of people making love on celluloid for company, just served to make him feel even lonelier afterwards. Sometimes he eschewed the video altogether, and settled back on his couch, closing his eyes, and imagining that he was in a clinch with Scully, or Skinner, or both of them at the same time. He supposed that he should feel guilty about using real people to provide his jerk-off fantasies, but he didn't. They didn't know, and he didn't feel any less respect for them even after giving them starring roles in what he laughingly called his 'sex life'. Mulder always managed to exist happily on several different levels at the same time. His sexual needs and attractions, his work, his personal life, his search for his sister, his desire to know the truth; all were vividly intertwined, and yet he kept them completely separate in his mind.

Mulder threw another pencil, and sighed as it bounced back down again. This ceiling wasn't as good as the one in the basement.

"But that's not the only reason why I want to X Files back," he joked to himself. He winced, feeling a flash of something like pain pass momentarily through his body. Weird. He threw another pencil at the ceiling, and a moment later, he noticed Skinner walk by outside. The

man looked disheveled - a state of affairs that Mulder had never witnessed in his normally immaculate superior before. He thought about it for a moment, and then got to his feet and wandered impulsively along to Skinner's office.

The man looked terrible, but worse than that, Mulder could sense that something was wrong with him - he could almost feel a nagging pain radiating from him. Skinner dismissed his concern with an air of irritation that Mulder somehow knew wasn't real. He continued to express his anxiety until the other man grew annoyed.

"I'll be fine." Skinner snapped finally, struggling to his feet. Mulder moved forward, and caught him as the big man swayed slightly, and Skinner let out a low growl of pain. Mulder felt a stabbing pain in his own gut.

"What the hell...?" Mulder helped Skinner to sit down again, and then pulled up the man's shirt, ignoring his grunt of protest. "Shit, that's some bruise you've got here." Mulder traced the outline of the dark bruise on Skinner's flesh. Skinner winced, and Mulder reciprocated with a wince of his own. Shit, when did he start empathizing with this guy so much that he started feeling his pain? Mulder decided to cut back on using Skinner as a fantasy object for his jerk-off sessions if this was going to be the result.

Annapolis, Maryland.

January 24, 1999. 10:32 PM.

Scully read the page of the book she was halfway through, and then re-read it. She didn't take in a word either time. Finally, feeling uneasy, she put the book to one side, and lay back on the couch, closing her eyes. A few moments later, she opened them again. Something was wrong - something was very wrong. She got up, pulled on her jacket, checked her cell phone was in the pocket, and ran out of the door. She was already on her way to the Hoover building when she got Mulder's call.

"Where are you?" She demanded. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He sounded surprised.

"I thought...never mind. You're sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Mulder reassured her, "but Skinner isn't."

Scully felt a cold sweat break out on her forehead. "I'll be right there," she said.

Washington DC.

January 25, 1999. 4:01 AM.

All the evidence convinced Mulder that his ex-lover, Richard Matheson, was involved in Skinner's state of ill health - somewhere along the line at least. He didn't even hesitate to drive out to the man's house, but he did pause briefly before getting out of the car.

The things we do for love... The things we do for love...The words to the corny old song rose unbidden into his mind and he shook his head, wondering again why he felt so damn awful. Maybe Skinner wasn't the only one who had been poisoned; maybe it was catching. Mulder pushed aside his shirt, and gazed at himself in the car mirror. There was nothing there - no sign of the mottled bruising he had seen on Skinner's neck earlier this evening.

Hypochondriac, he mocked, smirking at himself. He steeled himself to see his old lover, reminding himself why he was doing this, but in truth **nothing** could prepare him for the sight of Richard Matheson in his dressing gown. Even twenty years on, the man still retained that aura of power and charisma that had so captivated the gauche teenage Mulder. His thick hair was morphing subtly from blonde to silver, but that just accentuated his tanned skin, and dazzling blue eyes. *Hypochondriac*, he mocked, smirking at himself. He steeled himself to see his old lover, reminding himself why he was doing this, but in truth **nothing** could prepare him for the sight of Richard Matheson in his dressing gown. Even twenty years on, the man still retained that aura of power and charisma that had so captivated the gauche teenage Mulder. His thick hair was morphing subtly from blonde to silver, but that just accentuated his tanned skin, and dazzling blue eyes.

Mulder was ushered into a downstairs room, and he gazed around the house, taking in the masculine décor, which somehow screamed 'gay' even though it was dark, conservative and traditional. Even the butler seemed gay, Mulder thought to himself. He noted that Richard was wearing his wedding ring, although he would have bet his life on the fact that whoever was sleeping upstairs in the man's bed right now was almost certainly not his wife. She kept a separate condo over the other side of town, where gossip related that she entertained men young enough to be her sons. She and her husband did have something in common after all then, Mulder thought with a wry smile.

After leaving Oxford, Mulder had finally made his peace with Matheson. In truth, he couldn't stay angry with his first love forever - there was too much between them for that. Mulder's sex life had stopped more or less after Phoebe. A brief dalliance with Diana Fowley, and a fling with a male FBI agent he had met in a field office in 1992 had been his only brief forays into the world of romance. Mulder wasn't entirely sure that he was any good at relationships. Richard and Phoebe had both hurt him so much that he wasn't sure he could take another full blown love affair.

Then of course, he had been a damn idiot, and fallen in love again when he least expected it, first with Scully, and then with Skinner, or maybe with both at the same time. Now, he was content to live with the daily agony and ecstasy of looking but not touching. It was easier that way. Mulder didn't have any illusions about himself. He knew that he was a difficult bastard to live with, consumed by his quest, and he doubted his own capacity to sustain a normal relationship. Scully and Skinner were the last people in the world that he would ever want to hurt. So he stayed silent, and that suited everyone best.

Matheson was useless. Mulder gazed at the man he had once loved, and implored him for help in saving his 'friend.' Matheson was clearly startled, and the look that passed between them made it clear that the senator knew just what kind of a friend Skinner was to Mulder - or thought he knew.

Mulder left the house feeling curiously liberated. He had loved the bastard, but he had been betrayed by him, not just once, but twice. The first time had hurt, but this time, tonight, he felt nothing. Finally, after all these years, he was free of Matheson's ghost.

Mulder fought down a new fear as he got back into his car. He couldn't lose Skinner. Not now. It was like losing Scully to the cancer, like losing part of himself, and he couldn't bear it. He rolled his shoulders back, taking a deep breath. His body felt as if it were being consumed by a parasite, eaten up from the inside, and he checked in the mirror again to make sure there was no sign of disease. What the hell was going on? Why could he feel Skinner's symptoms so vividly?

DC General Hospital.

January 25, 1999. 9:30 PM.

Scully glanced at her watch, and then looked up as she saw Mulder enter the room. He half-walked, half-ran over to see her.

"How is he?"

"He's...not good." Scully shrugged. "You don't look so good yourself." She stared at his disheveled appearance, and pale face.

"I've been doing a lot of running around."

"Did you catch anyone?"

"No." Mulder's mouth twisted into a wry, angry expression of defeat. "Tell me more about Skinner."

"He's in the ICU. It's touch and go, Mulder."

At that moment Scully stiffened in astonishment, and her eyes met those of her partner. If she hadn't been holding onto him she thought she might have fainted, and he clearly felt the same way. It was as if her guts had been wrenched out, as if someone had reached a hand into her body and torn out her heart, or her soul, or both.

"Mulder...?" She gasped.

<Oh shit, not again.> Skinner looked up into a pair of amused, old eyes.

<Yes, dear. We just can't keep you away can we?> The old woman was seated in rocking chair, her white hair falling in coarse waves over her wizened shoulders.

<Dead again?> he joked.

<Yes, Jace. That's twice now. It's becoming a habit.>

<I was...poisoned.> Skinner remembered. <Mulder, Scully...?>

<They're hurting pretty bad.> The old woman nodded. <I'm sure they're very confused, which is your fault, Jace.>

<**My** fault?> He got up and walked around, noting, without surprise, that he was wearing his blood-stained old marine uniform again. He ran a hand through his cropped dark hair.

<Yes, Jace. I thought that you were going to tell them about the nexus. I'm astonished that you haven't. No wonder they're confused right now.>

<It's better if they don't know.> Skinner crouched down beside her chair, and leaned his shoulder against her leg.

<Why?> She asked.

<For god's sake!> he exploded. <You've **seen** how paranoid Mulder is. What do you think I should say? "Oh, by the way, Mulder I know everything you're thinking and feeling so stop having jerk-off fantasies about me.">

<Does he? How amusing.> The old woman chuckled to herself. <Does Dana too?>

<No, or at least she keeps them quieter if she does. Mulder has no control over his thoughts and emotions - they just spew out all over the place the whole time. Scully's much more contained. Anyway, she has some Rambo thing going.> He sent the Old Woman an image of himself dressed in combat clothes, and camouflage paint, rampaging through the jungle, clutching enough weaponry to wipe out an entire army.

<Well you're very nice looking, dear, and they're only human.> The Old Woman snorted. <I'd forgotten just how much fun the sexual side of being corporeal could be. So, I suspect, have you.> She prodded him with a gnarled forefinger.

<What do you want me to do? Leap into bed with them? Drive around to Mulder's apartment next time he's jerking off, and offer him the real thing?>

<I don't see why not.> The Old Woman smiled. <They want you and you want them. You **do** want them, don't you?>

Skinner was silent for a moment before replying with simple honesty. <Yes.>

<Well then, I don't see the problem here.>

<You're kidding me, right? I can see thousands of problems. Not least that we work together, and that relationships involving three people are **highly** unusual, and very probably unsustainable.>

<Yes, well, you always did over-analyze things, Jace.> The old woman snorted reprovingly. <When you're dead it all seems so much more simple.> She grinned at him. <You must tell them about the nexus though. You're tearing yourself apart keeping all this bottled up inside you.>

<Mulder will go crazy. He's convinced that he's been spied on for years anyway. If I tell him I'm in his head, and have the ability to know everything he's thinking, he'll assume it's a conspiracy against him.>

<Nonetheless, you really do have to tell them.>

<I thought I was dead. Does this mean I'm going back again?> He asked, with a weary sigh.

<Well that's up to you, Jace.>

<It is?> He glanced up at her in surprise. <Well then, I think I'd prefer not to.>

<Hmmm. Let me show you something.> She took his hand, and he felt himself melting into darkness.

DC General Hospital.

January 25, 1999. 9:33 PM

Mulder felt as if he couldn't breathe. He fell back against the wall, his hands scrabbling at the collar of his shirt, trying to loosen it. Somewhere, nearby, he heard Scully falling down next to him.

"What the hell...?" He gasped. He closed his eyes, fighting off the feeling of utter desolation that was sweeping through him. The sense of loss was so acute that he wanted to vomit. He heard a keening cry escape from his own lips.

"Mulder? What's happening to us?" Scully asked, her breathing shallow and distressed. He could feel her shoulder, and the warmth of her against him, but it wasn't any comfort. He didn't think anything could be a comfort.

"I don't know," he whispered, "but it damn well hurts."

Skinner watched in dismay, then turned to the Old Woman.

<Help them! Somebody help them.> He implored.

<You're the only one who can do that.> She shrugged. <They're reacting to your death. You are dead at this precise moment in time. Do you remember what it felt like to lose your comrades when your last nexus was destroyed? That's what they're feeling now.>

<That's emotional blackmail.> Skinner hunched himself up, closing his eyes so that he didn't have to look down on the scene in the hospital, but he couldn't stop himself remembering the agony of losing his comrades all those years ago.

<Yes - it is.> The Old Woman chuckled. <However, what I'm showing you is the truth. You don't have to go back though. You have your own free will - you've always had that.>

The hospital suddenly disappeared, and they were bathed once more in soothing white light.

<Jace.> The Old Woman took hold of his head, and looked deeply into his eyes. <You have this choice because what you face if you return is...more than we can expect you to endure. You'll find out things that hurt, things that you've tried to forget. I can't promise you happiness, although that's not to say that you won't experience it at some point in the future. For now, though, it won't be easy.>

<That's supposed to persuade me to return?> Skinner asked incredulously. <Go back - it'll be shit, you'll have a really bad time, and it'll hurt like hell?>

<No. That was just a warning about what to expect.> She stroked his cropped hair lovingly. <If you don't go back then Mulder and Scully will be unprotected against what will happen next. Together, the three of you, with the bond of your nexus between you, are stronger than those two can ever be alone. You're the key to it all, Jace. You always have been. It's what you were born for.>

<Don't throw all that destiny crap at me again,> he snapped.

<I'm not. It's your choice, Jace. Really. I'll leave you to decide.> She traced a loving finger along his cheek, and then disappeared.

Skinner sat there in silence. The whiteness seemed warm and comforting, and somewhere in the distance, he could hear the whispering of a myriad of souls, cleansing him as they had done before. He glanced down at his blood-stained hands, and knew what he would decide. The Old Woman knew him far too well. She could have chosen any inducement at all, but she chose leaving Mulder and Scully unprotected, knowing that he'd never do that. Skinner sighed, and stood up. He spread his arms wide, and said goodbye to the peace, and tranquillity once more.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in the hospital, waking up in his own body, and he felt like shit.

Hoover Building.

February 15, 1999.

"What the hell was that all about?" Mulder growled as they emerged from Skinner's office. "When he's dying he's Rambo, threatening to put a gun to someone's head to find a cure, and rampaging around town doing all that he-man stuff. Then, when he recovers, he just doesn't care? He doesn't even want to **know** who poisoned him?"

Scully trailed along behind her partner, her own mind working overtime. She jumped when Mulder mentioned Rambo, and gave a little smile. Maybe Skinner wasn't the only one who could read her thoughts.

"I don't know what it's all about, Mulder, so don't yell at me," she told him calmly, getting into the elevator.

"I am not **yelling** at anybody. I'm just jumpy, Scully." Mulder slammed his fist against the elevator control panel, and it screeched to an emergency stop, causing her to lurch forward and crash into him. "What the hell happened in the hospital? What was that...that... **thing** that brought us to our knees when he died?"

Scully shook her head, gazing at her shoes. "I don't have any answers to this one, Mulder. I don't know any more than you do," she replied.

"Scully, please. Something weird is going on around here, and I don't know what it is, or how to fight it. It's not on the outside any more, it's inside, and frankly - it's scaring me."

Scully looked up. He was biting on his lip, and his hazel eyes were more troubled than she'd ever seen them before. Not for the first time, she wanted to reach out to him, to give and receive comfort, but again, not for the first time, something inside stopped her. She had always been strong. She could cope, and he would have to find a way of coping too. Mulder was too big an issue for her to deal with alone. His brilliance was not confined to his investigative intuition, or his prodigious memory - even his problems were on a grand scale. She wanted to help him, but she didn't know how, and at some point she had closed off the part of herself that even wanted to try.

"It was Skinner's death wasn't it?" Mulder whispered to her, like a frightened child struggling with a difficult truth. "The moment when he died, however brief that was. That was what set that thing off wasn't it? And before then - I keep having this weird feeling, Scully. Like I'm not alone, even when I am."

"We are not alone." She quoted at him facetiously.

"I think whatever is happening to us is linked to Skinner in some way - in fact I'm sure of it."

"The truth is in the Assistant Director?" She suggested, equally facetiously.

"Oh, Scully, don't tell me that you're not the tiniest bit curious." He pulled a face. "I know you too well. Curiosity takes you places that your rational mind tells you to run a hundred miles from. Curiosity keeps you with me, and with the X Files, when you don't even believe."

"Believe? In what? Ghosts, and ghoulies, and things that go..." Scully trailed off, remembering a dark wood, and a man who told her to believe in order to save her life.

"What?" Mulder looked at her intently.

"I'm not sure. Something." She shivered.

"I'm going to confront Skinner." Mulder told her, taking her by the shoulders, and looking into her eyes. "I think he has the answers. Come with me."

"Of course," she replied. "Don't I always?"

He nodded, and slammed his fist onto the elevator control panel again. The elevator resumed its journey, and Mulder got out.

"Mulder." Scully took a deep breath, and followed him. "There's something I haven't told you," she said, grabbing his arm. He looked down at her, his eyebrows raised inquiringly. "Something important," she added. "I didn't tell you before because...I couldn't make sense of it. I still can't, but it seems relevant to all this."

"What is it?" Mulder sat down, and got out a handful of pencils, starting to throw them at the ceiling, like a caged bear sent crazy by its confinement. Scully put a hand on his to stop him.

"It's about Skinner," she said. "It's about a kind of...talent he has. Something he did when we were trying to help you in Thurmont."

Skinner returned to his apartment in a daze. He hadn't really been surprised by Krycek's visitation. Once he recovered, he figured that the nanocytes showing up in his blood just a few days after Cancerman promised to bring him in line was too much of a coincidence. If Cancerman thought that this made any difference though, he was sorely mistaken. Go ahead, let them kill him. From what he could remember, which was little enough, death wasn't so bad an option. He'd die before he betrayed Mulder and Scully, or brought them under Cancerman's direct control.

Skinner took a shower, then changed into a pair of gray sweatpants and a black tee shirt. He wandered back downstairs, barefoot, and poured himself an obligatory glass of whisky, wondering when he had become a half a bottle a night kind of guy, and whether a drinking problem was something he should add to his many worries. When there was a knock on his door, he was almost expecting the cigarette smoking man to be standing there, waiting to see what his answer was. The last thing he expected to see was his two agents. He had been so busy processing his own worries and concerns that he had barely taken any notice of

their thoughts and feelings recently. He had developed a mechanism for such background 'noise' anyway, or every last inconsequential pondering over what to buy in the supermarket, or what color shirt to wear that morning would have intruded in his mind. If he listened to all of it, it would drive him crazy, so he viewed it like having the television on in the background. You could watch and listen if you wanted, or ignore it, and concentrate on something else.

"Sir. Can we come in?" Mulder pushed past him, making it clear that saying "no" wasn't an option.

"Please, be my guest." Skinner muttered ironically.

Scully gave him a faint half-smile, and sidled past him, but he detected her nervousness, and sense of anticipation. Mulder just felt angry - and scared. Fear? Skinner gazed at the other man in surprise. What did Mulder have to be frightened of here?

"How can I help you?" Skinner asked, sitting himself down, and placing his long legs on the coffee table, in an attempt at a nonchalance that he didn't feel inside. He found being with the two of them at the same time difficult. It was hard to separate out who was feeling what, when he was jamming their emotions from seeping through the link. Scully glanced at his bare feet, and for a moment, they almost exchanged a smile. Skinner remembered teasing her about a foot fetish, and then they both recalled where that memory came from, and the smiles faded. Scully's blue eyes clouded over in confusion, and he wished more than anything in the world that he could hold her, and make everything all right.

"I want to know what's going on, sir. We both do. Scully told me about some kind of telepathy thing you two had going in Thurmont, and ever since we got back I've had a sensation of being watched. Then when you were ill - I could feel your symptoms. Scully says she could too. When you died..." Mulder paused, pacing around the room, struggling with the memory. "We both felt it," he finished lamely, in what was clearly a huge understatement. "Now you refuse to investigate? And you expect us to just sit back and **accept** that?"

Skinner felt his world turn dark and cold. He hated situations like this. He didn't mind fighting any dangers life threw at him, using his fists, or his mind, but confronting his emotions had him running scared, and explaining himself was anathema to him.

"You're suggesting that there's some mystery here, Agent Mulder?" He asked, his tone faintly sneering as he made a conscious decision to bluff it out. "What's all this about? You're suggesting that I'm some kind of telepath, using my powers to do what? **Spy** on you?" Skinner laughed out loud.

"Are you?" Mulder asked quietly.

There was silence for a moment, and Skinner got up, turning his back on them, pouring himself another glass of whisky.

"Are you working for them, is that what this is? Are they using you to keep us under surveillance? A completely unique form of surveillance, one that works from the inside out? So that you know what we're thinking? So that you can report back on our every last trip to the bathroom?" Mulder demanded. Skinner stiffened, remembering the cigarette smoking man's deal, knowing that was exactly what Mulder's enemies wanted.

"If you think that anyone is interested in your trips to the bathroom, Mulder, then you really **are** paranoid," he snapped, downing his whisky in one gulp and pouring another. He felt a rough hand on his shoulder, and swung around, knocking Mulder away.

"Don't push me, Mulder," he growled. Over Mulder's shoulder, he saw Scully's eyes widen in distress.

"Or what? You send out something that gives me one mother of a headache? Can you do that, Skinner? Is it a weapon?" Mulder pursued his line of inquiry relentlessly.

Skinner's whole being revolted at Mulder's suggestion. He recalled the evil acts the cigarette smoking man had asked of him; to kill one of his comrades, and to bring Mulder and Scully under his control, both of which he had refused to do. Yet Mulder didn't know him well enough, or didn't trust him enough to know that he would never use this ability to harm the people he cared about.

"It'd be a good weapon. One click of your fingers and we have to jump. If we don't..."

<NO!> Skinner's anger built to a crescendo, and that one word reverberated between them, carried along the link, and echoing with perfect clarity in all their minds. Mulder stood there - for once actually stunned to have his theory proven.

There was a long silence.

"At least that was honest." Mulder said finally. "So, you're what - some kind of relative of Gibson Praise?"

"No. I wasn't born this way. I was made." Skinner shook his head.

"By whom?" Mulder leaned forward intently.

"Guess." Skinner shrugged. Realization dawned in Mulder's eyes.

"I knew it. The consortium owns you. **He** owns you, and now you want to own us." Mulder turned away, and Scully gazed between the two of them, torn.

"Nobody damn well owns me." Skinner growled.

"How did it happen? Why did you do this to us? What have you done?" Mulder demanded. "What do you know about us? Every thought in our head? Every emotion?" He said it as if he didn't believe it, but when Skinner would not meet his eye, he shook his head in amazement.

"Well that's gotta be **my** worst nightmare come true," Mulder commented ruefully. "I don't know about you, Scully."

Scully just shook her head, mutely.

"If that's your worst nightmare then you don't have a very vivid imagination." Skinner snapped, remembering falling, a dozen gunshot wounds to his body, hearing his friends dying all around him, feeling them dying. He allowed the image to seep out into the link, no longer caring, and gulped down his whisky, ignoring the shocked looks the two agents gave him as they shared that snippet of memory.

"So you're, what? Some kind of telepath?" Mulder questioned.

"No, I'm not any kind of telepath. I can only hear your thoughts because there's a nexus - a kind of link between us, between all of us." Skinner told them.

"A link? Created by whom?"

Skinner glanced down at his hands, as if he could still see the blood on them, and he no longer tried to contain his own guilt. Mulder rocked back on his heels, his eyes full of betrayal.

"I see," he murmured.

"No, you don't. You don't see at all." Skinner replied.

"Yeah - I do." Mulder gave him a look of disgust, his feelings spiraling out of control, buffeting Skinner with their force as they flowed through the nexus. Skinner didn't fight it. He laid the nexus bare, and he saw the change in Scully's expression as she felt the full force of Mulder's emotions. Skinner wasn't sure he cared any more. It felt good - it felt so damn good not to have to fight it, not to have to remain vigilant, always on guard in case someone found out, damming everything up until he felt fit to burst. "You know..." Mulder walked up close to him, invading his personal space just as the cigarette smoking man had done a few days before. "I always thought they'd find a way of controlling me sooner or later. I just didn't give them credit for the methods they'd use, or the people. I can't stop them knowing everything I do now, can I? Short of killing you that is, and I remember what happened last time you 'died'."

"Mulder, listen to me - I'm not spying on you. I didn't want this to happen." Skinner said desperately. He could feel Mulder's sense of being violated, and he didn't blame him. He'd feel the same if it had happened to him.

"Too late, Skinner. Too damn late. I've heard all I damn well want to hear." Mulder snapped, turning on his heel and striding towards the door. "Scully?" She still hadn't said a word. She looked at Mulder, and then at Skinner, and both men felt her confusion and uncertainty. Finally she got up and followed Mulder to the door. He was half way down the corridor before she got there. She turned, and gave Skinner a puzzled ghost of a smile, and his heart ached at the distress he could feel emanating from her in palpable waves. Mulder's

emotions surged through him again, dominating the nexus with their intensity. The sense of fear, of anger and paranoia, of a trust betrayed... and more than that, a genuine fear of being **known**. Scully recoiled from the overwhelming buffeting.

"It's all right. I'll block them until he calms down," Skinner told her. "I'm sorry - you're not used to it. It's confusing."

She nodded, and left.

Skinner lay down on his couch, nursing one more glass of whisky, and wishing that he had thought to buy another bottle. He felt bone weary. The emotional exchange had exhausted him, and he wanted to reach out to Mulder, to speak to him again, to try and make him understand, but his mind was too tired, and Mulder's emotions were still too intense for him to even try and make contact with the other man. When the phone rang, he answered it with a surly grunt.

"Mr. Skinner. I trust that you're fully recovered now?" The voice on the other end of the line was smug, almost purring.

"No thanks to you." Skinner spat, sitting up.

"On the contrary. I allowed you to live. I hope that you'll see the power I have over you now, and agree to discuss our little deal."

"We have no deal." Skinner snapped.

"You're being hasty again." The smoking man chuckled. "You haven't heard what I have to say yet."

"You've infected me with these nanocytes, and you can pull the trigger on me whenever you want. So what? You could do that anyway. Just kill me if you want, but you won't get Mulder and Scully if you do." Skinner growled.

"We don't want to kill you. In fact, we have no intention of killing you." The smoking man's voice was like silk over cold steel. "However...we could easily keep you in considerable pain. Imagine the ordeal of going through your recent experience every few days. Imagine never knowing when you wake up in the morning whether you'll be well or diseased. I expect you'd lose your job - although I'm sure you'd get an disability pension. Imagine how distressing it would be though, to have to rely on others to nurse you through your many bouts of ill health. I'm sure that a proud man like you would find that hard to bear."

Skinner closed his eyes, and ran a hand over his pounding temples. He stared his own worst nightmare in the face, and came to his decision.

"Do it then," he said. "I still won't help you."

"We'll see." There was a click, and the phone went dead.

Skinner lay back on the couch, wondering if his old enemy would start the process this very night, wondering if his current headache was the beginning of it, or merely a reaction to the emotional overload he'd been subjected to this evening. He closed his eyes, longing for the blissful oblivion of sleep, if only for a few hours.

Scully got down to the parking garage to find that Mulder had ditched her. She wasn't surprised. She stood there for a moment, trying to decide whether to return to Skinner's apartment, but she wasn't ready for that. The information she'd been given was too much, and she felt almost bruised from the intensity of the emotions both men had given free rein too upstairs. Scully hadn't said a word throughout the meeting. She didn't feel Mulder's sense of violation, which surprised her in itself. *Maybe I just have less imagination*, she pondered, as she began to walk. She understood Mulder's sense of outrage, she just didn't **feel** it. While he saw this link, this... what had Skinner called it? A nexus? While Mulder saw it as a threat, and was deeply suspicious of Skinner, Scully just remembered how it had felt to have him in her mind when they broke into the armaments factory, and the truth was that she had liked it. There was something guileless about the non-verbal communication they had shared. She felt known, and accepted, in a way she had never felt before.

When she returned home, Scully made herself a mug of strong, sweet coffee, and sat down with a sigh. The turmoil in her head refused to go away, and she nursed the warming mug in her hands, still brooding. She found herself faced with a strange reversal. In the past, Mulder had always given Skinner the benefit of the doubt, whereas she had been more suspicious. When had that changed? Scully realized that she could pinpoint exactly when. She remembered the way Skinner had reacted to her danger back in the factory, the way she had held him, and seen something in his heart, or his mind, that was as endearing as it was mysterious. She was certain that Skinner meant them no harm, that this situation had spun out of his control, and he was as much at a loss with how to deal with it as they were.

Scully ran herself a bath, and began undressing. She looked at herself, naked, in the mirror and then flushed. Could he see her standing here like this? Could he see her reflected through the mirror of her own thoughts? Did he know all her secrets? The flush began on her neck, and seeped down over her white flesh, and she shivered. It was a curiously erotic thought, and yet so disturbing too.

Scully wondered what it would be like to make love, knowing that someone was inside her mind, watching - a permanent voyeur. Did he see her touch herself at night? Did he watch her bathe? Did he laugh at the stupid thoughts she amused herself with? The secret thoughts nobody knew about - like the time she sat behind him in a car, and imagined cracking open an egg, and frying it on his bald head. Scully squirmed. Would she have to censor herself the whole time now?

Did he know that she wasn't as self assured as she liked to appear? Did he ever sense the doubts she shared with nobody, not even Mulder? Did he know that she loved him? Scully jerked her head in surprise. Where had **that** come from? The thought didn't surprise her though. They were kindred spirits, she and Skinner. She looked at herself again, and knew

that when she had seen into Skinner's mind, she had recognized a soul not unlike herself. Both of them were so seemingly strong, and self-assured. Scully thought wearily of her long haul journey through the ranks of the FBI, encountering the almost daily sexism that came with working in a field where there were still so few female agents. She knew herself to be strong, but inside she had surprising vulnerabilities which she didn't allow anybody to see. Skinner was like that too. As hard as steel on the surface but so much hidden, and so much of that surprisingly gentle. Scully couldn't be angry with him, although a part of her wanted to be.

Scully didn't get much sleep that night. When she woke the next morning, she felt different, as if something had changed, and there was a nagging ache in her stomach. Unable to pinpoint the problem, she got up, dressed in one of her usual sensible suits, and took herself off to work as if nothing had happened. She looked as immaculate as usual. Nobody would guess at the turmoil going on inside. Mulder wasn't in the bullpen, and he still hadn't turned up by 11 am. They had a meeting with Kersh at 12, so Scully called him on his cell phone.

"Yeah."

"Mulder?"

"Yeah."

"You're not at work."

"You're one hell of an investigator, Scully. Did you figure that one out by yourself?"

Scully fought back a wave of irritation. "Mulder, just get here. Now."

"No can do. I'm sulking," Mulder told her. "In fact, when I woke up this morning I thought I might take the first plane outta here. Then I got to thinking - who the hell are you fooling, Mulder? You can't outrun this, because it's in your head and it goes with you. I feel so damn trapped, Scully."

"We need to talk." Scully glanced around the bullpen. "Please come to work, Mulder."

"Nope."

Scully slammed the phone down in exasperation as she realized that he'd hung up.

Well, if she couldn't talk to Mulder, she could sure as hell talk to Skinner. Maybe he would be able to get through to her partner. Out of all of them, he had the best handle on this situation after all. Scully walked along to Skinner's office; when she got there she was surprised to see his PA sitting in the Assistant Director's chair, going through his desk drawers.

"What's going on? Where's Skinner?" She asked. The PA shrugged.

"He resigned."

"He did **what?**" Scully strode into the room, slamming the door behind her. The PA, who Scully felt sure was a plant, and who she had never liked, blinked in surprise.

"I got here this morning and was told that he'd resigned," the PA repeated. "He spoke to the Director privately last night apparently."

"He can't just **resign**. He has to give notice." Scully snapped.

"There were special circumstances apparently. He's already left. He didn't come in to pick up his things, or even to say goodbye." The PA looked saddened by that, and Scully wondered if she'd misjudged the woman. "I thought I'd go through his desk and send him any personal items he might have left, but there aren't any. He didn't really bring his personal life to work."

Scully stared at the woman in disbelief, then turned on her heel and left. She grabbed her jacket, and got into her car, heading out towards Crystal City, her meeting with Kersh completely forgotten. Then she pulled out her cellphone and called Mulder again.

"I want you to get over to Skinner's apartment," she told him tersely.

"I don't think so," he replied. She could hear him slamming that stupid basketball around his apartment.

"He's resigned." Scully snapped.

"What?" There was silence.

"Exactly. He was pretty upset last night, Mulder. I think we should make sure he's okay."

"You can, Scully. I don't want anything to do with the guy."

"Mulder you're the one who accused him of everything short of homicide last night. Now I'm asking you to get over to Crystal City." There was another long silence. "Mulder," she said at last. "How often do I ever ask you to do anything for me?"

She heard a faint sigh.

"I'm on my way," he said.

Mulder pulled up in the parking garage a few minutes after Scully.

"He just resigned? What about serving out his notice?" Mulder asked as she set off towards the elevator.

"Apparently he doesn't need to. Special dispensation from the Director."

"What?" Mulder exclaimed, aghast.

"Exactly." Scully replied.

They emerged onto the 17th floor, to find it full of people carrying boxes.

"What the hell's going on here?" Mulder strode angrily along the corridor - the trail of people led directly to Skinner's apartment.

"Excuse me - where do you think you're going?" A woman stopped him at the door.

"Special Agent Fox Mulder, FBI." He showed her his identification. "And you are?"

"Marianne Lopez, from Lopez Packing. Mr. Skinner hired us to clear out his apartment and arrange to put his belongings into storage."

"He did what?" Scully pushed past the woman, and saw that the job was already half complete. The living room was bare, its contents packed into a few boxes which were waiting in the hallway.

"Where is Mr. Skinner now?" Mulder asked.

"I have no idea. He paid us in advance, he didn't leave a forwarding address."

"In cash?" Mulder questioned.

"What?" The woman glanced distractedly at Scully, who was opening one of the boxes.

"I asked if he paid you in cash." Mulder repeated urgently.

"As a matter of fact he did, yes. He paid well." The woman smiled. "He called us late last night. He was in a big hurry - his apartment is being sub-let this afternoon."

Mulder shook his head and went over to where Scully was busy looking through the box she'd opened. She shot him a look of pure venom, and disappeared up the stairs. Mulder bit on his lip, and followed her. The master bedroom still hadn't been touched. Scully walked through it, going to the en-suite bathroom, rifling through the cupboards.

"He must have been in a hurry. He didn't even take his shaving kit." Scully emerged back into the main bedroom. Mulder opened Skinner's closet, and peered at the contents.

"It doesn't look like he took much by way of clothing either," he murmured. Scully joined him, and her attention was drawn to a pair of black combat pants, neatly folded on a hanger. She pulled them out.

"Scully?" Mulder's face was wrinkled up into a bemused frown.

"He wore these when we went to the armaments factory." Scully rummaged around in the pockets, and drew out a syringe. They exchanged glances.

"Skinner was a junkie? How many more secrets are we going to find out about the guy?" Mulder commented wryly.

"I'll take this to the lab. Have it analyzed." Scully said, putting it in an evidence bag, and placing it in her pocket.

"Why bother? The guy's cleared out of here. Maybe that's for the best." Mulder shrugged.

"What the hell is it with you, Mulder?" Scully exploded.

"Scully?" Mulder followed her out of the bedroom. She looked so angry that he thought she might explode. "Scully!" He caught up with her, and pulled her around to face him.

"Did you ever think that I might want this? Did you ever stop to think that this was about more than just you?" She snapped at him.

"Scully." He sounded like a scared child.

"Why does it upset you so much, Mulder? What is this anger all about?" She demanded.

"I just...aren't **you** angry?" He looked at her searchingly.

"No. I'm confused, I want to know more, to try and understand, but I'm not angry. I don't understand you, Mulder. You've spent your entire life investigating the paranormal, and the first time you get to really participate in something, to have first hand proof, evidence - you turn your back on it? Why?"

"This isn't the paranormal. This is people's brain chemistry being manipulated so that..."

"That's crap, Mulder. My brain chemistry wasn't changed, and neither was yours. He was the only one who was experimented on."

Mulder took a deep breath. "He told you that?"

"No. He showed me. Unintentionally. He didn't ask for this any more than you or I. Now why the hell does your famous open mind not extend to this particular circumstance?" She demanded, her blue eyes spitting fire.

Mulder stared at her. "I don't like feeling...invaded," he whispered at last. "I feel tied down, trapped, it's almost like a kind of claustrophobia."

"That's just your perception. I'm sure that you don't have any more secrets than the rest of us, Mulder. Why is it so much worse for you to be known? Because that's what all this is about, isn't it? Being known? Having him, of all people, **know** you." She saw from the way he flushed that she was close to the truth, and wondered what dark secret he had that he

wanted to keep concealed from Skinner. "All right - have it your way. Make him into the enemy, if you want, but just remember that he's an enemy who risked his own life to save yours."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Mulder demanded.

"This." Scully strode along to the box of belongings in the hallway, pulled out a photograph, and handed it to her partner. "You figure it out, Mulder, I have a hunch to play."

And so saying, she strode off.

