

Starchild by Xanthe



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

Story Notes:

Beautiful Starchild pic by **CDavis**

This story is a birthday story for CD, inspired by this wonderful pic she made (above).

Many thanks to Gaby for beta help.

Spoilers: Closure. This is Not Happening

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Darkness

He was curled, like a fetus, his knees against his chest, his chin resting on his knees, his hands clutching his shins. He felt...content, flooded with a sensation of the most beautiful peace, more restful than anything he had ever known. His body was spinning in a sea of darkness, his heart beating in time to the tide, and keeping pace with something else...something stronger. If he concentrated he could hear a sound, like a drum, booming softly, steadily, with the most tremendous power. He focused on it, wonderingly, inhabiting the sound and becoming one with the reverberations and realization came with a strange ease, as effortless as everything was right now. The sound was the world's heart, beating

deep within the Earth's crust. It wasn't a human heart, but it pumped the lava-flowing lifeblood of this world through arteries of rock. The world was alive, as was everything upon it. It spun before him, a perfect synchronous vision, completing an age-old dance that was dizzyingly simple in its complexity. Why had he never noticed it before? Oceans crashed, their waves consuming the sea shore, back and forth, back and forth; mountains soared, their peaks touching the fabric of the sky, obscured by clouds; and the untold trillions of creatures that inhabited the earth spun out a daily choreography of existence, weaving a tapestry of life that was both beautiful and perfect.

Peace

Mulder breathed – and found he had no lungs. He was floating, supported, outside the joyful turning of the world. He was no longer part of it. He didn't draw breath with the Earth any more, and his heart was not part of that complex pounding rhythm of life that linked each and every inhabitant of the world. Somewhere, far, far away, he could feel his body decaying, and becoming one with the universe. Dead - and alive...for he detected a faint spark of life within it that did not belong there, that was alien to the tapestry being woven in front of him. It came from somewhere else, was implanted in his dead body, waiting, waiting to be reborn...

The world continued spinning, seemingly oblivious to the alien seed nestled inside his lifeless body that even as he watched was returning to the earth, matter forming back into its constituent parts, feeding the world with its sloughed off remains. Mulder lay still, curious, his mind pushing out to find its limits...and found that there were none. Startled, he opened his eyes...and the universe around him exploded in a million points of starlight.

Starlight

He was surrounded by stars – too many to count, each shining brightly against the darkness of space, and yet he wasn't afraid. Instead he was filled with a mild curiosity, and sense of wonder. He watched the starlight for what felt like an eon and a split second at one and the same time, his heart and mind as open as they had always been during his earthly existence, only now, for the first time, there was no price to be paid for that openness. There was no pain of discovery, loss and betrayal, as had too often been the case during his earthly existence. Instead he was rewarded by the starlight bathing him in its warmth, holding him as comfortingly as an infant, rocking him gently.

He wasn't sure how much time passed. There was no time here. He was outside time, just as he was outside life, and outside of his world. It felt like forever. It might have been less than one turn of the humming, vibrant, blue-green world in front of him, or it might have been centuries. All he knew was that one moment he was still, and then he was moving.

First his head, pushing against an invisible barrier, moving inexorably towards one of those beckoning pinpricks of light. It seemed to know him, welcomed him, becoming warmer and brighter as he drew close, and then he was moving so quickly he seemed to be hurtling through space, the stars moving past him faster than the speed of light, creating beautiful, multi-colored patterns against the dark sky that surrounded him. Faster now, so fast that

everything was a blur of light, and then that light exploded into a crescendo of white that welcomed him to his new life, gently birthing him into a new phase of existence.

Birth

He lay, winded, on his side, still curled up like a fetus. This brave new world was bathed in so much white that he couldn't see, although he knew his eyes were open. All around him he could hear noise, and after a little while he was able to make sense of the buzzing in his ears, and separate the different sounds of...voices. People were talking to him. Dozens of voices were laughing and singing and calling him by name, and in the background there was the constant, insistent sound of music, the same tune endlessly playing, joyful, powerful, and enticing. He remembered it...but he wasn't sure where from.

