

Spellbound by Xanthe

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

Story Notes:

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Spoilers: This story follows immediately after The 6th Extinction and Amor Fati. Many thanks to my dear friend Holmes for sending them across the pond so I could view them.

Spellbound by Xanthe

"After all that has happened to me, all that I have known, and seen, and discovered, it seems almost ironic that the answers, when at last I found them, came from within.

For one always chasing after wraiths, and staring up at the sky, searching for some elusive truth I believed to be "out there", the inside of my own mind was perhaps my final, unexplored frontier.

I, who had never believed myself to be coward, had never had the courage to face what lay within until chance brought me face to face with myself, and took me on a journey through the underworld of my own buried psyche. For a while, like Orpheus, seeking his Eurydice, I was lost in the darkness, searching, although for what, I knew not.

Chance - so blind, so uncaring, sent me to the brink of insanity, before pulling me back, reeling from the aftershock of knowing too much, of drowning in my own weak and useless humanity. Scully told me, after the event, that I was more truly alive while insane, than I ever had been before, and, in a way, I understood what she meant.

We are all locked up within ourselves. When I look in the mirror, I see a reflection, not the real me, and to some extent we are all reflections, locked up in what we perceive to be our own reality. When the truth was laid bare to me, it was like the mist clearing after a foggy day, like the first rays of dawn appearing over the horizon. I was new. Reborn. And, like a helpless infant, I was powerless over my fate. I could do nothing with my realizations, except lie, Christ-like, on the sacrificial slab that my own father had constructed for me. His first born, his eldest son, offered up to vengeful gods, in exchange for what? I did not know then, and I do not know now.

No inner journey is without pain, and the bittersweet taste of self-realization is no different. I saw a future, one possible future, and with it came all the mocking half-truths I have haunted myself with for so long. A wife. A family. Children. My sister. Why has it been so hard to face up to my own true nature? Why torment myself with visions of a future that I could never have? My mind, chasing rainbows, knew the truth my heart had so long denied.

It showed me that life only in order to make me face the fact that I could not have it; to remove, for once, and for all, the fantasy that I might one day deny my sexuality, and take up society's challenge to be 'normal'.

Maybe we are all, to some extent, enchanted by the false image we construct around ourselves, and our own self-created mythology. I am no different. I, the coward, who insisted others see the truth when he would not face it himself. Trapped within my reflection, the man in the mirror, I could weep for the lost years of self-denial. Only in being insane, did I find my sanity. Maybe, in a way, Scully was right. I **was** more alive than I'd ever been, and I found out, finally, who Fox Mulder really is. The truth, when at last I found it, was less painful than it might have been.

Because of him."

Skinner let himself into his apartment with shaking hands. If he looked down, he could see the faint, marbled effect of the carbon build-up in his bloodstream as the nanocytes went about their deadly work. "Just a warning," Krycek had said, as he moved his fingers across the palm pilot. "A little warning, old friend. A reminder of who owns you. We've been disappointed in you. You defied us. Openly. Count yourself lucky that you're still useful to us or this could be the end. As it is, it's just a warning. Just a warning..."

Skinner stumbled into his safe haven, and shut the door behind him. He walked over to his drinks cabinet, and poured himself a large glass of whisky, then, turning, caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. Large, dark veins pulsed across his face, a network of deadly dark lines criss-crossed his neck, forming a lattice of pain. Skinner downed the whisky in one gulp, then poured himself another. His head pounded, and his whole body ached. Just a warning...Yes, he would get better. A few days of discomfort - sweaty, sleepless nights, full of pain, and then the torment would lessen and he would be well again. Until the next time.

I can't live like this. Skinner moved to his desk, opened the lid of his lap-top, and sat staring at his reflection in the screen. *Who are you really?* Just a warning. Just a friendly warning...next time, do as we say, Skinner, or it could be so much worse... Skinner flinched, as he remembered the feel of that black leather glove, stretched over a lightweight, plastic hand, caressing his cheek. He could feel Krycek's warm breath on the side of his face. *Who are you really?* Half a man. Emasculated by his enemies, forced into being a lackey, a traitor, bargaining his soul in exchange for his life. It was a bitter deal, made all the more so by who they had made him betray. Skinner rested the cool glass against his forehead. . Skinner moved to his desk, opened the lid of his lap-top, and sat staring at his reflection in the screen. *Who are you really?* Just a warning. Just a friendly warning...next time, do as we say, Skinner, or it could be so much worse... Skinner flinched, as he remembered the feel of that black leather glove, stretched over a lightweight, plastic hand, caressing his cheek. He could feel Krycek's warm breath on the side of his face. *Who are you really?* Half a man. Emasculated by his enemies, forced into being a lackey, a traitor, bargaining his soul in exchange for his life. It was a bitter deal, made all the more so by who they had made him betray. Skinner rested the cool glass against his forehead. . Skinner moved to his desk,

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Mulder.

He could still see the other man in the hospital. Those insane eyes, crying out for help, had tugged at Skinner's conscience even more than the pitiful, blood-stained plea that had followed. Skinner buried his head in his hands. He had tried , damnit. He had tried, and he had failed. He had risked his life for nothing. Risked Mulder's life for nothing. In the end he had been no help at all. None of them had. Not Kritchsgau with his drugs, and his stupid damn machines, not Scully with her investigation in Africa, and not him, with his helpless, clumsy attempts at comfort and aid. Mulder had been taken. Mulder had been experimented upon, and subjected to the most invasive brain surgery, the results of which still weren't clear.

Who are you really?

Skinner made up his mind, and began to type into his laptop. When he'd finished, he downed the rest of the whisky, and walked back over to the mirror. He ran a hand over dark, veined flesh, and laughed, mockingly. "It's what you deserve," he told his reflection. "The least that you deserve."

Who are you really?

Not this. Not a damn coward, so scared of death that he'd sell another man to save himself. Not this. He didn't recognize himself as this. He drew his gun, and smiled at his reflection in the mirror, wondering at the unfamiliar, disfigured visage that smiled back at him.

Who are you really?

"Dead," he replied, placing his gun against his forehead. No longer a danger to anyone else, no longer leading a half-life. Not half a man any more. My own man again. Dead. His finger closed around the trigger, and squeezed.

Mulder inched his fingers under the bandage beneath his baseball cap, and scratched. He knew that he shouldn't itch his healing wound, but damn it, he was only human! He rubbed away absently, sitting at his computer. So much had happened to him in the past few days. He had entered his own private hell, been tormented by visions, imprisoned, drugged, unable to communicate with anyone until Skinner had come along. Even then, the respite had only been temporary. Mulder closed his eyes, and leaned back in his chair, assaulted by a hundred images. Then he put his hands back on the keyboard, and started to type again, his eyes still closed.

"I remember feeling as if I were at one with the universe, and yet curiously outside it. There were a million voices in my head - it was impossible to make sense of all of them. I felt...as if I were in a chrysalis; a half-waking, half-sleeping limbo, a human in the process of transformation...but into what? I don't know. The process, whatever it was, wasn't completed, and I'm left with only memories of a time when I was almost a god, when the answers were so close I could almost touch them. I don't regret leaving it behind, I only regret what it cost me, and those around me."

Mulder opened his eyes. "Those around me," he whispered. Then he began to type again.

"In that god-like, surreal state, I saw everything in slow motion. I was far ahead, spinning wildly into space, and the people around me seemed like ants, scabbling around on the ground below. The one thing that I do remember, in the most vivid way imaginable, is that at some point **he** stood by my bedside, and made a conscious decision to die for me. He looked at me, and I heard his mind as if he was speaking out loud. He weighed the past, he weighed the future, his mind raced over what was in his blood, and what had been done to him by our enemies, and he decided that he would risk death in order to help me. It was in that moment, that I knew I loved him. In that moment all the scattered shards of my fragmented existence came together. My sexuality, so long repressed, was suddenly as clear to me as my own reflection in the mirror. I knew who I was. My long, teasing relationship

with Scully fell into place. I loved her. I had always loved her, but I could never **make** love to her. I had loved women; I had loved Phoebe, and Diana, but I had never been in love with them. I knew that I had thrown myself into my quest partly to avoid my homosexuality. I had known that for a long time, but it never mattered before. It only mattered now because I suddenly knew that I wanted more than a lifetime of repression. Now, for the first time, I had found someone I could love; **had** loved, for many years if I was honest. He was standing right here, by my bedside preparing to die for me - and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop him."

Mulder paused, his face drawn with lines of sadness. He gave a rueful smile, and shook his head, then continued typing.

"It was as if all my life I had been doing a giant jigsaw puzzle, but I could never see the picture I was piecing together. Now, lying there, immobile, unable to properly communicate, I could see not only the puzzle, but myself, kneeling in front of it, trying to complete it. You'll laugh at me here, when I show you this one day, as I hope to, very soon. You see, none of it meant anything. Not my quest, not Samantha, not the conspiracy, the aliens, the monsters, the X Files, and not even Scully, though it pains me to say it. The grand picture of my life, the one I'd spent all my days constructing, was just two people - me and you. You, and me. That's what my life is, or at least what it should be, that's the puzzle I've been trying to complete inside. Trying, and failing. Only now, the picture has come together. There are only a few pieces left before it's completed, and only in this dream-like state could I even see what I had been working on. You, and me. That's what my universe boils down to, in the end. You are my bottom line, you complete the puzzle that is me, Walter."