Mulder sat down on the bottom stair, and looked at the photograph, wondering what the hell he was supposed to see. The photo showed a group of soldiers - marines judging by the uniforms. They were muddy, and looked weary, but they were smiling and goofing around for the camera. Mulder scanned each face. There was a blond kid, with a freckled face, a lieutenant - older, his dark hair prematurely graying, a grave, dark-eyed kid, a small, stocky man wearing a crucifix...Mulder's eyes went back to the dark-eyed soldier, and examined him closely. He closed his eyes, and remembered a cell and a youth, holding out his hand to him. He remembered taking it. He saw a flood of images, and someone saying "I'll carry you." He remembered a blood-stained uniform that looked just like the uniforms these soldiers were wearing. Mulder ripped the photograph out of its frame with shaking fingers, and turned it over. There were hand written identifications on the back. "Casey, Logan, Me, J.A..."

Mulder turned the photograph back over, and traced the outline of Skinner with his finger.

"Jace?" he whispered.

Scully charged out of the elevator like a lioness going into battle. She located the doorman and flashed her badge at him.

"I need to look through your security tapes," she told him. He looked surprised, but led her into a back room, where the tapes were stored, neatly labelled.

"We run them on a 2 month rotation. Anything older than 2 months has been wiped."

"Do you know Walter Skinner?" She asked him.

He shrugged. "Sure. Nice guy. Big tip at Christmas. Works long hours, no family, no life." The man grinned. "Always looks kind of grumpy, bald, expensive suits..."

"Yes, that's him," she interrupted. "Do you ever remember seeing him dressed casually...?"

"Plenty of times - jeans, gym clothes. He worked out a lot. We have a gym here in the apartment block, and a pool..."

"Yes." Scully interrupted his sales pitch. "I'm thinking about some specific clothing. All black - combat style. Do you remember seeing him dressed like that?"

"Can't say I do." The man shrugged. "Hang on...yeah, I do remember - I remember because he looked like shit. You know, staggering around. I thought 'This guy's had one too many'. You know what I'm saying? I was so busy wondering if he was going to make it back to his apartment without throwing up in my elevator, that I hardly noticed what he was wearing, until you just mentioned it."

"Thanks." Scully nodded, and surveyed the tapes. It didn't take her long to find what she was looking for.

"What's this?" Mulder looked up as Scully threw the tape into his lap.

"Evidence," she replied, cryptically. Mulder took the tape back upstairs and played it on the video in Skinner's bedroom.

"Is he drunk?" Mulder freeze-framed the image.

"No. He's drugged."

Mulder raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "I was only joking when I accused him of being a junkie, Scully," he told her.

"Look at the date of the tape, Mulder." She handed him the box.

"January 9?" He frowned.

"Yes... the date we mysteriously came back to life. Do you think the two events are unrelated? Look at the time he returns." She pointed. "I think we regained consciousness about half an hour before then. I'd say that the method he chose of reaching us was to take some kind of mind-altering substance. He saved our lives, and if the price for that is this...nexus thing, well I personally think it's a price worth paying. Now I'm going to find him, and tell him so. Are you coming?"

"Scully." He hung back. She turned, expecting a battle, but only found a look of anxiety in his eyes. "Didn't you stop to think that we have a method of telling him all this without finding him? Or at least, we used to."

"What do you mean?" Scully frowned.

"Did you feel different when you woke up this morning, Scully?" He asked.

"I...yes." Scully looked at him, her eyes wide and astonished.

"I was so busy being angry, that it blocked out everything else. He hasn't just gone from here, Scully. He's gone altogether. He's gone from inside my mind."

"You don't think he...?" Scully whispered.

"No. The last time he 'died' we sure as hell felt that. I don't know what's happened to him, Scully, but I have a bad feeling about this."

"Ah - you're awake."

Skinner struggled to open his eyes, then blinked as the bright light assaulted him.

"Good afternoon, Walter."

Skinner shook his head, trying to clear it. The room swam into focus, and he saw a short, stocky man standing in front of him. His blond hair was thinning at the back, and his eyes were a strangely pale shade of blue. Skinner squinted at him, unable to see clearly without his glasses.

"Who..." Skinner cleared his throat, then tried again. "Who are you?" He managed to rasp at last.

"I'm your nemesis, Walter," the man stated seriously. Then he broke into a laugh, his body suffused with energy. "My name is Robert Noy - although I'm sure you'll call me by many different names before our work here is complete. I'm used to that, and can assure you that I won't take offense."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about." Skinner swallowed again. His throat was dry, and he was thirsty.

"You'd like a drink." Noy remarked.

"Yes." Skinner glanced down. He was still dressed in sweatpants and a tee shirt, but his wrists were handcuffed behind his back. He was sitting on a chair, in the middle of a room that was empty save for a desk. Noy was perched on the desk. He had an open, friendly, good-natured face.

"Well, maybe if you co-operate you can have a drink." Noy smiled as if they were discussing the weather.

"If I co-operate?"

"Yes." Noy went and sat down behind the desk. He gestured to a thick file. "Walter Skinner, this is your life." He grinned again, chuckling at his little joke. "I've read this file from cover to cover, several times. Born June 3, 1952, in Lone Oak, Iowa. Son of Rebekah and William Skinner, one brother, Joseph. You enlisted in the marines on your 18th birthday in order to

serve in Vietnam - how noble of you - distinguished in battle - several times - awarded the Navy Cross, Silver Star, Purple Heart...hmm, very impressive." Noy paused, and glanced at his captive. Skinner raised an eyebrow. "Of course, you know all this." Noy laughed. "Badly wounded, 3 month stay in a VA hospital...an undergraduate degree in political science, law degree - graduated first in your class, distinguished career in the FBI - hmmm, that word 'distinguished' again, Walter. My, my, you're a perfectionist aren't you?" Noy's eyes didn't leave Skinner's face, but there was no reaction to that comment. "So, back to the facts - fast track to promotion, wife Sharon died in a car accident a few years ago," Noy shook his head. "A-ha, Walter. I see a chink in that armor of perfection. Prior to your wife's death you'd been separated for eight months. That must have been upsetting for you. A failed marriage? Failure - Walter Skinner, those words aren't usually used in the same sentence are they?" Skinner's jaw clenched, and Noy laughed again. "In short..." he gestured to the file, "all the facts and figures, everything we need to know about Walter Skinner." He picked up the file and dumped it theatrically in the trash can. "And yet nothing at all. Nothing at all about the man."

Noy got up, and came to stand directly in front of Skinner. He crouched down in front of his captive, and examined his face, thoughtfully. "Why do you keep yourself so fit, Walter? Hmm?" He asked, placing a hand around one of Skinner's biceps. "Impressive, Walter. Very impressive." Skinner tried to shrug him off, and Noy laughed again. He was, Skinner thought, like an excitable little flea. "So, you haven't answered my question - what's behind the colossus image, Walter? Why do you need to keep yourself so strong? What are you afraid of?"

Skinner jerked his head in annoyance. "What the hell kind of a game is this, **Robert?**" He growled.

"You don't like me using your first name?" Noy asked innocently. "Hmmm. I'll remember that."

"Why am I here?" Skinner demanded.

"You know the answer to **that**, Walter," Noy tapped him reprovingly on the head. "You were sent here, by an associate of mine. It seems that you refused a job opportunity he gave you, and he wasn't very happy about that."

"That son of a bitch is behind this?" Skinner snarled, yanking his hands fruitlessly, frustrated by the handcuffs that bound him.

"My associate trained me in my craft, and has kept me gainfully employed since. He sends me people who he think could benefit from my services." Noy laid a hand on Skinner's shoulder, as if to calm him.

"Your craft?" Skinner asked.

"I'm a psychologist." Noy told him. "My specialty is breaking people down into tiny little pieces, then building them back up again." He slapped Skinner's shoulder cheerfully. "In the image of our choosing," he added, as he went to sit back down. "It's surprisingly easy once

you know the tricks, Walter. I have a 100% success rate. It can be a little painful, but I'm sure that if you approach the process with a willing heart and a desire to be helpful, then any discomfort will be minimized."

"You're a professional torturer." Skinner stated, with a wry, mocking smile.

"Such a crude word," Noy smirked, "but yes, if you must insist on calling a spade a spade, Walter, then 'torturer' sums it up fairly well. I like to think I'm little more sophisticated than that though. You see, I'm fairly specialized. I can **do** extracting information, but really that's simple stuff. What I prefer, what really excites me..." he leaned forward, his face glowing, "is what I'm going to do you, Walter. I'm going to pull you apart, and find out what makes you tick. When I put you back together again, you'll be as good as new - better even, and so much more co-operative."

"You can do what you want to me." Skinner shook his head. "I doubt you can do anything that hasn't been done before. I've experienced pain - I'm sure you've seen my medical notes from Vietnam, so you'll know that pain alone doesn't hold a great deal of fear for me. I'm sure you can hurt me, but you must already know that I'd rather die than let you, or anyone else, break me, as you so crudely put it."

"You're not the suicidal type." Noy commented wryly. "Ah, Walter. You're so certain. So confident." He smiled. "As if pain was my only weapon. It isn't. In fact, I prefer to use it sparingly. I find it makes more of an impact that way. I told you that this is a craft, and I'm a supreme artist. You are my blank canvas, Walter, and you know, I have a feeling that you might turn out to be my masterpiece." He nodded to himself, those strangely icy eyes gleaming opaquely. "Now, you'll forgive me for saying that you haven't been very helpful, have you?" Noy put his head on one side and then shook it, in mock sadness. "So, I think that drink will have to wait. You've also been injected with a drug - its effects will wear off soon enough but you'll find that it's blocked your, uh, shall we say 'special' abilities. I'm sure that you're dying to tell your young friends where you are, but of course you don't know, and there's no way that you'll find out. When the drug wears off you'll have to satisfy yourself instead with telling them how much danger you're in. Or would that worry them too much? Hmm?" Noy's pressed his face up close to Skinner, and Skinner turned his head away.

"I do hope they deserve your devotion, Walter." Noy commented, rocking back on his heels. "You'll need to have something to cling to for the next few days. Knowing that they're worthy of your suffering will keep you going I expect."

Skinner ground his teeth together, and shook his head. "You won't succeed with me." He stated firmly.

"Won't I? I'm dying to find out what's underneath the immaculate appearance, of Walter Sergei Skinner." Noy plucked a photograph out of the dumped file. "Freshly laundered, crisp white shirts, everything in its place down to your polished shoes. What a perfect front you present to the world, Walter, not a hair out of place, if you'll excuse the inappropriate metaphor." He glanced at Skinner's bald head with a laugh. "It's going to be such fun

discovering what's beneath it all." He clapped his hands together in exaggerated anticipation, then pressed a bell on his desk, and a few seconds later two men in dark uniforms entered the room.

"Farewell for now, Walter." Noy smiled. "We'll talk again soon," he promised.

"I'm looking forward to it already." Skinner replied sarcastically. Noy grinned in delight and waved him goodbye.

Skinner was taken along a corridor, and down some stairs, then ushered into a small, white room. The door was locked behind him. He looked around. There was nothing in the room. There was no window and no bed - just a bucket that he presumed represented the toilet facilities.

It took him all of two seconds to explore his new home, and then he sank wearily to the floor. He remembered falling asleep on his couch, then waking up briefly as something was put over his face. He had struggled for a few seconds, but after that he must have lost consciousness as he remembered nothing else until he had woken up here. Skinner saw that his watch was missing. He also noticed a bruise on his right arm, and further investigation revealed needle marks. He lay back against the cool, hard wall. His head was pounding, and he would have killed for some water to dampen his parched throat. He tried sending his mind along the nexus, but the drugs they'd injected him with had done their job, and he couldn't even find the link, let alone communicate with Mulder or Scully. His brain felt groggy, and his whole body felt as if a two-ton trunk had hit it. All the energy had been knocked out of him.

He closed his eyes, thinking to relieve his discomfort by sleep, but the moment his eyelids touched, a siren sounded in the cell. Skinner got up, and paced around, and the siren stopped. He glanced up at the ceiling, and saw the cameras - too far up for him to reach, or dismantle in any way. There were cameras in all four corners of the ceiling - nowhere in the cell was out of their field of vision. Skinner rubbed his aching neck, and sat back down again, closing his eyes once more. The siren sounded again, making him jump. He ignored it, pulled his knees up to his chest, and placed his arms around them, resting his head. A few seconds later the cell door opened, and a guard stepped inside.

"You will remain awake," the man told him.

"Or?" Skinner asked.

"Or we'll make you." The guard replied, flexing his arms in an unsubtle way. Skinner thought about it for a moment. He remembered something his mother had said to him, years before: "Choose your battles wisely, Walter." This didn't seem worth fighting over.

"I'll stay awake then," he agreed. The guard nodded, and stepped back outside the cell again. Skinner sat back down on the floor, kept his eyes wide open, and began to run through his options.

Georgetown, Washington DC.

February 16, 1999.

"So - where do we start?" Scully asked, as she opened the door to her apartment and let Mulder in.

"At the beginning?" He ventured, holding up the disks he had stolen from the Hoover Building.

"Which is where?" She looked over his shoulder as he inserted the disks into her waiting laptop computer.

"Lone Oak, Iowa." Mulder pointed at the screen, bringing up a file on Skinner.

"He was awarded the Navy Cross?" Scully let out a low whistle.

"Yeah. He got that for something he did in Vietnam."

"The Navy Cross is really **big**, Mulder." Scully said in an awe-struck tone. "My father would have been seriously impressed."

"The guy is a hero." Mulder shrugged. "What about the syringe?" He glanced up at her, his fingers speeding over the keyboard. "What were the results on that?"

"Heroin - and Skinner's DNA on the needle."

"Scully..." Mulder bit on his lip, frowning. "I'm trying to make sense of this."

"Really?" She raised an eyebrow. "Usually you're two steps ahead."

"Okay, maybe I've been in denial on this one." Mulder gave a wry smile. "We didn't talk much about our OBE did we?"

"No. To be honest, a lot of seems...blurry. Like a dream." Scully admitted. "But I do know that someone called Jace saved my life, and I know that he looked a hell of a lot like that Vietnam photograph of Skinner."

"Heroin's a mind altering drug. Do you think that somehow it enabled him to have an OBE of his own?"

"It's the only thing that makes any sense." Scully shrugged.

"No, Scully, it doesn't make sense. I mean why did he look like that? Why was he so young, and what was it with all the blood?" Mulder frowned.

"I don't know. I suspect that the only one who does is Skinner."

"And he's missing." Mulder looked into her blue eyes, his own hazel ones troubled. "You blame me for that, don't you?"

"I..." Scully hesitated. "No. I do understand, Mulder, I even agree with you on some level. It's just that I'd like to know the full story before I make any more judgments."

"Fair enough." He nodded. "If Skinner is this Jace person who saved our lives, then I figure we owe him one, and I'll do everything I can to find him."

"Mulder - what about Kersh?"

Their eyes met.

"Fuck him." Mulder grinned.

Skinner wasn't sure how much time passed, but suddenly there was activity in the cell, a loud noise, someone slapping his face - hard. He sat up in confusion, and pushed the black-uniformed guard away.

"Please stay awake, Walter," a voice said. He looked up groggily, into Noy's pale blue eyes.

"It's very important that you obey my instructions." Noy crouched down in front of him. "I could send someone here to help you. Would you like that?" Noy asked.

"Help me?" Skinner repeated, confused.

"Yes." Noy smiled. "Just to help you stay awake. I can be very generous like that." He clicked his fingers, and two young people, a man and a woman, entered the cell. Neither of them could have been more than twenty-five. "This is Antonio." Noy gestured to the man and he came forward. He was stunningly good looking, with thick dark hair, and a wide, sensuous mouth. "And this is Marla." Noy gestured, and the woman stepped forward nervously. She was no slouch either - petite, with shiny blonde hair, and deep green eyes. "Marla, Antonio - this is Walter. I want you to treat him well. Marla - you take the first watch." Noy instructed, and she nodded.

Skinner watched, bemused, as everyone but Marla left the cell. She sat down beside him, and took his hand in hers, gently stroking the fingers. He accepted the caress, numbly, trying to make sense of this development.

"We have to make sure that you stay awake because I don't want them to hurt you." Marla confided. "Maybe we can talk?"

"I won't tell you anything." Skinner told her, his dry mouth giving the words a rasping quality.

"I'm not here to interrogate you." She looked surprised.

"No? Why are you here then?" Skinner asked.

"To make it easier for you to stay awake. To offer comfort," she added shyly, her fingers caressing his hand. He pulled it away and noted that she looked almost hurt. "Please, Walter. I really don't want them to hurt you again. Please, can we just talk? About anything - not about you if you don't want."

He looked into her green eyes, and noticed the way her hair fell across her face. He wished she was Scully. "Tell me about the music you listen to. Or the books you like to read." She prompted, taking his hand again, and resting it in her lap. Skinner sighed, and banged his head back against the wall.

"I want some water," he rasped, rolling his aching shoulders.

"They won't let me." She looked frightened. "I'm sorry. Does your neck hurt?"

"Yes."

"Here. I might be able to help." She knelt beside him, and placed her hands on his neck. He stiffened under her touch, and she began to knead, firmly but gently. "Keep your eyes open or they'll see," she whispered. "There. Does that feel good?"

"Yeah, it does. Very good." He nodded, wishing that he could sleep, or drink, but accepting the only comfort that was being offered to him in this whole nightmare.

"You're so tired. I wish I could help more." Her voice caressed his ear.

"Never mind. It's not your fault." He shrugged. Her fingers continued their gentle probing. "You're good at this," he rasped.

"Yes - I have a degree in personal massage." She laughed, a tinkling sound, like a little bell. "Maybe they'll let me bring in my aromatherapy oils. I'd like to massage you properly."

Skinner thought how bizarre it was that he was locked up in a cell, being fawned over by a very attractive young woman, but he was too tired to give it much thought. His mind was working on remote right now, stuck in a numb space where it stayed awake, but wasn't capable of much more.

He listened to her inconsequential chatter for what seemed like hours. She had two sisters, but she was the youngest, which didn't mean that she was spoiled, she wanted him to know. It was tragic being the youngest - you always had to wear hand-me-downs and got teased the whole time. She had once had a boyfriend called Brad who hadn't treated her very well, and her sisters had thrown paint all over his car in revenge. Skinner grunted in all the right places, closing his eyes, and opening them again as she dug her fingers into his back.

"Please," she whispered. "They will hurt you. I know they will."

He cleared his throat, and sat up straighter.

Lone Oak, Iowa.

February 17, 1999.

"Lone Oak, Iowa." Mulder stepped out of the car, and stretched his long body. "Nowheresville. Everytown." He glanced around. "Just your average small town. A Carnegie Library, a water-tower, a drugstore, a coffee shop."

"Yes, Mulder. I **can** see." Scully got out of the car and stood beside him.

"I think..." Mulder did a 180-degree turn, and then pointed. "Coffee shop. Center of local gossip. Let's find out more about the Skinners shall we?"

"Old William Skinner died, oh, about ten years ago now." The whiskered old man unbuckled his prosthetic leg and rubbed the stump enthusiastically. Mulder exchanged a glance with Scully. "If you ask me, he never got over the accident, although Rebekah went before him. She died...let's see, must have been 1972. The eldest boy was just back from 'Nam. Shot up pretty bad. Will jnr, or Wayne...something like that."

"Walter?" Mulder asked, ordering another plate of fries and a soda for the old man, who seemed to have the tastes of your average 10-year-old.

"That's the boy's name. He moved on straight after the wake. We never saw him again until his daddy's funeral. I don't know why folk can find the time to attend funerals when they can't be bothered to visit. Young'uns are so busy with their lives and their fancy cars," the old man spat on the wooden floor, "that they forget about the old folks back home. Would a visit have hurt him, huh?" He attacked his second plate of fries with gusto.

"So you haven't seen him recently?" Mulder asked. "In the past couple of days, maybe?"

"William? I just told you, son, he passed away years ago." The old man looked at Mulder as if he were an idiot. Mulder nodded, and smiled.

"I meant Walter. The, uh, boy." He grimaced at Scully. The thought of anyone calling Skinner a 'boy' seemed laughable.

"Eldest lad? Around these parts? No. I'd have remembered." The old man chuckled. "The Skinners were well known. Someone would have talked if they'd clapped eyes on young Wade."

"Walter." Scully corrected absently.

"That's the fella! Now, old William, he and I shared the same problem. I lost my leg back in WW2, but he had a limp that must have driven him half crazy with pain. I used to say to him - Will, just get the darn thing taken off, much less trouble that way, but he wouldn't listen. Didn't want nobody calling him a cripple. He was a good man - ask anyone around here. There's a few families wouldn't be here today if Will hadn't given them extensions on their loans. Farming's a tough business, and there were times we all struggled."

"William Skinner used to work in the bank?" Mulder asked.

"That's right. He used to be a farmer himself, but after the accident he struggled on for a couple of years and then he had to give in, take a desk job in town. His brother in law worked in the bank - he got Will the job. They stayed on living at the farm, but the other side of the family used to work it. Must have hit Will hard, relying on other folk, but he never said. He was a good man. Nice family."

"Can you direct us to the farm?" Scully asked.

"Nobody's lived there since Will died. None of his sons stayed around to work on the land." The old spat on the ground again in disapproval. "You can go up there - I'll draw you a little map, see." Mulder gave him a pen, and the man drew on the back of a napkin. "Farmhouse might still be standing - it's been a long time since I was up there."

"Thank you, sir." Scully smiled, and patted the man's stump. He grinned at her, and slapped her bottom as she turned to leave. Mulder winced.

"So, what exactly is it about young'uns and their fancy cars?" Mulder grinned, as they walked outside and got into their shiny silver rental.

"Too busy polishing them to visit their folks." Scully shook her head wryly, doing a fairly good imitation of the old man's accent.

"I wonder why he didn't visit though?" Mulder mused, as they got in the car, and he tried to follow the shakily drawn map. "I mean, doesn't Skinner strike you as the sort of guy who'd view it as his duty to trek out here a couple of times a year to visit?"

"Maybe he did. Maybe that old man just didn't know about it." Scully shrugged.

"This is a small town, Scully." Mulder shook his head. "If Skinner visited - everybody would have known. My guess is that there was some kind of rift with his father, and after his mother died there was nothing to come back for."

"Maybe." Scully nodded, her head jolting as the car turned off the road, and along a gravel track. "But none of this takes us any closer to finding Skinner."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Mulder drew the car to a halt. "And that's another thing. His father's name was **William**?"

"Yes. So what?" Scully got out of the car, and looked around.

"Like your dad, and mine?" Mulder raised an eyebrow, and whistled the Twilight Zone music. "Coincidence, Scully, or something more sinister?"

"Coincidence." Scully told him firmly. "William is a common name, Mulder."

They found an old farmhouse in a state of some dilapidation. Mulder peered through the window.

"Imagine living here, in the fifties. Must have been kind of like growing up in a sitcom."

"I'm sure that's not how it seemed to Skinner." Scully glanced around. "Well, he's not here."

"You were expecting him to be?" Mulder got out his flashlight and shone it around the dark interior of the house.

"No. Not really." Scully sighed. "I was hoping though."

"Hoping that he'd come home, back to his roots, like salmon?"

"Salmon go home to mate, Mulder." Scully pointed out.

"Hmmm. And Skinners don't come home at all." Mulder put his flashlight away. "He hasn't been here, Scully."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

Some time later, the cell door opened, and two guards entered the room. They gestured him to get up, and he staggered to his feet, his whole body protesting. He felt like an old man.

"Good luck, Walter," Marla whispered, and he gave her the faintest hint of a smile, before he was ushered out of the cell and returned to Noy's office.

"Walter - how are you feeling?" The interrogator asked him.

"Lousy," he growled. "Sleep deprivation, lack of food and water. Isn't lousy how I'm supposed to be feeling?"

"Yes it is." Noy smiled. "However I've looked through your medical records and you're in excellent health, so I'm sure that this little ordeal means nothing to a man of your strong disposition. Like the proverbial ox, aren't we, Walter?"

"Are **we**?" Skinner rolled his eyes.

"Yes - amazing for a man who was so recently dead." Noy informed him. "My associate told me about the nanocytes. He gave me this." Noy held up a palm pilot. "Apparently, if I just press this button here..." His finger was poised over the device, and Skinner braced himself for imminent discomfort. "I'll consider it." Noy took his finger away, and Skinner felt himself relaxing. "But really, I'm suspicious of all this new-fangled technology. And this," he gestured at the palm pilot, "seems to be to be an imprecise art. I'd hate to kill you accidentally. I pride myself on never having lost a client yet."

"A client?" Skinner raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware that I was paying for your services."

"Well of course you are, Walter." Noy told him. "You'll pay - in sweat, and tears, and confessions. I always do my best by my clients. Now if you'd just take off your shirt."

"Why?"

"Don't question everything, Walter. I'm sure it's in your nature, but it'd be easier if you didn't. Take it off." Skinner sighed, and finally pulled the tee shirt over his head, tossing it down on the chair. "Good. I think that deserves a reward - don't you?" He handed Skinner a glass with a thimbleful of water in it. Skinner gulped it down in one go. "I know you'd like more. Co-operate and you can have more. Take a seat." Noy gestured to the chair.

"Aren't you going to handcuff me again?" Skinner asked, doing as he was told.

"Do I need to? I only want to chat." Noy smiled. "Tell me about yourself."

"My favorite color is blue, I hate cucumber, and the first cat I ever owned was called Lucky." Skinner replied facetiously.

"Really? And was she?" Noy chuckled, pouring himself a coffee, and stirring it. Skinner felt his dry mouth almost spasm with need. "Lucky I mean?" Noy added.

"No. She got hit by a truck." Skinner snapped.

"Ah. An early tragedy. How did you feel about that?" Noy asked. Skinner raised his eyes heavenward again.

"I was seven years old. How do you think I felt?"

"You loved her then? Was she a little stray you adopted?" Noy put some sugar in his coffee, then some cream, and resumed stirring it.

"Yes." Skinner shrugged. "She was a farm cat. We lived on a farm. Her mother died when she was a few weeks old. Mom didn't approve of cats living in the house so I smuggled her in. She slept in my bed."

"Waifs and strays. How many of those have you collected in your life, Walter?"

"Are we talking cats here?" Skinner snapped.

"We're talking anything." Noy smiled, and raised his cup to his lips.

"Can I have some more water?" Skinner asked.

"No. Tell me something else about yourself, Walter. You have a brother. Is he still alive?"

"Yes."

"And your mother and father?"

"Both dead, but you must know that already," Skinner replied, with an irritated snap of his head that he regretted instantly, as the world spun around him. "I need some more water," he said.

"No you don't. Not yet. You'd like some, yes, but you don't **need** it yet. My art is a precise one, Walter, and I'm very good at it."

"Fuck you." Skinner growled.

"Hmmm. Sex." Noy smiled. "Is that on your mind right now?"

"What? How likely is that?" Skinner hissed.

"I don't know. You tell me." Noy sat back in his chair, and took a sip of his coffee. Then he opened a packet of cookies, and took one out. He dipped it thoughtfully in the coffee, then devoured it in a series of dainty nibbles. "Have you ever slept with a man, Walter?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?" Skinner snapped.

"Just a question. Have you?"

"No." Skinner shrugged, not wanting to explore this particular subject any further.

"Do you want to sleep with Mulder?"

"No."

"Do you want to sleep with Scully?"

"Scully's a woman, you were asking about men." Skinner's voice dripped with as much disrespect as he could muster.

"And the answer to my question is?" Noy dunked another cookie in his coffee.

"No."

"Why not? She's very pretty. Most straight men would want to sleep with her." Noy smiled.

"I work with her. I respect her." Skinner replied, evenly.

"And you don't respect people that you sleep with?"

"That isn't what I said!" Skinner protested.

"Hmmm. Why do you protect Mulder and Scully, Walter?" Noy questioned. "You don't have any sexual interest in them, so there must be another reason."

"You're saying that it isn't possible to act out of friendship?" Skinner raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"Would they call you a 'friend'?" Noy asked. Skinner hesitated. "Well?"

"I don't know." Skinner shrugged.

"So, it's a pretty one-sided friendship then." Noy mused. "Where did you learn the art of protection, Walter? Of adopting waifs and strays, and forming one-sided little friendships? Does it bother you that they don't reciprocate your emotions?"

"I haven't asked them too." Skinner snapped.

"Ah. I see." Noy nodded sagely. "So, you'd give your life to protect them, but you don't expect anything back from them - not even a crumb of friendship. That's fairly selfless of you, Walter. Why haven't asked them to give you anything back? Is it because you always have to be in control? Never needing anything from anyone else? Is it safer that way?"

"Oh spare me the psychobabble." Skinner sighed wearily. "Just let me sleep, or give me some water."

"You can have some more water if you answer my questions." Noy poured a glass of water, and placed it in on the desk, just out of Skinner's reach. Skinner thought about it for a moment. They were only questions. They didn't mean anything.

"All right. What do you want to know?" he growled.

"Tell me more about the waifs and strays." Noy smiled. "Tell me who was next, after the inappropriately named Lucky."

"Mulder?" Scully ran up the hill after him, her long coat flapping around her ankles. She felt too warm, despite the freezing February wind. "Mulder!" she finally caught up with him and grabbed hold of his arm. "What are you doing? I thought you said he hasn't been here."

"He hasn't." Mulder glanced around from the vantage point of the hilltop. "Look at it, Scully. Imagine what it must have been like growing up here. Wheat ripening in the summer sun. Dogs running around, cattle maybe..."

"Idyllic." Scully grunted.

"So idyllic that Skinner enlisted on his 18th birthday to get away. Maybe Vietnam seemed like a nicer place to be?" Mulder frowned and tugged on his bottom lip, deep in thought. "Look." He pointed at something silver glittering through the trees. Scully turned around, and opened her mouth to say something, only to find that he'd set off again.

"Damn it, Mulder, I'm not wearing the right shoes for hiking," she grumbled, chasing after him again.

"It's a lake." Mulder told her when she caught up with him.

"Clearly." Scully replied, tight-lipped. "And you trekked out here to see it - **why?**" She asked pointedly.

"Just a hunch. I wonder if there's anyone still living around here who remembers Skinner, or his family?"

"Out here? In the middle of nowhere? Why would there be?" Scully asked.

"Ah - bingo!" Mulder grinned his most infuriating grin, and pointed at a small cabin on the far side of the small lake.

"Mulder, tell me that you're not...oh shit!" Scully looked down, one foot stuck in mud up to her ankle. When she looked up again she saw, with a groan of disbelief, that Mulder had already set off on his journey to the other side of the lake.

"Hello! Anyone at home?" Mulder knocked on the door of the cabin, and peered inside. It was small, and dimly lit, but cozy.

"Who's that? Ah, I've been expecting you! Come in, come in." A woman appeared at the door, making him jump.

"Sorry, I didn't hear anyone." He flushed.

"That's okay. Come in." She opened the door wide, and gestured him to sit down. He glanced around. There were no chairs, just some enormous cushions, and a low table.

"Minimalist." She winked. "People spend too much money on a load of crap they don't need in their houses, don't you think?"

"Um, yeah." He grinned, taking to her immediately. "Absolutely!" He thought of his own sparsely furnished apartment.

"I'm Cressie. Short for Cressida. Don't ask." She sighed.

"I won't. My own name's Fox, and people who live in glass houses..."

"Exactly!" She roared with laughter. "Fox...oh dear god!"

"Yeah." He settled his lanky frame down on one of her cushions, finding it surprisingly comfortable.

Cressie was a tall, raw-boned woman, with thick, coarse brown hair. She was wearing a pair of tight old jeans, and a sweater that showed off her ample bust. She was of indeterminate age, although Mulder put her in her early twenties. She wasn't exactly a beauty, but she had a fire in her green eyes, that Mulder found curiously sensual. He decided that he liked her. At that moment, a muddy, scowling Scully appeared in the doorway.

"Hi." Cressie smiled and beckoned her in. "Come on. Shit - is it muddy outside? Look at your nice suede boots!"

"I know." Scully treated Mulder to one of her best icy stares.

"Sit down, hon. Have a rest for a bit. Fire's on. Fancy a drink? Oh, I'm Cressie by the way. Cressida Mulvey."

"Dana Scully."

"Pleased to meet you, sweetheart." Cressie gave her an appraising stare. "Really pleased." She surprised Scully by putting her arms around the smaller woman, and giving her a quick bear hug. "Sit down, Dana. I have coffee ready to go." She poured them both a mug of coffee, and brought it over."

"You're not joining us?" Mulder gestured to the mugs and she shook her head.

"I prefer something stronger, honey!" She gave a deep throated laugh, and pulled out a bottle, placing it to her lips and taking a swig.

"We're here about Walter Skinner. We wondered if you knew him." Scully asked. Cressida laughed out loud.

"Knew him! Walter and I grew up together!" She exclaimed.

"Walter Skinner? Are you sure?" Scully exchanged a look with Mulder. "I'm sorry - are we talking about the same person?"

"Sure." Cressida took another swig of her drink.

"No offense, but you look too young." Mulder said smoothly. Cressida roared with laughter again.

"Why would I take offense at that, sweetheart!" She reached out and patted his knee." Mulder exchanged an amused glance with Scully. "I kind of keep the lighting low in here for

a reason." Cressida winked again. "Now, let's get back to Walter. Are you friends of his?" She looked at them both keenly.

"Yes." Mulder said firmly.

Scully nodded. "Yes, we are. In fact, we work with him, and we were wondering if you'd heard from him recently."

"From Walter? No." Cressida shook her head. "He moved on right after his mom died. Nothing to keep him here. Not even me." She looked regretful.

Mulder leaned forward, his curiosity roused. "Are you saying that you and Skinner were...romantically involved?"

"Romantic!" Cressida laughed again. "I'm not a great one for romance, and to be honest, Walter wasn't either. We were just lost souls. Me, Walter, and Nathan. We hung out together. He had to sneak out to be with us. It used to make me laugh - him with his neat clothes, and oh so perfect family, and us from the wrong side of the tracks. Nat was brought up by his grandma. She was a senile old coot. Once she mistook Nat for the family dog and locked him in the kennel all night." She roared with laughter. Scully winced. "Well, it seemed funny at the time." Cressida shrugged. "As for me, well my mom was the neighborhood tramp, and I was on a fast track to following in her footsteps. I don't think Walter's parents would have approved of us. I used to tease Walter about that," Cressie confided. "Hanging out with trash like us. I accused him of playing in the gutter, making himself feel good by having folks like us to look down on. Of course it wasn't that at all." She shook her head sadly. "I always did have a habit of shooting my mouth off. We **did** make him feel good, but not in a superior way. That whole family was so damn serious, like they all had something up their respective asses, if you'll excuse my French. I viewed it as my own special project to loosen that kid up." She took another gulp of her drink, and winked at them again. "I think I succeeded in **that**. Big time." Her laugh was positively bawdy after that statement. Scully raised both eyebrows, and Mulder suppressed a smile.

"They say you never forget your first, and Walter was kind of unforgettable. I seduced him out by the lake, with Nat watching from a nearby tree. It was kinda cute."

"Um. Yeah." Mulder shot Scully a glance of disbelief. "Nat watched?" He asked, curious.

"Sure."

"Did you both, uh, **know** he was watching?" Mulder pursued, with a morbid fascination.

"Sure. Yeah." Cressida grinned. "Nat was like a puppy, or a squirrel, or something. He was always just there, hanging around, leaping out of trees and stuff. Poor kid. We just let him tag along. When Walter upped and left for 'Nam it broke Nat's heart."

"What happened to him?" Scully asked.

"Oh hell, sister, what happens to all trash? He was washed out to sea like the rest of us. Just human flotsam and jetsam. He was never going anywhere anyhow. He couldn't read or write, and mostly he didn't bother with school."

"But you stayed here." Mulder glanced around the cabin. "Did Walter come back?"

"Yeah. Poor bastard. Shot full of holes, and really pissed with life. I told him he could stop damn well feeling sorry for himself around me, because as far as I could see it was his own fault. He should never have enlisted in the first place. I, uh, never was much of a sympathetic shoulder to cry on." Cressida admitted with an apologetic shrug. "And hell, by then I was so drunk half the time I didn't know what I was saying. Like mother, like daughter I guess." She gave a rueful shrug. "Walter couldn't do nothin' for me. Nobody could. He cleared on out of here soon after his mom died. He took his brother to live in town with his aunt after his mom died, and then moved on."