"Fox..." Gentle fingers brushed his face. Someone was stroking his hair. "Fox...come and play." He raised his head, surprised to find that he could move, and even more surprised to realize that he had been unable to before, save for the tiniest fluttering of eyelids, and the smallest opening and closing of his mouth and furling and unfurling of his fists. Now his body seemed real again, fashioned from the very fabric of starlight. He held out his hand, and saw a shadow of movement rippling within the light.

"Where..." He spoke the word in his mind, and it found its way to his tongue as if by magic. "...am I?" He finished, his voice full of wonder.

"With us...you're safe...come and play." The world moved slowly into focus, darkening around the edges until he could see shadows and then a sea of faces, gazing down at him. Children's faces. "Come and play, Fox. You're safe now. You're with us now."

"Where...?" One face in particular stood out in the crowd. Small, round, beloved...framed in dark braids, large dark eyes, soulful eyes...eyes that had haunted him for a lifetime.

"Samantha?" He reached out to touch her, found her real and substantial beneath his fingers.

"Yes, it's me. Come on." She grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet, and he found himself running across a green meadow, laughing as he went, running away from the source of light that had birthed him here, in this hauntingly beautiful place.

"Samantha?" He questioned, still incredulous. "Samantha!" He caught up with her, and swung her around in his arms. "How...?" His question was carried away by the whirlwind of his little sister, as she chased the shadows and cobwebs of his previous existence from him.

"You're here with us. They saved you. Something bad was about to happen to you, so they brought you here," she told him. "Like they did me."

"The walk-ins?"

She smiled and did a little dance but made no reply.

“Something bad? Something bad happened to me?”

She stopped dancing, and nodded solemnly, her eyes dark and knowing.

“Yes. Just like something bad happened to me.” Said so simply, with no real emotional connection. “They took you before it happened. You weren’t there - not for the worst of it anyway. Like me. Some of it, but not the worst of it..” She gently traced her fingertips over his cheeks and he reached up to touch them himself, a memory rising unbidden to his mind. He could feel his flesh being speared with spikes, his body being cut into with drills...he had been drugged, his mind foggy and unclear, but the pain had been real. He had opened his mouth to scream...

“Hush.” Someone touched his arm. “It’s okay. They took you from it.” He found himself looking down on a boy of about 8 years old, who was gazing at him with large, solemn blue eyes. “You were saved from it. I was too. I was grabbed by a bad man and taken away from my Daddy...I don’t know what the bad man did to my body but I know they saved me from it. They brought me here.” He smiled, seemingly unconcerned by the muddle of his words. Mulder gazed at him uncertainly. “I’m Luke.” The boy had dark, spiky brown hair that fell endearingly into his eyes when he spoke. “I saw you when you came here before. After that, I hoped my Daddy would find a way to come here too. I’d like him to know I’m okay.” Luke gave a little half-shrug. “He looked for me for a long time but I was already gone. He looked so hard and hurt so much when they found my body that I could feel it, even here. I wish he knew I was okay.”

Mulder closed his eyes and tried to access memories that now seemed so very far away. He had been taken too, but not by any man...by someone – or some **thing** very different. His last waking memories had been that his entire body hurt. He couldn’t move...he wanted to scream.

“You don’t have to think about it,” Luke told him gently. “There’s no pain here.” He tugged insistently on Mulder’s arm, which seemed weightless, and insubstantial. The boy’s fingers were gossamer light and when he touched Mulder their bodies seemed to coalesce momentarily, like beams of light colliding. “Nothing hurts here,” Luke said. “Our bodies aren’t the same.”

Mulder moved his legs, experimentally, and was reminded of those pictures of men walking on the moon - this body floated so easily. He gave a little laugh as he bounced effortlessly over the grass. Suddenly the pain and terror of his last few hours in his old body seemed a long way in the past. That body was dead, decaying in its earthly grave. This one was full of energy and life.

“Don’t think about it,” Samantha said softly. “Let’s run instead.”

All around him he could hear children laughing as they played.

“I’m a little too old for this,” he murmured and she laughed and pointed.

“No you’re not. Look at yourself.”

He glanced down at himself. He was smaller now...younger, little more than a child himself. Younger even than her. He was 12 years old again. "I don't understand. You look the age you were when you were taken but I...I...was a grown man."

