

Tornado by Xanthe

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He had seen it. Maybe he was used to it but somehow he had expected, wanted more from these two. More than the shared expression of discomfort when he had told them that they faced a four hour drive with him. More than the way their eyes met and they only just managed to stop themselves making faces at each other. He had seen it. He always saw it.

Skinner pulled on his jacket and picked up his bag, trudging wearily down to the car lot. It didn't matter of course, he didn't have any finer feelings on the subject. A job had to be done and they had to do it. All three of them. His presence was required because he had dealt with the case 15 years previously and theirs partly because of the unusual nature of the recent offense and partly...because of all the agents who worked for him he trusted and respected Fox Mulder and Dana Scully the most. And they didn't trust him. They didn't even like him, and they dreaded the idea of a 4 hour drive with him, a stay in a motel in adjoining rooms, casual conversation over meals. As he walked he could imagine them bemoaning their fate in that little basement cupboard that Mulder called an office. "4 hours? With Skinner? What did we do to deserve this?" And Mulder didn't want to investigate this case. He had some other pet project he was working on and he resented Skinner's intrusion. Skinner had been required to be forceful, to insist - not to put too fine a point on it, to ORDER Mulder into this investigation. So Mulder would be sulking. He wasn't sure what was worse - a sulking, snide Mulder or an angry, insolent one. He had dealt with both in his time, not always very well, he admitted, but Mulder was a hard case. Even so, whatever mood he was in, he was always nothing less than brilliant, passionate and committed and his integrity was beyond doubt. If only he was sure that Mulder had the same high regard for him but he knew that he didn't. Scully even less so. By nature suspicious, she trusted only the facts. He liked and respected her but he knew that, like Mulder, she did not return these feelings.

The trouble was that he viewed himself as their friend, very probably the only true friend that either of them had apart from each other. Certainly their only friend at the FBI. Unfortunately they didn't see him the same way. They viewed him as a grudging ally, someone who might or might not help them in a crisis. Someone who was just as likely to rein them in, take them to task, demand answers and standards of behavior that they could not or did not want to provide. An impediment, a possible traitor. Not a friend though. Definitely not a friend.

He reached the parking lot, saw Scully standing by the car he had requisitioned, flicking through a file. Mulder was leaning against the wall, whistling to himself, an expression of bored irritation on his face. With a heavy heart, Skinner approached the car, opened the trunk, stowed his own bag into it and stacked theirs on top, then tossed the keys to Mulder, opened the back door and sank himself down in the seat.

"You can take first shift, Mulder. Now let's get going." Skinner growled. He saw them exchange another glance at his tone. Oh great, first we have to go on a case with Skinner and then we find out he's in a bad mood...their expressions said. He opened his briefcase, took out some work and pretended to read.

Two hours later and Scully had taken the wheel. Skinner leaned back in his seat, stretching his cramped muscles, and glancing at the two agents. The radio was on and they were having a muttered conversation, an easy conversation, sure that he couldn't hear them, that he was too engrossed in his paperwork or too busy being sullen to even want to join in. Scully was teasing Mulder about something, something to do with pencils and ceilings and in return he was making references to "possession" and dolls. Skinner felt excluded from their easy intimacy. It had been a long time since he had worked with a partner in the field but he had warm memories of it. The closeness and camaraderie was something he missed, like he missed those friends he had lost in Vietnam, their loss still a dull ache inside his heart. Like he missed Sharon...like he missed the presence of one person in his life who cared if he lived or died. There was no such person. He shrank away from these thoughts. He had his job and that had to be enough. No point wanting or expecting anything more from life. He refused to change, to ingratiate himself with people in order to win their affection. True friendship was more than that. He had experienced it more intensely in Vietnam than he could ever realistically have hoped to again. And yet, he had recaptured it in his early days at the FBI; initially with Vernon Sharkey, his first partner and later, after Sharkey retired, with Simon Alexander. Both had been good men, men of integrity. Particularly Sharkey. Skinner had been partnered with the seasoned, grizzled "old hand" as a green recruit, straight out of Quantico. "The Shark's" legend had gone before him and Skinner had been scared stiff of his partner at first. In time he grew to appreciate the other man's straightforward view of life.

"Don't tie yourself up in knots, Walt!" Shark would say. "Too conscientious, that's your trouble. Don't worry at everything, like a killer rabbit!"
"A killer rabbit?!"

"That's right. Wild rampaging bunny. That's you. Slow down, son. Sometimes things just need time to work themselves out. Answers come outta the blue. You gotta learn to recognise what you can hurry along and what needs to stew."

He had very nearly cried when the Shark retired and the news of his death just a few short months later hadn't surprised him.

"When I go, there'll be nothing to live for." Shark had told him with a sigh a couple of weeks before his retirement. "You hear it all the time. People retiring, nothing to do, nothing to get up for. Few months later - zeroville! Dead city."
Skinner smiled. Shark always had a distinctive way of expressing himself and he had been right. Retirement had killed him. Then there had been Alexander...Skinner snapped shut the file he was looking at with a savage motion of his hand that brought Mulder's head swivelling round in surprise.

"Sir?" Mulder enquired.

"How much further?" Skinner asked. "You want me to take a turn at the wheel, Agent Scully?"
Scully exchanged a glance with Mulder.

"No, sir. I'm fine," she murmured, plainly not wanting to abandon Mulder to the fate of polite chit-chat with the boss for the rest of the journey. So he stayed where he was, leaning back in his seat, wondering why his neck muscles felt as if they were welded together like iron.

"Sir..." He came to with a start. Mulder was kneeling in his seat, staring at him. "Sorry to wake you but we have a problem, sir." Mulder told him. He shook his head to clear it. It felt close, sticky. There was an oppressive, still heat to the car. He glanced out of the window. Why was the sky yellow?