"Walter." Mulder said the name out loud and smiled, his tongue moistening his dry bottom lip. "Walter Skinner," he mused, taking a sip of water, remembering Skinner's desperate plea to him in the hospital, when he'd been too out of his head to respond. *It's me - Skinner. Walter Skinner.* "Yes, Walter. I know. It's always been you, Walter Skinner. Always you." Mulder sighed and made a rueful face, then finished his glass of water. "You sure know how to pick them, Mulder."

He got up, carefully, the room going into a dizzying spin around him.

"I wish I knew what they'd taken away." He glanced at himself in the mirror, took off the cap and surveyed his bandaged head. "What did they take from inside my skull? Maybe I shouldn't care, because what I'm left with is so much more than I had before." He smiled at himself, and his reflection smiled back. "So, Mulder, now that you know what you are, and what you want, how do you convince him that he feels the same way? Because you do, Walter. You do. I've seen inside your mind, and your heart, and I know what you are, down to the very marrow of your bones, and I like what I saw."

He took a sharp intake of breath, as he heard the sound of a gunshot. It was followed, a split second later, by an intense pain in his forehead.

"No!"

Mulder bent double. He had the sudden, real sensation of a world torn out of joint, dislocated, as if some malevolent witch had cast a spell upon them all, and then he passed out.

"Walter? Are you all right?" A voice whispered tenderly in his ear.

Skinner shifted, and cried out. His head hurt as if someone had stabbed him in the eye, and lanced a red-hot poker all the way through his brain.

"It's okay. Hold still." A cool washcloth was pressed against his forehead, soothing him. Skinner lay there, trying to make sense of this, but his head hurt too much. The pain pounded against the inside of his skull, and then receded. "Here, take a sip of water - I've ground some grieve-root into it, so that should help." Skinner felt a cup pressed against his lips, and he took a sip, not even trying to make sense of any of this. "Good." That gentle hand on his brow again, and then, more surprisingly, the feel of lips pressed to his own. "Honestly, I can't leave you alone for a second! I was gone for one day, Walter. One day! And I come back to find you like this."

Skinner opened his lips, trying to find a reply, and failed. "Who...?" He struggled to sit up, but a hand pressed him down. Gingerly, afraid of the light, Skinner opened his eyes. His vision was blurry - partly from his injury, and partly from the lack of his glasses. A man was sitting on the bed beside him, holding his hand. He looked...familiar.

"Mulder?" He screwed up his face, squinting uncertainly.

"Um, it's me, yes. Fox. Although you know I gave up any allegiance to the House of Mulder a long time ago. I've been Fox of the House of Skinner for a few years now."

The other man's face grew clearer. It **was** Mulder, only not a Mulder he'd ever seen before. This Mulder looked younger, and less careworn. His open face was unlined, and his hazel eyes were full of...love?

"Walter, I came home to find you lying in our chamber. You had a bad wound on your head - I think you fell and hit your head while trying to hang the new mirror. It was all askew when I came in." Skinner tried to move his head, and caught a glimpse of the huge, ornate, gold-rimmed mirror, hanging at an angle on the far wall. "Maybe you tripped over the rug?" Mulder, if it **was** Mulder, suggested.

"Maybe," Skinner whispered.

"It's a beautiful present, Walter! Trust you to surprise me with it," Mulder laughed, glancing at the mirror. "When on earth did you arrange to buy it? You haven't been out of my sight for months!"

"I don't...I don't remember," Skinner touched his forehead. His headache was easing, but he felt so tired, and none of this was making any sense.

"You'll be fine, my love." Mulder - could it **be** Mulder? And if so, how? - ran a gentle hand along the side of his face, and caressed his cheek tenderly. "You've cut the side of your head but I've dressed the wound. I expect you'll have a bad headache for a day or so. Honestly, if you didn't want me to go you should have said," he teased. "Instead of half killing yourself in sorrow at my absence!"

Skinner grunted, unsure what reply, if any, he should make. The room had become clearer now. It looked as if he were in a castle, with stone walls, and lush tapestries. He was in the most enormous bed he had ever seen, and there was a roaring fire in the grate. He was stripped to the waist, only wearing his briefs. He could see his shirt, and pants, slung over the back of a chair nearby.

"Where am I?" He asked.

Mulder's eyes widened in distress. "You're home, Walter. Your home. This is your keep. Don't you remember?"

"No," Skinner said honestly. Then he took in Mulder's clothes and frowned in bewilderment. The other man was dressed in a flowing white shirt, and tight black pants, with knee-high leather boots on his feet. He looked slender, boyish, and handsome. His hair was longer than Skinner remembered it. Skinner felt a sudden flash of pain in his skull. He had a vivid memory of the last time he had laid eyes on Mulder; the agent's short, spiky hair had clearly been cut by some solicitous orderly in the hospital, with no skill whatsoever. It looked as if somebody had taken a pair of shears to his head. This man couldn't be Mulder; his hair was thick, and silky, his hazel eyes wide and bright, not full of anger, pain, and recrimination, as Mulder's so often were recently.

"What's the matter?" The stranger asked.

"Who are you?" Skinner demanded, managing to sit up. "Where am I?"

"Hush, Walter. It's all right." The stranger looked upset. "It's me, Fox."

"Fox?" Skinner struggled to make sense of this.

"Yes, me. You remember me. Your life-mate? Snakes, Walter, we've been together for four years, you'd think I'd have made some impression on you!" The other man was trying to be cheerful, but Skinner could see the worried doubt in his eyes. "We met while I was searching for my sister, don't you remember?" Fox asked, anxiously.

"Samantha?" Skinner asked.

"That's right." The relief in Fox's voice was palpable. "I was looking for her, and found you instead. And you were so sad...you'd lost your wife, and baby son, and your enemy had poisoned you. I left you and went looking for a cure. I brought it back and we've been together ever since."

"Poison?" Skinner murmured. He raised a hand and touched his face, but there was no evidence of the nanocyte infection. "I remember a room. A gun. I shot myself," Skinner recalled, the memories rushing back.

"You need rest," Fox said, gently pushing Skinner back into his pillows. "I'll be here. I won't leave your side, dear-heart."

Dear-heart? Was it his imagination or had Fox Mulder just called him **dear-heart**? He lay back on the pillows, and watched, puzzled, as Fox climbed onto the vast bed beside him. Then he felt the other man's arms go around his waist, and he laid his head on Skinner's shoulder, and kissed his neck. "Sleep, Walter. I'm here now. Get some rest." Skinner closed his eyes, wondering what strange world he'd blundered into, and how. And yet...and yet those strong arms around his almost naked body felt so **good**, and the sensation of Mulder lying next to him, warming him, comforting him, felt so **right**. He fell asleep, still wondering.

It was dark. He had already paced out his cell a thousand times. Six steps to the right. Turn. Four steps to the front. Turn. Six steps forward. Turn. Another four steps - home. And it was so dark. An endless dark, that stretched on for all eternity. A sharp darkness, not mellow like sleep. Sharp, and cold, and cruel. He had traced every inch of that cell with his fingers, and already knew that, impossible though it was, there was no door, and no window. No way out. No way in. He had no memory of how he had got here. One minute he'd been hanging the new mirror Fox had bought as a surprise gift, and the next...he had been here.

He sat down again, and buried his face in his hands. He was imprisoned, and he didn't know how, or why, just that he was.

"Fox?" he whispered. Then louder. "Fox?" Then again, a great roaring cry that tore his heart apart. "FOX!" The word echoed around the tiny chamber, with all the clarity of glass shattering on hard ground. Around and around, a sound that never ended, the sound of his beloved's name. For hours his cry reverberated, bouncing endlessly off the walls of his prison, tormenting him with the noise until he thought he would go insane. He had never thought it would pain him to hear his lover's name but as that word echoed around him, he curled up into a ball, and placed his hands over his ears. He longed for respite from the noise for just a second. He was desperate to escape from the relentless whispering of a name that served only to remind him of what he had lost.

Mulder came to, a few seconds after he'd passed out. He was on his feet, running for the door before he'd even fully recovered consciousness.

"No," he whispered, as he got in his car, and sped towards Crystal City. "No, you damn stupid bastard. This isn't how it was meant to turn out. I didn't go through all that for nothing. I do not, finally, struggle towards self-realization only for you to kill yourself, you idiot!"

Mulder drove up at Skinner's apartment block, parked his car, badly, and ran for the elevator. The ride up to the 17th floor strained every nerve in his body, and he urged the elevator to go faster. When the doors opened he fled along the hall, to Skinner's apartment, knocked on the door, and, when he got no reply, he drew his gun and blasted a hole in the lock. He burst in, gun still raised, and then stopped. A quick sweep of his eyes around the room revealed that Skinner wasn't there, but there was an empty glass on the table, next to his laptop. Mulder went over to it, picked up the glass, and sniffed the contents. Whisky. He put it down again, and glanced at the open laptop. The screen-saver was whirling, creating an endless kaleidoscope of stars, traveling through a night's sky. Mulder pressed a key, and the stars disappeared. He sat down, holding his gun loosely in his hand, and found that he was looking at a suicide note.

To Whom It May Concern:

"My affairs, such as they are, are in order. My will is filed with my attorney. Forgive me for taking the one step that I never thought that I, of all people, would ever take. I've always viewed suicide as a coward's way out, but in this instance I view it less as a release for myself, and more as a way of ensuring that I do not continue to be used as a pawn in a game I do not understand. While I live, I endanger the lives of people who I care about. Dead, I am no longer a threat to them.