"You're different." A little sadness crept across her face but soon scurried away. Emotions here were as ephemeral and insubstantial as their bodies. "You aren't here to stay, Fox. You're just here to visit. They said I had to give you back one day, but until then, we can play. Like we used to." It was that simple. In his previous life he would have asked a thousand questions, but here, now, only the moment mattered. This place was both timeless and ageless.

"Aren't you a little old for games?" he teased, tugging her braid. She laughed and slipped easily away from him.

"Nobody is too old for games here," she yelled, running down the hill towards a sparkling stream, her arms outstretched as she went. Luke followed her, looking back over his shoulder, calling for Mulder to join them. Mulder hesitated, glancing back towards the light, and then forward to the green meadow where his sister was playing. The curiosity that was part of the very fiber of his being pricked at the back of his mind. He wanted to understand. He had so many questions in his head...and yet if he sought answers to them he knew he would have to leave his sister, and it was so peaceful here. Somewhere, a long way away, he sensed a dead body, lying cold beneath the soil, abandoned and forgotten. He didn't want to return to that. This place was full of magic, and enchantment...it was so easy being here. Here he could rest from all the questions and questing that had consumed his soul, and just be for a while, at peace.

Mulder turned his face away from the light, and ran down into the meadow to be with his sister, and his new friend, his unanswered questions fading from his mind with every joyful step he took.

Farewells

He wasn't sure how long he stayed. Days and nights merged. All thoughts of his old life disappeared. He was happy here. He wanted to stay here forever, lost in this eternal haze, playing out endless youthful summers over and over again, devoid of responsibility or heartache. But one day his feet turned, of their volition, and began climbing up the hill that led back to the bright white light. At the back of his mind he saw a grave being opened, and a body being dragged to the surface, and he fought the memory, trying to deny it. His friends watched him with sympathetic gazes, but they couldn't understand. They belonged here - he had just been seeking respite. He resisted the drag of his feet as he climbed, and tried to resist the lure of the light as it beckoned him home but the force compelling him onwards was too strong for him.

He paused at the summit, and gazed back down to where his friends were playing. Two of his playmates had accompanied him on his journey, unbidden, each taking up position beside him on his climb up the hill. One was Samantha. The other was Luke, who had been his closest friend during his time here.

"I won't go back," he said to his friends, glancing at the light. "I want to stay with you."

"Yes." They nodded, but neither of them moved.

"I belong here, with you," he said, scuffing his foot along the grass.

"Yes." They nodded again but he knew they didn't believe it.

"If you see my father...give him this." Luke removed a gold chain from around his neck and placed it in Mulder's hand. Mulder fingered it thoughtfully, remembering another chain, with a different symbol, a long time ago. Attached to Luke's chain was a tiny image of St Christopher. "Daddy gave it to me when I was seven. He and Mom had just gotten divorced, and I had to travel between them a lot. Daddy said St Christopher was the patron saint of travelers." Luke shrugged, as unemotional as ever, but his solemn eyes were shining. "Give it back to my father, Fox. Tell him I'm okay. I'm happy here."

"How will I...?" His words were cut off, by something tugging him, like an umbilical cord, drawing him inexorably towards the light, a moth to its flame.

"I'll miss you." His voice was fading, and his body was becoming paler, almost translucent. He held out his hands, and watched them start to glow. "I want to stay," he whispered. Two pairs of hands reached for him, and held him, but he could no longer feel them. "I want to stay!" he said again, desperately. They soothed him with meaningless words, unable to fully comprehend his distress, no longer able to connect with any kind of strong emotion. Here life was simple, and he was already becoming complicated again. He didn't fit in any more. He accepted the inevitability of their parting, and whispered his farewells.

"Goodbye. Take care...goodbye..."

He wasn't sure they heard the words, because he was pure phosphorescence now, flowing back down to that light source from whence he had been birthed. He called out to them, and they waved goodbye. He watched them recede, until they became two little dots on the hillside, and then they turned, and, hand in hand, skipped back down the hill together.

His light merged with the glowing ball of starlight and then for a while he was lost.

Starchild

He was alone once more.

It was peaceful.

