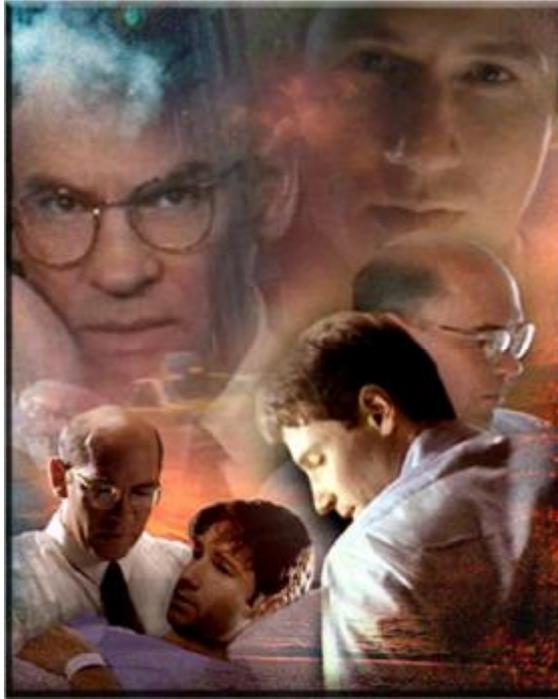


What If...? by Xanthe



<http://www.xanthe.org/what-if/>

Story Notes:

Pic by Mika

This story was written especially for CD for her birthday.

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Mulder watched as the man in the interrogation room began rocking back and forth, his one good arm crossed over his stomach. His dark hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat, his chin showed several days growth of beard, his clothes were ripped and dirty, and even from behind the two-way mirror, Mulder knew that their prisoner stank. He didn't envy the FBI agent interrogating him being in such close quarters with their suspect. At least he, and the other 2 agents from the Behavioural Sciences Unit, could watch from another room.

“Let’s start with your name,” the FBI agent asked in a reasonable tone. Their suspect rocked to and fro, never ceasing his restless motion for a second.

“He already knows my name,” the man hissed. His other arm, the one resting on the table, was curiously still compared to the constant motion of its owner’s body, but the FBI agents had already discovered that the left arm was a prosthetic. It disturbed Mulder. He frowned, his quick mind reviewing what he remembered from the autopsies on the 5 murders so far. Was it possible that a man with only one arm could have committed them?

“Who are you talking about, sonny?” the FBI agent asked. He was an avuncular man in his late fifties, so Mulder guessed he could get away with calling this possible mass-murderer “sonny”, although personally it wasn’t a term he would have used in connection with their suspect. It would have been hard to find someone who looked the part of a serial killer more than this unwashed, clearly psychotic man in front of them – although, as Mulder had discovered from his 10 years with the FBI hunting down some of the most evil and insane men in the country, looks could be deceiving.

“Him... he knows.” Their suspect looked straight at the two-way mirror and Mulder held his breath. The two agents with him in the room glanced at him, their expressions both concerned and confused. They were rookies, sent to learn all they could from the legendary Fox Mulder, prodigal agent of the BSU, whose skill in tracking down serial killers was surpassed only by his reputation for weirdness. Mulder sincerely doubted that he could teach the rookies anything – what he did was so intuitive and instinctive than it wasn’t something that could be learned. He had long since come to accept that he had a genius for sniffing out the darkness of the human soul, and it was a gift that he could have done without, because it had caused him much loneliness and heartache over the years. Now he stared at this suspect, lost in thought, oblivious to the looks he was getting from the other agents in the room. And the man stared back at him – straight at him, although he shouldn’t have been able to see him at all unless he could see through walls. Mulder felt a shiver of foreboding creep up his spine.

“You know me don’t you, Mulder?” the suspect said, getting up and moving towards the mirror, his hands going up towards his greasy black hair, and brushing it away from his forehead as he walked. Mulder didn’t move. He felt frozen, paralysed. He wasn’t even surprised that this dirty, deranged specimen of humanity knew his name – somehow it felt normal, natural - to be expected even. What did surprise him, what filled him with horror and was the reason for his paralysis, was the massive, ugly scar that was splayed across the other man’s forehead, dipping at the centre into a gaping black hole that disappeared right inside his skull, creating a crater at its maw where the two sections of his forehead joined uneasily around the apex of the hole.

“You know who I am, Mulder,” the man hissed, pressing his entire face against the mirror, never once taking his eyes off Mulder – who he shouldn’t have been able to see. Mulder put out a hand, and rested it against the surface of the mirror, tracing the outline of the other man’s scarred head, and almost immediately a dozen images flooded into his mind. He saw this man, much younger, impossibly young, his dark hair clean and shining, his forehead

unscarred, his arm healthy and whole. He saw himself, running, fighting, screaming names at this man...

"It's me, Mulder. Me," the man hissed.

"Alex," Mulder whispered, just a split second before the other man finished his sentence:

"It's me...Alex."

"Alex...Alex Krycek." Mulder fell backwards, spiralling off his chair as a black mist descended around him, and he lost consciousness.

*_*_*_*_*

"Hey...Fox...I'm home." Skinner kicked the kitchen door open with his foot and deposited the bags of groceries on the counter. "Fox?" He glanced around the cold condo.

"In here," a voice called.

Skinner smiled and followed the source of the voice to their study. He paused on the threshold. His lover was sitting curled up in his chair, his bare feet poking out from under his long, lean body, staring intently at the computer screen, his hair sticking up in a dozen different directions, his teeth worrying incessantly at his full lower lip. Skinner leaned against the door-frame for a moment and drank in the sight. It didn't matter that they had been together for 7 years, and that his lover now had the tiniest streaks of silver showing at his temples, this was how Skinner always liked to think of his lover: chaotic, intently absorbed, his mind clearly miles away, and yet domesticated, and at peace.

"Hey," Skinner said softly, not wanting to break into his lover's mood.

"Hey back at ya," Mulder said, waving his free hand in the air until Skinner captured it in his own, and brought it up to his lips for a kiss.

"You're cold," Skinner commented. "You should have turned the heating on."

"Isn't it on?" Mulder muttered, still never taking his eyes from the computer screen.