"Why did he do that? Take his brother away?" Mulder pressed.

"Cause he didn't want the kid left alone with his old man."

"William Skinner? We heard that he was the salt of the earth, pillar of the local community." Mulder frowned.

"Yeah, that's what it looked like. Everyone in that family looked the part, but I'm telling you, there was something seriously fucked up about the lot of them. Walter didn't talk about it. He doesn't talk much about himself, but he was one stressed-out kid. We helped him unwind."

"You haven't seen him since?" Scully asked.

"Hell no. I haven't seen anyone since. Until you folk, that is." Cressida grinned, and knocked back another shot of whatever alcoholic substance was in the bottle. Scully exchanged a puzzled glance with Mulder who shrugged, looking equally perplexed.

"And do you have any idea where he might go if he was...uh, really upset about something?" Mulder asked.

"Walter loved the lake." Cressie nodded her head at the open door. Outside, it was getting dark, the evening sun slanting across the lake, casting shadows on the surface.

"You can't think of anywhere else he might have gone?" Scully pressed.

"No. I'm sorry." Cressida shrugged.

"Well, thanks for your time." Scully started to get up.

"He was different after 'Nam you know." Cressida stared dreamily at the lake through the open door. "We still used to make love, more out of a need for comfortin' and having someone to hold than anything else, but sometimes I used to think he wasn't there. You

know, in his head." She twisted her finger against her temple. "Hell, I don't blame him for that. I was drunk on my ass most of the time anyhow. He used to wake up screaming some, for a long time after. He never did tell me what the nightmares were about, but he lost something over in 'Nam and I don't think he ever got it back, and I ain't talking about 'innocence' or any shit like that. I'm talking about something real."

"His whole unit was wiped out in an ambush. He lost all his friends." Mulder said quietly. Scully looked at him in surprise.

"How do you know that?" She asked.

"He told me." Mulder gave her an apologetic half-smile.

"Well it could have been that - but he told me about that. This was something different, something he wouldn't talk about. He just used to keep yelling out stuff in his sleep, about some experiments or something, and a name."

"A name?" Mulder leaned forward. "Do you remember what it was?"

"Sure, clear as yesterday. Lubecker. Doctor Lubecker."

"So, Nathan, and the enchanting Cressida. The first in your little collection of worthy causes." Noy commented, taking another cookie and breaking it into several pieces, leaving a trail of crumbs on his white notepad. Skinner groaned, and struggled to stay awake

"They were just friends," he mumbled.

"Tell me, Walter - how did your parents feel about you having such undesirable playmates?"

"They didn't know." Skinner shrugged.

"Ah, another one of your famous little secrets." Noy clapped his hands together delightedly. "How many secrets do you have, Walter?"

"How many does anyone have?" Skinner replied, his eyes closing.

"Stay awake, Walter." Noy said reprovngly. "I'm trying to have a conversation with you. So - what was the problem? You were scared that your folks wouldn't approve? That having these less than perfect friends would ruin your family's image? There's that word again - perfect. Is that what you are, Walter? A perfectionist? Except that you know how many dark secrets you have, and how imperfect you really are underneath."

"Can I have some more water, or some food? You told me I could if I co-operated."

"Not yet." Noy said with a wry shake of his head. He picked up the notepad, and swept the uneaten remains of the cookie into the trash can on the floor beside him. Skinner followed the movement with his eyes, licking his cracked, parched lips, and feeling them sting beneath his tongue. "You've lied to me several times, and anyway, you haven't told me anything that really distresses you yet." Noy informed him.

"You fucking crazy son of a bitch! You promised me I could have water." Skinner threw himself forward in an angry frenzy but the door opened, and the guards reappeared within micro-seconds, grabbing hold of his shoulders and restraining him.

"Temper, temper." Noy smirked. Skinner tensed, expecting some kind of retribution, but he was merely escorted him back to his cell and left there.

Marla reappeared a few minutes later.

"Walter." She crouched down beside him. "Are you okay?" She took his face between her fingers, and he stared at her groggily.

"What? Yeah. I guess." He rubbed his eyes, suddenly aware that he was half-naked, and feeling faintly embarrassed about that.

"Here. I got you these." She opened her jacket, and pulled out a bottle of water, and a sandwich, handing them to him furtively.

"What about...?" He glanced at the cameras.

"One of the guards owes me a favor." She grinned. "I told him to look the other way for a few minutes. Go on. Eat."

Skinner didn't need any further prompting. He downed the drink in one go, then devoured the sandwich. It didn't do much to relieve the cramping in his stomach, but it was something. "Well that evidence didn't take long to disappear." Marla commented. "Did Noy hurt you?"

"No." Skinner shrugged. "He just asked me a lot of idiot questions."

"Poor Walter." Marla took his hand, and gently massaged each finger. Skinner didn't protest. It felt nice.

"So that was Skinner's first girlfriend. Not the kind of girl you take home to meet the folks." Mulder mused, striding ahead. Scully glanced down at the half frozen mud underfoot, and sighed.

"Once more into the breach..." she quoted, following on behind. "What now?" she asked, catching up with him.

"Doctor Lubecker?" Mulder suggested.

"You don't seriously think that Skinner would have gone looking for the architect of his nightmares at a time like this, do you?"

"No, but I do think that he might have gone looking for someone who knows a way to undo what he's created. Someone who was an expert on this whole nexus thing."

"And you think that's Lubecker?" Scully frowned, struggling, as always, to keep up with his long strides, a fact which Mulder never seemed to notice.

"Maybe." Mulder shrugged.

"But? I sense a but?"

"There's one thing that doesn't fit the theory that Skinner went anywhere willingly."

"Which is?" Scully stopped, her heart growing cold. She hadn't considered this eventuality.

"Why did he pay the packing company in cash?"

Mulder stopped suddenly, and Scully bumped straight into him.

"What now?" She exclaimed, exasperated.

"Are you hungry, Scully?" He asked, running a hand over his stomach. "I am. In fact I'm starving."

"You only ate a couple of hours ago," she protested.

"And really, really thirsty." Mulder stood still, and concentrated. "Skinner's back," he whispered.

Skinner wasn't sure how long he had gone without sleep, but his head felt a bit clearer after the food and drink. Marla was a sweet kid, he thought to himself. She did blather on and on, but he supposed she was doing him a favor, trying to keep him awake. He was grateful for the food and drink, anyway, even if his mouth was now dry again and he would have killed for another bottle of water.

The guards returned and he was escorted back to Noy's office. The man had changed his clothing, so Skinner wasn't sure if more time had passed than he imagined.

"Walter. Sit down." Noy pointed. Skinner hesitated. The plain chair had been replaced by one that looked as if it had come straight from an execution chamber.

"It's electric, yes." Noy smiled. "You see, I work to a time honored, old fashioned kind of system, Walter. It's called the carrot..." He picked up a glass of water and placed it on the edge of the desk, "and the stick."

One of the guards pushed Skinner down into the chair, and fastened metallic straps over his torso and arms.

"Don't tell me. This is the stick." Skinner grunted, wryly.

"No, no, no!" Noy laughed, nodding at one of his guards. A moment later something cut a burning swathe across Skinner's shoulders. "**That's** a stick, Walter." Noy told him.

"Ow!" Mulder slammed his foot on the brake. "What the hell was that?"

"I don't know." Scully rolled her shoulders cautiously. "Mulder, get moving. If I don't have something to eat soon I'm going to pass out."

"You're feeling hungry too?"

"Yes. It just kicked in a few moments ago." Scully frowned.

"It isn't really our hunger - and that wasn't our pain. You can eat all you like but I don't think it'll make any difference. Skinner's the one who needs food, not us."

"Which makes it sound more and more as if he's somewhere he doesn't want to be." Scully said slowly. "Mulder, I'm getting really worried now."

"Me too." Mulder replied grimly, swinging the car back onto the road.

"Do you think it's a two way thing - do you think we could communicate back to him?" She asked. "He might be able to tell us where he is."

"If he knows." Mulder shrugged. "And as for the whole telepathy thing - I don't know. You seem to have more experience of that from what you described of your visit to that armaments factory."

"We could...try." Scully suggested hesitantly.

"Okay. Why don't you give it a shot?" Mulder glanced at her, and she sensed his reluctance to probe the nexus any further, and nodded, leaning back in her seat, and closing her eyes.

"Why did your marriage fail?" Noy asked, perching himself on the desk in front of Skinner.

"Why does any marriage fail?" Skinner glared. Noy touched his finger to a button, and Skinner gave a startled growl as his flesh was singed at every point where the metallic strips met his torso.

"There's no easy way out of this, Walter." Noy told him. "I want you to be honest - with yourself and with me. It's really going to prove much less painful in the long run. Now, back to Sharon."

"We just grew apart." Skinner mumbled, his whole being suffused with rebellion for this prying into the most private areas of his life - areas he had never shared with anybody before.

"Why?" Noy pressed.

"You want a whole list of reasons?" Skinner spat. Noy pressed the button again, and Skinner clenched his fists against the burning pain.

"Yes. I do." Noy smiled. "Were you unfaithful to her?"

"No." Skinner protested angrily.

"Of course not. I was just teasing." Noy shook his head. "So why?"

"She felt I was shutting her out. You know how women are - they want to know what's going on in your head."

"And you didn't feel able to share that part of yourself with her? Or were you scared of creating another nexus? I've heard that lying is impossible in the non-verbal communication of the nexus - is that true?"

"Yes, in a way." Skinner sighed. "Feelings, thought, they just...flow in the nexus. There isn't any artifice." He paused, then started again. "There were...uh, times when I could feel Sharon's mind, and it scared me. I shut her out. I was protecting her. She didn't need to be dragged into my past."

"Were you afraid of that intimacy?"

"No." Skinner spat, annoyed. Noy pressed the button, and Skinner's whole body convulsed.

"Yes you were. You were afraid that if you created a nexus with her, and that if she died, you couldn't face the loss, after the loss of your comrades."

"That...might be true." Skinner conceded, still panting from the pain.

"So, why Mulder and Scully? The most recent addition to your collection of underdogs. Why choose to link with them?"

"I didn't create the nexus on purpose. It just happened, gradually. I was hardly aware of it at first. I'd never have finished it but...circumstances made it necessary." Skinner hedged, tensing for the burning, which never came.

"Hmm. Tell me about your father." Noy requested, in a change of subject that left Skinner floundering. He closed his eyes, shaking out the sweat that was falling into his face, and he saw a road, and a man. The man turned and looked at him, and he saw that it was Mulder.

"Any luck?" Mulder asked.

"What?" Scully sat up with a gasp.

"I asked if there was any luck?" Mulder's face came into focus in front of her, and she put a shaky hand on his arm.

"Pull over, Mulder."

He did as he was told, with a look of alarm.

"I saw a man's face. It wasn't Skinner...I think it was someone in the room with him. Someone interrogating him." Scully said.

"What did this man look like?"

"Blond hair, very pale blue eyes - scary eyes. That's all I got. Skinner...is afraid of him."

"Has Skinner been hurt?" Mulder demanded. Scully closed her eyes, and then nodded.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then we need to hurry." Mulder put the car into gear, and swung it back out onto the road.

"Are we still going to look for this Doctor Lubecker?"

"Yes. We're also going to try and find out more about Skinner's so-called resignation, and who arranged for his apartment to be sub-let."

"Mulder - why did they kidnap Skinner? What do they want with him?" Scully asked, frowning.

"Us?" Mulder turned to look at her, his eyes bleak. "Try and talk to him, Scully."

"I'll try, but I think he's blocking me."

"Either that, or he's very preoccupied with something else." Mulder suggested.

Scully closed her eyes again, and concentrated once more

Skinner felt the warmth of the nexus pulsing and glowing in his mind.

<Scully?>

<Yes, I'm here. Where are you?>

<I don't know. They took me. Drugged. Scully, his name is Robert Noy, he says he works for our friend the cigarette smoking man...Shit!>

A wave of pain coursed through his body, and he opened his eyes.

"Concentrate, Walter. We were talking about your father." Noy's pale blue eyes glittered coldly.

"What do you want me to say about him? He was a good man. We had a good relationship."

"When the demerol was working." Noy added.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that when his painkillers were working, he could be halfway nice to you and the rest of his family, but when they weren't...well, he was something of a Jekyll and Hyde character wasn't he, Walter?"

<Skinner?>

<I'm still here. I can't keep the nexus blocked...I'm too tired...Sorry, Dana...>

Skinner's head drooped wearily onto his chest. He was suddenly relieved to be able to let go, to float into the warmth of the link.

"Tell me about the accident that maimed your father, Walter." Noy said, with a nod to the guard standing behind him. Another blow ripped a searing pain across his shoulders, throwing him forwards, making the cool metal straps around his torso bite into his burned flesh. Skinner screamed.

"Shit!" Mulder bit on his lip as a wave of sensations flooded through his mind and body. For the first time he felt the link, unfettered, flowing between them like a tangible entity, full of warmth, and light, and energy, but it carried with it the most terrible pain. He saw a room, and the man that Scully had described, and felt more tired and thirsty than he could ever remember being in his life.

<Mulder?> He recognised Skinner's 'voice' although the sound was in his head.

<Yeah. I'm with Scully. We're looking for you.>

<I'd be kind of grateful if you'd get a move on...> Skinner muttered faintly. Mulder could hear the wry tone in the mental voice, and it surprised him.

<We're going as fast as we can. Perhaps you can help us...Shit! What was that?>

<I keep upsetting my captor.> Skinner murmured, in what Mulder could sense was an ironic understatement.

<Well don't. Just keep him happy. Tell him what he wants to hear.> Mulder snapped.

<I would if I knew what that was. Unfortunately it isn't clear...>

There was another sharp wave of pain, and then Skinner's mental signature dissipated into a morass of pain, and confusion.

<Skinner!> Mulder yelled, but the link was full of images, and he couldn't make sense of them.

Walter stood in the farmhouse. He was five years old. Outside his father lay trapped beneath the tractor, screaming his head off. Inside, his baby brother lay in his crib, crying at the top of his voice. Walter hesitated, torn. His mother had told him to stay here, but he felt so useless. Surely he should do something? But what? He pulled a chair across the room, and climbed up onto it, peering into his brother's crib. His mom had said he mustn't touch Joe unless she or his dad were in the room. Did that mean now too? Joe was blue in the face from crying. Walter prodded the baby with his finger.

"Shut up, Joey." He demanded. "Daddy's been hurt. You have to keep quiet."

The baby stared at him with uncomprehending blue eyes, his face screwed up, and tears running down his cheeks. Walter stroked the baby's head, and Joe began to calm down. Finally, he was quiet, but that meant that Walter could hear the screaming outside again. Joe could hear it too, and he started to cry again. Walter got down from the chair, and walked over to the door. He opened it a fraction, and peered out. His mom had told him to stay inside, she'd ushered him in here, and hidden his eyes with her coat so he wouldn't see what had happened. Walter shivered. Something bad had happened.

He opened the door a little bit more, fearing what he would see. The screaming was louder now, and he couldn't bear it. It was like the sound that a trapped hog made before it was butchered, and it ripped through the air, silencing the birds, and making the dogs in the yard bark loudly in distress. The baby had started wailing again. Walter opened the door all the way, and stepped outside. He could see the tractor in the field, a little way off, but he couldn't see his father. The tractor was on its side, and he knew that his father was

underneath it, but he couldn't see him. Walter walked slowly across the yard towards the screaming tractor, scared of what he would see, shivering with dread. Closer, closer...he saw a hand, then an arm, and his father's dark hair.

"Daddy?" He whispered. The fingers on the hand moved. They were covered in blood. Walter edged forwards again, and rounded the side of the tractor, then stopped, his mouth open in a wordless scream.

His father's leg was crushed like a piece of soft fruit, pieces of bone sticking up through skin, blood pouring into the ground, and he was trapped. He couldn't move.

"Walter?" His father panted.

"Daddy." Walter walked resolutely past the bleeding, broken limb, and went to kneel beside his father's head.

"Help me!" His father wept. "Hurts...shit, hurts..." His voice faded into a series of low moans.

"I don't know how to help you..." Walter whispered. He got up and tried to push the tractor away, but it was huge, and he was too small to make any impression on it at all. Giving up, he went and sat back down by his father's head, tears of despair rolling down his face. An idea occurred to him. Joe had stopped screaming when he stroked his hair. He put out a small hand, and stroked his father's hair. He wasn't sure it helped, but his father stopped screaming a few minutes later, and went still, his eyes closed. Walter continued stroking, scared that if he stopped his father would start crying again. He'd never seen his daddy cry before.

"Did that upset you?" Noy asked.

"Well what do hell do you think? I was five years old." Skinner snapped.

"What upset you more - the fact that he was hurt, or the fact that you couldn't help him?"

"Both. I felt so useless...and small." Skinner said.

"Ah. Being small. Is that fear of being weak and useless, and unable to protect the people you love, the reason why you keep yourself so...bulked up?" Noy asked, trailing a finger across Skinner's biceps.

"I just like to keep fit." Skinner rasped. The pain tore through his body like a tornado, leaving him panting and writhing in his bonds.

"Lie." Noy smiled. "I know you too well, Walter. I can tell when you're not being honest with me. Your father recovered?"

"Yes. He wasn't well enough to work the farm though."

"That must have been a blow to his pride. He was a proud man, wasn't he?"

"Yes." Skinner blinked through the sweat that was blinding him.

"And isn't it true that if he had allowed the doctors to amputate his leg he'd have been in less pain?"

"I suppose so, but he wanted to keep it."

"Of course he did. He preferred to live with the pain than have people perceive him as crippled. The illusion of perfection - that was all important to him, wasn't it? He demanded nothing less, from himself, and from his sons." Noy said softly. "Outward perfection, hiding secrets within. I'm sensing a theme here, Walter."

"I'm tired. I don't know what you want from me with all this psycho crap." Skinner shook his head. "If you want me to say "yes" then I will. It's not important. It's not true."

"Isn't it?" Noy's face swam into his field of vision, those pale eyes searing into his soul. "Are you sure?"

Georgetown, Washington DC.

February 18, 1999.

"Mulder?" Scully glanced at him, worried. He hadn't said a word during their entire journey back to DC. Both of them had been assaulted by a series of images, and emotions, but Mulder was deathly pale, and his body was tense. She sensed through the link, that somehow he experienced these sensations more acutely than she did, although she had no idea how, or why.

"Yeah," he replied, faintly.

"Are you okay?"

"No. Are you?"

"No." Scully opened the door to her apartment, and waved Mulder inside. He sat down on her couch, wearily, then jumped back up again.

"We have to find him, Scully," he told her, pacing. "I've read studies about the sort of technique Noy's using on Skinner. The sleep deprivation, lack of food and water, use of pain. He's making Skinner rely on him for the basics for survival, and then he's subjecting him to this...travesty of psychology. By the time he's finished Skinner won't know what's true and what isn't - Noy will have fucked with his brain so much he'll have him believing that black is white and vice versa."

"And you're worried that whoever controls Skinner will be able to control us?"

Mulder made a face. "That's inevitable, but it's not my main concern right now." He sat down on the floor, and leaned back on the couch. "I'm more worried about Skinner," he admitted. "I'm not saying that I'm not still angry with him about this, but shit, Scully, I can't stand by and just listen to what he's going through, to **feel** it like this."

"I feel the same way." Scully nodded. She dragged herself to her feet, feeling utterly weary and unsure whether that was her own exhaustion or Skinner's that she was experiencing. As time passed, she felt the weight of his emotions more and more, and guessed that this was a sign of how her former boss's endurance was being tested and how great the pressure on him was.

"The link is weird. This whole nexus thing," Mulder mused. "It's kind of like watching TV only with the added dimension of feeling. I can see what Skinner's seeing if I close my eyes, although I can't see Skinner himself, and I can hear what's going on, and of course I can feel what he feels. It's curious though - I know it isn't my pain, and they're not my thoughts. It should be confusing but it isn't. I can turn it on and off. I can ignore it if I want...except when..." he trailed off.

"When he's hurting." Scully nodded, wondering if Mulder was coming to accept the link now that he had experienced it more.

"Yeah." Mulder's face was troubled. "Let's get moving again," he said. "You trace Doctor Lubecker, while I see what I can find out any more information about the people who abducted Skinner, and where they might have taken him. I'll look into our friend Noy too while I'm at it."

Skinner wasn't able to walk when they unbuckled him from the chair. His legs felt numb, and he could see the raw, red burns across his chest and stomach. He staggered, and Noy reached out a helpful hand to keep him upright, nodding at the guards who stepped forward, and half dragged, half carried him back to his cell. He landed on the cool white floor with a thud, and lay there for a moment. When he closed his eyes, the inevitable siren rang out, assaulting his aching head with its blaring noise. He opened them again, and gazed blearily at the ceiling.

A face came into his line of vision. Dark hair, wide, sensuous mouth.

"Mulder?" He whispered.

"No. Antonio. My friends call me Tonio. Walter, what have they done to you?" The man pulled him up, and settled Skinner's face into his lap, gently caressing his jaw. If Skinner could have moved, he would have done so, uncomfortable with the intimacy, yet in a curious way it felt good to be comforted, after so much pain.

"Tonio...are you Italian?" Skinner mumbled.

"My mother was." Tonio smiled down, revealing a set of straight white teeth. He had the face of an angel, as beautiful as any man Skinner had ever known, save one, maybe. "You're hurting." Antonio's fingers gently found the burns on Skinner's body, and the cuts on his shoulders. "I'm so sorry. If you can sit up - I have something for you. Something Marla gave me." Tonio whispered, arching one eyebrow meaningfully, and glancing at the cameras.

"Water?" Skinner rasped.

Tonio nodded. "But quickly, we don't have long." He sat Skinner up, and knelt in front of him, hastily handing him a sandwich, and another bottle of water.

"Can't you bring more next time?" Skinner asked, downing the contents of the bottle in one gulp.

"I'll try. It's hard." Tonio shrugged. "Do you feel better now?"

"Yeah. I suppose." Skinner shrugged, handing the empty bottle back.

"Good. I wish I had something for these." Tonio gestured at the burns. "Next time I'll see if there's anything I can bring."

"Why are you helping me?" Skinner mumbled, rubbing his eyes wearily, and longing for sleep.

"Marla. She's...well I like her." Tonio looked sheepish. "Also, I feel sorry for you."

"Me too." Skinner managed a faint smile. "Thanks, Tonio."

"That's okay." The other man returned his smile. "You can't sleep, but I can help your headache. You do have a headache, yes?"

"Hell, everything aches," Skinner replied. He allowed Tonio to pull him down so that his head was in the other man's lap again, then Tonio began to massage his naked scalp with long, sensuous fingers. Skinner stared at the ceiling, and imagined it was Mulder.

Mulder batted away the insistent, invisible fingers rubbing his temples.

"Fuck you, Tonio," he growled, fighting back a wave of gnawing jealousy. He could see Antonio's flawless skin, and straight teeth in his mind's eye, just as Skinner could see them in reality.

<Skinner? Can you hear me?>

<Mulder?> Skinner's voice seemed to come from a great distance, and was hazy.

<The people who took you - do you have any idea who they were? How far away you are from here?> There was a long silence. <Skinner?> Mulder repeated insistently.

<I'm sorry. I'm finding it hard to keep...I'm so tired. I'm glad you're here. It...helps...> Mulder was surprised by this admission. He couldn't imagine Skinner ever talking like this to his face, and he guessed that the link added an intimacy, and lack of artifice to their communication. You couldn't dissemble in the link, or hide behind a persona. You were just **you**, in the rawest, most naked sense.

<Do you have any idea how far away you are?> Mulder repeated.

<No. Drugged.> Skinner replied.

<Listen - when Noy interrogates you, just go along with him. Don't believe him though. Don't listen to what he says - just agree with it. It doesn't matter. None of it matters.> Mulder instructed.

<Try.> Skinner's 'voice' went out of focus, then returned again. <Harder. I'll try harder.> Mulder guessed that the other man was so tired he was finding it hard to concentrate on anything.

<Skinner - does the name Lubecker mean anything to you?> Mulder asked. The emotion that flooded back through the link made it clear that it did, although Mulder had no idea what exactly the name meant to Skinner as a wild tumult of images swept through his mind. Being tied down, screaming, an injection, leaving him helpless, opening his eyes, seeing his unit also being injected, a sharp pain in the base of his skull, and then nothing, until all the tests started again.

<Okay, calm down. This was the guy who experimented on you?>

<Yes. We were Marine Recon - a kind of special forces. We volunteered for the experiments. Can you believe it? Volunteered.> There was an ironic laugh. <Of course we didn't know what we were volunteering for, in the best tradition of the military.>

<Is he still alive? Lubecker?>

<I have no idea.> Skinner's voice faded, then came back again. Mulder felt a wave of anxiety in the pit of his stomach.

<Shit, they're coming back. No! I'm too tired...> Mulder felt the tension uncurling like a fist inside him.

<Listen, we're here. Scully and I. We're with you. You're not alone. We've been feeling everything that...>

<NO! You're...? Shit, Mulder - I don't want you two feeling this.> Skinner snapped abruptly out of focus, much to Mulder's surprise, and for the first time in hours, his head cleared, and the other man's discomfort disappeared from his consciousness.

<Dammit! You don't have to do this alone!> Mulder roared, feeling both relieved and bereft at the same time. Suddenly he understood why Scully had liked the sensation of the link the first time she had experienced it. He had never seen Skinner like this before - never seen into any man's soul like this. Skinner's mental signature was completely different to what he would have expected. Warm, curiously uncertain, with a hint of inner steel and resilience. Mulder was intrigued.

Skinner came to a quick decision the moment that the door was opened. It was bad enough he had to suffer this indignity, but for Mulder and Scully to endure it with him, to see him this helpless, was more than he could bear.

When the guards came to escort him back, he feigned weakness, so that they had to lift him to his feet. In that split second, he used the last atom of his fading strength, and hit out. He grabbed a gun from one of the guards, and held it against the man's head, and then pulled his captive out into the corridor, screaming at the other guard to drop his weapon or he'd shoot. The guard refused to comply, and they stood there, glaring at each other in a standoff situation. Finally, Skinner shoved his captive away, and turned and ran up the corridor.

He knew that he was being pursued, and his legs felt as heavy as tree trunks, his vision going in and out of focus. He lurched into a door, then another, looking inside, trying to remember the way to Noy's office, to get hold of that bastard, and shove this gun to his head. His head swam and he swayed, staggering again. A noise behind caught him unawares, and he turned, falling awkwardly against the wall. As he did so, he heard someone running up behind him, and then there was a sharp crack across the back of his head. When his vision cleared, he found himself looking down the barrel of a gun.

"Oh dear." Noy sighed theatrically. "That was just plain stupid, Walter." Skinner had been dragged to Noy's office, and held between two guards while his 'crime' was outlined to his tormentor.

"Worth a try though." Skinner growled.

"Yes, and I'm sure it bolstered your flagging self esteem, even if you **were** unsuccessful." Noy smiled. "However, in order to discourage future escape attempts, I'm afraid I'll have to punish you."

"Somehow I thought you'd say that." Skinner shrugged. Noy motioned with his head, and Skinner watched as a bench was brought into the room. He was strapped to it, face up.

"You see, Walter, you're worth a good deal to me - but only your mind." Noy crouched down beside him. "Your body is irrelevant. We could break your arms and legs - cripple you for life if we wanted. It wouldn't matter - so long as we have your mind. As it is, I'm inclined to be merciful, and anyway, I'm a great believer in the punishment fitting the crime. Are you a student of history, Walter?"

"Yeah, but I bet it isn't the kind you study." Skinner shook his head, wondering where this was going, and expecting that he wouldn't like it, wherever it was.

"I bet you're right." Noy grinned. "Let me explain: the military used to have an unusual punishment for dealing with deserters and runaways. The feet were whipped until they bled. Some men never walked again. I've already explained that it doesn't matter to me whether you can walk or not. So, I'm going to kill two birds with one stone: punish you, and render any future escape attempts impossible."

Skinner struggled fruitlessly with his bonds as the guard took up position by his feet, but it was a token resistance. He held onto his dignity in the face of overwhelming pain for several long minutes, and then a dam broke somewhere deep inside and he opened his mouth, and screamed. He could feel the blood trickling down the soles of his feet, felt each vicious blow melt into one long agonizing blur. The lacerations were more painful than he could bear. He lost consciousness at some point, and was revived almost immediately with a bucket of cold water thrown over his face.

"I didn't want you to miss anything." Noy told him, with a self-satisfied smile.

"Fuck you." Skinner managed to hiss, but finally he lost all sensation of self, and became nothing but his own pain.

Scully held on to the side of the car as Mulder drove like a lunatic. She had uncovered an address for Doctor Lubecker. It was an unusual name, and she was sure from his record of serving with the military during Vietnam that he was the man they were looking for. It hadn't been easy to find him though. There had been no record of Noy at all, despite her extensive search.

"Mulder, slow down," she said through gritted teeth. "We won't be able to help Skinner if the car ends up in a ditch."

"Can't." Mulder replied tersely. "Fucking, fucking..." he didn't finish the sentence, and his fingers whitened as they gripped the steering wheel even more tightly. He made a conscious effort to switch off from the scene that Skinner's tortured mind was sending them, but it was almost impossible to ignore the other man's excruciating pain. "I'll kill Noy," Mulder whispered. "When I get my hands on him, I'm going to kill him."

"Not if I get there first." Scully replied. One look into her blue eyes convinced him that she was more deadly serious than he'd ever seen her before.

"Deja Vu." Mulder grouched to her. "Deja fucking vu. I feel like I spend my whole damn life looking for the people I love when they've been abducted. Samantha, you, and now Skinner. It must be some kind of karmic shit. Maybe I used to kidnap people in a former life, and this is my penance. If I ever **had** any previous lives," he murmured to himself as an afterthought. Scully placed a hand on his arm, and he looked up in surprise to find a silent recognition of his devotion in searching for her when she had been abducted glowing in her eyes.

"We'll find him," she said. "You got me back, remember? We'll get Skinner back, and maybe one day you'll find Samantha as well."

He nodded, comforted by her words. They drew up outside a house, and got out. It was a big house, in a good neighborhood.

"This guy earned some money somewhere along the line," Mulder muttered grimly. When they knocked on the door, a gray-haired man opened it.

"Dr Lubecker?"

"Yes." The man glanced at them, his face puzzled.

"Agents Scully and Mulder, FBI." Scully supplied.

The man frowned. "Hold on." He closed the door again.

Mulder exchanged a look with Scully, and she raised an eyebrow and drew her gun, edging her way around to the back of the house. Mulder drew his, and knocked on the door again. When there was no reply, he shot the lock off, then kicked his way inside.

"There was no need...!" Lubecker rushed up the corridor towards him, waving his hands frantically. "I was just..."

"Hiding the evidence." Scully emerged behind him, scooping up a set of keys that had fallen from his pocket.

The pain in his feet didn't fade when the beating stopped. If anything it got worse. When they untied him, Skinner just rolled onto the floor and lay there, no longer caring if they kicked him to death.

"Remove the rest of your clothing, Walter." Noy instructed.

"What?" Skinner lay there, uncomprehending.

"It's time to uncover some more layers. I want to see what's inside, what makes you tick, Walter."

"And I have to be naked for that?" Skinner asked. "You sick fucking bastard. Why?"

"I like to think that the outward appearance echoes what is going on inside, and encourages soul-searching honesty. It's time to be revealed." Noy said. "Now, can you do it yourself, or do you want some help?"

Skinner knew in some distant recess of his brain, that he was being out-manuevered in an increasingly complex game of psychological chess that his beleaguered mind could no longer

keep up with. Stripping him of his clothing was just another in a long line of tiny calculated moves that Noy had made in order to strip him of both his dignity, and his sense of control. What was it Mulder had said? Just go along with it? It didn't matter?

<You're wrong, Mulder.> He whispered soundlessly in his mind, as he rolled his long legs out of his sweatpants and shorts, wincing as the fabric touched his raw, bleeding flesh, not wanting to examine his feet too closely to see the damage. <It does matter.>

They strapped him naked back into the hated chair. He wanted desperately to find some place in his head to hide from the questions, to hide from the pain and the weariness, the hunger and the thirst, and the shame but Noy was relentless.

"So tell me more about your father. You say that you had a good relationship with him?"

"Fairly good." Skinner felt beyond resistance, or half-truths.

"And your mother?"

"I adored my mother."

"Enough to protect her from your father's temper?"

"My father never laid a finger on any of us." Skinner snapped, irritably.

"I'm sure he didn't. It was a silent kind of terrorism wasn't it? Everyone tiptoeing around his moods, constantly worrying about upsetting him. The whole household revolved around him."

"He was in constant pain," Skinner said. "He wasn't like that before the accident. We all understood. Sometimes he just needed things to be quiet."

"Ah, Walter. Always defending what you love. How touching. The truth is that he made your lives a misery. All of you. You enlisted at 18 to get away from home. You couldn't wait to leave."

"I..." Skinner closed his eyes. "Yes," he whispered.

He was 12 years old, sitting at the dinner table, watching two tears streak silently down his brother's face.

"Pass the salt please, Walter." His father glanced at Walter who glanced at Joe, who was nearest the salt. Walter reached over and handed his father the salt. His father smiled at him.

"Thank you, Walter." Joe's sobbing reached a crescendo. Skinner looked at his brother, and then at his mother, who shook her head, with a worried frown. The tension around the table was palpable.

"Does anybody want bread?" His father picked up the bread knife, and started to cut. Walter nodded.

"Yes please." Joe whispered. His father ignored him.

"Joe wants bread, dad." Walter said, taking his own slice.

"Joe has more than made himself heard today." His father said calmly, buttering his bread. "I was taking a nap in the living room, and he woke me up, crashing into the room."

"I didn't know you were asleep. The door was closed. How could I know you were asleep in there?" Joe begged. His father ignored him.

"Dad, Joe's 7 years old..." Walter began.

"Then it's time he knew how to be quiet." His father snapped. There was silence again. Walter glanced at his mother who shook her head again, and then at his brother. There would be two weeks or more of this. The silences, the tension, until all their nerves were on edge. His brother would be alternately mocked and ignored. Then it would be over, and everything would be fine again. It was exhausting. His father could make a mountain out of the proverbial molehill, and nobody could point out the absurdity of it without risking that wrath being turned on them. Walter knew that from bitter experience. They were minute events in the tapestry of life that made their house into a cage, where nobody could breathe freely.

"There were good times too," Skinner whispered. "Before the accident, my father was a different person. We were close. Sometimes afterwards he would be that way again. Sometimes for months..."

"But he couldn't keep it up, could he? The uncertainty of his moods must have been very unsettling for you, Walter. Never knowing if he was going to Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde, and always trying to protect your brother and your mother from his less benign persona. You weren't big enough, or strong enough to protect them though were you? Just as you weren't big enough or strong enough to help your father after his accident. You failed, Walter." Noy said, taking out a nail file and smoothing his nails, thoughtfully.

"Yes." Skinner nodded, too tired and in too much pain to argue the point.

"What happened to your brother, Walter?" Noy asked, opening a bottle of water and pouring the contents into one of the two glasses on his desk.

"He's fine. He lives in England now." Skinner looked longingly at the glass. Noy transferred the contents of the full glass idly into the empty one. It made a glugging sound, and Skinner thought that he would go crazy just listening to it.

"How did your father feel about you taking him away to live with your aunt?" Noy transferred the contents of the glass back again.

"After Mom died, Dad just got...worse." Skinner shrugged. "I wasn't going to leave Joe there."

"How did your father react to you taking him away?" Noy pressed again.

"Badly. We had an argument about it." Skinner's dry mouth was begging for the water that Noy was so idly wasting in front of him.

"You never saw your father again after that?"

"No." Skinner snapped. "He didn't want to see me. He wouldn't take my calls."

"Ah. Another failed relationship." Noy picked up the full glass, and downed the contents in one go. Skinner followed his movements with greedy eyes. "Your mother and Joe. Cressida and Nathan. Mulder and Scully. All your lost causes. People you thought needed your protection. You like to be needed, don't you, Walter?"

"I don't know." Skinner shrugged. The pain seared its way into his flesh as the electric current burnt into his skin at the contact points with the metallic strips.

"Yes you do." Noy smiled.