Mulder, if you're reading this..." Mulder buried his head in his hands, unable to continue. Suicide? It didn't need to come to this. Not now. Especially not now, when they both had so much to live for. He finally gathered himself together, and read on. "...I want you to know that I admire your courage, your belief, and your devotion to the truth. I'm sorry that I failed you. You should know that whatever you guessed about me while you were ill, is true. Krycek infected me with the nanocytes, and he's been holding them over my head like a death sentence. I take full responsibility for what happened to you - I assigned you the case on his orders, and I reported back to him on your progress. I have a very real sense of blood on my hands. Your blood. While I pulled back from the brink of total betrayal, and could not trade your life for my own, I'm clearly a danger to you. Please don't feel any guilt as a result of my actions here today. Our enemies have forced my hand - you are blameless. Just view this as the final duty of someone who has always considered himself to be your friend."

Walter Skinner.

Mulder passed a hand over his eyes, and tried to remember how to breathe. His chest felt so tight he thought that he would pass out.

"You stupid, stupid, bastard," he muttered. "You stupid, pig-headed, noble-hearted bastard. Damn you, Walter!" He got up, squaring his shoulders to face the grisly task ahead. A glance around the living room revealed nothing, so he systematically went through the entire apartment, dreading what he might find in each room as he pushed open the door. Nothing. The apartment was quiet, ordered, peaceful - nobody could possibly guess at the turmoil that must have been going through its occupant's mind. Mulder shook his head. The time on the file revealed that it had been written barely an hour ago. Some last vestige of his omniscient gifts had made him hear that gunshot, and feel the pain of the wound to his

temple. Skinner had to be dead. A shot to the head at point blank range...Mulder went back down to the lounge, realizing that, despite everything, he still clung to some hope that Skinner was alive.

Something caught his eye. A huge mirror hung above the fireplace. Mulder went over to it, looked at his reflection, and frowned. There was blood on the mirror. Not much, just a thin smear. Mulder rested one hand on the mirror and wiped at the blood with his fingers - it was still fresh. He had a sudden sensation of being watched, and glanced up quickly. He found himself looking into his own, mocking eyes, but for just one fraction of a second, he could have sworn that he saw something else - some **one** else. Mulder shook his head, dismissing the feeling. Ever since his recent brain surgery, he had been haunted by strange, hallucinogenic sensations. He looked down at the rug he was standing on, and saw another, small, red stain.

"Not enough," he murmured. "Not enough blood loss to kill a man, and not enough to be the consequences of a bullet to the brain. What the hell has gone on here?"

Light. Walter looked up, straight into his lover's face.

"Fox?"

His lover looked changed. He appeared...somehow different. His hair was short, and he wore a bandage on his head.

"Fox? What happened to you?" Walter placed his hands upon the cool surface of his cell wall. Fox was looking straight into his eyes. His lover's long fingers were pressed against the cell wall, as if it were made of glass. "Fox." Walter reached out, and touched his fingers to where his lover's hand was pressed. Over Fox's shoulder, he could see the inside of a room, but he didn't recognize it. "Where are you?" Walter whispered, but his lover didn't reply. He made no sign that he had even seen him. Instead, he wiped his fingers over the cell wall, then glanced at them, deep in thought. A few seconds later, he removed his fingers from the wall, and the cell returned to darkness once more. Walter gave an inarticulate cry of despair, as he was robbed of at least some contact with his beloved, however limited and brief. He got up, and paced the cell again. No way in. No way out. He didn't know how long he had been here but he didn't feel hungry, or thirsty, or even tired. He just existed, in a timeless void. The sound of his cry echoed around the small chamber, assaulting him, until he sank back once more, curled his large body into a fetal position, and lay on the dark floor, trembling.

Skinner stirred in the night, and let out a cry, remembering dark, faceless enemies, and the hidden dangers of the jungle. His skin was ridged with dark lines, and Mulder was bleeding to death at his feet.

"Hush. It's okay." Someone ran tender hands over his shoulders, and down his arms, jolting him out of the nightmare. He felt warm. Safe. Loved. Lips pressed against his cheek, and a hard, strong body was holding him tight.

"Fox?" He turned, and looked into bright, hazel eyes, visible in the faint light of dawn.

"So, you remember me now?" Fox grinned.

"Yes. I remember you." Skinner placed blindly questing fingers over that familiar, unfamiliar face.

"Good. I was starting to wonder. You worried me half to death yesterday, Walter."

"I'm sorry. It's just...I don't..."

"It doesn't matter." Fox's lips covered his own, gently, and parted them. His tongue pushed into Skinner's mouth, exploring. Skinner froze. "It's all right, my love." Fox drew back, his hands caressing Skinner's shoulders, those long fingers gently tweaking an ear.

"No, it isn't." Skinner sat up, ignoring the pounding in his temple. "I don't belong here, Mulder. Are you Mulder? Is this a dream, or some kind of afterlife? I was in my apartment. I'd decided to take my own life..."

"Take your life? Why?" Fox's startled gasp surprised him.

"You know why. Because of Krycek, because he was making me betray you, because of the infection in my blood."

"No, Walter - I found a cure for that years ago!" Fox exclaimed. "You're just confused."

"Well I wouldn't argue with that," Skinner mused. Was it possible that he'd somehow been involved in an accident? That he'd forgotten the past four years? That would explain how Mulder's hair had grown, although it didn't explain why the other man looked so young, or why he seemed to think it was perfectly normal to cuddle up to his boss, and kiss him. It sure as hell didn't explain the bizarre transformation in his dress sense, to say nothing of why they were living in a castle. Was it even remotely possible that the bullet hadn't killed him? That somehow it had caused him to go into a coma? That when he'd got better, he and Fox Mulder had given up their careers at the FBI and retired to a castle in the country, where Mulder wandered around dressed like some kind of romantic hero, and where they were...lovers? No. Definitely not, Skinner decided. It was absurd. And yet here he was, and here was Mulder. It didn't feel like a dream. It felt real.

"Tell me about myself again," he said.

Fox smiled, but his eyes were worried. "All right. Your name is Walter - you remember that much?" Skinner nodded. "Well, more correctly, Sir Walter. You own these estates - you're the wealthiest landowner for miles around. When you were younger, you ran away with your neighbor's daughter - the Lady Sharon?"

Skinner laughed out loud. "I was married to someone called Sharon, and of course she was a lady, but she'd laugh her head off at the title! And as for being called **Sir** Walter. Well that's just absurd."

Fox pulled on his lower lip thoughtfully, in an expression that was so Mulder, that it freaked Skinner out.

"Well, these are the facts, Walter. I can't help it if you find them amusing," Fox replied, with a shrug. "Both families were against your match with Sharon. You ran away and lived on the run for a couple of years. When you returned, your own family was reconciled to their new daughter, but her father never forgave you for stealing her away. When she died in childbirth and your son with her, Sharon's father went insane with grief and blamed you. He poisoned you, but kept you alive, ensuring that every day was a living death for you. Every morning, for one hour, you were disfigured by the poison, and in great pain. That was when I met you..."

"Is this a fairy story?" Skinner interrupted, his voice a disbelieving growl.

"No, it's a love story." Fox grinned, and lightly touched Skinner's shoulder with his hand. "I fell in love with you the moment I first laid eyes on you. I think it took you a little longer to notice me, but you were so wrapped up in your grief that's hardly surprising. You let me stay in your house, and showed me great hospitality, and I was wicked enough to repay your kindness by seducing you! I gave up my search for my sister, and went searching instead for a cure for you. When I found it, I brought it back here, and you took me as your Life-Mate. 'Never to be parted, until the end of time,'" he quoted. "Those were the words you said at our ceremony," he grinned, patting Skinner's stunned cheek.

"I see," he murmured, completely and utterly bemused. A gay wedding? Were those legal? "What year is this? What world is it? What damn reality is it?" Skinner demanded.

Fox blinked, then clearly decided to humor him. "It's the year of the Fox," he said. "You teased me about that unmercifully for 4 whole months before you finally realized that the joke was wearing **exceedingly** thin. As for reality - well, Walter, it's our reality, and that's the only kind I know." Fox shrugged. "Now, if you're really feeling ill, and not just playing with me, then I know a guaranteed way to make you feel better." He gave a sly smile. "It works every time."

He pushed Skinner back down onto the bed, and straddled him, then bent his head, and lightly tongued the other man's nipples. Skinner nearly jumped out of his skin from a combination of surprise, that Fox Mulder should be anywhere near this sensitive area of his body, and shock that his mouth should feel so good against his bare chest. Fox grinned at him, grabbed his arms, held them over his head, and then sank his mouth down onto Skinner's and kissed him soundly, his tongue thrusting insistently between Skinner's lips, exploring and devouring him. Skinner was astonished to find his body responding, his cock hardening inside his briefs.

"Fox...?" He croaked, when the other man released him.

"Hush, Walter. I'll make everything better. You'll see," Fox winked at him, then trailed a line of delightful, fiery kisses down his body, ending up at his briefs. He pushed them down, then took Skinner's cock in his mouth. Skinner yelled and nearly leapt off the bed. This wasn't happening. He was sure that it just couldn't be happening. Fox's hands stroked his thighs, while his mouth worked on Skinner's hard cock. He felt sure that he should push the other man away, and protest, but the truth was, he didn't want to, and that fact surprised him more than anything else in this strange universe.

Krycek's apartment was a run-down, one-room place on the outskirts of town. It smelled of damp, sweat, and decay, which seemed fitting. Mulder didn't miss the more subtle smell of danger though, as he lay in wait. A spare prosthetic, lying in a bag by the mattress, showed him he had come to the right place, although Mulder hadn't really doubted his source.