He drifted, cocooned in warm, silent radiance, but soon he found he was being drawn towards one of the bright points of starlight that surrounded him. As it grew closer he recognized his old home, and heard that familiar heartbeat, beckoning to him. He went slowly, unwilling to be dragged back to his own death, but death sought him, like an irresistible force. He found himself a bystander once more, watching the world humming and glowing. He knew everything, inhabited every point in space, no longer aware of his

own body. He was the stars, shining in the sky. He was the world, and every creature in it. He knew what every living being was thinking, and as he grew closer, his heart began to beat in time with the world's heartbeat, until the two were indistinguishable. There was a humming all around him, and, if he concentrated, he could narrow down each clamoring voice that made up that sound, and isolate the thoughts of each individual. He knew what each and every person in the entire world was feeling, and it was so easy that he wondered how he had never been able to do it before.

As he drew close, he could see his body, decayed, and ugly, and yet, miraculously, still containing a spark of life that was now flickering and flaring back into existence, calling him back like a siren song.

He resisted, fought with all his might. He did not want this world, or this cold, clammy, aching body, with its stench of death. He wanted weightlessness, and freedom. He wanted to be returned to the starlight...but it didn't matter what he wanted. He was drawn effortlessly back to that body, his struggles as useless as those of a leaf fighting a hurricane. He was too weak, too puny, too unimportant. He was being given no choice. He would return.

Death

Death, when it came, was not without pain, but that pain was of the same kind as birthing – soon forgotten amid the confusion of the new state of being. The world came closer, blue and green and beautiful, and then he was hurtling past the moon, down towards the planet...there was a roaring sound in his ears, a great tearing agony, and then...silence.

He was lying on his side, his arms wrapped around his knees...newly dead. The world stank. It stank of sweat, and antiseptic, and the stench of humankind. Mulder retched against his knees, and felt a hand on his back.

"Easy now, Mulder. You're going to be okay." Scully's voice. She swam into focus in front of him. Christ - how long had it been? Her pale, strained face spoke of too many worried nights, and her body was swollen with imminent childbirth. He took a while to try and make sense of that, and then dismissed it, finding it too hard to deal with. Over her shoulder he could see Skinner, standing as he always stood in hospitals, awkward, as if unsure what his place was and whether he was entirely welcome, and yet at the same time feeling unable to leave. Mulder could read his boss's face as easily as he could breathe. Breathe...his chest was rising and falling of its own volition, without his own doing or wanting, in an old, familiar pattern. He felt so heavy, and full of death. His heart was thumping too loudly, beating out a rhythm he had wanted to leave behind. The sensation of blood flowing through veins that had been cold and still for so long hurt him. It made his body ache, sending shockwaves of pain through his nerve fibers. He was acutely aware of each of his senses as they flooded back in. Everything seemed too bright, too colorful, too noisy, too sharp...it intruded on the sense of peace that had been his recent reality and he resented it. He wanted it all to go away. He wanted to go back. He didn't belong in this brash, harsh, noisy world. He longed for the peace and tranquility of before, for the unconditional love, the sensation of being held in warm light. Here there was only confusion, and pain, and

stinking solid flesh. There he had been pure thought. There had been no extreme emotions, no suffering, none of the usual conflicts that were inherent in his human condition - and none of the multitude of problems that were fundamental to being Fox Mulder. What waited for him here? What, truthfully, did he have to live for here, after having known such peace? What could possibly compete with that?

"Mulder - it's me." Scully reached out to stroke his hand and the touch of her flesh on his own felt rough and too hot on his sensitized skin. He pulled his hand away, surprised to find that his limbs even answered his own commands. This body didn't feel real. He didn't belong here. He saw Scully swap a glance with a man standing behind Skinner, and he stared at the man for a while, wondering who he was and what he was doing here. The man looked familiar - he had spiky brown hair and almost opaque blue eyes...then realization sank in and he nodded, and tried to speak, needing to complete the task that had been entrusted to him. His dry throat wouldn't offer up any words, and it was Skinner who pressed the glass to his lips, and helped him drink. The water tasted of chemicals, and was warm and stale. His senses were so heightened that the taste of the water offended him and he spat it out.