"Bad weather warning." Mulder told him. He noticed that Mulder's shirt was stuck fast against his skin and he could feel that his own was doing the same.
"What sort of bad weather?" He asked.

"Possible twister." Scully said. "We heard it on the radio about an hour ago, but we weren't sure how close we were going to be to it."
"Fairly close by the looks of it." Skinner glanced at the oppressive sky again.

"Yeah, we kept going but I think we're going to run straight into it if we carry on," Mulder told him. Skinner sighed irritably, glancing at his watch.

"You think we should stop?" he asked them.

They glanced helplessly at each other and he sighed again. What was wrong with people? Put these 2 agents in the field by themselves and they would make a hundred life or death decisions without even thinking about it. Stick them in a car with him and ask them a question about the weather and they acted as if they'd never had to think for themselves in their lives before. He was used to this effect, it happened frequently. People just deferred to him. Maybe they thought it upset him if they made a decision while he was there, as if they were encroaching on his territory or something. It occurred to him that Mulder would probably ask him what tie he should wear if he were in the same room while Mulder was changing. This almost made him smile as he glanced at Mulder's tie. Perhaps that wouldn't be such a bad thing. Mulder lacked a certain sartorial elegance in the tie department and, although he said it himself, Skinner felt he managed his own wardrobe with a certain low-key style.

"Do we have any information about where the tornado is headed?" Skinner asked them. Scully shook her head. "Radio signal's been breaking up," she explained. A gust of wind suddenly shook the car and Skinner made a decision fast.

"This way, might be a fair guess. Alright, agents, I suggest we look for shelter. " He turned round and saw an enormous dark cloud out of the back window. "Quickly," he added. Scully nodded and put her foot down hard on the accelerator.

The car was soon being buffeted by wind and hailstones. Scully peered through the windscreen, unable to see clearly. Skinner felt a swooping motion as the car was lifted off the ground and then placed down again a few feet further down the road.

"We really need to find shelter," he murmured. Mulder nodded, his jaw clamped tightly shut, his face pale.

"There." Skinner pointed to a road with a house at the far end.

"Worth a try." Scully veered off towards the house, saying something as she drove but the howling around them was so strong now that Skinner couldn't hear her.

"What?" He yelled.

"A basement!" she shouted. "The house might not be safe if the tornado comes close. And it looks like it is coming close!"

"Yes." He yelled back. Saying anything else seemed like a waste of effort. He noticed Mulder's pale face again, the way the sweat was slickly pouring off the other man's head. He knew he was drenched in sweat as well - he didn't have the luxury of a thick head of hair to soak it up, but all the same, he recognised the look on Mulder's face because he had seen it before. Not on Mulder, but on other people. On his brother whenever they had gone out in a boat when they were kids. His brother always ended up heaving his guts out over the side of the boat, his face as white as a sheet. And his best friend in Vietnam, Greg Cunningham who had looked this way whenever they found themselves up somewhere high, or in a helicopter. He had taken to standing by Greg whenever he saw the other man's vertigo coming on him, distracting him, making some stupid joke or just talking to him in a low, soft tone. It was the tone he adopted now, talking to Mulder.

"When Scully stops the car, we'll run for the house, Mulder. Just run, alright?"

Mulder's pupils were dilated and Skinner wasn't sure he had even heard him. Mulder just stared over Skinner's shoulder, still kneeling in the front seat, his eyes fixed on the yellow sky and whirling landscape he could see through the back window.

The car came to a screeching halt and Scully opened the door, threw herself out, ran for the building. Skinner was behind her. A gust of wind took his breath away and lifted Scully, quite literally, off the ground. Skinner reached out one big arm and wrapped it around her waist, his mind filled with an image of the diminutive agent whisked off by a tornado to visit the Wizard of Oz. They got to the door when Skinner looked back and realised that Mulder wasn't behind him. He could see the other man, still sitting in the car, his face agonised. Scully turned immediately and started to go back.

"Stay here!" He hissed, starting the run back to the car. She nodded, clutching onto the porch to avoid being carried off into the air by the wind again.

Skinner wrenched open Mulder's door.

"You'll be fine!" He yelled. "Just run, Mulder." Mulder shook his head, swallowing convulsively.

"I'll stay here," he said, hanging onto the seat belt. "I'll be fine here. I'm not moving."
"Yes. You are." Skinner glanced at the dark cloud that was edging steadily towards them, swallowing sound and making the sky glow an unnatural yellow color. "Get out now!" He ordered. The tone of voice didn't work. Mulder just shook his head mutely and tucked himself even further down in the seat. Skinner reached into the car and pulled Mulder out physically, undoing each of the other man's stiff fingers from the seat belt and yanking him forwards.

"Leave me alone!" Mulder pushed him back and Skinner took a deep breath and then hit him across the face, sharply. Mulder stared at him, his eyes shocked, and Skinner took advantage of the moment to drag the agent bodily from the car, heaving him across the yard, towards the porch. Scully came running out to grab them.

"NO!" He yelled, seeing what she did not, that several large pieces of planking from a fence were spiralling towards them. He swung Mulder to the ground, throwing himself down on top of the other man, reaching out a hand as he fell to grab Scully's knee, so that she toppled down with them. He placed his own large body over theirs, feeling Mulder gasp and squirm beneath him, feeling Scully go limp, too winded to move. He covered Scully's head with his left arm just as he heard a huge crash which was immediately followed by a savage, shuddering pain that swept down the left-hand side of his body as something hit him. Suddenly the air was still again for a moment. He looked up, watching as the wooden planking spun off across the yard, away from them. Mulder was getting to his feet, running towards the building and Skinner pulled Scully up and practically threw her in the same direction. He saw her turn, cry out and he turned as well. The car, where until 2 minutes ago Mulder had been sitting, was now being lifted into the air and was twirling around in the sky like a ballerina showing off her steps. Then the wind dropped and the car was hurled back down to the ground, spitting out its contents as it went. He saw his briefcase, his papers, snatched up and emptied out across the sky. As he turned back he was in time to glimpse Mulder's look of absolute horror before the agent resumed his course, struggling up onto the porch and into the house. Hailstones whipped down on top of Skinner, driving into his cheeks, cutting him and he stumbled into the house after the two agents feeling giddy and battered.