Mulder settled down by the door, gun drawn. He didn't have long to wait. Less than an hour later there was a sound outside, and then Krycek appeared in the doorway. Some age-old instinct took hold of Mulder. He had the same reaction every time he saw his former partner: his fists went ballistic. He landed a satisfying thump to Krycek's face, and another to his body before the other man even realized he was there. Krycek spun, reaching for his gun, but it was too late. Mulder kicked his legs from under him and held his own gun to Krycek's head.

"One false move, and you're dead," he hissed.

"Mulder - good to see you too, buddy," Krycek grinned, pushing the gun away, without fear.

Mulder pistol-whipped him across the jaw and had the satisfaction of seeing a tooth fly out of the other man's mouth, and blood welling up in his lip.

"It's not a game any more, Krycek. It never was," he said, in a dull, toneless voice. "You might just have cost me the one thing that makes any of this miserable excuse for a life worthwhile. I don't have any patience left as far as you're concerned, so talk."

"About what?" Krycek held his hand to his bleeding mouth, his green eyes losing their mischief, and becoming dark - and deadly - as he saw that Mulder meant business. "It must be important if you managed to find me. You've never managed it before."

"I never had the same incentive before." Mulder hauled Krycek up by the collar on his leather jacket, and deposited him in a chair in the middle of the room. Then he fastened the other man's hands behind his back with handcuffs.

"Which is?" Krycek asked, the blood flowing down his jaw unchecked, and dripping onto his white tee shirt.

"Skinner." Mulder raised the gun, and placed it against the other man's head.

"Skinner?" Krycek looked confused.

"Where is he?" Mulder dug the cool metal of the gun into Krycek's flesh.

"I don't know. Should I?" Krycek shrugged.

"Don't bullshit me, Krycek. I'm not in the mood."

"I'm not."

"I know all about the nanocytes, and I know that Skinner was thinking of committing suicide. I'm sure that wasn't in your game-plan, Krycek. You enjoyed using him as a weapon against me too much. So, where is he?" Mulder could feel his patience wearing thin. He was so close to putting a bullet through this man's brain. Only the belief that Krycek knew something about Skinner's disappearance stopped him.

"Mulder, listen to me - I don't know where he is. I didn't know he was thinking of committing suicide." Krycek's eyes were serious, and Mulder was surprised to find that he believed him.

"Is there a cure for what you did to him?" Mulder demanded.

"There's always a cure, Mulder. For everything." Krycek gave a lop-sided, bloody smile, then spat out another tooth. "You just have to decide whether it's worth the price."

"What price?" Mulder drew back, but kept the gun raised, still pointed at Krycek's head.

"Mulder, I don't have the cure. I was paid to pull Skinner's strings, and I enjoyed it, but someone was pulling my strings too. That's the way the world works. A chain of puppeteers, leading all the way back to..."

"Who?" Mulder leaned forward. Krycek's lip had swollen to twice its normal size, and his voice was muffled.

"You know who. 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...'" Krycek grinned. "If only we knew his name," he whispered. "Huh, Mulder? They say it's a wise man who knows his own father..."

"Shut up!" Mulder swung his fist into Krycek's chin, and the other man gave a pained yelp.

"Where can I find him?" He demanded.

Krycek shrugged, and tried to right himself. "How should I know?" He panted. "He contacts me. It's always been that way. You found him once before - find him again."

"Last time...Skinner helped me." Mulder felt his loss even more as he said that. Krycek shrugged again.

"I'm sorry, old buddy. Shoot me if you want, but this time, I can't help," he murmured, almost apologetically. Mulder hit him again, just because it felt so damn good, then he took

hold of the other man's thick dark hair, pulled his head back, and looked into those chameleon-green eyes.

"That one was for Skinner. If he's still alive, and if you ever hurt him again, you're a dead man."

"I didn't know you cared." Krycek's eyes narrowed. "Caring makes you vulnerable, Mulder. You can't afford the luxury of being weak."

"It doesn't make me weak. It makes me human," Mulder snorted. "And I wouldn't want to be any other way. I've seen what happens to people who sell their souls, Krycek, and it isn't a pretty sight." He allowed his gaze to linger on Krycek's bruised flesh for just long enough to drive his point home, then he turned on his heel, and left.

"It's a horse." Skinner eyed the bay stallion warily.

"It's not just any horse, Walter! It's your horse, Cedar," Fox chided.

"He's...big." Skinner watched as the stallion snorted, and side-stepped around the yard.

"He's the finest horse in the realm. You've turned down countless offers to buy him," Fox reminded him gently. Skinner closed his eyes, and tried desperately to remember any of this, but he didn't. He had no idea what the other man was talking about. Everything was unfamiliar, from this magnificent castle they stood outside, to the clothes he was wearing. He was dressed in soft hide trousers, comfortable leather boots, and a black cotton shirt. Everything fitted him perfectly, even the boots, which were clearly well worn, as if they had molded themselves to the previous owner's feet after months of wear.

"Walter, it's okay." Fox put an arm around his shoulder, and kissed his cheek. Skinner froze and glanced anxiously at the groom, who was holding the horse's bridle.

"We'll be seen," he hissed.

Fox looked startled. "Walter - your servants know that we're life-mates. They've seen us kiss before," he said. "Why did you think it would bother them?"

Skinner stared at him blankly. "This kind of behavior is...the norm here?" He asked.

Fox gave him a bewildered look. "Of course," he shrugged. "Come on, Walter. Let me show you around your estate. Maybe seeing your favorite haunts will jog your memory."

"Haunts would be right," Skinner muttered under his breath. "I feel like a ghost. Maybe I am dead after all."

Fox was mounting a chestnut stallion, slightly smaller than Skinner's bay, with long, slender legs. The horse was full of nervous energy, just like its rider. Skinner couldn't help but smile at the resemblance.

"He's beautiful. Like a racehorse," he mused, stroking the horse's long nose. It blew at him, and rolled its eyes nervously.

Fox frowned. "Normally Rowan loves you - you spoil him far more than I do," he commented, calming the horse. "I think of horses as creatures to get me where I need to travel, but you...when you ride, you seem to become one with them, Walter. It's magnificent to watch - it's how I fell in love with you in the first place." He gave another of those heart-stopping smiles, and Skinner felt his stomach flip. Love? He couldn't dismiss the sheer pleasure of what Fox had done to his body earlier, but love?

Skinner pulled himself hesitantly onto the bay stallion. He had ridden horses before, in his youth, but that had been a long time ago, and he'd spent the past ten years sitting behind a desk. He clung onto the animal, holding the reins too tight. The bay seemed to sense something was amiss, and swiveled his head to regard Skinner with large, puzzled dark eyes.

"Okay, Cedar." He stoked the animal's neck, but it continued to stare at him, clearly as unconvinced about the whole thing as Skinner was. Fox set off, and Skinner dug his heels into the stallion's flanks and followed on behind, in fits and starts. The horse immediately sensed his lack of experience, and Skinner clung on for dear life. He was becoming less and less convinced of the amnesia theory that Fox was so sure of. To be forgetful after a head injury was one thing, but to replace your memories with an entirely different set that seemed just as real didn't make any sense.

Fox led them along a pretty pathway through pastures and meadows. Skinner gazed around, trying to gauge what part of the country he might be in, and failing. He soon noticed that there were no roads, no airplanes, no sign whatsoever of modern technology. Even if they had been buried deep in the country, that didn't explain the lack of air traffic. It was beautiful countryside though. He followed Fox and Rowan through a small wood, and they emerged beside a beautiful lake.

"This is our place," Mulder said. "I remember when you first brought me here." He gave a sly smile, that startled Skinner.

"Why?" He asked, curious.

"Because it was mid-summer, and we were both hot after racing here. You won of course - you're a better horseman than I am. So I suggested that we swam to cool down - and it turned into a race, and that time I won because I'm a better swimmer, and afterwards I pulled you out of the water, puffing and wheezing..." Fox stopped, and gazed at Skinner expectantly. "This is where you protest that you weren't puffing and wheezing, old man," he prompted.

Skinner smiled, sadly. "I don't remember it, Fox," he said gently.

Fox swallowed and looked out over the lake. "Well, you were tired. I was tired too but I didn't tell you that!" He gave a wan smile at the memory. "We both staggered out and just lay on the ground in the sun, soaking up the warmth. We fell asleep lying side by side, stark naked, and I woke up to find you kissing me. We made love, Walter." He touched Skinner's

arm gently, his eyes bright with remembrance, "and afterwards we ate the food we'd packed in our saddlebags, and watched the sun going down over the lake. It was one of the most beautiful days of my life."

"It does sound..." Skinner hesitated. It did sound beautiful, but it wasn't his memory. A lump rose in his throat. He didn't belong here. He hadn't led a life that could make any sense of this experience. Mulder would know, he thought to himself, feeling a pang deep inside his heart. **His** Mulder would know. Not this charming, beautiful, completely enchanting doppelganger, but Agent Mulder; difficult, unruly, and just as enchanting in his own way. His Mulder might be able to make sense of this. He was, after all, the patron saint of bizarre phenomena. "And they don't come much more bizarre than this," Skinner muttered under his breath.

Mulder felt like a hamster, running around and around in circles. He had spent the past 2 days trying to track down the man who had told him he was his father, but, as Krycek had warned him, his old enemy wasn't a man who was easily found. Finally, in despair, he returned to Skinner's apartment and sat on the couch, thinking. He was used to making wild intuitive leaps of faith, to ruminating along tangential paths that somehow led to the truth, but this was different. Skinner seemed to have literally disappeared. Nobody had seen him: it was as if he had vanished off the face of the earth.