"I have something," he said, not recognizing the sound of his own voice. It grated, was too guttural, and lower and deeper than he remembered it.

Scully exchanged a glance with Skinner now, clearly confused. "Mulder, it's okay. You're going to be okay," she said softly.

"I know that." He shuddered as he sat up, hating the feel of the sheets crawling on his skin, hating the sound of his own voice, the warmth of his own blood running through his veins. His own weight was pulling him down, making him feel clumsy and bloated. He had been pure light, nothing but thought. To be reduced to this lump of stinking flesh distressed and offended him. "I have something for John." He knew it was important to do this. When it was done he could close his eyes and turn his back on this world once more. There had to be a way to return to that ethereal, drifting state. There had to be a way back home.

"John?" Scully glanced at the man standing behind her and he stepped forward, a frown creasing his forehead.

"You've never met me, Agent Mulder," he said, in a confused tone.

"No, but I know who you are, John Doggett." Mulder managed to lever his ugly, useless body into a sitting position. He felt alienated from his flesh and longed to be free of it. Gravity pressed down on him like an almost tangible presence, crushing him with its oppressive weight.

"May I ask how?" Doggett asked.

"It doesn't matter. I have something for you." Mulder beckoned the other man close, then reached out, and took Doggett's hand. Doggett stared at him, still frowning. Mulder opened his own hand, and allowed the tiny gold chain he had been holding tightly in his closed fist to slip into Doggett's outstretched palm. Doggett stared at it for a moment, and then the color drained slowly from his face.

"Where did you get this from?" he asked, in a choked voice.

"Your son gave it to me. Luke. Your son." Mulder shrugged and his shoulders hurt from just that small movement. His head was buzzing. He didn't like this place, this room, all these people with their various scents. It was overloading his senses.

"Luke?" Doggett looked as if he was about to pass out. Skinner placed a hand on the man's shoulder. Mulder wondered for a moment how they all knew each other, and what the hell Luke's father was doing waiting for him in his hospital room as if he knew him, but somehow, on some level, he was sure it all made sense. Maybe that was why he had been sent back. Maybe it was that simple. He had been returned so that he could give Luke's father proof that his son was all right. Now that he'd done that, he could close his eyes and return back to the light.

"He's fine," Mulder said wearily. "He wanted you to know. He said you gave him the St Christopher after you and his Mom got a divorce. He had to travel a lot. That's what he said. St Christopher...patron saint of travelers." Mulder sought out Skinner over Doggett's shoulder. Skinner's eyes were dark behind his wirerims, as unfathomable as always, but now he could see depths in that formerly inscrutable darkness that he had never noticed before. Mulder found that he could not drag his gaze away from those dark orbs. There was a lifetime of unspoken words reflected in them that transfixed and fascinated him.

"What are you saying?" Doggett's face was screwed up, and Scully was standing, her hand over her mouth, her eyes shocked beyond belief.

"I'm saying he's fine. He didn't feel anything. They took him before he was abused and murdered...I'm assuming that's what happened to him? He didn't experience any of it. He's fine," Mulder said again. "He's happy, John. Let him go."

Doggett closed his hand around the St Christopher, and moved forward urgently. He placed his hand on Mulder's shoulder, pushing him back into the pillows. His fingers hurt, digging into Mulder's new skin, and he winced.

"What the hell are you telling me? What the fuck is all this about? You cannot just...you can't just..." Doggett ran out of words, his eyes desperate, and afraid. Strange how easy it was to understand people, just by looking at them. Mulder was sure that it hadn't been this easy before. Skinner put a hand on Doggett's shoulder, and pulled him away.

"Take it easy, John," he said softly, his tone soothing, and calm. Mulder gave a little half-smile. He remembered that tone. Skinner had often used it on him.

"Take it easy?" Doggett said incredulously. "The man wakes up after five months in a coffin, and he has my son's chain in his hand - a chain that sure as hell wasn't there when we buried him! Now I want to know how he got this chain and what he knows about my son's murder."

"Mulder was dead. You saw the body," Skinner said softly. "Judging by the circumstances, I would say that the most likely explanation is the one he's just given. Your son gave him the chain to give back to you."