"No, it isn't." Skinner sighed. They'd had this battle over Mulder taking care of himself a million times before and he doubted that he'd ever completely manage to change his lover on this point, although they had made some progress, by dint of much hard work and not a little discipline along the way. Mulder disliked one of Skinner's firm, painful punishment spankings enough to at least try to remember to eat occasionally, to dress himself in clothes appropriate to the weather, and to take back up when he ran off to follow up one of his famous hunches – nearly all of which proved to be accurate, so it was impossible to berate

him too much for his habit of disappearing at regular intervals to become embroiled in some life or death situation. At least now he'd take 30 seconds to write a note before running off, and would generally remember to take his cell phone with him – which was a considerable improvement on the old Fox Mulder - the errant agent who Skinner had called onto the carpet in his office more times than either of them liked to remember.

Skinner could still remember visiting Mulder's apartment one cold day in February, 7 years earlier, to find his agent, not yet then his lover, lying freezing cold and almost comatose on the floor, gazing glassily at the ceiling, suffering from both hypothermia and malnutrition after working non-stop for 10 weeks on a particularly nasty case. When Mulder was lost in his work, he forgot about taking care of himself – forgot about everything else in fact except crawling into the mind of a serial killer in the hope of catching him before he killed again. On that occasion, Skinner had scooped him up, taken him back to his own apartment, fed him, kept him warm, and refused to let him out of his sight for 2 weeks while Mulder recovered – and that included sleeping beside him just to make sure his unpredictable agent didn't slip off somewhere in the night, chasing after shadows, as he had been known to do. Somehow Mulder had never left when those 2 weeks were up – and while it had surprised Skinner to wake up one day to find their limbs entangled, their cocks throbbing against each other, and Mulder's lips pressed firmly against his, Mulder had taken it all in his stride, as if he had expected it to happen all along – which was one of his lover's more infuriating habits, Skinner thought wryly to himself.

The discipline side of their relationship had evolved equally naturally, and, gratifyingly, Mulder had at least seemed surprised to find himself upturned over his lover's knee one day, his pants around his ankles, on the receiving end of several sharp swats from his irate lover's broad palm. Afterwards, they had talked for a long time about Mulder's habit of neglecting himself and trying Skinner's patience to the limit, and had finally decided to pursue a discipline relationship. Mulder agreed that Skinner should spank him for any instances of self-neglect, and promised to do his best to follow Skinner's simple guidelines for not getting himself killed, something which, Skinner assured him earnestly, would break his heart in two and effectively end his own life as well. It had been that, more than his smarting backside, which Skinner thought had finally made Mulder adapt his behaviour a little, and take better care of himself. Mulder, of all people, could understand and empathise with the pain of losing someone you loved.

Over time the discipline side of their relationship had evolved; Skinner had discovered that spanking was not only an effective punishment, but that it was also just about the only thing that could calm his wayward lover when he was distraught, or break him out of one of his obsessive moods. There were also times, although Mulder would always deny it, when Skinner knew his lover found being butt naked over his knee comforting- there was a sense of connection for both of them, and Mulder felt safe, and loved during a spanking and

particularly enjoyed the post-spanking cuddle that inevitably brought them closer together. For such an articulate man, Mulder found it extremely hard to talk about his own needs. He could talk at length about Skinner's needs, about their jobs, their sex life, and even about his own emotions – but he found it the hardest thing in the world to ask for a simple cuddle. Skinner had long since learned to recognise the signs that Mulder needed a couple of swats on his backside, followed by a long, tender session of lying in his lover's arms having his hair stroked and being gently kissed every now and again. Somehow, the mild spanking allowed Mulder to give in to his need for the cuddle that he so desperately wanted, and Skinner was happy enough to go along with the charade.

Neither of them spoke of the times when Mulder found a spanking arousing, plain and simple. That, too, had taken Skinner by surprise – but not for long! And they both enjoyed the hot, sweaty, urgent sex that inevitably followed one of **those** spankings.

Over the years, Skinner had become skilful at recognising the kind of spanking Mulder required for the particular mood he was in. To this end he had even purchased a small leather paddle, which he kept in his nightstand drawer, much to Mulder's chagrin and repeated protests (and even one attempt to hide it – something he hadn't tried again after Skinner demonstrated the consequences). Spanking was a part of their life together – and somehow it was an essential ingredient in what made them so close and kept them so much in love, even after several years sharing a bed and a life as well as working in the same building.

"How long have you been home?" Skinner asked, still holding Mulder's hand, gazing at the computer screen over his lover's shoulder.

"Dunno. A couple of hours maybe," Mulder murmured, clicking through several web pages as he spoke, his right hand twitching restlessly. Skinner noted the movement and the fact that Mulder had not yet looked away from the computer screen. He had come to notice such small details as adding up to a much bigger picture that spoke volumes about the state of Mulder's mind. Mulder was undoubtedly a genius at what he did but it wasn't wise to underestimate the demons that drove - and sometimes threatened to consume - him.

"You were back early," Skinner commented noncommittally. "Did you close the net on the suspect you were after? You seemed to be pretty close to catching him."

For the first time Mulder's hand stilled, and he glanced away from the computer and towards the window, his expression troubled.

"Yes. We found him," he said softly.

"And?" Skinner asked, still caressing Mulder's cold hand, squeezing gently and reassuringly.

“You know...I don’t think it was him,” Mulder murmured, his expression still distant, and faraway.

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know. Just...something.” Mulder shuddered slightly, and Skinner wrapped his arms around his lover’s shoulders and held him tight against his chest, warming Mulder’s cold body. He noted that Mulder was going through one of his ultra skinny phases and sighed inwardly. Mulder was slender as it was – a few days of neglect was all it took for his ribs to start showing. Mulder had been working hard for the past couple of weeks and Skinner guessed that something in particular about this case was bothering him – but at this stage it was entirely possible that Mulder himself wasn’t even aware that he was troubled by the case to the point of self-neglect. Often Skinner noticed the warning signs long before his lover became aware of them.