At last there was a respite from the wind and hail. The house was deserted. Wise people, Skinner thought to himself. They must have heard the bad weather warning, realised it was heading straight for them and taken shelter elsewhere. The table was set for dinner, a loaf of bread abandoned on it and a single candle burning in the center. Skinner wondered at that. How could it keep burning in the midst of this maelstrom? he wondered, "like a good deed in a naughty world..." Where was that from? Portia, Merchant of Venice... At least he thought it was. Stupid thing to think about at a time like this.

"Basement..." Scully was saying, leading the way while the shaken Mulder trailed along behind like a pathetic puppy. He chased after them, feeling oddly tired and drained,

wondering from a distance why his left hand and arm felt so numb, as if they didn't belong to him. Scully located the basement and led the way down the steps. Skinner brought up the rear, closing the door behind them, locking it. They went down some more steps and found themselves in a mess of boxes and cases and abandoned household goods. At least it was quieter down here. You could hear yourself think and breathe... breathing too fast, too heavily. Skinner watched as Scully launched herself at Mulder, hugging him, taking him over to some dusty chairs, stacked on top of one another, pulling one down and sitting Mulder on it, smoothing his hair from his eyes.

"Mulder? Are you alright?"

"I..." Mulder stared at her. "I think I lost it back there."

"It doesn't matter. You're safe now." Scully smiled at her partner tenderly.

Skinner envied them their closeness again. There hadn't been any female agents in his day. It must be nice to work with someone as solicitous, clever and just plain attractive as Scully. He wondered wryly how Mulder ever got any work done sitting near this woman all day. He walked the last step down and felt his leg buckle underneath him. Scully turned at the sound.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"I'm fine." He turned away from her, wishing that he was back in the field with a partner who genuinely cared about his welfare, not a grudging subordinate who was asking to be polite. "I have no idea how safe this place is but it has to be better than the car."

"Yeah. The car." Mulder winced, exchanging a glance with him. Skinner's expression didn't change. So Mulder had a fear of tornadoes? So what? Everybody in their right mind was scared of tornadoes. If Mulder's fear was more of a phobia, what did it matter? Skinner limped his way across the room and found a tiny, cracked window. He cleaned away a patch of dirt and grime and looked out. The sky was still ominously yellow, the storm hadn't abated any.

"We might as well make ourselves at home," Skinner murmured. "This could be a long night." He glanced at his watch and winced. His left hand was badly cut and starting to swell. There was a huge lump on his wrist and one of his fingers was obviously broken. How hadn't he noticed that before? It was also 10pm. It should be dark out but it wasn't. The sky still glowed a dirty yellow color, casting unnatural, scowling shadows in the air. They weren't safe yet. They weren't anything like safe. This one looked as if it would go on for some time. Best not tell Mulder that though.

"There's nothing we can do for now," Skinner murmured to them. "So we might as well accept we're here for the night. Try and get some sleep."
Scully nodded. Mulder swallowed.

"You don't think it'll pass soon?" He asked, his pupils starting to dilate again.

"I have no idea. I'm not a weather expert." Skinner shrugged and felt a wave of nausea pass through him. "Let's just get some rest shall we? We won't be going anywhere even if the weather does improve. Not with the car in little bits all over the place. That's if it hasn't gone for another journey into outer space." He tried to smile at Mulder but Mulder just

stared at him, his face frozen in fear. Scully stepped in.

"It's alright, Mulder. Don't think about it. We'll be safe down here," she murmured, none too accurately, Skinner thought to himself. They probably wouldn't be safe if the tornado came right at them but it might not. It might veer away, attack some other part of the country or burn itself out.

Skinner sat himself down on the floor, his back against some boxes. He watched through half-lidded eyes as Scully sat down next to Mulder and took her partner's hand in her own.

Simon Alexander. 10 years younger than him, straight out of Quantico. And he'd tried to be to Alexander as Shark had been to him. A wiser, older person, someone who'd watch out for the younger man, show him the ropes. And he'd failed. Alexander was too passionate, too driven. Took himself off on his own, ignored all Skinner's advice.

"You do things your way, I'll do them mine, Walt!"

"You mean you think I'm too by-the-book, too concerned with the due process, etc, etc... and you're the maverick, go-getter?" He glanced at his partner, knowing all too well the image Alexander had of himself. An image he was sure would get his partner killed. Stupid to be killed for an image.

"No, no, no, Walt. Well, okay, yes. Although of course, I know your secret." Alexander tapped the side of his nose. "I bet not many out there do, do they, Walt?"

"My secret?" He asked with a weary smile.

"You only break the big rules, Walt. That's your secret. I've seen you. Everyone thinks you're so straight. You always file every little detail, no stone unturned, look into every nook and cranny and never ever bend the rules... except I know you do. Not the little rules, but the big ones. The really big ones. I've seen you do it. That time you bailed me out of the Markham case and the not so tiny matter of the missing gun a few months ago. You think I didn't notice these things? And the really cunning thing is that because of your reputation nobody expects it of you do they? So you get away with it. Sneaky bastard! It's a good strategy, Walt. Very good."