"What are the keys for?" Mulder demanded. Lubecker licked his lips nervously, darting a glance at Scully whose gun was pressed firmly into his back.

"Nowhere." Lubecker bluffed feebly. Mulder guessed that he wasn't one of nature's heroes.

"Let's see shall we?" Mulder grabbed the man by the shoulder, and pushed him down some steps and into a big study. "I'm guessing that we're looking for some kind of concealed door." Mulder swung the man forward, expectantly.

"Show us." Scully dug her gun into his back. "A friend of ours is in trouble so we're feeling **really** impatient."

Lubecker glanced from Mulder's pale, uncompromising face, back to Scully's grim features, and came to a decision.

"It's over here." He pushed aside a bookcase to reveal a door.

"Which key?" Mulder held them up, and Lubecker took them, and unlocked the door. He led them down into a corridor.

"Shit. It's like a rabbit warren." Mulder observed, as they passed several locked doors. "Did you do your experiments here?" He asked. "Back in the seventies - before those marines were sent back out to 'Nam? Was it here that you experimented on them?"

"Yes." Lubecker shrugged. "All my research notes are here. I was asked to destroy the notes initially but..." He made an apologetic little face. "It's my life's work," he whispered.

"Did you have anything to do with the Nexus Project?" Mulder asked.

"Yes." Lubecker opened a door with one of the keys and showed them into a room. Mulder stopped short with a gasp.

"I know this place," he said. Scully nodded.

"Me too."

"It's the room from his nightmare. The one about being strapped down, injected..."

"Yes." Scully glanced around at the empty beds. "No lab rats at the moment, Doctor?" she inquired with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm kind of retired. They only use me for special projects these days," the doctor admitted. "I was never very mainstream anyway - I was always more on the fringe of things." He opened a filing cabinet, and pulled out a handful of files. "Is the Nexus Project the one you're interested in?"

"Yes." Mulder nodded.

"Here. This is all my research on it."

Mulder handcuffed Lubecker to his own filing cabinet while Scully started to flick through the files.

"Tell me about the Nexus Project." Mulder demanded.

"Well, it was a long time ago." Lubecker stated nervously. "I've done a lot of things since then...but I do remember some details," he added quickly, as Mulder's expression darkened. "You know that we only use a small proportion of our brains? We don't utilize their full potential?"

"Yes." Scully nodded, still flicking. "That's well documented."

"Well, the Nexus Project tried to unlock that potential."

"Why was the project closed down?" Mulder asked.

"We had only one real success, and he wasn't very co-operative." Lubecker shrugged.

"Walter Skinner?" Scully found a photograph in the file of a young marine, with serious dark eyes. She held it up for Lubecker. He nodded.

"Yes. He was very talented. His nexus was the only one that really worked."

"In what way was he 'unco-operative'?" Mulder asked.

"The brain has great power. He could have used the link to do all sorts of things..." Lubecker trailed off.

"Such as?" Mulder prompted.

"Killing people - killing one of the other members of the link. Exerting more control over the link generally. We envisaged more of an army of worker ants under one leader, than an autonomous unit of individuals who just happened to be linked." Lubecker shrugged. "You could say that our vision differed from his."

"You terminated the project because he wouldn't kill someone?" Scully asked incredulously.

"It wasn't my decision." Lubecker protested. "I didn't terminate it."

"So Skinner didn't control the people in the nexus in any way?" Mulder asked sharply.

"Not really. He seemed to enjoy being linked, but not because it gave him control over people. He got some other kick from it."

"You're not kidding." Scully held up the notes. "Subject 1 stated that his experience of the nexus was almost erotic?" She raised an eyebrow.

"He was 18, Scully." Mulder grinned. "Everything is about sex at that age. I found clothes pins erotic at 18."

"And did you grow out of that?" Scully inquired.

"Come around to my place on laundry day and I'll show you," he leered. "Is there any way to undo a link?" Mulder asked the scientist. "Once a nexus has been created - can it be reversed?"

"Only by death." Lubecker shrugged.

"I see." Mulder sighed. "So tell me - why wasn't Skinner terminated along with the rest?"

"He was. Only he wouldn't stay dead so it was decided he'd be more use to us alive. I was asked to monitor him." Lubecker's eyes flicked towards some equipment in the corner of the room. "I'd almost forgotten about him, when the screens flickered back into life a few weeks ago."

"And you informed your boss?" Mulder asked.

"Yes." Lubecker shrugged. "Of course. I wasn't sure he'd be interested. We have some new techniques these days - we've been able to, uh, breed some children who are pretty useful to us."

"Breed? Like dogs?" Scully questioned.

Lubecker flushed. "It's just a turn of phrase. They're were carefully chosen, and well looked after."

"When did you start that phase of the project?" Mulder asked. "The children, I mean?"

Scully looked at him, wondering what he was getting at.

"1973."

"I see." Mulder nodded.

"Mulder." Scully drew him to one side. "Not everything is about Samantha," she whispered.

"I know that, although it does seem to be too big to be a co-incidence. I was actually thinking about Marla and Antonio."

"You think that they're part of this project?" Scully asked.

"I don't know, but they look about, what? 23, 24?"

Scully nodded.

"Well, they could be the result of the next wave of experimentation."

"Maybe. We won't know until we find Noy." Scully said. "Talking of which, standing here isn't helping Skinner."

"No." Mulder looked around thoughtfully then glanced at the equipment in the corner. "Does that give you any clue as to where the subject is?" He asked Lubecker.

"Like a homing beacon? No." Lubecker shook his head, his face flushed.

"But you do have him chipped don't you?" Mulder pressed. "You'd have wanted to keep an eye on him so I bet that you do."

Lubecker nodded.

"Where is it?"

Lubecker pointed at his desk drawer, and Mulder found a small device, which beeped at regular intervals.

"It's not very accurate." Lubecker shrugged. "It'll take you within a one to five mile radius, that's all."

"That's something." Scully took the device, and slipped it into her pocket. Mulder turned and walked over to the monitoring equipment at the end of the room. He took out his gun, and fired several shots into it, watching with some satisfaction as it shattered into several pieces. Then, on an impulse, he swept the broken machinery onto the floor and stamped on it, just to be sure.

"Wait! What the hell are you doing?" Lubecker protested, tugging at his handcuff. Mulder stalked back, and stood too close to the cowering doctor, staring him in the eye.

"His days as a lab rat are over." Mulder stated in a flat monotone that nonetheless conveyed a barely suppressed anger. He glanced around the room, and shivered, seeing a unit of young men, innocently volunteering for what they thought was a special mission, and then shipped here, to this nightmare, to be experimented upon. Scully put a hand on his arm, and for a moment, they both saw it. A flash of memory, a struggle, looming shapes in white coats, somebody screaming, a sharp pain at the base of the skull, and then it was gone, over.

"Come on. Let's go." Scully said to her partner, casting a contemptuous glance at Lubecker. Mulder picked up the files on the Nexus Project, and they walked towards the door.

"Wait! You can't leave me here!" Lubecker protested. "I live alone! Nobody even comes by to visit."

"You're mistaking us for people who give a damn." Scully smiled sweetly, and closed the door behind them as they left, locking it with Lubecker's own key.

They got back into the car, and Mulder laid his head on the steering wheel for a few moments, gathering his strength. "Those poor damn marines. Not much more than kids," he muttered. Scully nodded, remembering a shadowy image of being experimented upon herself. She shuddered.

"Skinner," she murmured.

Mulder nodded, and put the key in the ignition. "Let's find him. Where to, Scully?"

She pored over the homing device, trying to figure out how it worked, and then placed it on the road map.

"West. I think." She shrugged. "We can try west."

"Women and maps." Mulder sighed.

"Don't go there, Mulder," she warned. "You'll only get hurt."

They were silent for a while, as Mulder drove. Scully didn't like the silence. If she closed her eyes she could feel Skinner's pain, could see Noy's face, and hear what he was saying, and she knew that Mulder could hear it too. She drifted off along the link. Somebody was speaking her name. She homed in on the sound, and found herself somewhere else.

"Mulder and Scully. Scully and Mulder." Noy repeated with an irritating sing-song inflection. "It must have been almost a reflex action for you to start protecting them when they fell foul of the powers that be. Hmm, Walter? Do stay awake!" Another blow across his shoulders failed to open Skinner's eyes, but a second blow had an effect. He tried to sit up straighter.

"And you failed them too." Noy stated implacably.

"Yes." Skinner nodded, wearily. "I did."

"You're never good enough, are you, Walter?"

"No."

"You try, but you always fail. Your marriage, your friends, even your career these days. All failures."

"Yes." Skinner whispered.

"When Scully had cancer, you tried to save her. You betrayed everything you believe in, sacrificed your dearest principles to save her, and it didn't work. Another of your secret deeds for a one-sided friendship, and you failed her. She could have died because you didn't succeed."

"Yes." Skinner's head drooped down on his chest. He hurt so much, and he was too tired to think straight. Besides, Noy was only speaking the truth. He hadn't been able to save Scully. He had never done enough for either of his agents. He had told Scully that in the hospital before he had died the second time.

"And Melissa Scully. You got yourself shot bumbling around trying to find out who killed her, and did you bring the killer to justice? Of course not. He was killed before he could stand trial. Another failure."

"Yes." Skinner rasped through dry lips.

"And Mulder, what about him? You try to help him, in your ineffectual, bureaucratic way, but as with Scully, it's just not good enough is it? **You're** not good enough, Walter."

"I know." Skinner nodded, remembering his father telling him so on a hundred different occasions before. He had always tried to be the cleverest, and the strongest, to get the best grades, to be perfect, to win his father's praise, to help soothe the bitterness of his father's injury by giving him something to be proud of, but it was never enough.

"Useless." Noy placed a hand on Skinner shoulder, and pulled his head up to look at him. "Poor, useless Walter. What on earth are we going to do with you?"

"Mulder?" Scully snapped out of the link, still reeling with shock, as Mulder slammed his foot on the brake, pulled the car over, and got out, not even bothering to close the door behind him. She watched as he disappeared down the side of the road. Scully sat there for a moment, then got out of the car and followed him. He was sitting on a bank of grass, his knees clutched close to his chest. She was surprised to see that he was crying. She sat down beside him, and rested her head on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I just needed a few..." Mulder brushed the tears away angrily.

"It's not an easy thing to witness." Scully murmured.

"No. I just never...maybe we never gave him credit for all the times he helped us. He risked his life for us on several occasions, and he thinks that it doesn't count? That he failed us?"

"Mulder, you said it yourself - Noy's manipulating him."

"What was that stuff Skinner said to you at the hospital? I only got a glimpse of that but it seemed like he didn't think much of himself there."

"I didn't think of it like that. I think he just regrets never having come down on our side, publicly and unequivocally."

"He's more use to us where he is, walking a middle path for us, keeping himself in a position of power to help us fight our corner." Mulder protested.

"I know. I agree." Scully put an arm around Mulder, and kissed his hair gently. He was strong, but his strength was different to hers - or Skinner's. Nobody could take what Mulder had in his life and continue to function even remotely sanely if they didn't have a fierce inner strength, and sense of purpose. "What did he do for me when I had cancer, Mulder? Do you know?" She asked him quietly. He looked at her, and bit on his lip, then he nodded.

"Yes."

"You didn't tell me."

"Not my secret to tell." Mulder shrugged.

"I see." Scully thought about it for a moment, then got up to return to the car.

"Besides...he did it because he's in love with you." Mulder said. Scully froze.

"What makes you say that?" She asked quietly, her back to him.

"It's obvious. Christ, the guy even has you down as his next of kin on his personnel file! Do you love him?" The question hung between them for a long moment, and then Scully nodded.

"Yes," she replied simply. Then she turned. "How about you?" She asked.

"Am I in love with you? Hell, yes." He grinned. "You don't need any damn nexus to tell you that."

"No, I knew that already." She gave him a wry smile. "I wondered if you were in love with Skinner."

Mulder's head snapped up, and there was a flush on his face but now wasn't a time for pretense. There could be only honesty between them in this place, at this moment in time. Mulder cleared his throat.

"Yeah." He shrugged, not looking at her.

"That was the secret? The one you didn't want him to know?" She pressed, her blue eyes thoughtful, and understanding.

"Hell, Scully, did you ever **see** anybody straighter than Skinner? I wanted to stay alive." Mulder grinned. "Besides, it's kind of unusual to be in love with two people at the same time." He glanced up at her again, almost afraid of what he'd see on her face, but she gave him the faintest ghost of a smile.

"Is it?" She raised an enigmatic eyebrow.

Mulder watched her walk back to the car, struggling with his feelings. *Damn it, this is why I hate relationships*, he grumbled to himself. *Too damn confusing*. He knew that he didn't stand a chance with Skinner, but he could see that Scully would be happy with the other man, if they could only find him, and bring him safely home. Mulder loved them both so he knew exactly what they saw in each other. He bit down his feeling of exclusion, and the raw sensation of jealousy and rejection. He was happy for them. Really.

"It wasn't **all** your fault, Walter," Noy told his captive. "Mulder and Scully weren't really worthy of your protection. You should have chosen more wisely." He gave a regretful sigh. "They don't care about you, you do know that don't you?" Noy asked. Skinner shrugged.

"I haven't asked them to care."

"No, but you'd like it if they did. They don't. Scully is quick to think you've betrayed them, and as for Mulder, well, his paranoia is well known. He trusts no-one."

"I don't blame him for that, with the life he's led." Skinner shrugged again.

"Always defending the people you love, even when they aren't worthy." Noy shook his head. "You're an idiot, Walter."

"Probably." Skinner rasped.

"Here, have a drink. A tiny reward for being so co-operative." Noy held the cup to Skinner's lips, and he drained it greedily.

"You know, you've really held up far better than I would have expected." Noy mused. "Hmmm...I do hope that nobody has been feeding you, or giving you any water when my back was turned. If they have, I'll be annoyed. Has anyone helped you while you've been here, Walter?"

Skinner gazed blearily at Noy trying to make sense of his words, and then he shook his head, slowly.

"No." He rasped.

"Tell me the truth, Walter." Noy placed a hand on the device that activated the chair. Skinner ran a tongue over his lips, gazing anxiously at Noy's hand. "I won't be angry with you, just with whoever helped you. Tell me, Walter." Noy encouraged. "Has anybody but me given you food or drink while you've been here?"

Skinner thought about it, and then finally he shook his head, tensing wearily for the expected burn. Noy laughed out loud, a delighted laugh, and moved his hand away. He snapped his fingers, and Skinner was released from the chair, and hauled back to his cell. He didn't see the smile fade from Noy's face as quickly as it had come, to be replaced by a look of intense satisfaction.

"Shit. I know what he's doing." Mulder pressed his foot down hard on the accelerator. Scully snapped out of the scene in Noy's office, and turned to look at him.

"What?" She asked.

"Marla and Antonio. Oh shit, Scully. We have to get there soon. Really soon. Skinner's too out of it to see what's happening. Damn." He banged a hand against the steering wheel. "How far are we, Scully?"

"About 20 miles. I think." She frowned, shaking the homing device.

"You **think**?" Mulder raised a dangerous eyebrow.

"Mulder, this thing is ancient, added to which, I have no idea how it works, but I'm fairly certain that this is the way."

"Let's hope so." Mulder said grimly. "Hold on, big guy. The cavalry's coming."

Skinner lay unmoving when he was thrown back into his cell. He was dimly aware of Tonio scrambling over to kneel down next to him.

"Oh shit. Oh, god, what the hell did they do to you? Oh, Walter." Skinner saw himself reflected in Tonio's eyes. It wasn't a pretty sight.

<Here.> Tonio's voice soothed him, like a balm. His gentle fingers stroked Skinner's face, and his mind seemed to pour healing thoughts into Skinner's aching body. <Give up, Walter. Just allow yourself to float...> Tonio instructed. A few moments later, Marla entered the cell.

"Walter, I managed to sneak in when nobody was looking," she whispered, sitting opposite Tonio and gently touching Skinner's arm. Skinner tried to say something, but she put a finger over his lips. "Hush, dearest," she murmured. <Let us take care of you.>

Her mind was like a bright, spangled tunnel, Skinner thought to himself. So easy just to slip inside it, to allow her thoughts to wash over him, to caress, and comfort him...

"What's happening? What are they trying to do?" Scully asked Mulder frantically.

"Noy planted them there for a purpose. He's disorientated Skinner, weakened him, and made sure that those two the only ones who've shown him any kindness."

"They're working on Noy's orders?" Scully frowned.

"Of course." Mulder nodded.

"The food and drink?"

"Well, Noy had to keep Skinner alive, but by making it look as if the food was being smuggled in, Skinner thinks those two bimbos are helping him. Noy's got him believing that to the extent that Skinner protected them at his own cost when Noy asked him to betray them. He's even got them keeping Skinner awake under the guise of not wanting him to be hurt." Mulder's whole body radiated a kind of fury that Scully had never seen in him before.

"What are they there for?" Scully asked.

"Isn't it obvious? You heard what Lubecker said. The only way out of the nexus is if someone dies. However, as far as I can see, there are no limits to how many people are **in** a nexus. If Marla and Antonio are part of Lubecker's follow-up project they probably have some kind of basic telepathic skills, which they're using to get into Skinner's head right now. If he links with them, then you and I are effectively outnumbered and outgunned in this nexus, and, worse than that, we're lumbered with those two for the rest of our lives. Till death us do part."

The two of them exchanged a look of sheer horror.

"Can we do anything to stop it?" Scully asked, in desperation.

"I don't know." Mulder pulled the car over.

"What the hell are you doing!" Scully protested. "We need to get there - now!"

"Hang on. How about we approach this from a different angle? How do you feel about those pretty kids who are fawning all over **our** Skinner?"

"**Our** Skinner?" Scully raised an eyebrow.

"Scully - we're the ones he chose to link to, and we're the ones in this nexus. He **chose** us, not them. That makes us a unit. He belongs to us, and we to him. I don't know about you, but I'm feeling kind of territorial here." Mulder sounded almost proud of this fact, his resistance to the nexus fading rapidly as he witnessed Skinner's continuing defiance of his captor.

"Oh yeah." Scully said with a grim smile. "Me too."

"So why don't we tell him?"

"Mulder I've tried talking to him for hours, and so have you. He's so far gone he isn't replying."

"That doesn't mean that he can't hear us. I think we need to do some positive reinforcement here, Scully, or we might find that our positions have been usurped. Now, we've tried contacting him alone, but I think that's the wrong approach. How about we try, um, linking with each other, and then contacting him together?"

"A united front?" Scully mused thoughtfully. "It's worth a try."

Mulder held out his hand, and Scully looked at it for a moment, and then took it. They both closed their eyes. Almost immediately, Scully felt the warmth of the nexus flood in, bringing with it Skinner's pain, which was effectively dominating the link, making her flinch from the force of it. Scully felt Mulder's mind like a cluster of bright, swirling silver clouds enveloping her own pulsing orange hues, and merging with them, creating something beautiful, like a Christmas star, shot through with light. They surged together down the nexus, and found Skinner's mind - a blends of pale blues and grays, tinged with the black of pain.

<Walter?> Scully merged with him, sending the full force of her soul along the link, trying to shore up his fading energy. <We're here. You're not alone.> There was no reply. <Walter?> Scully called again.

<Jace?> Scully heard Mulder's voice echoing through the link. It was, she thought, worth a try.

<Jace?> She joined her voice to Mulder's, and a few seconds later she felt Skinner's unmistakable presence.

<Yeah...here...> The voice was faint and weak. Scully traced it to its source, and gathered Skinner up in her mental embrace. Then she sensed Mulder settle around them, like a

protective cloak or shield. It felt good. She poured every ounce of healing she could into the link, muttering meaningless platitudes, like a mother comforting a sick child.

<We're very close to you.> Mulder's voice echoed in the link. <You'll be rescued soon. You just need to hold on for a bit longer.>

<Can't...> Skinner's voice was weak and distant.

<You have to.> Mulder insisted. <Listen to me - you can't trust Marla and Tonio. Don't allow them into your mind.>

There was a muffled, confused response that neither of them could understand.

<It's true.> Scully insisted. <They're trying to trick you. Please be strong until we get there. We're here. You don't need them.> She gave him a mental hug, trying to radiate a sense of comfort into the link. It made her heart ache to see him brought this low, stripped of his dignity, and subjected to this ordeal. Something inside her broke and she let go of any conscious sense of self, and became Mulder and Skinner and Scully simultaneously. Mulder took his cue from her, and did the same.

<Our nexus is complete.> Scully wasn't sure if she said it, or Mulder. She wasn't sure if she could tell the difference between them any more, or even if her thoughts were her own or his. All she knew was that the part of her that was Skinner let down its barriers, and she felt a sense of overwhelming happiness and a renewed sense of hope as their love flowed freely into the link. For the first time in her life, she was whole.

The presence of their two minds in his, loving and comforting him, shored up Skinner's fading strength. He rolled over and batted Tonio's fingers away from his temples.

"Get the fuck away from me," he growled. "Both of you."

"Walter!" Marla reached out to him, and he looked her straight in the eye.

"Get out of here," he hissed. "I don't want you anywhere near me. I know he sent you."

They exchanged glances and then Marla nodded at Antonio and they knocked on the cell door to be released. Within minutes Skinner found himself being dragged back to Noy's office. He noticed that the electric chair was gone, but he couldn't stand on his broken feet. He was dumped on the plain wooden chair that he had sat in on his first visit to this room.

For the first time since he had been brought here, Skinner saw a genuine emotion on Noy's face: anger. His pale blue eyes were opaque with rage, and his body language, which had previously been nervous and excitable, was now dangerously still. Skinner guessed that this was the real Noy.

"I think Mulder and Scully have been talking to you." Noy snapped. "I didn't think they'd prove dangerous, which was a miscalculation on my part. Now, I'm going to give you, and them, a little message of warning, and then I'm going to prevent you from having any contact with them at all for the next few days."

He motioned with his head and Skinner didn't even see the first blow as it swung across his back. Someone caught hold of his face and he felt a fist crunch into his jaw. At some point he toppled over onto the floor, but the blows continued to rain down on him. When finally the onslaught stopped, he was on the verge of losing consciousness. He was aware of someone plunging a needle into his arm, and then it felt as if a blanket had fallen over his mind. He howled, not from pain, but from the loss of the link with Mulder and Scully, which had been the only thing keeping him going. At that point, mercifully, everything went black.

The guards dragged him back to his cell, and slung his battered body back inside, locking the door.

"This is as far as the device goes." Scully's face was pinched and white. The loss of the link when they had been so closely entwined hurt her more than the pain that had preceded it. They had both felt every last blow that Skinner had endured - as Noy had intended them to. Mulder had been forced to stop the car when it was at its worst, and they had both sat there, holding hands, sending every last piece of their energy to Skinner to help him get through it. When the drug took effect, separating them from Skinner's mind, they both reeled from the shock of it. Mulder was surprised at how quickly he had become accustomed to this flowing of energy and warmth between them. It physically hurt him when it was no longer there. They were both worried now about what was being done to Skinner in his drugged state. The unknown was more terrible than the pain had been.

"One mile. One mile..." Mulder drove around, looking out of the window. "Damn. He could be anywhere. Give me the map, Scully. Let's see if there are any clues." He glanced down, tracing his finger along the road they were traveling on. "There's a row of private houses up here. The rest is an industrial complex." He looked at her and shrugged. "So - toss up. Is he in a house, or some kind of warehouse?"

They looked at each other for a moment.

"I don't remember him seeing any windows," Scully said uncertainly, "and those long corridors didn't look like they were in a house."

"There were no windows at Lubecker's little underground lab either, and that was beneath a private house. There were also some long corridors there." Mulder mused.

"Could be either." They stared at each other glumly. Mulder started the car again, and turned it towards the industrial complex. They were halfway down the road, when Scully put a hand on his arm.

"Turn around," she whispered. He glanced at her. "It's just a feeling. Turn around," she repeated. He nodded, swung the car around, and headed back towards the houses.

"Remember this moment," Mulder told her, "because I'm about to say something I don't say very often: I think it's time to call for some back up."

Scully gave a faint smile and reached for her cellphone.

They drove slowly along the road, peering at the houses. They were opulent, and set well back from the streets, with their own private gates. They finished one pass of the street and turned back, re-tracing their steps.

"Maybe I was wrong...maybe we should have gone to the industrial...Mulder, stop!" Scully pointed at a couple of men, standing by a car on the driveway of one of the houses. They were smoking, and laughing about something. "Do they look familiar to you?" Scully asked.

"Yeah." Mulder stopped the car, and peered over. "The dark one looks like one of the guards."

Scully opened her cell phone again, and gave directions to the back up team.

"They'll be here soon. Do we wait for them?" She asked.

"Hell, no. Someone's stolen something that belongs to us - something priceless. I want it back." Mulder said determinedly. "I want **him** back."

Scully smiled and drew her gun. "For once, I agree with you, Mulder. Don't let it go to your head."

The two men on the driveway were taken by surprise. Both men were clearly too scared of Noy to give any aid to the two agents, and mutely refused to co-operate even when Mulder placed his gun to their heads, so they handcuffed them to the car and went into the house. Scully was relieved to hear the sound of a number of vehicles screeching up outside as she walked through the door.

The door to the underground complex wasn't concealed and they found it easily enough, tiptoeing down a flight of stairs, and along a familiar white corridor. A few seconds later, the backup team joined them. Scully was glad that she had them behind her, as they swarmed over that rabbit warren beneath the house, searching for Skinner.

There were dozens of rooms, and endless long corridors. At the end of one, they burst into some kind of recreation room, taking its occupants by surprise. One of them, a pretty girl with bobbed blonde hair, was busy playing pool with one of the guards. She looked around, startled, as Scully crashed into the room, waving her gun.

"Federal Agent. Drop your weapons!" Scully called. The backup team flooded in behind her, and began making arrests. Scully went over to the girl, and looked her up and down.

"Are you Marla?" she asked. The girl nodded, looking confused. She looked even more confused a few seconds later when Scully's fist crashed into her jaw, knocking her to the floor.

"I thought so." Scully smiled and walked away. The back-up team glanced at each other in alarm and Mulder grinned.

"And you must be Tonio," he murmured to a handsome, dark-haired man. Tonio took a wary step back. "Oh, I'm sorry, my knee slipped." Mulder said a few seconds later, as he stepped over Tonio's wailing form.

None of the guards would tell them either where Noy was, or Skinner. Scully could only assume that Noy must be one frightening SOB to inspire such silence.

"Let's split up." Mulder said, when faced with the myriad of corridors, going in four different directions. Scully nodded, and set off.

Mulder ran down the corridor, slamming open each door, to find them all empty. The fourth one along was locked. Mulder shot a bullet into the lock, then kicked the door open and practically threw himself inside. He came to a sudden halt.

"Oh shit," he whispered.

Skinner was lying on the floor, curled up on his side in a fetal position in a pool of his own blood. He was naked, and semi-conscious. His arms and torso were covered with burns, lacerations and welts and his face was bruised. He looked smaller than Mulder could ever remember seeing him. His feet were torn into shreds, so mangled that Mulder winced at the sight of them. Mulder went and crouched down next to him. He took off his coat, and placed it over Skinner, cradling the other man's head gently in his hands, muttering soothing platitudes. Skinner's eyes opened, and came into focus.

"Mulder...?" he rasped.

"Yeah. Don't worry. You're safe. We've got you now." Mulder couldn't stop himself stroking a gentle finger along the side of Skinner's face. He thought that Skinner looked like a lion he had seen on a wildlife program once. The creature had been shot, and was lying with its paws tied together - just a carcass. What had once been strong and vital, proud and vividly alive, had been reduced to nothing but mere mortal flesh, the spirit gone.

"Mulder!" Mulder heard Scully's voice in the corridor and Skinner's forehead creased into a worried frown.

"Scully...I don't want..."

Mulder nodded, understanding the unspoken plea and he got up quickly, leaving the room and pulling the door shut behind him. Scully came flying down the corridor, her red hair framing her anxious pale face.

"Mulder. I heard a gun shot. Have you found him?" She asked.

"Yes."

"Thank god. Let me..." Scully tried to push past him but he wouldn't let her.

"He's in a bad way, Scully," he said.

"I'm a doctor, Mulder," she snapped impatiently.

"I know, but there are paramedics on their way. They can treat him."

"I want to see him," she told him angrily.

"Yeah, I know. You can't." Mulder held his ground, blocking her way, placing both his hands on her shoulders to hold her back. "He doesn't want you to see him like this, Scully. Trust me. I'm doing this for him, not for you."

She glared at him for a moment, and then her expression softened.

"Okay, but I'm following him to the hospital in the car."

"Fine." Mulder nodded. "Noy?" He asked.

"We got him," she muttered grimly.

"Good. Let's see how he likes being on the receiving end of an interrogation. Go and get the paramedics, Scully, and bring them along to this room." He motioned with his head.

"Is he going to be okay?" Scully asked, turning back.

"I think so. Physically anyway." Mulder shrugged. "Mentally - who the hell knows after that sick head-fuck played with his mind?"

"We'll have to help him then." Scully told him firmly.

"Yeah. We will." Mulder nodded. "I promise you that we will."

He returned to the room, and sat down beside Skinner, gathering up the other man in his arms, and holding him while he waited for the paramedics. Skinner felt cold and clammy to the touch, and Mulder held him close, warming him with his own body heat. He no longer cared about revealing his feelings - he suspected that Skinner already know them anyway. He just wanted to be as solid and reassuring a presence as he could for the other man right now. Skinner couldn't feel them through the link because of the drug, and Mulder wanted to reassure him that he wasn't alone any more. He held Skinner tight, and rocked him like a child.

The first thing that Skinner was aware of when he woke up in the hospital was that somebody was holding his hand.

"Scully?" He turned his head, and saw a blurred image in red and white.

"Sir?" He felt her hand squeeze his. "How are you?" His vision came into focus and he looked into her concerned blue eyes.

"You tell me," he whispered wryly.

"Well, nothing was broken. You're badly dehydrated, and you've dropped a few pounds in weight. You have multiple contusions, lacerations and burns but you'll heal." She smiled, and he managed a slight smile back and tried to sit up, then groaned as his head felt as if it had been split in two.

"Not yet." She pushed him back down. "Take it slowly. Your glasses are on the nightstand if you need them."

"Yo! He's awake." Mulder bounced into the room bearing two cups of coffee and a bag of Krispy Kreme doughnuts, nudging the door shut behind him with his foot. "No coffee for you I'm afraid -I think the caffeine would just about kill you in your condition." Mulder grinned, handing a coffee to Scully. "Would a doughnut do him any harm, Scully?"

"I don't think so." She smiled, her hand still not leaving Skinner's.

"How are my feet?" Skinner managed to ask, as Mulder placed another pillow under his head, to raise him up a fraction.

"Well...not good." Scully admitted. "They were badly torn."

"You'll have some impressive scarring but you should be able to walk again." Mulder told him, handing him a doughnut. Skinner felt a wave of relief at that news. He tried to open up his mind, cautiously, and felt a small stirring deep inside and a muted response from the two other people in the room.

"The drug's still in your system, and anyway you're too tired for that." Scully told him reprovingly.

"But we're looking forward to learning all about this stuff when you're better. I, for one, have a lot of questions and some exploring I want to do with this whole nexus thing." Mulder leaned forward his face animated. Skinner glanced at him in surprise and Mulder grinned back and devoured a doughnut, licking the sugar off his full lips with a swipe of his tongue.

"How much of it did you...'hear'?" Skinner muttered.

"Most of it. Pretty much all of it." Mulder replied, sitting down on the chair beside the bed.

"Oh." Skinner closed his eyes.

"Does that bother you?" Scully asked.

Skinner opened his eyes again. "Yeah," he replied.

"I thought it would." Mulder nodded. Scully's fingers stroked Skinner's, softly.

"It doesn't matter," she told him. He was too weak to care, but he thought he might later. He closed his eyes and remembered them calling him Jace, which made him flush. They even knew that. He supposed it was only fair - he had rummaged through their memories, and knew things they hadn't told him, and wouldn't want him to know. He probably deserved the same to have happened to him. It had a kind of natural justice to it.

Skinner managed a bite of the doughnut and nearly passed out again from the sheer sensory pleasure of eating something that tasted so damn good. He blissed out on the soft yeasty dough for a few moments. "Thanks. I really needed that," he murmured to Mulder when he'd finished.

"I thought you'd appreciate it!" Mulder grinned, then bit on his lip. "I owe you an apology," he said.

"An apology?" Skinner frowned.

"Yeah. I should have given you a chance to explain things. I've done some reading...and I understand things better now. I'd still like to hear your story though - when you're better."

"You don't need to apologize. What I did was wrong." Skinner shook his head, feeling weary to his very bones.

"You went through all you did at Noy's hands because you wouldn't give us to Cancerman, which is what I accused you of. I **am** sorry." Mulder said softly. Skinner managed a wan smile. "We have a lot of things we need to discuss." Mulder told him, his hazel eyes holding a meaningful look.

Skinner sighed, and nodded. "How did you find me?" He asked.

"We took a trip to Lone Oak." Mulder took a bite of his second doughnut. "In fact we had a stroke of luck there. We met up with Cressie - Cressida Mulvey - you know, your old girlfriend." He grinned at Skinner's confused frown. "She was the one who told us about Doctor Lubecker. That was our biggest lead."

"Cressie?" Skinner repeated, still looking confused. "You had a conversation with Cressie?"

"Yeah." Mulder nodded. "Brown hair, green eyes, kind of sexy." He winked at Scully who rolled her eyes.

"I don't know who you met out there, Mulder, but it wasn't Cressida Mulvey." Skinner told him. "Cressie drowned in 1972, a few months after I got back from 'Nam. People said she fell into the lake one night after a drunken binge but I don't think she did. I think she took one look into her future and decided that she didn't want it," Skinner said softly.

Mulder and Scully exchanged glances.

"Ghosts," Mulder whispered.

"Too many of them." Skinner closed his eyes again. "For a while back then, I wanted to join her but as Noy so accurately pointed out, I'm not the suicidal type."

"He wasn't accurate about everything," Mulder told him seriously, touching Skinner's arm gently. "He said what he did in order to break you."

"He did a good job," Skinner murmured wearily.

"He didn't succeed," Scully said firmly, squeezing his hand.

Skinner gave a faint, mocking smile, his dark eyes completely bleak.

"Didn't he?"

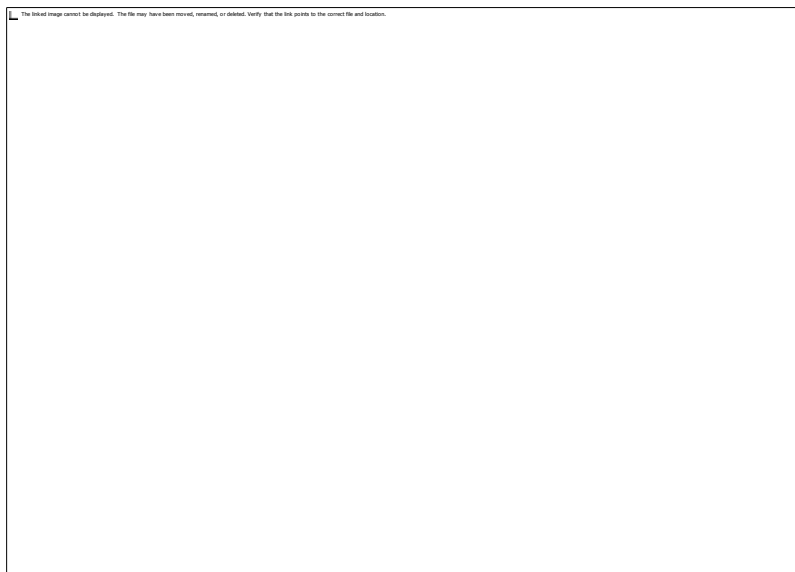
End of part three.

Chapter End Notes:

I promise there'll be snugglebunnies in part 4 after all that angst.

Synergy by Xanthe

Author's Notes:



Skinner turns to Mulder for help in coping with the aftermath of his recent ordeal, while Scully discovers an unusual gift of her own.

Posted 29th November

This story will (eventually) cover a number of years.

Spoilers: *Avatar*, *One Breath*. Season 6. I'm ignoring *Biogenesis*, and *The 6th Extinction*, etc etc, and creating my own mytharc now. I promise you more answers than CC ever gives you, and LOTS MORE SEX!