Mulder buried his head in his hands, fingering his healing skull. He no longer wore the bandage, and the wound was healing well enough, although the itching still drove him crazy. Of course, in the end, it all came down to his father, whoever he was. It always had. The truth was dangerously close to home. So close, that it hurt. Mulder got up and examined his wounded scalp in the mirror, trying to think of some way he could contact his father. What was it Krycek had said? *Our father, who art in heaven...*

"What does he expect me to do? Pray?" Mulder asked his reflection incredulously. He placed his itching head against the cool glass and ran it over in his mind. Pray? To that cigarette smoking bastard? He stood there for a long while, just thinking, then had that eerie sensation of being watched again. He jerked his head up quickly, and for just one split second, caught a glimpse of dark eyes before his own reflection replaced the image. Mulder blinked. It was late. He was clearly hallucinating. He went back over to the couch and lay down. *Our father, who art in heaven...* It was worth a try. He'd do anything to get Skinner back - even pray to the devil.

"How do you feel?" Fox grinned at Skinner as he flung himself down on the bed, with a groan.

"Stiff," he replied honestly. His whole body ached from the unaccustomed exercise. It was yet another factor in his increasing certainty that he was not this 'Sir Walter', however enjoyable the fantasy was.

"I'll arrange for a bath." Fox walked to the wall and pulled a rope handle. A servant appeared a few seconds later. "Hot water please. Sir Walter wishes to bathe," Fox said briskly, disappearing into an en-suite chamber and reappearing with a large tin tub. Skinner stared in disbelief. True, he hadn't seen any sign of modern living, but even so... He watched, in a daze, as hot water was poured into the tub, until it was half-full and steaming. Then the servants left, and Fox returned to his side. "You're still recovering. Let me take care of you," Fox murmured, kneeling at his feet and tugging off one of his boots.

"I can do it," Skinner growled, uncomfortable with being waited upon.

"I know, but I can do it more easily," Fox smiled. "One of the first things that struck me about you, Walter, was that you were prepared to kneel at my feet and help me with my boots - you the mighty landowner, and I, the scoundrel begging at your door. I think that was when I first fell in love with you."

"You said you first fell in love with me when you saw me out riding," Skinner grunted.

"So I did. I loved you then too. And I really, really loved you the first time I saw you naked," Fox winked, and Skinner wanted to be offended, or shocked, but he wasn't. Instead, he just wished he could give in to the fantasy.

Fox finished removing his boots, then lovingly massaged his feet. Skinner lay back on the bed, resting on his elbows. The trouble was that this was just so damned **nice**. He noticed Fox's hands had traveled up his legs, and were now gently fondling his calves, and then his thighs. Skinner watched, acquiescent, as the other man unbuttoned his trousers, and tugged at them. He moved his hips to aid Fox, and soon he was naked from the waist down. Fox climbed onto the bed beside him, and started to unbutton his shirt, pausing to steal a kiss to a collarbone, and a nipple, and to dip his tongue into Skinner's naval. Skinner gave in. Something inside him just snapped, and he caught Fox up in his arms, and held him close in a tight embrace, then he pressed his lips to the other man's and kissed him hard. Fox drew back afterwards with a startled smile on his face.

"I can see you're back, my love," he whispered. "Thank the gods. I was beginning to get worried." He pulled Skinner close, and kissed him again. Skinner's hands traveled urgently over Fox's hard, lean body, caressing him. Suddenly he was like a teenager, out on a first date. He needed this. He needed to feel Fox's naked skin beneath his fingertips. It was a fantasy he had harbored in a secret corner of his heart for too long, and now he wanted to explore it, to taste the reality. He tore Fox's shirt from his shoulders, then, with eager fingers, fumbled with the buttons on his pants. They stubbornly stayed fastened, so in frustration he ripped the fabric open, much to Fox's amusement.

"I must remember to hit you on the head more often if this is the result," the other man laughed, kicking his pants off, so that he was gloriously naked. Skinner didn't reply. He was too busy running his lips over the newly revealed flesh, pausing to take a nipple in his mouth, then continuing down to Fox's hardening cock. He covered it with one big hand, and caressed it to full erection, then sank back on the bed, claiming another sweet kiss from Fox's generous lips, stroking the other man's cock as they kissed.

"Lie back," Fox whispered when they'd finished. He reached for a silver tin and opened it, and Skinner did as he was told, trusting his new lover. Fox smeared some kind of salve on his fingers, then tip-toed the tips around Skinner's sensitive, puckered hole. Skinner groaned, and pushed himself back into the bed. Fox smiled. "Relax, dear-heart, I'm going to do that trick you like," and so saying he inserted one finger into Skinner's anus. Skinner had never been finger-fucked before, and he had no idea how pleasurable it could be. Fox's fingers were skillful, finding his prostate, gently stimulating it, until Skinner was moaning for more, and harder. Fox smiled, and coated his hard cock with some of the salve, then held Skinner's buttocks in his hands, caressing them gently.

"Now?" He asked. Skinner nodded, needing it, wanting it, and wondering at himself all at the same time. He felt a moment of pain, as he was stretched, then the tip of Fox's cock slid into him, and he opened up, swallowing the other man into his body. Fox rocked gently, then pushed, and Skinner cried out at the exquisite pleasure of the movement. He lay in a haze of sensation, watching as if in a dream, as this beautiful man made love to him. Fox's body was sleek with sweat, his eyes glowing with love, a lock of dark hair falling onto his forehead, and sticking there. His long fingers continued to caress Skinner's thighs, and ass, and then one hand wrapped itself around Skinner's cock, and the twin pleasures of having Fox's hard penis inside him, making love to him, and his own cock pumped was too much. Skinner came.

Fox didn't take much longer, and they both lay there for a moment, smiling at each other stupidly, then Fox got up and wiped his hand on a cloth. "Come on - let's get cleaned up," he said, holding out a hand to heave Skinner off the bed.

Skinner didn't think he'd ever felt so good in his life as he lowered himself into that warm water, and relaxed his stiff muscles. He felt...sated. If only...if only he remembered any of this life, then he would truly have been able to say that he was happier than he had been in a long time, maybe happier than he had ever been in his life before. Fox grinned at him, and joined him in the tin tub, resting between Skinner's open legs, his back against Skinner's chest. Skinner soaped the other man, stealing a dozen kisses along the back of Fox's tanned neck, wondering how this could have happened. It was as if someone had handed him the key to a door, and he'd turned the key in the lock, to find his own true self. Why then, did he feel so uneasy?

"My love?" Fox turned to gaze at Skinner, hearing his troubled sigh.

"Nothing," Skinner ran his hands down Fox's arms, and then leaned back, holding the other man tight against him, as if he never wanted to let him go. "Nothing..." he murmured again.

They sat there until the water became cold. Outside it had grown dark, and the only lighting in the room was the warm, orange glow from the fire as it consumed the logs in the hearth. Above it, the huge, gilt mirror looked down upon them. Fox got out of the tub, and wrapped himself in a cloth, handed Skinner one, then tumbled onto the bed, and closed his eyes, with a contented sigh. Skinner watched the flames casting beautiful shadows over Fox's dozing face, and traced his fingers over the other man's cheek, and down his jaw, letting it rest there for a moment. He smiled. This was everything he had never even known that he

wanted, and yet...it wasn't his. Skinner got up, and wandered over to the mirror. He placed his hands on the cool glass, and looked at his own dark reflection.

"Who are you really?" He asked. "Not the coward, and the traitor. You killed him. Who are you now? An impostor? Leading another man's life? A thief? Stealing what doesn't belong to you?" He hadn't expected a reply, and gave a gasp of surprise, as another face appeared in the glass in place of his own. It was a man - so like him as to be his twin, and yet not him. This man was clothed, while he was naked, and his eyes were full of some agony that he couldn't understand.

"Who are you?" He asked, placing his hand flat against the glass. The other man's eyes flickered over his shoulder to Fox's naked form, lying on the bed, and then back to Skinner, his expression one of frantic fury. Skinner backed away in alarm, and the other man disappeared from sight. Skinner shook his head, wondering if he had imagined the whole event, but if he closed his eyes he could still see the anger, and feel the sorrow that emanated from the man in the mirror. Two doppelgangers then. One of Mulder, and one of himself. How could he possibly make sense of this?

Walter gave a cry of sheer, frustrated anger as the vision disappeared, and drove his fist into the cold, hard wall of the cell. He didn't feel anything as he pounded the wall, over and over again. Nothing. Not even any pain. Who was that man who had taken his place in his lover's bed? His heart ached with jealousy, as he struggled to make sense of it. Fox was as he remembered him, lying outstretched on the bed, his loose limbs relaxed and at peace. He didn't wear a bandage on his head...and yet the other one did. The other Fox who appeared occasionally on the opposite wall. He didn't look like his Fox. He was deeply troubled, and his eyes were haunted...but by what, or maybe whom, Walter had no idea. He paced his cell, wondering how much time had passed. He didn't feel hungry, or cold, or hot, or tired, or thirsty. He just was. Time stretched out before him and behind him, and was nothing. Here, now, there was only him, and it was as if he occupied this one moment in time, and every moment in time all at once. He couldn't make any sense of it. He prowled for a second, a day, a year and a lifetime, and then he sat down, and buried his face in his hands.

"You want my help, son?" The voice was familiar, reverberating through his mind, mocking, and dangerous. Mulder opened his eyes and looked around, but there was nobody there. He hadn't expected there to be.

"Father?" He voiced the word tentatively in his mind to be met by a crowing laugh.

"Ah, my son. I see you have found the truth, at last," that hated voice said.

"One part of the truth, the one I've tried to avoid for so long - that you and I might share anything, least of all our genes," Mulder commented bitterly.