Alexander smiled that irritating lop-sided grin. He had thick blond hair and wide blue eyes. Girls thought he was cute, men thought he was gay but he wasn't. Skinner had never known a man have more conquests than Alexander; he was a real babe magnet. Skinner would turn his back for a second and when he looked round again he'd find Alexander smiling at some beautiful woman who'd materialised out of nowhere. He envied his partner his easy charm, his way of knowing how to talk to people. He had never found it that easy.

"You just smile." Alexander told him. "And you chat. Just chat. Simple, Walt! You need to loosen up."

"No, I don't. I have a wife, Simon. I don't need added complications thank you!" he had grinned.

"Ah the divine Sharon. How is life in wedded bliss land?" Alexander asked him. Skinner smiled. Life in wedded bliss land was very nice indeed. Life was nice. He had a good, if irresponsible partner, a beautiful wife, a job he loved. Sure there were ghosts that sometimes haunted him, nights when he woke up sweating in terror at the things he had witnessed, friends' names that came unbidden to his mind when he least expected it. Friends he had last seen from above, his consciousness floating outside his body as he looked down on their bloody corpses, on his own bloody corpse. Yet all the same... life was good. For a while, life had been good.

"Sir?"

"Huh..?" He woke up to find himself looking into Scully's concerned blue eyes.

"You were talking in your sleep," she told him. "And groaning. I think you may be hurt. Will you let me look?"

He shrugged himself back into the here and now.

"I'm fine," he told her brusquely. She hesitated, looked back at Mulder for support. Mulder got up, stretching his long, lean body.

"She's a doctor, sir. You might as well agree to it. She doesn't usually take no for an answer." Mulder grinned at him but it wasn't a real smile. It was a pained, distracted smile. A man trying to convince himself that he was okay and not trapped in a basement by a ravaging storm.

"Really, Scully. I'm...." He yelped as her fingers found his left hand.

"Fine?" She finished for him, raising a quizzical eyebrow. "With a broken finger and possibly a fractured arm?"

"What?" He frowned crossly, looking down at his arm.

"It's started to swell. We have to get this off." She gestured to his wedding ring.

"No!" He said, too hoarsely, too loudly. Scully exchanged another glance with Mulder.

"You don't understand, sir. If your hand swells up any more the ring could cut off the circulation. That could be dangerous. Please..." She slipped her fingers down to the ring, tried to tug it. His hand had already swollen and he could feel the metal digging into his skin.

"No. I don't want...."

"You must," she told him firmly. He opened his mouth to protest, caught Mulder's eye and closed it again.

"When the doctor speaks, there's nothing you can do." Mulder told him wryly. "I should know."

"Help me." Scully told Mulder. The agent knelt down beside Skinner and held his hand still while Scully tugged on the ring.

Skinner lay back, feeling as if his heart was being ripped out. He wanted to scream, not from the pain in his hand but the one inside him, deep inside.

"There." Scully handed the ring to him and he took it numbly.

"You don't understand," he told her savagely. "You don't understand anything." She was shocked by his tone, got up, moved away, exchanging another glance with Mulder, the pair of them backing off. He closed his eyes again, feeling the sweat pouring down his face, clenching his good hand tight around the ring, trying to ward off the tears.

"What don't we understand, sir?" Mulder asked softly. Trust Mulder to dare to ask questions like that. Trust him not to let anything drop if his curiosity was roused.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter, Mulder. It isn't important." He opened his hand, stared at the ring. Mulder edged back, crouching beside him again. He examined the ring, read the inscription.

"That's cute. Romantic." Mulder smiled. "You never used to wear it, until..."

"No." He wished he could breathe more easily and he wished that he didn't hurt.

"We never knew you were married."

"It wasn't a secret." He shrugged.

"No. But you didn't wear a ring, never mentioned a wife."

"I don't recall you ever talking about your love life either." Skinner murmured, feeling hot and sticky and uncomfortable.

"I don't have one." Mulder smiled. "And then when you were shot - your wife didn't come to the hospital. How were we to know you had a wife?" He glanced at Scully who also looked faintly curious.

"We had only just separated. I couldn't ask... or expect... she wanted space, not emotional blackmail from an injured man. I never even told her I'd been shot." Skinner shrugged, wondering why he was telling Mulder this. Or Scully for that matter.

"You're hurt more badly than you're letting on." Mulder leaned over him, moved him gently into the light of the grimy window. Scully gasped.

"Why didn't you say!" she exclaimed, coming over to him. He saw the dried red blood on his trousers, felt Scully's fingers against the bruised lump on his head.

"There was no point," he murmured. "You can't do anything until the storm's passed. So we just have to sit and wait and accept. I'll be fine. I've had worse." Again that image, blood pouring out of a hundred different wounds as he lay on the ground, left for dead.

"Sir!" Mulder's hand slapping his face lightly. "You passed out."

"Where's Scully?" he asked.

"Gone upstairs to fetch some water."

"She shouldn't. It could be dangerous. It could..."

"She'll be back soon." Mulder said. "Just lay back. And here - you should put this in a pocket. It rolled out when you fell unconscious." He handed Skinner back his wedding ring.

"I haven't liked to take it off since," Skinner told him. "It doesn't matter. I might as well chuck it away. I was being stupid. I mean, I hate jewelry, always have done. I wouldn't wear it when she was alive so what's the point of it now she's dead?"

Mulder stared at him, uncomprehending.

"I didn't know she was... dead I mean."

"Didn't you?" Skinner closed his eyes.

"When...?" Mulder asked. He didn't reply and heard Mulder's sharp intake of breath. "You wouldn't talk to us about it. After that business... you wouldn't talk. I asked you how you knew where to find us and you wouldn't say."