Thanks to Daydreamer for her inspiring creation of Commando!Skinner in *Retrieval* (and sequels). Also to Holmes, whose *Folie A.D.* has such a beautiful Young!Walter in it. Both these stories can be found on the **WalterTorture** site.

Massive beta reading thanks to: Holmes, Phoebe, Twisted Sister and Sergeeva.

I love both the pics I have to illustrate this story as they're both so **right** for it, and yet so different. I'm using the new one **YankeeRose** made for this instalment.

George Washington Memorial Hospital.

March 1st, 1999.

"How is he?" Mulder paused outside Skinner's hospital room and handed Scully a doughnut as she shut the door behind her.

"Lousy." She made a face, and took an absent-minded bite out of the doughnut, then frowned. "Mulder, when exactly is this Krispy Kreme obsession going to run its course?"

"Not until the big guy is home, and maybe...not even then," Mulder told her, wiping a piece of sugar from her nose, with the lofty, irritating air of a big brother.

"I stand warned. And you should be too." Scully grimaced in the direction of the hospital door.

"A bad day?" Mulder sighed.

"They're all bad days." Scully shrugged.

"Maybe this is just **him**," Mulder ventured. "I mean, we don't know him that well, not really. Maybe this is just what he's like."

"No, Mulder, I don't believe that." Scully's blue eyes were thoughtful, and sad. "Noy got to the very root of his soul, and it's preying on his mind. I think that's one reason why the physical injuries are taking so long to heal. Also..." Scully hesitated, and lowered her voice. "Mulder, I think he's scared of going home."

"What makes you say that?" Mulder frowned. This wasn't like Skinner. He couldn't imagine that the ex-Marine would be scared of **anything**. "How come I haven't gotten any of this? Are you getting information through the link that I'm not?"

"No. I think we both experience the link in the same way, and at the moment he's got it shut down pretty tight so it's hard knowing what's going on in his head. I got this information the old-fashioned way - from his body language, and what he says. Think about it, Mulder. They knocked him out, dragged him from his apartment, tied him, hurt him, beat him, and drugged him. Then they chiseled away at his soul with a precisely honed surgical instrument - Robert Noy. Skinner isn't a man who's used to that level of introspection. He can't put it behind him. It's just weighing on him. Look, you talk to him. He doesn't listen to me. In fact, he doesn't even like talking to me. I think it's some macho thing."

"Macho?"

"I'm a woman. He doesn't like me seeing him this vulnerable."

"And you think he'll be okay with me?" Mulder asked incredulously. "He doesn't even like me, Scully."

"That's not true, Mulder. He..." Scully hesitated. This was so hard on all of them. The feelings and thoughts that swam around in the link were confusing, and it was easy to be overwhelmed by them. Skinner, still taking drugs for his injuries, was seemingly unable to control the Nexus, alternating between blanketing it down altogether, or swamping it with a dozen or more conflicting emotions. Mulder and Scully both felt either bereft, or under siege, and the strain was taking its toll on all of them. "He's very fond of you," Scully finished, privately suspecting that Skinner's emotions were a good deal more complex than that. Mulder flushed.

"Yeah. Right," he murmured.

"Mulder." Scully put a hand on his arm. He looked down into her anxious blue eyes. "I know you don't find it easy to make friends - but he really needs one right now."

Mulder paused, and nodded. "I owe him, Scully. I'll do my best," he replied gently, covering her hand with his own.

Skinner was sitting at the window when he went in. Both his feet were still heavily bandaged, and his legs were raised in the air. The doctors had privately told Mulder and Scully that it was unlikely he'd ever be able to walk comfortably again. He might just about

get by with the use of canes, but full movement was likely to be very restricted. That had hit them both hard. There was something so physically indomitable about Skinner, that seeing him like this hurt. His large, powerful presence had been reduced, and the loss of independence was clearly chafing on the big man.

"I heard that," Skinner remarked, ignoring the bag of doughnuts Mulder chucked in his direction, and allowing it to fall to the ground unheeded. Mulder sighed, and picked it up.

"You heard what? Scully telling me off because I'm addicted to doughnuts? Hey, they're good! Who wouldn't be addicted?"

"No, the other crap. I don't need a friend," Skinner said morosely, turning back to the window.

"Oh, that. Right. The trouble is that Scully would take all the sugar out, and fry them in some low fat oil or something, probably substitute whole-wheat flour and stick some tofu in them instead of jelly, and they'd end up being really healthy, and taste like shit." Mulder grinned, and took a bite of his doughnut. "Whereas men know that a doughnut, is a doughnut, is a doughnut. Don't mess with it. Eat it - or don't eat it, just don't try to feed us a pile of low fat crap that pretends to be the real thing." Mulder devoured the item of food in question, and licked the sugar off his fingers. "You've been eavesdropping again, haven't you?" He perched on the armchair opposite, and looked at the other man.

"Hard not to when you broadcast the whole time," Skinner growled.

"Well, you know, that's your fault. You've never shown us how this damn link thing works. I mean, there must be a way of controlling it better than we are doing, isn't there?"

"Scully doesn't seem to have much problem with it. You're the one shouting. Her thoughts are nice, and clean, and tidy, and... **ordered**. Yours are all over the place."

"Forgive me for thinking," Mulder murmured, reaching for another doughnut.

"And I'm not afraid of going home. What kind of crazy talk is that? I sure as shit want to go home," Skinner thundered. "The doctors say I can leave here at the end of the week, and the sooner that time comes the better. I'll get better a damn sight faster in my own home than stuck in this goddamn hell-hole, with this fucking awful food."

Mulder watched the outburst thoughtfully, sensing the underlying tension. Scully was right - it was a kind of fear, but of what, he couldn't tell.

"Sir, the fact that you're not eating is one of the reasons why they won't let you go home," he pointed out gently, "and that's the main reason why you're not getting better. You're also not taking all the meds they give you. That doesn't help."

"I don't like drugs, and how the hell did you know that anyway?" Skinner turned on him angrily.

"You're talking to a hospital veteran here, remember?" Mulder smiled. "I hate the wooziness of pain meds too, but at least when you're taking them you get some sleep. And you do need the sleep. Shit, sir, you look worse now than when they brought you in here, and you looked pretty rough then."

Skinner's shoulders slumped in despair. "I'll be fine," he shrugged, his voice distant. "I just want to go home." Mulder shifted uncomfortably. "What?" Skinner looked up, the nexus relaying an emotion to him, even as Mulder's body language yelled that there was a problem. "Nothing." Mulder did his best to keep his thoughts clamped down - he didn't want Skinner finding out about this the wrong way.

"Mulder." Skinner's dark eyes met his, and they were so helpless, and hopeless, that Mulder felt a wave of pity for him. "Please - I don't have any control over my life right now as it is. Don't keep anything from me," Skinner implored.

"All right." Mulder took a deep breath, "Look, Scully just went to the bathroom. She's going to pop back in before she goes to say goodbye. Let's wait for her to come back."

"You pulled the evening shift, huh?" Skinner sighed. "It's not that I don't appreciate what the two of you are trying to do, but there's no need. I know that I've placed you in an...unusual situation, but I don't want to be any more of a burden on you. What I did was wrong, and unfair. I had no idea that this would be the consequence. You don't owe me anything. I don't want anything from you. Just go, Mulder. I'll do fine on my own."

"Sorry, but I think you're stuck with us." Mulder shrugged. "And as for owing you something - you're wrong. We'd be dead if it wasn't for you. Jace," he said softly. Skinner flushed, and looked out of the window again. "I don't understand all of it, and I don't pretend to," Mulder made a face, "but I do know that you finished making the nexus because it was the only way to save our lives, and that's a fact we **all** have to learn to live with."

At that moment, Scully slipped into the room again. She handed Mulder a cup of coffee, and put another one down on the table beside Skinner.

"Well?" Skinner looked at them both expectantly. Mulder sighed, and glanced at Scully, who was raising both eyebrows questioningly.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"He says he wants to go home." Mulder shrugged. "We have to talk about that."

"Why, for god's sake? Since when did I need your permission to go back to my own goddamn apartment?" Skinner exploded.

"Because it's been sub-let, and your furniture put into storage," Scully told him, gently but firmly.

Skinner's mouth snapped shut, his jaw clenching spasmodically. Mulder fought back an almost overwhelming urge to offer comfort. This was so damn hard! Watching this strong,

capable man, taken apart piece by piece, struggling so hard to retain some semblance of his dignity in the face of blow after blow, his whole life falling apart in front of him.

"I know you had nothing to do with that, and that Noy or his...employer was behind it, but the lease is only for 6 months. By the time you've fought a legal battle over it, the sub-lease will be up, so it's not worth it. In the meantime, however..."

"Where the hell am I going to live?" Skinner asked. "Damn, I need somewhere of my own, somewhere I'm familiar with so I'm not tripping over the goddamn furniture every five minutes." He gestured towards his bandaged feet. "I need to get back to normal. I need my job. I want my life back," he whispered, bowing his head. Mulder sensed just how hard the big man was holding onto his emotions, and realized, not for the first time, that he was on the verge of a complete breakdown.

"Damn that fucking bastard, I'm going to break his fucking neck!" he fumed, unable to contain his anger. He got to his feet, and marched to the door, slamming it shut as he left. Scully emerged a few seconds later.

"What the hell was that all about?" she demanded, catching up with him.

"Robert fucking Noy. I'm going to go down to the prison, and rip his goddamn head off," Mulder snapped. "I can't stand seeing Skinner like this."

"Well you'd better get used to it," Scully retorted, her blue eyes flashing angry sparks at him.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Mulder came to a halt, breathing heavily. His stomach ached as if he had a stitch. He hated standing by, watching people he loved...people he cared about, hurting like this. He needed to act. He had always needed to act, all his life, from when Samantha had first been taken, to watching Skinner being broken in two through no fault of his own, by faceless men trying to get at Mulder and the X Files.

"It's okay. I know." Scully wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled him down. He buried his face in her hair for a moment, shaking.

"Shit, if this is how helpless I feel watching him, then how the hell does he feel?" Mulder mumbled into her blouse.

"A hundred times worse," Scully told him honestly. She pushed him back, and looked at him.

"I just can't stand being so passive. I can't stand watching him fall apart like this. He was always the strong one, Scully. I didn't realize how much I relied on that."

"I know." The distress showed in her blue eyes. Mulder knew then that she felt exactly the same way as he did, she was just better at hiding it. "Mulder, you have to get used to this, and you don't have to be passive. There's something you can do," she told him, "and I don't mean beating the shit out of Noy. I don't think **that** would achieve anything, apart from giving Kersh enough ammunition to throw you out of the FBI," she said, with a wry smile.

"What are you talking about? What can I do?" he asked helplessly.

"Well...I've been thinking," she said slowly.

"Oh shit, I'm not going to like this, am I?" Mulder looked at her. "I can tell."

"Mulder - he doesn't have anywhere to go, and we can't leave him alone right now. You must see that. He's floundering...he needs us now, more than ever. Now, granted, my apartment's bigger, but I'm just not physically strong enough to help him around the place. In addition - I think it's you he needs particularly right now. He won't open up to me. At least he gets **angry** with you. He doesn't even do that with me - he's just icily polite, and distant."

"You think he should stay with me?" Mulder mused. "I wouldn't mind that, Scully, honestly, if it was for the best. I mean, I know he's not easy to be with right now, but he's welcome to stay with me, if it would help."

"He doesn't have anywhere else to go." Scully shrugged. "I'll spend as much time as possible there too but he'll find it easier living with you. He'll need help using the bathroom, and washing and so on. I think it would just about kill him if I saw him like that. He won't exactly enjoy it being you, but he'll be able to deal with that better. He does need us both though - if we're ever going to get him through this."

"Yes." Mulder nodded. "The nexus...when it's flowing right, it seems to soothe him. Hell, even I enjoy it when he lets it just flow. It's just all this stopping and starting, and the anger. Christ, the anger, the sadness, the goddamn awful pain." He ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. "Okay, let's go and tell him the bad news shall we?"

"No." Skinner said the minute they walked back through the door. "You must be really pissed off to have drawn the short straw, Mulder."

"Eavesdropping again? You've got a bad habit there, sir," Mulder told him.

"The answer's still no. I'll find my own place to live. I don't need your fucking pity," Skinner said savagely.

"It's not pity, you stupid bastard, it's..." Mulder exploded into a sudden frenzy of activity. He picked up a bag, and started to cram Skinner's possessions into it. "It's friendship, compassion, caring, and, if we're going to be all new-agey about it, and why the hell not, love. So just shut up, and get used to it. You started it, and now you're stuck with it, and I don't care whether you want to stay with me or not. You're going to. Period. And I'm getting you out of this damn place right now. You're just going to lose even more weight if you stay, no matter how many infusions of doughnuts I get into you. At least back at my place I can feed you some proper junk food. You'll be on a diet of non-stop pizza for the next month, followed by cheesecake for dessert, every night. No arguments," he growled, as Skinner opened his mouth in shock. Scully's eyes were wide with surprise, and she exchanged a glance with Skinner.

"Better do as he says," she murmured. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're beautiful when you're angry, Mulder?"

Mulder flushed bright red, and thrust the packed bag into her hands. "Look, none of us are used to any of this. We're just getting by as best we can. Okay - I don't like knowing what girls talk about in private," he glared at Scully, "I find some of it toe-curlingly embarrassing to be honest. I don't like knowing every time **you**," he glared at Skinner, "want to go to the bathroom, and most of all, I hate it that you know how I feel about every tiny damn thing in the whole damn world. I'm dealing with that. We're all dealing with it but I guess it'll take time. Let's all just be kind to ourselves in the meantime, huh? We're all in this together, and as you are in no condition to take care of yourself right now, why not lean on us?"

"Why not, Walter?" Scully repeated gently. "We've leaned on you enough times."

"Whatever." Skinner shrugged.

Mulder sighed. He should have known it would take more than one frenzied outburst to deal with the demons Robert Noy had extracted from his ex-boss's psyche. And that was another thing - his ex-boss. Mulder felt a pang of sadness about that. He stood there, in the middle of that hospital room, just wishing that everything was back to normal. He wanted to turn back the clock six months, so that there would be no nexus, and no Kersh. He would still be working on the X Files, and his boss would be back where he belonged - behind a desk, and not inside his head. Then Scully wouldn't know that he loved her, and Skinner wouldn't know he fantasized about him...if only it was all as it had been. He wanted it back.

"So do I, Mulder," Skinner whispered, a faint smile on his lips. "So do I."

Scully rolled her neck from side to side as she went to retrieve a wheelchair. She felt so damn tired. She and Mulder had taken it in turns being with Skinner for the past few days, and it hadn't been easy. Unlike Mulder, she wasn't sure that she **did** want her old life back. It had been a lonely enough existence, devoid of warmth, of love. Ever since Skinner had first entered her mind back at Thurmont, she had glimpsed something she wanted more than her empty apartment, her science journals, the X Files, and her perpetually teasing relationship with Mulder. The nexus between the three of them made her feel as if she belonged to something, it gave her a place where she could relax, and truly be herself, in the warm, comforting embrace of close friends. A part of her just wanted to knock Skinner and Mulder's heads together, and demand that they give her what she wanted, but an age-old, weary intuition, warned her to just stand back, and let events unfold. It was hard, but she was strong. Scully sighed. Yes, she was strong - she had always been strong, and sometimes she just wanted to damn well share the burden. Stepping back, and allowing Mulder and Skinner to work this out together, was the hardest thing she'd ever done, but somehow she knew instinctively that it was right. **She** didn't have any problem with submerging herself in the link, and finally claiming what felt almost like an inheritance, or a destiny, if she believed in such a thing. They were the ones who were resisting it. "Men," Scully sighed. "Can't live with 'em, can't shoot 'em," she murmured under her breath, as she pushed the wheelchair

back to Skinner's room. "Well, you can, but it doesn't solve anything. Been there, done that."

Skinner's doctor was not at all happy to have his patient removed from his care.

"The bandages on his feet will need changing each day to prevent infection," he pointed out.

"I can do that," Scully told him, watching as Mulder tried to pull Skinner out of his armchair.

"Mr. Skinner really isn't in any condition to leave."

"His condition appears to get worse with each passing day," Scully noted acerbically, thrusting Skinner's notes at the physician in proof of that point. Skinner growled in pain as Mulder clumsily tried to swing him from the armchair to the wheelchair.

"All the more reason to keep him here."

"No - all the more reason to take him home," Scully told him firmly. "Put him back in the armchair." She strode over to the two men. "Now, **you**," she said to Skinner, "put your arms around his neck, and then **you**," she looked at Mulder, "put your arms around his back, and pull him up that way." They both glared at her, and she could sense their discomfort at the thought of the close physical contact that maneuver required. Tough. They'd have to grow accustomed to it while Skinner stayed with Mulder. Using Scully's sensible method, Skinner was soon deposited in his wheelchair. Both the agents felt his total, and abject sense of misery at being wheeled out of the hospital in this way, and it hurt Scully more than she cared to admit. She didn't know whether it was better to address the issues that were upsetting the big man, or to sweep them under the carpet, and hope they'd just sort themselves out in time.

"You will walk again," she told him as Mulder settled him into the car.

"Is that your expert medical opinion, **Doctor**?" he snapped.

"No. Just a feeling," she said softly, smiling at him.

He turned his face away, and stared out of the window.

"Home, sweet home," Mulder threw open the door to his apartment. Skinner glanced around his new home with a sinking heart. He hadn't relied on anyone else since...since the aftermath of Vietnam, and even then that hadn't been for long as his young flesh had healed quickly, despite injuries that should, by rights, have killed him - **had** killed him. He had always been self-sufficient, he had never needed to lean on anyone. He hated the feeling of vulnerability with a vengeance.

"Vulnerability isn't the same as weakness," Mulder said softly. Skinner clenched his fists. It was hard enough dealing with this situation without the added problem of his thoughts leaking into the nexus. He **could** keep them to himself, but it required a constant vigilance that he didn't always have the strength for. "You're an invalid - you don't need to be strong right now. You just need to concentrate on getting better," Mulder told him.

"Oh, shut the fuck up, Mulder," he growled. "What are you? Rent a homily? You sound like my Mom."

"Ouch." Mulder made a face. "Nobody ever accused me of sounding like a mom before. I must be getting old. Coffee? Iced tea? Oh, I don't have any of that. So, it's coffee or...nothing," he finished lamely. "I wasn't expecting company. See - I'd make a lousy mom. Look, I'll go and get some groceries while Scully settles you in." Mulder's sense of relief at escaping from the apartment flooded through the nexus in a palpable wave. Skinner winced.

"Walter, give it time. Just concentrate on getting better," Scully told him. He wasn't sure when she had first started calling him 'Walter', but instead of finding it reassuring, it was just another reminder of how much their lives had changed, and it was a change he couldn't accept right now. It reminded him of how much he had lost: his job, his apartment, his health, his peace of mind, and maybe even his goddamn sanity.

Scully drew the drapes, and tidied up an assortment of socks, old pizza remains, and magazines from the floor. Skinner glanced at the magazines as she disappeared into the bedroom.

"*Celebrity Skin, Blonde Babes, Leatherboys, Conspiracy*...nobody could accuse you of not having eclectic tastes, Mulder," Skinner murmured. He threw the magazines back down on the table, and wheeled himself over to the window. Mulder's apartment was small, and cramped, and it took him five minutes to maneuver himself around various obstacles by which time he was screaming with silent rage and frustration. He hated Mulder's apartment, and he hated the wheelchair, and his injuries, and... hell, he hated his whole goddamn life.

The view from Mulder's apartment wasn't exactly exciting, but at least it wasn't the damn hospital. Skinner stared out of the window for a long time, listening to Scully clearing up with half an ear. Guilt warred with anger inside him. Guilt for having entangled them in this nexus, trapping them in a situation they hadn't asked for, and didn't want, and anger with them for being inside his head, and his heart, just when he needed loneliness and solitude in order to keep going. Skinner knew himself to be a loner. In the past, when he had been hurt, he'd just crawled away and licked his wounds, but even that was denied him now. Skinner felt like an animal caught in a trap - and he'd have happily gnawed off a paw in order to escape. Maybe that was what he was doing right now, in pushing Mulder and Scully away. They were, after all, as much as part of him as his own right arm. The nexus had made them so. The nexus...Skinner remembered how it had been with his comrades in 'Nam. The link had pulsed with energy. So many minds, so much power, the heady, overwhelming sense of excitement. Much as he'd hated the experimentation that led to it, Skinner had loved the nexus itself, and this one had the potential to be so much more. It was smaller, more intimate, full of a soft, comforting warmth, like coming home, and he damn well hated it.

Instead of soothing him, the nexus felt like an open wound - it was hard enough trying to keep up with his own shifting emotions right now, without having to cope with Mulder's and Scully's too.

"Okay - I've tidied up in the bedroom, and put fresh sheets on the bed, so that you can sleep there." Scully's brisk voice broke into his reverie.

"Mulder...?"

"Will sleep on the couch. He's used to it," Scully smiled.

"I don't want to put him out," Skinner said gruffly, in what was as close to an apology as he could manage for his previous behavior.

"You won't. He sleeps on the couch all the time," Scully informed him. "The bed was covered in junk, so I doubt he's slept on it in months. Now, I'm going to get some of your clothing out of storage for you. Is there anything in particular you'd like? Books, personal items?"

"No. I don't care. Whatever." Skinner shrugged. "You're leaving?" He fought back a wave of panic, hating himself. Damn, he didn't want them always around him, but he didn't like being left alone either.

"Yes, I am," Scully told him. "You'll be fine here until Mulder gets back." She patted his shoulder encouragingly, and squeezed lightly. He longed to put his hand over hers, and to kiss her cheek as she said goodbye, but he couldn't, and he didn't. Instead he shrugged, and turned back to the window. "I'll see you tomorrow," she murmured, and then she was gone.

Mulder returned with enough groceries to last for several weeks - more, Skinner suspected, because he had wanted to delay returning home, than because they really needed such vast supplies. The other man kept up a constant stream of conversation as he unpacked the groceries, none of which required any participation from Skinner apart from the occasional grunt.

"Look - pizza!" Mulder held up the cardboard box triumphantly. "Bought some salad too, in case Scully scalped me," he grinned. Skinner was beginning to find all the false attempts at cheering him up wearying. He wasn't a man used to sitting around doing nothing. Even at weekends, he'd always had the promise of paperwork, and more paperwork sitting waiting for him at the office, if he was at a loose end. He tried to remember what he had done in his limited spare time before this whole nightmare had begun. He occasionally read novels - about twice a year, but the rest of the time he really had either worked out, which clearly wasn't an option at this moment in time, or focused on his work, and now that had been taken away from him too. The emptiness opened up in front of him like a yawning chasm.

"It's kind of late," he said suddenly, fighting the melancholy. "I'll go to bed."

"You haven't eaten," Mulder pointed out.

"I'm not hungry." Skinner wheeled himself into the bedroom, thinking that at least Mulder's apartment was all on one level. In many respects, his own apartment would have been impractical for his recuperation, but that didn't stop him longing to spend a night in his own bed, with his own possessions around him. He wasn't used to wallowing in this much self-pity, and that was the whole point. He wasn't used to any of what was happening around him. It was all spinning out of his control, and he couldn't say, or do, anything to make a difference.

Skinner undressed, as best he could, refusing to call Mulder to help him. There was only so much indignity he could take. They had already both endured a visit to the bathroom that Skinner was sure would haunt him to his grave. He managed to strip down to his briefs, and then fell sideways onto the bed, hoping to crash-land on the mattress and stay there. He almost made it, but the foot rest of the wheelchair got in his way, and he lurched forwards, banged his head on the nightstand, and ended up in an ignominious heap on the floor. Mulder appeared in the doorway in nano-seconds, alerted both by the crash, and the wave of pain reverberating through the nexus.

"Oh shit. Why didn't you call me, you stubborn bastard?" Mulder knelt down beside him, and wiped a streak of blood from Skinner's head. "Damn, Scully will have my hide for this." He managed to haul the other man up, and get him into the bed. "Look, you have to start asking for help," Mulder told him, "I can't damn well guess everything you want. When your feet heal you'll be able to do more for yourself, but you can't yet. It's just a waiting game is all - you've played them before."

Skinner didn't reply. Somewhere, deep inside, something vital shut down. He knew he didn't want to eat, or drink, or speak, or live. He wanted to crawl into the darkness and lie there, for all eternity if need be.

"Look," Mulder continued, "you just need to get better. Your job's waiting for you, you can get your apartment back in a few months. Staying at the Mulder Penitentiary isn't a life sentence. You've got a Get Out of Jail Free card, you just can't use it yet, that's all."

Skinner turned over, and closed his eyes. He wasn't sure that he remembered how to speak, and if he did, he was too tired to manage it. If Mulder thought it was just a question of getting back on his feet, then he was wrong. What Noy had done to his body was nothing compared to what he had done to his soul. Skinner felt as if he had been broken into a myriad of tiny pieces, like shattered shards of crystal, each of them scattered to the four winds, and he was just too weary to even look for them. He curled up in a fetal position, and hoped for the blessed, numbing relief of sleep.

Mulder stared at the other man's hunched back for a long time, in exasperated silence. He wasn't usually at such a loss with how to deal with situations that involved either Scully or Skinner, but this was different. He had always been able to get through to the big man before. He knew that Skinner hid behind walls, that he was a deeply private person, but on more than one occasion he'd managed to draw him out, and make him talk. Mulder wasn't

afraid of confrontation, or of delving into someone's psyche to make them face up to the truth. He had done that much for Skinner during that fiasco with the call girl. Skinner hadn't been so unreachable then, though. Now it was as if he were surrounded by a dark cloud, and Mulder couldn't get through, either physically or mentally. When he tried to push his mind into the link Skinner wouldn't answer. It was like shouting down a well.

Mulder returned to the other room, and surveyed the pizza and salad. He wasn't exactly hungry, but one of them had to keep eating. He ignored the salad, but took the pizza over to the couch and laid down in his favorite position, on his back, one hand clutching the remote, the pizza balanced on his chest. He turned the video on, and remembered, too late, that it contained his latest porno offering. He wouldn't have felt uncomfortable watching porn with Skinner in the other room, if it weren't for the fact that when he watched sex videos, gay or straight, he always ended up fantasizing about people not a million miles from home. How the hell was he ever going to be able to jack off again now they were in this damn nexus? He wondered if he was condemned to a life of permanent sexual frustration from here on in, as he really couldn't see himself sharing his fantasies with his chief objects of desire via nexus TV. He was just puzzling this dilemma, when the 'phone rang.

"What the hell was that?" Scully's voice.

"What? Oh, that. Skinner fell over and cut his head," Mulder winced.

"Is he okay? It really hurt."

"I know. I felt it too." Mulder sighed. "As for whether he's okay - well he's still alive, if that's what you mean. More than that, I don't know."

"Why? What's happened?" He could sense her concern through the link. There had been so much said, and yet unsaid between them. She knew he loved her, he knew she loved Skinner, and both of them knew that Mulder's sexuality swung both ways. It had been one hell of a way to be outed. Emotions ebbed and flowed through the nexus in an endless eddying whirlpool, and stray thoughts, or whole internal monologues danced in and out of focus. It was confusing, and with all of them feeling too vulnerable to just sit around a table and talk it out, they were lost in the dark, fumbling their way along while trying desperately to hang onto some semblance of their own personalities

"Scully, he's impossible. I don't think this is going to work. I'm worried about him. He wouldn't eat anything, and he's so damn stubborn. Jeez, I thought you had your moments but he beats you hands down."

"I am not stubborn." Scully sounded surprised.

"Yeah. Right! Dream on, unbeliever," Mulder chuckled.

"What about you!" she retorted. "Once you get an idea in your head, nothing on this earth can stop you from following it."

"That's called determination, not being stubborn." Mulder paused suddenly, feeling a lump in his throat. For a few seconds they had returned to the teasing relationship he valued so much - and he hadn't realized how much he'd missed it.

"Mulder, you need to get some sleep," Scully said softly. "When I felt Skinner's pain earlier, I tried talking, you know, with this head stuff, but everything's gone quiet, and kind of dark." He was surprised to hear a wistful tone in her voice.

"It's hard keeping your mental voice focused too, isn't it?" he added. "I'm not sure that telepathy is ever going to be as good as real speech. You have to really concentrate on what you're saying."

"I don't find it that hard." She sounded surprised. Mulder hadn't thought that their experiences of the nexus might actually be different. "I know what you mean though - your 'voice' jumps all over the place. One minute you're telling me something about Skinner, and the next you're musing on some X File in the bottom of your filing cabinet, at the same time as salivating over a doughnut. It's like having three different TV stations on at once. God, Mulder, is that what it's like being inside your mind?"

"Must be," he grinned down the phone, "and yours is scarily tidy. Or maybe you've just learned how to organize the messy bits more effectively."

"Hmmm." She was silent for a while. He lay there, just listening to her breathe, hearing a faint echo of her thoughts from across town - they weren't anything he could get a handle on, but somehow it was reassuring just listening to their whispering caress. "I'll come by tomorrow, Mulder, after work. Goodnight."

"Night, Scully." Mulder clicked the 'phone off, and stared at the heaving, panting bodies onscreen, then with a sigh, he turned the video off as well. He just couldn't. Not with Skinner in the next room, and not with Scully listening in from across town. He switched off the TV, and closed his eyes. It was still early, but somehow he had a feeling he was going to need all his strength for tomorrow.

Scully ran herself a bath, and lay in the bubble-filled water, with a bar of chocolate, and a good novel to hand. She rarely indulged herself like this, but right now, she felt she could use all the pampering she could get, and hell, nobody **else** was going to pamper her so it had to be a DIY operation - like so much else. Scully ran a finger over one breast, soaping herself. She touched herself lightly. Usually, such pampering sessions ended somewhat inevitably with the use of a certain electrical item she kept in her night-stand. She thought for a moment, about the nexus. She had no wish for either Skinner, or Mulder to witness her in this most private of activities, but another, stronger, side of herself reasoned that they'd have to know. Sooner, or later, they all had to come to terms with the fact that they could tune into any bodily activity, however private, or intimate. Scully had already eavesdropped, guiltily, on a trip Mulder had made to the bathroom. She hadn't done it on purpose, but there was a fascination with understanding how the opposite sex felt, what their

experiences were, and Scully was only human. If they similarly eavesdropped on her - well, good luck to them. She wondered again whether it was simple lack of imagination that made her so sanguine about being watched in this way, but decided it wasn't. Somehow, the fact that it was Skinner, and Mulder who could see her stripped of all pretense, merely made it seem natural to her. It felt right. She knew them now, more intimately than she had ever known anybody. She was joined to them, and she knew only that this was as it should be. It felt almost as if the universe had clicked into place.

Scully could hear her heart beating in the warmth of the bath water, and she had a faint flash of memory, of a woman holding her hand, showing her the world's heart beating in time to the lifeblood of every single being who lived upon it. Scully wondered whether the memory was real, or a dream, but it didn't matter. She felt connected with herself, with Mulder, and Skinner, with the world, in a way she couldn't remember ever feeling before. It was a good sensation. She felt at peace.

Scully soaked herself thoroughly, the warm water relaxing her stiff neck and shoulders, then enveloped herself in a fluffy towel and wandered back to her bedroom. She unwrapped herself in front of the mirror, and traced a hand over her thigh, tangled it through her pubic hair, stroked herself gently, fascinated by her reflection. Her red hair hung in damp tendrils down the side of her face. She closed her eyes, put her head back, and thought of Tom's blond hair, and wide, strong shoulders. She imagined Todd's mouth caressing her nipples, then moving lower. She hadn't thought about the twins in years - some memories were too painful to look at, and that particular memory had ended in the most embarrassing experience of her life. Yet ever since she'd had her out of body experience, she felt more comfortable with the memory. Now, she looked back with longing. They hadn't done anything wrong. Those boys had been so right for her at that time in her life, and so good to her. She'd felt special with them in a way she hadn't felt in so many long, lonely years. Scully opened her eyes again, and gave a start. Behind her, looking at her reflection in the mirror over her shoulder, was a young man she recognized. He had dark hair, and solemn brown eyes, and he was wearing a torn uniform.

"Dana?" his voice sounded choked, and she smiled at him in the mirror.

"Jace."

He offered a tentative hand, and she took it, and kissed it, gently, then placed it on her breast. He pressed close to her naked flesh, so close that she could feel his hard, lean, body, and she arched back against him. His fingers played with her breasts, and his mouth nuzzled at her neck.

Scully closed her eyes, moaning softly as he touched her. In her mind's eye she could see two heads, two bodies, caressing, and fondling her. She thought at first that it was the twins, and smiled. The stroking on her nipples intensified, and a finger slipped between the folds of flesh between her thighs. Scully leaned back, opened up, and another finger caressed her. She made little panting cries, "oh, please..." she looked down, and saw two dark heads, and not the twin blond heads she had expected. Scully faltered, wondering why this fantasy was going along a different path. One of her phantom lovers couldn't have been

more than 18-years-old, his dark brown eyes glowing with desire, as he kissed her breasts, and belly. He had wide, powerful shoulders, and a solidly muscled body. The other was gently tickling her clit with his fingers, his hazel eyes alight with love, a curl of dark hair flopping onto his forehead, his mouth wide and sensuous.

"You're so beautiful," someone was whispering. "So special. Our Dana, our beautiful Dana..." The whispering was like a chorus, surrounding her with love, and she fell back onto her bed, and allowed her ghostly lovers to caress her thighs, to dip their dark heads down onto her white flesh, to stroke, and soothe, and tease to climax. "So soft...so warm..." The fingers continued their work between her legs, and a warm mouth sucked at her breasts, arousing her to the point of ecstasy. Scully threw back her head and cried out her climax, and when the sound of the blood rushing through her head stilled, the ghostly voices had faded to nothing more than an echo. She opened her eyes, and found that the room was empty, and she was alone.

Skinner awoke to the beating of his own heart. It was dark outside, and for a moment, he felt the warm, hazy after-effects of the shared dreaming. He'd forgotten about that aspect of the nexus. He bathed for a moment in the glow of a sensuous twining of bodies, and a love that ran so deep it reached into the very core of his soul. He stretched out his body, feeling good, then reality kicked in. His back hurt, his feet hurt, and his head was pounding. He glanced at the pain meds on the night stand, but mutely turned away from them. There was so much that he couldn't control right now, but he would have mastery over his own pain if that was all that was allowed. He'd suffer it, and transcend it, and, yes, maybe even enjoy it, for the distraction it afforded him.

He slept fitfully, on and off, but peace eluded him. When he closed his eyes, he saw his fallen comrades, and heard their strangled death cries through the link, or he recoiled in horror from the sight of Cressie's bloated, naked body as they dragged her from the lake. Scully's flashing blue eyes morphed eerily into Noy's pale, evil ones, Mulder's dark hair hid his brother's scared eyes - a mish-mash of images from his past assaulted and tormented him.

He longed for the comfort of his office, for the peaceful oblivion of his job, of knowing he could rely on his body, and his strength. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the boy, standing, looking out of the window.

"Feeling sorry for yourself?" the kid's tone was mocking.

"I told you I didn't want to go back," Skinner growled. "I said I didn't want to go back, but you made me, and now **this** has happened."

"You have to go back, before you can go forward." The boy wandered over to the bed, and morphed into the Old Woman. She smiled at him tenderly, and touched his bare scalp.

"Leave me alone." He moved away, angrily, and she backed off, her expression sad.

"Go back, go all the way back, Jace, then you can move on." She bent to kiss him, and he felt the press of warmth on his skin.

"I said, fuck off!" he yelled, turning over, and waking up to find Mulder opening the drapes.

"Good morning to you too," the agent murmured. "Not a good night I take it?"

"Don't you have to get to work?" Skinner glanced at the clock on the night-stand.

"No. I've taken a couple of days off. I don't think you're in any condition to be left alone right now."

"Mulder, I'll do just fine on my own. Go to work."

"Sorry. Scully's orders." Mulder shrugged apologetically. "It's nice out. How about I get some breakfast then take you for a walk?"

"Oh god, I'm not a fucking dog!" Skinner snapped. Mulder's reaction flooded the nexus with a mixture of anger and pity. Skinner knew he was behaving badly, but couldn't stop himself.