"You resent me and yet you still come to me for help?" His father's tone was mocking.

"Skinner. Where is he?" Mulder asked bluntly. There was silence for a long moment.

"We should talk. Come to me," his father commanded, his voice growing weak. An address flashed into Mulder's mind and he was already on his feet and out of the door before the last echo of that ghostly voice had faded.

"Walter?"

Skinner continued staring out of the window, sensing that Fox was standing behind him.

"Walter..." Fox's hands came to rest lightly on his shoulders.

"Fox, don't." Skinner gently disengaged himself. "We both know that I'm not him." He turned and looked straight into the other man's eyes, then he took hold of Fox's hand and placed it on his stomach. "Did **he** have this scar?" He asked.

"I don't understand. You got that soon after I met you - while we were out hunting wild boar," Mulder told him. "I was in the way, and you shoved me aside and got a tusk in your belly for your troubles. I thought you'd die - I got every healer for miles around to look at you, but you bounced back. Too strong to kill," he said affectionately.

"Did it really look like this?" Skinner asked insistently, sure that there had to be a world of difference between a scar left by a bullet, and that caused by a damn pig.

"Well..." Fox's eyes were troubled. "You were scarred there," he insisted.

"But it didn't look quite like this, did it?" Skinner took Fox's hand again, and pressed it to his ribcage. "And here - the jagged scar."

"When you were a boy, about 18, you told me that you went to fight the King's war. You said that you were young, and full of noble ideas, but nothing prepared you for the reality of battle," Fox said. Skinner felt icy fingertips creep slowly up his spine and he shivered as if someone had walked over his grave. Could lives really be so alike, and yet so different? Patterns, eddying and swirling, almost the same, and yet a world apart. "You were cut down, you and your fellow knights, ambushed in a forest as you scouted ahead of the main army," Fox continued, still touching Skinner's scarred ribcage. "They killed your comrades, and left you for dead..."

"Hush." Skinner placed a hand over the other man's lips, unable to continue hearing his life parroted back to him, twisted in this way.

"Walter?" Fox faltered, brushing his fingers aside. "It's a dark memory - sometimes you have nightmares about it. It's hardly surprising, my love." He wrapped his arms around Skinner's head and pulled him close. "You lay pinned under your dead horse for a day and a night before you were found. Lying next to you the whole time, was the severed head of your

friend, his eyes still open. The scar on your ribs is where one of your assailants struck you down with his sword," Fox finished.

"Not a sword. It wasn't a sword," Skinner said helplessly. "Fox, it doesn't look like a sword wound, does it?"

"I don't..." Fox broke off and bit on his lip.

"It's different, isn't it? It's in the same place, but it isn't quite the same," Skinner told him. "Look at it!" He roared, grabbing a candle, and holding it over the scar. He needed to make Fox understand. He had to make Fox understand before he lost his courage, forgot about the man in the mirror, and gave himself up to all this world had to offer. Fox's face was grave, as his fingers lightly touched the scar.

"I don't want to believe..." Fox said miserably, his clear hazel eyes troubled.

"You must." Skinner grabbed his head, and rested it against his own forehead. "Trust me, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to just accept all this, but it isn't true, Fox. Remember the clothing I wore when I came here? It's not the type of clothing that you wear, or that your Walter wears, is it?"

"I don't...no. It isn't," Fox whispered.

"Fox, I'm sorry, but I'm not him. I'm not him..." Skinner whispered.

Fox struggled for a moment in his arms, and his body trembled against Skinner's but the big man wouldn't let him go. Finally, Fox stilled, and when he looked up, his eyes were troubled, but accepting.

"Where is he then?" He asked. "Where is my Walter?"

Skinner glanced over Fox's shoulder, at the ornate mirror, that seemed to watch their every movement. "I'm not sure, Fox," he whispered. "I'm not sure."

Mulder stopped his car outside the huge mansion, and got out. The enormous door opened before he even had a chance to knock, and two identical burly bodyguards stood there. Mulder recognized them immediately as being clones of the bounty hunter he remembered from several altercations. Neither of them spoke to Mulder, they merely escorted him down several long corridors, sandwiching him between their burly bodies as they walked. Mulder glanced around in surprise. Outside, the house had looked old, but within it was like a laboratory; shiny, and modern. Their footsteps echoed on the cold, smooth floors as they walked, the sound reverberating around the corridors.

They paused outside a closed door, and one of the bodyguards turned to him.

"He's waiting for you," was all the man said.

"In here?" Mulder pointed at the door. The man didn't reply. "How do I get in?" Again, no reply. Mulder shrugged, and raised his hand to knock, but the door slid silently open, and he stepped inside.

Mulder gazed at the interior of the room in shock. It was built like a huge, observatory, with a domed, glass ceiling, and was lit by dark blue light, from an unidentifiable source. In the center of the room was a throne, and seated on the throne was his...father. The smoking man's eyes were open, and fixed, and he was completely still. Two more bodyguard clones stood beside him, equally unmoving.

"Hello?" Mulder went up to him. "Can he hear me?" He asked the clones, when there was no response. They ignored him. "Father?" He said, tentatively, hating hearing the sound of this name on his lips, spoken to **this** man.

<My son.> The word echoed in his mind, but still his father made no movement. He just stared straight ahead. <Kneel,> his father commanded.

"You've gotta be kidding, right?" Mulder said incredulously. "Kneel to you? Like in homage or something?"

<Kneel,> his father repeated silently, and the two clones took hold of Mulder by the shoulders, and forced him onto his knees. Mulder stayed where he had been put, and watched as his father raised his hand, in a dreamlike state, and pressed it to Mulder's unwilling lips.

<Greetings, my son, my first born,> the man intoned.

"I didn't come here for any of this crap. I want information. I need..." Mulder began. His father made a small, almost imperceptible movement with his eyes.

<Yes, I know what you want, what you always want,> he murmured, his tone wistful, and faintly irritated. <You were always thus; always needing, questioning, and curious. From the moment you were born. Your thirst for knowledge, and your quest for enlightenment sometimes made me proud of you, and at other times...it can be trying, son.> There was a note of amusement in the other man's 'voice' this time. <There are times to wait, to be patient, and times to actively seek out what you require. You never did seem to know the difference,> the still, silent man said reproachfully.

"Maybe if the answers had been forthcoming. Maybe if you'd ever be honest with me," Mulder snapped.

<I told you all that you could handle. Any more, and...> A slight shake of the head punctuated this statement. <You weren't ready then. Now, however.> A gleam appeared in the other man's eyes, and, moving so quickly that Mulder didn't even see him, he grasped Mulder's head between his cold, hard fingers and pressed. Mulder let out a scream. His father fingers were like steel. He couldn't escape from their relentless probing. He felt sure they would drill a hole into his skull, and suck out all the contents, leaving him drained.

<Ah,> his father said, releasing him a few minutes later. <I see. You have a choice to make now, son.>

"What kind of choice?" Mulder demanded, rubbing his bruised head.

<A choice about the future. Your future, the future of the world. Your sister's future...> That last sentence dangled between them, and Mulder's head jerked up, his eyes darkening.

"You know where she is?"

<Yes. You can have her, son. You can be reunited with her. She's safe, and well. Join me. Sit beside me, and we will be as one. You, me, and your sister. A family. At long last, we can be together, and you can have the answers to every question you have ever asked - to every question you might ever want to ask. All the knowledge of the world can be yours.> His father's tone was strong, and forceful and Mulder knew instinctively that he was telling the truth. Everything he had ever wanted to know could be his. He could understand it all at last.

"What's the catch?" he asked, in a wry tone.

"There is none. Just a choice." His father's grim, stony face broke into an infinitely slow smile, that didn't reach those staring eyes. "Your choice, my boy. Come with me, and join us, or go, and find that which is lost. If you chose to go, we will not be here when you return. We cannot wait.>

"That which is lost? You're talking about Skinner?" Mulder demanded.

<He that you seek. Yes. You are looking for a cure. Here. Take it.> His father raised a bony finger, and one of the clones stepped forward, holding a vial. He placed it on the throne. Mulder put out his hand, only to be stopped by the force of his father's thoughts. <Think carefully, my son. If you take this, and leave, you will never find us again. You must choose. Him, or us.>

"Do you know where he is, and how I can help him?" Mulder demanded. His father's head moved fractionally, up, and then down again.

<Yes. It's your choice. If you choose him, I will help you find him, and save his life. I promise. Choose, then, my son. Choose. Him, or **this**.>

Mulder fell backwards as the full force of his father's mind hit his own. He reeled from a myriad of images that swirled into his mind, and out again. For just one second he knew the answers to everything. He knew how life on this world had started, where it had come from, how it had evolved. He knew the past, present and future. He knew where his sister was, and why she had been taken from him. He knew everything for one split second, and then it was gone and he could have wept from the loss.

<Join us. Leave him. He is nothing. Join us...> His father's mind was welcoming, and warm. <Come, my son. Take up your rightful place beside me, where you belong.> His father held

out a hand, his eyes still staring blankly into the distance. Mulder hesitated. His father's hand was so close. It would have been easy to just take it, to be enveloped by that all-knowing, all-seeing embrace. The vial lay before him, at his father's feet. He had to choose, one or the other. He saw a man, surrounded by glass, saw himself, looking into a mirror. Who was he? Someone who would sacrifice everything for his quest? He had been once. He remembered a dream, and a puzzle. The puzzle of his life; the final, missing piece, had not been his quest. It had been Skinner. His whole life had been understanding that one fact. Him, and Skinner. Not knowledge, not his father, or his sister, but Skinner. His hand closed around the vial, and he put it into his pocket, and got to his feet.