"No. She told me. Sharon, the old woman, I don't know which. She told me just before she died. They said... that she didn't regain consciousness, but she did. She told me."

"And you came back to work?" Mulder asked incredulously. "You came straight back to work as if nothing had happened?"

Skinner opened his eyes, saw how shocked Mulder looked.

"We all have our own way of dealing with things, Mulder," he murmured

"Oh right, yeah. And yours is the sweeping them under the carpet and pretending they didn't happen method, yes?" Mulder queried.

"What's to say? I didn't want sympathy." Skinner was feeling distinctly light-headed.

"No, but still." Mulder shrugged.

"Like I said, what good would it do?" Skinner asked the other man savagely. They glared at each other for a moment, then Mulder just shook his head.

"I don't understand you," he murmured.

"Feeling's mutual." Skinner grunted.

Scully returned and Skinner breathed a sigh of relief that she was safe.

"How is it out there?" He asked.

"Still bad." Next to him he could feel Mulder stiffen. Scully crouched down and handed him a bottle of water. She passed some bread to Mulder and then pressed some into Skinner's good hand. He chewed dutifully, not feeling hungry.

Of course he hadn't told Mulder. Why should he? He knew what Mulder was like apart from anything else, all the burdens of guilt he took on himself. And Skinner felt as if his life was becoming just one more tragedy in the wake of Mulder's quest for the truth. A couple of

beatings, a bullet to the stomach, a serious attempt to discredit him at the Bureau, set him up, lose him his job and the death of his wife. Because of Mulder and Scully. Being in thrall to an enemy he despised. Because of Mulder and Scully. Agreeing to participate in a cover-up operation he had found personally abhorrent. Because of Mulder and Scully. Starting to doubt his own integrity, the integrity of his superiors, his government and his country. Because of Mulder and Scully.

"Because of what, sir?" Mulder asked, leaning forward.

"Nothing."

He watched as Scully got up, awkwardly, crossed the room, limping.

"You're hurt too, Scully," he said.

"It's nothing. Just a sprain." She smiled. "When you saved our lives out there, I fell awkwardly."

"Sorry." He remembered grabbing her knee, toppling her over.

"Really, no need. That fence crashed right into where I had been standing. You really did save my life."

"And mine." Mulder grinned. "We should probably say thanks or something," he added grudgingly.

"Oh don't bother." Skinner waved his good hand tiredly. "I should have let you both die," he murmured.

"What?" Only Mulder had been close enough to catch that.

"Yeah... let you die. Get my life back." He closed his eyes again.

I've lost too much, he thought. Become used to it. First his unit in Vietnam, all wiped out in that ambush except him. Why was he alive? Why? Had he been of use somehow? Fulfilled a destiny? Had his only reason for living been that he was brought here, to this basement, on this night with these people? Would he die here, 30 years after he should have died? What had he done in those 30 years? Did he just exist so that Fox Mulder got to keep the X Files, to have someone looking out for him, protecting him, pulling god knew how many strings to keep him from being expelled from the Bureau, or assigned elsewhere?

"You should have been tougher on Mulder." Shark told him.

"I know," he murmured.

"Protecting his ass at the expense of your own. When has the little shit ever done that for you?"

"He once... he did. Twice..."

"First time - that business with the call girl right? Well his ass wasn't on the line then. Second time was covering up that gun thing for you. Well that was as much about Agent Scully as it was about you."

"Scully..."

"She's nice. No offense, Walter, but I wish she'd been my partner instead of you! A man could get used to working with such a lady!"

"Hands off, Shark."

"Hey, you know me, I'm no lady's man. Not like that other guy... Alexander. Now he was a prize jackass if I ever saw one. Don't think I don't know why you let Mulder get away with all this crap, Walter but he isn't Alexander. Not even close."

"If I had protected Simon, he'd still be here."

"Some people you can't protect from themselves. Like Alexander, like Mulder. They'll just go ahead and kill themselves anyway. Nobody can save 'em. Serious death-wish folk. You're not like that, Walter. You don't want to die."

"No."

"Someone's looking out for you anyway."

"You?"

"Me? No. I'm just a fevered dream, son! A symptom of your delirium. Someone else is looking out for you. You know that. Charmed life you've led, boy! Always getting shot at and never actually laying down and dying. Just never quite ready are you? Shame. There's a lot of folk up here would like to see you again. All your friends from Vietnam, your mom and dad, Simon, Sharon, Great Uncle Casper."

"I don't have a Great Uncle Casper!"

"Me neither." Mulder was grinning at him. "What on earth were you dreaming about, sir?"

"Nothing." He closed his eyes again.

"I'm worried about him." Scully's voice sounded very distant. "He keeps lapsing in and out of consciousness. If only we had some painkillers. Or something to bring down his temperature. He's burning up, Mulder." He felt a cool hand against his head.

"He'll be okay. He's strong. I thought I'd been hit by a goddamn tree when he threw himself on top of us out there."

"Mulder he's getting weaker and he's hallucinating. I...I think I'm going to go back to the car. See if I can find my medical bag."

"What? Scully you can't!"

"No. You can't, Scully." He managed to force open his eyes. "I absolutely forbid it. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir." She gave him a rebellious look, sat down beside him, holding her foot out in front of her body awkwardly. "But you've been hurt pretty bad, sir. And you're in shock. Can you stay awake? I don't like the way you keep slipping in and out of consciousness."

"Oh, you don't care, Scully," he muttered, his eyes closing again. "It doesn't matter."

The time had long since passed when it mattered, since he mattered to anyone. Like Shark said, everyone he'd loved was dead. Why did he bother hanging on down here with people he'd risked his life for, ruined his life for, but who didn't even like him? Why bother?

"Feeling sorry for yourself, Walt?"