They both stared at each other, hearts sinking, coming to terms with the dismal reality that they were facing a whole day together, which wasn't where either of them wanted to be right now.

Mulder was grateful for the knock on the door that evening. It had, he reflected, been one of the worst days of his entire life. Skinner had barely eaten, hardly spoken, and when he did, it was merely to bite Mulder's head off. Mulder wasn't sure just how much sympathy he could hand out without snapping. He was just glad that Skinner was sunk so deep in darkness that he hadn't noticed Mulder's bitter thoughts, or emotions.

Mulder opened the door, and his breath left his body in a whoosh. Scully stood there - only she wasn't a Scully he'd ever seen before. She was dressed in tight, faded jeans, and a bright blue sweater that clung to her breasts and brought out the vivid color of her eyes. He had a sudden, hazy recollection of a dream, of kissing her beautiful, naked body, and a flush rose to his cheeks.

"Scully?" he murmured.

"Mulder." She kissed his cheek, which was something she didn't exactly make a habit of doing.

"Walter." She walked over to the wheelchair, and kissed **his** cheek too. "Okay - we're going out," she announced, ignoring the looks of surprise that both men were giving her. Even Skinner seemed to emerge from his sullen reverie for long enough to be dazzled by Scully's new found aura. She shone as bright as any sapphire or ruby.

"Out?" Mulder got Skinner a sweater and slung it to him, then grabbed his own jacket.

"Yes. I thought Adams Morgan might be nice." Scully started pushing the chair before either man could object. "There's a ton of restaurants there. We could decide what kind of food to eat. Walter? Do you have a preference?"

"No." Skinner shrugged, his stance clearly indicating that he didn't give a damn. Mulder strode on ahead and summoned the elevator.

"There's whole wave of ethnic restaurants recently opened - some are pretty good," Scully informed them.

"There's a great Vietnamese restaurant down there," Mulder added. "Have you ever had Vietnamese food, Walter?"

Skinner gave him a withering look. "Yeah - in Vietnam," he said pointedly. Mulder felt sure the ground would open up and swallow him. He flushed, and glanced at Scully, who shook her head.

"Ethiopian," she said quickly and decisively, changing the subject. "I really like African food."

The food was definitely good. Scully ordered a Messob for them to share, and a whole platter arrived, with little heaps of food on it; some egg dishes, some meat, some fish, some vegetable. Skinner sat in his wheelchair, gazing at the platter listlessly. Mulder had only managed to get one piece of toast down the other man's throat all day, and he wasn't even entirely sure about that, as his back had been turned for some of the time Skinner had been eating it. Mulder fidgeted, overcompensating for the atmosphere by talking too much, but Scully was equally vivacious. Mulder had never seen her so sparkling, and he had no idea why she had been so suddenly transformed. She had always been a beautiful woman, but now she had an aura that was truly stunning. He knew he wasn't the only one blinded by her - the waiters, and other diners were also sneaking looks in her direction. Only Skinner seemed unimpressed. The big man barely spoke, and Mulder felt he made things worse every time he tried to drag him into the conversation. Skinner had a put-down for every comment he made. Skinner made no effort to eat, and finally Scully wrapped a piece of the light, thin bread around some of the meat sauce, and held it up to his mouth. He looked at her in mute rebellion for a moment, then opened up and allowed her to feed him. Thereafter she just kept doing it, whether Skinner liked it or not, and he opened his mouth grudgingly for each morsel. Mulder envied her courage. He'd tried something similar that morning and the results had been...unpleasant. Scully had been right about Skinner - he wouldn't explode with her. Even in the midst of such a dark depression, he was still too much the gentleman to shout at her. It was only when he was alone with Mulder that he allowed the demons to come out and dance.

Mulder almost dreaded the moment when they returned to the apartment, and Scully would leave. He helped Skinner into the bedroom, and then returned to the other room, shutting the door softly behind them. Then he sat next to Scully on the couch in silence for a

moment, feeling Skinner's grasp on consciousness fade. It was only when Mulder knew Skinner had fallen asleep, that he turned to Scully.

"I don't think I can take much more of this," he told her.

"You have to. Mulder - he's only been here for one day," she pointed out. "Don't you want to help him?"

"Yes, but I'm not. He despises me. I can't say anything without him jumping down my throat. Scully, let's face it, he needs expert care."

"That's exactly what he's got," Scully told him, getting up and going to his bookshelf. She put her hand on one of the volumes, took it out, and laid it on his coffee table, then another, and another. "Mulder, you did get a psychology degree..." she began, pointing to the texts.

"That was years ago!" he protested.

"And I've seen you in action - you've out-psyched serial killers. How can one tired, wounded, damaged friend be too much for you?"

"Because I know him. I care about him. I'm scared of screwing up, and getting something seriously wrong," Mulder admitted miserably.

"Mulder." She took hold of his shoulders, and looked him square in the eye. "You are what he needs right now. I don't know why, I just know it's true."

"What about you?" he asked.

"He'll accept comfort from me - he'll let me feed him, and touch him, but he won't talk to me. You've seen that."

"He doesn't do more than snap at me," Mulder told her.

"Well, make him. You're not the one who's lost everything here, Mulder," she kissed his lips gently. "You're the smartest person I've ever met, and you have a handle on people, a kind of intuition that I could never hope to emulate. If anyone can figure him out, it's you."

Mulder gazed at her. She radiated a kind of strength, and beauty that was mesmerizing. He had never seen her so sure, so certain, so in charge.

"What the hell happened to you anyhow?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You seem different."

"I feel different." She gave a half smile. "It's like...Mulder, when I was younger, I agonized about whether to go into the FBI or pursue my career as a doctor, or even whether to

channel my energy into medical research. I spent hours and hours talking it over with Melissa, and Mom and Dad. Mom, being Mom, used to tell me that God had a plan for all of us, but I always thought that was a cop-out. It seemed to me that God would want you to make your own plan - why else give us the sense we were born with, to say nothing of free will? I...I do have faith," Scully ducked her head down, and played with the hem of her sweater. "I do have faith, but it's changed. It changed last night. I don't understand how, or why, I just know there's a purpose, and I've figured out what I am, and where I belong. Before, every day seemed to be a process of negotiation. Should I go to work, or should I hand in my notice?" He caught his breath, and she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mulder, but there were so many occasions when I felt as if your work, and your quest were swallowing me whole. I wasn't sure who I was any more. I believed in the work, and yet..." she shrugged. "Well, I wondered if I wouldn't be more use working as a doctor, or a scientist, than chasing after monsters and conspiracies. Today though, today I didn't wake up questioning myself. Today I knew the answers. I know what's important now." She looked up, and smiled, and the sight took his breath away.

"What's that?" he asked.

"You. And him." She nodded towards the bedroom door. "The three of us - this nexus. It's given me something I've never had before. I'd fight for it. I'd die for it. If necessary..." she paused, her face serious, "I'd even kill for it. You're always the one acting on instinct, and I'm always the one reminding you about science, and logic, but not this time. This time I can only tell you something nebulous, something I have no proof of, but the truth is, that I believe. I believe that there is something so right about this, and I don't know why, or how, I just do," she shrugged. "There, go call the men in white coats, Mulder. You and I have finally swapped sides!"

"The truth is in all of us, huh?" he teased gently. "I just wish it wasn't so damn hard." He glanced towards the bedroom door, lost in thought.

"You can do it," she told him firmly. "You have to. For all of us."

Mulder said goodbye to her a few minutes later, then turned back and gazed thoughtfully at the books on the table. He fished out his glasses, sat down on the couch, put his long legs up on the coffee table, and began flicking through the books. He felt emotionally tired and wrung out after the difficult day with Skinner. He couldn't help wondering if the way he was treating the other man was helping. Maybe treating Skinner with kid gloves was just making things worse. Mulder looked up a number of different opinions on the subject, and tried to work it out for himself. He devoured the concept of "tough love" from various papers on drug abuse, but decided that neither he nor Skinner were ready for that yet. A thought occurred to him. Maybe he was approaching this from the wrong angle - maybe he needed to write a profile of the other man, as he would when getting into the mind of a serial killer.

Mulder went to his filing cabinet and got out the notes on the Nexus project that he had taken from Lubecker's office. He'd gone back to arrest the other man straight after freeing Skinner, and had taken the opportunity to thoroughly clean out the entire laboratory. He'd already read the notes about the Nexus project several times, but now he went through

them with a fine tooth-comb. He was so engrossed in his work, that he didn't notice the movement by the door. There was no shadow, the door didn't open, but suddenly, Mulder looked up to find that he wasn't alone. There was a kid sitting on his couch. Mulder held his breath - he recognized the boy, although he had no idea how he had got there.

"Jace?" he smiled.

The kid gave a tentative smile back, then flicked through the files Mulder was looking at. "What are you doing?" he asked, his dark brown eyes solemn.

"Trying to figure you out," Mulder said softly, pinching himself, unsure if he was awake or asleep. This was the closest he'd ever been to experiencing a paranormal event at first hand, and his mind was racing, trying to make sense of it.

"Me? I'm not that tough to figure out."

Mulder was fascinated by the boy - he **was** clearly Skinner, but so young, and without that businesslike veneer, and aura of authority that characterized his older self. There was an endearing innocence to him, combined with a streetwise bravado that came and went. The boy wasn't sure of himself.

"Why are you here, Jace?" Mulder asked gently, taking his glasses off and placing them on the table.

"To be with you." The kid shrugged. "You're more fun than **he** is right now." He gestured with his head in the direction of the doorway.

"Hmm. That's not strictly true." Mulder sat back, anxious not to scare his unexpected guest away.

"What do you mean?" The boy's face was half in shadow. He moved into the light, and Mulder fought to stop himself from gasping. The kid was blood-stained, and his uniform was torn, yet he looked quite solid, and corporeal. His dark eyes were glowing softly in the lamplight.

"Well, I think you're a manifestation of Skinner. You're using the nexus to escape from the prison of your own mind. Being here with me is an expression that you'd like to get well. That's a good sign, but you can't do it by escaping. You have to face up to this, Jace."

"You know what's best for me?" The boy's eyes were wide, and scared. He was asking a question, not issuing a challenge.

"I think so." Mulder got up, and moved carefully, so carefully, over to the couch. He hunkered down beside the boy, and reached out a tentative hand to touch him. The kid didn't move. Mulder was surprised to find Jace's arm felt real. He was solid flesh. "Walter..." Mulder hesitated. The boy froze, as if he wanted to run, but he was still there - the use of his name hadn't scared him away. "Is it only as Jace that you can show your vulnerability? Is that what's happening here?" Mulder gazed searchingly at the boy.

"I was scared every day in Vietnam. I woke up scared, and I went to bed scared," Jace whispered. "Have you lived with fear like that, Fox?"

"No. I can't say I have." Mulder watched the light and dark chase fleeting battles across Jace's pale face.

"When they died..." Mulder had a vision of a wrenching, screaming agony that almost blinded him. A dozen minds died, crying out their pain, and a white light exploded in his mind.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Jace's hands batted at his face, bringing him back to reality.

"It's okay. Thanks for sharing that with me," Mulder said, trying to pull his thoughts back into some semblance of calm after the horror he'd just witnessed.

"I can never stop it happening. I can't keep you safe." Jace gave a broken shrug. "I've put you in danger. I'll lose you both, like I lost the others."

"Is that why you keep pushing us away?" Mulder bit on his lip. God, he understood! He understood all too well. "Jace, when my sister was abducted, I blamed myself. I blamed myself for years. If I'm honest..." Mulder hesitated, but Jace's dark eyes never left his face, and he knew he had no choice but to give the kid the truth. He deserved nothing less. "If I'm honest, I still do. A small part of me always will. There's a word for it in these textbooks, Jace - it's called Survivor's Guilt. There's also PTSD?" Mulder stared at the kid keenly. He wasn't sure how much he knew, and whether he was patronizing him or not. It felt so strange to be sitting here, talking to an 18-year-old version of the man who had been his boss, and who he knew himself to be in love with. Jace was frowning.

"Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," Mulder offered. "I know they didn't give vets much help with that after 'Nam. If nobody ever helped you, maybe you just buried that side of yourself - literally. You buried the Walter who died that day back in 'Nam, and maybe he could have stayed buried if it hadn't been for your recent traumatic experiences. Now, you have to make peace with him, Walter. Can you do that?"

"Can you help me?" the boy's voice was so faint as to be almost ethereal.

Mulder smiled. "I'd like to, but you're not an easy guy to help, Walter." He was reminded of Melissa, the woman he'd interviewed about the Temple of the Seven Stars. She had been suffering from a multiple personality disorder, each sub-personality invented by some part of her mind in order to protect her. Skinner seemed to have just the one. Mulder wondered if the other man divided his life up into before his OBE in 'Nam, and after it. He watched the emotions splay over the kid's face. He was so young - his expressions so honest, and open, compared to the much more guarded personality he would become. "Do you want my help, Walter?" he said softly. "Is it so hard to ask for it?"

Jace began rocking, back and forth, clutching his stomach. Mulder put a gentle hand on his back. "Walter?" he pressed.

"I'm scared," Jace confided.

"Of what? Of me? Of being known?"

"Of what I might find out." Jace's face was deathly white, his eyes darker than ever. The blood in his hair was a sickly red.

"Why?"

"I was...there's a field." The boy stared into space, his eyes tortured.

"Nam?" Mulder pressed, carefully.

"No. Before." The boy carried on rocking back and forth. Mulder slid his hand over his shoulder, and held him. His shoulders were thinner than Skinner's broad frame, and he was trembling. "I can hear a dog, barking. There's a tractor...I can't do it." Jace broke off from the narrative. "Don't make me do it," he begged Mulder.

"You have to," Mulder said, his tone uncompromising. If he could have spared the kid he would have done, he'd have done anything to help him, but he didn't know any other way. It was so strange, seeing Skinner like this - as this lost, innocent youth. "Do you trust me?" he asked.

"What?" The boy looked distracted, then he gave a strange half laugh. "Of course," he whispered. "You more than anyone. You, and Dana." Mulder couldn't help feeling a glow of pride, and warmth on hearing those words. The way Skinner was treating them these days he wasn't sure the other man even liked him, let alone trusted them.

"Well then. What harm can you come to?" he asked, reasonably. "I'm not Noy, Walter. I won't use the memory against you."

"I can't." The boy shook his head, his movements becoming more violent, and his eyes seeming to become darker, and deeper.

"Walter, it's okay. Look, we can..." Mulder blinked. One minute he had been talking to the kid, and the next he'd just vanished, as if he hadn't been there, and yet he'd been solid. Real. Mulder had seen him, held him, touched him. "Jace?" He got up, and glanced around the empty apartment. "Walter?" He walked over to the bedroom, and opened the door. Skinner was fast asleep, his face as pale as that of the boy Mulder had just been talking to. "Walter?" Mulder crouched down beside the bed, but if the other man was awake, he didn't move. Mulder watched him for a moment, seeing the boy all too clearly in the visage of the sleeping man.

"I know you're in there, Walter. Just hang on. It might be a rough ride, but I promise I'll be here," he whispered. "I'm going to step back. You know what you have to do. When you're ready, I'll be waiting."

Scully spent the following day pulling in a couple of favors, then she drove to the prison where Robert Noy was being held. He had been Skinner's nemesis, and she was going to make damn sure that he didn't end up being a nemesis for all of them. Scully had never felt so liberated from pure thought before in her entire life. She was acting on instinct, a kind of protective instinct that she'd never felt before, like a lioness fighting for her pride. She walked down the long corridors, and into the visitor's room, and paused in the doorway, just looking at him. He wasn't a big man, and, sitting there, head bowed, examining his fingers, he didn't seem remotely dangerous, but Scully wasn't fooled. This man had single handedly taken Skinner apart. She was here to see if he had any clues about how to put him back together again, and she didn't intend to leave empty handed. Sensing her gaze upon him, Noy lifted his head, and looked straight at her. His pale, almost opaque eyes, sent a shiver down her spine. He smiled, and waved a hand at the chair waiting for her.

"Agent Scully. How good to see you. I wondered when you'd show up," he murmured.

"Don't try that crap on me." She took her seat opposite him. "You had no idea I'd come here."

"Of course I did. I know you." He gave her an easy smile, that didn't reach those cold, evil eyes. "He told me all about you. Do you know what he'd like to do to you?"

"I'm not here to listen to this," she snapped.

"Oh?" He put his head on one side. "He's crazy about you. I asked him if he wanted to sleep with you, and he lied. Of course, he has some fairly old-fashioned views about love - he knows you're already in love with Agent Mulder, so he doesn't see a place for himself in your charming little love-nest. Obviously the man has never considered the intriguing possibilities of a menage a trois. You have, though, Agent Scully, haven't you? Hmm?"

Scully felt almost lulled by the seductive cadence of his voice, and the sense that he somehow **knew** her. Damn, no wonder Skinner, drugged, dehydrated, and tortured, had been sucked into this man's twisted view of the universe.

"You don't know me, Noy," she hissed.

"Of course I do." He gave her a bland smile. "How is dear Walter? Ah, don't tell me; he's suffering, isn't he? You see, my dear Dana, you must give me credit for knowing my job - and you really should have allowed me to complete it."

"If, by that, you mean torturing him half to death, then..."

"Dana!" He interrupted her, looking hurt. "I know my craft, my dear. There was no gratuitous torture, just enough to get to the bottom of dear Walter's soul. After that, well, you interfered just as we were getting to the good bit - the bit where I built him back up again. That would have been so good. Walter would truly have been my masterpiece if you hadn't stopped me. I was so close." Noy smiled. "I'm an artist, my dear, and Walter was the most exquisite example of my art. So many secrets, so many walls, all of them stripped

down. Now, the poor man doesn't have any defenses. You were very cruel to remove him from my care in that way."

"Your **care**," Scully spat. "He'll never walk properly again because of you."

"Ah, well. I never said there wouldn't be a price to be paid. He was so obstinate." Noy gave a little chuckle. Scully closed her eyes. The frightening thing was that Noy could almost make her believe in this nonsense. He had gotten to the core of Skinner's soul, and maybe he **could** do a better job of building the big man back up than either she or Mulder seemed to be managing.

"Self doubt? How very un-Scully." Noy seemed to guess her thoughts. She noticed the way those shifting, opaque eyes minutely examined every expression, every nuance of her body language. Oh yes, he was very skilled indeed in his black art.

"We're not here to talk about me. I want to talk about him," she said firmly.

"Forgive me for reducing our charming little conversation down to its most crude level - but what's in it for me?" Noy leaned back in his chair.

"Restitution? Recompense?" she suggested. "Don't you have any sense of remorse for what you did?"

"Remorse? You could hardly expect that from a sociopath, my dear." He smiled, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "No. I think I would need a show of good faith from you in order to reveal any of my little secrets."

"All right then. Maybe we can do a deal. If you co-operate with me, I'll certainly make sure it's noted on your file. The court might view that favorably."

"Or they might not." Noy shrugged.

"I've spoken to Marla, and Antonio." She tried a different tack. "Why did you use them, Noy? What were you hoping to achieve?"

"You know the answer to that very well, Dana." He smiled smugly. "I did think Agent Mulder might drop by and see me, then I weighed it up, and I knew it had to be you. You make an interesting threesome. Have you noticed the patterns in your lives? I have. Walter's wasn't the only file my employer gave to me - he also provided me with yours, and Mulder's. I needed them to make sense of the whole picture. And what a pretty picture it is too." He laughed out loud.

"Tell me how I can help him," she demanded in despair. She hadn't intended to let him know how much this meant to her, but she wasn't sure that she could truly hide anything from this man.

"You can't. A bullet to the head might be kindest." Noy shrugged. "Ironically, it's probably the nexus that's making it impossible for him to heal. He can't hide, you see, and he does so

need to hide. Such beautiful secrets. Did you know that he loves you? Of course you do. Did you know that he also loves Mulder? That **did** intrigue me - there's no evidence of any previous homosexual encounters in his life."

"You don't know him, and you sure as hell don't know me." Scully got out her gun, and loaded a cartridge. Noy watched her, intrigued. "This panel between us is bullet-proof," Scully informed him, deciding to try a little psyching out of her own. "However, if I were to fire at the same place enough times, it'll shatter. What you have to weigh up, is how long it will take to break. Will there be enough time for the guards to come in here and stop me, or will I get to you first. This..." she took another object out of her pocket, "is a silencer. So maybe they won't even hear me. They're not watching - they let me see you as a favor, and they're turning a blind eye. I don't suppose they'll allow me to go so far as to kill you without trying to stop me, but by then it might be too late. What do you say?"

"I say that you're bluffing," he smiled, but she noticed the faintest flicker of morbid curiosity passing across his pallid face.

"You see, if he doesn't get better, then we all go down with him, so I have nothing to lose," she said nonchalantly, taking aim at the plastic panel. "You know enough about the nexus to know that's true."

"And I know enough about you to know that you wouldn't pull that trigger," he said. "You can't threaten me, Dana, and you can't offer me anything, either, although it's been very amusing toying with you. I'm already very well protected. Do you seriously think I'll be convicted for what happened to Walter? I have friends, my dear, in very high places. We both know that. I'm not going to prison for this. I'm getting away with it - scot free."

Scully felt an anger rise up deep inside her heart. It built up into a single ball of shining white energy, and she couldn't contain it. There was a soundless explosion that made the world go black, and the next thing she knew, Noy was picking himself up off the floor, nursing a bruise to his chin. She wasn't sure which of them was more surprised - her, or him. The plastic screen between them remained untouched, and undamaged. She had somehow managed to reach through it, and deliver a resounding punch to his jaw, without physically **doing** anything.

"I see that you've discovered some of the more unusual aspects of the nexus," he murmured, rubbing his chin ruefully.

"You knew about that?" She sat down, feeling exhausted. She heard a faint clamoring sound in her mind, and then the nexus went black, as if it had been shut down altogether. She had no idea what that meant.

"You didn't?" he smirked, seating himself back down again. "Ah, you, and Walter, and Mulder. The blind leading the blind, blundering around without knowing anything about what you're truly capable of."

"Why don't you tell me?" She folded her arms. "Or next time I might hit you with more than just a psychic right hook."

"What do I know?" He gave one of his little chuckles. "Not much. They only told me enough to help me with Walter's particular case. You were born...when? 1964?" Scully nodded. "Well that part of the immunization program was 2nd stage so you certainly have the capability. You, and every man or woman in your generation. Of course most of them can't access their special...gifts, because they don't have the sheer energy required for it. You do. You have three people's energy to draw on. Don't ask me how it works because I don't know. And I don't know **why** either." He held up his hand to interrupt her before she could even ask the question. "I just know what they told me. You, Agent Mulder, even me - if I were in a nexus, or had some other form of energy to draw upon, we all have dormant specialized skills. Congratulations - it looks like you've just found yours."

Scully tried to process this information, her mind working overtime. She attempted to call Mulder through the nexus, but she assumed he must be asleep because it felt like she was talking from underneath a blanket - her voice was muffled, and there was no reply.

"Lubecker - does he know more?" she demanded.

Noy shrugged. "I have no idea." He sat back, and gave her an assessing stare.

"What about Skinner?" Scully asked. "How can we help him? **Can** we even help him?"

"Normally I'd say no," Noy smiled. "I did, after all, do a very thorough job. But...the nexus is the one variable I can't calculate. It'll either send him over the edge, or it'll save him. Only you, Mulder, and Walter himself have the power to influence that outcome. Walter's a strong man - my only advice to you is to be even stronger. Good luck, my dear," he smirked, as if it were already a lost cause.

Scully gazed at him coolly, then picked up her gun, and got to her feet. "You'd better hope that your friends in the Consortium don't manage to save your hide," she told him, slamming the gun back in her holster. He raised an eyebrow. "Because the minute you're a free man, you're also a dead man," she hissed, in a low, deadly voice.

"Dana Scully? Assassin? I don't think so." He shook his head, those wintry eyes never leaving her face.

"I've changed." She leaned across the table, her own deep blue eyes spitting fire. "Before the nexus I was just a ghost, drifting aimlessly. Now I know who, and what, I am, and nobody touches either of my friends again. Ever." Scully felt a protective surge inside that she had felt briefly before, when Melissa had died, and when Emily had been ill but it was far eclipsed by her current emotion. Skinner and Mulder were part of her now, and it was a bond that was stronger than any blood tie. She loved them, and would fight to the death for them, like a lioness protecting her cubs.

"Ah, not an assassin - an avenging angel. A very **beautiful** avenging angel. It's an image that suits you, my dear." Noy nodded, his expression serious. "I'll take your words under advisement." For the first time since the interview had begun, Scully felt that she might have rattled the other man's cage. She was aware of those chilling, opaque eyes never leaving her back, as she turned and walked towards the door but her own resolve was even stronger.

When she got to the door, she paused, and glanced back at him, resonating her determination in every atom of her body, and she knew from the expression on his face, that she had finally gotten to him.

Scully drove quickly to Mulder's apartment in order to share her discoveries with him, but there was no reply to her knock on the door. She got out the set of keys he had given her, and opened the door, drawing her gun. Mulder was sitting in an armchair, one arm lolling by his side, his eyes closed. There wasn't a mark on him but he was out cold. A quick look in the bedroom revealed that Skinner was in a similar condition, his face etched with lines of pain, his expression frozen into a mask of anxiety.

"Walter, wake up." Skinner heard the voices from a long way away, but it took him several minutes to follow them back into consciousness, then he found himself gasping for air. The world coalesced into a pair of bright blue eyes, which he identified as belonging to Scully, and he came to with a start, shivering violently. She covered him with another blanket, and pressed a cup of strong, sweet coffee to his lips. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Mulder, shivering equally violently, wrapped up in at least 3 sweaters. Mulder dropped onto the bed as if his legs wouldn't hold him up any more.

"What happened?" Mulder asked.

Skinner looked at Scully, and tried, and failed, to rub the sleep out of his eyes. He felt so tired he could barely move.

"Scully...did something," he muttered. "She drained the link."

"I'm sorry." Scully looked abject in her remorse. "I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know it would have any effect. It just happened."

"I repeat, **what** happened?" Mulder asked again. He sank back onto the pillow beside Skinner. His face was pale, and there were enormous dark rings under his eyes. Scully hesitated, and glanced at Skinner, and he sensed her anxiety, then she took a deep breath.

"I went to see Noy. I wanted information. He...made me angry and before I knew it, I'd zapped him with some kind of energy discharge. He went down like he'd been hit by Mike Tyson."

"Way to go, Scully." Mulder grinned. "Energy discharge? You mean it was a physical manifestation of your emotional state? Fascinating. Kind of like a poltergeist, although the psychic energy there is usually only released by disturbed adolescents. I think you're a bit old to have your own personal poltergeist, Scully, and besides, I'd be really envious if you had one, and not me."

"I don't understand it either." Scully sat down on the bed next to Skinner, and looked at him. "Do you?" she asked.

"No. Yes. No." He shrugged.

"Ah, very decisive, Walter," Mulder murmured. Skinner was aware of two sets of eyes looking at him expectantly. He stared into the distance. He knew he had started speaking, he just didn't have any power over his own voice. He felt detached, numb, and the room dissolved around him, taking him back in time, to a different place. A memory, long suppressed, flashed into his mind.

"He was just a kid...we never spoke about him again. He was the youngest in our unit. One day, we were out in the jungle, and under attack. We were outnumbered - there must have been thirty of those guys - and we didn't stand a chance. Corporal Lyle...Ritchie...he, I don't know what he did, but the next thing I knew we were waking up in the jungle surrounded by the charred bodies of a whole unit of Vietcong, and Ritchie... couldn't get his head around what he'd done. **They** knew of course...we were always monitored, and they pulled us back in and tested us to death. Literally."

Skinner closed his eyes, remembering, then opened them again. "Ritchie's response showed that it was possible to use the nexus to kill - that's why they wanted me to kill one of my unit. They wanted to monitor the results, they wanted quantifiable evidence, so that they could repeat the process, duplicate it in whatever other goddamn nexuses they had set up. When I refused...they took Ritchie away to do some more tests on him - invasive procedures. We all felt it when he died. I should have just done it and saved them all the trouble, but I couldn't choose. How could I choose? Which man lives, which man dies. They were all part of the nexus, part of **me**. How could I?" Skinner felt the coffee mug tumble out of his nerveless grasp. Scully caught it before it spilled, and set it on the nightstand.

"You couldn't," Mulder told him firmly. Skinner felt his face taken between two long, slender hands, and held fast. "You couldn't," Mulder repeated urgently, but Skinner wasn't listening. He had failed his lost comrades, just as he had failed his father, his mother, his brother, Cressie, Nathan, Sharon, Mulder and Scully. He didn't know why he hadn't seen it before. An endless list of failure from a man who had always prided himself on...what was it Noy had pointed out - that he was a perfectionist? Oh yeah, he'd failed. He'd failed every single significant relationship in his entire life. He was a grade A fuck up.

Scully went home. Occasionally, at regular intervals, she returned but Skinner neither noticed nor cared. Days passed, maybe weeks, he couldn't be sure. Mulder and Scully occasionally managed to coax some food down his throat, but it was only just enough to keep him alive. His feet healed - as much as they were going to at least, although they were badly scarred, and he couldn't walk without relying heavily on a cane. He was never exactly going to be doing any boxing again. He sometimes spent an hour just getting dressed. Everything was too much effort. A whole day would pass as he sat watching the rain spiral down the windowpane. When he looked at himself in the mirror he saw a pale, gaunt stranger. He looked old, with dark rings under his eyes, and new lines on his forehead. His jaw was permanently clenched, his lips set in a hard, straight line. He paid no attention to the nexus, and the link faded into a gray, lifeless, barely pulsing shadow of what it had once been. Skinner knew it was still there, still haunting them all, but he found that by ignoring it, it almost went away.

Mulder more or less left him alone. They shared an apartment, but they rarely spoke. Skinner wasn't sure, but he thought Mulder was waiting for him to start talking. If that was the case, he'd have a long wait. There was nothing Skinner wanted to say. He was vaguely aware that the apartment was a mess: Mulder could never be bothered to buy groceries, and he had some habits that were downright irritating, including leaving the remains of his pizza dinners lying around until they developed a layer of furry, green mould, but none of this got under Skinner's skin, as it would have normally, so he just ignored it.

Life developed a routine. Mulder went to work, and came home, went to work, came home. Went to work...and didn't come home. Skinner didn't blame him. He knew he wasn't exactly good company right now. He sat in the armchair, in the dark, watching out of the window, trying not to care. He resisted the urge to follow the link into Mulder's mind, to demand to know where the hell he was. It was better for all of them if they ignored the nexus, and pretended it wasn't there. That way, only stray thoughts and the strongest emotions made it through. Sometime later, he felt a streak of pain, and again, he fought down an impulse to find out what had happened. The pain had been mild - hardly life-threatening. Mulder had probably just stubbed his toe or something. It was five a.m. when Mulder rolled back home, dressed in a black sweater, and black pants.

"Oh, you're still up," Mulder turned the light on, and Skinner winced as it assaulted his eyes.

"Yeah. I wondered where you were."

"Did you? I'm surprised you even noticed."

"Hmm." Skinner watched as Mulder rolled up his sleeve to reveal a long graze to his elbow. "Well? Where were you?" he demanded.

"Out, pursuing my hobbies. Just like the old days," Mulder shrugged.

"Hobbies?" Skinner raised an eyebrow.

"I was breaking into a government building." Mulder looked at him, a challenge in his eyes.

"And did you get caught too, just like the old days?" Skinner asked, wincing as Mulder slapped some iodine onto the graze.

"Oh yeah - and dragged in front of AD Kersh. I am now officially suspended for two weeks - without pay, and he's set OPC on my back too." Mulder made a face.

"You are so goddamn stupid!" Skinner erupted. The rage felt good. Damn good. It was the first time he'd actually felt **anything** for weeks.

Mulder tensed. "Yeah, I am. Why does that upset you? It's my life, my goddamn career. Don't you even care what information I was looking for?"

"Is it any different to what you usually look for? Evidence of ET? Proof of conspiracies?" Skinner couldn't keep the sneer out of his voice. Mulder was so close he filled his vision, and

he could smell the blood from his wound, and the sweat on his clothes. Somehow, for no reason he could understand, both enraged him. He felt his anger spiraling out of control, unreasonable, uncontrollable. He wanted to get hold of Mulder's shoulders, and shake some sense into him, to smash his fist into flesh, to seek comfort in violence, and allow the darkness full reign.

"What more proof do I need? I've got you. Living evidence of the conspiracies if nothing else. Or why else do you think they experimented on you?"

"To give them the edge in 'Nam. This has nothing to do with little green men, Mulder," Skinner growled.

"Yes it does." Mulder pulled a file out from under his jacket, and laid it on the table. "I went back to Thurmont, Walter."

"You did what?" Skinner felt a blind rage consume him. "You stupid bastard. After what happened last time? Supposing they'd used that weapon on you again?"

"Why would you care?" Mulder was standing close - too close.

"After all the goddamn trouble I went to last time to get you back? What do you think?" Skinner snarled, feeling the raw rage well up inside him.

"What trouble did you go to, Walter? You won't tell us. You never even speak to us." Mulder was so close Skinner could feel the warmth of his breath on his cheek. "Why not? We know about Jace, we know what you did to save our lives, and we know what it cost you. What's more you damn well know that we know. What the hell is the problem here? Why won't you let us in?"

"Drop it, Mulder," Skinner growled, stepping back.

"Or what?" Mulder kept moving forward, and Skinner found himself backed up against the wall. "Do you think I don't know what you want to do right now, Walter? You want to plant your fist in my face, and hurt me as much as you're hurting. Well do it. Go on. I won't stop you. Here...right here." He pointed at his chin. "Go on, big guy. Lay one on me."

"Don't fucking tempt me," Skinner flared.

"Do it!" Mulder's eyes sparked flames of angry hazel light, and Skinner couldn't stop himself. His fists flashed out, blazed streaks of pain into Mulder's flesh. One to his chin, another to his ribs. Skinner pummelled, lost in some dark angry place, that didn't know reason. He was so weak that the exertion wore him out, and his breath came in hard, fast gasps, but still he kept landing those blows, and still Mulder kept taking them. "Keep going...come on...hurt me...because it hurts you too, doesn't it?" Mulder pointed out, accurately enough. The nexus had sprung into life, glowing an angry red, pulsing into violent flares of light. Every blow from Skinner's fist hurt the big man as much as it hurt his agent. "Come on - that's not hard enough - you can do more than that. Or are you too weak? Is that it? Too damn useless? Is it just another thing you can't do right?"

Skinner felt the humming in his mind reach a crescendo. He stepped forward, and swung his arm back, wanting to silence Mulder forever, to cut out the fire of his words, imprinted as they were on his soul, but his wounded feet wouldn't hold him, and the movement toppled him sideways to the floor. He lay on the rug, winded, then saw Mulder loom over him. The other man pinned his hands above his head, and he was too weak from lack of food to dislodge him.

"What's the matter, Walter? Can't you even struggle, damn it?" Mulder's hand tightened around his wrists, and he turned his head away from the words, seeking the respite of oblivion. Mulder slapped his face - once, twice, making him angry again, keeping him angry, keeping him **here**, not allowing him to slip away, and it was too much. "How does it feel to be useless? Not to be able to **do** anything, out of control, Walter, a **victim**. How does it feel?"

Skinner didn't cry - he wasn't sure he even knew how to any more. He just keened, his whole body shaking from side to side, with a vicious trembling he couldn't stop. Mulder released the hold on his wrists, and laid down next to him on the hard floor, got hold of him as if he were a child, and pulled him into an embrace. Skinner made a perfunctory attempt to push him away, but Mulder brushed his protest aside, held him even tighter, and Skinner gave in. He put out his arms, blindly, and wrapped them around the other man's body, convulsed against him, needing the comfort of warm flesh. He felt every last vestige of his pride disappear. He had sunk to this; a useless, pathetic husk of humanity.

"It's okay, it's going to be okay," Mulder soothed; meaningless, mindless words, to someone too badly wounded to understand anything other than platitudes. "It's not a question of pride...it's sharing. You can be honest with us. You've seen the worst of us," Mulder told him.

"I can't stand being this," Skinner rasped, taking fistfuls of Mulder's shirt, another wave of revulsion, and self-loathing sending him into spasm.

"What?" Mulder still wouldn't let him rest. "What's so wrong with being you, Walter?"