“Did something happen today?” Skinner asked. Mulder glanced up sharply, his eyes questioning – and for the first time since Skinner had arrived home his lover actually looked at him. The relevance of that wasn’t lost on Skinner – usually Mulder’s movements were easy and unaffected and he often couldn’t take his eyes **off** Skinner, partly because, as he was so fond of saying, he was “just enjoying the magnificent view!” and partly because of his own anxiety that Skinner would one day just disappear. Skinner understood the nature of Mulder’s concern – they’d talked about it and Mulder had learned to live with his anxieties – although they were anxieties that had prevented Mulder forming any meaningful relationships at all before Skinner had come along. His lover had always been too wary of losing someone to risk loving another with all his heart. Even now, he had a habit of calling Skinner at odd times of the day or night if he was away, just to check that Skinner was still there, and still okay. It was just one of Mulder’s quirks and Skinner had long since come to accept it as such – even if it did mean that he was woken in the middle of the night – sometimes more than once in the same night - just because his lover wanted to be sure he was still alive. Now, Mulder was clearly avoiding meeting Skinner’s eye – which usually meant that he had something to hide – or at least something he wasn’t sure that he wanted to share.

“Fox?” Skinner prompted. “Did something happen today?” He repeated.

“We brought the guy in for interrogation. It was weird...” Mulder hesitated.

“In what way weird?” Skinner frowned, never taking his eyes off of Mulder’s troubled face.

“I don’t think he’s the perp,” Mulder said, but Skinner was a trained FBI agent and could tell when someone was avoiding the question.

“In what way weird?” He asked again. Mulder’s hazel eyes were distant and full of unspoken fears. Skinner felt his stomach tighten and he squeezed his lover again, firmly.

“He could see me,” Mulder told him. “I still haven’t made sense of it, but he could see me, Walter. He saw through the two way mirror right into my eyes.”

“I’ve had that experience,” Skinner laughed, relieved that it wasn’t something more serious. “Sometimes they seem to look straight at you, don’t they?”

“No...this was different. He **did** look straight at me,” Mulder informed him, his teeth starting to worry on his lower lip again. “He got up, came over to the mirror, showed me the scar on his forehead – and he was looking straight at me, Walter. He even called me by my name – which he shouldn’t have known – and the freakiest thing...I knew his name, Walter. I knew that he was called Alex...and I saw what I can only describe as visions of a life I know I haven’t led.”

“Christ...were you okay? Are you okay now?” Skinner pulled Mulder out of the chair and examined his lover under the light. Mulder’s skin was pale and his face looked pinched and drawn but he submitted to Skinner’s examination without protest.

“Did anything else happen?” Skinner asked. Mulder’s split second hesitation gave him away.

“No,” he murmured, his eyes sliding away from Skinner’s as if he was unable to meet his lover’s firm gaze. Skinner sighed inwardly, aware that he had just been lied to. He considered forcing the issue but decided against it – whatever was bothering Mulder would come bubbling to the surface in its own time, and until then he’d just have to wait. As for the visions Mulder had described – Skinner had no idea what they might be, but this wasn’t the first time Mulder had reported such seemingly psychic phenomenon. Sometimes when he was involved in a case he could lose himself in it so much that he often saw the next killing as it took place and could describe the crime scene perfectly to the investigating officers when he arrived on the scene. This would have been useful if he had been able to see the killer’s face, but the drawback to the visions was always that Mulder saw the killing from the killer’s viewpoint, and, unsurprisingly, that degree of identification with such murderous people had sometimes edged Mulder close to insanity himself.

Skinner pulled his lover close and held him, and, while Mulder came willingly, his body remained a little stiff – he only wholeheartedly submitted to comforting after a spanking. Skinner was worried by how thin Mulder seemed to have become in just a few days. He could feel his lover’s ribs starting to stick out, and that was a worrying sign. He needed to nip this in the bud before it went too far.

“Let’s eat,” Skinner said, drawing away.

“I’m not hungry,” Mulder said. Skinner was about to insist when Mulder interrupted his thunderous expression. “I had a huge meal earlier, with Agent Doggett,” he said.

“Agent Doggett?” Skinner frowned.

“The pathologist at Quantico,” Mulder supplied.

“Ah, the little red haired one? The one you can’t stand?” Skinner quirked an amused eyebrow at his lover and turned to go into the kitchen to prepare dinner.

“That’s not true!” Mulder protested, tagging along behind. “As a matter of fact I like her...I just can’t stand the way she always has to throw her scientific theories at me all the time to try and disprove my ideas! We argue like cat and dog but I like her – she keeps me on my toes.”

“Well, your whole investigative method is based on hunch and intuition and her whole working life revolves around the science of what’s there – what can actually be seen and quantified, so it’s hardly surprising you don’t see eye to eye,” Skinner remarked, trying to decide whether to call Mulder on the lie he’d just told about having eaten. “So, how come you had a big meal with her?” He asked, deciding to take the roundabout route to finding out just how much his lover had consumed.

“I wanted her opinion on an aspect of how the victims had died...I caught her just as she was going to lunch and she told me if I wanted to talk I’d have to go with her because she was starving and wasn’t giving up her lunch hour to listen to my wild theories.” Mulder winced, but he was grinning as well. “She eats an enormous amount for such a small woman but then again she is 7 months pregnant so I guess that’s hardly surprising. Did you know that her husband is something high up in the Washington DC Police Department?”

“Hmmm? No, I didn’t.” Skinner began unpacking the grocery shopping, deciding that if he made something that smelled delicious enough, Mulder might just be tempted to eat it.

“Well he is. John Doggett – they met over a dead body in an alley somewhere. Dana said it was very romantic. Just like our first meeting!”

“Fox, we met when you were sent to my office for a dressing down for disobeying orders on a case,” Skinner reminded him. “Our first meeting consisted of me yelling at you for ten minutes.”

“I know. It was so cute.” Mulder smiled incorrigibly. “You know how sexy you are when you’re angry. All bulging muscles and glaring white shirt.”

“Dana Doggett? That’s a nice name,” Skinner deflected adeptly as he rolled up the shirtsleeves of one of said white shirts and reached for a saucepan.

“Yeah, well, she used to be Dana something else – Scullion or something. She did tell me but I wasn’t listening. Boy she really **talks** when you get her going. I used to think she was this sour little thing but when she’s eating she never stops talking.”

“Did you tell her about what happened to you in the interrogation?” Skinner asked, pausing in what he was doing and watching his lover intently. Mulder made a face.

“Yeah. I, uh, asked her what her scientific opinion was on alternate universes and past lives,” Mulder said, and then he stopped, a grimace on his face, waiting for Skinner’s reaction to that particular statement.