"God no, Shark. Hate whiners."

"Oh you've never been that. So you thinking of giving it all up, Walt? Coming to join us?"

"It does seem appealing. Nothing left to stay here for really. Maybe it is time to move on."

"You want it to end here, in a basement? Killed by a goddamn storm? Not really your style, Walt!"

"Who cares? I'm tired. They don't trust me you know."

"I know."

"They never have."

"No. I guess not."

"After everything that's happened."

"Be fair, Walt, you don't exactly explain yourself real well. They probably don't know half the ways you've helped 'em."

"The benefit of the doubt... I don't even get that." He could feel himself leaving his body, floating gently up into the air. Suddenly he was free! And there was no pain. This was good. It felt good. He looked down on one red head and one dark brown one, listening.

"What's he talking about, Scully?"

"I'm not sure. Us?"

"Maybe. Maybe he's right. Maybe we don't give him the benefit of the doubt. We didn't over that Kritschgau thing."

"You're blaming me, aren't you, Mulder? I suggested that Skinner was our enemy."

"No, I'm not blaming you. I'm just trying to see things from his point of view. His wife died you know and that happened because they wanted to get rid of him, to set him up. And that happened..."

"Because of us. Yes. I didn't realise she had died. What a shame. I rather liked her. Oh, Mulder you're not going to start blaming yourself are you?"

"I don't know, Scully. I mean, jeez, his wife dies and he doesn't even MENTION it. It's weird. And directly or indirectly, it is my fault."

"Well if it comes to that I could blame myself over him getting shot. He took that bullet for me, for my family, for Melissa."

"We're a liability." Mulder put his head back and for a second Skinner saw straight into the other man's eyes. They were full of a sad kind of guilt and he found himself wanting to shake Mulder, absolve him. Only he wasn't in his body and he couldn't do a thing, just watch.

"It's his job." Scully murmured, glancing over to Skinner's silent body.

"No it isn't, Scully. His job was closing down the X Files, reassigning us and getting on with his career. We screwed that up for him because he has a conscience and wouldn't play ball with the guys who call the shots. Everything else stems from there."

"Maybe you're right but what can we do about it?" Scully sounded troubled.

"I know what I can damn well do about it, Scully." Mulder said softly. "I'm going outside to

see if I can find your medical bag."

"Mulder you can't!" Scully tugged on her partner's arm.

"I can and I will." Mulder turned to face her, gripping her shoulders and looking urgently into her eyes. "Look, Scully, you can't go because of your ankle and anyway - didn't he give you a direct order not to? You don't break direct orders."

"Unlike you," she whispered. "Please hurry back, Mulder. Don't freeze on us out there will you?" She looked searchingly into his eyes.

"No. I won't freeze. Now you take care of him. He's been a good friend to us, Scully. We don't want to lose him." And so saying Mulder turned on his heel and ran up the basement steps.

Skinner watched, curious, found himself floating back down...

"Wake up! You must wake up!" Hands on his shoulders, tugging.

"I am awake." Pain flooded through his body as he opened his eyes. He didn't want this pain. Hadn't he chosen to leave it behind? He shifted his head to look at her. She was leaning over him. "Where's Mulder?" he asked, wondering if he had been dreaming or not. "He's here..." She hesitated.

"Where is he Scully?" He asked her quietly.

"He went outside. To see what he could find in the car. If there is a car."

"I told you..." He began, angrily, scared that his dream seemed to have been real, scared for Mulder.

"Yes, but you didn't tell him." Scully smiled sitting down beside him.

"Semantics, Scully."

"Good. Keep talking. I don't care what you say, just stay awake." She was warm, nestling next to him, her shoulder against his right arm.

"Mulder's scared of tornadoes. Phobic. He shouldn't have gone out," he murmured.

"I know." Scully shrugged. "But I couldn't stop him. He thought you were going to die. He felt like he had to do something. If he hadn't gone I would have, despite what you said, despite my ankle. Now talk. Come on." She nudged his arm as he felt his eyelids beginning to droop.

"Hmm? Oh. Right. Simon Alexander."

"What?"

"Alexander. I'll tell you about him. You'd have liked him, women tended to. He was my partner. One day he..." Skinner shifted, felt the room go black, then his vision cleared. Scully nudged him again. "Yeah, he... was investigating something personal. Something he shouldn't have been. Too close to it you see. I knew that but I covered for him when I should have reported him. I knew how important it was to him. But I should have betrayed him, Scully. If I had he'd still be alive." He felt her stiffen against his arm.

"What happened to him?" Her eyes looked like two sapphires in the darkness.

"I should have been watching him. I WAS watching him but he was tired, we both were. I told him to go home, get a good night's sleep. He assured me that he would, but he didn't. Slunk off, left me a note. Next thing I knew..." Skinner paused. He could hear the sound of the storm raging outside but he didn't want to think about that because he didn't want to think about Mulder being out there and from the look in Scully's eyes he knew that she didn't want to think about that either.

"Go on." Scully said softly.

"Soon as I found the note I took off after him but I was too late. Next thing I knew, I was holding his body. Blood all soaked into his hair. Caked with it, crusted into his scalp and down his face. I blamed myself."

"You shouldn't have done." Scully told him earnestly. "It was his responsibility. His own actions. It wasn't your fault."

"No. It wasn't." Skinner turned and stared down at her in the eerie yellow gloom. "It wasn't my fault, Scully. I did my best just like you do, but there are some people who just have to do things their own way, even if it ends up getting them killed." Scully looked up at him, holding her breath.

"You know. You understand," she whispered.

"Oh yes, I understand. I've been there," he told her. "I see myself in you all the time. Taking care of him, trying to stop him getting himself killed. But you can only do so much."