<You've made your choice then?>

"Yes. I know what I want. Will you keep your promise and help me find him?" Mulder asked, holding his breath. There was a long silence.

<Yes,> his father said, finally. <Now leave. Quickly. Before I change my mind.>

Mulder turned on his heel, and walked swiftly towards the door. <And, Fox?> The voice was soft, and tender. <I did love you, my son.> Mulder hesitated, but he didn't turn back. If he had done, he would have seen one, solitary tear wind its way slowly down leathery, stony, unmoving skin.

"What do you see?" Fox asked the old lady, eagerly.

"You're always the impatient one." She shook her head and her thick white hair rippled around her wizened old face. "Here, and there, always impatient. All the time. No different anywhere, or any time."

"She's talking in riddles," Skinner whispered to Fox.

"She's the best soothsayer in the realm," Fox whispered back.

"Just because I'm old, doesn't mean I can't hear!" She told them, with a reproving stare. She sat hunched over a bowl of steaming water, poured a dark, inky fluid into the bowl, then stirred it with her little finger. "Ah," she murmured, thumping her stick on the floor. "Ah," she said again, louder.

"What?" Skinner demanded, feeling seriously irritated by the whole performance. This woman was clearly a charlatan and he was annoyed that he had allowed Fox to talk him into visiting her. She looked up at him with sharp blue eyes, and smiled. "And you, are always torn between doing what is right, and what has to be done. They aren't always the same thing, are they?" Her bright eyes seemed to bore holes into his soul. "Hush!" she laughed out loud. "We all learn, and change, and transform. Sometimes **he**," she pointed at Mulder, "even becomes settled - love does that to some people. If they fall in love with the right one, and he generally tends to. Sometimes... **you** even learn to trust your own heart," she whispered to Skinner, "and then you find your happiness too."

"And what," Skinner raised an eyebrow, "does this have to do with our problem?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying." She grinned at them both. "Change can happen. Look at me. I started out as a midwife, hmm? And now look at me. I heard voices for 50 years before I took any notice of them. Used to dismiss them as the wind rustling in the trees, or the birds singing in the sky. All this time listening to all this chatter in my head, and trying to pretend it wasn't there. Hmm? Such a shame. All those wasted years." She sighed, sat back and folded her bony hands. "Don't you make the same mistakes. Either of you," she warned.

"Can you actually see anything?" Skinner demanded. "Or did you take this," he gestured to the bag full of gold coins, "for nothing."

"Nothing." She passed a hand over the coins, and Skinner blinked - they had disappeared from right under his nose. "The one you seek is locked up in glass. The one who put him there lives with the dead. An old enemy is at the root. All this can yet be brought to a satisfactory end if you have willing hearts. Good day to you." She got up and began briskly tidying away.

"What?" Skinner gasped. "That's it?" He exchanged a puzzled glance with Fox.

"It's enough. I only give you enough. No more, no less. Run along now, boys. Off and play." She clapped her hands at them as if they were chickens that had wandered into the house.

"An old enemy..." Fox mused. "Do you mean Lady Sharon's father? Is he behind this?"

"And you never take 'no' for an answer either. Not in any realm." The old woman frowned at him. Skinner stared at her. There was something almost familiar about her. She was tiny, but her indomitable will shone out from those fiery blue eyes. Around her neck she wore a tiny gold amulet.

"Scully?" He peered at her in the dimly lit room. She smiled at him, and patted his arm. "You're a good man. In any lifetime. You could be more cheerful, and smile more often, but good all the same. Go back home, and hurry. He waits for you." She smiled, and then turned her back on the pair of them and refused to say another word.

"If the man who did this to us is dead how can we ever hope to find him?" Skinner asked despairingly as they walked back to their horses.

"She said he lives with the dead, not that he **is** dead," Fox told him, lending him a hand as he mounted the bay stallion, and lurched unsteadily in the saddle. "Lives with the...the catacombs!" He announced, triumphantly, turning his horse around and setting off at a gallop. Skinner sighed, and tried to follow on behind, at a clumsy trot.

"And that's another thing." The old woman poked her head out of her hut. "He does that in every lifetime as well!"

The catacombs were set into the hills; vast underground tombs so cold they made Skinner shiver as soon as he stepped inside.

"Who would want to live here?" He asked Fox in a whisper.

"There's a strange man who has been thrown out of every town in the realm. You...Walter told him he could stay on his lands, but not in one of the towns or villages - nobody liked him, you see. He came up here and has lived here ever since. I don't know his name, but his nickname is Tombs, because of where he lives, among the dead," Fox informed him.

"Tombs." Skinner stopped short.

"He lives in your world too?" Fox asked, seeing his expression.

"Yes. Or at least he did. Fox - he's a dangerous man. We must be careful."

At that moment they heard a sound, and a small, dark-haired man emerged from a solid bank of rock. Skinner blinked. He could have sworn that there was no break in the rock - no holes or fissures that could have hidden the man.

"What have you done to Sir Walter?" Fox demanded, advancing on the man. Skinner sighed. So much for the careful approach.

"He's here. With you." The man's eyes rested on Skinner for a moment, his expression curious.

"That's not him. Where is he?" Fox grabbed hold of Tombs's shirt and shook him. Much to Skinner's surprise, Tombs burst out laughing.

"He sent me to live with the dead, in the rock. So I sent him to live alone, in the dark, in the glass."

"Is he alive?" Fox demanded.

"He's..." Tombs paused, and ran his tongue over his lower lip, relishing the moment. "He's entombed!" he said triumphantly.

"He was good to you. He allowed you to stop running. The townsfolk would have killed you," Fox yelled.

"Ah yes, but an old enemy of his paid me more money than I've ever seen before in my life. I need to live, if I cannot beg, and he wouldn't let me beg any more."

"You disturbed people, with your displays," Fox blurted accusingly.

"So I did. Would you like to see one?" Tombs asked Skinner. Skinner made no reply, but watched, in silence, as the strange man stepped forward into the light. Tombs raised his hand above a slab of rock, then lowered it, but pressing his flesh straight into the solid surface of the rock, where it disappeared from sight.

"I like rock...this one is cool. Some rock is warm inside, but not this one. Glass is good too. I can stand inside glass. That's what I did to him. I sent him the mirror - a special mirror, with a spell on it. When he touched it, he fell inside, and now he's trapped. Forever." Tombs gave a proud, shifty smile.

"That doesn't explain how I got here," Skinner said, crossing his arms.

"Spells are like that." Tombs shrugged. "The universe doesn't like a vacuum. It found something as close to the original as possible to fill it - so you were dragged into our world."

"Doesn't that leave a gap in my world?" Skinner asked.

"Maybe." Tombs shrugged. "Maybe not. Maybe your world is out of joint anyway, so just another crack doesn't matter. Maybe. Or maybe you were just leaving it anyway." Skinner paled, remembering the gun he had placed to his own temple, remembering pulling the trigger. The spell must have taken him at that split second, causing just a mild head wound, when he had sought death, and whirling him across dimensions to this time and place. Skinner couldn't help smiling a wan smile. Mulder would have loved this.

"How can we free my Walter?" Fox's voice sounded broken, and Skinner could have kicked himself for not realizing how painful all this was for the other man.

"You can't - the spell was for all time. It can only be broken on the other side - on **his**," he pointed his head in Skinner's direction, "side. The spell requires the presence of someone within the mirror. Someone answering **his** description." He jerked his head at Skinner again. "He's very like the other, isn't he? Why don't you just keep him instead?" He asked Fox. Skinner stepped forward just in time to stop Fox breaking the other man in half.

"Would I do instead? Could I exchange myself for Fox's Walter?" He asked, the idea suddenly occurring to him.

"You could." Tombs shrugged. "But why would you want to? It's an eternity, not a life-span. Do you understand? Outside time. No end. Forever and ever."

"No! I wouldn't ask you to do this." Fox grabbed Skinner's arm roughly.

"Fox." Skinner smiled gently, and grasped the other man by the shoulders. "I was going to take my own life anyway. I don't belong here, and neither of us could ever be happy knowing who was locked up in that mirror. I don't say that the idea of staying here isn't tempting..." he touched Fox's face tenderly, "but it isn't right. I don't belong here. It's not who I am."

They returned to the keep in silence, each keeping his own counsel. It was late, and they were both tired. Fox went straight to the huge, gilt mirror and placed his hands against it.

"It's hard to imagine someone locked up inside glass. It must be so cold," he shivered. "I can't let you do this," he told Skinner.

"You can't stop me." Skinner shook his head. Fox stared at him for a long time, before he finally seemed to accept the inevitability of Skinner's words.

"We have until morning. Tell me about your world. About your life," he asked, sitting down in front of the fire.

"My life? What's to tell? I was about to end it." Skinner saw the questioning look on Fox's face, and with a sigh, he started to explain. When he'd finished, Fox took his hand, and kissed his fingers gently.

"My Walter was only saved when I turned my back on my quest and found a cure for his illness instead. It's the same for you. I'm sure of it. We've been happy ever since, and I don't regret my decision."

"My Mulder isn't like you." Skinner shook his head ruefully. "He isn't in love with me for a start, and he wouldn't give up his quest for anything."

"I once thought that," Fox replied, with a knowing smile. "I was locked in a prison of my own making, until Walter set me free."

"It sounds to me as if you set him free, not the other way around." Skinner stared into the fire, trying to remember Mulder's face, wondering what it would feel like to touch it, fantasizing about what it would be like to kiss those lips, and hold the other man. To take him as his lover, and never let him go again.