“Uh huh.” Skinner said neutrally, still watching his lover carefully.

“You don’t think I’m crazy for talking about this stuff do you?” Mulder asked.

“Fox, I’ve always thought you’re crazy. It’s one of the reasons why I fell in love you.” Skinner grinned.

“Deflection!” Mulder slapped him on the arm. “Answer the question!”

“Well, no...you’ve got an inquiring mind and you had an experience you can’t explain – and it’s not the first either. We’ve lived with your psychic abilities for a long time now, Fox, and we know there are some things that can’t be explained by science, however much I would prefer that **not** to be the case!” It was Skinner’s turn to grimace. “Are you sure that all this talk of alternate realities isn’t you just clutching at straws though, Fox?” He asked gently. “You want an answer to explain what happened to you during that interrogation so you’re going down a science fiction route in order to get one?”

Mulder thought about that for a moment and then sighed. “Maybe. You’re kinder than Dana Doggett. She told me in no uncertain terms that I was crazy to even think it and that the very notion of past lives and alternate realities defied all known scientific laws.”

“Well, she does have a point,” Skinner said gently. Mulder made a face, and wrapped his arms around his body.

“I guess. I just...there’s something here I’m not seeing. Something just out of my field of vision.” Mulder sighed.

“You won’t see it if you don’t eat and get some rest,” Skinner told him firmly. “Talking of which – I’d like you to eat something tonight, please. You’re starting to look a bit skinny.”

“I’m fine. You worry too much, Walter.” Mulder leaned over and bestowed a big kiss on Skinner’s cheek.

“Hmmm – and I won’t be blackmailed or otherwise coerced into allowing you to skip dinner by means of big sloppy kisses so get some plates out and lay the table please,” Skinner instructed. “Two place settings, Fox.”

“We’re expecting a visitor?” Mulder inquired cheekily. Skinner reached out, grabbed his lover’s arm, and bestowed two firm swats to Mulder’s backside.

“No, we’re expecting you to sit down and eat – no matter how much you ate with Agent Dana Doggett earlier,” Skinner told him sternly. Mulder made a face but reluctantly accepted the two plates Skinner handed him and set them on the table.

Mulder grumpily pushed his food around the plate, managing a few bites only when Skinner went upstairs, brought the paddle down, and laid it pointedly on the table. Skinner was genuinely worried by this point – Mulder was clearly in the grip of one of his obsessions and this new vision was of some concern. Mulder had spent the past few hours surfing the net

for information on alternate realities and he shared this information with Skinner at some length over their meal – which was another reason why Mulder wasn't eating. Whenever he got embroiled in something that piqued his intellectual interest he lost interest in just about anything else for a while – and food was always one of the first things to fall by the wayside. Luckily for Skinner, he was the last – Mulder's interest in his lover never waned. Finally, exhausted by the torrent of information and by keeping up with Mulder's labyrinthine mental leaps and jumps, Skinner sent his lover upstairs to bed.

"It's only 9.30!" Mulder protested.

"I know – but you're worn out," Skinner replied, his sharp eyes noting the dark shadows under Mulder's eyes and the pale cast of his skin. "I could do with an early night myself. I'll be up in a minute."

"Ah! And the euphemistic 'early night'." Mulder winked lasciviously. "Why didn't you say so! Don't be too long, lover boy!" And with that he pinched Skinner's bottom cheekily and then sped off upstairs, as his lover growled in mock protest and made to swat his retreating backside.

Skinner locked up and turned the computer off, then collected the paddle from the table in order to return it to the nightstand and hurried up the stairs, eager to make long, slow, tender love to his partner...but when he got into the bed beside Mulder he found his lover curled up half asleep. Mulder snaked unerringly to Skinner's side the moment the big man settled, and rested his dark head on his lover's broad shoulder, in the way he always did when they were in bed together.

"Make love now..." he mumbled. "Mmmm?"

"Somehow I don't think so, buddy," Skinner chuckled, and even by the time he had wrapped his arms around his lover Mulder was already fast asleep.

*_*_*_*

It wasn't a noise that woke Mulder in the middle of the night. It was something else, something much more subtle, something only he could sense – it was a feeling.

"Walter?" Mulder sat up in bed and surveyed the sleeping form of his lover beside him.

"Hello, Mulder," a voice said and Mulder looked around, startled. There, by the door, stood the figure of the man he had watched being interrogated the previous day.

“Alex,” he said, uncertainly. He felt a cold sensation sweep through the room. There was a mysterious green light glowing all around them, making the hair on his arms stand on end. “Walter, wake up,” he said, nervously, reaching out a hand to rouse his sleeping lover, but Walter felt cold to the touch and remained unmoving. “Walter? What have you done to him?” Mulder yelled, trying to wake his lover. He leaned over Skinner, sure that he would find him dead, but the rise and fall of his chest betrayed the fact he was still alive – just deathly cold and impossible to wake.

“He wouldn’t be able to see me even if he was awake. Only you can see me. Only you can see this.” Alex gestured with his good arm to the shimmering green light that surrounded them both. “Because I’m not really here – but you know that already, don’t you, Mulder?”

“What do you want?” Mulder hissed, his teeth starting to chatter in the frigid air.

“I want you.” Alex smiled, a feral grin, his green eyes glowing like the energy field that surrounded them both. He came to sit on the bed and Mulder froze, genuinely afraid. He had been in many dangerous situations in his time but none had freaked him out as much as this one. “I meant what I said earlier,” Alex whispered. “I know you. And you know me, don’t you?”

“Yes. No...I can see pictures of you in my head but I know I never met you before I saw you in that interrogation room yesterday,” Mulder hissed. “I have memories of you that don’t exist.”

“Oh they do exist – somewhere,” Alex said softly. “Just not in this universe...but in the universe I come from, you and I knew each other very well.”

“We’re enemies,” Mulder knew as soon as he said it that it was the truth.

“We were also friends. Kind’a.” Alex gave a grim, elusive smile. “Right up until he put a bullet through my brain.” He gestured at Skinner.

“Walter? Walter shot you? Why?”