"Yes."

"Once..." Skinner paused. This was hard. "You remember the bastard who killed the little girls? The one who cut little fabric hearts from their dresses?"

"Roche? Yes, I remember." Scully nodded.

"Well... I blamed you for Mulder's actions then. I've regretted that ever since. I was angry, because you couldn't stop him, the way I couldn't stop Simon. Only Mulder is responsible for his actions. Only Simon was responsible for his. Am I talking enough or did I stop making sense some time back?"

"You're doing fine." He was surprised to feel her hand slip into his, her fingers small and warm against his skin. "Hold on, sir. Please hold on," she whispered. He closed his eyes.

"Still haven't joined us then?" Shark asked him.

"Not quite yet. No." He smiled. "Why don't you just hang around until I decide?"

"Mulder!" Scully got up, limped across the room as Mulder appeared in the doorway.

"I'm fine! I found your bag, Scully. I beat the storm!" Mulder seemed positively euphoric.

"How is he?" he asked in an undertone.

"I'm fine." Skinner growled, wishing that people would stop asking about his health.

"We'll soon see." Scully told him firmly. "Go get me some water and a towel and any

blankets you can find, Mulder."

"You want me to go back up there?" Her partner asked her incredulously.

"Only into the house. Go on."

Mulder sighed dramatically, raised his eyes heavenward and then disappeared again. Scully advanced towards Skinner holding her medical bag.

"I'm going to examine you," she told him briskly.

"Is there any point to me protesting?" He asked.

"None whatsoever," she replied firmly. "So you might as well save your breath."

She came back over, undid his tie, started unbuttoning his shirt.

"I can do that." He whispered, feeling uneasy at the intimacy of the gesture.

"Can you?" She grinned. "Oh go ahead then, be my guest."

He put his hands up to his buttons, tried to move his fingers, cursed.

"Hurts huh?" Scully smiled at him. "It's easier if I do it, sir. God, you're an awful patient."

"Yeah. That's been said before." He smiled back, admitting defeat.

Mulder returned noisily, clattering down the stairs clutching a bowl of water, a pile of towels and blankets stuffed under one arm. He set the bowl down, splashing some of the contents over Scully as he did so.

"Mulder!" she chided.

"Sorry!" He grinned, looking more relaxed than he had all evening. "Anything I can do?"

"Yes. Go and break up one of those chairs," she told him.

"For firewood?" He queried, his head on one side.

"For a splint," she replied. All three sets of eyes seemed to meet and ponder this.

"I don't like the sound of this," Skinner murmured.

"No. I didn't think you would. Now let's see." She finished unbuttoning his shirt, pulled it from his shoulders and frowned, her eyes narrowing. She put two deft, gentle fingers against the left side of his chest and he gasped. "Broken ribs," she informed him. "Two of them I think, maybe three and badly bruised. Nothing much I can do about them right now." Her fingers were now on his arm and he bit down on his lip to stop himself crying out loud. "It's definitely broken but not badly," she told him. "I can set it. I think I should. If we leave it you could get some problems later on."

"Will there be a later on?" He enquired.

"Oh yes." She smiled. "I don't approve of patients dying on me."

"Oh I wouldn't be so inconsiderate," he murmured.

Mulder returned, clutching a few pieces of wood that he showed to Scully. She selected one and glanced up at Mulder.

"We're going to set it," she told him. Mulder looked questioningly at Skinner who thought about it for a moment and then nodded. "Actually it wasn't a choice." Scully informed him. Mulder snorted and exchanged a wry glance with Skinner.

"I told you what she's like when she's in doctor mode," he informed his boss.

"Despite the warning, one is unprepared for the reality..." Skinner murmured. "Alright." He lay back, feeling apprehensive. "Go ahead."

"Mulder, I want you to hold him down." Scully whispered softly. Hold him down? Where did they think he was going for heaven's sake?

"Okay." Mulder shrugged cheerfully and Skinner could have thumped him. "Sorry, sir. Doctor's orders." Mulder loomed over him, put a strong hand on each of his shoulders and leaned against him. "On the count of 3, Scully?" Mulder queried, looking at her and winking.

"Three." Scully nodded, her fingers closing around his arm, twisting slightly to get purchase. He started breathing deeply, staring straight ahead.

"One, two,"

He heard an awful crunching sound and a scream that seemed to emanate from the depths of his lungs.

"Three." Mulder finished, grinning at him, his eyes betraying a frantic horror at the pain he had just helped to inflict.

"That was two!" Skinner rasped. "You said on three!"

"I'm a dreadful liar." Mulder told him, letting him go. "Can't stop myself. Scully's just as bad. You should never trust a word we say." He sat down beside Skinner, watching as Scully laid the splint against the other man's arm, starting wrapping a bandage around it.

"I'll remember that." Skinner murmured.

Mulder poured some water into a cup, held it against Skinner's lips and he drank greedily.

"Cold." He shivered.

"Shock." Scully said. She got a blanket and threw it over him. "Hold him forward, Mulder." Scully said. "I want to see if he's got any other injuries." Mulder put an arm around Skinner's shoulders, pulled him forward.

"I could have managed that much." Skinner told them irritably.

"You reckon?" Mulder let go and Skinner found himself falling backwards. Mulder caught him before he hit the wall, holding him steady. "Sorry. Couldn't resist. Stop being so damn self-reliant and just let Scully take care of you will you?" Mulder scolded. Skinner didn't have the energy to reply. He opened his mouth when Scully told him to, swallowed the pills she

put on his tongue, washed them down with water from the cup Mulder was holding to his lips.

"You'll be okay." Mulder told him companionably, his arm still around Skinner's shoulders, a cushion for his head, "we'll look after you."

"You still here, Walt?"