"We were both leading half a life," Fox murmured, resting his head on Skinner's shoulder. "You are so like him. He would do this too. Give up everything, for a stranger."

"Hardly a stranger." Skinner smiled. "He and I have led surprisingly similar lives, it would seem."

"From all you've said - yes." Fox kissed his lips gently, then got up. "I'll sleep in another room," he said quietly. Skinner nodded. "You're wrong about your Mulder," Fox said, as he reached the door. Skinner raised an eyebrow. "He is in love with you. Trust me. I know him almost as well as I know myself, remember." And with a smile he slipped from the room.

Mulder let himself into Skinner's apartment, and lay the vial on the table, then looked around expectantly. The apartment was still empty. Somehow he had expected to find Skinner sitting there, waiting for him. Damn his father. Damn him! Why had he trusted him? Mulder looked in every room in the apartment, but there was no sign of life. Damn! He ran back downstairs, and stared blankly into the mirror.

<Don't do this to me, Father,> he pleaded silently. <Don't betray me. Keep one promise. Just one. After all you've done to me, I deserve that much, don't I?>

Silence.

Mulder threw himself down on the couch in despair. "What the hell use is the cure if I can't give it to him?" He raged out loud. "You promised me!"

The darkness that enveloped him suddenly lifted and he found himself looking into his beloved's face.

"Walter - it's me, Fox." His lover's face was strained, and anxious. "We know what's happened to you. We're going..." he hesitated, and bit on his lip. Walter knelt in front of him, and touched his fingers to the spot where his lover's hands rested on the glass. "We're going to rescue you. I don't know if this will work, but it's what we were told to do." Someone else loomed into sight behind Fox. Walter's eyes narrowed as he found himself looking at a mirror image of himself.

"It looks like I'm not going to meet you in person," the other man said. "I'm sorry if I've done you any wrong." His fingers touched Fox's sleeve lightly, and a look passed between them. "If so, it was unknowingly done," the man murmured. "I hope that taking your place will be recompense enough."

"Taking my place?" Walter echoed, frowning.

"Put both your hands on the mirror, Walter," Fox instructed.

Walter did as he was told, and watched as his mirror image did the same. Then the other man's face came closer and closer, until it seemed to merge with his own. He gave a strangled scream, feeling as if he was being sucked down a very long tunnel. Then everything went black. When he opened his eyes, he was lying on his back on the floor of his chamber, staring up into Fox's worried eyes.

The first thing Skinner was aware of was the sharp clarity of the air in here. Even the darkness was sharp. There was no sound, no movement. Everything was black. He got up, and paced the confines of his cell. Six steps. Stop. Turn. Four steps, stop. Turn. Another six, turn, and four more. That was it. Enough room to lie down, but he wasn't tired, or hungry. He couldn't tell how much time had passed - a minute, or a day, or even a year.

Sometimes, there was light, and Fox or Walter would talk to him. He lived for those times. Fox would babble about what he'd done, and what books he'd read and strange ideas he'd heard of in foreign realms. Walter was less talkative, more pensive, but he would spend longer with Skinner. He told Skinner how when people touched the mirror, it was possible to see them, and he'd shared that information with Fox. They hoped that between them, they could make his burden less heavy to bear. Fox occasionally went searching for a way to free him, but always returned empty handed and dispirited and it took several days of effort on Walter's part to lift him out of the dark mood. Skinner loved to watch the two of them together; touching, talking, sharing the everyday snippets of their lives with him.

He didn't regret his sacrifice for a second, and was so used to watching their lives, that it surprised the hell out of him, when the other wall suddenly sprang into life. His heart caught in his throat, as he found himself looking into Mulder's hazel eyes. His Mulder. He placed his hands against the cool wall, his fingertips resting where Mulder had his.

"The bastard told me...he told me...oh shit." Mulder rested his head on the wall, and Skinner tried in vain to touch his hair. "I'm sorry, Walter. I don't know where to look any more. Shit, I shouldn't have believed him, or trusted him. I'm an idiot. If you were here right now, you'd tell me that."

"Yeah. Probably. If I knew what the hell you were talking about," Skinner murmured, wondering when Mulder had taken to calling him 'Walter'. And why.

"I come back here every night. I don't know what I'm expecting. That you'll somehow materialize out of thin air, maybe?" Mulder asked. Skinner smiled. Tombs had told them it was possible to break the spell in his own universe, but he hadn't said how, and even if he had, how the hell could he give the information to Mulder, when the other man clearly couldn't hear a word he said?

"I won't ever stop looking though." Mulder smiled. "Sometimes, when I look in this mirror, I think I can see you. I know, I'm obsessive to the point of being delusional. Always have been!"

Skinner closed his eyes, and pressed his cheek against the wall of his cell. Mulder was so near. If only he could speak to him, tell him what he had learned about himself while in the other universe, with the other Mulder.

"Walter, I have the cure here, just waiting for you, if you'd only come back to me," Mulder said, and for just a second, Skinner was sure the other man had seen him. Mulder started, and then shivered. "Someone just walked over my grave," he said, with a wry grin, and then he disappeared. Skinner curled up in a tight ball on the floor of his cell, and covered his head with his hands until the wave of intense sorrow passed.

Mulder stared at his reflection. His hair had grown back, and he was fit and well. He had returned to the house where he had visited his father, but it was empty, and abandoned. His father had kept that promise at least. Mulder threw himself down on the couch in weary despair. He remembered the suicide note Skinner had written, and read it again, for the millionth time, looking for clues, but there were none. He drew his gun, and held it against his own temple for a moment, then placed it on the couch beside him. Not yet. Soon, but not yet. He closed his eyes, and recalled his dream of a jigsaw puzzle, of one final piece slotting into place, but how could he find that piece? He was lost inside the puzzle, and couldn't see a way to end it.

<Father. I'm begging you,> he whispered, sending the prayer into the ether. Who knew where the old man had gone now, or what he had become? Mulder felt the faintest whispering touch of another mind against his, as if he were being contacted from a great

distance, but there were no words, just an image of shattering glass, and then he was alone once more. Mulder sat there for a moment, and then he got up.

"This is stupid," he said, picking his gun up off the couch. "I know. Since when has that ever stopped me?" He mocked back at himself, watching the way his mouth moved in the mirror. He raised his gun, pointed it at the mirror, and then, after a brief pause...he pulled the trigger.

The glass shattered into a thousand pieces, and Mulder turned away, covering his eyes with his arm, as the glass flew in all directions. When finally the noise stopped, he stood up, cautiously, and turned back. There, lying on the floor, was Skinner.

"You do know that this doesn't make any sense, don't you?" Mulder said, crouching down beside the big man, checking to see if he was alive.

"Yeah. I know. I can explain," Skinner whispered, trying to sit up, and plucking a shard of glass from his arm as he did.

"No, that's my line. You sit in an office, and I go out doing all the weird shit," Mulder grinned.

"Not this time." Skinner grinned back. Mulder looked at him, startled, then, on an impulse, leaned forward and took the other man's head in his hands, and kissed him hard on the lips. When he finally released Skinner, he stepped back warily.

"Okay, punch me, but make it quick," he said.

Skinner shook his head and before Mulder knew it, he found himself pulled back for another deep, searching kiss. "I guess you can tell that I'm happy to be home," he murmured, his dark eyes expressing an emotion Mulder had never expected to see in them.

"I've been looking for something all my life. How the hell was I to know it was you all along?" Mulder asked, tracing a finger over Skinner's face, as if trying to memorize the beloved features.

"Sometimes it's hard to see the truth - even when it's staring us in the face," Skinner replied with a wry smile.

Mulder helped him over to the couch, and gave him the vial. "I know about the nanocytes. This is a cure. Apparently. I've had it analyzed and it isn't harmful. Shit, I'm gabbling, I just can't believe this. Where **were** you? How did you just appear like that?" Mulder asked.

"It's a long story. I was somewhere else, and I was shown another way to be...a different way of living, if you like. I wasn't even aware of wanting it before, but now..." Skinner broke off. "Yeah, it's crazy. It even sounds crazy to me, but I'm sure it happened." He frowned. "It seemed so real."

"Sounds similar to what I went through recently," Mulder commented, remembering the dream-like state he had been in, unable to move, or communicate, lost in a hallucination. "There's so much I want to tell you about that, about what I realized because of that experience. So much damn time wasted, and that's my fault, not yours. I'm sorry - we have all the time in the world to talk about this." He finished prattling, and burst out laughing. Skinner raised a puzzled eyebrow, and Mulder grabbed his face again, and held it between his hands, his expression one of wonder. "More than anything else, Walter, I'm just so damn pleased to have finally finished my jigsaw! You were a pretty big, damn piece to have missing on that giant canvas, I can tell you."

"What?" Skinner frowned.

"Later." Mulder pulled the other man into an embrace. "Much later," he murmured, as he started to undress him.

A loud crash woke both of them in the early hours of the morning. Walter got up, and lit a lamp, and they both surveyed the broken mirror.

"How did that happen?" Fox asked, sitting up in bed, his hair sticking up on end.

"I don't know." Walter knelt down and fingered the shards of glass. Then he looked up, with a smile. "I do know that our friend is free though. I can feel it."

"He is?" Fox's face was wreathed with smiles. "Thank the gods. The enchantment is really broken? You're sure? He's no longer spellbound?"

"Oh, I didn't say that." Walter smiled, teasingly. "He's still spellbound, just by someone else."

Fox grinned, and patted the bed, inviting his lover back into the warmth. He felt different. As if a wrong had been righted, everything had been put back in its proper place, and all was right with the universe once more.

The End.

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