“To save you. To save himself.” Alex shrugged. “Even in that reality he seemed to care about you – although I’m guessing you didn’t take it this far.” He surveyed their double bed with something approaching a faint sneer. “He did this to me.” Alex pushed back his hair to reveal that crazy, lurching mess of scarred flesh and misshapen bone again. “It gave me an ability...made me able to see things that other people can’t. You know what that’s like, don’t you, Mulder?”

“Yes.” Mulder agreed quietly. “Tell me more about this ability.” He was intrigued despite himself. Alex grinned.

“You’re not that much different to him, my Fox Mulder. Not as bitter maybe. More the innocent – like he was when I first met him. You haven’t taken the journey he took. You took a different journey. He looked outside himself for answers and became increasingly frustrated and cynical when he didn’t find them, but you don’t...you look inside, into the

darkness of men's souls. You've seen all the evil we do, and you've taken it into yourself and yet still remained untainted by it."

"That's where you're wrong," Mulder replied. "It has tainted me. It's changed me. It's Walter who has kept it from eating away at me – he's kept it from making me bitter, and turning me crazy. Maybe your Mulder didn't have the benefit of him, keeping the darkness and the shadows away."

"Aw! And how does he do that? Don't tell me – by the strength of his lurve." Alex made a mocking face. Mulder shrugged.

"Why are you here, Alex?" He asked softly. "What do you want from me?"

"I want to show you all the different realities you could have lived in," Alex replied. He held out his hand. "Come with me, Mulder, and I'll take you to places that most people can't see. You can glimpse those realities, on the edge of your consciousness, but Walter can't – like almost everyone else he's stuck in the boring here and now. I can see them though, Mulder. What you can only glimpse, I can see." Alex's eyes glowed demonically green in the shimmering light. "That bullet did something to my brain...it enabled me to see all these gateways into different realities – to slip between them as easily as passing into another room. The first place I jumped into, straight after he shot me, they had the kind of medical science that pieced me back together, even if it couldn't quite cure me. After that, I just went from gateway to gateway."

"Didn't you ever try to go back?" Mulder asked, shivering.

"No. What would be the point? What was waiting for me there?" Alex asked bitterly. "No...I decided to find people in these other realities who I'd known in my own world, and see what they were like, what they were doing. It doesn't take much you know, Mulder, to change the course of a whole reality. Sometimes it can be something so small – like a chance meeting on the street, or a different person being born. Take you for instance...of all the Mulders I've met, you're the closest to the one I left behind. Similar job, similar kind of drive...you aren't always like this you know. In some realities you're an arrogant bastard. In one, you're a professor at some kind of college. You hand out the best grades to the students who sleep with you – men as well as women. I wonder if you were bisexual in my universe and I just never knew it?" Alex grinned, and glanced at Walter's sleeping form again.

"That doesn't sound like me," Mulder said, shaking his head. He couldn't imagine handing out grades in return for sexual favours.

"Oh, but it was you – a you who hadn't been through the same experiences that you've been through...a you who was soured by his parents divorce when he was a teenager, and who has hated the world ever since. He thinks people will always let him down if he allows them to get too close. He's clever and he uses that to manipulate people. You can be a nasty piece of work in some realities, Mulder."

“Where was Walter in that reality?” Mulder asked, intrigued despite himself, despite wondering whether this was really happening or just a dream, a hallucination...or a nightmare.

“He was killed in Vietnam. Why? Do you think you’d have been a better person if he’d come along and rescued you?” Alex smirked.

“Maybe. It happened in this reality,” Mulder replied. The grin faded from Alex’s lips. At that moment the green light shimmering around them flickered for a second. Alex gave a little moan, and grabbed his forehead, pressing hard.

“Is it difficult to control?” Mulder asked.

“We don’t have long,” Alex replied, ignoring the question. “Come with me, Mulder. You know you’re curious. You know you want to see what’s out there. You’ve always been interested in extreme possibilities. Come with me.” He held out his hand. Mulder gazed at it for a moment, unsure. He felt like he was being offered either the Holy Grail or a poisoned chalice – and he wouldn’t know which until he took an irrevocable step in order to find out – by which time it would be too late. He glanced at Walter’s sleeping form beside him.

“I’m not leaving Walter,” he said firmly.

“You can come back.” Alex’s lips were twisted into a savage grin and Mulder wasn’t sure whether it was a lie or not. “Come on, Mulder, come with me!” He stood, his hands outstretched. “I can show you places you never even imagined could exist. It’s beautiful out there – there’s a whole universe of universes to discover. Don’t you want to see your sister again? I could take you to her. She’s alive and well in another reality, Mulder. In countless other realities, she’s fine.”

Mulder gazed at Alex, spellbound. “In your reality?” he asked. “Is she alive in your reality?” Alex shook his head. “No...but she is in others. Come with me. I’ll show you. Don’t you want to see what became of her when she grew up?”

He held out his hands again. Mulder chewed on his bottom lip, seriously torn. This was the one thing he had wanted all his life, and yet to have it he had to leave Walter, leave this life that he loved so much, this man that he adored, and take a step into the unknown with a man he knew, on some level, to be his enemy – a man he couldn’t trust to return him here. And yet...the lure of meeting his sister, alive and well and grown up...it was so strong. He reached out a hand, uncertainly, and Alex moved forward and grabbed it. The shimmering green light began flickering on and off, on and off, around them.

“Come with me!” Alex said, his eyes gleaming in the darkness, sensing victory. Mulder turned back and saw Walter lying on the bed – their bed - only the bed seemed very small and faraway and it was only when he was nearly ripped out of this universe where he was so loved and cherished, that he realised how much he wanted to stay. He couldn’t leave Walter, not even for a glimpse of someplace else, not even for the promise of seeing his sister again.

“NO!” Mulder screamed, wrenching his hand away and reaching back towards the bed, towards Walter and everything he loved most.

“Mulder!” Alex’s voice was angry and thwarted. Mulder ran down a tunnel of pulsing green light and threw himself back towards the tiny bed at the end of it, searching for the safety of Walter’s arms. The green light winked, and Mulder turned and saw Alex disappearing into a tiny speck of jade. “Mulder...no.” Alex’s voice was thin and reedy, and the expression in his eyes as they faded away was sad and utterly lonely. An image sprang up in Mulder’s mind, as strong as any of the visions he had experienced during his years with the BSU. He saw Alex, roving from dimension to dimension, seeking revenge on the two people who had destroyed his life in his own world. A feeling of desolation swept through him and he found himself shaking, his mouth opening wide in a keening scream of terror, confusion and pain...