"Yes, Shark."

"They're just taking care of someone who's sick. They'd do that for anyone. Doesn't prove anything, Walt."

"No, Shark."

"You're soft, Walter. Always said it."

"Killer rabbit?"

"Killer rabbit, sir? Where?" Hazel eyes, laughing at him.

"Nowhere." Nice to feel that arm around his neck though. Scully was doing something with water and his leg but he didn't want to think about that right now.

"You don't like them much, do you, Shark?"

"Not strictly true, Walt. The lady's alright! No, only kidding. They're okay. Not really worthy of you, but then neither was Alexander. They're never exactly going to be proper buddies though, are they? Your position makes that hard."

"I can still look out for them."

"If you want to, Walter. "

"It was nice seeing you again, Shark."

"You too, Walt."

"So who's Shark?" Mulder asked, nudging him. "Scully wants me to keep you awake," he whispered apologetically. "Otherwise I promise I wouldn't make idle conversation."

"Yeah... Shark was my first partner, when I joined the FBI."

"That was years and years ago, right?" Mulder asked.

"I'm injured, Mulder, not brain dead. I don't care to be teased." Skinner told him. Mulder grinned.

"Twenty years," Skinner murmured, relenting. "Give or take."

"You did well in 20 years." Mulder glanced at Scully who nodded. "Right to the top."

"You won't get to the top. Upset too many people," Skinner murmured.

"Yeah, I know. I'm still grieving for my lost career." Mulder smiled, softly. "Who cares?" He muttered. "I never thought I'd live this long, let alone go places professionally. It wasn't what I joined the FBI for."

Scully finished with his leg and washed her hands. Skinner wished the water in the bowl hadn't turned quite such a deep shade of red. Scully wiped her hands and sat down beside Skinner, on the other side of him.

"All done," she said.

"Thank god," he breathed. "Could I go to sleep now?"

"Not yet." Scully smiled. "Come on. Talk some more."

"Nothing left to say." His head lolled against Mulder's shoulder. He felt Scully's hand creep under the blanket and clasp his, squeezing gently.

"Tell us about Shark." Mulder suggested.

"Shark was a good man. Taught me a lot."

"And how does that tie in with the killer rabbit?" Mulder enquired.

"That's what he called me once." Skinner grinned in the darkness.

"Really?" Mulder's eyes were quizzical and amused as he turned to face his boss.

"Yes. You're taking advantage of me now, keeping me talking when I'm delirious. I could end up saying something I'll regret."

"Oh you already did." Mulder laughed.

"Tell us some more." Scully squeezed his hand again. "Go on. About Shark or Simon."

"Simon?" Mulder queried.

"My second partner." Skinner sighed, wishing the memories weren't so painful. "Too many ghosts," he muttered. "All gone. All dead."

"Yes." Mulder's eyes looked so infinitely sad that Skinner wished he could comfort the other man, but he couldn't even move. "Sometimes I look around and it just seems like everyone's died."

"Yes." Scully nodded. "And I'm sick of burying people so we've all got to stay alive," she told them firmly, looking meaningfully at Skinner.

"I'm doing my best," he said, his head lolling again.

"Oh no." Mulder tapped his shoulder. "That's not your best, sir. You have to do better. Tell us more about Simon."

"He wouldn't tell me where he was going. Did that a lot, just got an idea into his head and took off." Skinner noticed how Mulder's eyes met Scully's, guiltily. "And he was a good agent. Inspired. The best I ever saw until... until..." He glanced at Mulder, shrugged, then felt a wave of sickness pass through him. "Anyway, he had integrity. That's hard to find. Something to value."

"Yes. Definitely." Scully rubbed her thumb gently against the palm of his hand.

A sound woke him. No, the absence of sound. The storm had abated, the tornado had

passed them by and they were still alive. At least if the pain in his body was anything to go by, they were still alive. And they must have fallen asleep despite Scully's best efforts. Skinner was aware of Mulder's head leaning against his shoulder, of Scully's head nestling under his chin, her hand still loosely lying in his own. A curious sense of peace swept through him.

"I'll be off then." Shark said. "Seeing as how you've rejected our invitation to let you join us, yet again."

"Another time, Shark! Another time."

"Sir?" He struggled to open his eyes. "Dawn." Mulder smiled at him. Daylight flooded through the basement. "I've phoned for help but the emergency services are in chaos. However, guess what?"

"What?" He blinked at Mulder.

"Truck in the barn!" Mulder smirked, holding up a key. "Gas in it and ready to go. Come on, let's get you out of here, sir."

Mulder crouched down, put his arms around him and pulled him up. Skinner winced and tried to keep from crying out. Scully went on ahead, holding the doors open as Mulder helped him out, his good arm wrapped around Mulder's shoulder, leaning on him heavily.

"Look." Skinner stared at the candle on the table, still lit but very nearly burned down to nothing. "I don't believe it, after all that wind."

"Can't have reached in here." Mulder shrugged, trying to get Skinner moving again. Skinner clung to him, trying to get his breath back.

"There's a line from Shakespeare. I remembered it last night. Something about a candle shining like a good deed in a bad world."

"Yeah, well, it sure is a bad world," Mulder told him. "And not many good deeds."

"No." They shuffled on. Mulder looked back.

"But some," Mulder added. "Stupid candle. Burning all night for nobody."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Skinner shivered.

Scully brought the truck up and Mulder manoeuvred Skinner into the seat, getting in beside him.

"Hospital I think, Scully," Mulder announced cheerfully. He glanced around at the bright blue sky, the sun soaking them with its warmth. "Storm's over and we're all still alive!" He grinned. "Amazing! It was a close thing wasn't it?"

"Closer than you think." Skinner said.

THE END

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