"The hell he did!" Doggett snapped. Mulder closed his eyes wearily. Luke's father would one day come to accept and take comfort from the St Christopher amulet, and the evidence it represented of his son's afterlife. One day. Just not yet.

"Agent Doggett." Scully's voice. Sharp, intelligent, incisive - his Scully. Unchanged in that at least. **Agent** Doggett...ah, so Doggett was with the Bureau too. Yes...he must be Scully's new partner. A replacement for Mulder. How much time had passed? "You've seen so much," she told Doggett, her tone softer now. "Why can't you believe?"

Mulder was surprised to feel a low, rumbling roar emerge from deep in the pit of his stomach. It passed up to his mouth, making his chest hurt on the way, and his lips opened and closed as the ripple reached his face, a strange keening sound emerging from his throat.

"Mulder." Scully was looking at him, an expression of astonishment on her face. Mulder gaped back at her, as surprised as she was. Laughter. He had just laughed, and it was the most curious sensation. Why had he never known how many muscles it took to laugh? His ribs ached from the effort.

"Sorry, Scully. I...that was funny. Hearing you say that. So much must have changed while I was gone..." He reached out, and placed a hand on her stomach. He could feel the baby's heartbeat beneath his fingers, and his mind traveled down the umbilical cord, and into the fetus nestled within his partner's stomach. The child was a girl. She was almost normal. Almost. But not entirely. Mulder decided not to tell Scully that.

"She'll be beautiful," he whispered, having a vision of a red-haired little girl, bright-eyed and full of curiosity. "Just like her mother. I wish I could stick around to see her, but I have to go back. I want to go back. I don't belong here."

He closed his eyes again, curled himself up in a tight ball, and refused to say another word.

Rebirth

He wasn't sure how much time passed, not because it went swiftly, or easily, but because he didn't care. The days were heavy and sultry. This world weighed down on him and he longed to be free of it. He grew accustomed to the stench, and the limitations of his body but never stopped hating it. He endured the catheter, the thermometer, and the endless examinations because he had no choice. He refused to talk because he had nothing to say. He didn't belong here. There was no reason to stay. What reason could there be? He spent his time in a half-waking, half-sleeping state, gazing endlessly out of the window, lost in his memories of floating in the stars, consumed by white light. His body, this useless, clumsy hunk of flesh, grew thin, and pale, and weak as the days passed but he didn't care. Soon he would be at peace once more. At rest. Soon he could return from whence he had come, nestled in the safety of the starlight, away from this world in which he had no place.

Scully visited often, but she was tired, and worried. He knew she was concerned about her baby, and he knew that he should tell her that it would be fine, that the baby was fine, but he couldn't break his silence. He needed his silence, and clung to it desperately. She stopped coming as her time grew near. It was too much of a strain for her to come here and watch him slowly die when she was so full of the new life inside her. Doggett had said something to her. Something along the lines that even if she didn't care about herself, she should think about her unborn child. Mulder remembered the way Skinner had winced when Doggett said those words, and, somewhere deep inside, he empathized with that wince. John Doggett was a brave man to talk to Scully like that...but she had listened. That should have surprised him, but nothing surprised him any more. Time had moved on, and this was just another example of how he didn't belong here any more. Scully had someone new in her life. Someone she listened to. Someone who cared for her. He was out of place. He had to go.

Skinner became his only visitor. Every day he came. Every day he stood, awkwardly, as if afraid that the tiny hospital room was too small to contain his large frame, and that he was taking up too much space, getting in the way. Mulder knew his boss was unsure whether he was welcome, but needed to come anyway. Mulder could smell the other man before he even walked into the room. Everyone had a different scent. Skinner's was clean, with an earthiness underneath that his cologne couldn't hide. Mulder liked the smell. His days were spent waiting for that familiar smell, and he only really relaxed when Skinner was sitting beside him in the small room, talking to him, or just reading. Even the silence was full of words. Mulder would never have known that in his previous earthly existence. He had liked to fill silences with words then, but now, lying here voiceless, he could hear so many sounds he had never heard before.

At first Skinner didn't say much. He just stood, leaning against the wall, or perched, uncomfortably on the armchair, never looking as if he was going to stay for long, but still ending up not leaving for hours.