“Fox! Fox...wake up...it’s okay...”

Mulder found himself thrashing around frantically in a pair of broad arms.

“Walter?” He stopped struggling and looked around. There was no sign of Alex, or the green light, and the room wasn’t freezing cold any more. He was though – his body felt like ice.

“Fox – you’re shivering. Christ, you’re cold! Hold still.” Skinner wrapped their blankets tightly around Mulder’s shaking body and held him close. Mulder went very still...he loved being held by Skinner but resented his need for it at the same time, and he always felt very conflicted whenever his lover tried to cuddle him.

“It’s okay.” Skinner kissed his hair affectionately, and rubbed his arms briskly. “It’s no wonder you’re so cold. I found you lying on top of the blankets, screaming and shivering. What happened, Fox?”

“I saw him, Walter. I saw Alex Krycek. He was here.”

“It was a nightmare,” Skinner said soothingly.

“No. No, it wasn’t. It was real. Alex was here, Walter. He tried...to tempt me away.” Mulder shivered again.

“Tempt you where?” Skinner asked gently. Mulder wasn’t sure whether his lover was humouring him or not but it didn’t matter – it just felt so good to be held in Skinner’s strong arms.

“To another reality – that’s what he said.” Mulder shivered again. Falteringly, he related to Skinner the substance of what he was sure had just taken place in this room. When he

finished, Skinner hugged him close, reassuring him that all was well. There was nothing more real in any universe than Walter's big arms, keeping him safe.

"You know..." Mulder whispered. "I thought that Alex was having his revenge by ruining the lives of the people he blamed for what had happened to him – he couldn't touch them in his own dimension but he could track them down in every other dimension, like some wandering evil spirit, taking his revenge on the alter egos of the people who had hurt him...and I think for a time that was what he did. I think that was what he was trying to do to me...to tempt me away from you, and strand me someplace, some place a lot worse than this reality, for all its faults. But...I wonder if something else wasn't going on as well. At the end, when I refused him, he looked so desperately lonely...maybe this time he wanted to stop hurting people, and to find some happiness for himself. Maybe he was just looking for some company."

"Maybe." Skinner sounded uncertain.

"You do believe me?" Mulder asked, turning his head to gaze at his lover.

"Yes – yes I do," Skinner said softly. "You know I do, Fox. You believe what you saw and that's always been good enough for me."

"Not always," Mulder murmured, poking Skinner slyly in the ribs.

Skinner grimaced. "Well, okay, maybe not in the early days – but you have to admit it was a lot to take in. Once you moved in here and I saw how your dreams and visions and leaps of intuition helped you catch killers I was convinced though. You know that." Skinner squeezed his lover's shoulders reassuringly.

"I often wonder why I am the way I am – why I have these visions. I sometimes wonder if it's because of Sam, because of what happened to me the day she was murdered." Mulder shivered, not from the cold this time, but from the bitterness of the memory. His sister had been abducted and murdered by a serial killer – and it had been a 12-year-old Fox Mulder who had found her small, broken body. He had been catatonic with shock and grief for a month afterwards, lost inside his own mind, and his strange psychic experiences had begun soon after that.

"That's very likely the case," Skinner agreed gently.

"I've been burying myself too deeply into this case," Mulder admitted sheepishly, gazing up at his lover. What he needed now was comfort – he wished he knew how to ask for it, but somehow Skinner always seemed to pick up on his unspoken signals. "I was convinced when we caught Krycek that he was our perp, and now...maybe he was...maybe he was trying to attract my attention by performing those killings...or maybe the killer is still out there. I'm not sure." He lifted his face to gaze at his lover again. "I didn't tell you everything last night," he admitted. "I...collapsed yesterday, during the interrogation."

"Fox – Christ...are you okay?" Skinner's eyes were anxious as he examined his lover for damage.

"I'm fine, Walter. I just fainted. Probably lack of food. I...lied about eating with Agent Doggett as well. At least...I didn't lie exactly...we did have a huge meal...only she ate most of it...I only took a couple of bites."

"All right, Fox. I think we need to deal with this," Skinner said firmly. "Get up – I want to take a good look at you and check you're okay. Then..." He gave an ominous sounding sigh, and Mulder's heart did a little flip flop and ended up in his feet.

"You're going to spank me aren't you?" He said dolefully. He had very ambivalent feelings about being spanked. He hated it, but he knew that he wouldn't have just admitted his sins to Skinner if, on some level at least, a spanking wasn't exactly what he needed right now.

"Yes, I am, Fox. Unless you have a very good reason why I shouldn't," Skinner said sternly.

Mulder thought about it for a moment, but could think of no good reason. He had lied to his lover about his health, and broken their cardinal rules about self-neglect. They had discussed what particular behaviours would lead to a spanking, and Skinner had been adamant that spanking was something he was prepared to do only in response to Mulder's self-destructive behaviours – he wouldn't spank his lover if they had a fight, or Mulder screwed up at work, for example. He would only spank him for actions that put himself in unnecessary danger, or for not taking care of himself. This clearly came into that category.

"Come on, Fox. Don't dawdle. Boxers and tee shirt off – now," Skinner commanded, pulling back the blankets. Mulder slid out of the bed, and removed his boxers and tee shirt, then watched, with what felt like an entire flock of butterflies flying around in his stomach, as Skinner switched on the bedside lamp, then opened his nightstand drawer and removed the small but deadly, (as Mulder knew all too well) black leather paddle.

"Come here, please." Skinner beckoned him over and then pulled him between his knees. He examined his lover thoroughly, taking no notice of Mulder's scarlet blushes – Mulder hated close scrutiny of his body. He wasn't ashamed of it exactly, but he didn't like it being inspected this closely either. Skinner took his time – and Mulder knew that his ever-thorough lover noted every single sticking out rib, and took in the hollow of his stomach and the leanness of his long limbs.

"Tomorrow you'll eat every meal with me – and you won't leave the table until I'm satisfied you've eaten a proper meal," Skinner told him firmly.

"You don't trust me," Mulder accused.