"I fucked everything up. From the beginning. It was all my fault." Skinner kicked out, tried to reject Mulder's embrace, but the other man was too strong for him in his weakened condition. He gasped for air, unable to see, his mind buzzing with images from the past.

"What do you mean?" Mulder's hazel eyes were closer than he'd ever seen them before. Close enough to drown in. Skinner closed his own eyes, and clung onto sanity by his fingertips. "Tell me about the field, Walter. You're standing in a field. There's a dog," Mulder's voice was hypnotic, sending Skinner back in time, to a place he didn't want to go. He didn't ask how Mulder knew about it - somehow he wasn't surprised by that fact.

"Don't make me," he whispered.

"I have to." Mulder's voice was cool, hard, in control. He was holding Skinner tight, not allowing him to escape from the questions, from the unwanted comfort, not granting him any peace.

"The field..." Skinner could smell the grass, heard a dog barking, and the sound of a child playing, and knew he was sending the image down the link, as vivid as any picture on a TV screen. "My father. He told me to stay inside, but I didn't," he began, faltering. "I was playing with my dog." He saw the dog, leaping up, then running away, eagerly, and he followed it, laughing, calling out. He was so busy playing that he didn't see the tractor until it was too late. Then several images coalesced into one. His father's shout of surprise, the way he swerved to avoid his son, the wrenching of hard metal as it twisted and fell, the front tire slipping into a pothole, and then a ghostly silence, punctuated only by the sound of someone screaming. "Shit. I can see it, Mulder. I can see it." Skinner shivered. "My father's accident was my fault. I remember the way the tractor fell. There was this noise, and...my father just disappeared underneath it. I couldn't see him. No, that's not true. I was too scared to look. Like I was too scared to look at my OBE in 'Nam. I'm such a fucking coward, Mulder. I've hidden that fact for years, hidden from it for years, but that's the bottom line."

"You were five years old," Mulder's voice sounded strange, choked.

"I didn't even remember it, but it was always there, just out of reach. They never made me feel bad about it but..."

"But you kept paying for it anyway, huh? Oh shit, Walter, you and I have so much in common."

Skinner started to shiver, almost convulsing with the fears that kept him paralyzed. "What's behind the fear, Walter?" Mulder's voice was insistent, breaking into the silence, and darkness. "I've been feeling the fear since you woke up in the hospital, but I don't understand it. Tell me. How is it connected to your father's accident?"

Skinner shook his head, turned his face away, but Mulder turned it back.

"I'm not going to let you hide. This might be hard but you have to face it. I'm going to make you. Tell me what you're afraid of."

Skinner couldn't stop the image of his own crippled feet rising up in his mind. It crashed savagely through the link, making Mulder gasp as if he had been punched again, and then a wave of realization radiated between them as Mulder figured it out.

"Your father couldn't handle his disability, but you're not him, Walter." Mulder's fingers were so gentle as they caressed his face. They were at odds with the younger man's hard muscled body that was holding Skinner tight, keeping him trapped, keeping him safe. "You think that your frustrations with your disability will cause you to treat Scully and me the way your father treated his family?" Mulder asked, holding Skinner's face between his hands. Skinner nodded, blindly. "That won't happen. You're not him." Mulder seemed so sure, but Skinner wasn't.

"You don't understand," he croaked. "It's worse for you two. I could escape - and I did, when I upped and enlisted for 'Nam. There's no escape for you and Dana."

"We don't need an escape. We do need you," Mulder said simply. His voice was warm now, and soothing. Skinner wondered just how damn stupid they must look, lying on the hard floor in a tangle of limbs. He opened his eyes, and winced when he saw the damage he'd done. Mulder's jaw was bruised, and he had a cut under his eye. "I'll live," Mulder told him softly, as Skinner's thoughts tumbled transparently through the nexus. "Thank god you gave up eating, or I don't think I'd be saying that right now! I'll live, Walter, and you know what? So will you, my friend. So will you."

Mulder got up, hauled Skinner to his feet, and deposited him on the couch. Then he sat down beside him, still panting.

"You look like shit," Skinner commented, sprawled untidily on the couch, too exhausted to move.

"Yeah, but you should see what the other guy looks like," Mulder grinned.

"Bad, huh?" Skinner winced.

"Oh yeah." Mulder shook his head. "I always knew you were a stubborn SOB, Walter, but I never thought it would take you this long to finally give in."

"Give in to what?" Skinner frowned.

"Me!" Mulder laughed.

The light dawned visibly on Skinner's face. "You were trying to get me angry on purpose?"

"Trying! Shit - yeah! I've been trying to get some kind of reaction out of you for weeks, Walter, doing all kinds of stuff I thought would piss you off. I thought something would make you snap, and start yelling - I really needed a glimmer of an opening to get my foot in, so to speak. In the beginning you were flaring up all over the place, but you wouldn't talk. Then, just when it was clear you were ready to talk, you just closed down completely. I didn't much like you angry, but I sure as hell hated you being a zombie."

"Did you really go back to Thurmont? You didn't just say that to get a reaction out of me?"

"No. I did go up to Thurmont, and before you hit me again, I had a very good reason. One of the things I found in those files, is that your friend Doctor Lubecker made an urgent visit to Thurmont while we were all in cloud cuckoo land. Coincidence? I don't think so." Mulder shook his head.

"You never do," Skinner muttered wryly.

"Now that's my Skinner," Mulder beamed. "I haven't figured out the connection yet - I was caught too soon - but I'm sure I'll figure out the answers in time. It's not important right now - you are. Hell, I kept putting off going to Thurmont **because** of you. I should have known

that worrying about one of us would be more likely to get your emotions going again than any other stupid shit I could think of. It fits the profile."

"You did a profile on me?" Skinner asked incredulously, his head lolling back wearily on the couch.

"Yeah." Mulder dug a piece of paper out of his pocket, and handed it over. "Stubborn, pig-headed, close-mouthed, kind-hearted, control freak. Sound like anyone you recognize?"

"Hell, no." Skinner gave the ghost of an ironic smile.

"Hold still." Mulder got up. Skinner looked at him in surprise. "We're going into Mulder shutdown mode. I don't want to get up again unless I have to." Mulder went to the cupboard and pulled out a bag of tortilla chips and some salsa, then searched around under a dresser for a bottle of whisky.

"Interesting choice of drinks cabinet," Skinner remarked. The other man looked like shit, Mulder thought, but at least this was a break-through, of sorts.

"I don't drink much," Mulder shrugged.

"And you hid what you did have so I wouldn't get my hands on it," Skinner guessed, accurately enough.

"Yeah. Well, you were bad enough sober. I shudder to think what you'd have been like drunk off your ass," Mulder replied. He sat back down on the sofa, and handed Skinner the bottle. "Now, I intend to find out," he grinned. "I want to get you totally smashed, Walter."

"This is some kind of guy thing, isn't it?" Skinner almost smiled.

"Yeah. I thought that was what guys did when they hung out together. Not that I'd know." Mulder gave a self-deprecating shrug. "With the Lone Gunmen I just make geek talk, and with Richard...well..." Mulder shrugged, going red. "We weren't exactly regular guys hanging out," he finished lamely, knowing he'd just sent a particularly lurid image through the nexus of exactly what he and the Senator used to spend their time doing. "Sorry," he murmured. "You really have to tell me how to control this thought thing better. It's driving me crazy."

"You should be on the receiving end." Skinner managed a wry smile. "I used to wonder about you and Matheson."

"You did?" Mulder bit on his lip. "Why?"

"Well, Matheson is well-known in Washington circles for his, uh, predilection for young men, and he has a habit of helping out his ex-boyfriends in their careers. You were one of his proteges. There was gossip. You had to be aware of that." Skinner was looking at him keenly.

"There's always been gossip about me, one way or another. I never take much notice of it," Mulder shrugged. "Richard was my first great love, but not my last. He dumped me. You know all this. Here, drink," he ordered, steering the subject away from that difficult area. Skinner didn't need telling twice. He put the bottle to his lips, and took a swig. "And talk." Mulder took the bottle from him.

"About what?" Skinner put his head back, wincing as that movement pained him. Mulder could feel his total exhaustion, radiating through the nexus.

"Anything. Everything. Nam, your father, your wife. I don't mind. All of it. Any of it."

"It hurts." Skinner shrugged.

"I know. Walter," Mulder grabbed hold of Skinner's neck and pulled him down so that he was resting on his chest. "Just talk. Don't think." Mulder felt the other man fight it for a moment, but it was a token resistance. Skinner's body relaxed, and he remained with his back resting on Mulder's chest, both of them staring at the ceiling. "I know what it's like to have a...difficult relationship with a father. I know what it's like to carry guilt around for something that happened to you as a child. Who would have thought that Spooky Mulder and the buttoned up Assistant Director would have so much in common, huh?" He nudged Skinner.

"I identified with your quest more than you knew," Skinner admitted wryly. "That's why I created the nexus, Mulder. It wasn't to spy on you, or to betray you. I just...wanted to know that you and Scully were safe, to see what you were investigating. Didn't you ever wonder why I signed off on your cases for so many years? I knew what you'd seen, Mulder. I saw it too, through your eyes. I believed. I always believed. Maybe since I was 18-years-old, since the OBE. I don't know." Skinner shrugged, and took another swig of whisky.

"Walter - you need to stop feeling guilty about the nexus. I know I reacted badly when I first found out, but now...well, it fascinates me - and there are worse people to share thoughts and emotions with."

"Like Bill and Hillary Clinton?" Skinner suggested, idly.

"Well, I was thinking more of the torment that would be a nexus with AD Kersh, and Martha Stewart, but yeah, Bill and Hillary would be high on the list," Mulder smirked. "The entire cast of *Friends* spring to mind too."

"But presumably they're as nothing compared to the entire cast of *The Waltons*," Skinner pointed out.

"True." Mulder nodded sagely. "The entire cast of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on the other hand, well, now you're talking." He was rewarded by a snort of laughter from the other man. "Walter," Mulder handed him back the whisky bottle. "You can't expect to repair the damage Noy did in one go. It'll take a while. Don't get frustrated with yourself because of that. There'll be good and bad days."

"Yeah. I know." Skinner drank again. "Are you drunk yet?" he asked.

"Nearly. How about you?"

"Yeah. Nearly. I don't remember when I last ate. Scully probably knows. She seems to be taking an unnatural interest in that subject. The liquor's gone straight to my head. Sharon used to hate it when I got drunk. Had to sleep on the couch. She was a teetotaler. Ever seen Scully drunk?"

"Nah," Mulder felt warm, soothed by the alcohol, and the catharsis of Skinner's confidences. "She could probably drink both of us under the table though," he slurred.

"Yeah." Skinner nodded exuberantly. "That woman's something else. You in love with her?" He glanced up at Mulder.

"Yeah. You?" Mulder glanced down at him, his arm tightening protectively across Skinner's chest..

"Yeah." Skinner nodded again.

"She'd kill me if she knew I'd got you drunk in your condition," Mulder observed.

"What a way to die though," Skinner pointed out.

"Yeah." Both men smiled happily at the ceiling for a while, musing on that fantasy.

A day passed in drunken talk, interspersed with naps. Mulder felt sure he should be trying to get some food down Skinner's throat, but the company, and shared reminiscences were also what Skinner needed right now, and he didn't want to interrupt that. He wasn't sure how much time passed, but at some point Skinner hauled himself off to his bedroom, and a day or so later Mulder was sure he heard the other man in the bathroom, then pottering around the kitchen. He was therefore, all the more surprised when he finally got up, and glanced around the apartment, to find that it was empty. Skinner's bed had been made, and the bedroom was tidy and ordered, whereas before it had been a mess, but the other man had definitely gone. There was no note, nothing. Mulder could have cursed himself for his stupidity. Skinner was vulnerable right now - anything could have happened to him. He sent his mind along the link - Skinner was definitely still alive, but wherever he was, he wasn't answering. In desperation, Mulder called Scully, then got washed and dressed while he waited for her to arrive.

"He wasn't abducted again?" Scully demanded when she showed up, glancing around the apartment as if she expected to find Skinner hiding somewhere.

"No. I know I was drunk, but I wasn't **that** drunk. And besides, what kind of kidnappers tidy up someone's bedroom when they abduct them?" Mulder pointed out.

Scully frowned. "What frame of mind was he in? And what the hell happened to your face?" she asked, suddenly coming to a halt, and looking at him properly for the first time.

"We had a fight. And he was okay. I think." Mulder shrugged.

"A fight? That was what all that stuff was about a couple of days ago? I figured something big was going on from all the activity filtering through the nexus, but I didn't want to interfere." She looked suddenly vulnerable, and Mulder could have cursed himself for not calling her before. It must have been hell for her to glimpse half-seen thoughts and emotions through the nexus, and not understand what was going on.

"I'm sorry." He spread his arms in a gesture of contrition. "I was just concentrating on him. There was some big stuff going on inside his head, Scully."

"And fighting helped clear that up did it?" she remarked, waspishly. "No, don't tell me. It's clearly a guy thing. I don't want to know. You're sure he didn't leave a note?"

"Yeah. I'm sure." Mulder nodded. "I've tried contacting him, the other way... you know, but..."

"Nothing. I know. I tried too." Scully's blue eyes radiated her concern. "How long has he been gone? I mean, he didn't just go out to get some groceries, did he?"

"No. It's been several hours. Scully, he doesn't walk too well, and he's as weak as a kitten. I'm really worried."

"Me too, Mulder." Scully thought about it for a moment. "Do you think he went to Crystal City? Or to the Hoover Building? Maybe he wants to try and get his old life back."

"No." An idea suddenly occurred to Mulder, and he grabbed his keys from the coffee table with one hand, and Scully's arm with the other. "He's gone back further than that, Scully."

Lone Oak, Iowa.

May 2nd, 1999.

"Mulder, he isn't here." Scully glanced around the empty farmhouse. Mulder's shoulders slumped. He had been so certain. Damn, he'd look a fool if Skinner **had** just gone out shopping after all - but if he had, why was he blanking them through the nexus? A thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Not here, Scully. Come on." He set off over the hill, towards the lake.

"Déjà vu. Who says it doesn't exist?" Scully mumbled under her breath.

It was a lot warmer this time than when they'd last been there. There was spring blossom on the branches, and birds were singing. It was a beautiful place, with an air of peace, and tranquility but Mulder barely noticed that. He was looking for something man-made.

"There." Mulder pointed at the rental car parked outside Cressida Mulvey's cabin. Scully pushed past him, and started to run. Mulder watched her go, then followed on behind, his long legs eating up the distance in no time.

Scully was nearing the cabin when there was a sudden sound inside both their minds, almost like the chiming of a bell. The door opened, and Skinner limped out onto the porch. He glanced at them, and they stood, frozen, unsure what their reception would be. Then he smiled. Mulder felt a lump rise in his throat. He watched, from under a tree, as Scully gave an inarticulate cry, and threw herself up the steps to the cabin, and into Skinner's waiting arms. The nexus suddenly opened up, and Mulder drowned in its warm, soothing balm. It was a shock to be completely enveloped in something so benign, so comfortable, like slipping on an old, much-loved pair of slippers.

<I'm sorry. I won't ignore it again, unless that's what you want.> Skinner's voice.

Mulder smiled: they made a good couple. Skinner was gaunt, pale, and far too thin, but he was alive again. There was some crucial Skinner essence in the nexus that had been missing for so long. A kind of humming vibrancy, and a quiet, understated strength. He was wearing an open-necked checked shirt, and faded denim jeans that were just hanging off him, and Scully looked so right in his arms, her red hair shining in the Spring sunshine, her eyes as blue as the sky overhead. Mulder stood there, frozen to the spot. He didn't belong here. He didn't belong with them.

Skinner murmured something to Scully, then looked up, and his eyes unerringly found Mulder, even half-camouflaged as he was by the tree. Mulder just shrugged, and nodded, not wanting to intrude, wanting to slip quietly away. Skinner held out a hand, and Mulder found himself walking towards them, then running, and before long he had joined his friends on the porch. Scully's thoughts were radiating through the nexus, glorying in it. Mulder didn't think he'd ever seen her so much in her element before. He allowed himself to be pulled into a group bear hug, then backed off, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you both. I just needed some time alone, to think things through without interruption," Skinner said, as their reproachful thoughts reverberated through the link. "There's something...before we go any further, there's something I have to tell you." Mulder could sense Skinner's anxiety but he had no idea what was coming next. "I kept it from you...because...I don't have any answers, or solutions. Basically, the nanocytes - I still carry them in my body. Krycek was controlling them, on the orders of our smoking friend. He was using them to bring me into line, and to make me deliver the two of you, gift wrapped, so to speak."

"But you turned him down. That was when he decided to send you along to Noy?" Mulder pieced together that particular puzzle with a resigned sigh.

"Something like that." Skinner glanced down at his hands. "I'm sorry. I know I've made you both vulnerable, I also know that if Krycek reactivates the nanocytes, or even uses them to kill me, then you two will suffer as a result. I remember what it feels like to lose people you're in a nexus with. You don't ever recover. Not really." Skinner shrugged. "I wanted to

tell you that. You see, it's up to you. I can't close the nexus, but I can withdraw as much as possible, keep it lifeless, the way I've done for the past couple of months, and we can try and return to our old lives - or a semblance of them at least. It's up to you both. I'll let you decide. Take as long as you want." Skinner turned to walk back into the cabin, but Scully stopped him by putting her hand on his arm. She glanced at her partner.

"I can't talk for Mulder, but I know what I want," she told him firmly.

Mulder's reaction was more mixed. He knew he did want the nexus. It was beguiling, seducing, and he longed to just give up, and bask in its warmth, but he didn't find such trust easy, even with these two people, whom he loved more than anyone else. He looked from Scully's pale face, to Skinner's haggard one, and knew he wanted to make things right, somehow. Anyhow.

"I'd prefer that we tried, rather than just let those bastards win," he murmured. "We'll deal with Krycek, and his boss, when the time comes. In the meantime...the nexus intrigues me. I'd like to find out more."

Skinner gave a strained smile, his eyes still anxious, but Scully beamed, her thanks radiating through the link. They stood there for a moment, awkward, embarrassed by what they had all just agreed on, knowing that it required a kind of sharing and commitment that was beyond anything they'd ever experienced before.

Scully broke the mood. She glanced through the open door of the cabin, then gave a startled gasp.

"Last time we were here, it looked so lived in. Now..." Mulder looked over her shoulder at the dark interior, covered in cobwebs.

"It's been empty for years," Skinner told them both.

"I'm surprised. It's a pretty hideaway. Who owns it?" Mulder asked.

"I do." Skinner said, then he laughed out loud at their surprise. "Cressie left it to me in her will. It was all she had. The cabin's not worth much, and there isn't much land, but Mulder's right - it makes a nice hideaway, which is why I'm here. I've...decided to stay here for a while," he confided.

Scully's head snapped up. "Alone?" she asked, her expression anxious.

"Well...not by choice, but you both have jobs to go to, and, as Mulder so rightly pointed out, I have a lot of healing to do. I'm not ready to go back to work yet. I'll do just fine staying here, doing the place up."

"But not alone," Scully insisted. "I have some vacation time due. Mulder?" She looked at him, and he nodded. He probably had at least two months vacation time banked up. He hated vacations, but maybe this one would do him good. They all needed time to get to know each other, within the context of the nexus, and where better than here, away from

the stresses and strains of their lives back in DC. "Could we stay here with you? Would that be all right?" Scully asked Skinner.

"I'd like that. Very much." Skinner gave a shy smile, then offered her his hand. "Come on. Let me show you around."

It was pretty basic, Scully thought to herself, and she'd never considered herself to be much of a homemaker but she threw herself into renovating the cabin in a way that took them all by surprise. The cabin was small - just one big bedroom, a large living area, a bathroom and a kitchen, and it wasn't exactly comfortable, but it was where Skinner wanted to be, so they all endured the primitive living conditions while they worked on making it habitable. She worried at first, that she'd have to return to work after a couple of weeks, when her vacation time expired, but Mulder came up with an ingenious solution to **that** particular problem. He disappeared off to DC one morning, and returned with a trunk full of clothes for all of them, and a big grin plastered over his face.

"We can take as much time off as we want," he informed them, as they sat out on the porch, eating a meal of barbecued sausages cooked over an open fire, as the kitchen was a complete shell while they remodeled it.

"How's that?" Skinner took a swig of beer, and put his feet up on the railing. He mostly wandered around in socks in the cabin, as it hurt his feet to wear shoes, although he'd happily don his sneakers if they had to go into town, or out into the yard to saw up some lumber. Both Mulder and Scully knew how much it hurt him to put his swollen feet into shoes though. He didn't walk easily, or without pain, but he could at least get around with the aid of his cane. "Don't tell us, you just went up to Kersh, said you wanted paid vacation leave in order to decorate a cabin in the woods, and he was so relieved to get rid of you he agreed?"

"Almost." Mulder grinned. "No, as a matter of fact I managed to convince him that you were in danger of being abducted again. I said you'd need around the clock guarding until you were fully recovered and able to come back to work, and I volunteered Scully and me for the task. The bit about wanting to get rid of me is right though. I think he thought it was his lucky day. He couldn't sign the 302 fast enough!"

Scully put her arm around Mulder's shoulder, and kissed his cheek. "Thanks, partner," she said, feeling utterly relieved. It was such a weight off her shoulders. She needed to be here right now, with these two men.

"What about the OPC review?" Skinner asked softly. Mulder's eyes met his.

"Shelved, apparently, on the orders of a higher authority. Any idea who that might be?"

"None at all." Skinner gave the faintest smile, and none of them were in any doubt that he'd made some strategic phone calls.

Scully felt a haze of peace as she caught the glance that passed between the two men. She cherished their growing affection for each other. The nexus grew stronger each day, and with it, Skinner's own strength seemed to reassert itself. The big man had filled out again, and the work around the house helped return him to something approaching his former level of fitness. It would still be a while before he was totally recovered, but it was a good start.

Mulder had been right though - sometimes there were good days, in fact most days were good days, but there were the occasional bad days too. On one occasion, a song came onto the radio, while they were busy painting the living room, and he put his brush down abruptly, and limped out of the cabin, still in his socks. He disappeared into the woods for a couple of hours, then returned, tired, cold, hungry, and limping badly, but smiling again. Nobody said anything. Scully just sat him down, and brought over a bowl of warm water, adding some tea tree oil to it. She bathed his feet, while Mulder brought him a coffee. His feet needed bandaging, but Scully did that without scolding him, and he smiled at her gratefully. Although he never did tell them what had set off that particular incident, Scully received a hazy image of a dark-haired woman she knew instantly to be his mother, and saw her dancing around a farmhouse kitchen to the song they'd heard on the radio. *Bittersweet*, a voice echoed in her mind. She knew how even the most simple memories could take on profound depths of emotion when you were feeling vulnerable.

On another occasion he spent the entire day just sitting, his arms wrapped tight around his chest, watching them work. He didn't say anything, just stared into space, fighting invisible demons. Scully dropped a kiss onto his head every time she passed him, and Mulder teased him incessantly about not doing his fair share about the place, until Skinner finally gave a growling response which broke the mood. Both agents were aware they had to tread carefully, but their efforts were paying off, and Skinner's good days far outweighed the bad.

It was fun too. Scully couldn't remember the last time she'd actually had some honest to goodness fun. She enjoyed not having to dress in power suits, and go out there and do battle in the bastion of male dominated working practices that was the FBI. Her biggest decision in the morning was which pair of paint-stained jeans she should wear. She tied up her hair into a ponytail as it got longer, eschewed make-up, and woke up each day with two men who she felt closer to than anyone she'd ever met before. They were part of her, their minds as familiar as their faces.

Mulder's mind was all over the place; bright, spiraling, colorful - kaleidoscopic in its shifting intensity. His emotions were equally complex, a dizzying cascade of feelings, like a waterfall. He kept his companions constantly amused as they worked, singing along to the radio, yanking Scully's pony-tail, and dancing around, his long limbs contorting comically. Occasionally, when Skinner grew too introspective, Mulder would suddenly hurl himself on the other man, and tickle him viciously until he gave in and laughed helplessly. Mulder loped around in jeans and a sweatshirt, unable to concentrate on any one task for longer than half an hour, but during that time he gave it his total all, focused on it intently, his tongue moistening his lips as he worked, a lock of dark hair falling into his eyes. Scully couldn't resist pinching his butt and trying to distract him - there was something so earnest about him, and

it was such a challenge to break his concentration. He made her shriek with laughter when he finally cracked, and pursued her around the cabin flicking paint at her.

Skinner's mind was more restful, shot through with streaks of silver, that revealed hidden depths. Just when you thought you knew him, another side emerged. His mind was a veritable Russian doll, each layer revealing another within, then another, and another, each like the one before, and yet each uniquely individual, and subtly different. He wore a uniform of gray sweatpants and tee shirts, or faded jeans and shirts, each tucked in neatly, revealing his returning physique. He was the mastermind behind the refurbishment of the cabin, and he had a good technical grasp of how to go about the various building works. Scully loved watching him work. His big hands were so strong, and capable, and his blunt fingers smoothed down pieces of planed wood, almost caressing them, in a way that turned her on so much he'd catch a stray thought, and look up, startled, then wink at her.

"Having another Rambo moment, Cinderella?" he teased, and she didn't even blush these days. She enjoyed sitting with her feet in his lap, after dinner, while he stroked each one, gently. It had been a challenge to get her to sit still, as her feet were so ticklish, but Skinner had a soothing aura, and before long, she found herself relaxing, and succumbing to the loving massage with a sigh of contentment. She adored sitting out on the cabin steps, watching the sun go down over the lake, leaning her head on Mulder's shoulder, and having her feet massaged. They didn't speak, just sat, growing more and more comfortable with each other with each passing day.

None of them had talked about taking their relationship any further, but she knew that was what she wanted. For now though, it wasn't right. They needed more time. This was a time for gentle healing, getting to know each other, and coming to terms with the increased intimacy of the link.

The men allowed her the privacy of the bedroom where she slept on the floor, as there was no bed, while they hunkered down in the living room. Later, when it got warmer, Skinner suggested that they all sleep out under the stars and Scully, still a tomboy at heart, loved the idea. It was on that first night, lying around the campfire, that they experienced another shared dreaming.

Scully was sitting beside a brook. She recognized the forest - it was where she had taken her first lovers, the twins. She was naked. She heard a noise behind her, and looked up, to see Skinner. Not Jace. Skinner. He was smiling at her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Thinking." She held out her hand, and he came over, and took it.

"About what?" He was still smiling.

"You." She looked across the brook, into Mulder's hazel eyes. The other man was sitting on the opposite bank. "And you too," she told him. Then she flicked some water into Skinner's face, and, laughing, jumped into the brook. He followed, grabbed her around the waist, and flicked some water into **her** face. She giggled, then was silent, as he moved close, and

touched her lips with his own. She felt Mulder's hands on her hips, behind her, stroking her. He scooped up handfuls of the cool water, and poured the liquid onto her hair. She put her head back, and noticed the sunlight sparkling through the trees, and she was so happy, standing there, with her two lovers, that she felt as if her heart would burst.

Scully woke up with a start. Skinner was lying on his side, facing away from her, and Mulder was a huddled mass under his blanket. Both men still slept, but she knew that they had all shared the dream. The embers of the fire were still glowing orange. Scully sat and watched them for a while, sending her mind into the nexus, and stealing a peak at the men's dreams. Mulder was chasing through the forest, calling for her, asking where she was. She soothed him softly, and laughed when his dream veered off at a tangent, with the arrival of two bright lights in the sky overhead. Even dreaming, Mulder showed his normal pavlovian response to such manifestations, and he crashed off through the forest towards the lights to investigate. Skinner's forest had turned into a dark, inhospitable jungle. A scream sliced through the air, and Scully jumped. A sudden burst of gunfire surprised her, and she saw Skinner twitch, his body shaking. She got up, and went to lie down beside him.

"It's okay." She pulled him close, and he jerked out of the nightmare, opened his eyes, and gazed at her blearily. "Go back to sleep," she whispered. He nodded, and closed his eyes again. Scully nestled close to his broad chest. She liked being next to him, lying in the warm circle of his arms. He wasn't an easy man to comfort, but in moments like this he could be taken unawares, and Scully was glad of that. She soon fell asleep, but she didn't miss Mulder's look of hurt surprise when he awoke the next day to find that she had slept the night in Skinner's arms.

None of them mentioned the shared dreaming. Scully respected the fact that although she was ready to take the blossoming friendship between them all one step further, it might be harder for the men. She also knew that despite her experience with the twins, her relationship with them had been fundamentally different. Tom and Todd had a unique bond, and shared everything, but Skinner and Mulder had to reach their own agreement on how this relationship would develop. She knew one thing though - if, **when** they took their friendship to the bedroom, they would go together, all three at once, or not all. It simply wasn't an option that anybody would be left out. She loved them both too much to contemplate that, and she couldn't truly have chosen between them. Mulder was her soul-mate. They'd worked together for years, and she looked out for him, worried about him, saved his life on countless occasions, and had her own life saved by him. He wasn't anybody she would have chosen for herself, but he was hers none-the-less. Skinner was different. He was her resting place, her shelter. Strong, courageous and true, he was permanence and stability to counter Mulder's wild brilliance. They complemented and balanced each other.

The cabin started to take shape. It didn't have any furniture, but it was looking good, with fresh coats of paint, and the structural work that Skinner had designed, and she and Mulder had helped him achieve. They had been working hard for several weeks and she thought they had almost finished, when Skinner returned home with an enormous truck-load of lumber. Scully's heart sank.

"What the hell are we going to start making now?" she grumbled.

"You'll see," Skinner replied with an infuriating smile.

"You're getting like Mulder," she observed.

"This is a bad thing?" Mulder inquired, getting up.

"Mulder don't come over - I need that hammer." Scully held out her hand, meaning to point, but instead the hammer whirled through the air and landed with a clatter at her feet. Skinner and Mulder both keeled over simultaneously as if they had been running a marathon.

"You know," Skinner began, panting slightly, and struggling to sit up, "you are really going to have to tell us when you want to borrow all this energy. It's exhausting."

"But I feel...fantastic," Scully replied, rushing over to make sure that both men were okay.

"You would - you've just borrowed half our energy supply for the day," Mulder pointed out.

"I'm sorry." Scully felt a wave of guilt. They both looked so pale. She ran and made them some hot, sweet coffee, and brought out some chocolate and cookies.

"I think," Skinner looked at her over the top of his steaming mug, as he lay in the entrance to the cabin, long legs akimbo, too tired to move, "that we have to work on refining these skills of yours."

"I'd love that." Scully was serious. "You mentioned..." she hesitated. "Ritchie - did he have any control over this power?"

"Yeah." Skinner nodded. He didn't seem upset that she'd raised this subject. "We worked on it for a while. He was able to use it at will, without disrupting the nexus too much, after some practice. Basically, if you control it, then you can only take as much as you need, and it shouldn't take you by surprise, like it did just then. You probably took twenty times as much energy as you actually needed, just to have the end result of moving that hammer from a, to b,..." Skinner broke off abruptly. "Mulder - what are you doing?" he asked. Mulder's head snapped up, guiltily.

"I was just concentrating on the hammer," he muttered lamely.

"Why?" Skinner frowned.

Mulder flushed. "I wanted to see if I can move it too," he admitted. "Okay, at the risk of sounding like a whining kid, how come Scully can do that and I can't? I don't have any special skills!" he wailed. Skinner and Scully stared at him blankly. "Look, you can create the damn nexus, and as far as I can see, you're in charge of it. You can shut it down at will, or open it up, and when you're asleep it's not as strong as when you're awake," Mulder said to Skinner. "Now Scully is acting like a goddamn poltergeist, throwing stuff all over the place, and all I seem to be able to do is get zapped for energy every now and again, like some kind of life-force donor or something!" Mulder finished, flushing furiously.

"Noy said that everyone in our generation had special capabilities," Scully recalled. "So it's probable that you can do it too. You just need to concentrate - like this," she glared at the hammer, and it spun into the air, and smashed against the far wall. Mulder ducked, and put his hands over his head.

"Thank you, Scully, but please don't treat us to any more demonstrations. It would be really embarrassing after the kind of life I've led to be put in my grave by a floating hammer," Mulder groused.

Scully put her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry," she said again, turning back to Skinner, who had gone another degree paler, and was now cramming a whole bar of chocolate into his mouth to recoup the lost energy. "You're right." She sat down with a sigh. "I really need to get this under control."

"The sooner the better." Skinner patted her knee sympathetically, then glanced back at Mulder. "Stop that - it's giving me a headache," he growled. Mulder started guiltily, and tried to pretend that he hadn't been staring at the hammer trying to will it to move. Scully couldn't help herself. She collapsed into a fit of giggles, and when she looked up both men were staring at her, which just made her worse.

"Women," Skinner commented to Mulder.

Mulder sighed theatrically, and shook his head mournfully. "Plumb crazy," he drawled.

Scully's lessons started the next day. She and Skinner spent an hour doing some mental exercises, with Mulder on stand-by with a jug of hot coffee on the stove, and a plate of cookies in easy reach. Scully had likened the lack of energy following one of her displays of pyrotechnics, to the body going into shock, and sweet food seemed to help.

"Could be a great new way to diet," Mulder commented.

"Yes, but first you have the calories leached from you, **then** you replenish," Scully pointed out as he helped himself to his fourth cookie.

Mulder shrugged. "Whatever." He sat on the steps of the cabin, and watched as Scully carefully threw a baseball to Skinner, without touching it. His sense of being left out permeated the link, and Scully felt sorry for him. He had spent his entire life chasing after phenomena just such as this, so it seemed almost cruel that he had to watch while she and Skinner exercised their psychic muscles. The baseball swung violently out of control, and landed in Skinner's midriff with a resounding "oomph." Skinner doubled over.

"I'm sorry. God, I always seem to be saying that." Scully hurried to see if he was okay, but he waved her away.

"Maybe we need to start from the beginning," he said, when he'd got his breath back. "Come here." She walked obediently into his outstretched arms, and stood with her back to his chest. "Okay, empty your mind." She felt his fingers on her head, then his mind, closer than she'd ever felt it before. The nexus glowed with energy, and she wasn't sure where she

ended, and it began. She merged into him, and they were one, with Mulder hovering nearby, still a separate entity. <Now, feel that, use that power, send your thought out a little way...no, don't open your eyes, you can feel the ball, just play with it.> Scully bounced the ball up and down with her mind's eye, made it do an aerial display of amazing agility, then panicked, and sent it flying into the lake.

"Very good," Mulder remarked, clapping ironically, clearly not wanting her to see that he'd been impressed. Scully felt herself separate out from Skinner, and she opened her eyes, dreamily.

"That was...fantastic," she said, gazing up at him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He kissed her forehead.

When she looked around again, Mulder had disappeared back into the cabin.

Scully glanced at the lumber still piled up in the yard, covered by a tarpaulin as they passed it on their way back to the cabin.

"You never did say what that was for," she commented to Skinner. He stopped, took her hand, and looked down into her eyes with an expression that took her breath away.

"I'm going to make a bed," he told her. "A very big bed."

"Big enough for three?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

Skinner smiled, and brushed away a tendril of hair that had sneaked out from her ponytail. "Of course," he replied, then he kissed her again.

The bed soon took shape. Skinner carved a huge wooden headboard, and placed it into position, then stood back to examine his handiwork. Scully stopped varnishing, and stood beside him.

"Looks good," she commented. We just need to let this coat dry, then we can put the mattress on.

"Yeah. What happened to Mulder?" Skinner glanced around the room, wiping his hands on a rag.

"I don't know. He said he had to go and do something," Scully replied.

At that moment they heard hoof-beats outside, and both went to take a look. Mulder walked into the yard, leading two horses.

"Mulder?" Skinner glanced at the horses, perplexed. Mulder's boyish face creased up into a grin.

"Well, you guys have been working so hard that I thought you could do with an excursion. You know what they say about all work and no play," Mulder laughed. "Come and say hello to Mork and Mindy."

"Those aren't really their names, are they?" Scully patted the long nose of a pretty bay mare.