Then, as time passed, and Mulder felt his ribs dig against his own flesh from the inside out, Skinner became more vocal. He didn't remonstrate, as Scully had done. He didn't nag and cajole as the doctors and nurses did. He just cleared his throat and started to speak, and what he said took Mulder by surprise.

"I know where you are right now." Skinner's voice was very low and deep. Melodious. Soothing. Mulder settled into his pillows, feeling a wave of calm wash over him. Soon it would be over. Soon Skinner would lull him back to the starlight, with the sound of his deep, reassuring voice. Mulder let the sound of that voice caress him. He felt warm. At peace. He was light-headed from lack of food - despite the nutrients they managed to pump into his veins he was wasting away.

"I know because I've been there," Skinner said. Those words pricked at Mulder's consciousness, somehow demanding recognition. His easy peace was disrupted.

"I was only 18, but I never forgot how it felt. I don't know if your experience was the same as mine...but I told you about the light. When I was carried back to my body, away from the

light, I could have wept." Mulder felt his eyes flickering open of their own accord. "I read everything I could about Lazarus. You remember - the biblical Lazarus? Jesus brought him back to life. I felt connected with him in a way that I wasn't connected with the world. For a long time after I woke up things didn't seem real. I didn't seem real. Everything looked too bright and that hurt my eyes. Food tasted too sharp, noises hurt my ears. My body was so heavy, and sick, and useless. I wanted to be weightless again. Is that what you want, Mulder? Do you want to return to the light?"

Mulder found his mouth opening and closing silently. His cheeks were wet. He wanted it so much that it hurt.

"You were out of it a lot longer than I was. With me, it was probably only a few minutes. With you...five months. I don't pretend to understand that, or how you can still be alive, but you **were** dead. I saw your body, Mulder. Five months. I don't blame you for wanting to go back. This world must seem so strange to you now, but you can learn to live again. I did."

He felt a hand touch his wrist, and then come to rest on his palm. Skinner's flesh was warm, enticing. The touch of human flesh had repulsed him before but now it beckoned and caressed, coursing with blood, energetic and vibrant. He could feel the other man's heartbeat, could tap straight into Skinner's soul. He saw another hospital, and another person lying on a bed. Sharon Skinner. He saw her clearly, heard Skinner talking to her in that same low, heartfelt, loving tone. She had died. Skinner had offered her up his heart on a platter and she had died. Now he was facing the same scenario again.

"Your prognosis is poor, Mulder. If you keep on like this you'll only last another couple of weeks," Skinner told him softly. Mulder felt a finger trace across his palm, drawing comforting circles on his hand. "Scully and I moved heaven and earth to bring you home, to bring you back to us," Skinner was saying. Mulder closed his eyes as tightly as he could, trying not to listen. "If you won't live for yourself, then at least live for her. She needs you. Her baby needs you."

Mulder didn't want to be needed. He wanted to be free.

"You have to eat. That's the bottom line. Come back to us, Mulder. Eat. Drink. Be alive again. You don't have to choose death."

I didn't choose death, it chose me, it brought me back here, he wanted to say, but his lips remained closed, his voice silent.

"Isn't there anything here you want to live for?" Skinner asked. "Your work? Your quest? Scully? Her child? Can you leave it all behind so easily?"

Yes. Yes he could. What was his work, or his quest? What did they mean any more? He had found his sister, and he wanted to return to her. His quest had brought him nothing but heartache and loss. He could remember all the people who had died because of him. His father, his mother, Melissa, Deep Throat...he couldn't live with that knowledge.

"Mulder." Skinner's fingers dug more urgently into the palm of his hand. "Stay," Skinner said softly.

It was just a word. Just one word, but it reverberated in his mind.

Stay.

"Stay for Scully. Stay for her baby. Stay for all our sakes." There was a pause, and then words he almost didn't hear because they weren't spoken out loud. They were silent, words that Skinner kept to himself, words that Mulder heard over the drumming rhythm of Skinner's beating heart from whence they came.

Stay for me.

And the world snapped back into focus around him. He took a deep, choking breath, and oxygen flooded his lungs.

Stay for me.