"No, I don't – not when you've admitted to me only a few moments ago that you've been lying about the amount of food you've been eating," Skinner said in a fierce tone. He traced a finger over Mulder's ribcage. "I should have noticed this before...but now I recall that you've been wearing tee shirts and boxers to bed of late – and you're always muffled up in big, shapeless sweaters during the day as well. Not any more, Fox. From now on we'll have a little inspection every night until I'm satisfied that you've put some weight back on."

Mulder made a face, but he was sanguine enough about the restrictions. He had earned them after all – and he did rather like the amount of attention Skinner gave him when things got this far and he neglected himself to this extent. He did not, however, enjoy the spankings.

“All right – over my knee. And Fox...” Skinner gazed at him sternly.

“Yes, Walter?” Mulder replied, chewing anxiously on his bottom lip.

“This is a punishment for your deception and for breaking our rules on looking after yourself. It won’t be a walk in the park. This ass of yours will most certainly know it’s been well and truly spanked up by the time I’ve finished with you.”

“Yes, Walter,” Mulder said glumly. He lowered himself gingerly over his lover’s knees, hating the position at first, and then relaxing into it and finding a curious sense of calm in the closeness to his lover. Skinner’s thighs were broad and well padded – and the bed provided support for his chest and legs. There was something very comforting about being this close and this connected with Walter, so that he could hear his lover’s heart beating, and feel the warmth of the other man’s solid flesh. Skinner placed one of his broad hands on the small of Mulder’s back, keeping him firmly in position and Mulder took a deep breath. He both liked and hated being held down. He hated it because it presaged what was to come – a spanking he couldn’t escape from - but he liked it because it made him feel secure and it took away his choices. He always had such a whirring, active mind that it was a relief to have respite from that for a while, to just be, over his lover’s knee, knowing there was nowhere else he could be at this moment in time because Skinner wouldn’t allow him to be anywhere else. His lover stroked his exposed bottom for a moment, as he always did before commencing a spanking. Mulder always wanted to yell at him to get on with it, because those agonising few moments waiting for it to begin always frayed his nerves, but Skinner wouldn’t be rushed; he took his time, connecting himself with Mulder, feeling his backside, soothing his lover with a ritual that was necessary and reassuring to them both. Finally, Mulder started to relax, and that was when the first swat fell on his naked bottom. Mulder gave a yelp of surprise – even though he had known it was coming it always surprised him how much Walter’s beautiful, broad hands, that could caress him to such exquisite heights of sexual ecstasy, could also inflict such sharp pain during a spanking.

“OW!” he cried, as the spanking continued in earnest, with Skinner not stopping for a second, not even to allow his squirming lover to draw breath. Mulder twisted and turned and begged and would have done anything to make his lover stop the onslaught, even for just a second, but Skinner’s large palm was relentless in its work and soon Mulder knew that his bottom was glowing a bright red – it was certainly giving off enough heat to warm the room.

“At least this will warm you up,” Skinner commented grimly. He stopped the spanking, much to Mulder’s relief – only to pick up the black leather paddle.

“Please. I’m sorry. I’ve had enough, Walter. Honest!” Mulder begged.

“The hand spanking was for lying to me...the paddle is for not taking care of yourself, Fox,” Skinner told him firmly. “You know the rules. You always get the paddle for neglecting to eat.” And with that, he brought the little paddle down firmly on Mulder’s bottom. It made a loud cracking sound as it made contact with Mulder’s already sensitised flesh and Mulder gave a howl that was both heartfelt and necessary. Each loud slap of the paddle on his burning skin elicited another howl. In the midst of his pain, Mulder remembered the choice Alex had given him, and, even upended in this position as he was, over his lover’s knee, being thoroughly spanked, Mulder was glad he had made the choice he had. The spanking hurt like anything, but it warmed more than his backside – it also warmed his heart knowing that someone cared about his actions enough to punish him for not taking care of himself properly.

Mulder was crying copiously by the time the spanking ended. In fact he was crying so hard that he didn’t notice it was over for several minutes – and then he became aware that Skinner was soothing him by gently stroking his back, and whispering loving endearments to him.

“It’s all over. You’re fine. I love you so much, Fox. You have to take better care of yourself,” Skinner was murmuring. Mulder’s sobs subsided and he lay there, lost in an endorphin haze, loving the feel of his lover’s hand gently caressing him.

“If you’re ready, I’ll put something cool on your bottom now,” Skinner said softly. Mulder nodded dreamily, and then gripped the sheets tightly in his hands as Skinner fished out a tube of gel from the nightstand and began gently soothing it into Mulder’s flaming bottom. Finally it was over, and Skinner carefully eased Mulder off his knee – only for Mulder to throw himself into his lover’s lap and bury himself in his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Walter. I wouldn’t have gone,” Mulder whispered, between hitching breaths. “I love you too much.”

“Hey...I love you too,” Skinner replied, his lips gently kissing the side of Mulder’s cheek. “Come on...settle down with me...that’s right.” He arranged Mulder so that he was lying face down on Skinner’s chest, his warm bottom exposed to the world. Skinner wrapped his big strong arms around Mulder’s shoulders and held him tight, soothing him every now and again with gentle caresses, and leaving light kisses on Mulder’s hair every so often. Mulder felt totally at peace – he loved these moments and just wished it wasn’t necessary to go through a spanking first in order to be able to completely surrender himself to Skinner’s comforting cuddles. Ever since his sister had been murdered, he had found it hard to completely trust anyone with his emotions. He had spent his life worrying that the people he loved would leave him, and it was hard for him to admit that he needed anyone.

“I wonder what happened that made that Alex’s world different to this one,” Mulder murmured. “He said his Mulder was more cynical than me...that his experiences had made him that way. He said his Mulder looked outside himself for his answers, that he was always searching for something. I thought maybe his sister hadn’t been murdered like mine was,

but Alex says she wasn't alive in his world. I wonder if the same thing happened to her that happened to my Samantha, Walter."

"Maybe...or maybe they never found his Samantha's body," Skinner said softly. "Maybe that's why he's still searching outside himself while you turned inwards. You know what happened to your sister because you saw it." They had talked about Mulder's experience of finding Samantha's body – in fact Skinner was the only one who ever **had** talked to Mulder about it. Everyone else, from his parents onwards, had found the subject too difficult and as a result he had bottled it up for years before Skinner had come along, and released him from the prison of the memory of that dreadful day.