"Nah, I wasn't listening when the lady told me what their names were, but these fit them. I know Walter can't get about much, and I know he misses the open air, and being able to walk around the lake, and take in the scenery, so I thought horses might be the answer. You've got them until tomorrow and then someone's coming by to take them home. I was only allowed to borrow them 'cos everyone in this damn town knows the local hero here." Mulder handed the reins to Skinner. "There's a picnic in one of the saddlebags. I want you guys to have a great time," Mulder said. His emotions shifted, a strange, quicksilver flash that Skinner couldn't quite catch. He was touched by Mulder's thoughtfulness.

"Us? What about you?" Scully asked. "Aren't you coming with us?"

"Do I look as if I know how to ride?" Mulder feigned astonishment. "No, this is for you two. I've been wanting some peace and quiet anyhow."

"Are you feeling okay?" Skinner glanced at him keenly. Mulder shrugged, and again, Skinner felt that quicksilver shift of emotion - Mulder was trying to hide something, and he was thinking very hard about...a brick wall. Skinner frowned.

"Fine!" Mulder said, too brightly, the brick wall staying firmly in place. "Look," he confided, "this nexus is great, but sometimes I feel the need for my own space. Okay? Nothing personal." He handed Skinner the reins of the white stallion. "Go on. Go!" Mulder grinned. "Have a great time." He practically manhandled the pair of them onto the horses, then waved them off.

It was beautiful, Skinner thought, as he rode the horse alongside Scully. She wasn't a very adept rider, but he'd grown up on a farm, and had been scrambling on and off horses his entire childhood. It had been awhile, but it wasn't a skill you ever forgot. He took them around the lake, which was really nothing more than a large pond, at a slow pace, leading Scully's mare when the terrain got more difficult, then handing the reins back to her when the path opened out again. Scully's red hair glowed in the summer sun. She looked so natural, in her torn jeans, with her checked shirt tied across her bare midriff in a casual knot. Her hair was half up, half down, and she had a smattering of freckles across her nose. She looked relaxed, happy, and her blue eyes shone as deeply as the glittering lake. It was warm, and Skinner realized that he was happy too, being out here, in a place he had always loved, with a woman he adored. It was so kind of Mulder to have thought of it. His wounded feet meant that walking any kind of distance was painful, and he had too much pride to allow them to take him out in a wheelchair. The horses had been typical Mulder inspiration. It had been so long since he had an opportunity to explore his old boyhood haunts.

They rode for a couple of hours, then stopped, and examined the contents of the saddlebag. They ate the meal Mulder had packed for them sitting under a tree, gazing out over the shimmering lake. It was almost perfect, but not quite.

"Are you worried about Mulder too?" Scully asked.

"Yeah. He...was trying to hide something," Skinner told her. "He's not very good at that - I can only hear your thoughts and emotions in unguarded moments, usually you're pretty good at not flooding the nexus with them, but he finds that hard. He was thinking about...a brick wall?" he raised an eyebrow at Scully, then clapped a hand against his forehead. " *The Village of the Damned*," he said, suddenly, getting to his feet.

"What?" She jumped up and followed him.

"In the film, there are these telepathic children, and the main character fools them by thinking of a brick wall, so that they won't guess that he's trying to destroy them. Shit, Mulder's planning on running out on us."

"Running out? Why?"

Skinner helped Scully onto her horse, then grabbed the reins of his own mount, and swung himself into the saddle. "Because he thinks he's doing something noble. He thinks that we don't need him. He's a damn fool." Skinner set his horse off at a gallop, and Scully followed on behind as best she could.

<Mulder!> he yelled down the link. <Stay where you are, or I'll damn well kill you!> There was a hesitant exclamatory response, and then he felt Mulder nervously and clumsily build the brick wall back into place. Skinner urged the horse on even faster.

He galloped into the yard, and found Mulder hastily packing his case into the car. The other man stood up, blinking nervously.

"Going somewhere?" Skinner asked dangerously. "Ditching us, maybe?" He got off the horse, and slung the reins over the fence, then limped slowly over, scared of falling without the benefit of his cane.

"Maybe," Mulder shrugged.

"No. You don't do this, Mulder," Skinner told him.

"Why not? We've been here for a couple of months, Walter. The cabin's done. The whole nexus thing has been interesting, but I have to get back to work. I miss it." Skinner knew that was the truth. "Look, I'm not used to vacations. This one probably did me good, but now I want to go home," Mulder said firmly.

"Without saying goodbye?" Skinner asked.

"You're a fine one to complain about **that**," Mulder pointed out.

"All right, but not yet. Listen to what I have to say, and then decide," Skinner told him.

"Please - don't go just yet." He turned his head, as Scully clattered into the yard.

"Okay. Not in front of Scully though. I couldn't bear that. I'll be waiting for you down by the lake," Mulder told him, striding off. Skinner helped Scully off her horse, and began to tell her briefly what had transpired, but she already knew.

"Couldn't help eavesdropping. Sorry," she gave an apologetic smile.

"Okay. Look, I need some time alone with him."

"That's fine. I'll take a bath." Scully turned and went towards the cabin, then stopped.

"Walter." He paused from unsaddling the horse, and looked at her, raising a questioning eyebrow.

"Bring him back. It's time."

"Yes. I know." He smiled at her.

Skinner unsaddled the horses, then set them free in the field behind the cabin. It had a makeshift fence, and it would hold them well enough. Then he grabbed his cane, and limped down to the lake. Mulder was sitting on a log, gazing at the water. Skinner paused. Mulder looked so lost, and lonely, his dark hair blowing in the breeze, his slender shoulders hunched uncomfortably.

"Fox." He sat down beside him. Mulder carried on looking out over the water.

"Ah, I'm 'Fox' now, am I?" he asked.

"If you want. You've been calling me 'Walter' for weeks."

"Well, you don't dislike your name."

"Who says? I hate it actually. It's like Horace, or Reginald or something. Old fashioned. It's a family name. I never liked it." He ran a hand over his bald scalp, feeling a faint breeze on the top of his head.

Mulder glanced at him. "Okay, let's cut the crap, Skinner. I know she loves you because she told me, and anyway it's damn obvious. You told me you love her. That's fine. One of us was always going to luck out, and the other one slink away with his tail between his legs. That'll be me. Foxes are good at that."

Skinner laughed out loud. He couldn't help it. Mulder glared at him.

"I'm sorry." Skinner shook his head. "We didn't mean to make you feel left out. I knew there was something wrong, but I suppose I found it hard to address it. I'm, uh, not used to spilling my guts, as I think you know. Emotional discussions with other men, hell, with anyone, have

never exactly featured large in my life. The bottom line is...we don't want you to go." He put his hand on Mulder's arm, but the other man shook it off.

"Just because we're in this damn nexus together doesn't mean..."

"We can work on that," Skinner interrupted him.

"Work? How?" Mulder looked up in surprise.

"The way I did with Dana. There are some parts of yourself you want to keep private. That's okay - we all understand that. You tend to overwhelm the nexus with your thoughts and emotions sometimes..."

"I guess I'm a more expressive kind of person than you two," Mulder responded hotly. "You're both so damned controlled..."

"It wasn't a criticism," Skinner soothed. "Just an offer of help. I should have offered before, but it was all so new, we were all finding our feet, uh, literally in my case." He glanced at his twisted feet ruefully. "I had a few big adjustments to make myself," he admitted. "It wasn't easy, letting either of you in."

"No. Being known isn't easy." Mulder bit on his lip. "Look, I don't talk about it, and hell, these days I try not to even fucking well **think** about it, but you know the way I feel about you. You've seen inside my goddamn mind, poked around in my memories. You know I'm not exactly straight as an arrow like you. I love Scully, hell, I could even have been straight for Scully, but...well, you know about Richard, and...there were others, mainly one night stands. You probably know about them too."

"Yes. I do." Skinner shrugged.

Mulder thought about that for a moment, swallowed hard, then nodded, accepting the inevitable. "Look, my feelings don't need to screw up the nexus. You and Scully make a good pair. It's because I know what she sees in you, that I can't fight this. It's right. You should be together."

"Mulder, we're in a nexus. There's always going to be the three of us," Skinner pointed out, gently.

"I know. That's good, but not in bed, right? We're close, but not **that** close," Mulder gave a wry grin. "Look, Walter, I know you don't feel the same way about me..." he began, his emotions clouded with misery.

"How do you know that?" Skinner asked.

"Did you screw the guys in your last nexus?" Mulder asked. Skinner flushed. "No, I thought not." Mulder turned his head away. "I'm not a sympathy fuck, Walter. I've got more pride than that."

"Mulder." Skinner turned Mulder's head back, and looked in his eyes. "I didn't sleep with my platoon. Jeez, I can imagine how badly I'd have got beaten up for even suggesting it, and if I'm honest the idea makes me shudder, but..." he held up his hand as Mulder opened his mouth to say something, "let me finish. We did share...we used to have these...I'm not proud of this, you understand, but we'd have what I can only describe as group sex sessions with prostitutes in Saigon. Not really orgies as such - we never shared the girls, but we did share the moment, and the sexual high was magnified through the link. It never satisfied me though." Skinner felt the emptiness of those encounters, the initial high followed by the terrible low that stayed with him for days. "The link creates an intimacy, a closeness, that I've always found erotic. It's no different for me now, than when I was 18, although it might have been more intense then," Skinner confided. "Now...well, I can't help it. I can't describe what it's like being in this nexus with you from my perspective, but I know I created it in the beginning because I cared about you, as much as I cared about Scully. It might not have been a physical kind of love then, but it is now."

"I don't understand." Mulder looked bewildered.

"Okay." Skinner swung one long leg over the log, and straddled it, then sat facing Mulder. "I can't explain it in words, so this will have to do." He put his hands on Mulder's shoulders, and drew him close. Mulder came, reluctantly. Skinner took hold of one of Mulder's hands, and placed it on his own heart. "Close your eyes," he whispered.

He was young, 18-years-old, and he was in a room. There were women, with exotic, almond-shaped eyes, and sleek black hair, talking in sing-song voices. He felt horny. There was a musky scent in the air, perfume mixed with arousal. He kissed one of the women, but he didn't love her. He did love the other men in the room though, and he loved sharing this moment with them. It was the closest, most intimate way he could express his love. They were part of him, and he would have done anything to protect them. The sounds of sex, the heady scent, the high of drugs, all combined in the nexus, creating an erotic wonderland of sensation. Mulder moaned, and put his head back, sharing the experience, reveling in the nexus, abandoning himself to it.

Then, abruptly, the scene shifted. He was sitting in a big office, behind an equally big desk. He was older, and he felt so different, nursing a loss so painful that it still ached inside as if it had happened yesterday. He was closed off, remote, detached from himself, from the world, but that didn't mean that he didn't want more. The memory of the nexus was so vivid he longed to recreate it, to experience that high again. He flicked through a file, then paced the office, waiting for a 'phone call, worrying about two agents in his charge. Agents he respected, people he liked. People in danger. Silently, guiltily, he sent out his thoughts to find them, just to check they were okay, but to do that he had to open up another nexus, just the beginnings, not enough to cause any damage...and then it was too late.

The scene shifted again. A man and a woman were sitting in front of him. They were part of his nexus now, part of him. He loved them, equally, with a passion that was fed by the warmth of the nexus. He would have died for them, a hundred times over, and instead he

just had to look on, wondering if they were even aware of his existence. An eternity of meetings, countless rescues, too many times when he'd risked his butt and career to save them, and always lonely. Always on the outside, looking in. Until now. He wanted them so much it was a physical ache, and he would live with that if they didn't want him.

Another shift, and Mulder stared, fascinated, at an image of himself in Matheson's arms, and was surprised by a fierce wave of jealousy.

<Every time you thought about him, I wanted to punch him,> Skinner admitted. <I wanted to be him. I knew I didn't have any rights with either you, or Dana, but that didn't mean I didn't **feel**. You went out on cases, you were together the whole time. I wasn't part of you. When I made the nexus, I was full of guilt, because you clearly belonged together, and I just forced my way in. I thought you'd reject me. I felt I deserved nothing less.> Skinner's voice echoed in his mind.

<I didn't know.> Mulder felt warm flesh against his mouth, and opened his eyes, startled, then drew Skinner closer, opened the other man's lips with his own, and claimed him with a deep, loving kiss. His hands roamed over a pair of solid shoulders as he consumed Skinner hungrily, so many years of pent-up longing going into that one kiss, needing, wanting...

<Understand now?>

Mulder drowned in the pulsing light of the nexus. Damn, but this felt so good. <Yes.> The kiss ended, and he found himself grinning like an idiot.

<Good. Come on.> Skinner got up.

Mulder sat for a moment, still reeling from what he had been shown. The sun was beating down on Skinner's unprotected scalp, bathing him in light. He was all Mulder's fantasies come to life. He'd gained weight, and bulked out again during their time at the cabin, and his face had lost that gaunt, haunted look. He was wearing faded blue jeans, and a plain navy shirt, open at the neck to reveal wiry curls of dark hair.

"Mulder?" There was an expression in those dark eyes that made Mulder's heart miss a beat. Hope, love, promise...and a trace of anxiety. "Mulder?" He realized that Skinner was mistaking his awe-struck contemplation for vacillation. Skinner took a step forward, then almost lost his unsteady footing. Mulder leapt up and grabbed his arm.

"I'd offer to carry you but you're too damn heavy," he grinned. "And you're really not my idea of Scarlett O'Hara."

"Ditto." Skinner laughed. "Come on. I guess our Scarlett's waiting for us back at the cabin." He fumbled for his cane, but Mulder offered him his arm instead. Skinner took it, leaning heavily on him, and angled his head for another kiss as they walked.

<You've never done this before?> Mulder asked, enjoying the totally mind-blowing sensation of talking to someone, and kissing them, at the same time.

<No. Why? Am I doing something wrong?> Skinner asked anxiously.

<Hardly...> Mulder held him tight, his hands roving over a firm butt, his mouth devouring the mouth that was so firmly planted on his.

Mulder didn't even remember the journey back to the cabin. The next thing he knew he was standing on the threshold of the bedroom. Scully had made the bed with white sheets, and was sitting holding a pillow to her chest, cuddling it while she waited. Her hair was wet from her bath, and she was wearing a blue and white checked shirt, and a pair of clean jeans. She looked breath-taking. A smile of relief spread across her face when she saw them. She patted the bed beside her, and Mulder went, blindly, dimly aware that Skinner was hovering in the doorway uncertainly.

"Six years. It's about time," she whispered, taking his face in her hands, and kissing him. It was like all his Christmases had come at once, Mulder thought. First Skinner, now Scully, both the subject of so many fevered fantasies for so many years, now made real, warm flesh and blood, wanting him. The kiss ended, and, as one, they both turned towards Skinner, and held out a welcoming hand.

"I understand why we had to wait now, why it couldn't happen before. We weren't complete before," Scully said, beckoning to the big man.

He hesitated for a moment, and they saw their image reflected back through his eyes, sitting there, together, but no longer separate from him. Now they were a part of him, and he of them. He came and sat beside them on the bed. Scully leaned forward, and her ruby lips met Skinner's mouth. Mulder closed his eyes, felt the kiss, was both of them simultaneously, Scully and Skinner, and he experienced their arousal with his own.

"How, uh...how does this work?" Skinner asked, looking suddenly at a loss. "Um, call me conservative, but I've never had two lovers at the same time before."

"Neither have I." Mulder caressed Scully's red hair.

"I have." Scully grinned, clearly enjoying the look of surprise both men gave her. She flooded the nexus with an image of herself, with two identical young men, kissing them, being stroked, and caressed by them.

"Way to go, Scully," Mulder whistled, finding the image unbearably arousing. His cock was rock hard inside the prison of his jeans.

"Getting undressed is a good first step." Scully started unbuttoning her shirt, and was stopped by two pairs of hands, and a mental cry of protest from both men.

"Uh...I think we'd both like to take care of that," Skinner murmured, his already deep voice sounding as if it had gone two octaves lower with arousal. Mulder leaned over and kissed Skinner as they both worked on the buttons of Scully's shirt, opening it to reveal two round, white breasts, nestled inside her bra.

"Oh boy." Skinner paused, and they both gazed in silent contemplation for a few seconds.

"Didn't anyone tell you it's rude to stare!" Scully berated. Mulder laughed, and started unbuttoning her jeans, while Skinner ran his hands around her back, found the fastening to the bra, and undid it, pulling the item of clothing away to allow her breasts to fall free.

"Dana," his voice was choked with arousal, and he cupped each breast in his large hands, then held them, stroking them softly with his thumb, as if in worship. Mulder thought just the image of Skinner holding Scully in this intimate way would be enough to make him come. He broke into the mood, tugged her jeans down her thighs to reveal her panties, and soon disposed of those too.

"I'm more of a bottom man, myself," he murmured, his hands caressing her buttocks, as she lifted her hips to make this manoeuvre easier.

"Well, that works out perfectly then," Scully smiled. "Now, I want to see the pair of you too."

She knelt on the floor, and took off Mulder's boots, and socks, then began to undo his jeans. Mulder saw a pair of long legs appear around his thighs, pulling him close against a warm, solid body, and then he felt Skinner's hands unbutton his shirt, the big man's lips nuzzling at his neck, sucking his ear gently.

<Oh shit...> He spun off into space, enjoying being the focus of so much undivided attention, and felt their minds like so many fireworks going off in his head, exploding around him in their need, and arousal. Skinner finished unbuttoning his shirt, pushed it open, and his fingers played with Mulder's nipples, making the younger man moan and cry out, his adam's apple bobbing, his body held tight between Skinner's thighs, the big man's legs crossed over his abdomen. Scully started pulling his jeans, and slowly, inch by inch, managed to tug them down, taking his boxers with them. Skinner moved his legs, and stripped Mulder's shirt from his back in one fluid movement, and Mulder gasped in shock as felt Scully's small fingers close around his hard cock.

<Oh shit...> he cried again, incoherently, and his cry was met by their loving warmth. It was like drowning in warm, melted chocolate. Mulder pulled himself back from the brink, and glanced down at Scully. She smiled, and gestured with her eyes towards Skinner. Mulder grinned, and nodded. They turned at the same time, and jumped on the big man, who landed on his back on the bed with an "oomph", winded.

"Your turn," Mulder was joined by a deliciously naked Scully, who climbed onto Skinner's chest, straddled him, and began tearing his shirt off, ripping a few buttons in the process. Mulder carefully undid Skinner's sneakers, knowing how much pain the other man's feet caused him. He gently slid Skinner's socks off, and massaged his ankles for a few seconds. Skinner had been on his feet quite a bit during the course of the day, and they were swollen, and raw looking, which often happened when he had overdone it.

Mulder disappeared into the bathroom, and found two cool, damp washcloths. He returned, knelt by the bed, and wrapped the cloths around his lover's feet. Skinner gave a contented

sigh, and Scully dipped her head, and licked his hard nipples. Skinner hadn't bathed after his afternoon out riding, and he smelt of sweat, and horses. It was a masculine smell that turned Mulder on, reminding him of saddles, and leather, and it mingled with Scully's newly bathed aroma of ylang ylang, to mount a dual assault on his senses. Mulder unwrapped Skinner's feet, and kissed his toes.

<Don't...> Skinner shifted uncomfortably. <They're ugly. Here.> He held out his hand to drag Mulder onto the bed, but Mulder ignored it, and continued gently playing with Skinner's scarred feet, kissing and licking them.

<They're part of you,> Scully scolded, joining Mulder. She traced a finger over one scarred sole, then the other.

Mulder sneaked a hand up Skinner's thigh, to the fly on his jeans, and unbuttoned slowly, his hazel eyes never leaving Skinner's face. He was aware that being with a man was a new experience for the big man, and he wanted to take it slowly, but Skinner didn't seem worried. He smiled, and stroked Mulder's hair encouragingly. The younger man could feel a promising hardness beneath his fingers, but still he took his time, his tongue moistening his lips in anticipation as he worked. Scully tugged on the legs of Skinner's jeans, and carefully guided the fabric over his sore feet, and then he was as naked as they were. She jumped back on the bed, her breasts jiggling, and they both looked down on their lover. Skinner's cock delivered all that it had promised, Mulder thought to himself. Broader than his own, but not quite as long, nestled over two large ball sacs. Yeah, definitely worth the wait, and better even than the fantasy he'd had of it.

<Thank you,> Skinner grinned, and Mulder laughed out loud, and pressed his mouth to the tip, enjoying the way it twitched in anticipation of his caress. Scully meanwhile had taken her place astride Skinner's chest once more, and was sitting, her head thrown back in wild abandon, as Skinner played with her breasts. She moved her round, dimpled buttocks up and down in a rhythm, as Skinner stroked her into greater heights of arousal. This was definitely a good sight, Mulder thought to himself, as he circled Skinner's cock with his tongue. This was every fantasy he'd ever had on lonely evenings in front of the video. Scully, sitting astride Skinner, her white bottom against his tanned, washboard stomach. He had an idea, and after a planting a quick kiss on each of Scully's pale globes, he disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a tub of vaseline.

<No condoms, guys...>

Their voices insisted it didn't matter, that they needed to share, as closely as possible, flesh against flesh. A slight sadness permeated the link, as Scully reminded them that she couldn't have children so that wasn't a factor. Their thoughts soothed her, and she was soon distracted as a myriad of positions, fantasies, and growing sexual excitement flooded into the nexus, making it impossible to tell who was suggesting what. Somehow Mulder found himself on top of Scully, his tongue buried deep in the dark red hair between her legs. He felt Skinner behind him, and then a lubricated finger slid inside his body. He moaned, and pushed back with his ass, then forward into the deepest recesses of Scully's body, and then back again. Skinner's one finger became two, and Mulder became Skinner opening up his

body beneath his firm, tender caress, and became Scully, legs open wide, limbs akimbo, panting, and writhing on the bed.

Scully grabbed fistfuls of sheets, and moaned as she was licked, her mound swollen and red with desire. Skinner ran his hand over Mulder's back, and cupped his firm butt cheeks, probing inside, making Mulder whimper with need. Mulder drew back, and nudged his own cock into the folds of Scully's flesh, and she pulled him deep inside her, just as Skinner entered the younger man, pushing him open, sliding into his body. Every nerve ending in Scully's body quivered as that long, hard cock filled her, and she could feel every nerve ending in Mulder's body responding the same way to Skinner's thick cock. There was a pause, as if they were all waiting, and then the world erupted into a spectacular display of stars. They became each other; Scully looked down on her own body, and felt what it was like to have a penis, to thrust into warm flesh, to be consumed by another person, and welcomed deep inside. She was Skinner, making love to Mulder, Mulder making love to herself. She was all three of them at the same time, and they were her. She experienced Skinner's brief flash of surprise at finding himself flat on his back, his white breasts being caressed by large, male hands, his legs wide open, revealing his most secret areas. She was Mulder, insatiably curious to experience everything, lying in wonderment, inside her body, looking up at himself, at Skinner over his own shoulder, seeing two men making love, being turned on by it. He moaned in wonderment at the sensation in his clitoris, his whole body convulsing in an orgasm that came from deep within; silent, invisible, a sweeping wave of pleasure.

There were brief pauses, moments when they washed each other down with cool water, anointing bodies already damp with sweat, and then it began again. Time had no meaning, nothing had any meaning but their nexus, and their need to be one, as close in flesh as they were in mind. After all they had endured, they finally came together with explosive force. The fire of their joining couldn't be extinguished swiftly, it had a beat and tempo all of its own that had to be ridden out to the end. Skinner sank his fingers deep into Scully's body, as she straddled his chest, while she sucked Mulder's cock, and he, in turn, rode up and down on Skinner's cock. Her hair was damp with perspiration, and the force of her orgasm trapped Skinner's hand deep inside her, unwilling to relinquish him, as Mulder spent himself down her throat.

Then there was quiet. They were still for a long while, then Mulder moved in the darkness, found Skinner's face, asked him a silent question, and received his silent reply.

<Yes.>

Scully could have wept. She rolled Skinner onto his front, held his head, kissed his face, his neck, ran gentle fingers over his bare scalp. She got a pillow, and placed it on her lap, then put his head on it, played with his ears, muttering soothing words. She watched Mulder cup his taut buttocks, gently soothing him, then he slipped a finger inside Skinner, and another, finding some magic spot that reminded her of her own clitoris, making her cry out, as Skinner cried out, the pleasure taking both of them away on the crest of a high wave. She

kept talking to Skinner, meaningless nothings, and held his head against the pillow, caressing him constantly. Mulder's cock was hard again, and she was him, preparing to enter the muscular body of the man lying so still and acquiescent beneath him. She felt herself opened, and watched as Mulder slid inside the tight passage. Skinner tensed, and she relaxed him with soothing words, and soon he was arching his back, crying out inside her head, his body convulsing with pleasure. Mulder caressed his buttocks, as he pumped back and forth, and she heard him whisper the same little phrases over and over again - words of love, and endearment. Then there was another explosion, and they were quiet again, for a long time.

Scully remembered drinking huge, long, gulps of water, and she remembered using the bathroom, then she found herself lying on the bed once more, sandwiched between the two men. She was facing Skinner, and she could feel Mulder's hands on her buttocks. Skinner's lips found her dark, swollen nipples, and she whimpered in pleasure. One of Skinner's hands tickled her clit, one of Mulder's fingers probed inside her anus. She welcomed them in, wanted more, wanted to be them, inside her, to be herself, enveloping their hard flesh inside her own soft flesh. She remembered the sensation of being Skinner, being filled, and wanted both of them inside her. She pulled Skinner's hard cock towards her, and guided Mulder's cock to her anus, her mind displaying the image, showing them what she wanted. They lifted her up carefully, as if she were made of some precious substance, and gently, slowly, rocked into her body at the same time. If she closed her eyes, she could see Skinner's broad shoulders, and Mulder's long, lean limbs, could feel them both inside her body, inside her mind, inside the very core of her being. Their hard cocks filled her, throbbing together, synchronous, in time to the beating of three hearts. Scully was no longer coherent, she had become something else, a being of nerve endings, and an abundance of love and passion that she had denied for too long. Now that the floodgates had opened, she wanted to go on expressing herself in this way forever.

There was peace for a second, as if she stood on the top of a giant rollercoaster, towering in a dark, star-field sky. They all hovered, poised on the edge, and then they fell together, at the exact same moment in time, and roared towards their climax, exploded into it, like a sun going supernova. The heat of their passion coalesced them into one being; they were all dimly aware of the world moving, just out of their perception, of time whizzing by. They were outside their own bodies; three people, moving as one, experiencing an intensity of pleasure that they never knew existed.

Then it was over. Outside it was dark, then light again, then dark, as they slept in each others arms, a tangle of limbs, of sated bodies, and that, Scully thought later, was the most beautiful moment of all. <I love you,> she whispered, hazily, and the words filtered through the link, were met by answering assurances, and expressions of love. A hand moved on her thigh, a kiss was dropped onto the back of her neck, and a feeling of contentment, of oneness, of joy, radiated back to her. She felt as if she could fly through the air, supported by clouds, and never fall, so strong was the nexus that embraced and enveloped her.

She looked down and saw all three of them sleeping. Skinner had one arm over her hip, his hand resting on Mulder's thigh, Mulder's legs were entwined between her ankles, his chin resting on her shoulder, one of his hands joined loosely with Skinner's, forming a protective

circle around her. Then, exhausted, she returned to her body, and slept again in their loving embrace.

"Okay, Scully." Mulder's voice awoke her god knew how many hours later. "I've heard of the earth moving, but this is ridiculous."

She raised her head and looked around, sleepily, then sat up, her mouth open wide in surprise. The room was a mess - it looked like a hurricane had ripped through the bedroom, scattering clothing, coins, books, and lamps to all four corners.

"And don't try and tell us that you didn't do this," Mulder grinned, his lips still swollen from their activities, "because you're the only poltergeist living in this cabin, madam."

Skinner's unspoken <shit> reverberated through the link, as he sat up and surveyed the damage. <If this is going to happen every time we have sex, then we'd better get all the furniture nailed down,> he commented wryly. <I don't feel like I've been hit over the head with a frying pan though, and I usually do after Dana's been busy.> He frowned.

<Me neither. I think that sex created a vibe all of its own. I've never felt so fantastic in my entire life.> Mulder smiled, and stretched his long limbs like a cat. He got out of bed, and surveyed himself in the mirror. <I feel sore...> he grinned at his lovers <but it's a **good** sore, if you know what I mean!>

<Yeah.> Skinner wrapped Scully up in his big arms, and kissed the top of her head. <How about you, oh crazed destroyer of the bedroom?> he inquired.

<You don't even need to ask,> she smiled up at him. <It seemed so unreal, I'm not sure if I dreamed it.>

<Judging by the state of the bedroom I'd say not.> Mulder hesitated, then opened his mouth. "Hello." He cleared his throat, then grinned, sheepishly. "Just testing to see if my voice still works. I can't remember when I last spoke out loud. It seemed to me that the telepathic thing got a lot easier, didn't it?"

"I think we just hit a groove where communication of any sort was so simple," Scully said, her voice sounding strange to her ears.

Mulder turned on the radio, and pranced around the room naked, yelling out the words to the song, while the other two grinned at him appreciatively. They all shut up, their minds clamouring with shock when the news came on. Mulder's mouth opened and closed, and he sat back down on the bed with a thump.

"Is it my imagination...or did we just lose 3 days?" he whispered. "Shit. No wonder I'm so hungry."

"It's not your imagination. We did." Skinner shook his head in disbelief.

"And don't go blaming it on UFO's this time," Scully added.

"Well, not unless UFO stands for Unidentified Fucking Objects," Mulder quipped, and was rewarded by two pillows hitting his head simultaneously.

Days went by in a haze of sex, that Skinner never wanted to end. This was a nexus as he had always wanted it to be. A true merging of hearts, minds, souls and bodies that he had never before experienced. The days were warm, and the nights sultry, dripping with the combined heat of their entangled bodies.

One night he awoke to the sound of roaring in the skies. He got up, wondering if the summer heat had been broken by a storm, and went over to the window.

"One. Two. Three." Skinner blinked. There was a little girl, playing hop-skotch in the yard. He grabbed a pair of sweatpants and ran out of the cabin, wondering if he was dreaming, but she was still there. "Nine, ten, eleven." She hopped towards him, smiled, flicked her long, dark hair out of her eyes, and skipped back again. "Twelve!" she finished triumphantly.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" he asked her. She smiled again. She had the deepest blue eyes he'd ever seen, and wide, full lips, that twisted some emotion deep inside his heart. She couldn't have been more than six years old.

"Don't be silly, Daddy!" she chided. Then she started to hop towards him again. "One, two..." Skinner looked up, the sound of her words drowned out by the loud noise overhead. The night sky was filled with orange flame - then he realized that it wasn't night at all - the sun had been obscured by the shadows of hundreds, maybe even thousands, of enormous spaceships, hovering overhead.

"What the hell...?" As he watched, the ships came lower, and lower, until he could see the undersides of their sleek metallic bellies, as they hovered overhead.

"Daddy!" the little girl yelled. He glanced around, but there was nobody else in sight. "Daddy! Help me! Take me home!" He held out his arms to her, and she ran into them. He picked her up, held her tight, and started to run back into the cabin, to wake Mulder and Scully, to warn them that...

"No. Not here. Back home - to Washington." The little girl placed her hands on his shoulders and looked into his eyes, and he stopped, bemused. "Time for you to leave, Walter. You're done here," she whispered, and her long dark hair grew coarse, and white, and her features became lined, and wizened, and those bright blue eyes faded into an ancient, timeless gray. She was heavy, her body that of an Old Woman.

"What's happening?" he yelled over the roaring in the sky, putting her down on the ground.

"Jace...it's time to go back now. It's starting," the Old Woman told him.

"What is?" Skinner looked up at the sky full of ships.

"The end. The beginning. Your time is near." She kissed his cheek, as he stood, frozen to the spot. "Don't be afraid." She took hold of his hand. "We chose well. You and your nexus are the best of us, the distilled essence of what we are. Yin and yang, dark and light - you have everything inside you. You've all known great sorrow, and great joy. You've experienced life, and death, love and fear, in equal measure. Between you, you've been children, parents, brothers, sisters, lovers. You represent the male, Jace, Dana the female, and Fox, our beautiful child, our brave new soul, is both, transcending his form. Take them, and go." She pushed him towards the cabin.

"What am I seeing?" He peered up into the sky again, but the ships had disappeared, and there was only a black, velvet shroud, lit by a myriad of stars.

"The future. The past." She shrugged. "To be honest, sometimes I have difficulty knowing the difference any more."

"I can't do this. Whatever you want of me, I can't do it." Skinner grabbed her shoulders. She was as faint and insubstantial as a wraith.

"Of course you can, Jace. If you can't, nobody can. I always told you that you're the best of us. You and your nexus." She kissed him on the forehead, and her body began to lose its shape. "You won't see me again for a while," she whispered, her voice fading.

"Don't leave me!" he cried, trying to pull her back.

"I never leave you," she chided. "I'm always here, but next time you see me you won't recognize me...I'll...have...changed..." Her voice faded into nothing, and she was gone.

"Walter?"

Skinner blinked. He was standing in the yard, dressed in his sweatpants, just as he had been in his dream, but this time he was awake. Mulder had an arm around his shoulders, trying to warm his cold flesh, and Scully was looking into his eyes, anxiously.

"Walter?" she said again. "You were sleep-walking. Are you awake now?"

"Yes. Awake," Skinner muttered, trying to take a step. He would have fallen if it hadn't been for Mulder's arm, keeping him upright.

"Oh god, look at your poor feet!" Scully bent down, and he saw that his bare feet were bleeding, the blood seeping into the dark, brown earth. Skinner gazed at it in a daze, uncomprehending.

"Did you see?" He turned to Mulder. "Did you see what I saw?"

"No. What did you see, Walter?" Mulder asked gently, leading him back to the house. Between them, Mulder and Scully helped him to sit down on the couch. Scully wrapped him in a blanket, while Mulder sat down beside him, an expectant look on his face.

"There was a sky full of ships. Space ships." He looked hesitantly into Mulder's hazel eyes. "You think I'm crazy."

"Me? No. I think you're trying to turn me on," Mulder grinned. "Tell me about the ships, Walter." His tone was gentle, encouraging.

"There were hundreds, thousands maybe, and they wanted something from us." Skinner shuddered, and pulled the blanket around his shoulders. "There was a little girl, she became the old woman from my previous dreams, the one who calls me Jace, the one you met, she told me...it doesn't matter. Shit, it sounds so stupid when I say it out loud."

"Don't then." Mulder pulled Skinner's head forward, and rested it against his own forehead. "Show us," he whispered. Skinner nodded, and tried to calm himself, to get his thoughts into some kind of order, then he gripped Scully's hand tightly in his own, and closed his eyes, radiating the dream through the link. When he'd finished, they drew back, silent.

"What does it mean?" Scully frowned. "What was she trying to tell you? At the risk of sounding like a broken record, this might have just been a dream, Walter. You know, like a cigar is sometimes just a cigar. You've been under a lot of stress in the past few months, and the mind sometimes..."

"No. She only appears in my dreams when there's something important I have to do," Skinner interrupted.

"But what?" Mulder asked.

"I'm not sure. She made one thing very clear though." Skinner got up, limped into the bedroom, and started to pull some clothing into a bag.

"Walter? What are you doing?" Scully ran after him, Mulder at her heels.

"It's time to go back," he said. He heard their unspoken anxiety summed up in one word:

<Krycek.>

<I know, but I can't hide out here forever. It's time for us to leave.>

"All right, but not now. It's the middle of the night," Scully said firmly, looking at Mulder, who nodded.

Skinner allowed them to lead him back to the bed, allowed Scully to bandage his feet, and they rested uneasily in each other's arms until dawn. Then they got up, and packed.

Skinner looked around the cabin, one last time. Somehow, he had a feeling that it would be a long while before they returned. He glanced at his companions as they waited for him by the car. Scully had put on make-up, and tidied her hair. She was wearing a pair of silky black trousers, with a belted tunic. Mulder was in an elegant dress suit, complete with tie. They both looked so different, after the past couple of months spent out here in the middle of

nowhere, lounging around in paint-stained clothing, but they were still his, and he was theirs. Skinner felt a lump rise in his throat. Home was anywhere they were.

<Time to go back,> they whispered.

He nodded, and pulled the door shut firmly behind him. He had faced the past. It was time to face the future.

End of Part 4

Chapter End Notes:

I'm not sure I'll ever write any more of this one. I've tried - several times - but it just wouldn't come out right so I've kind of given up. Sorry! At least it ended with a bang though!

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