"Mulder...are you okay?" Skinner was helping him to sit up, pressing a glass of water to his lips. He'd always refused it before but now he drank, greedily, holding on to Skinner's arm as his weak body struggled to stay in an upright position.

"I'm fine." They were the first words he'd spoken in a long time, and they sounded strange, but somehow right on his lips. "I'm kinda hungry." He gave Skinner a wan smile. Skinner's face erupted in so many different expressions that Mulder couldn't quantify them all.

"I'll get some food. Hold on."

Skinner ran out into the corridor, calling for assistance, and Mulder sank back onto his pillows, a smile creasing his face. He looked down on his wasted body with a grimace. Even light as it was, it still felt heavy, and clumsy, but he seemed to remember, for the first time since returning, how good it could feel to be human as well. To live, and laugh, and breathe, and eat. To be in love and make love...he seemed to remember that.

He ate the food they brought him, surprised to find that even the hospital food tasted exquisite to his starved palate. Eating could be so intensely pleasurable. How had he forgotten that? His mouth watered as he savored the sensation of taste, of warm and cold liquids washing down his throat, of sweet and sour flavors on his tongue. His body seemed to hum with life as the food warmed him, returning his vitality.

Later, he suffered a new barrage of tests, and through it all he never once took his eyes off the man whose silent plea had spoken to him louder than any voice could, resonating through every fiber of his body. His blood coursed with the knowledge of it, thrumming through his veins, singing, dancing, wild and vibrant. There was a sexual heat to it, an aroused yearning that he had forgotten was also part of being human, and being alive. Mulder had found his reason to stay - and in the strangest and most unexpected of places.

As soon as they were alone again he turned to Skinner.

"When I was dead..." He hesitated. Skinner's dark eyes never left his face. Such easy eyes to read, now that he knew. Skinner waited for him to continue. Mulder gave a tired grin.

"When I was dead, I knew everything. I mean **everything**."

Skinner leaned forward, so close that he was almost touching.

"I inhabited every point in the universe. Hell, I **was** the universe." He gave a wry chuckle.

"You once told me that not everything is about me...but just for that moment it was," he

grinned. "I knew the answers to everything. Everything was so clear. I could trace each

person living in this world right down to their heartbeat..." He traced his fingers down

Skinner's wrist, and pressed the pulse point there, felt the blood surge and scurry beneath

his fingertips. Flesh on flesh. That felt good too. Not uncomfortable or clumsy - just very

human. There were other sensations flesh could experience too, and his body glowed with

that knowledge as he traced his fingers wonderingly over Skinner's tanned skin, enjoying the

sensation like a child, innocent, reborn. "I knew what people were thinking, and what they

felt," he told Skinner. "The longer I'm here...that ability is fading. I can only see glimpses

now. Just glimpses, here and there." Skinner nodded thoughtfully, not understanding what

he was trying to say. His face was so familiar and beloved. Mulder's new born eyes saw in

ways he had not known were possible before. Where before he had seen only inscrutable

dark eyes, hidden behind wirerims, now he saw a fascinating and compelling reflecting glass

of many deep emotions. He saw friendship, and an overpowering protective instinct, he saw

a strong will married to a kind heart...and he saw love. Now it was so obvious that, like so

much else, he wondered how he could ever have missed it before. Mulder moved his fingers

further, and touched the other man's hand, tracing patterns on his palm, fascinated by the

tingling electricity that hummed and buzzed between them. "I know, Walter," he said.

Skinner looked up, his eyes puzzled. "I saw everything. I knew what every single person in

this world was, what they felt, what they thought. And I saw you. I **know**, Walter," Mulder

said again.

Realization dawned slowly. Skinner's face colored in surprise. He looked both appalled and

intensely embarrassed at the same time. His broad shoulders were settled into a hunched

line, as if to protect himself, to ward off great emotional harm. He was bracing himself for

inevitable pain.

"Don't." Mulder put a finger on the side of Skinner's face, interrupting the all too visible flow

of emotions as they radiated in the other man's dark eyes "Knowing you wanted me to

stay... that's why I decided to come back," he said softly.

There was silence for a moment, and then Skinner smiled, a slow, quiet smile, and millions

of points of starlight exploded in Mulder's mind.

He was still hungry. Hungry for life.

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