"Maybe that's it. You always say I'm the intuitive one in the family, but you have quite a knack for it yourself, Walter Skinner. Maybe it isn't that though – maybe that other Mulder is always searching because he hasn't found what he's looking for yet – because he hasn't looked inside himself so he hasn't found that he loves you yet. He keeps on searching for what he thinks will make himself complete when it's right there in front of his face, if he'd only wake up and see it."

"Hmmm." Skinner's voice sounded low and utterly contented – which gave Mulder an idea.

"I fell asleep earlier," he said.

"Yup." Skinner agreed.

"We were going to..." Mulder glanced up into his lover's amused brown eyes.

"Yup!" Skinner said again.

"I'm awake now," Mulder commented mischievously.

"Uh-huh..." Skinner eyes were glowing now.

"Sooo..." Mulder slid down Skinner's naked body, pausing for several long minutes to suck on his lover's nipples on the way. By the time he reached the other man's cock it was already hard and ready for him. "Mmm..." Mulder sucked on it hungrily for a few moments and then released it. "I can think of a better place for this," he commented lasciviously.

"Sure you're not too sore?" Skinner asked. Mulder shook his head.

"Feel nice and warm and..." he grinned. "Horny!" he finished. Skinner smiled and sat up. He arranged a pillow on the bed and Mulder threw himself on top of it on his front, his legs akimbo. He wiggled his red ass invitingly. Skinner laughed and opened the nightstand to retrieve some lube.

"Take it slow but hard, lover boy," Mulder invited, raising his ass in the air to meet Skinner's cool, lubed fingers. "Remind me what I could have lost."

Skinner's hard cock was soon nudged into his entrance, and Mulder lifted his hips obligingly to accommodate it. He gave a satisfied grunt as Skinner pushed all the way home, in to the root, his balls slapping against Mulder's ass. Skinner lay on top of Mulder for a moment, panting, and then kissed his lover's neck slowly, taking his time. His hands gently caressed Mulder's body, and then he withdrew and pushed back in, slow and hard just as Mulder had asked for. Mulder felt as if he was being transported away on a tide of pleasure just as mind altering as that green shimmering light that had almost taken him to a different world. This, he thought to himself, was a much safer and more pleasurable way of entering a different reality. He was soon floating away, his body moving in time to Skinner's powerful thrusts, his cock aroused by the friction of the pillow against its rigid length. He came a few seconds before Skinner and then lay there, dazed and sated, while his lover finished off.

They were both in a post-coital stupor of pure bliss when the phone rang. Skinner reached out a hand to find it, his cock still embedded deep in Mulder's body. He fumbled around for a second and then Mulder heard him talking. A few seconds later, something hard and plastic was placed against the side of his face.

"It's the office," Skinner told him. "It's for you."

"Mmm?" Mulder glanced up, befuddled, and then realised he had to speak into the phone. "Lo," he said in a hoarse voice. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Fox Mulder," he managed in a reasonably normal tone of voice. Skinner settled down on top of him again, keeping him warm, his soft cock still lazily lodged inside Mulder's body.

"Sir...sorry to disturb you, but...something's happened, sir." Mulder recognised the voice of one of his agents. Although he had refused the title of Head of the Behavioural Sciences Unit, everyone knew that he ran the show down there. He had a nominal boss, but that was someone who just saw to it that the paperwork was completed and the department stayed within its budget – Mulder's phenomenal solve rate was so legendary that his reputation preceded him wherever he went in the Bureau. He knew that his career was driven by the demons that had been with him since his sister's murder, but since moving in with Walter at least he had those demons largely under control. They would always be with him, but with Walter by his side he could handle them.

"What is it?" Mulder asked anxiously. Skinner rested his head against the phone so that he could hear as well, alerted by Mulder's tone.

"It's the prisoner, sir, the one we were interrogating yesterday. He's gone, sir."

"Gone?" Mulder knew he should have been surprised, but he wasn't.

"Yes, sir. I just went to check on him a few minutes ago and he's disappeared – he's just vanished out of a locked cell, sir. Nobody went in and nobody went out. I even checked the surveillance film, sir and there's nothing...well..." The man hesitated.

"Go on, Agent," Mulder ordered.

"It's probably just a blip on the camera, sir, but about 2 hours ago there was a flash of green light in his cell, sir. That's it. It was over in seconds...and now he's gone."

"All right, Agent. There's nothing you could have done."

"But, sir..." The other man began.

"I said it's okay, Agent," Mulder said in a firm tone. "I'll deal with it tomorrow." The agent was silent for a moment and then bid his superior farewell. Mulder put the phone down with a sigh.

"You were expecting that," Skinner commented.

"No...I just wasn't surprised when it happened," Mulder replied, wearily. "Walter...I think something very important and very strange happened here tonight."

"I think you're right." Skinner withdrew from his lover's body, and settled down beside him, gazing at Mulder in the dim lamplight. "Are you okay with all this?" he asked, his dark eyes concerned.

"I'm fine. I'm just left...with a lot of questions. I wish I could meet my counterpart in Alex's world. I have so many things I'd like to ask him – so many things I'd like to tell him."

"Like what?" Skinner asked, gently brushing a strand of hair from Mulder's eyes.

"Well there's you for a start. The Mulder in Alex's world hasn't yet discovered how very necessary you are to his happiness."

"Ah." Skinner smiled that special smile that made Mulder's insides turn to mush.

"And there's Alex – I wish he could find some peace, wherever he is. He seemed...so very lost and lonely. I don't know what he did in his universe to earn my counterpart's enmity, but nobody deserves to lead such a desperate existence. I hope that one day he can find a Walter Skinner of his own, maybe in a universe where I died as a child, or was never born, and then he can have some of the happiness that I have right here. Walter..." Mulder drew his lover close and placed a heartfelt kiss on the other man's lips. "I don't care about all those other 'what if's', all those places where Samantha might be alive, not if it means that I can't be with you. I...just want you to know that this is where I belong, and I don't ever want to be anywhere else but here."

Skinner gave another one of those smiles and wrapped his arms around Mulder's body, holding him tight, and Mulder knew that of all the Mulders, in all the universes in all eternity - he was the happiest one in existence.

The End

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